



Historical shifts and emergent paradigms: tradition, ideology, sources of power and influence in flag studies

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Abstract

This paper overviews the evolution of flag studies on a global level, once a subset of heraldry and still linked to it in recognisable ways, then transformed into a nascent social science discipline by Whitney Smith from the mid to late twentieth century. Along the way another powerful commercial and professional force arises seeking titular influence in flag studies, graphic design, while a different counter-ideology emerges from a group calling themselves 'active vexillologists,' seeing new purposes and opportunities for self and programme promotion through claiming use of the term 'vexillology' in exercises of aesthetic rating, diagnosis, counselling, and/or guidance.

We are clearly at a watershed. Where are we headed now? In a world where alternative facts are widely circulated, where social media attacks or influence can be very powerful although not always based on the truth, how do we judge the best way for flag studies going forward? This essay will look at possible answers from a few different individuals working in flag studies before closing with the author's vision for the future.

Vexillology, like any other system of knowledge, is socially constructed. What its boundaries are, what is acceptable or unacceptable, what is considered trite and jejune on one hand, or cutting edge and visionary on the other, is always appraised within cultural and historical contexts. And just as flags deserve study, so does the field of flag studies.

How does one go about analysing a scholarly discipline – or, even, as some might have it, a would-be scholarly discipline? The answer has two steps. First, do a historical review of the field, broadening awareness of how methodology and practice have evolved. Second, bring to bear a critique of that progression informed by an understanding of some cultural studies assumptions.

A good example of step one from the field of literature is *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory* by M.A.R. Habib.¹ Another, this time from the field of history, would be *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* by Ernest Breisach.² Being such a fledgling and often overlooked field, vexillology has had until recently only one treatise on its methodology, a long essay (c.100 pages) written by Peter Orenski back in 2001, then self-published as a monograph and

1 M.A.R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

2 Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2007).

distributed again by him in 2003.³ This was immediately followed by an e-mail thread on the Flags of the World (FOTW) website that had some long, well thought-out reactions and responses to Orenski's claims and challenges, the last of these coming in February 2004.⁴ Since then, there has been only one scholarly publication – roughly the size of Orenski's – devoted to this topic. It was by Dr Željko Heimer, just published in 2017 by the Flag Heritage Foundation, and will be given more attention below under Historical Review.⁵

The passing on November 16 2016 of Whitney Smith, known as 'the father' of Vexillology⁶ and 'the world's greatest expert on flags',⁷ offers those in the world of flag studies a clear and decisive marker. We are at a turning point, a watershed moment for vexillology, and right now reflections on the field's history, methodologies, and possible future directions are both pertinent and crucial. This essay engages the conversation on methodology contributed to earlier by Emmet V. Mittlebeeler and Peter Orenski, later joined by a new cohort of vexillologists like Heimer and myself,⁸ while also answering the call for such work by Whitney Smith himself when in his 'Vexillological Classification Systems' he included a specific category, eponymously named Vexillology, with the subsections 'History: Origins of' and 'Vexillology: Academic Studies'.⁹

Historical review summary

When academics pursue the highest level of rank in their field of study, they traditionally write a thesis, something we in America often refer to as a dissertation. This is a book-length analysis of the highest level, which brings new insight and information to our collective body of knowledge, and it must be defended and approved by a jury of other doctors in the field before the candidate advances to the rank of Doctor. Professionals doing vexillology come to it from some different fields, but this should not worry us. The scholarly

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- 3 Peter J. Orenski, *Quo Vadimus: An Essay on the State and Future of Vexillology* (self-published, 2003).
 - 4 'Vexillology and Science', FOTW website, <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/vxt-sci.html> [retrieved 14 June 2017].
 - 5 Željko Heimer, *Vexillology as a Social Science* (Danvers MA: Flag Heritage Foundation, 2017).
 - 6 Brian Pendreigh, 'Obituary - Whitney Smith, vexillologist', *Sunday Herald* (Scotland), 1 January 2017, http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/14997293.obituary_Whitney_Smith_vexillologist/ [retrieved 14 June 2017].
 - 7 'Flags Down: Obituary: Whitney Smith, vexillologist, died on November 17th', *Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/news/obituary/21711293-worlds-greatest-expert-flags-was-76-obituary-whitney-smith-vexillologist-died> [retrieved 14 June 2017].
 - 8 Emmet V. Mittlebeeler, 'Is Vexillology a Science?', in Whitney Smith (ed.), *An Introduction to Vexillology* (Flag Research Center, 2000), pp. 9-18; Orenski, pp. 57-63; Heimer, *Vexillology as a Social Science*, p. 4; Scot Guenter, 'Introduction,' *The Washington Flag Congress 2011: Proceedings of the 24th International Congress of Vexillology*, p. 3; Scot Guenter, 'The Three Phases of Vexillology', *Flag Research Quarterly*, no. 3 (October 2013), p. 12; Scot Guenter, 'In the Footsteps of the Founder: A Reflection on Studying the Flags of NAVA', *Flag Research Quarterly*, no. 12 (August 2016), p. 6.
 - 9 See Whitney Smith (ed.), 'Vexillological Classification System', in *An Introduction to Vexillology* (Flag Research Center, 2000), p. 8. Category 8 shows a slight modification from its earlier presentation, see Whitney Smith, 'A Vexillological Classification System,' *Flag Bulletin*, 21/1, no. 92 (January-February 1982), p. 21.

disciplines themselves are in flux over time. Vexillology needs to be recognised as an interdisciplinary field of study. There is no shame in that; in fact, there is cause for celebration, as vexillologists can serve not only the disciplines they personally choose to call home but also other fields, through cross-fertilisation of ideas and academic practices.

