

THE PRINCIPLES OF VEXILLOLOGY

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While symbolism is found in art, literature, religion, psychiatry, and many other areas of life a very extensive and significant aspect of symbolism is the concern of political science. The essentially political nature of vexillology and the necessity of studying flags from the standpoint of political science derive from the little-analyzed subject of political symbolism.

Political scientists have long been cognizant that the spheres of behavior which may legitimately be labeled as political are much broader and deeper than had long been assumed. Political science ultimately must analyze literally everything having to do with decision-making phenomena in society. At one time political science was interested only in formal institutions, such as legislatures and constitutions and political parties. Now, through the influence of such disciplines as semiotics and behaviorism recognition has come that all artifacts, actors, and actions which affect politics are political.

Symbolism is among the areas which only recently have been conceded as being important to politics. Political symbols themselves are not new — they have existed for hundreds if not thousands of years. Rather it is the case that they rarely were considered by political scientists as legitimate subjects for study. There seem to be two reasons for this which it is important to take note of.

First, in outward appearance the political symbols — flags being the most important of these, at least in the modern era — seem to be mere decoration to “real” events, a superficial aspect that has no real importance. This imputed superficiality or triviality has meant that, until recently, there has been no attempt made on the part of social scientists to work out a systematic, theoretical explanation of the role symbols play in politics. Having no hypotheses, no theoretical framework allowing them to deal with the subject, political scientists for the most part have simply not known what to do with flags, how to think about them, and have simply ignored them.

A further problem is that those vexillologists who have dealt most directly with graphic symbols, in almost all cases, have been unfamiliar with political science. Those who have written about flags (and books on heraldry and seals and various other aspects of symbolism) have known little about political science. As a result the subject of political symbolism has consistently lacked any rigorous, scholarly application of social-scientific principles. The present examination of the subject leads to some tentative hypotheses which, if accepted and acted upon, could influence positively the way in which vexillology develops in the future.

Vexillology needs to develop and test major and minor hypotheses about flags and their study so that the activity of vexillologists will not be random or purposeless or trivial. What is presented here can only be considered a preliminary formulation that will require rigorous testing, both from the standpoint of logic and from the standpoint of correspondence with actual facts. The first question to be asked is what constitutes the fundamental nature of flags. Regarding this, the following theses are advanced by the author:

1. Flags are artifacts conceived of and constructed by human beings interacting within their cultures.
2. All flags are messages of intentional (and, sometimes, unintentional) content made by one or more individuals and addressed to themselves and to others; i.e. flags are a form of social communication.

3. The purpose of the analysis of flags is to understand more accurately and more completely the nature of human society.
4. While flags can be analyzed from the standpoint of history, esthetics, usefulness, commercial value and other aspects, the scientific study of flags is properly part of the social sciences.
5. The study of flags must be undertaken in coordination with, or at least with an understanding of, other social sciences.
6. No understanding of flags in general or of a particular flag is complete until the relationships the flag has with the society in which it is utilized are understood.
7. No understanding of human society in general or of a particular society is complete until such flags as it uses are understood, i.e. until the study of its flags is taken into account as part of the social sciences.

Acceptance of these principles leads to propositions implicit in the social scientific nature of the work which vexillology requires:

8. The study of flags must be undertaken from a scientific standpoint.
9. Objectivity, comprehensiveness, open-mindedness, and rationalism are necessary for the study of flags.
10. The study of flags must be value-neutral and analytical, not hortative or normative.
11. Hypotheses derived from observation must be tested by further observation, by logical analysis, and by experimentation. Hypotheses found wanting must be revised accordingly or discarded.
12. Scientific knowledge of flags presupposes the existence of accurate data concerning flag symbolism, usage, design, and history.
13. Regularities, similarities, special cases, changes over time, casual relationships, and the social functions of flags require statistical analysis.
14. Scientific knowledge of flags presumes that data are organized into meaningful statements which convey an understanding about flags above and beyond the information directly implicit in the data themselves.
15. Recognition of the legitimacy of the scientific approach to the study of flags means neither that such a study is completely autonomous nor that it is subsumed in the

study of another subject.

Finally, practical experience in the matter suggests that the importance of the following be recognized and taken into consideration:

16. The study of data on any aspect of flags does not impute the existence of, nor must it entail the development of, a partisanship toward the existence (or maintenance or expansion) of the forms and functions under study. Promoting flags is fundamentally different from seeking to understand them.

17. The designing and making of flags, the display of flags, promotion of flag usage, collecting of flags, the use of flags to achieve certain ends, and analysis of the relative artistic merits of various flags are not subsumed in the study of flags, although the study of any of the above activities is.

18. Involvement in nonscientific aspects of flags, especially for ideological, political, or commercial ends, may distort perspectives of data and/or relevance in the pursuit of scientific knowledge of the subject.

19. The value of a parallel study of related symbols (such as heraldry) is proportional to its adherence to the scientific principles and procedures applicable to the study of flags itself.

Since vexillology is still very much in its infancy, it is impossible at present to say what directions it will take in the future. Indeed it is not at all certain that it will ever achieve the "escape velocity" necessary for its launching as a recognized scientific discipline. A century from now it is possible that the study of flags will be considered exactly as it was a century ago — an antiquarian curiosity, suitable as a hobby for children or the retired but scarcely a fit subject for the serious consideration of adult women and men. If so, the failure for having inadequately developed the inherent possibilities of the subject will be that of those who, beginning in the early 1960s, have presumed to speak and write about vexillology as an arena for scientific analysis.

The 20th century saw the growth of many nascent sciences — nuclear physics, selenography, social psychology, and anthropology to cite but a few — scarcely imagined by previous generations. On the other hand the facts forming the bases for those studies had already existed for thousands of years — as have the facts about flags which those who call themselves vexillologists must address.