

Banal Nationalism in the Family. Genesis and Implementation of a Research Project

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ECPR SG Citizenship Virtual Seminar 3
Monday 15 May 2023

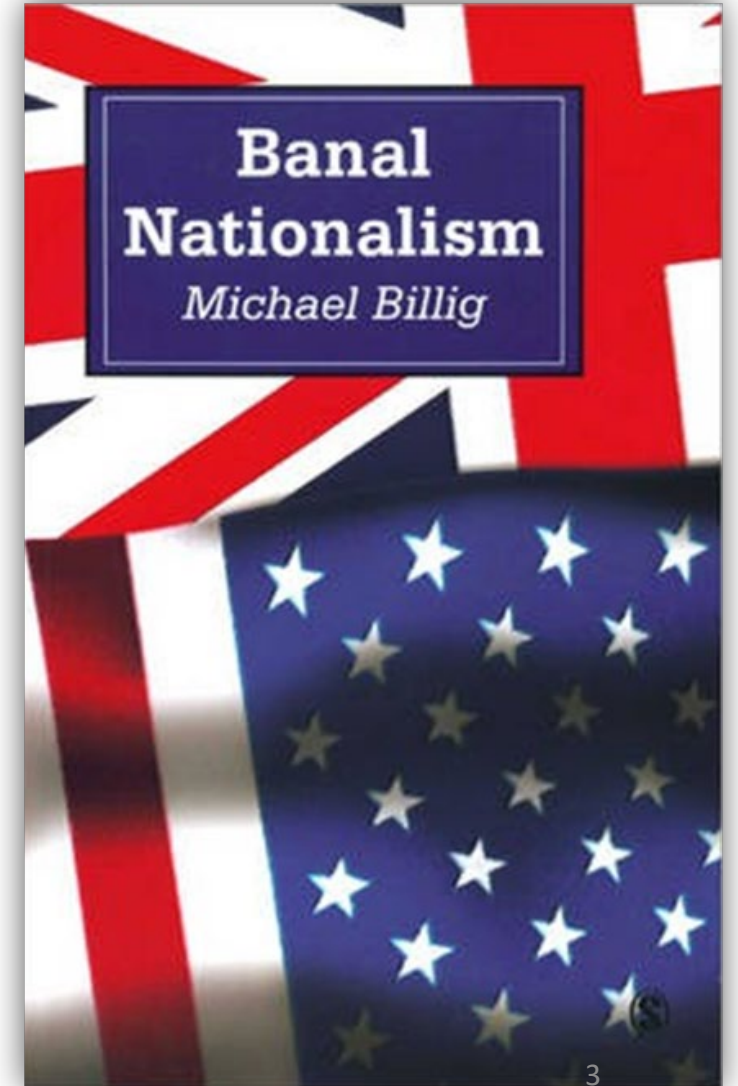
1. What is "*banal nationalism*"?

A successful book

Published in 1995, *Banal Nationalism* is the fourth most cited book on nations and nationalism after those by Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawm.



The author, Michael Billig, was born in 1947 into a Jewish family. He is a psychologist, student of Henri Tajfel (*Social Identity Theory*), professor of social sciences at Loughborough University (England).



A theory

It is a theoretical proposition according to which there is no difference in kind between vindictive, populist or separatist nationalism, and less 'hot' feelings such as patriotism, identity or national sentiment.



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According to Billig, nationalism is the universal ideology that takes the division of the world into nations as natural, and which makes the nation sacred by making it the source of the legitimacy of power.

An original thesis

Billig writes *Banal nationalism* and argues that nationalism is a universal, all-powerful ideology at a time when the social sciences predict the end of nations;

The book appears at the end of the great historiographical debate on the genesis of nations that lasted several decades and ended in the early 1990s with the victory of the modernists (Gellner, 1983 & Anderson, 1991, in particular).

Consequently, because nations are seen as historical and political constructs, they could and should soon give way to other political forms better suited to the evolution of humanity.

A provocative thesis

« It would be wrong to assume that ‘banal nationalism’ is ‘benign’ because it seems to possess a reassuring normality, or because it appears to lack the violent passion of the extreme right. As Hannah Arendt (1963) stressed, banality is not synonymous with harmlessness. In the case of Western nation-states, banal nationalism can hardly be innocent: it is reproducing institutions which possess vast armements ». (Billig, 1995, 7)

Nationalism benefits powerful nations. Yet nations and patriotism are defended by small nations - former colonies and stateless nations in particular, but not only - because the nation has become the only register available to challenge the domination of the powerful. It is in this sense that Billig believes that nationalism has become the only universal ideology.