Whitney Smith got his PhD in 1964 in Political Science. He always maintained that vexillology was a social science, as it ultimately sought to study people and how flags relate to, influence, and inspire them. Recall his third Fundamental Thesis: 'The purpose of the study of flags is to understand more accurately and more completely the nature of the human condition.'¹⁰ William Crampton got his PhD in 1994 in sociology, another of the social sciences, and his dissertation, *Flags as Non-Verbal Symbols in the Management of National Identity*, asked significant questions about recognising how and why the Nazi use of the flag with the swastika was as effective as it was in the 1930s and 40s in Europe.¹¹ There have been academic studies of flags going on beyond vexillological associations or their peripheries for years, some such recent works brought to vexillologists' attention through a column in the debut issue of *Flag Research Quarterly*;¹² vexillology as a field is strengthened every time such work is made accessible to us and even more so when those doing this work begin to interact with or join us.



Left, Whitney Smith holds the Guyana flag which he designed;
right, a young Whitney Smith

Within the world of vexillology, two major dissertations in flag studies have earned their writers a Doctor of Philosophy degree in recent years: Željko Heimer's work in military sociology at the University of Zagreb in 2013, and Frederick Brownell's work in history at the University of Pretoria in 2015.¹³

10 Whitney Smith, 'Fundamental Theses of Vexillology', *Flag Research Quarterly*, no. 3 (October 2013), p. 6.

11 Whitney Smith, 'William G. Crampton', *Flag Bulletin*, no. 175 (May-June 1997), p. 96.

12 See 'Selected Abstracts of Dissertations and Theses Related to the Study of Flags: 2010-2011', *Flag Research Quarterly*, no. 1 (March 2013), pp. 15-16.

13 Frederick Gordon Brownell. *Convergence and Unification: The National Flag of South Africa (1994) in Historical Perspective* (Doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria, 2015); Željko Heimer, *Croatian Armed Forces Identity as Expressed through the Military Unit Flags in the Homeland War and Following It* (Doctoral thesis, University of Zagreb, 2013).

Traditionally, an early chapter of any dissertation gives a review of the literature in the field to put its area of inquiry and analysis in its proper context. Therefore, reviewing the pertinent chapter of each of these dissertations will reveal that author's working definition of vexillology and summarise and explain the history of flag studies to date – including vexillology as a discipline – in a manner deemed suitable to satisfy the academics sitting on the review committee, who can sometimes be very demanding on what to put in or leave out, what terminology and methodology to use, and even the tone and word choices of a candidate. (Disagreements on these matters or old feuds awakened between members of a review committee can be a PhD candidate's nightmare!)

Brownell

In the second chapter of Brownell's *Converging and Unification: The National Flag of South Africa (1994) in Historical Perspective*, one finds a quick *historical* summary (as the title indicates) of flag studies over the last half millennium and of the field of vexillology specifically in the last half century. He begins with flag charts of early European seafarers out exploring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, next discussing how maritime use led to flag plates and then flag books collecting these, often for the navies of the nation states of Europe. In reviewing significant general flag books historically, he notes stand-outs, starting with F.E. Hulme's *Flags of the World* (c.1895), which went through reprints and improvements by subsequent editors over the decades, including the work of Captain E.M.C. Barraclough starting in 1969, later aided by William Crampton in the 1979 and 1981 reprints. He moves on to discuss the contributions of Germans Rudolf Siegel and Ottfried Neubecker in the first half of the twentieth century, and Whitney Smith's *Flags through the World and across the Ages* in 1975.¹⁴



Fred Brownell

In the section on vexillology as a discipline, Brownell acknowledges Smith as its founder, with the establishment of the Flag Research Center and the *Flag Bulletin* in 1962 putting his operation and collection 'in the forefront of flag science' for the next fifty years.¹⁵ He documents the origin and rise of FIAV, and given his audience, embeds there the establishment of the South African

14 Brownell, pp. 31-4.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Vexillological Association in 1990, for which he credits Whitney Smith as 'midwife'.¹⁶ He also acknowledges the important role William Crampton played in formative vexillology by convening the Flag Section of the Heraldry Society in London 1968-9 to produce the *Dictionary of Flag Terminology*.

Then begins a terse historical review of growing interests and activities in flag studies in selected Anglophone nations, starting with the United Kingdom. The work of William Crampton is given central focus here; Brownell points out he played 'a leading role in the field of vexillology' from 1967 until his death in 1997, birthing the Flag Institute out of the Flag Section of the Heraldry Society, editing *Flagmaster*, and serving as Secretary General of FIAV.¹⁷ As the search for a national flag for South Africa is the main focus of the dissertation, Brownell reviews Canada's switch to the Maple Leaf flag, then contemporary Australian debates before pointing out selected academic approaches to flag analysis from a range of scholars—cultural historian Elizabeth Kwan, art historian Albert Boine, communications studies professor Carolyn Marvin, semiotician Sasha Weitman, and myself.¹⁸

Heimer

Heimer's literature review and summary of vexillological methodology to date is more accessible to all thanks to Heimer, Ted Kaye and David Phillips, the trio involved in its translation, and to the distribution support of the Flag Heritage Foundation, so while denser in its review of vexillological methodology, it may be more tersely summarised here. First, he defines key concepts – Identity, Symbols, Totemism, Science, and Flag - then he summarises flag studies before vexillology, going back to medieval *portolanos* and coming forward in time through flag charts, then nineteenth-century flag books prepared by various European nation states for their navies, noting Neubecker's 1939 work in this category as the 'high point' of quality and accuracy for such manuals.¹⁹



Željko Heimer

He pushes on to argue that vexillology is not 'the younger sister of heraldry' though their interests and data might certainly overlap in some areas, and that 'only sociology can provide answers to questions about the social circumstances in which flags appear and are used, about the way in which certain social groups identify with a flag, and about the link formed between the flag as identification symbol and the group it represents within a wider social

16 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-4.

