Theoretical aspects of a Flag for Europe

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Many people think there should be a "flag for Europe", but very few have so far addressed themselves to the problems which this concept presents. The design of a flag in a moment of inspiration is comparartively simple, but the creation of a design which truly and totally represents a whole continent is in practice much more complex and demanding a process than it appears to be superficially.

To begin with, what is meant by the name "Europe"? When asked to define the area of the continent many people today content themselves with a description of Western Europe. When asked for example to name the highest mountain in Europe most people reply automatically "Mont Blanc", overlooking the existence of Mont Elbrus in the Caucasus. In the absence of any satisfactory traditional or classical definition many people fall back on "congnitive mapping" rather than actual consultation of an atlas, leaving open questions such as the following.

1) Is Europe defined as the homeland of the "Europeans"? If so, what are Europeans? Do they include Turks, Azerbaijanis, Lapps, Samoyeds, Yakuts? If Europeans are to be confined to "Caucasian" peoples would we paradoxically have to exclude Azerbaijan from Europe?

2) Is the area defined by religion --is Europe the Christian continent? Clearly not, because even traditional Europe includes areas such as Albania, Cyprus, and Bulgaria with substantial Moslem populations.

3) What are the frontiers of Europe? Traditions provides some answers but not all. Russia has traditionally maintained that the Ural mountains divide Europe from Asia, and in classical times the Straits of Gibraltar and the Hellespont or Dardanelles became fixed boundaries. But the isles of Greece present an area of ambibuity. Anatolia, ie mainland Turkey has always been regarded as a part of Asia, was in fact once called Asia, but some of the adjacent islands today belong to the Turkish republic and others to Greece. Examples are Gökçeada (classical Imbros) and Bozca Ada (famous in the Trojan Wars as the isle of Tenedos). These now belong to Turkey and are part of Asia, whereas neighbouring Samothrace and Lesbos belong to Greece and are therefore part of Europe.

Similarly Cyprus is normally thought of as part of Europe, but when the northern, Turk-inhabited part, was separated off did that become part of Asia?

Likewise when Armenia, previously Russian, was partitioned between Turkey and the Soviet Union in 1921, did one part become Asian and the other European?

4) Is Europe definable by the international organisations which are or appear to be European-based. Some are confined to countries traditionally thought of as European, such as the European Free Trade Area, but most, even if based on an European core include non-European members, such as the Council of Europe which includes Turkey, COMECON which includes Mongolia, NATO, and the Western European Union which include the USA and Canada, and the EEC with its overseas associates. The Eurovision Song Contest is extended

not only to Turkey but also to Israel. Why not to New Zealand?

I do not offer any solutions to these paradoxes, but simply request anyone thinking of designing a flag to take them into account. Europe, whatever it is, does not just mean the western littoral.

One final paradox might be mentioned, namely that my countrymen do not normally think of themselves as Europeans, as is shown in 'the famous newspaper headline: "Storm in Channel --Europe Cut off!" and the debate on entry into the EEC wich was expressed in Britain as "Should Britain go into Europe?"

Europe, even when once defined as a particular set of countries or parts of countries, turns out to be a very divided land-mass, particularly in terms of the political and cultural affiliations of its population. We all know of the famous "Iron Curtain" which is supposed to have descended across Europe, but in practice we find that the continent contains a substantial group of non-aligned states as well as those closely linked to the USA on the one hand and to the USSR on the other. Economically the western part is still divided into the members of EFTA and of the EEC, whilst COMECON includes countries not in the Warsaw Pact. The Council of Europe, as well as having non-European members, does not include all the states not politically linked to Moscow.

However, for vexillological purposes the main division would appear to be that between the capitalist and the communist states, and I shall return later to the question of wether a flag can be devised that does not offend either type of economic system. I next propose to analyse the flags which have existed hitherto and wich have attempted to represent more than one European state. For this purpose I am indebted to an article in 'Deutsches Schiffahrtsarchiv' No.2 of 1978 by Gerhard Dumke entitled 'Rhein und Donau Flaggen', from which most of the following section has been derived.

