Object centric study of everyday nationalism in a preschool

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In his work on 'banal nationalism,' Michael Billig (1995) discusses the daily reproduction of beliefs and habits, which structure everyday life in modern nations. He argues, that in media, the nation is naturalised through everyday talk. Furthering his ideas, in this paper I explore the habituated nature of national existence as it is materially embedded and naturalised in the everyday lives of preschool children. Nationalism studies have largely conceived of objects in terms of their semiotic and symbolic qualities, their sign value. They have generally subscribed to a conception that different objects carry with them symbolic meanings. New studies seek to trace out how different objects make part of broader ‘material cultures of the nation’, such as old stones (Kowalski, 2017) or teacups (Balthasar, 2017). Objects carry with them a complex and changing social life of their own, they have their own and changing "voices", they invite interaction, mobilize and take part in, invoke feelings and a sense of community, as they cross children’s everyday lives. Instead of iconic objects, such as the national flag, I focus on how ordinary and taken-for-granted objects participate with children in the preschool. With ethnographic data and by focusing on these objects, I aim to demonstrate how the nation forms a part of preschool life that are rarely noticed, explored or contested. This exploration contributes to the small body of literature on everyday nationalism in very young children’s lives in the global context of growing xenophobic populism and right wing nationalism that heightens the need to know more about how children engage with and learn about the nation.

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