

Marca España

POR ELLA PLEVIN ILUSTRACIÓN DE ANTONIO MINGOTE

In a globalised world, how do we detect the difference between a country's authentic character and its market identity? ELLA PLEVIN enters the murky, mercurial world of nation branding.



THERE IS AN OLD JOKE which sees an optimist, a pessimist and a marketing consultant stare into the proverbial glass of water: half full, half empty... and a glass in need of resizing.

But what if we asked for more than a simple chalice for this timeless metaphor? What if we could make it bigger? Global? A cup that could contain the rise and fall of empires, a cup that could sculpt or scorch the face of earth, produce timeless works of art and great sporting moments?

I'm trying, with this attempt at ad-speak, to take an exploratory sip of nation branding: the idea that an entire country's worth of living and dying communities, history, landscapes, industries, religions, cultural output, climates, native plants and animals can be distilled into some sort of imagineering serum; a network of associations in the consumer's mind based on the visual and verbal expression of a place that spins growth in the form of tourism, investment and resources.

Nation branding experts believe that a country's image in the global popular imagination is subject to change, and that it is the duty of public authorities to design policy which could improve a nation's global picture in a world where 'every place must compete with every other

place for its share of the world's wealth, talent and attention'.

Insights into these associations are researched and sold on to governments and corporations interested in using the material strategically. It's a developing field, and while it's not — to put it politely — a hard science, state interest in the doctrine behind it is growing.

Spain is an interesting case study with a dedicated project — the Marca España or 'Spanish Brand' — established in order to strengthen the nation's image among Spanish citizens and abroad. Its website attests to Spain being the 13th most-reputable country in the world: a world leader in organ donation; the second-lowest crime rate and second-highest life expectancy in the world; the leading exporter of fruit and vegetables and first in European sustainability ranking, with the seventh and eighth-greatest airports in the world. ¡Olé!

Spain had already turned global perceptions around following the Franco years (one of the longest dictatorships in Europe at nearly four decades) and has always put an emphasis on tourism and national promotion (accounting for about 5% of its current GDP) but increased its efforts with the Marca España to absorb some of the shockwaves of the 2008 financial crisis. The project initially emerged out of a series of meetings held by a number of organisations from around 2002, known as the Jornadas internas sobre Marca España. But more on this later.

I visit professor Steven Curtis, associate professor of interna-

tional relations at the London Metropolitan University to see if he understands nation branding as half-full, half-empty or half-cut. We talk about Simon Anholt (one of the most prolific participants in the field) and his Nation Branding Index, the leading ranking system for nation brands which surveys 50 countries among a panel of 20,000 people in 20 countries.

"His thinking is that countries do have a brand image, similar or analogous to the brand reputations that Coca Cola or Nike have," Professor Curtis tells me, "but he thinks it's a mistake to go to the next stage and say that countries can therefore rebrand themselves, that people form these perceptions and it's very difficult for countries to shake them."

He continues that the ideas surrounding Anholt's work in the field are still popular with leaders and politicians who might want to rebrand or strengthen a nation's image, despite a big debate about whether it's feasible or not — and whether it's even desirable. "Often it's driven by political motivations," he says, "figures who would want to increase a country's soft power to have more influence on the world stage and so on, but there's not a lot of evidence for that."

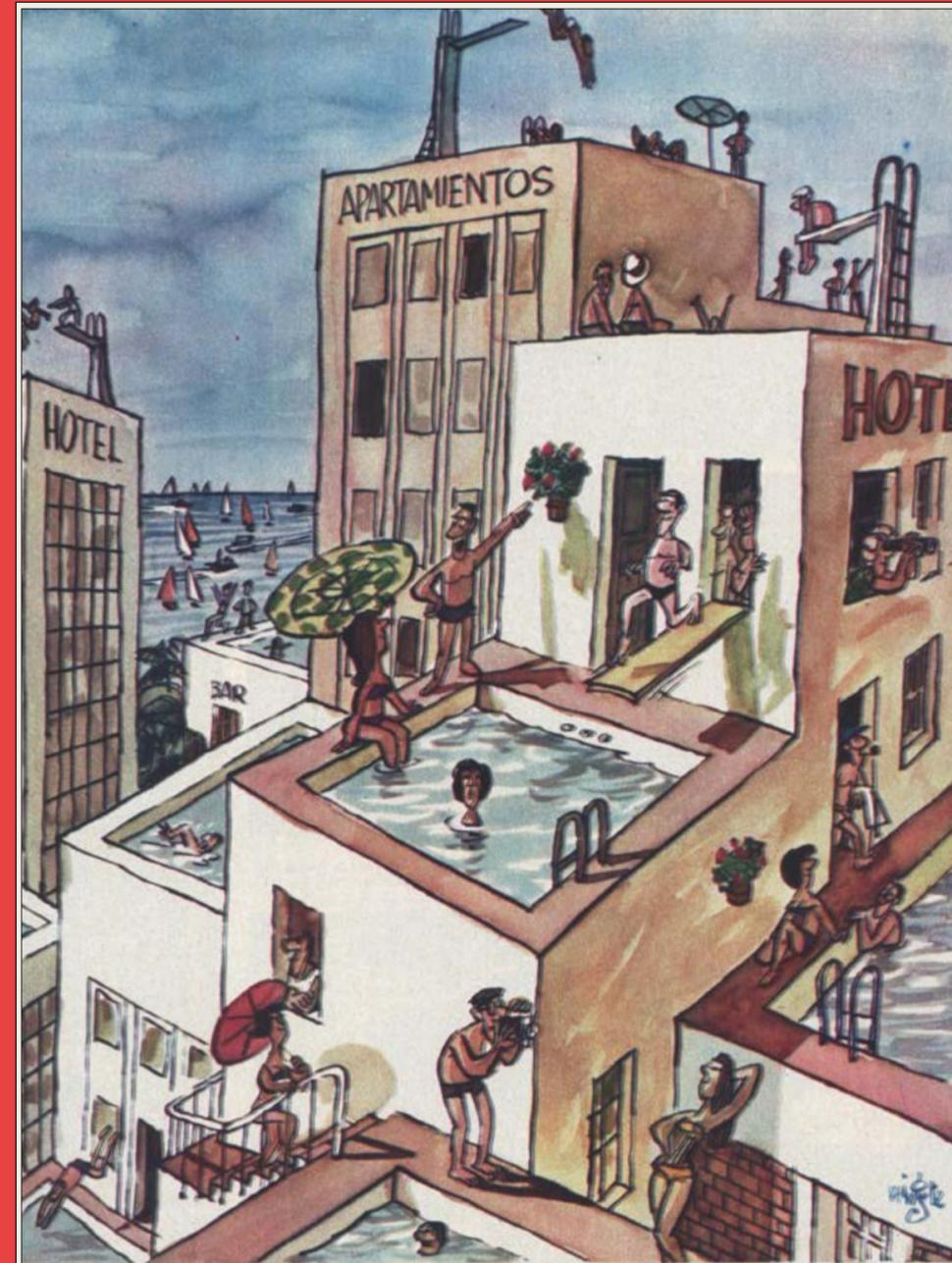
Waly Ollins, cofounder of advertising agency Wolff Ollins, thinks otherwise. He believes that nations have been doing the equivalent of branding and rebranding for centuries, noting that slogans like France's, *liberté égalité fraternité*, helped form the modern nation state as we know it today, and that competitive globalisation and technology have put even greater importance on hav-