Because it is provocative, the banal nationalism thesis is not always welcome.

2. *Banal nationalism*, how does it work?

By constant flagging

Firstly, it is the result of a continuous flagging of national belonging in the public space, the media and political discourse.

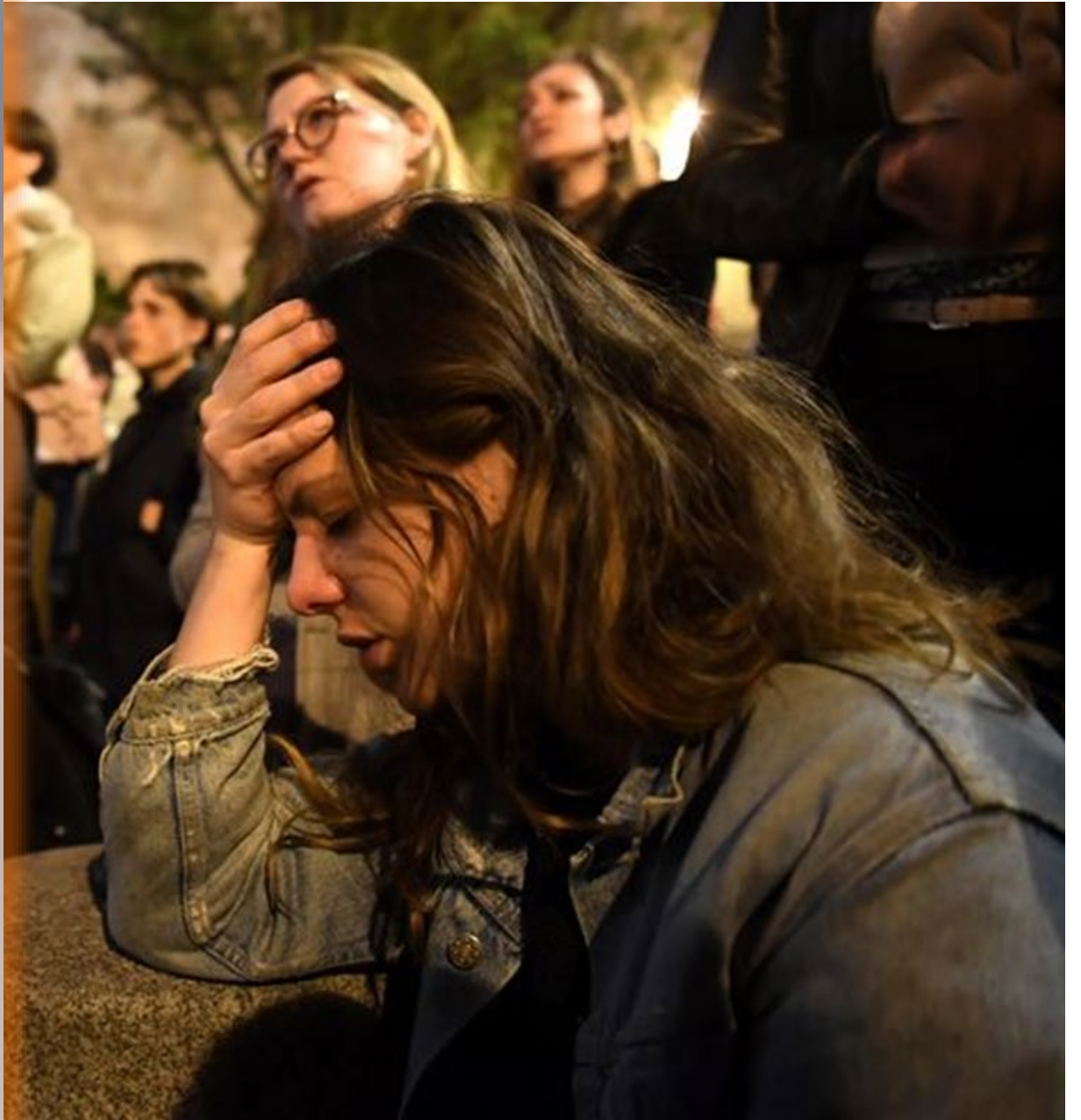


The French
underwear
Made in
France

Making
France
Fair trade
milk











Emmanuel Macron ✓

@EmmanuelMacron

Suivre



En 2018, vous aurez peut-être dans vos vies personnelles des doutes ou des drames, mais n'oubliez jamais que nous sommes la Nation française.

