

BOOK REVIEW

The GOOD COUNTRY EQUATION - How We Can Repair the World in One Generation¹

Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Simon Anholt (2020)

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During the past two decades, nation branding has taken shape as a distinct interdisciplinary field that combines aspects of marketing, international relations, public diplomacy, and culture policy. The purpose goes far beyond the encouragement of tourism. States today use branding techniques to draw foreign investment, spur exports, bring in talent, boost their soft power, and inspire national pride in their citizens. In an era when competition is mounting, and perception is critical in shaping opportunities, there has never been a greater need for an appreciation of the workings of nation branding (Dinnie, 2008; Szondi, 2008). In addition, the findings of José Filipe Torres (2026a-c) further corroborate this point by showing that nation and place branding play a pivotal role in enhancing competitiveness.

The intellectual origins of nation branding are strongly tied to the contributions of Simon Anholt, who is considered the pioneer of the discipline. In particular, his groundbreaking (1998) publication titled "Nation Brands of the Twenty-First Century" argued that countries have branded reputations that can affect international behavior. This landmark piece laid the groundwork for the development of several important books such as (Anholt, 2003) and (Anholt, 2007), laying the basis for theories regarding how nations could impact their reputation on a global scale. Among other initiatives, Anholt developed the Nation Brand Hexagon, Nation Brands Index and the Good Country Index and his TED Talk, "Which Country Does the Most Good for the World?", has been viewed millions of times, underscoring his global influence.

In addition to Anholt, there have been a number of influential scholars who have had an important impact on the field. The book (Dinnie, 2008) is perhaps one of the most thorough scholarly approaches to the topic, offering both theoretical perspectives and examples from around the world. Another example is the work of (Szondi, 2008) on the connection between public diplomacy and nation branding, which helps to define the parameters of both fields and

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their interconnections, highlighting the importance of relationship-building and communication in shaping national reputation. Meanwhile, José Filipe Torres has also had considerable impact on professionalizing the field. In 2026, he published several articles, including (Torres & Karaburun, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). These publications emphasize the growing importance of digital environments, data strategy, and comprehensive branding strategies in nation building.

In the Central and Eastern European sphere, a notable contributor to studies in nation branding is Árpád Papp-Váry. His books, (Papp-Váry, 2019) and (Papp-Váry, 2020), provide an insightful and theoretically rich account of country branding. They can be regarded as among the most comprehensive researches on country branding carried out in Hungary. This particular body of work holds special relevance for explaining how small and transitional countries struggle with their global identities.

In terms of the wider scholarship on the topic, the work entitled “The Good Country Equation” by Simon Anholt (2020) is a unique piece of writing that stands out from the body of academic literature written by the same author in the past. Moving beyond his previous, more technical writings, Anholt combines elements of memoir, politics, philosophy, and other perspectives to address the question of why our systems do not seem to be working well and how countries can adjust their behavior within an interconnected world. It is both a continuation of Anholt’s long-standing interest in national reputation and a departure toward a more normative, ethically grounded vision of global responsibility.

The following review places *The Good Country Equation* in the development of nation branding research and offers a comprehensive, chapter-by-chapter analysis of its arguments, contributions, and limitations.

In Chapter 1, Anholt poses his central question: why the world fails to function? and uses his decades of advising governments to frame the Good Country Equation as both diagnosis and invitation. From his observations of over fifty countries, he argues that global dysfunction is caused by “the tendency of nations to put competition, political interests, and outdated educational models above global responsibility.” What is strong in Chap. 1 is its ability to explain complex global issues without simplifying the underlying ethical and structural challenges. He also acknowledges the limitations of his optimism in light of prejudice, political self-interest, and entrenched nationalism. Overall, Chap. 1 is effective in its academic and ethical journey, blurring memoir and manifesto in such a way that it challenges the reader to rethink national action in an increasingly interdependent world.

