Beyond Imagined Uniqueness: Nationalisms in Contemporary Perspectives

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CHAPTER FOUR

POSTING NATIONALISM: POSTAGE STAMPS AS CARRIERS OF NATIONALIST MESSAGES

Henio Hoyo

To Maria, for all those things she knows so well.

The Banal Postage Stamp

Postage stamps are that kind of everyday-life objects that may provoke interest when first seen but then quickly become usual and largely ignored. In most cases, these small, colorful pieces of paper are quickly glued to a letter or package, without paying much attention to them. Maybe, after reaching friends, relatives and workplaces all around the world, some stamps will be preserved as a part of a collection. However, in most cases their destiny is again attached to the envelope they came with, being simply discarded or at best, kept in obscure archives, where they seldom will receive any further attention.

More or less the same can be said for the academic world. Most scholars see stamps just as little pieces of paper occasionally glued to the wrapping paper of those journals to which they are subscribed. Stamps will no appear in academic texts; if they do, their role will probably be more of a casual image than as a real part of the argumentation.

1 I want to thank my brother, José Luis Hoyo, for his support on my study of several items of the family collection.
However, we should be more careful when not noticing postage stamps; perhaps they not only accompany messages and texts but are messages on themselves. Precisely, my hypothesis is that, besides being devices for the payment of mail service and objects of collection, postage stamps work as “carriers” of an official national imaginary, promoted by a state and comprising messages about the history, features, composition and development of such nation.

This paper is divided in two main sections. The first includes a very brief state-of-the-art and an historical background of stamps, indicating two main paradoxes about them. Then, some observations on the use of images and symbols on nationalism will allow me to introduce my main arguments regarding the nature of stamps as “carriers” of nationalist messages. I will develop such argument by studying first how states and political actors direct or influence the design of postage stamps, and then how specific written or ideographic messages are depicted on them, so leading to a typology of messages about the nation that can be found on postage stamps.

The second section will test my arguments in two ways. The first will be a comparison aiming to find how political changes in a single state are reflected or narrated in the iconographic and written messages of stamps issued on different moments. The stamps of Germany seem to be ideal for such exercise: if my argument is correct, then a comparison between the stamps issued during the Nazi regime and those of the post-war period should show radically different messages regarding the German nation.

Next, I will perform a further comparison, analysing how the same historical episode is portrayed on the stamps of two different countries. I will study the messages and visions portrayed in stamps issued by Mexico and Spain, commemorating the 500 anniversary of the arrival of Columbus to the American continent: an episode that was not only celebrated, but extensively discussed as it points to issues that lay at the very core of the national identity of both countries. If my hypothesis is true, then the stamps should evidence the different visions involved.

This research is relevant because, despite the wide commercial and philatelic literature on postage stamps and the enormous number of collections around the globe, it is very remarkable that stamps have not received much attention on the academic world. The typology and comparisons made will not only test the hypothesis, but also show the potential of postage stamps as sources for further academic research. My sources will be, on the one hand, selected works on nationalism such as those by B. Anderson, M. Billig, and E. Hobshawn among others, together with the existing studies about the political messages and uses of postage stamps. For the comparative exercises I will rely mostly on the direct study of selected items of a private stamp collection.

State of the Art

Items like coins, banknotes or political posters are regarded as useful sources for research, but stamps have been largely ignored for such purpose, despite the fact they communicate as much information--to say the least. Apart of some isolated efforts it is quite recent that a small group of specialists engaged in a deep study of them. Their work, even if very valuable, is mostly devoted to country cases or to very particular topics, such as the depiction

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2 This paper is part of an ongoing research on the topic, so my findings are preliminary. My cases do not aim to make a detailed, quantitative analysis of all the stamps issued by Germany over several decades, nor of all the stamps issued around the globe dealing with Columbus’s trip. Such research is well beyond the scope of this article.
of scientists, or the use of underground stamps by the Solidarity movement in Poland.8 Regarding regional or small-scale comparisons, some interesting yet brief studies have appeared, such as those on post-colonial African stamps and their political connotations, or for Latin American countries.9 Still, works devoted to the political and governmental influences on the design and use of postage stamps are rather few,10 and larger comparative researchers are scarce indeed.11 In this way, there is still a lot of work to do for a more comprehensive understanding of the implicit and explicit messages in postage stamps, and its political applications.12

The Paradoxical Stamp

The use of written messages as a means of interpersonal communication across distance is certainly as old as literacy itself. However, written messages were usually restricted to specific social groups, not only (quite obvious) literate ones, but also those having some economic level: the technical difficulties implied, especially for long distances or sea routes, made mail services inaccessible for most of the population.