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ing a strong brand in order to access world resources. In his own words, "nations with a strong brand win".

He notes too that, in the commercial landscape, globalisation is changing customer demands: we want choice, immediacy and provenance, despite or even fuelled by growing suspicions of globalized capitalism. "Coming from somewhere, [embodying] meaning that comes from somewhere," he says "is going to be more and more important. As the world accepts that there is more competition people will be able to charge competitive prices for product because it is different, because it is indigenous." McDonald's localised menus are one example of a response to this: "Authenticity is great. If you can fake that you can fake anything," he concludes.

George Monbiot would agree, "When political debate no longer speaks to us, people become responsive instead to slogans, symbols and sensation." Indeed it's difficult not to view nation



AÑO 2000

—Lo que me gusta de España es cómo ha sabido conservar su tipismo.

Antonio Mingote's prophetic vision of Spain in the year 2000, drawn 1967

branding as part of a wider system that sees competition as the defining characteristic in human relations, that sees citizens as consumers and wants to replace democracy with a market for choice. Never mind the glass — what's in the water?

Specialists in media and communication theory, such as Melissa Aronczyk and Birgit Stober, have charted the worrying rise of corporate-inflected state branding in relation to nationalism, asking who has the right to represent or market a particular place in a

democratic state. The field is re-designing the ways in which authority across the public sector is exercised and managed and some, like Aronczyk, believe that this affects the moral basis of national citizenship. The foundation of Marca España is a network of various public-private partnerships; a brand painted by a complex network of actors, not all of whom have been democratically elected.

The first of these is the *Foro de Marcas Renombradas Españolas*, founded in 1999 — a fo-

rum of leading Spanish brands whose objective was to promote members as strategic assets and share expertise in order to combat Spain's perceived lag in the world economy following the Franco years.

In its current iteration, it is composed of no less than 184 specialist 'collaborators' overseen by a high commissioner. These groups range from Spain's tourism board, Olympics committee, national library, national ballet company and state TV network RTVE to regional football

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clubs, universities and business schools, oceanographic societies, cultural foundations, energy companies, NGOs, Airbus, shipbuilding industry protectionists and fashion conglomerates besides ministries of agriculture, foreign relations, public works & transport, education, economics, tourism, energy and technology...

If nation brand experts are to be believed, the Marca España coalition is an important asset to international diplomacy and trade. But who is measuring the negative effects that attempts to generate a (clearly impossible to attain) cohesive, hegemonic national picture paints? How influential has the long-term design of a 'Spain brand' been to the Catalan separatist backlash for example?

Keith Dinnie is credited with writing the first textbook on nation branding. In 2009 he asked a group of Japanese students, "If Spain was a person, what kind of person would it be?". They told him she was, among other things, a "beautiful and sexy 25 year old with five boyfriends all waiting for the day they can date her", and he presented this rather simple observation at a conference in Athens the same year. If this is who she is, she is *un fantasma*. Spain is popular, currently ranked at number three for tourism in the Country Brand Ranking. But what if she wants to be so much more than a brand, a babe, an idiom or a slogan? Efforts to simplify or organize a chaotic world using marketing dogma are understandable at best; irrational, problematic and unsustainable at worst. Better to go *plus ultra* — Latin for 'further beyond' — and Spain's national motto since the sixteenth century.