11:36 - 31 déc. 2017

4 910 Retweets 9 584 J'aime



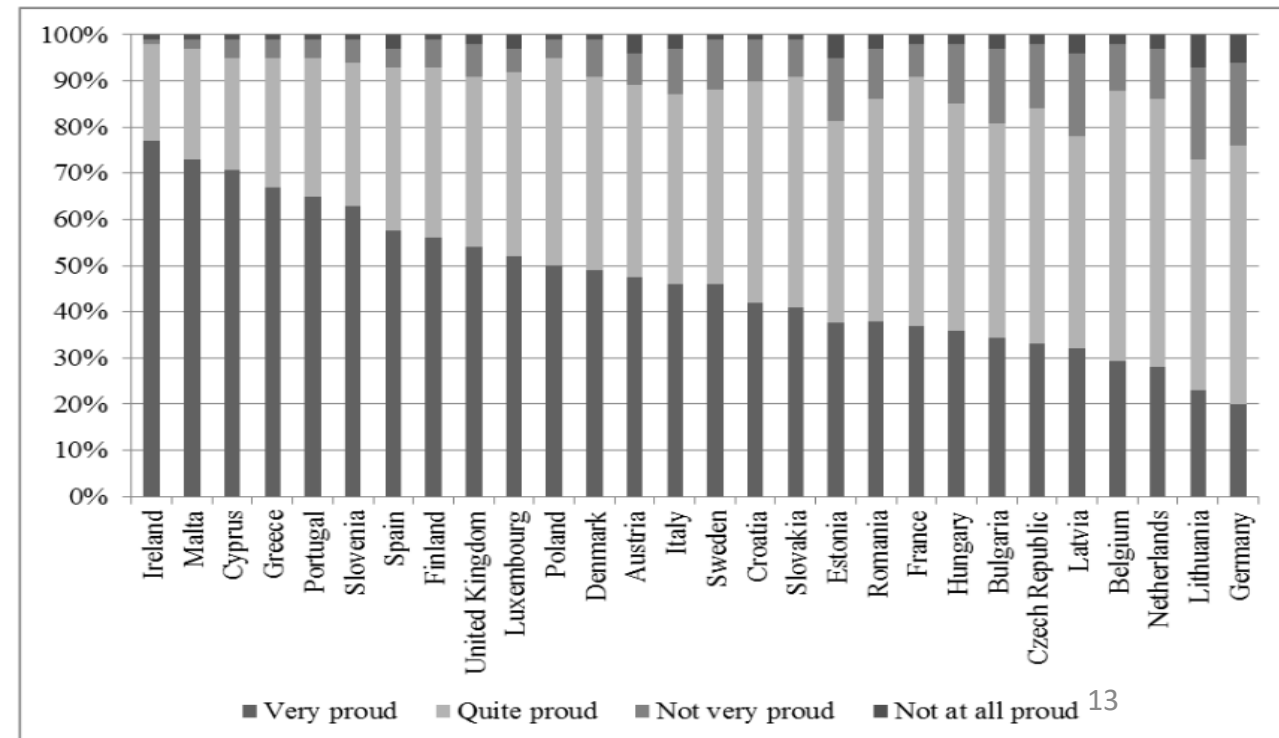
In 2018, you may have doubts or dramas in your personal lives, but never forget that we are the French Nation.

By the quasi disappearance of counterarguments

The notion of nation - and of people, which is its direct corollary - has become the indisputable register of legitimisation of power. The idea that we are the way we are because of our nationality is self-evident. "National Identity" has been fully naturalised.