19 Heimer, *Vexillology as a Social Science*, p. 36.

community'.²⁰

Heimer responds to Whitney Smith's 'Principles of Vexillology,' saying, 'In the introduction, Smith, as a political scientist, defines vexillology as a political science.'²¹ He then works his way through Smith's nineteen Fundamental Principles, summarising and giving his reactions. He follows this with a summary of and reaction to Orenski's essay, followed by a reflection on the usefulness of using vexillology to predict flags, in which he wonders if 'vexillological prediction' is even necessary.²² In the closing pages of the work he resolves that vexillology calls for an interdisciplinary approach to better understand all aspects of flags, and he distinguishes between two categories he creates: pure vexillology, which is the cataloguing and recording of details about flags, in taxonomies and so forth, and applied vexillology, a term he uses to encompass and include flag research that employs the scholarly approaches found in the social sciences. He concludes with the affirmation that sociology as a discipline offers the best home base for vexillology to grow with and develop a useful symbiotic intellectual relationship.²³

Cultural studies assumptions

In the last four decades Cultural Studies has spread around the globe, as a basic approach to getting at meaning in human interaction, with things people make and how they use them. It has been absorbed increasingly across disciplines in the social sciences, but also in the arts and humanities. It has certainly irrefutably influenced me. I was not trained to be a political scientist like Smith or a sociologist like Heimer – I took my advanced degrees in interdisciplinary cultural analysis, with guidance from professors trained in anthropology, intellectual and social history, art history, popular culture, and literary theory. I am a professor of American Studies in a department called Humanities that integrates specialists on Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, and religion - but all colleagues within that department have cultural studies sensibilities in approaching our work, trained in and open to the new insights interdisciplinarity can bring. We share some basic assumptions about how to study meaning, human actions and activities, and cultural creations in the world around us.

Some of these assumptions to bring to meta-vexillological reflection for its benefit:

1. Flags are cultural creations, and thus they both *reflect* and *affect* cultural beliefs and practices, as all culture is mediated.
2. Both tacit and explicit knowledge about flags need to be understood, the divide overcome whenever possible.
3. Culture needs to be understood in all the complex forms in which it manifests itself. Social and political contexts within which it manifests must be carefully analysed.
4. It is important to explore where power is controlled or maintained in the society or social interaction under examination.
5. Vexillology itself is a social construct, just as all conceptual paradigms are social constructs.²⁴

20 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-8.

Looking at the history of flag studies, I earlier grouped it into what I called the Three Phases of Vexillology: roughly flag studies pre-Whitney Smith, under Whitney Smith, and post-Whitney Smith.²⁵ For deeper probing into its historical shifts and emergent paradigms, as well as ideological challenges to the practice from both outside and within the system, one might start by recalling when vexillology was seen as a subset of heraldry (and it certainly still is linked to it in recognisable ways). It was transformed into a nascent social science discipline by Whitney Smith from the mid to late twentieth century, becoming a truly global phenomenon in the twenty-first. Another powerful commercial and professional force has arisen seeking titular influence in flag studies, graphic design, while a different counter-ideology has emerged from a faction calling themselves 'active vexillologists' (although the meaning here is different than the way Heimer presents it), seeing new purposes and opportunities for self and programme promotion through claiming appropriate use of the term 'vexillology' in exercises of aesthetic rating, diagnosis, counselling, and/or guidance, and including under 'the rubric' of vexillology all flag collectors, flag promoters, flag manufacturers and sellers.²⁶

Heraldry

Whitney Smith explained that heraldry had its practical origin to meet a need created after helmets were developed that covered a soldier's face.²⁷ Henry Bedingfeld wrote this was most likely in Plantagenet Anjou and Maine in France in the mid-twelfth century.²⁸ In any case, according to medievalist researcher Nancy Marie Brown, the practice of true heraldry was widespread in Europe by 1200.²⁹ It was the Crusades that really increased the need for such symbolic cognisances in Europe, and the practice of heraldry we have today has evolved from the systems begun at that time to establish rules of symbolic usage while supporting the dominant culture. Smith wrote in 1975:

Even today the concepts and artistic style and attitudes of heraldry are influential; in the designing and usage of flags. ... Most important is the core of common-sense principles exemplified in the very earliest arms: flags are generally more effective when they are simple, employ distinctive designs and colors, remain relatively fixed over time, and are unlike other flags in design.³⁰

The study of flags was clearly not as important as an understanding of heraldry (or even sphragistics!) to the Founding Fathers of the fledgling United States, as their appointing of an austere committee to select a great seal makes evident,

24 Ziauddin Sardak and Borin Van Loon, *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Totem Books, 2005), p. 9. I have paraphrased some basic assumptions from their list and integrated a few theoretical foundations used in many of my syllabi.

25 Scot Guenter, 'The Three Phases of Vexillology', pp. 11-12.

26 See Peter Ansoff, 'Vexillology and Flag Design', to be published as a Letter to the Editor in the upcoming issue of *Flag Research Quarterly*.

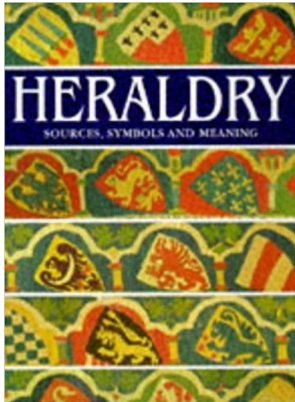
27 Whitney Smith, *Flags through the Ages and across the World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), p. 44.

28 Henry Bedingfeld, 'Origins', in Henry Bedingfeld and Peter Gwynne-Jones, *Heraldry* (Secaucus NJ: Chartwell, 1993) p. 10.