Chapter 2 outlines the development of Anholt’s concept of national image, showing how his initial idea of nations having “labels” similar to consumer products was misunderstood and exploited for commercial purposes. It also shows how his essay published in 1998 inadvertently created an industry that is obsessed with logos and slogans, contrary to his assertion that reputation cannot be created or manufactured through marketing activities. The value of Chapter 2 is that it shows how stereotypes affect tourism, trade, and trust, and how nations misunderstand this impact by relying on propaganda rather than behavior. Anholt also criticizes the inefficient focus on “image-polishing” activities that marketers engage in, especially in developing countries. However, Anholt’s argument is that reputation is earned, not created, since global reputation is driven by deep cultural stories that have been around for decades, not by stories created by governments.

Chapter 3 follows Anholt's journey from examining images to engaging with state actors, from the UK Foreign Office to Croatia and beyond, to the post-Soviet space. He shows how states misunderstand their reputation challenges, focusing on slogans rather than meaningful behaviors that can truly influence the way they are perceived globally. His findings illustrate the depth to which stereotypes can affect international attitudes, as well as the difficulty, for those with strong nationalist loyalties, to think from an outside, foreign-eyes perspective. The strength of this chapter is in showing the potential for symbolic actions, such as Slovenia's development as a donor country, to have a greater influence on reputation than marketing efforts. Yet Anholt also identifies systemic barriers to genuine strategic shifts, such as bureaucratic resistance, organizational stagnation, and political short-termism, which can make such shifts difficult to achieve. Ultimately, Anholt argues, reputation is earned through meaningful, imaginative contributions to international affairs, rather than through marketing efforts.

Chapter 4 shifts from geopolitical discussion to an in-depth exploration of the emotional toll of Anholt's global undertakings, using Anholt's fear of flying as a springboard to discuss the emotional toll of his work. His trip to Chile illustrates the juxtaposition of the physical and mental toll of Anholt's travels and the mental stimulation he receives from exploring different cultures. This makes Anholt more relatable and illustrates that his ideas come not only from training and education but also from his experiences of discomfort and fear. The chapter also continues to illustrate the larger thesis of the book: that true global engagement requires moving beyond one's comfort level, whether as an individual or as a state actor. The trip to Chile is also symbolic of how Anholt's fear and experience might influence his worldview in attempting to improve state behavior in the context of the global system.

Chapter 5 engages in a comparative discussion of Bhutan's idealistic pursuit of Gross National Happiness and Botswana's more low-key and stability-focused governance to examine the limits of national narrative. Anholt criticizes the idealization of Bhutan, which, in the author's view, ignores the problems that happiness indices might mask, and Botswana's governance, which remains largely invisible because of the international community's preference for drama over substance in governance. The chapter suggests that reputation is more determined by the preferred narrative of observers than by actual behavior, although Anholt sometimes relies on simplistic contrasts to make his case. The chapter concludes that the image of the nation is ultimately the product of the complex interplay of governance, history, and international expectations, and not of narrative symbolism.

Chapter 6 utilizes Anholt's own experiences in Mexico and the United States to illustrate how geopolitical influences, structural inequality, and stereotype formation impact national reputation, thereby highlighting the inherent limits in nation branding. The author reveals how Mexico's cultural wealth is marred by dominant stories of crime, whereas the United States maintains its global presence with considerable political and cultural clout. The key drawback of the chapter is that it often interprets these differences in terms of communication rather than structural power or historical hierarchy. However, Anholt effectively proves the emotional and political value of national images, thereby supporting the argument that significant change in perception is linked with substantial behavior.

Chapter 7 focuses on an analysis of how small states, such as Latvia and the Faroe Islands, deal with their issue of visibility in a global system that appears to favor larger states. It provides rich understanding on issues of identity and politics of scale, asserting that the challenges faced by such states are not due to any lack of culture or capability, but to the uneven attention they

receive in the global sphere. Though it recognizes the dignity with which such states assert themselves, it also recognizes a limitation in the author's argument, namely, that at times, the author overestimates the role of symbolic action in a context where structural invisibility is the main issue. Nonetheless, it supports the general argument that reputation is developed through substantive action, rather than branding.