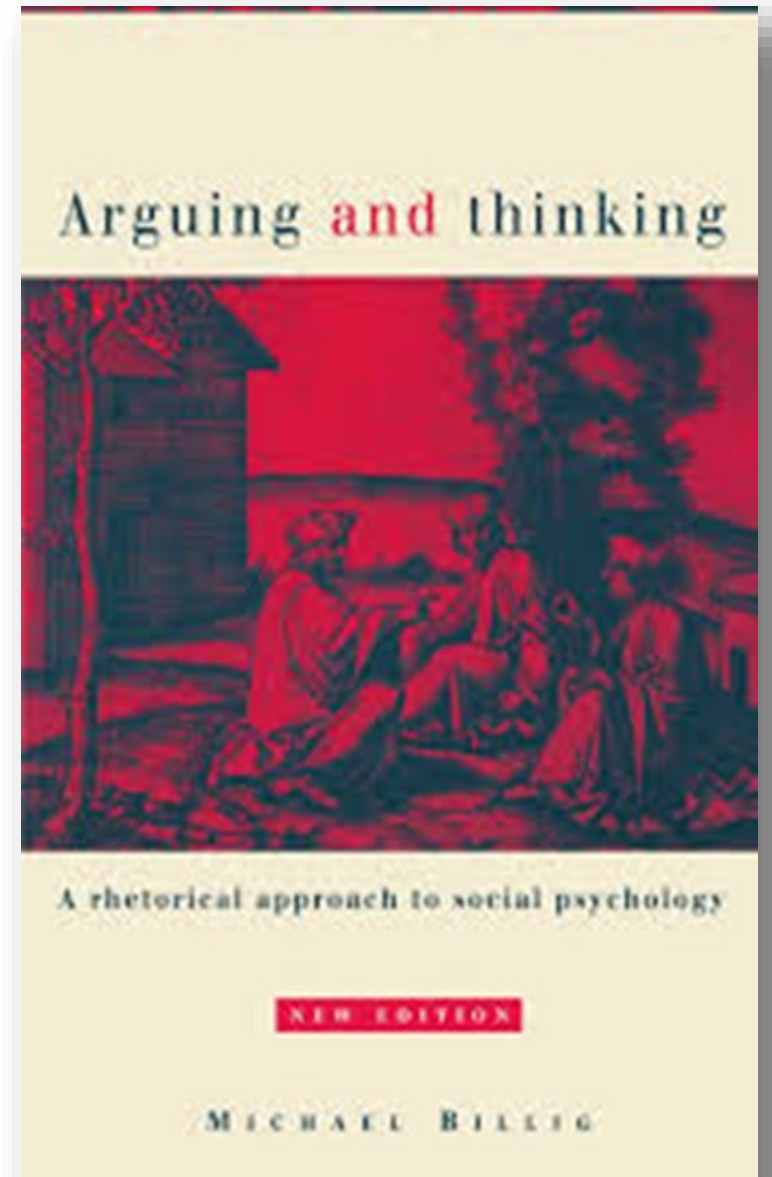
National pride reaches extremely high scores everywhere

Source: Survey data on nationalism, by Klára Plecítá –Vlachová
Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences.
Data EVS 2017



The quasi-disappearance of the universalist argumentative register - a register that can be opposed to nationalism in that it does not involve categorisation - is all the more problematic in Billig's eyes because, in his view, human thought functions rhetorically.

Billig argues that nationalism has killed the political imagination.