However, the growth of literacy, technological changes and the increased mobilization of human groups both inside a country (i.e., from rural communities to industrial cities) and across far distances (transatlantic migrations, colonial expansion) made it necessary for more and more individuals to use mail for reaching authorities, acquaintances or relatives. These developments demanded the creation of both efficient and affordable postal systems. Therefore, postage stamps were first proposed by Rowland Hill in a pamphlet in 1837, as a part of a larger communications reform in England.13 Up to then, the mail system was fragmented and complicated, and the fee was calculated according the distance, weight and number of pages of the letter. Furthermore, the fees had to be paid by the recipient—so quite frequently, after travelling for days, a letter had to be returned because the addressee was not willing or able to cover the expenses involved.14

To cope with this, Hill proposed a unified system where the sender would pay a fixed fee, receiving a stamp in return, which should be glued to the letter as evidence of payment. Thus, the first stamp (nicknamed “Penny Black” after its value and color) appeared in 1840, depicting a bust of the Queen Victoria.15 This system was an immediate success, so in the following twenty years the number of letters multiplied by ten. Also, the example was quickly followed overseas: by 1853, forty-four other countries were issuing stamps.16 By 1874, when the Universal Postal Union (UPU) was created, most independent states had their own national postal systems and monopolized the production of stamps.17 In this way, postage stamps became part of everyday life—of course, until electronic mail became common.

The history and role of postage stamps certainly account for their extensive use. However, they cannot explain other features of postage stamps. If, as we have seen, from a practical point of view stamps are just small technical devices (proofs of payment) then they would a rather minor issue in the administrative chain, especially when compared with the real administrative and logistic difficulties of handling enormous amounts of letters and packages by land, air, and sea. Even more negligible would be the particular aspect of the stamp—and certainly, there would not be any need for complex designs and colorful depictions on it.19 A proof of the payment of a postal service could have any format; a standard seal or a very simple stamp bearing the

11 Altman, Paper Ambassadors; Alexis Schwarzenbach, Portraits of the Nation: Stamps, Coins, and Banknotes in Belgium and Switzerland, 1880-1945, vol. III/847, European University Studies (Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Scott, European Stamp Design.
12 In other words, it is necessary to complete the chain “who/says what/ to whom/with what effect” regarding postage stamps and its political connotations (Reid, “The Symbolism,” 224). See also Brunn, “Stamps as Iconography,” 318.
13 Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 5-10; Reid, “The Symbolism,” 226-229.
15 Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 6.
amount paid, the date and the issuing authority, would suffice. 19

Here comes the first puzzle: everyday evidence shows that postage stamps are far more elaborate than that. As a matter of fact, stamps are created by specially hired artists and designers, and then produced by experts according to complex processes. Many are especially created to celebrate events or facts of historical or national significance (commemorative series and/or special series). In some cases, stamps are so aesthetically rich that they resemble true artworks. Even those stamps specifically designed for the everyday postal service (the definitive series, also named permanent or regular) have much more iconographic elements that the strictly necessary, like detailed and vivid depictions of the flora or fauna, examples of the national culture, or renowned persons, places, and monuments: too much for a fee-paying device. 20

A second observation is that, all around the world, specialized governmental agencies are the ones in charge of the design of postage stamps, making decisions about their pictographic elements, format and monetary value, and sometimes also monopolizing their physical production and distribution. Why? It sounds odd (to say the least) that a technical device is so important, that a special governmental agency must be set to deal with it.

Precisely, the second puzzle is that, despite their (allegedly) technical or administrative character, stamps are in fact very important for governments and states; so significant indeed, that one of the first actions of any new sovereign entity—or one claiming such treatment—is to issue its own currency, passports, and stamps. 21 The first two cases are quite reasonable, as they refer

19 This is what David Scott refers to as indexical function of the stamp and is the case, for instance, of the modern automated postmark (made by machines) that resembles very much a seal and does not have the iconographic richness of stamps (see Scott, European Stamp Design). The same applies, to a good extent, to the on-the-spot printing of stamps in modern mail offices. However, the extensive use of both technologies is quite recent, despite being far more efficient and cheap. Why they took so long to displace the postage stamp? A good reason would be that stamps had some other functions, which these technologies could not perform.

20 A striking comparison can be made between tax stamps and postage stamps. Most tax stamps have extremely simple designs, no special iconography, and bear just the amount to be paid and the issuing authority. They seem to be much closer to a “pure” fee-paying device. This fact supports the idea of postage stamps as having a “special role”: if tax stamps are so simple and yet functional, why postage stamps could not be the same?


22 Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 16. This pattern is repeated the same in the post-colonial states of Africa, that in the states product of the break-up of the Yugoslav and USSR federations, that issued their own stamps within their first year of independence; see, Brunn, “Stamps as Iconography,” Todd Pierce, “Philatelic Propaganda: Stamps in Territorial Disputes” Boundary and Security Bulletin 4, no. 2 (1996): 62-

to two strategic areas: the economy and the citizenship of the state. Why stamps should deserve the same attention?

The answers to both puzzles cannot be found in the administrative functions of stamps. Particularly, the iconographic richness is not justified at all by such role, and the aim to profit from philatelists is only a partial explanation. 23 We should focus instead on identifying other functions that could account for the importance and particular features of stamps. But to proceed with such analysis, I must first address some key notions of nationalism and particularly, how nationalist messages can be spread through everyday objects.