29 Nancy Marie Brown, *Ivory Vikings: The Mystery of the Most Famous Chessmen in the World and the Woman Who Made Them*, Kindle edition (St Martin's Press, 2015), p. 200.

30 Smith, *Flags through the Ages*, p. 45.

while discussion of a new flag did not start until prompted from without for practical reasons.³¹ Seeing the study of flags as a subset of heraldry was also clearly conveyed in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The Library of Congress headings system was first set up in 1897,³² and as Sebastià Herreros Agüí has pointed out, when one looks to this authority for ranking and placement, one discovers that in Class C of History, Heraldry is listed as an auxiliary science of History, and Vexillology is listed under Heraldry at CR 101-115 Flags, banners, and standards.³³



*Otfried Neubecker, Heraldry (1976):
companion to Whitney Smith's seminal,
Flags through the Ages and across
the World (1975)*

When Smith came along, part of the transformation that he wrought was to separate vexillology from heraldry with the argument that it was a social science analysing flags throughout the world, across time and cultures to get at the human condition, rather than an established set of rules that arose in a specific socio-historical context in Europe.

As I like to summarise the distinction: vexillology is descriptive, not prescriptive. But vexillology should not stop at being descriptive (what I call 'solid vexillology');³⁴ it must then push on to be analytical, using critical thinking. That is the ultimate point behind social science, and in a broader sense, all scholarly inquiry.

Because of their past history and their overlapping focus areas, in the twenty-first century heraldry and vexillology have much to gain from collaborating, even as they advance as separate fields. Many heraldry societies include sections on flag studies, and many heraldry societies participate in and bring new knowledge to FIAV. One should not forget that Otfried Neubecker's beautifully detailed *Heraldry: Sources, Symbols and Meaning* was created and published as a companion volume to Smith's 1975 *Flags through the Ages and across the World*, in the same format in the following year.³⁵

31 Scot M. Guenter, *The American Flag 1777-1924: Cultural Shifts from Creation to Codification* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990) p. 29.

32 Tsering Wangyal Shawa, 'Critical Analysis of Library of Congress Subject Headings,' Princeton.edu, 6 August 1998, <https://www.princeton.edu/~shawatw/lcsh.html> [retrieved 25 June 2017].

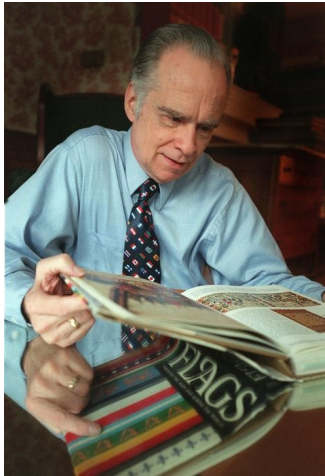
33 Sebastià Herreros Agüí, reply to a posting by Paolo Paddeu on his Facebook page, 3 January 2016.

34 Scot Guenter, 'Solid Vexillology,' *Flag Research Quarterly*, no. 10 (August 2016) pp. 2-4.

35 Brownell, p. 34; Otfried Neubecker, *Heraldry: Sources, Symbols and Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

The age of Smith

Whitney Smith not only coined the term vexillology, he conceived and nurtured the growth of a distinct discipline by constant mentoring of flag scholars globally, while organisationally being instrumental in the growth of organisations to further such study, often on national levels but also, with FIAV, providing a mechanism for such groups to interact and learn from each other more cohesively. His major contributions and leadership in the field are well documented already, and covered richly and fully in multiple other places.



*Whitney Smith with
Flags through the Ages and
across the World*

The North American Vexillological Association, to better make his message accessible to a younger generation, has republished his 'Fundamental Principles of Vexillology,' so it is now free online for anyone to read.³⁶ All vexillologists should read it and be ready to articulate it and respond to it. Think of it as a catechism, or a shared foundation upon which to build—that essay needs to be the starting point to begin our discussion of where vexillology is and where it should go next, and Heimer should be applauded for taking the time to review it as carefully as he did in his dissertation.



William Crampton

In the later decades of the twentieth century, Smith was joined by William Crampton in the business of professional vexillologist, that is, a flag expert who makes a living from consulting based on his knowledge about flags. Although at odds a few times over business dealings, as scholars dedicated to this emergent field of study and in their leadership roles to students of flags across the planet, the pair stressed three vital things:

³⁶ *Flag Research Quarterly*, no.3 (October 2013), www.nava.org/publications

1. 'how and why and where flags were used must be fully understood, in principle and in practice, lest the subject degenerate into a mere collecting of pretty pictures';
2. there must be rigorous and proper documentation in published materials; and
3. theoretical studies are important to the development of vexillology as a field.³⁷

Graphic design

This current age of postmodernism, this era of globalisation, with its international technological advancements and interconnections while still marketing a culture of consumption and desire for consumption around the planet, has been a period in which the boundaries between many scholarly disciplines blur and some new ones arise. One that has certainly gained in stature and influence in my lifetime is the professional field known as Graphic Design. According to the Royal Academy of Art at The Hague, graphic design is the 'process of developing and giving form to communication concepts by arranging, adapting and visualising the available information'.³⁸ Graphic designers are people who are hired to influence the reader, the viewer, the consumer – the person processing the communication – to accept the message, whatever that might be, more readily and eagerly. They are trained to do so, and are often allied with advertisers or promoters. Many times their goal might be to brand you, not with a tattoo but with an ongoing desire for or commitment to a product or an idea, with or without your awareness of how you are being influenced.

