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Unpacking Joint Attributions of Cities and Nation States as Actors in Global Affairs

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Summary

Public diplomacy efforts of nation states and cities within these states inevitably develop alongside each other, giving rise to joint attributions regarding these entities as actors in global affairs, though also potentially intensifying perceptions of their independent and even contradictory roles in international diplomacy. Variations in attributions of cities and states as more or less conjoint actors can be expected to affect both the visibility of key actors and the formation of attitudes and behaviours towards these actors in international affairs. In this article I explore how and in what dimensions such variations can be expected to occur, applying recent thinking on the constitution of social actors to this emerging debate in public and city diplomacy scholarship and proposing a conceptual framework that distinguishes joint ‘selfhood’ and ‘actorhood’ as key dimensions of joint city/state attributions. The article includes a discussion of the implications of this conceptualisation for public and city diplomacy.

Keywords

public diplomacy (PD); city diplomacy; nation-branding; city-branding; nation states; actorhood; selfhood

1 Joint Attributions of Nation States and Cities

Research in the field of public diplomacy (PD) focuses on the ways in which country brands and images are cultivated as forms of ‘soft power’ in efforts to develop favourable relations in the international system for the advancement of national foreign policy objectives. Images, brands and relationships in international relations are shaped not only by national diplomacy, however, but also by the public diplomacy efforts of other actors at non- or substate level, including cities. Proceeding from the recognition that PD activities are undertaken at least in part by city governments, the scholarship on city diplomacy foregrounds the role of cities and local authorities as key actors in international relations.¹ The very fact that many cities can and do develop their own localised value systems, sub-identities, sub-brands and sub-relationships indicates the extent to which the cultivation of a country’s image and brand emerges from complex relationships in which the respective identities and branding efforts of cities and nation states can either be juxtaposed or mutually reinforcing.²

¹ Amiri and Sevin 2020.

² Lara 2020.

This co-evolution of PD efforts on the part of cities and nation states highlights the importance of understanding potential variance in joint attributions, that is, the degree to which cities and their nation states appear as coherent or independent entities and actors in global affairs. The relevance of joint attributions is especially evident when cities undertake initiatives that have both strong national significance and popularity as well as global relevance and reach, for example in the case of city bids to host the Olympic Games or international economic and political summits. The issue of joint city/state attributions also surfaces in negotiations between the respective brand and image-building endeavours of cities and nation states, as for example when cities are promoted *within* nation-branding efforts, which can potentially give rise to city–state tensions. A case in point is the way that campaigns to promote tourism in the cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem strenuously avoid mention of Israel as part of what Crilley and Manor have theorised as an ‘un-nation branding’ strategy aimed at countering negative associations of this nation with armed conflict, occupation and human rights violations.³

The PD literature to date has only rarely conceptually addressed the issue of the joint attributions that emerge from the diverse PD efforts of nation states and cities within those states. As I shall elucidate in the following section, one major reason for this oversight is that the nation state is widely treated in the PD literature as a ‘corporeal entity’ in the sense of one strong, singular and coherent social actor. As I shall further argue, however, emerging scholarship on city diplomacy is challenging the centrality of the corporeal model of the nation state, thereby opening new pathways for the development of alternative and more formative conceptualisations of nation state, substate and non-state entities. Such reconceptualisations can help us attain a better understanding of how joint attributions of cities and nation states come to exist in the first place, how they are enacted and given shape in practice, and the implications of such attributions.

2 The Usefulness and Boundaries of Conceptualising the Nation State as a ‘Corporeal Entity’ in Public Diplomacy

In the literature on public diplomacy it is still quite common for scholars to write about PD without much theorising on the nation state itself. In most cases scholars presuppose that nation states *are* ‘actors’ and write about PD as something that ‘nation states do’ in order to ‘achieve their international goals’.⁴ Proceeding from this often tacit premise, PD scholars typically adopt normative models focused on goal attainment and control as the basis for the strategic soft power actions they recommend that nation states undertake. An illustrative example of this assumption is the proposal ‘that nations should emphasize shared core values when targeting foreign audiences’.⁵ Conceptualisations of the nation state as a coherent single entity are manifest not only in the treatment of states ‘as one whole’, moreover, but even more so in the widespread virtual *personification* of states as agentic human-like actors that are able to ‘desire’ things,⁶ and that have a ‘will’ of their own.⁷

³ Crilley and Manor 2020.