Three Key Facts of Postage Stamps

Our analysis starts by noting three key facts. The first one is, postage stamps are official documents designed, produced or at least approved by a nation-state; 24 second, that they have an international scope, as paper letters and their accompanying stamps travel not only inside, but also outside the borders of the issuing state. 25 These two facts already hint at the political


23 Of course, a good reason for the aesthetic quality of some stamps is the revenues made by sales to collectors (see Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 120-142). This is why many countries issue remarkably beautiful, elaborate pieces, or even whole series on topics with very little connection with them: for instance, those depicting Walt Disney characters or foreign celebrities, issued by certain states from Africa, Oceania, and the Caribbean (see Jones, “Heroes of the Nation?”, Kevane, “Official Representations of the Nation”) or, as more extreme cases, stamps of some Arab issuing entities depicting European paintings and sculptures of naked humans and intimate loving scenes, even if such stamps cannot be sold on the local market, for religious reasons, those celebrating foreign historical episodes (such as the conquest of space by the USA and USSR) or showing flora and fauna of far, tropical regions (see Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 123; Hoyo and Hoyo, Postage Stamp Collection, (several items); Posnansky, “Propaganda for the Millions,” 56, fig. 12; Reid, “The Symbolism,” 241. Also, the People’s Republic of Korea issued two special, very elaborate stamps celebrating the marriage of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, but it is highly unlikely that they were sold anywhere but in North Korea itself (see Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 75-76; Gabriel Jonson, “The Two Koreas’ Societies Issued Reflect in Stamps” East Asia 22, no. 2 (2005): 90.) However, these late cases perhaps should not be named postage stamps properly, as they do not have any real postage use.

24 Even if there are stamp-issuing authorities that are not States—such as the United Nations or the Sovereign Military Order of Malta—the actual use of their stamps for mail purposes is very limited or nil, being focused on the collector’s market instead.

25 Aidedez, “Commemorating the Chief,” Altman, Paper Ambassadors; Brunn,
implications of postage stamps. They also serve to differentiate them from other related items. For instance, the official quality of stamps distinguishes them from political posters, which can be issued not only by governments, but also by political parties, social organizations, unions or companies. Also, their international scope differentiate stamps from banknotes and coins, which are also issued by states, but are devised primarily to be used inside the boundaries of a given state or monetary union.

The last, third key fact is more elusive, but still remarkable. Relative to banknotes or posters, stamps have more individual character, as items sent to specific individuals and families. Political posters are addressed to large social groups (voters, workers, youth, women) and displayed in massive numbers on public places, in a very impersonal way. Currency is made to be used by everyone: the same banknotes and coins will be used once and again by countless anonymous persons. But postage stamps can be used only once—in fact, to put a seal on the stamp is called cancellation—and subsequently they become part of a particular letter, which is sent to a specific person or family in the world. This relative individual character is also noticed in the fact that, when a letter arrives, the first action of the recipient is to read the senders’ name and then commonly to check the stamp—especially if it comes from abroad and shows colorful, interesting designs or appealing slogans. In contrast, only cashiers look carefully at the currency they receive, and for quite different reasons.26

In sum: the official quality, the international scope, and the relative individual character of postage stamps should be taken into account to have a better understanding, not only of the roles of postage stamps, but also on the rationale of the entity issuing them. In other words: it is necessary to understand the goals and methods used by states to intervene on the design of postage stamps, in order to assess how images and slogans contained at them are ideologically charged: especially, how they depict a national imaginary: a vision that a given state promotes about the features, composition, history, and destiny of the nation (or nations) it rules.


In this vein, for a new nation-state is not only important to be sovereign; it is crucial to remind its population how important and meaningful such sovereignty is. This process starts from the very elementary school when a national history, language, and culture is taught for years and the national symbols are revered once and again, until they become deeply embedded on the minds of the future citizens of the nation. In this way, a particular vision about the features, composition, and history of the nation is interiorized, becoming a self-evident truth that should not be challenged. Of course, such vision should be continuously reinforced in order to preclude challenging visions, which could impact on the conception of the nation—i.e., regarding its history, social or ethnic composition, cultural expressions, history or destiny, language or any other element that (supposedly) marks the unique character of the nation and therefore, defines it against all the rest in the world.

All these interiorized, shared beliefs about the special nature of the nation, its history and features are represented through an official imaginary that takes great advantage of symbols and slogans. Therefore, the display of flags, arm coats, national maps etc. is constant, even in such unglamorous places as the entrances of bureaucratic institutions or in so apolitical situations like a weather report on TV news. In the words of Michael Billig, nationalism can be banal, but banality does not mean triviality. This continuous flow of messages reminds individuals about the existence of a nation; of their condition, rights, and duties as members of such nation; and of the existence of a structure of power ruling it. This kind of nationalism is less visible, but certainly no less important than the militant, vociferous nationalism of grandiose, massive political parades, and strenuous declarations. Together, the teaching of a national imaginary in school and the everyday use of symbols permit the prevalence of the nation in the minds of its citizens in an almost natural way.