As they test their boundaries and explore overlapping areas, it is no surprise that graphic designers wander into the area of vexillography. They create symbols and signs to manipulate people for a living, and they are looking for clients; they also do it as a calling, as there is artistry and a keen sense of aesthetics involved. It is conscious using of the arts to influence the masses, or specific demographic targets. Therefore, graphic designers are increasingly stepping in to fill any perceived or available void in vexillography, and representative graphic designers are turning up more regularly at NAVA meetings.³⁹

In South Africa in 1994, during the ongoing debates and power struggles over just what the new symbol representing South Africa might be, graphic designers interjected themselves, claiming their professional credentials gave them the training and expertise to make these choices. In his dissertation, Brownell documents a rather involved and layered selection process that goes through a few phases. In Chapter Six, he covers how after the public submission of new flag suggestions failed to produce a suitable candidate, the committee appointed to make the recommendation gave interested graphic design companies and collectives an opportunity, given their professional expertise. These graphic design submissions were then judged by the Heraldry Council, and did not pass muster. Brownell writes:

37 Whitney Smith, 'William G. Crampton', p. 96.

38 'General Definition of the Discipline,' Graphic Design, Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, <http://www.kabk.nl/pagewideEN.php?id=0103> [retrieved 25 June 2017].

39 See, for example, Michael Green, 'Branding the Nations,' a paper presented at the Fiftieth Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association, San José CA, 15 October 2016.

[T]he majority of designs had no potential and were not at par with internationally accepted standards. They also did not lend themselves to easy and successful reduction, reproduction or manufacture. In short, the abiding impression was that modern commercial image makers, although they might be on par with logo design, displayed little knowledge of even the basic principles of successful flag design.⁴⁰

Brownell himself, when later appointed convenor of a new committee charged with devising a flag that would please all and instructed to complete this task within a week, recalled a design he had created earlier, and a slightly modified variant of this would in the end become the beautiful flag so well known around the world today as representing South Africa. One interesting bit of information: he came up with this flag design while reflecting on how to integrate ideas of convergence and unification for his nation during 'a seemingly interminable meeting of FIAV' in Switzerland in 1993. He flipped over the lecture programme and sketched it out on the back; Jos Poels, sitting nearby, noticed it and commented on it. Thus master symbols are born!⁴¹

Graphic designers also got involved during the first phase of New Zealand's referendum on a new flag. One crowdsourcing website in New Zealand that draws on international submissions online to get cheaper and faster responses for customers quickly garnered a list of 180 graphic design submissions for their new national flag.⁴² In a well-organised but expensive procedure, the Flag Consideration Panel (a dozen Kiwis from all walks of life with attention paid to including some minority as well as celebrity representation) reviewed all 10,292 submitted flag designs and in August 2015 announced a long list of 40 for further consideration.⁴³ This number was then reduced to four finalists, but a fifth flag known as the Red Peak (by graphic designer Aaron Durstin) was added after public outcry was generated through outreach on social media following the finalist selections.⁴⁴

A public referendum was held to make a final choice among these five with a silver fern flag winning, and then, when put up against the old flag in another public referendum, with 67.8 per cent of the electorate participating, the old flag won with 1,208,702 votes, while the alternative silver fern received 921,876 votes.⁴⁵ Despite all the effort, time and money expended, and the multitude of graphic design entries proclaimed by advocates as 'Good Flags' while the current New Zealand flag was deemed 'Bad' or inappropriate, in the end the cultural identity ties to the original flag were too strong for too many in the nation.

40 Brownell, p. 166.

41 Ibid., p. 173.

42 'Graphic Design Job - New Zealand Flag Design Contest!', DesignCrowd, <https://jobs.designcrowd.co.nz/job.aspx?id=462753> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

43 New Zealand Government, Flag Consideration Project, 'The NZ Flag – Your Chance To Decide', <http://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/ArcAggregator/arcView/frameView/IE25848623/> [retrieved 26 June 2017]; see also Michael Mulholland, 'New Zealand Flag Referendums', paper given at ICV26 (Sydney, 31 August 2015), forthcoming.

44 Artesyt, 'Red Peak – the "designer's choice" flag for New Zealand', video posted 20 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB63X0x-zlM> [retrieved 29 June 2017].

45 New Zealand Government, Flag Consideration Project.



The power and influence of graphic designers is on the rise, and they will undoubtedly be involved in more flag design processes in the future.

At the large university where I teach they are one of the largest and most competitive majors in the entire College of Humanities and the Arts. This past semester a graphic design student, Javier Yep, came to me to direct his thesis project, which turned out to be designing a new flag. I assigned him readings not only on flag design, but also Brownell's dissertation, and I asked him to think about the process Brownell went through collectively, as part of a changing South African society, and individually as a Chief Herald with all the training and tradition that indicated.

I tried to stress how important it is to listen to people and to realise that the meaning of a flag is not conferred by the creator but by its acceptance by the group it represents or by others responding to that group. I went over the difference between a vexillologist and a vexillographer, and I taught him that even if he only wants to be a designer of flags he will still benefit from some immersion in the study of flags.⁴⁶ I told him the two things are not the same thing. Art history is not to be confused with art. The '-logy' on the end of the word makes it seem so obvious to me, but appears to be glossed over or overlooked by so many – it means 'study of' not 'study and/or design of'.



