

form a basis for economic cooperation. The 57 founding AIIB members who signed its articles of agreement in December 2015 included a number of major donor countries and others that are clearly not geopolitically aligned with China on security issues. Among these were the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and India. Today, the AIIB has the second largest MDB membership behind the World Bank, with 110 approved members. While the security alignment hypothesis may contribute to explaining why the United States and Japan refused to join the AIIB, it cannot explain why AIIB membership is open to any country that was a member of the World Bank Group's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), or the Japanese-led Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Despite failing to explain every case, Davis' book will spur a wide-ranging debate within the scholarly community and contribute in important new ways to existing research on IO membership.

Nation Branding and International Politics. By

Christopher S. Browning. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023. 240p. \$130.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592724001610

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When picking up this book, I recalled a conversation in 2003 with a fellow student about whether governments were thinking about their states' "brand" in international politics and how to study it. We agreed this was a fascinating phenomenon, but apart from Peter van Ham's articles in *Foreign Affairs* (2001) and *Millennium* (2002), there was no literature on it (as far as we were aware). Classical realists had noted the relevance of reputation and status, political psychologists had written about perceptions and images, and constructivists about how state behavior is shaped by culture and identity. But the idea that states might have a "brand" that was politically created and protected seemed new. Twenty years on, the concept of "nation branding" and its place in international politics is still flying under the radar of much of international relations (IR) scholarship. This is surprising given the rise to fame of the concept of "soft power" (Nye 2004), which highlights the power of attraction as an instrument of statecraft and, consequently, raises the question of how states *can* make themselves attractive vis-a-vis others. The practice of branding offers an answer. And as Christopher Browning notes, many governments have taken this answer to heart, leading to a "proliferation of nation branding programmes" (p. 7). Yet, analyses by the likes of van Ham, Nadia Kaneva (*Branding Post-Communist Nations*, 2012), Melissa Aronczyk (*Branding the Nation*, 2013), Kristin Eggeling (*Nation-Branding in Practice*,

2020), or Browning were largely ignored by the "soft power" cottage industry.

Against this backdrop, Browning's decision to synthesize and expand on his earlier work in this book is welcome and a valuable contribution to the field of IR. The main message is that nation branding "intersects with international politics in often complex ways" (p. 182), and the book sheds light on this complexity by analyzing the phenomenon from different perspectives. General points are given empirical texture through useful illustrations and case studies.

The book is divided into six substantive chapters. The first three are presented as the conceptual framework. Chapter 1 (Brand(ing) States) sets out to specify the meaning of nation branding as the selective projection of an image that creates an emotional connection with an audience, differentiating it from related concepts of national image, national identity, propaganda, public diplomacy, and soft power. The chapter emphasizes the close link to questions of identity and the analytical focus on the *practice* of branding, the active attempt to create or protect a brand. As Browning argues, this ties the concept to agency and intent and has a strategic dimension. While overlapping with propaganda and public diplomacy, he sees nation branding as less political in presentation and not focused on selling policies but as situating the state in the logic of a "global imaginary."

Chapter 2 (Competition States) places the emergence of foreign policy branding practices in the cultivation of a new geopolitical imagination after the end of the Cold War, which replaced the logic of great power competition with a process of globalization defined by economic rationalities. In this imaginary, states had to follow the logic of the market if they wanted to be successful, turning "statesmen" into "salesmen" (p. 37). Browning focuses on intellectual entrepreneurs like Simon Anholt pushing this outlook and creating an industry around it, with themselves as branding consultants advising governments on how to stay competitive in this new world.

Chapter 3 (Anxious States) takes a step back to argue that states engage in branding practices to gain ontological security, that is, to establish and protect a stable sense of self, primarily via external recognition. Browning argues that the projection of a simple, marketable image tailored to external audiences tends to be unsuitable for fostering nationalism internally. (For example, the Oktoberfest may be a good brand to attract tourists, but it is not an effective symbol for fostering an imagined community among Germans.) He discusses overlaps, also in later chapters, but cautions about seeing branding as a tool for nation building.