Apart from schools, museums, and flags everywhere, there are several other ways to promote an official national imaginary. For instance, banknotes and coins not only allow trading, but also show that there are national institutions regulating such interchange. On a banknote there is always a seal, an institutional name and commonly, a signature of an official of the state. Besides, the nation itself is portrayed on its money through depictions of monuments, objects, and important persons. Other cases of “nation flagging” include the public ceremonies and national festivals, which periodically remind both children and adults about the existence and history of the nation, or during the burial of prominent figures. Clearly, a similar role have national pavilions at the World Fairs devoted to display the nation to foreign audiences. Finally, the media has an essential role: radio, TV, and newspapers are extremely important on the diffusion and reaffirmation of the national imaginary and propaganda.

In sum: it is essential to understand the role of such instruments on the spreading and reinforcement of a particular national imaginary because, if successful, this can assure the personal attachment and loyalty to a nation. From what was stated above we can already perceive that postage stamps, being official documents that travel both inside and outside the frontiers of the issuing state and reach specific individuals, are ideal vehicles for diffusing an official national imaginary. Scott is right when saying that “the stamp . . . probably has more concentrated ideological density per square centimetre than any other cultural form.” For this very reason, stamps have been called the “windows of the state”; “portraits of the nation” or “official representations” of it; as well as “paper ambassadors” that carry “a certain picture of the world”. Let us explain briefly how this is made possible.
Who Stamped the Messages?

A very good way to assess the involvement of political actors on the production of postage stamps is to study the processes according to which they are produced. The studies on this field are few. One, recent and detailed, is Schwarzenbach’s comparative analysis of the decision-making processes of the “bearers of value” (stamps, coins, and banknotes) of Belgium and Switzerland. Also, very insightful is the work by Frewer and Dobson on the Japanese case. They find that, for the design and production of postage stamps, the Japanese Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MOPT) work through a very complex committee system that unites both artistic creation and political considerations.

A first, clear sign of the political relevance of postage stamps is that, for the definitive series, it is normally the Cabinet itself who decides the topics to be issued or changed. Only then a team of artists, designers and specialists create the stamps, under close inspection by high-ranking civil servants from MOPT’s Postal Bureau.

If that is for the definitive series, the commemorative stamps (because of their very nature) can be even more politically significant. In this case, the procedures for Japanese stamps initiates annually with the active involvement of other governmental ministries and agencies. They send their proposals of topics to be commemorated, following MOPT guidelines—i.e. that stamps must recall nationally important events “that people should remember”; portray significant Japanese historical events, or honor persons that contributed to the culture and academic learning of Japan. Topics such as religious, political, and industry groups, or “controversial issues” are banned.

After receiving the initial proposals, MOPT’s Postal Bureau appoints a committee of public officers, technical specialists, artists, art historians, and some other experts to select the commemorative stamps that should be issued next year. This selection is subjected to political negotiation between the Head of the Postal Bureau and the members of other governmental agencies; finally, the MOPT’s Minister must approve the final list of stamps. The fact that stamps are the subject of an annual political negotiation involving several Japanese state agencies and high-ranking officers is enough to indicate their political importance. However, a further indication of it is that, when an agreement cannot be reach, it is the Cabinet itself which makes the final decision.

As a result, the process of stamp design and production in Japan combines artistic and technical creation with very important political considerations. Hence, in the Japanese commemorative stamps produced after the end of the Second World War we can find a clear message regarding the new place of Japan on the world: they portray traditional Japanese identity and history but at the same time promote an image Japan as a prosperous, pacific, and democratic country and particularly, as one having a direct involvement on international peace and cooperation.

Let us make a comparison by taking a very different case: for instance, the contemporary policies regarding stamp issues of Mexico. In this case, the topics of the stamps can be suggested not only by governmental agencies, but also by private or social organizations as long as they sign a contract with the Mexican Postage Service (SEPMEX) and pay a fee for the issue. The guidelines for the topics are more general: for instance, stamps “must be closely related with the cultural identity” and “to have an important meaning” for the country or the particular territorial unit where the contracting institution lies; also, they must “avoid topics or designs that can be offensive for a person or a country”.

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42 Schwarzenbach, Portraits of the Nation.
44 Following a governmental reform, the MOPT became part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in September 2004, and also first a Postal Services Agency was created and afterwards a public corporation—Japan Post—appeared in 2003. See Dobson, “The Stamp of Approval,” 57.
46 Ibid.
47 Dobson, “The Stamp of Approval;” Frewer, “Japanese Postage Stamps.” Dobson also argues that some politicians and social groups had been able to influence the selection of commemorative stamps, but in a more or less veiled way. (Dobson, “Japanese Postage Stamps,” 29-34.) This contrasts with the existence of a real “lobbying” regarding the design and topics for commemorative stamps in, for instance, USA and Australia (Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 94-97).
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 11-17.
51 On 8 September 2008, SEPMEX changed its name to Correos de México (Mexico Post) as part of a larger organizational reform.
After reaching an agreement, SEPOMEX is in charge of the design and production of the stamp while the sponsor institution should provide brief information about the topic or events to be celebrate, and can also provide graphic elements for the design—but SEPOMEX can opt for not using them. One further restriction is that the stamps can only be issued on the occasion of the 25 anniversary and its multiples for “pieces of art, scientific, and technological discoveries and developments, archaeological discoveries and natural sites.” There are also “special stamps” related to current events, particular dates (i.e. Teacher’s Day), topics without a specific timeline, or events that do not comply with the aforementioned rule of the 25 years.