⁴ Gilboa 2008, 55.

⁵ Golan 2013, 1253.

⁶ Anholt 2006, 274.

⁷ Fan 2008, 148.

The prevalence of this implicit corporeal model of the nation state is by no means exclusive to scholarship on PD, of course, with the same tendency being equally if not even more widespread in the important neighbouring field of research on international relations. The literature in this latter field is likewise marked by an absence of theorising about the nation state, with international relations scholars often implicitly and unquestioningly depicting the nation state as a corporeal social actor.⁸ There are notable exceptions to this tendency,⁹ but in these studies the implicit corporeal model of the nation state is largely replaced by an explicitly corporeal model. For example, Wendt ultimately concludes that nation states ‘are real actors to which we can legitimately attribute anthropomorphic qualities like desires, beliefs, and intentionality’.¹⁰ In sum, the majority of theorists in the fields of both international relations and PD continue to conceptualise the nation state as a person-like social entity with its own self, intentions, behaviour, and character.¹¹

2.1 *Why the Corporeal Model Prevails*

In problematising the corporeal model of the nation state for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of joint attributions regarding the role cities and nation states in public diplomacy efforts at national and international levels, it is useful to start by asking why this corporeal model remains so prevalent in PD scholarship. One explanation for this persistent conceptualisation can be found in the fact that PD is an applied field of research in which strong ties have been forged between social science and professional practice, with PD scholars predominantly developing interest-oriented and problem-driven theory. Given this context, it is mostly sensible and relevant to draw on common-sense ideas that include notions of nation states as ‘natural’ social actors, above all because most analysis in this field is not primarily concerned with how such entities emerge as social actors in the first place but rather aims instead at understanding the practices and effects that ensue from the given ‘fact’ that nation state actors are, so to speak, *already there*. As Faizullaev emphasised in his 2007 paper ‘Individual Experiencing of States’:

International relations and international politics can exist as a concept and can be [de]constructed conceptually, but practical diplomacy cannot avoid conventional phenomena, including common-sense experiencing of states.¹²

From this perspective it seems justifiable that so much of PD research proceeds from implicit assumptions about the nation state as an individual social actor. In practice, however, the widespread taken-for-grantedness of the nation state as one uniform corporeal entity in the PD literature has led to the development and persistence of what may now be somewhat of a blind spot in this field. This blind spot persists where scholars follow the core assumption of Faizullaev’s argument that ‘the state as an individual is a defining characteristic of the individual experiencing of the state’ and that essentially ‘no person can individually experience the state

⁸ Jackson 2004.

⁹ Including works by Wolfers (1962), Mansbach and Vasquez (1981), Cederman (1997) and, most prominently, Wendt (1999).

¹⁰ Wendt 1999, 197.

¹¹ Faizullaev 2007.

¹² Faizullaev 2007, 536.

without perceiving it as an anthropomorphic entity'.¹³ Whether or not this assertion holds true is the focus of the following section.