1) The Rhine Octroi flag of 1804-14. This was an international flag for use by recognised vessels on the Rhine during the Napoleonic domination. The colours are supposedly derived from the blue and gold of France and the black and gold of Germany. Whatever their origin they have had a powerful influence on all later designs.

2) The flag of the pre-war Straits Commission also used these colours, with the blue --a lighter blue signifying neutrality or internationalism, as the background.

3) The modern version of the Octroi flag, prior to 1965, was red and white, another "international combination" which also had widespread influence.

4) The later version of this body's flag reverts to the neutral blue background and introduces the well-known ring of stars device to symbolise the membership.

5) The International Danube Commission of 1921-1940 also had a blue background with an anchor, and its initials in French, the language of diplomacy.

6) The European Commission of the Danube, 1856-1940 had a flag in the then colours of the participating countries, the first known instance of this practice.

7) This is to some extent carried on in the flag of the present-day Danube Commission, with its flag of red white and blue. Austria is

the only non-Communist member of this Commission. On the obverse of the flag the initials CD are in roman letters.

8) The Commission for the Iron Gates and Cataracts had a prewar flag of blue and white and white stripes like the International Danube Commission, but with the colours of Yugoslavia and Romania superimposed. The modern flag has a neutral light blue background with their current flags forming a badge in the centre.

Certain major European organisation of our own times also have flags. That of the Council of Europe with its ring of gold stars on blue repeats the colours of the 1804 Octroi flag but also uses the naive device first supposedly used on the US flag to represent the member-states. This does not now have a star for each member, but the 12 stars together are said to "embody all the peoples of Europe including those which are not yet able to participate in the building of a paceful and united Europe" (1) The flag of COMECON is red and white with a single red star. The red and white could be construed as "international" in flavour and are also colours used by socialist parties in Western Europe. The flag of the old BENELUX organisation was a clever combination of the flags and emblems of the three countries. This works perhaps for three countries as in Examples 16 and 17 above, but would be hard to extend to many more. The flag of the European Coal and Steel community represented coal and steel, with the famous six stars to stand for the six members, and also provides an example of gold emblems on blue.

A flag for the Commander in Chief of the Western European Union was adopted in 1949 and offers several themes for international flags: the combination of the colour of the participating countries, the ring of linked chains or paper-clips, and the gold emblem on a blue ground.

The flag so far mentioned have in fact tried to achieve internationality by such devices, which can be summarised as follows:

1) The use of colours thought to be neutral or international in character. For Western Europe these have been predominantly blue and yellow, but red and white, red, white and blue, and the use of neutral light blue are also common.

2) Combinations of the colours of the participating states, as in the flags of Benelux, the Iron Gates Commission, and the WEU. A flag for Europe which tried to do this would have to include red, white, blue, black, yellow, green, with the blue in at leats two shades.

3) The use of rings of stars or chains to represent the members, or of initials in an international language or failing that in two languages.

Turning now to flags invented for Europe as a whole I begin with the well-known design of Count Coudenove-Kalergi for the Pan-European movement. Like others it has a light blue field to represent peace, or neutrality. It dates from the period after the First World War then the main international tension was between France and Germany. The yellow disc represents Apollo the sun-god and thereby intelligence and inspiration. The Count was one of those who did not know that Europe includes a substantial Moslem population, which is why the disc contains a red cross, and why the flag failed to be chosen years later to represent the Council of Europe.

The so-called Europe flag designed by Duncan Sandys did not make

this mistake and employs the colours green and white, signifying hope, as in the International Esperanto Flag (2). The colours were originally red and white but the red was changed to green in 1949 (3).

Red and white have been used by many designers of pan-Europeans flags, since they are the heraldic colours of Strasbourg, which many see as the symbolic capital of Europe (4).