Therefore, the design of commemorative and special series of Mexico is quite open. As a result, we can find very diverse topics and both governmental and non-governmental organizations acting as sponsors. For instance, in the period 2005-2007 federal Ministries like the ones of the Navy, of Public Education, and of Foreign Affairs sponsored stamps, and other federal agencies like the National Institute for Fine Arts and Literature or the Women’s National Institute did the same. Also the Legislative Power and the Supreme Court had their stamps, and even some local governments. Non-governmental actors also actively ordered stamps: so different subjects were commemorated such as 100 years of the Scout movement, 125 years of the Lebanese immigration to Mexico, and 50 years of the B.A. studies on Public Administration.

Furthermore, special issues included one stamp with the slogan “children, future of Mexico” sponsored by the firm Bimbo, while a second celebrated 90 years of El Universal, a privately owned newspaper. In this way, the Mexican case is quite open to external influences, at least regarding the design and production of commemorative and special stamps. The definitive series seem to be much more controlled, as their design is made by SEPOMEX itself. In any case: when events of profound historical relevance for Mexico are celebrated, it is sure that a stamp will be issued about it.

We will not get more into details on the specific ways governments control the design of postage stamps. Yet, from these contrasting cases is possible to assume that independently of the particular design and production procedures, stamps are still under bureaucratic and political control of states, trough specialized agencies. Therefore, by selecting individual items, we can now analyze what they communicate about the issuing state and especially, if an official national imaginary can be identified on them.

How to Address the Nation?

There are several possible ways to study postage stamps and their messages. From the point of view of semiotics, we can find three levels of meanings on any image: one that is immediately noticeable by the image itself, a second that can be implied by inclusion of symbols, and a third, “poetic” meaning that can be derived from the whole image and the specific circumstances. Certainly, we can find these meanings in any stamp. Moreover, the nature of postage stamps as official documents with international scope allows us to identify different aims of such messages: they identify a country for purely postal purposes; they represent it at home and abroad through recognizable symbols (flags, crowns, coats of arms); finally, they show particular, chosen aspects or moments of such country.

However, our main concern here is regarding the national imaginary as presented on postage stamps. Therefore, I will use the following typology to
classify the messages carried in stamps, in written and/or iconographic forms, regarding the nation.

1. human composition, especially regarding the ethnic features of the members of the nation.
2. cultural identity, comprising artistic manifestations (i.e., dresses, dances, music types, handcrafts, fine art pieces) and also social features that constitute cultural markers of the group, such as a given language or languages.
3. geographical composition, including not only maps of the national territory and references to its borders (whether claimed or de facto) but also about the physical features of the nation, both natural and human-made: landscapes, rivers, named mountains, but also cities, roads, monuments.
4. foreign relations, including its activities and relations with international actors (states or international organizations) and also general topics such as the promotion of international cooperation, of peace, or security.
5. historical development, including not only factual historical events, but also mythology and narratives about heroes and accomplishments.
6. political regime, especially about the type of state it is (kingdom, republic, federation etc.) and its dominant ideology, governmental organizations, relevant political groups, and specific members of the state leadership.
7. national economy, especially regarding key resources of the nation, strategic industries, central banks, currency, or key market institutions.

Of course, this list is not exhaustive. A further category might include accomplishments in the realms of science, technology, and knowledge, for instance presenting scientists as “heroes of the nation” or at least, as its representatives. Many other possibilities exist and in fact, some very detailed typologies, based on semiotic analysis, have been made.

However, these seven categories will be enough for a study that focus on the messages relevant for the promotion of a national imaginary by the issuing state. We must be aware that these categories are never presented in a “pure” form in any given stamp; in fact, in most cases we will find a combination of many of them. For that reason, the proposed categories should be taken only

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64 See Jones, “Heroes of the Nation?”
65 These typologies are much more focused on the particular kind of images depicted. For instance, in their large study of Finnish stamps, Raento and Brunn identified sixteen very specific categories, from “tourism, leisure, recreation” to “cartography” (Raento and Brunn, “Visualizing Finland”). Brunn also found twenty-four major themes in his detailed study of first stamps in the successor states to the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia (Brunn, “Stamps as Iconography”). However, my interest is not so much on an extensive classification of all the possible topics, but only on those messages relevant for the promotion of the issuing State of a particular national imaginary.

as an analytical device made, precisely, to study the depictions in stamps of a given national imaginary—which is always made of different elements melted in a (seemingly) coherent unity.

Next, I will make two brief case studies: one analyzing a selection of stamps issued by a single country (Germany) over a certain period of time, and the other comparing stamps regarding the same topic but issued by two different countries: Spain and Mexico. The first case will be useful to show how different national imaginaries are displayed across time in the stamps of a single political entity, enabling us to “read” them as an historical progression and to relate their changes to political, social and cultural changes on the issuing state. The second case will be helpful for comparing the different perceptions that two states have regarding the same topic or event, permitting us to compare the official national imaginaries involved—especially when the particular event or topic is cause of political debates.