2.2 *Limits of the Corporeal Model of the Nation State in PD Scholarship*

The prevalence of anthropomorphic conceptualisations of nation states as coherent 'entities with their own self, intentions, behavior and character'¹⁴ is at least implicitly challenged in some recent PD literature, especially in the emerging scholarship on city diplomacy which has gained considerable traction in recent years. By promoting recognition of the key role that cities can play in international relations, this emerging scholarship challenges assumptions about the strong corporeal nation state. Indeed, approaching global affairs and diplomacy from the perspective of any 'sub nation state' entity inevitably problematises corporeal notions of a coherent nation state and concomitant ideas of common goals, shared core values and so forth. By foregrounding the roles of alternative actors in international relations at local and regional levels, research on city diplomacy has shed light on the significant scale and roles of alternative 'sub-nation state' entities with their own intentions, behaviours, characters, identities and so forth.¹⁵ The actions of these entities may serve to reinforce or – more likely – to undermine or denounce and deconstruct the currently prevalent sense of the corporeal nation state.¹⁶

These emerging alternative perspectives from the scholarship on city diplomacy both highlight and call into question the extremity of Faizullaev's stance in asserting that 'no person can individually experience the state without perceiving it as an anthropomorphic entity' and that there is thus no alternative to the corporeal model of nation states as holistic, purposive and stable entities. Above all, these substate perspectives should challenge us to reflect on taken-for-granted conceptualisations of the nation state as a corporeal social unit with its 'own' goals, functions and capacities for action, not least because persisting with this model runs the risk of forgoing a potentially fruitful discussion on how diplomacy and nation-branding efforts come to make nation states appear as social actors *in the first place* and how images and joint attributions of cities and nation states come to exist, are enacted and are given shape through such practices. Failing to revise this conceptualisation further risks overlooking the potential impacts of *variations* in levels of joint attributions on people's information processing, attitude formation and behaviour as outcomes of public and city diplomacy efforts. For all these reasons it seems salient to 'unpack' the processes that underlie the development of attributions to nation states and their sub-entities which depict these plural entities as more or less conjoint and coherent social entities and actors. In the sections below, therefore, I address the following three questions: (i) how does the idea of the nation state as a corporeal social actor originally arise in society and within human minds? (ii) How do possible *variations* in constructions of nation states and cities as social actors affect peoples' cognition and behaviour? (iii) What implications do such variations have in turn for research and practice regarding public and city diplomacy?

3 Beyond the Corporeal Model: Unpacking Joint Attributions of Cities and Nation States

¹³ Faizullaev 2007, 532.

¹⁴ Faizullaev 2007, 532.

¹⁵ Amiri and Sevin 2020.

¹⁶ For a similar discussion on the tensions between nation state brands and corporate brands see White and Kolesnicov 2015.

3.1 *Towards an Alternative Perspective*

Scholars of organisation studies and institutional theory have highlighted the relative novelty of what now seems the largely common-sensical idea that complex social collectives such as organisations and nation states are more or less coherent entities that ‘do’ things such as setting goals, building relationships, acting more or less responsibly and so forth.¹⁷ These scholars further point to the way that such conceptualisations also change over time, detecting a steady increase in cultural constructions of the state as an agentic ‘actor’ in the decades of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In addition, research in social psychology has shown that the extent to which people perceive social collectives as more or less coherent entities and actors varies greatly depending on the focus of the perceiver and the contextual factors of specific situations.¹⁸ These variations in people’s perceptions of social entities and actors have significant consequences for the public relations and diplomacy efforts undertaken by social entities insofar as they affect how people process information about these entities.¹⁹ Variances in the attribution of actorhood to nation states can thus also be presumed to impact perceptions and behaviours in international relations.

Applying this perspective in the context of city and public diplomacy entails examining the ways in which nation states and cities are socially and cognitively constructed as meaningful entities and actors in the first place. This is because if attributions of entity and actorhood status do indeed vary significantly over time and in different contexts, then the cultivation of images, identities, brands and relationships of nation states can be better understood by problematising their ‘common-sense conceptualisation’ as entities and actors. This in turn entails a focus on entity status and actorhood as *variable properties* that exist, are performed and emerge through communication,²⁰ including through city and nation-branding initiatives.