The next three chapters investigate different claims about the benefit of nation branding. Chapter 4 (Good States) discusses the practice of trying to gain recognition as a "good" or "virtuous" state by pursuing what are

assumed to be normatively progressive policies. Or, more precisely, by showcasing that pursuit: As Browning notes, it is about *being seen* as doing the “right thing.” Of course, this raises the question of who configures that judgment and measures virtuous performance. Browning points to the popularity of the Nation Brand Index and the Good Country Index, again highlighting the influence of entrepreneurs like Anholt in pushing such benchmarking exercises. The chapter then reviews how Nordic countries actively promote the brand of “Nordic peace” as integral to their collective self-image and use it strategically.

Chapter 5 (Peaceful States) explores the more general claim that “nation branding is likely to have dividends for peace and security” because it replaces traditional power politics with more benign forms of competition. Browning dismisses this argument for IR, showing that cultivating a certain self-image can also be used as a tool in conflict. At the same time, he suggests that branding practices can have a pacifying effect domestically by enhancing the self-esteem of a people. Here, the chapter looks at the cases of Colombia and post-apartheid South Africa to argue that campaigns to rebrand their image internationally created feelings of togetherness and pride domestically, which can also be used by regimes for their own benefit.

Chapter 6 (Stigmatised States) takes on the promise that nation branding might help states “to move from a stigmatised geopolitical location to one with more positive resonances in global imaginaries” (p. 159). It presents a typology of strategies designed to change an image associated with lower or “backward” status within a global hierarchy (such as the developed/underdeveloped matrix), ranging from acceptance to “resurrection.” The chapter explores this empirically in a case study of “Brand Africa,” spearheaded by South Africa. While this campaign may have helped to “escape stigmatization,” Browning argues it did not amount to “emancipatory geopolitics” as it had limited support on the continent and was designed to uplift “Africa’s” image in an existing global imaginary, rather than replacing it with an alternative.

As this overview shows, the book offers a rich picture of the motivations for, and practices of, nation branding. It does not, however, offer new conceptual insights. State practices of creating, promoting, and contesting self-images have long been explored by IR scholars, including through the logic of ontological security. What the book does nicely is connect some of these insights with literature on status competition through the concept of nation branding and showing it at work in the real world. Yet, Browning suggests that understanding branding practices is about more than analyzing foreign policies of image management and political communication; it also raises “fundamental questions about the underpinning logic of international politics” (p. 7). And, indeed, there is a nascent theory of states interacting in a system that

requires them to compete over images of themselves—a struggle for recognition of sorts. Using the logic of the market as a primary force structuring international relations already informed Waltz’ logic of anarchy and state survival. So why not a social theory using a market logic for the operation of “soft power” in international politics?

Except that Browning does not (want to) go there. The “geopolitical imaginaries” to which the branded image speaks are not theorized but remain discourses (on globalization, development, etc.) propagated by branding experts. If there is a baseline in this book, it is the observation that branding is driven by consultants who (i) create the demand by telling governments that they must invest in the image of the state to enhance their status and competitive edge in international politics and subsequently (ii) offer solutions for how to do so. Perhaps this attributes “branding consultants” and their indices to too much power. In any case, Browning is critical of their agency and commodification of self-images, and much of the book is scrutinizing claims regarding the importance and impact of nation branding by showing problems with their assumptions and with government programs adopting such programs. For Browning, these problems are both practical and ethical. And so, one can also read this book as an effort to unmask the promises marketing experts attach to nation branding.

The book is thus caught in an intriguing tension between an explanatory and a critical agenda: It tries to both (i) make the case that nation branding matters in international politics and (ii) argue that those who claim it matters and profit from it are exaggerating its importance. These are not simply two angles on the same phenomenon but two conflicting approaches to knowledge production (or deconstruction, for that matter). Combining them is possible only when this conflict is flagged up and when there is a strategy of dealing with it, openly applied. Yet, it appears, Browning cannot quite decide whether to ground the discussion in an instrumentalist or existentialist reading and how to manage the tension between explanation and critique. For the reader, at least, it is not always apparent at which level the analysis proceeds and, more fundamentally, whether and when the critical approach works against the explanatory one.