*Flag of Unity in Diversity,
designed by Javier Yep*

Whitney Smith felt this way. As he wrote in 1999, 'Good and bad flag design is recognised as properly being in the realm of *vexillography*, where questions of taste and preference rather than objectivity and rigorous analysis prevail ... vexillologists in principle always stand apart from the flags they study, in order to derive scientific principles from knowledge of what is manifested in actual usage, rather than to evaluate such usage by applying *a priori* principles.'⁴⁷

46 For more on this flag, see <https://unityindiversityflag.com/about/>

47 Whitney Smith, 'American Heraldry and Vexillology,' *Raven* 6 (1999), p. 53.

Vexillonnaires

A challenge to this distinguishing between vexillography and vexillology for the sake of academic boundaries comes in a movement in the United States that calls such beliefs outdated and elitist. In some ways, it might harken back historically to Peter Orenski's experiment in New Milford. 'Given a jury trained in the principles of good flag design,' he hypothesised at one point, 'any municipality can organise an open flag contest and select a vexillographically acceptable flag.'⁴⁸ As he himself admitted upon further reflection, this is not academically sound but rather an exercise in the logical fallacy of circular reasoning.⁴⁹

Orenski promoted a faction he liked to call 'vexillology-in-action': the active intervention in a community's uses of flags, invited or not, to get them to replace aesthetically displeasing flags with ones that better conform to the advocates' definition of beauty.⁵⁰ An example of this was when the Portland Flag Association convinced elderly graphic designer John Lynch to join their club in 2000 because back in 1969 he had designed their current city flag, which had suffered aesthetically through modifications made by politicians before it was approved. They convinced him to join NAVA, and also to be part of a well-organised quartet of speakers they sent to City Hall to argue for a new flag design that they themselves supplied, presenting themselves as authorities by virtue of their status in NAVA. At the age of 89 Lynch did so, and they were successful at replacing their city's official flag with a visually more pleasing design. It is their community and they had every right to do so. Studying this behaviour is vexillology, performing it is not.⁵¹

Ted Kaye disagrees. As Roman Mars explains, from his group's perspective, there are two schools of thought in vexillology: 'The first is one that focuses on history, category, and usage, and maintains that vexillologists should be scholars and historians of all flags, regardless of their designs. The other school of vexillology, however, maintains that not all flags are created equal, and that flags can and should be redesigned, and improved.'⁵² The designer sets up a dichotomy: one group would follow the Fundamental Principles of Whitney Smith in this regard, the others would follow Ted Kaye. Calling themselves 'vexillonnaires', this latter group wants to claim authority not to study the culture around flags, but to change it, and to change the flags themselves. They falsely suggest that when they do so they are being impartial and objective. No, they are imposing their beliefs and values and affecting the flag culture of the group they study. They see such meddling to be their calling, their mission as vexillologists; Whitney Smith understood that this meddling pollutes their ability as social scientists to study the culture around the flag. However, they are not as much interested in understanding any particular flag in its socio-historical context as in promoting their own designs, or having the power to oversee the process of how others might change the flag's design.

The blog of the Portland Flag Association maintains that Roman Mars' TED talk on city flags is the most influential work in vexillology since Whitney Smith

48 Orenski, p. 67.

49 Ibid., p. 68.

50 Ibid., p. 98.

51 Mason Kaye, 'Portland Gets a New Flag Thanks to NAVA Members,' *NAVA News* 35/3, no. 175 (July-September 2002), p. 14.

52 Roman Mars, 'Vexillonaire' no. 140, 99% Invisible, 11 November 2014, <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/vexillonaire> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

published *Flags through the Ages* in 1975.⁵³ It has reached many people, that is quite true. But Mars, who calls himself 'a digital storyteller', is first and foremost a student of design and his true goal is changing designs, 'thereby making life better and providing joy'.⁵⁴ In the TED talk he mentions vexillology, but Mars is a graphic designer, and after he gets his audience to ridicule the flag of Milwaukee, he interviews another graphic designer from Milwaukee who wants to change the flag of Milwaukee. He ridicules many city flags and shares the chestnut S.O.B. joke about many US state flags without understanding the socio-historical contexts in which those flags were created, and I fear, without caring to understand. In a world where you appoint yourself the authority on how a flag should conform to your guidelines, it is easy to disregard or even mock symbols or elements that might have meaning or significance to those in the group that created the flag or claim it as a representation of their identity. The general audience, in contemporary American culture, loves the opportunity to feel they are superior to someone else – thus the dominance of reality television throughout the twenty-first century⁵⁵ - so this pulls viewers into the Mars video as they think to themselves, 'Roman Mars has good taste. I have good taste. But oh, those idiots from (fill-in-the-blank)'. For his final laugh Mars reveals the flag of Pocatello, Idaho. A sense of community is created through this shared feeling of collectively looking down on this flag – and by extension, the residents of Pocatello.⁵⁶



Roman Mars

This is entertainment perhaps, and after the ensuing media campaign of online ridicule, Pocatello government has been shamed into getting a better-looking flag, but arrogantly attacking symbols of others for not conforming to the would-be scholar's definition of beauty is not the point of a social science, or academic scholarship. Mars has reached many people and got them thinking about flags, which is to the good. However, the vast majority now think, according to his presentation and how it has subsequently been disseminated and reported, that the North American Vexillological Association goes around rating flags on which is the most beautiful, which ugliest, and that is what

53 'How Roman Mars Brought Vexillology to the Public,' Portland Flag Association, 14 October 2015, <https://portlandflag.org/2015/10/14/how-roman-mars-brought-vexillology-to-the-public/> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

54 Roman Mars, 'Why City Flags May Be the Worst-Designed Things You've Never Noticed,' TED Talks, March 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/roman_mars_why_city_flags_may_be_the_worst_designed_thing_you_ve_never_noticed [retrieved 26 June 2017].

55 Scot Guenter, 'American Reality TV: A Genre's Evolution from Schadenfreude to Parody', in Scot Guenter and Stanisav Kolar (eds), *Considering America from Inside and Out: A San José/Ostrava Dialogue Sharing Perspectives* (University of Ostrava Press, 2006), pp. 55-68.

56 Roman Mars, 'Why City Flags'.

vexillology is about and why it exists. And many calling themselves vexillologists now spend hours and hours online arguing how to make existing flags prettier, or designing new flags for collective communities who didn't request any help, then offering their new design to the communities and presenting themselves as experts. Vexillology should be studying how flags are part of these cultures, not telling people in those societies they are wrong and we know a better way they need to follow. That is ethnocentric, blatantly, and self-promoting in a non-scholarly way.