The European Economic Community does not as yet have a flag, despite several attempts to creat one. One early example was a blatant imitation of the Council of Europe flag with six stars for the six members. In 1973 there was an international competition to find an emblem for the EEC which was one by Mr Willem Rotter with his "E" emblem. This then remplaced earlier ones which had included a map of the EEC and a stylised globe with a dot representing the supposed location of the area. More recently a flag with a new version of Mr Rotter's "E" has made its appearance, and this inevitably makes it a yellow or gold emblem on a blue field (5). In 1983 however the EEC formally abdicated any resposability for adopting a distinctive flag by resolving to borrow that of the Council of Europe (6). The Council of Europe has resolved itself that is flag can be used by others European organisations but with their own emblems in the centre, and this permission has been taken advantage by European Christian Democrats who have combined the Pan-European Flag with that of the Council of Europe, and by the Euro-MP Amedee Turner who has invented a flag with the map motif in the centre of the ring of stars.

The European Parliament had a flag it used up to the time of the resolution of February 1983 to borrow the Council of Europe flag. This was also gold and blue, with the initials in form suitable for several languages. The emblem inside a ring of stars was used by the European Christian Democrats in the 1984 elections.

For the sake of comparision it is worth looking at certain other flags of international organisations, and it will be seen that naturally enough these repeat the same ideas. The flag of the Olympic Games, using the five rings discovered by Baron de Coubertin at Delphi, has colours symbolic of the five continents. The five rings remind us of the five chain-links in the WEU flag and others. The Organisation of African Unity employs the map idea, which is safe enough in this case, since the boundaries of the continent are in this case well-defined and unlikely to alter. The colours do not attempt to represent the colours of African flags. The flag of the former Union Afro-Malgache did do so, and also employed the map and ring of stars idea. Other organisations employ the well-established blue field for peace idea, including the United Nations and the former South-East Asia Treaty Organisation. Both of these also have geographical references: the globe coloured to represent the south east corner for SEATO and the whole globe withing olive branches. The UN flag supposedly employs a shade of blue known as "United Nations Blue" which has become in itself symbolic of internationalism and peace-keeping. This has no doubt reinforced the idea of blue as the colour of peace and neutrality. The flag of the South Pacific Commission also employs stars, this time in an arc, to represent the member-states, but is otherwise more imaginative and effective than other designs of the kind.

Most of the flags we have looked at so far have not been the work of vexillologists. They suffer from design faults which flag-students might be expect to avoid. Among these I would list:

1) the use of rings of emblems such as stars and chain-links which have to be altered every time the membership is altered, as in the US flag, unless some devious way is found of keeping the number static.

2) the use of all the colours of the participating states. These two are subject to change, and produce flags that are over-complicated.

3) the use of a map which is also subject to change.

4) the use of letters or words, such as E, EU, or EUROPE or EUROPA. We believe that flags should be purely graphic portrayals of a concept.

5) the use of "neutral" colours such as light blue which have no real semiotic significance. This colour is just as popular in the East as in the West as a non-committal "carrier" of emblem and devices. But vexillologists would say that all the colours of a flag should be meaningful.

Addes to these considerations we have the two problems I outlined at te beginning, namely the difficulty of defining the boundaries of Europe and the inescapable facts of the political divisions of the continent.

The ideal flag we are looking for would, therefore, have to achieve the following.

1) It would not be in neutral non-committal colours.

2) It would not be in all the colours of the participating states.

3) It would not have rings of stars or other devices to represent the members or the concept of membership.

4) It would not employ a letter, letters, or words to convey its meaning.

5) It would not include a map unless it was one that was indisputably fixed for all time.

6) It would not have colour combinations that were unacceptable to either East or West, eg blue and yellow or red and yellow.

7) It would somehow portray the ambiguous "frontier zone" between Europe and Asia.

8) It would not emphasise any current religious connections.

9) Like all flags it would distinctive and not suggestive of any other.

10) It would simple, cheap, and easy to make.

