



Why flags? Searching for an Essence of Flags

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Abstract

I have questions about flags. Looking for answers, I went not to vexillological papers, but to scientific publications in other scientific fields. What follows is a taste of what I found.



A proposed Minnesota flag designed by W. Becker

Why flags? Searching for an Essence of Flags

Dr. Whitney Smith, in his classic book, *Flags through the Ages and Across the World*, has written a definition of flags at some length, as good as can be found.¹ Dr. Scot Guenter has presented information about flags, and other totems of culture, relating to place.² He has examined how flags are used in Singapore. Dr. Carolyn Marvin has examined how people approach flags intellectually or emotionally, or as she put it “head” or “blood”.³ Dr. Peter Orenski has examined whether vexillology is a science and where we are headed as a science. His conclusion is that vexillology is, indeed, a science.⁴

So vexillologists have defined vexillology, we have confirmed that it is a science, we have looked to see people in different situations deal differently with flags, and we have looked at personality in approaches to flags.

From hundreds, even thousands of years of history, we know a lot about flags. From observations we have many basic principles we can rely on, such as simplicity in design and separation of colors, we know when flags are used culturally and politically, etc. And we can talk with confidence about these things. But why does simplicity work?, why are the standard colors chosen?, etc. Few in vexillology can launch large studies for the evidence we need.

Therefore, as I approached a multitude of questions about flags, I looked beyond vexillological papers, to scientific publications in other scientific fields to see if any current research is useful in interpreting and verifying principles we have accepted. What follows are a few samples.

I have a Soviet flag, smuggled out of the USSR in 1987 by a friend. I am given to understand it was illegal for foreigners to buy this flag, and illegal to take it out of the country. There was risk in getting the flag and it has special meaning for me.

So when I tell you it was not just any Soviet flag, but a flag Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had actually held in his hands, how valuable is this flag? Or perhaps it was not Solzhenitsyn after all, but Stalin who often had this flag in his hands. Now, would you want to *touch* this flag?

The first part is true, it was smuggled out. The second is made up, it is a common flag. Even so, the same flag can be first exciting, then disgusting. Things carry an almost tangible inner life, which we believe we can know about. From Pope Benedict, steeped in the mystery of belief, to the rational President Obama, who still plays basketball on election nights for good luck, we all have this sense.

In his book *Supersense*, Bruce Hood uses this type of experiment with a shirt, either from a famous celebrity or mass murderer to show that people do react to an essence that we impute.⁵ We react to inanimate objects as if there is something in them and we strongly feel there is more to things than the surface of the thing itself. Our beliefs have consequences, and strong reactions to flags may show they are more than just a piece of cloth.

We react to flags almost without thinking. This may appear simplistic, but there is an “underlying intelligence” in these gut reactions. We select the correct “rule of thumb” based on prior experience and knowledge.⁶ In fact, simplicity and cognitive limitations have been shown to be beneficial in many cases. Too much knowledge can cost us.⁷ It is widely known in sports that over-thinking interrupts a natural flow. This may be why so many flags are simple; it may be the essence of their power.

Colors make the flag, so few flags are only black and white. Picking a color in the visible spectrum continuum is arbitrary. Flags have common colors, not so arbitrary. To track down standard colors, one study, in *The Symbolic Species* by Deacon, examined the world’s languages for the colors they name.

Three colors were the fewest words they found in any language for colors, consistently: black (dark), white (light), and red. In languages with four color words, the colors were always black, white, red, and green. They found in languages with five or six colors the next colors defined were either yellow or blue, or both. Thereafter, colors were less predictable, but came in “complementary pairs between principal color terms”.⁸ Moreover, in the work of Elenor Rosch and her colleagues, there is a color center across languages and societies, i.e. a best red, a best green, etc.⁹ Flags do seem conform to these basic numbers of colors, and to the color centers indicated in these studies.

Which came first, the symbol or the brain? Deacon theorizes that the prefrontal cortex in our species and language co-evolved. He believes that to recognize abstract symbols, sounds, and visual shapes, the brain was forced to adapt. And this adaptation led to understanding even more complex symbols. Language is a collection of arbitrary sound symbols. Symbols find their home in the prefrontal cortex. Deacon states “... symbols don’t just represent things in the world, they also represent each other.” Symbols use other symbols, and more and more symbols in combinations of systems of symbols.¹⁰ Flags are symbols. And they reflect other symbols.

Some flags work, and some don’t. Symbols become part of a pattern and must fit, conform, or be discarded. “Symbols do not, then, get accumulated into unstructured collections that can be arbitrarily shuffled into different combinations.” There are “intrinsic” constraints “imposed by external reference.”¹¹

We may have an instinct for the structure and design of flags, yet there is much to learn about this instinct.

Can flags sing? There is structure in mathematics, language, and music. Horizontal stripes, vertical stripes, cantons, etc. are evidence of structure in flags. Flags resemble other flags. Patterns have evolved.

In language and mathematics, similar types of patterns would probably be called syntax. Is there a syntax of flags? If syntax influences math and language, does this influence our choice of flags (i.e., do language or math influence flag design) and how?

As with symbols referring to patterns of symbols, “our cognitive processes operate ‘at a very high level of abstraction’”. “And those abstractions may apply in similar fashion to all kinds of thinking— in number, words, or perhaps even music”.¹² Once we have established abstract symbols patterns, we store and reuse them “across cognitive domains”, in seemingly unrelated areas, as math problems, sentences, music, etc.¹³ Math, words, music, “flags”—do they all have one basic syntax, do they all work the same? Might a deeper understanding of flags help us understand language, math, & music?