Banal nationalism evidence problem

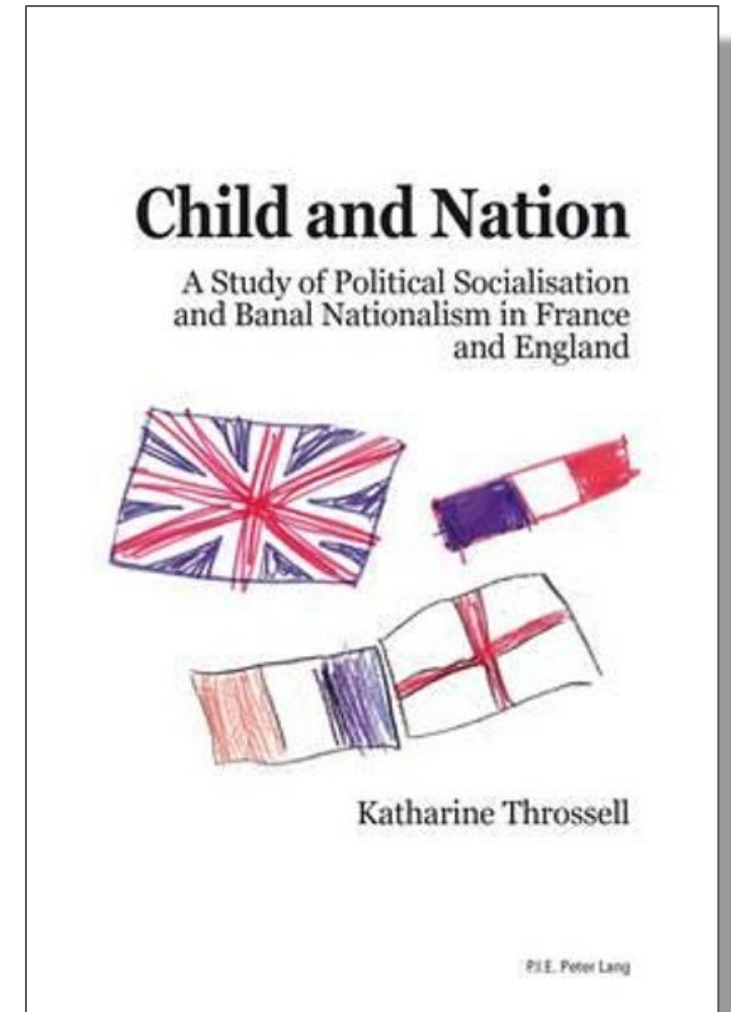
- The book *Banal nationalism* does not offer a systematic demonstration of its thesis. It suggests and exemplifies more than it proves it.
- Its first critics pointed at the lack of explanation of the way the flagging works.
- Jon Fox emphasizes the problem: how can we demonstrate the influence of the flagging when the point is that we don't see the flags, that we don't pay attention to them: they are all around and we don't notice?
- We can indeed look for the flags and show that they are plenty. That's been done quite often. But it does not solve the evidence problem.

By an early transmission: an additional explanation of the way banal nationalism works

One reason why national flagging goes largely unnoticed is that nationalism - in the banal sense of believing that the division of the world into nations is natural - is passed on from an early age, within the family.

Katharine Throssell shows that at the age of 8, children already know what a nation is, they know that they have a nation, that they have to love it, that it is bad to criticize the nation. They talk about the nation with words borrowed from the family vocabulary.

It is likely that this happens at a much earlier age.



3. ETPAF, a project that seeks to solve the problem of evidence of banal nationalism (at least in part!)

ETPAF in a nutshell

- Ongoing research project that aims to study how parents contribute to the transmission and naturalization of the division of the world into nations.
- Survey conceived with Maylis Ferry, PhD in political science (Doctoral thesis on the debates about the teaching of slavery at school);
- Funded by the Région Nouvelle Aquitaine, the DEPS, the INJEP and the Changes department of the University of Bordeaux;
- Implemented with two students, Louisa McDonald and Morgane Dirion;
- Project worked in close collaboration with Florence Delmotte, professor of political science at Saint Louis de Bruxelles and specialist of Norbert Elias;
- Larger team composed of sociologists, psychologists and researchers in educational sciences.

Research questions

The aim is twofold:

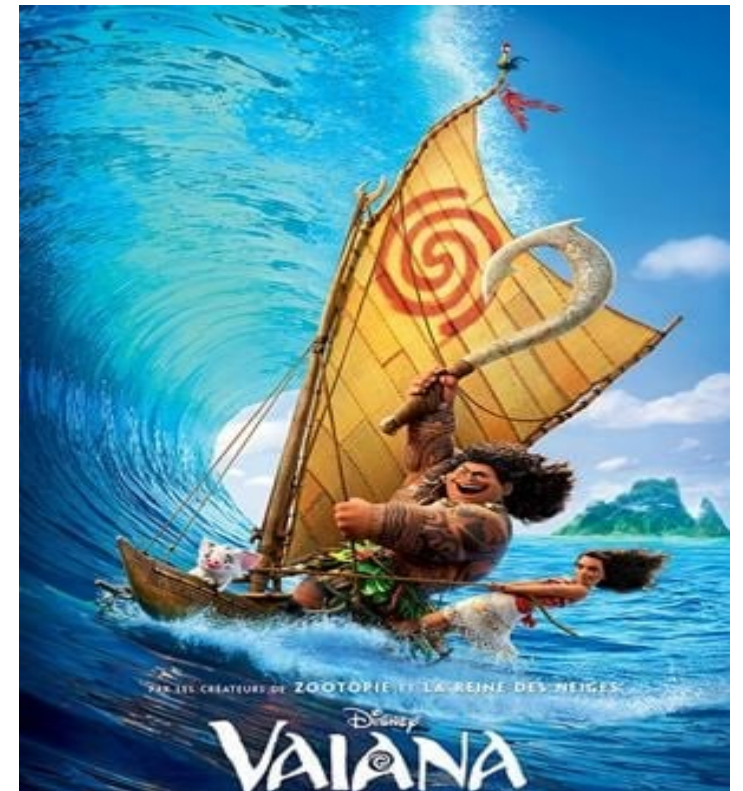
- On the one hand, to understand how parents transmit the love of the nation to their children: how much of this transmission is voluntary, how much is done in spite of them? What role do cultural products designed for children play in this transmission?
- On the other hand, on a more experimental note, to understand how parents, as adults, react to flagging when they become aware of it, and how they argue about the importance they attach to their nation when its evidence is questioned.