A solution might have been to read nation branding not in a complex relationship *with* international politics but *as* politics. That also would have shifted attention more squarely onto the political actors within the state apparatus doing the branding, rather than keeping it as a black box. In this regard, the book also could have made more of the distinction, borrowed from Kaneva, between “cosmetic” (superficial) and “institutionalized” (entrenched) nation branding. Moreover, in addition to studying the projection of a particular image, should we not also investigate its reception and analyze nation branding as a relational process, as an *interaction*? In

not taking that step, the book shares a weakness underpinning much of the literature on soft power, namely, does nation branding actually *work*? What exactly is its “constitutive impact” (p. 182)? How sustainable is the promotion of a cultural fragment tailored to the norms and desires of an external audience, hiding unattractive aspects through “pinkwashing” or “greenwashing”? And how do projected images and imaginaries connect with material realities? While this book does not develop substantive answers to such questions, it does provoke them. And by forefronting the concept of branding and raising awareness of the practice, it opens analytical doors and invites new lines of inquiry. As such, this book has plenty to offer and belongs on the shelf of everyone who wants to understand how states try to manage their identities and enhance their soft power.

Political Technology: The Globalisation of Political Manipulation. By Andrew Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 300p. £80.00 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S153759272400166X

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Vladimir Lenin once described Western democracy as “truncated, false, and hypocritical” (*Lenin’s Collected Works*, translated by Jim Riordan, 1974). This quote aptly captures the mood of Andrew Wilson’s serious and gloomy book, *Political Technology: The Globalization of Political Manipulation*. Wilson meticulously traces the systematic distortion of politics that began in Russia, even before Lenin’s time, and has since become a global practice. Political technology—essentially political engineering—leverages social media and front groups. Its techniques such as computational propaganda, troll farming, and paid endorsements have transformed politics into sheer spectacle. Truthiness has supplanted truth. Mass culture has skewed political culture. Fervent partisan enthusiasts have replaced rational policy advocates. The primary activity of politics has shifted from advancing policy positions to affirming group identities. Politics is no longer about content; it is about performance. And the performance is increasingly dismal.

From this dark and messy tableau, which Wilson renders with masterful precision, emerges the book’s central message: the truth-corrupting machinery of political technology, once the preserve of authoritarian regimes, now operates freely within liberal democracies. Even as elected officials dominate the internet and media, the real subjects of the spectacle are voters—masses of marionettes whose strings are pulled by agents distorting a plot devoid of objective meaning. Sometimes, it is the political leaders themselves, foully promoting divisive tales, who pull the strings. At other times, internal actors take the reins:

Political Action Committees (PACs) in America, a monopolistic media authority in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, or the “cyber yodhas” that scorch the Indian internet. Foreign agents, including Russian hackers and obscure political consultants selling their polarizing wares, also play a role in marring elections.

The result is an inversion of the political process. Democracy is meant to be about demand—*popular demand*. Whether directly or representatively, the pure will and interest of voters should decide electoral contests and guide policy. Instead, democracy is increasingly shaped by the “supply” side of partisan factions that distort information and manipulate popular opinion in covert and often fraudulent ways to serve their own ends. The implications of this shift are huge, perhaps greater than even Wilson recognizes. Gone are Edmund Burke’s necessary standards of civility without which the democratic polity descends into unruly factionalism. Vanished is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideal of the legislator as the educator of the “general will.” Today, elected officials have become untruthful spokespersons for factional interests; they are simultaneously masters of deceit and puppets of larger players. “Manners are of more importance than laws,” observed Burke. “According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them” (Edmund Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, 1796). The vicious style of modern democracy has become its central threat.

The book reads like both a sequel and a prequel to the author’s earlier work, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*. Building on theories of political communication and online propaganda, it departs from existing literature by demonstrating that the phenomenon has gone global, whether carried out by foreign exporters of political technology or its domestic adopters; whether to impose total control on the political system or to corrupt democratic discussion. Reflecting arguments made by scholars such as Kathryn Sikkink on the global diffusion of political norms and practices, Wilson shows how political technology methods spread across national boundaries, regardless of regime type. Alarming, democratic operators have adapted the ways of tyrants; political technology now grows at home.

The book achieves a synthesis of literatures on electoral manipulation, authoritarian resilience, and technology diffusion that fills a gap between disciplines. It offers valuable insights into how various nations and regimes employ political technology with varying effect. In Russia, the cradle of political stagecraft, the regime uses it to maintain stability, an argument that extends the work of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way on competitive authoritarian regimes. As an expert in Russia and Ukraine, Wilson is well positioned to study how post-Soviet techniques have permeated and vitiated open societies. His account of