In Chapter 8, Anholt uses Finland's quiet excellence and Iceland's cultural prominence to highlight the distinction between performance and reputation. He emphasizes how Finland's exceptional education system, governance, and innovation do not necessarily translate into international recognition, unlike Iceland's dramatic narratives which seem to have symbolic power. In this sense, Chap. 8 is successful in proving Anholt's point that narratives can override achievement, although it is also noticeable that Anholt sometimes presents these cases in terms of communications. In any case, Anholt is successful in proving his point that even excellent countries may find it hard to shape their international image, which supports his original argument that behavior is important, although other factors are also relevant.

Chapter 9 marks a turning point in Anholt's narrative as he moves from sharing his experiences as a consultant to rethinking his analytical tools. The conversation moves from a rigid MARSS approach to a more flexible Dapple. The value of this chapter lies in Anholt's willingness to think critically about his earlier, too-mechanistic approach and admit that reputation-building involves complex cultural and emotional factors. The drawback of this chapter is that it is somewhat vague, as Anholt struggles to balance his desire for precision in his models and his recognition that global perception simply does not lend itself to systematization. The chapter, however, effectively argues that a humble and iterative approach to analysis is necessary for making sense of how nations are viewed, and this sets the stage for the more developed argument that follows.

Chapter 10 focuses on Anholt's investigations into Sierra Leone and Afghanistan to discuss the limitations and implications of reputation building in conflict, poverty, and postcolonial trauma. The author argues that image-enhancing strategies are practically useless as long as foundational governance and public trust are in the process of being rebuilt and offers a biting commentary on international reductions of these nations as crisis states. The chapter's weakness is that Anholt slightly trivializes the impact of international structures and biases on perceptions of these nations, regardless of their actions. However, he does manage to highlight the complexities and difficulties in advising nations in these states of extreme crisis, thus supporting his overall argument that it is behavior and not branding that ultimately leads to improvements in reputation.

Chapter 11 compares Denmark and Russia in an attempt to understand how reputation is affected by state behavior, cultural stories, and geopolitical history. Denmark is used to illustrate how good governance and high levels of trust in society can be used to build reputation, but Anholt also warns that countries with high reputation may become complacent. However, in using Russia, Anholt shows that reputation is difficult to alter due to deep-rooted stereotypes and state behavior. The strengths of Chapter 11 include its clear explanation of the inability of any narrative to alter state behavior that is at odds with global norms. The weaknesses of Chapter 11 include its attempt at comparison that fails to account for the significant difference in geopolitical stature between Denmark and Russia. However, Anholt is successful in explaining reputation in global geopolitics.

Chapter 12 brings together the examples of Tuscany and Austria in order to show the role of cultural factors, heritage, and temperament in creating national image. The strength of the chapter is its sensitivity to the degree to which cultural narratives, deeply embedded in the past, affect national image, although Anholt sometimes presents them as fixed entities, which undermines the role of more recent political and social factors in complicating them. However, the author is persuasive in showing that national image is the product of long historical processes in which governments' influence is partial and indirect.

The Six Stage Model is outlined in Chapter 13, which is Anholt's attempt at creating a structured approach that draws on decades of work in nation branding advice. The beauty of the model is that it shows how countries often respond to crises in reputation in a reactive manner, rather than having any clear approach or behavior. However, in doing so, it encourages more purposeful behavior. There is also a tension in Anholt's work in that, in making the model so accessible, there is a danger that it oversimplifies the complex political situation that many countries find themselves in. However, it is also clear that it is a way of moving from criticism of nation branding to building global legitimacy.

Chapter 14 examines the European Union and the Commonwealth as case studies in how multistate organizations manage issues of identity, purpose, and international image. According to Anholt, both organizations strive for similar values but are hampered by internal divisions, bureaucratic procedures, and historical legacies. Anholt's critique of the European Union focuses on its capacity for peaceful cooperation and its problems in effective communication. His examination of the Commonwealth reveals the challenges posed by its colonial past. The chapter's strength is that it recognizes that multistate organizations need to be seen as purposeful actors, not simply symbolic ones. The chapter's weakness is that it often underestimates the degree to which multistate organizations are hampered by structural and historical limitations. However, it is undeniable that Anholt proves that international organizations face the same problems as nations in terms of image.