First Case: Stamps of History

Germany offers the unique opportunity of studying a country that, in a relatively short period of time, transited through several political regimes. In this vein, Lauritzen has studied the images and meanings of postage stamps during Nazism, showing the heavy political influence over their design and its uses for ideological propaganda.66 Here I will make a study of two samples, one coming from the Nazi era, and the other from the post-war Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). This will allow a comparative study of the messages carried in both samples. Following the categorization of components of national imaginaries developed above, I will focus my attention on those depictions with messages about the political regime, the geographical composition and the foreign relations of Germany, as they seem to be the most promising for the analysis.

Even if their iconographic design is quite simple and their texts are minimal, these stamps (figs. 4-1, 4-2, 4-3) contain easily recognizable messages about the political regime of the issuing state. In fact, they seem to be designed to be very noticeable, not only by its strong colors (red, dark blue) but also by the depiction of very meaningful symbols. Here, the political pillars of Nazism are shown: the ideology (using the prominent, central swastika as its symbol) the party, with the ominous eagle on a pillar, and the Führer himself.

66 All stamps tend to “the consolidation of national consensus around agreed-upon symbols which, in almost all cases, deny uncomfortable differences of class, race, or belief [inside that nation]” Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 101.
67 Lauritzen, “Propaganda Art.”
68 This despite the fact that it was not until 1937 that Hitler himself started to appear...
on it, the dark rock becomes easily identifiable as a lump of coal, to which the very dark-olive color of the stamp also helps. But there is more: a closer look on the angular shapes and the patterns of shadow and light on the characters themselves, make them appear to be made of some kind of metal. This is not an accident, as the region was also host of a very important steel industry. In this way, the stamp makes clear that Germany is not only claiming the territory itself, but the precious resources it harbors, in order to make them part of the national economy.

Taken all together, the postage stamps shown in figs. 4-1 to 4-4 are in fact very successful in communicating the type of political regime, foreign relations, territorial composition and national economy of the Nazi regime: Germany as a land with a single leader and party, with a all-dominant ideology, insisting on its territorial demands and also on the control over the key resources it needs for its national goals.\(^6\) We can only wonder what a French citizen would think if receiving a letter with the Saar stamp glued on it.

Now we can compare these stamps with those of the FRG, for instance, those definitive series minted during the seventies and eighties. Two of the most important of such series, comprising a great number of individual items, were devoted to castles (fig. 4-5) and to technological and scientific developments (fig. 4-6). Later, a series about German notable women was introduced; the piece devoted to the Jewish-German political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt was one of the most widely distributed (fig. 4-7).

By these stamps, the FRG promoted a very different national imaginary: Germany is shown as a country focused on development, especially of the peaceful aspects of technology (fig. 4-6) but also concerned with social

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\(^6\) In fact, postage stamps have been a favorite way to assert territorial claims. Many countries have minted stamps with maps that explicitly include disputed lands as part of the territory of the issuing State; for instance, Argentina regarding Falkland Islands, Guatemala on Belize, Venezuela on Guyana, and a number of countries on Antarctic territories. See Altman, *Paper Ambassadors*; Peter J. Beck, “Argentina’s ‘Philatelic and Semiotics,’” *Fierce, Philatelic Propaganda.* The same applies for the Bolivian gasta, by means not only of maps but also landscapes and commemorative issues regarding Jammu and Kashmir. (see Fierce, “Philatelic Propaganda” also Andrew Wyatt, “Do our stamps evoke nationalism?” *The Hindu*, 30 October 2005, http://www.hindu.com/thethindu/mag/2005/10/30/stories/2005103000100100.htm. Accessed 1

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Fig 4-1. The Ideology.
Fig 4-2. The Party.
Fig 4-3. The Leader.
Fig 4-4. Territorial reclamations.

in postage stamps. Before this, *Reichspräsident* Hindenburg was the leader depicted on the definitive series, and this continued even for some years after his death in 1934. Ibid., 69.
issues, like gender equality. In contrast, stamps of the Nazi era depicted almost exclusively males. The geographical allusions survive, but they are not regarding boundaries: the referents shown are now well-known German historical sites, depicted in simple but unequivocal ways.

Therefore, from the analysis of the definitive series, a radical change in the political regime is clear: from the challenges to existing borders to a focus on the internal landscapes; from the emphasis in coal and steel to a focus in peaceful technologies; from stark pictures of Hitler to soft portraits of Hannah Arendt. In other words, Germany changing from a national imaginary reflecting the totalitarian ideology, militarism and a exclusivist ethnic definition of the Nazi regime, to one where the German nation is defined mostly by a shared culture, and a common commitment to peace, democracy, social rights, and equity.

These findings about FRG’s definitive series can be verified in commemorative stamps. For instance, one of them (fig. 4-8) celebrates the proclamation of Jean Monnet as “honorary citizen of Europe” by the European Council. The second (fig. 4-9) celebrates 25 years of German-French cooperation, in both German and French languages. When compared with the Nazi stamps, the differences are immediate. The new ones abandon any aggressive connotation; on the contrary, they clearly promote a vision of Germany as a country basing its international relations on peaceful cooperation—particularly with its neighbor, France.