The only design I can imagine which would encompass all these points is one which goes back to the origins of the name "Europe". The Continent is the only one which has a myth to explain its name. This is the story of the maiden Europe who was the daugther of a King of Tyre, a city in Asia. In Greek mythology she was seduced by Zeus in the form of a great white bull. She climbed on his back and he swam with her over the sea to Greece, where he named the continent after her. Why not use this image as a symbol for Europe? The use of green and white in this flag would refer back to earlier ideas about the

"Europe flag" and would also signify hope for the future. The colours are not neutral but neither do they offend capitalist or communist. There is no map here, but the story symbolises a connection between Asia and Europe. There are no devices which have to be altered to reflect the membership, and the ancientness of the myth does not bring in any unwellcome religious overtones. The image can be said to signify power and strengh in the form of the bull, together with the beauty and humanity of the maiden which could be said to represent the common cultural heritage of Europe. This is a flag which would stand the test of time, and which would go a long way towards healing the unfortunate divisions of our Continent.

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NOTES

1) See Volker Junge: A flag for Europe, p3. This article has been published in abbreviated form in Flagmaster.

2) See also Martin J O'Malley: A Vexillological Analysis of the Colour Green in The Flag Bulletin, XXI.3

3) Junge, op. cit. p2.

4) The source of designs 26-32 inclusive is A Flag for Europe by Paul Martin and M G Levy in Saisons d'Alsace 1950.

5) Last reported on display at the Bonn Economic Summit Meeting, May 1985, see Flaggenmitteilungen 108.17

6) See European Parliament Working Documents 1-1194 of 2 February 1983
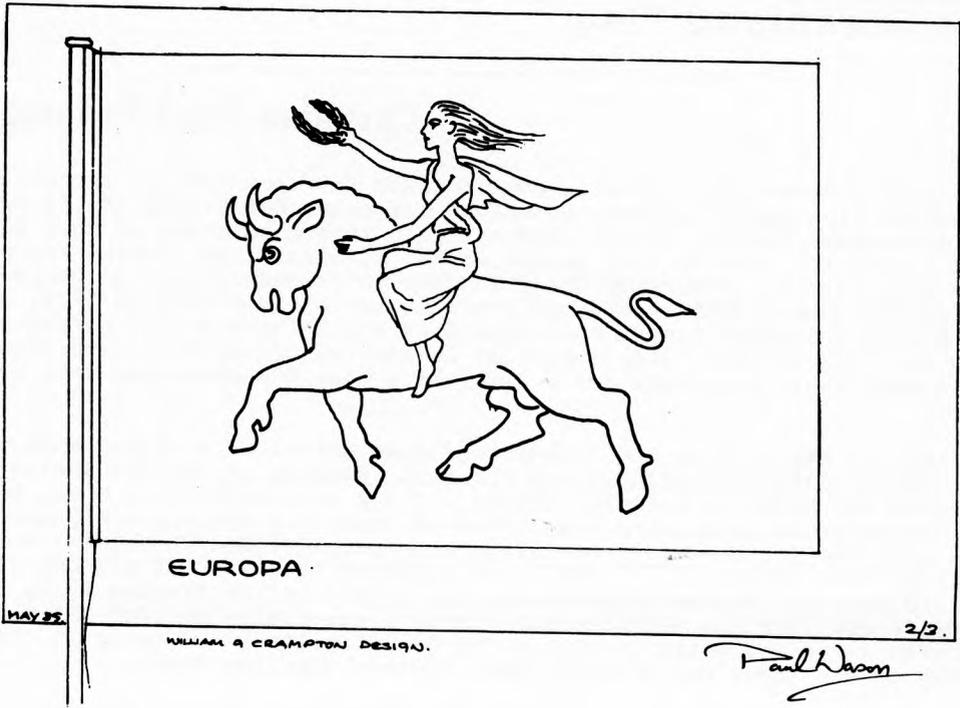
EUROPA ·

WILLIAM A CRAMPTON DESIGN.

2/3.

Paul Wason