3.2 *Dimensions of Joint Attributions of Cities and Nation States*

In a study on ‘culturally conferred conceptions of agency’ from a social psychology perspective, Morris, Menon and Ames argued that people’s cognitive models of social entities,²¹ which can include individual human beings as well as organisations and nation states, are generally composed of two dimensions, with people typically attributing both ‘selfhood’ and ‘actorhood’ to these entities.²² As such, selfhood and actorhood can be considered the two key dimensions of joint attributions at the intersection of nation states and cities within those states.

Researchers in the psychology of group perception have identified attributions of selfhood as being based on two interrelated components: (i) the ascription of common surface-level attributes such as similarities in visual appearance and location; and (ii) the ascription of common inner qualities such as values and desires.²³ For example, one commonly attributed surface-level property by which a country and its cities may appear as a single and coherent ‘social self’ is the perceived *stability* of such entities as a combined unit, that is, their apparent

¹⁷ Bromley and Sharkey 2017; Meyer and Jepperson 2000.

¹⁸ Lickel et al. 2000.

¹⁹ Hamilton and Sherman 1996.

²⁰ Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Buhmann and Schoeneborn 2021.

²¹ Morris, Menon and Ames 2001.

²² See also Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2018.

²³ Yzerbyt, Corneille and Estrada 2001.

inalterability. Such perceptions of stability can nonetheless vary significantly over time and place, as is evident in the relative weakness or strength and longevity of different city–nation relationships. For example, people’s joint attributions of a singular selfhood to the city of Paris and the state of France may be more deeply embedded and seemingly unalterable than in the case of attributions of selfhood to the historically more recent relationship between the city of Tel Aviv and the modern state of Israel.²⁴ Another important surface-level – that is, visible – determinant of attributions of selfhood was proposed in a study by Hamilton, Sherman and Lickel in the form of an entity’s *internal organisation*,²⁵ including a nation state’s visible coordinative structures such as its public infrastructure and various national agencies, with the state as the overarching macro-organisation of the country in the sense of a modern nation state.²⁶ Considering this aspect of attributions of selfhood helps to highlight how the ties between *capital* cities and the nation states to which they belong are much more ‘tightly knit’ than the ties between the state and other cities that are part of that same national unit but which do not have the same extent and density of state-level infrastructure, including national museums, agencies, associations and so forth.

Beyond such surface-level attributes, additional determinants of joint attributions of selfhood to cities and their nation states are the ‘essential’ and purportedly intrinsic qualities of these entities ‘that are regarded as highly enduring and transmitted across time and space’.²⁷ This argument applies in the case of attributions arising in relation to a distinct and shared underlying cultural reality and as such highlights an important connection between joint attributions regarding cities and nation states and attributions of the cultural diversity of these entities. For example, countries attributed with lower levels of cultural and ethnic diversity will inevitably have less scope and fewer chances of success for pursuing any strategy of ‘un-nation branding’.²⁸ Finally, joint attributions of selfhood are further determined on the basis of emergent ideas of a ‘common fate’,²⁹ whereby cities within a country are perceived to share state-level consequences of internal and/or external events. Such perceptions and attributions of shared consequences are widespread and indeed quite openly visible within narratives of patriotism. The effects of such joint attributions of a shared fate can also be seen in how the results of external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic play out and are framed as mutually affecting nation states and cities in a uniform(ing) fashion that serves to ‘bind’ these entities further together, as for example in the case of China and the city of Wuhan at the outset of the pandemic.

As in the case of attributions of ‘selfhood’, joint city/nation state attributions can vary significantly according to the extent to which these entities are communicatively and cognitively constructed as possessing joint actorhood, that is, the degree to which they are framed as single, coherent and meaningful collective and sovereign actors managing common goals that are perceived to reflect a purportedly shared ‘inner cause’ and set of ‘inner qualities’ (see ‘selfhood’ above). From this perspective, the actions of a country and its cities, as well as the interactions between these entities, are seemingly guided by shared underlying principles in the service of a

²⁴ Cf. Smith 2000.

²⁵ Hamilton, Sherman and Lickel 1998.

²⁶ Meyer et al. 1997.