From the international component, now we can turn to messages regarding the internal political situation. A particular stamp (fig. 4-10) is extremely appealing. It depicts, on the right side, a synagogue on flames; there is a Star of David on the left and below it, a text that can be translated as “the secret of redemption is named remembrance.” This particular stamp commemorates 50 years of the Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht) when thousands of synagogues and Jewish properties were burnt, and tens of thousands of Jews were deported to concentration camps. The stamp and its symbols explicitly show, to both Germans and foreigners, a dreadful episode of German history that are neither denied nor forget. In fact, it explicitly endorses the German policy of constant remembrance of the Holocaust and, by doing so, reaffirms the compromise with freedom and tolerance that the FRG is committed to.

Let us summarize: by analyzing the postage stamps issued by a single country in two different periods, we can trace the changes in its official national imaginaries regarding (at least) the following components: the political regime, the geographical composition of the nation, its international affairs, its economy, and of course, its historical development. In this vein, the comparison of German stamps from the Nazi period and those of the FRG leads to two totally opposite messages: the first is centered on the ideological supremacy and the rigid political control of German society, coupled with an aggressive view of the relations of the German nation with his neighbors and of course, the retrieval of the territories, resources and influence lost.
on the Treaty of Versailles. The second is one of a republic guided by the principles of peace, cooperation, tolerance and social inclusion, as well as the conscious, constant remembrance of the errors of the past, and the pro-European inclination of the new Germany.

Second Case: the Mark of Disagreement

In 1992 the world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus to the American Continent. The event was marked in very diverse ways all around the globe and also sparked intense debates, especially about the consequences of the colonialist European expansion upon native populations. It is not a surprise that the views differed radically; there is a lot of work done on this topic by historians, anthropologists and sociologists, especially those of the American continent.

However, instead of making an overview of the endless debates, I will analyze how the event was depicted on commemorative postage stamps of both Spain (figure 4-11) and Mexico (figure 4-12). If my hypothesis is true, we should be able to detect clear differences on how the two countries perceived and presented a transcendental event in their national histories and mythologies, and how it was represented in their stamps.

On first sight, the slogans make it clear that there are deep differences on how the two countries interpreted the arrival of Columbus. While the Spanish stamp refers to it as the *Descubrimiento de América* (Discovery of America) the Mexican stamp names it as an *Encuentro de Dos Mundos* (Encounter of Two Worlds). The meanings are quite different; in the first, Spain is explicitly discovering, therefore implying that something, previously unknown to humans, has been revealed: A New World has been found.

In contrast, the Mexican stamp does not allude to a "discovery" but to a meeting. By doing this, it points at the fact that there were populations on the Americas before 1492 and therefore, that America was "discovered" long before Columbus. This immediately makes clear fundamental oppositions on the understanding of the pre-Hispanic world: in one version, the land and their inhabitants are found by an allegedly superior civilization; in the second version, two diverse but fundamentally equal civilizations meet.

These contrasting views of history are strongly reinforced through the iconographic depictions. The Spanish stamp distinctly presents a sailor with long hair, beard and a proud look. Beside of him, one passage of the *Libros del Chilam Balam* (Chilam Balam books)\(^3\) is quoted, describing the arrival of the "foreigners of red beards, the sons of the Sun, the men of light colour." Additionally, on the upper left corner there is a crown above a small number 500. Certainly, the elements refer to the celebration of an historical discovery, but they also give a clear sense of the superiority of the discoverers: of a proud Spaniard sailor contemplating his accomplishment.

For its part, the Mexican stamp is also very rich on its iconographic elements. It is organized according to a symmetrical pattern (both horizontally and vertically) and is also based on two contrasting colors: dark green and pale orange. The upper part shows an indigenous figure, while the lower part shows a crown. On the left side lies an ear of corn; on the right there is one of wheat. All these elements are surrounding the depiction of two hands (the left one being much darker than the right) performing a handshake. The stamp uses symmetry and contrasting elements and colors, in order to present an opposition that, by the shaking of hands, seems to be settled.

What do the depictions on the stamps tell us about the national imaginary of each country? Both contain messages about an historical development relevant for the respective nations—but the visions about it are strikingly different. The Spanish piece depicts the arrival of Columbus as an achievement, in almost scientific terms (a "discovery") but also as a conquest by an emerging global Empire—insinuated this by the symbol of the small crown and the two hemispheres. The proud gesture of the Spanish sailor helps to this impression of superiority, and the (carefully selected) Mayan text seems to confirm it.\(^4\)

\(^3\) The *Chilam Balam* books are a compilation of ancient Mayan texts, with topics ranging from history to astronomy and medicine. They are regarded as one of the most important literary and cultural surviving pieces of Maya civilization, together with the *Popol Vuh* and the *Rabinal Achi*.