Sometimes, well intentioned vexillonaires can even directly affect politics and struggles for democracy in a society. In 2015, Ted Kaye went to Fiji on invitation from the Prime Minister, who himself had come to power in a bloodless coup in 2005.⁵⁷ As a nation, Fiji historically has had to deal with inter-ethnic strife, as its two main ethnic groups, native Fijians known as iTaukei (56.8 per cent of population) and Indians (37.5%) brought in as indentured labour for sugar plantations during the days of the British Empire, struggle for power and advantage while also learning to live together.⁵⁸ Amidst this struggle, the Prime Minister's call for a new flag was a crafted political assault on the indigenous chiefs in that society, to lessen their power and strengthen his. He announced the new flag search not far from the military barracks from where he had earlier successfully launched his coup, telegraphing a reminder of the military support he could call up.⁵⁹



Ted Kaye in Fiji

When Ted Kaye reported on the current state of this new flag selection process at ICV26 in Sydney, he showed an image on the screen that still sticks in my mind: It showed him, a foreign white man, a retired white banker, in Fiji to explain the correct way to do something to a group of smaller, dark-skinned individuals from that society; he was above them, looking down, and they were all looking up to him for answers.⁶⁰ I was thinking about the levels of

57 'Fiji opposition says removal of Union Flag would be "undemocratic"' *Telegraph* (UK) 5 Feb 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/fiji/11391710/Fiji-opposition-says-removal-of-Union-flag-would-be-undemocratic.html> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

58 'Fiji'; in *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fj.html> [retrieved 26 June 2017]; see also Fiji High Commission to the United Kingdom, 'About Fiji', http://www.fijihighcommission.org.uk/about_1.html [retrieved 26 June 2017].

59 Kirstie Close-Berry, 'Postcolonial? Yes. But Fiji's new flag will also be a break with the chiefs' power,' *Guardian* (UK), 4 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/04/postcolonial-yes-but-fijis-new-flag-will-also-be-a-break-with-the-chiefs-power> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

60 Ted Kaye, 'Fiji's New Flag: A Work in Progress?', paper given at ICV26 (Sydney, 31 August 2015), forthcoming.

deconstruction that image would attract at a conference on Post-Colonial Studies, if participants were told he had come from a privileged-class American background to tell those islanders living in a former colony how to make a new flag to represent themselves.

And so it is not surprising to discover that members of the political opposition did seize upon such an approach to his visit to Fiji. Professor Wadan Narsey, writing in the *Fiji Times*:

American Ted Kaye, a vexillologist (flag expert), volunteered to help the flag committee using his 'universal principles' of simplicity and a few colours only. Ha ha ha. So already we can forget our unique Fijian values and symbols.

Kaye revealed to Mark Hay (www.vice.com) in an interview on 3 March 2015 that a short list drawn up by citizen's panel 'will be opened to the public for comment, after which a final design will be nominated by the cabinet for consideration during the national parliament's July sitting'. No mention of the public choosing democratically.

American Kaye had already asserted before arriving in Fiji that the Union Jack was 'a relic of the colonial past', the shield had 'too many colours' and that there were many flags similar to Fiji's current one.⁶¹

The professor goes on to insinuate that Kaye is in collusion with the Prime Minister on what choices he favours, and argues that Kaye contradicts himself on what should be allowed for the colour choices of the flag's field.⁶²



Wadan Narsey

How did this all turn out? Fijians were not impressed with the 23 choices that Kaye guided them to. Opposition Party Members of Parliament spoke out against the entire process, saying there were much more pressing needs and noting how satisfied most Fijians were with the current flag and what it meant to them.⁶³ The Prime Minister said his office would select five finalists, but the process was put on hold and then he kept delaying.

61 Professor Wadan Narsey, 'Fiji Flag Fiasco', *Fiji Times Online*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=311149> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

62 Ibid.

63 Anton Pihl, 'Why Fiji Didn't Change Its Flag', blog post, 9 October 2016;

On 10 August 2016 Fiji beat the UK 43-7 in the rugby sevens finals to win their first-ever Olympic gold medal. Like many others around the globe, I remember seeing the international TV coverage of the Fijians watching the match (both in Brazil and back home): they were going wild, waving their hand-held national banners, celebrating ferociously and exuberantly after they took the gold in their national sport. As I watched that intense community bonding experience, that celebration of shared identity around that symbol, thinking about how much this meant to the inhabitants of this tiny nation, I knew those joyous people were not giving up that flag symbol for a long, long time. Within a week the Prime Minister announced the search for a new flag was terminated; he 'also said that the cost of a flag change would be better spent on the ongoing recovery of severe tropical cyclone Winston which hit Fiji on 20 February 2016 killing 44 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless'.⁶⁴



Left, a 12-year-old Fijian boy runs half a mile through canefields to watch the 2016 Olympic Rugby Sevens final on the nearest TV set. BBC
Right, homecoming of the victorious Fijian team. AFP Feroz Khalil

The future of vexillology

The vexillonaire sees themselves as the future of vexillology, and perhaps they are. They have certainly kept themselves busy alerting communities that they need the help of vexillonaire as flag designers, as consultants on a community flag selection process, or as expert jury reviewers once those processes have begun.⁶⁵ But the zeal for such change often fails to sufficiently gauge what emotional investment citizens might have in identifying with the flags slated for replacement. As I have explained before: suppose a lady has an ugly baby. You and others might agree it's an ugly baby. But she thinks it's a beautiful baby. Why? Because it's *her* baby! That might well be the element of enculturation of the targeted groups for some of these flag changes, put forward in the name of vexillology, which I argue cannot be ignored and should not be considered only superficially. I've always liked the flag of San Francisco—it might not get the highest marks from *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, but I don't care: when Roman Mars ridicules it in his video, I feel a bit of defensiveness on its behalf, just based on experiences I've had there and associated with it. I know I'm not the only person who bonds with some flags emotionally despite what some might call a flaw in their design – the power they can have over us is the purpose of vexillology in the first place!