Chapter 15 uses Kazakhstan as an exemplar case to further Anholt's most philosophical argument: that tribalism, not geopolitics or economics, is the underlying barrier to global cooperation. The chapter shows how Kazakhstan's modernization efforts in altering its global image represent a fundamental human tendency to categorize the world in terms of "us" versus "them," which in turn affects global politics, culture, and even individual prejudices. The strengths of Chapter 15 include its clear explanation of tribalism's influence on multiple identities. A drawback of Chapter 15 is its assumption that tribalism is almost inevitable, which ignores the degree to which structural issues such as inequality and authoritarianism actively promote tribalism. However, Anholt's work challenges global dysfunction from a psychological perspective, suggesting that true progress not only requires more effective policy but also fundamentally altering how humans think about other humans.

Chapter 16 describes the development of Anholt's original idea of the "Good Country" and the development of the Good Country Index. The author argues that countries should be measured in terms of what they do for the world rather than what they have achieved domestically. The strength of this chapter is that it clearly describes the importance of global responsibility in the overall context of national achievement. The weakness of the chapter is that it tries to argue against the quantification of moral activities and then uses the quantification of the Good Country Index to get people's attention. However, the overall idea that the author presents is quite intriguing.

Chapter 17 presents one of Anholt's most utopian arguments, suggesting that "natural cosmopolitans," people who instinctively go beyond national borders, provide us with potential pathways for moving beyond nationalism, and that tools like the Global Vote will be able to re-align political incentives for global responsibility. The chapter is at its strongest in terms of its positivity, suggesting that many citizens possess a concern for humanity as a whole, but that this is not being expressed. The Global Vote is presented as a symbolic expression of this cosmopolitan sentiment. One of the weaknesses is that Anholt does not sufficiently acknowledge obstacles like authoritarianism, disinformation, and inequality that impede these inclinations. However, he presents a hopeful image of global citizenship as an essential civic instinct for the twenty-first century.

Chapter 18 recaps the underlying question that the book has been addressing and recasts Anholt's project as an open-ended invitation rather than a final answer. The Good Country Equation is recast not as a fixed ideology but rather as a way to begin building a new kind of citizenry based on the idea of collective responsibility. The strength of Chapter 18 is that it is humbly written. Anholt presents his project as one that is intended to be a catalyst to empower individuals and organizations to think about their place in the new global landscape. The weakness of the chapter is the way in which Anholt's optimism is at odds with the way in which the current political and economic systems are structured and at times underappreciated. However, the chapter ends the book on an optimistic note without being unrealistic.

Throughout its eighteen chapters, *The Good Country Equation* moves from tangible country-based case studies to increasingly abstract explorations of global responsibility. In its opening chapters, Anholt demonstrates how countries grapple with reputation, visibility, and history, demonstrating the potency and limitations of behavioral responses in shaping global understanding. In its latter chapters, Anholt reflects inwardly upon his own theories, examining the structural, psychological, and geo-political constraints which shape understanding of country reputation. Mid-book case studies of countries such as Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Denmark, and Russia reinforce the idea that reputation is impossible to manufacture in an environment of conflict, governance challenges, and power imbalance. In its closing chapters, Anholt expands his analysis to encompass supranational entities, global ethics, and the philosophical underpinnings of the Good Country idea, arriving finally at the Good Country Index, the Global Vote, and cosmopolitan citizenship. Overall, these reviews suggest an ambitious text which combines humility with conviction: that despite the complexities of geo-political engagement, only through meaningful and collaborative action can we build a better world.

Cumulatively, this review suggests that *The Good Country Equation* is not simply an assessment of nation branding, but rather an argument about international responsibility and psychological dynamics in international cooperation. Moving from case studies to theory, Anholt proves that the world is becoming increasingly connected and that nations need to reassess their behavior in response to global challenges. While he recognizes that structural limitations make change difficult, he ultimately believes that nations can make progress if they approach international cooperation with humility, purpose, and a focus on the common good. This is the key to the lasting influence of *The Good Country Equation*.

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