\(^4\) It should be noticed that the *Chilam Balam* is a collection of different writings, and some of them are really not so sympathetic with the European new-comers and their rule.
The Mexican stamp depicts a very different image. Apart of the very clear “encounter of two worlds” phrase, the symmetry, the iconographic elements and even the colors seem to create a sense of equality between two actors, the Indigenous and the Spaniard. This in fact mirrors the national imaginary, as for the official Mexican official imaginary, is crucial the idea of the Mexicans as a pueblo mestizo (mixed people), product of the combination of Indigenous and European populations.75

The Mexican stamps depicts such imaginary in a very straightforward way. First, by explicitly referring to the foundational myth itself—the “encounter of two worlds” from which the modern Mexican nation was born. Second, by stressing the human composition of the Mexican nation, depicted on ethnic terms as the result of the mixing of two races. Third, the (also mixed) cultural identity of the nation, portrayed in terms of food: the indigenous corn on the left side, which still constitutes the base of Mexican diet (particularly in form of tortillas) and the wheat on the right, indicating the European bread.76 The message is, again, about modern Mexicans as being a synthesis of the “men of corn” and “the men of wheat”: that is, as mestizos. The message, congruent with the national imaginary of modern Mexico, is that two different but equally valuable worlds are at the core of the Mexican nation. This can be corroborated on more stamps commemorating the same matter (figure 4-13) that also use dichotomies to express an overall synthesis.

In sum, it is clear that the commemoration of the 500 years of Columbus trip to the Americas was politically relevant in both Spain and Mexico; however, each country interpreted such event in very different ways. For Spain, the descubrimiento de América refers not only to the Kingdom of Ferdinand II and Isabella I, but also to the subsequent, mythical Siglo de Oro (Spanish Golden Age) and the sixteenth century Habsburg Empire of Charles V and Phillip II, which is still central on the national history and imaginary of modern Spain. In this way, the Spanish stamp (figure 4-11) serve to remind both Spaniards and foreigners about the glorious past of

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75 In this vein, the 1925 work by José Vasconcelos is fundamental for this conception Latin Americans as being a new “race,” product of the mixture of other ones. (Bilingual reprint: José Vasconcelos, The cosmic race / La raza cósmica, trans. Dieder Tisdell Jaén (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Altman mentions, precisely, the 1930’s as the moment when Mexican stamps start to display explicit references to its indigenous heritage (see Altman, Paper Ambassadors, 66-67). However, this not totally true because, as early as 1895, stamps were issued honoring the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc. James E. (Ed.) Kloezeitl, “Scott 2008 Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue,” (Sidney, OH: Scott Publishing, 2007).

76 There is an additional but subtle mythological reference, as in the Mayan tradition, the Gods created the four original men out of corn.
in other words, to present Mexico as the modern heir of two equally valuable civilizations.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to prove the nature of postage stamps as “carriers” of an official national imaginary, comprised of messages about the history, features, composition and development of the nation. This was done by first, identifying some paradoxes of postage stamps, suggesting that they do not perform just administrative and philatelic roles. Then I argued that the official quality, international scope and relative individual character of postage stamps have made them ideal “carriers” to spread such official national imaginaries, both inside and outside the frontiers of the issuing state. To support this, I analyzed some ways in which governments intervene on the design of postage stamps. Then I proposed a categorization of the components of the national imaginary that a postage stamp can contain. Finally, I made the analysis to two cases: one looking of the stamps issued by the same state during two different historical moments; and the other focused on how the same historical event is presented by the stamps issued by two states.

From the analysis made, I can conclude that the initial hypothesis was confirmed—namely, that postage stamps work as “carriers” of an official national imaginary, comprises messages about the history, features, composition and development of the nation and which is promoted by the state ruling over it. Furthermore, the study showed the potential of postage stamps especially as sources for research on (but not limited to) nationalism. In fact, there is much work to be done on this field, whether on theoretical matters or concrete cases; and by using comparative or quantitative approaches. It can be said that, regarding postage stamps and nationalism, many issues are still pending to be addressed.

Chapter Five

NATIONALISM IN CHINA: IS IT INCREASING? IS THIS HELPFUL?

David A. Jones

Nationalism has played a significant, if sometimes changing, role in the long and winding road across the history of China for at least 2200 years since the founding of the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C.E. by Qin Chi Huang. This topic overlaps politics, but also culture and individual viewpoint. The word “National” appears in the name of a major political party from China’s history and the current political structure of Chinese Taiwan, but this paper explores the issue of nationalism well beyond the Chinese Nationalist Party, Kuo Ming Tong (KMT). The KMT candidate for President of the Republic of China, Ma Ying-jeou, ethnically Han and politically warm to peaceful cross straits reunification, won a landslide victory in the Taiwanese Presidential election on 22 March 2008, and this may be significant to the question of whether nationalism across China is “on the rise” as some of China’s intellectuals contend. Also, it is important to note that Lien Chen, Honorary Chairman of the KMT, and his wife, Lien Fang Yu, visited what is considered to be the tomb of Huang Di (Yellow Emperor) in Xinzhen, Henan, as the first part of what would become his fourth official visit to mainland China on 16 April

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