Research method

- The most obvious approach would be ethnography, if it were possible to enter the lives of enough families to have a representative sample (even in qualitative terms).
- Failing that, a system inspired by projective methods but enhanced by the involvement of the interviewer in the exchange which, as the survey progresses, explains more and more her position and finally her hypotheses.
- The interviews were conducted in three sessions (two hours each): one session to get to know the family well; one session to identify the family's cultural practices and the third to discuss nationalism.
- The interviews are compensated (200€ per family)

Session 1: Getting to know the family

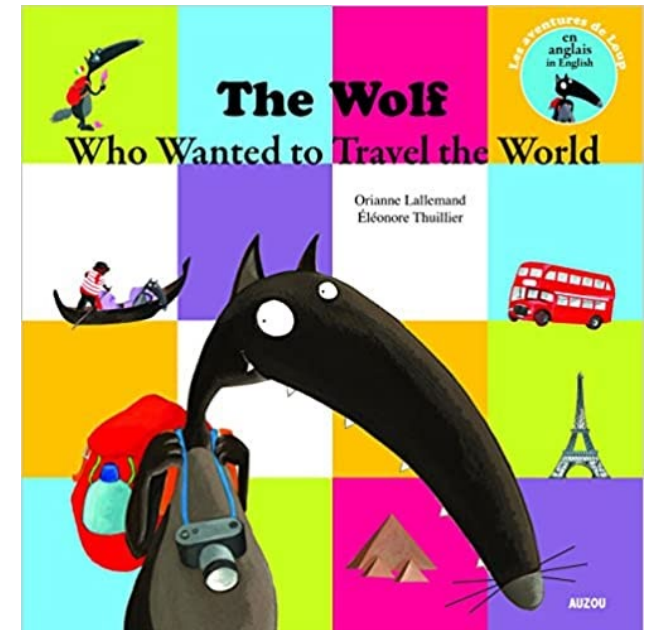
- Presentation of the survey and collection of the parents' consent (*General Data Protection Regulation* procedure);
 - Commented family tree of each parent;
 - Common time with the child around the photos chosen together (before the interview) and the drawing that the child has made of his family;
 - Daily life: how a weekday, weekend and holiday goes
- ❖ Instructions between the first two interviews: watch the Moana cartoon as a family



Session 2: Identifying cultural practices and moving towards the political

- Children's cultural practices: what they see, listen to, read, practice...
- Comment on a series of books/workbooks on the discovery of the world;
- Common time with the child: Debriefing around watching Moana;
- The first two *vignettes*: "You have to stand up for France: family friction during the 1998 World Cup" and "Carmen doesn't know what camembert is";
- ISSP questionnaire (extract) completed by each parent.

❖ Instructions before the third interview: read together *The wolf who wanted to go around the world*.



Session 3: The relationship to belonging

- Maslow's pyramid explained to the child;
 - Two other vignettes: "You must not damage the flag" and "Arthur's teacher does not want him to speak 3 languages at home";
 - Common time with the child around *The wolf who wanted to go around the world*;
 - Introduction to banal nationalism, using audio and video material.
- ❖ Distribution of gift vouchers



The difficulties of the research design

(COVID aside... and child interviews too!)