²⁷ Rothbart and Park 2004, 90.

²⁸ Crilley and Manor 2020

²⁹ Campbell 1958.

common purpose.³⁰ And while it goes without saying that nation states ‘collaborate in all sorts of collective activity’ and ‘serve as agents of their own [...] citizens’,³¹ it is also the case that cities can independently shape their own strong notions of actorhood. For example, cities may opt to join ‘transnational municipal networks’³² such as the international umbrella organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). By (self-) promoting cities as more independent actors in international affairs, such city initiatives have the potential to *reduce* attributions of joint actorhood at the level of an imagined city/nation state entity, thereby significantly challenging the notion that it is only nation states that can collaborate to form international alliances for advancing shared interests.³³ Recent initiatives undertaken by cities to engage in climate politics provide especially salient examples of how strong notions of city-level actorhood are enacted in practice,³⁴ since these initiatives do not relate only to the goals of particular actors or groups of actors but serve more broadly to make cities appear as agents for ‘general principles’, that is, as agents of what is imagined as the status quo of natural and moral law.³⁵

4 The Implications of Variances in Attributions of Cities and States as Joint Actors in Global Affairs

The arguments set out in the preceding sections show how recent thinking on the constitution of large collectives as social actors can be extended to emerging debates on public and city diplomacy. This especially applies to those parts of the debate that focus on the ways in which the nation- branding efforts of cities and their nation states are developed alongside each other, thereby leading to joint attributions that may be either mutually reinforcing or contradictory.³⁶ In highlighting the co-constitution of cities and their nation states as joint or individual actors, the view and approach I have offered here may be of particular interest to current scholarship that takes a strong interest in the role of cities in international affairs.³⁷ Such scholarship might be especially likely to be open to applying alternative non-corporeal perspectives in addressing the issue of joint attributions of cities and nation states in the light of recent discussions within the literature on city diplomacy that are highly conducive to the fruitful problematisation of established *corporeal notions* of the nation state as the single most influential actor in global affairs.

In this article I have set out to demonstrate how problematising the prevalent ‘corporeal model’ of the nation state can serve to open up a useful discussion about the dimensions in which we can expect to observe significant variations in joint attributions regarding collective city/state entities. Such variances are important because they can be expected to affect the ways that people process information about social entities, ultimately influencing attitude formation and behaviour in international relations. For instance, recent research suggests that variations in the extent of joint attributions of selfhood between states and substate entities can significantly affect

³⁰ Hannum 1990.

³¹ Meyer and Jepperson 2000, 107.

³² Toly 2008.

³³ Wood and Gray 1991.

³⁴ Johnson 2017.

³⁵ Meyer and Jepperson 2000, 107.

³⁶ Crilley and Manor 2020.

³⁷ Amiri and Sevin 2020.

public attributions of accountability for crises caused by substate entities such as cities or national corporations.³⁸ This is because high levels of perceived joint selfhood between entities render it more probable that people will readily and spontaneously transfer knowledge or inferred traits from one entity to another and thus draw implicit comparisons between these entities.³⁹

Finally, I propose that the approach and framework elucidated in this article can be usefully applied not only to the relationships of cities and nation states in global affairs but also to the relationships of nation states and other substate entities such as corporations, associations, regions, federal states and so forth. This conclusion accords with the increasing recognition in recent scholarship of the significance of the roles played by substate actors in PD and how such efforts may be complementary to or inconsistent with the PD efforts and role of nation states.⁴⁰ In drawing on this research throughout this article, I hope to have shown that focusing on the communicative and cognitive constitution of actors in global affairs can help us attain a better understanding of joint attributions of selfhood and actorhood to nation states and entities within these states, and to the behavioural consequences of such attributions.

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³⁸ Ingenhoff et al. 2018.

³⁹ Crawford, Sherman and Hamilton 2002; Pickett 2001.

⁴⁰ Lee and Ayhan 2015; White 2015.

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