Flags are charged with feelings. Without the emotion, flags are just sand in the desert. Emotion is complex. In short, it combines a “*mental evaluative process*” with responses to this evaluation by way of the brain stem and neurotransmitter nuclei which leads to mental images. Feelings result from the mental images at the end of this process.¹⁴ Feelings are “not a luxury”.¹⁵ Emotions and feelings are not “intangible and vaporous” they are “concrete”.¹⁶ And a feeling can be simultaneously shared, by hundreds, thousands, and millions of people.

“The immune system, the hypothalamus, the ventromedial frontal cortices, and *the Bill of Rights* have the same root cause.” Our social conventions and ethical structures are cultural, but also innate. They lead us to realize “survival is threatened” or “post-survival life could be bettered”.¹⁷

Flags are ubiquitous. Can they speak? Some professionals “believe that it is impossible to separate consciousness from the physical world, that a profound interconnectedness exists between all aspects of the organic and inorganic world.” Science has provided some evidence of the results of these beliefs, in empathy, “sense of peace”, and connectedness.¹⁸ Flags may be a manifestation of a connection to the world, an important way to sense and make tangible beliefs we cannot otherwise explain. They are tangible and intangible.

Flags give us inspiration and hope. Inspiration and hope are “essential tools for confronting those moments of confusion and doubt that are so often part of life.”¹⁹ Feelings are “end products of complex neural processes that include perception, emotion, memory, and behavioral motivation.”²⁰ The sources of these emotions are in the limbic system.²¹ In the amygdala we regulate fear and anxiety; in the hippocampus the results of amygdala reactions turn to long-term memory.²²

The function of these emotions is group cohesion, which helps us survive. “Without social consensus, we’d have anarchy and chaos...”²³ It is not difficult to see the visual role of flags to remind us of our inner beliefs, which plays a part to reduce fear and give strength.

Flag research has uncovered and disseminated a lot of information on the history and culture of flags. I, myself, am a construction worker, a professional accountant (a CPA), and a retail businessman, but not a scientist.

A scientist would have a basic grasp of the scientific approach and knowledge that I struggle with. Perhaps a small consolation is that I see everything as new and therefore with fresh eyes. The advances in science in every field, but especially in neuroscience, offer opportunities for

insight we could barely imagine decades ago, even just a year or two ago. The prefrontal cortex is less of a mystery than before; there is a microscope on our lives.

Vexillology can only benefit by using this new scientific knowledge to better understand the nature of flags and their place in human society. As we better understand nature around us and uncover more about the world, we may better understand flags. And as we better understand all that flags represent, perhaps we will better understand ourselves and life itself.

End notes

- ¹ Smith, Whitney, *Flags through the Ages and Across the World*, 1975, McGraw-Hill Book Company, pp. 6–11 & 34–58.
- ² Guenter, Scot, presentations at North American Vexillological Association meetings, especially “Majulah Singapura: National Day and Flag Culture in a Southeast Asian City-State”, *Raven*, vol. 6, 1999, pp. 9-18.
- ³ Marvin, Carolyn and Ingle, David, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, 1999, Cambridge University Press, UK, pp. 53 & 249 ff, and NAVA meeting 1991.
- ⁴ Orenski, Peter, *Quo Vadimus*, 2003 Peter Orenski, pp. 78–87.
- ⁵ Hood, Bruce, *Supersense, Why We Believe in the Unbelievable*, 2009 HarperCollins, pp. 21–23.
- ⁶ Gigerenzer, Gerd, *Gut Feelings, The Intelligence of the Unconscious*, 2007 Viking Adult, p. 49.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, Gigerenzer, p. 37.
- ⁸ Deacon, Terrence W., *The Symbolic Species, The Co-evolution of language and the brain*, 1997, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 117, referring to a study by Brent Berlin & Paul Kay .
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, Deacon, p. 117.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Deacon, p. 99.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, Deacon, p. 100.
- ¹² Scheepers, Christoph, et al., “Be It Number or Words— The Structure of Our Language Remains the Same”, *Association for Psychological Science*, press release, 6 June 2011, www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/new/releases/be-it-numbers-or-words-the-structure-of-our-language-remains-the-same.htm.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, Scheepers.
- ¹⁴ Damasio, Antonio, *Descartes’ Error-Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, 1994, Putnam Publishing, pp. 136–137 , italics by Damasio.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Damasio, p. XV.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Damasio, p. 164.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Damasio, p. 261, italics my own— referring to the US Bill of Rights.
- ¹⁸ Newberg, Andrew, MD, *Why We Believe What We Believe*, 2006, Free Press, a div. of Simon & Schuster, Inc., pp. 13–14.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Newberg, p. 15.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, Newberg, p. 17.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, Newberg, p. 28.
- ²² *Ibid.*, Newberg, p. 32.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, Newberg, p. 32.

About the Author

Lee L. Herold is the owner of Herold Flags and Flagpoles, a retail flag store, in Rochester, Minnesota, USA. He sells flags and flagpoles and installs flagpoles. He became interested in flags in 1987, joined NAVA in 1988, and attended many NAVA meetings and the ICV in Warsaw in 1991. Prior to owning the flag store he owned a public accounting firm; he is a Certified Public Accountant. He also worked in asphalt construction for 14 years.

He has worked with state legislators and others in Minnesota to examine the possibility of simplifying the Minnesota state flag, and has testified at five bill introductions, two of which passed their respective committees.