To build a sufficiently diverse sample: we tried to vary our recruitment strategies... including our leaflets!

- On the difficulty of providing a single survey protocol to families chosen for their diversity: financial compensation does not convince them all
- Cost and slowness of transcription
- Instability of the team...



Recherchons parent(s)
avec enfant de 5 à 6 ans
pour participer à une enquête !

3 séances d'entretien de 2 heures
environ chacune, à domicile
Dédommagement : 200€



Comment
on apprend
d'où on vient ?

Recherchons FAMILLES
avec ENFANT(S) de 5 à 6 ANS
pour participer à cette enquête.



3 séances d'entretien
2 heures environ chacune
200€ de rétribution

Comment
on apprend
d'où on vient ?

Recherchons
FAMILLES
avec ENFANT(S)
de 5 à 6 ANS
pour participer à
cette enquête.



3 séances
d'entretien
2 heures environ chacune, à domicile
200€ de rétribution

Si votre foyer comprend au moins un enfant âgé de 5-6 ans et que vous souhaitez
participer à cette enquête sur la transmission des appartenances

écrivez :
s.duchesne@sciencespobordeaux.fr

ou téléphonez :
06.31.86.55.80

En savoir plus :



<https://bit.ly/3ylQXHu>



Where do we stand now?

- Four pairs of interviewers took turns conducting 30 sets of three interviews with parents of a 5- or 6-year-old child and their child;
- The sample is indeed diverse, although it leans to the left and tends to overrepresent middle-class families;
- The parents' interviews are currently being transcribed;
- For the children's interviews, the question arises as to what we will do after the resignation of the doctoral student funded on the program.

Etape	Intervieweuse parents	Intervieweuse enfant(s)	N° entretien	Nom (fictif) de l'enfant	Date
Exploratoire	Sophie Duchesne	Maylis Ferry	0	X	Avril 20
			1	Louis	Juillet 20
			2	Clara	
			3	Ismaël	
Equipe 1	Maylis Ferry	Louisa McDonald	4	Joanne	Mai 21
			5	Henri	Mai-juin 21
			6	Clément	
			7	Malika	Juin-juillet 21
			8	Claire	Juillet 21
			9	Mélanie	Août 21
			10	Fouad	Septembre-octobre 21
			11	Julia	
			12	Julien	Octobre 21
			13	Nathan	
Equipe 2	Sophie Duchesne	Louisa McDonald	14	Léon	Novembre 21
			15	Timothée	Décembre 21
			16	Jeanne	Janvier 22
			17	Lucas	Janvier-février 22
			18	Elena	
			19	Stéphanie	Mars 22
			20	Alma	
			21	Emile	
			22	Héloïse	Avril 22
			23	Eliott	
24	Alba				
Equipe 3	Sophie Duchesne	Morgane Dirion	25	Albert	Mai 22
			26	Christie	Mai-juin 22
			27	Nicolas	
			28	Anton	Juin-juillet 22
			29	Jonas	

Conclusion: Some lines of analysis

- This survey allows us to analyse in detail what the agents of socialisation, i.e. the parents, think about their nation: their relationship to belonging and the way in which they see their role in transmitting national reference points;
- It confirms the evidence – in the French case - of the transmission of the national level as a very important level of identity to be transmitted;
- It brings out strongly the differences between father and mother - almost caricatured in some cases: the mother (must?) transmit the bond and the father, the preference and the competition;
- It should make it possible to observe differences in the nature of the relationship to the nation - by hypothesis, more turned towards the State for families with low economic and social capital and more towards the cultural community, for the others.
- **It should also provide us with more information about how banal nationalism works: the impact of flagging and how parents resist to the idea that their love to the nation is constantly imposed on them.**

Why bother about (banal) nationalism?

We (the research team) are often challenged to justify taking seriously the danger that banal nationalism poses to humanity. To believe that the division of the world into nations is natural seems to me to be threefold, apart from the risks of war:

- Because the omnipotence of national legitimacy is a powerful obstacle to humanity's ability to fight the climate catastrophe;
- Because it undoubtedly contributes to the crisis of confidence of citizens in their governments and with it, to the crisis of democracy; natio;
- Because it contributes to making competition the main driver of human activity, and in so doing, to the considerable impoverishment of humanity.

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