In a paper at the last NAVA meeting, John Hartvigsen asserted, 'The flag of the National Socialist German Workers Party, which was later adopted as the flag of

<https://antonpihl.wordpress.com/2016/10/09/why-fiji-didnt-change-its-flag/> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

64 Ibid.

65 'Municipal Flag Improvement Update', Portland Flag Association, 15 June 2017, <https://portlandflag.org/2017/06/15/municipal-flag-improvement-update/> [retrieved 26 June 2017].

the German Third Reich, despite being almost universally despised and discredited today, is arguably the best-designed, most powerful and dramatic flag of the Twentieth Century.⁶⁶ Yes, it passes all the tests of *Good Flag, Bad Flag* to be a very good flag, but it is hated and despised by so many around the planet: this is the power of culture and history, and why they must be highly valued in vexillology.

I want to make clear I am not unappreciative of good flag design, and enjoy beauty when I see it. I like the tone and the tips of the Flag Institute/NAVA Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles, '*The Commission's Report on Good Flag Design*', as it demonstrates and encourages awareness of very real cultural differences.⁶⁷ I do agree that if there are specific psychological ways certain colours or shapes influence us universally, if such evidence exists, and the effect is the same no matter what the human culture or prior life experience, then this is something that needs to be better understood by all vexillologists to help us analyse how flag designers, like graphic designers, are manipulating us.

Heraldry held greater sway over flag studies before Smith created Vexillology. Will the Graphic Designers and their counterparts the Vexillonaires appropriate the scholarly discipline now that he is gone? Perhaps. But I'd like to make a case to this group gathered at the ICV that the academic study of flags that Smith advocated, that brought us all together and to which he devoted his life, should not be abandoned too quickly. Smith argued that a scholarly understanding of political symbols was necessary for future vexillology, and I agree. Does that mean political science must be the 'home' discipline for vexillology? No. Heimer argues that sociology should be the 'home' discipline for vexillology, and while I agree that sociological and anthropological insights are crucial to the ongoing growth of this field, nor do I see it as mandatory that vexillology call either of those twin disciplines its official 'home'. It is quite possible for vexillology to grow and flourish as an interdisciplinary pursuit that integrates several additional fields mentioned by Heimer (history, art history, political science, communication studies, textiles, design science)⁶⁸ and several excellent ones he omits, e.g. psychology, semiotics, anthropology, women's studies, ethnic studies, culture studies, popular culture, geography, literature, tv/film studies.⁶⁹

I envision a future for vexillology building upon Smith's fundamental principles and based in multicultural interdisciplinary outreach. No one discipline must be home base; it can integrate as a fascinating focus topic across them, or as a special focus area subset of semiotics or communication studies. Just as an area studies approach works in my department at university, I can imagine scholarly

66 John Hartvigsen, 'The Flag of the NSDAP and the Third Reich: The Impact of a Well Designed Flag', paper presented at the Fiftieth Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association, San José CA, 15 October 2016.

67 Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles of the Flag Institute and North American Vexillological Association, *The Commission's Report on the Guiding Principles of Flag Design*, 1 October 2014, <https://nava.org/navanews/Commission-Report-Final-US.pdf> [retrieved 27 June 2017].

68 Heimer, *Vexillology as a Social Science*, p. 58.

69 For some evidence of my thoughts on how we could grow via interdisciplinarity, see my outreach to academic semioticians thanks to a link through vexillologist Steven Knowlton: Scot Guenter, 'Consider Vexillology', *Semiotix*, no. 10 (May 2013), <http://semioticon.com/semiotix/2013/05/consider-vexillology/>

vexillology drawing upon interdisciplinary approaches from several fields, discovering and sharing knowledge that better serves all of them while carving out an institutional and historical place for itself. Finding one agreed scholarly home is not crucial – but moving beyond taxonomies and other of what Heimer has labelled 'pure vexillology'⁷⁰ toward the higher levels of critical thinking and cultural analysis of flag usage emphatically is: on this point we heartily concur.

In a time when alternate facts are being disseminated at an increasing rate, when ignorance runs rampant, and major elected leaders of my home nation, a powerful country, openly dissemble, insult, excoriate reading, and even deny science, we need more attention to scholarship, not less. Vexillology should not abandon academic approaches, it should embrace them. Vexillology will be what we make of it, we here in this room, and others working with us who are here in spirit while scattered across the globe. It can wax and it can wane, it might evolve, or integrate, or become a shallow sham. Many options are possible. What can make all the difference? A resolved diligence to employ traditional academic regard for verification of information, stronger peer review, a clarion call for more critical thinking, and a scholarship that moves increasingly beyond cataloguing to analysis of flags as the powerful and compelling cultural artefacts they truly are. Let's get to work!

Acknowledgements

Looking to the past, the author would like to thank Whitney Smith for the inspiration for this paper, recalling many conversations we had. He would also like to thank William G. Crampton for the conversations and academic discussions he had with him years ago, and particularly for sharing his dissertation when asked. And looking to the future, he would like to thank Annie Platoff, as talking to her about Library of Congress Headings and how they get changed while doing this paper set in motion a plan by Karen Scott of the University of California at Santa Barbara to organise eventually and petition the Library of Congress to add 'vexillology' as a search option.

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70 Heimer, *Vexillology as a Social Science*, p. 54. See also Guenter 'Solid Vexillology'.