

Genera Vexillorum: The Phylo-Genesis of Flags

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Like other sciences vexillology must have a taxonomy and a theory of organic development. It must involve not only the collection, and documentation of data but also its classification and organisation, and hopefully the structuring of a basic system of nomenclature, ordering and management. In this paper I propose some ideas for accounting for the following questions:

- 1) Why are so many flag designs similar to others?
- 2) Why are there so few basic flag designs?
- 3) What is the organic link, if any, between one design and another?
- 4) How do new ideas in flag design come into existence?
- 5) Why are political party flags so important?
- 6) Are there any laws of organic development?

It may be useful at this stage to recall the work of earlier systematists in scientific phenomemena, such as Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin. In the eighteenth century Linnaeus formulated systems for classifying first of all plants and then the whole of the natural living world in

terms of relationships. (1) In the nineteenth century Darwin added to these laws about the development of the various life-forms, based on the theory of evolution of one species from another. From Linnaeus we derive the concepts of large groups, such as kingdoms of life-forms, organic groups, such as *genera* or *phyle* within these, and subordinate groups or *species*. From Darwin we inherit the notion that life-forms are not static phenomena but that the ones we observe are merely a stage in the development of the form from genesis to extinction. (2) It is my contention that these concepts can be applied to the world of flags.

However, there are limitations. We cannot as yet trace flag-forms back to the Precambrian Age, and even reports of cave-paintings of palaeolithic flag-hoisting ceremonies are as yet

1. See his *Systema Naturae* (1735), *Genera Plantarum* (1737) and *Species Plantarum* (1753).

2. See his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859) and *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868).

3. These reports appear to originate in an unpublished paper circulated by the author after a visit to a little-known cave in southern Spain.

unconfirmed. (3) The phenomena we are dealing with must almost by definition be restricted to the last thousand years or so, and to all intents and purposes to the last two hundred years, these being the ones in which nation-state building, ideas of political empowerment and popular participation have most frequently occurred and been put into effect. (4) At the same time because of the importance of these ideas of political development is necessary to match them with vexillological development, and to be able to show that non-verbal symbols are just as important as other forms of symbolic politics. (5)

To return to the five questions posed above: here are some possible answers.

4. Theories of political development, including the part played by identity in the political process, have been developed by the Committee on Comparative Politics of the US Social Science Research Council, chaired by Lucian Pye, the acknowledged expert on crises of identity. The Committee has published a series of studies on the subject of political development.

5. The basic work on symbolic politics has been done by Murray Edelman, e.g. his *Symbolic Uses of Politics* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1964). In this he reminds us that politics is basically about "who gets what, and how".

1). Because those who design or create them want to show that they are members of a club or group of nations with similar ideals and aspirations. Thus when Finland freed itself from Russia in 1917, even though it did not share the same language-group or associated culture with its neighbours it deliberately chose a flag in the Scandinavian style to show that it shared their aspirations in other ways (constitutional government, social democracy etc.)

Conversely a design can be chosen to show that even though the inhabitants do not share the same political and social aspirations, they are related by culture and language to the country or group of countries whose flag is being imitated. The flags of former British dependencies such as Australia, New Zealand and Fiji are cases in point.

2) There are so few basic flag designs because there is only a limited number of Urflaggen. This term refers to the dozen or so basic flag designs, which form the stems from which all others are derived. These fall into several groups, largely determined by the political circumstances of their genesis.

A: Primitive: these include the Red Flag, the Cross of St George, and the white cross on red (all with various names in different milieux).

B: Early Political Tricolours: only two: the Dutch and the French.

C: Late Political Tricolours or Tribands: Argentina, Miranda, Arab Liberation, Black Liberation or Garvey colours, the flag of Anarchy.

D: Crescent and star.

E: Ethiopia. This is in effect a political tricolour but was not originally conceived as such.

The contention is that practically all modern flags are derived from these ultimate sources, although I would add an important cross-over point with the creation of the Stars and Stripes (1777), which began what is really a completely new phyle.

This answer is also related to the first, in that there is only a limited number of political aspirations available, although these are susceptible to variations: e.g. black Africans could also be Moslems and use the crescent and star as well as the Garvey or Ethiopian colours. (6)

3). The organic link between flag designs is partly the same phenomenon as in 1) above, partly the rule of heraldry that simple precedes complicated, and partly the desire for normality, as specified by Sasha Weitman in his famous essay. (7) Normality means the desire to show that your

6. For a full account of the Garvey-Ethiopian-Rasta colours see my "Marcus Garvey and the Rasta Colours", a paper delivered to the XIIIth International Congress of Vexillology, Melbourne, 1989.

country is a nation-state like others, with an equal place in the comity of nations. As Weitman puts it: To be one of them, it is felt that one must act and look like one of them, and this includes among other things sporting the kind of flag they sport. A flag that is too idiosyncratic, like the flag of Nepal, communicates the uniqueness of the nation, but it may also communicate its isolation from the international community. (8)

In the last resort the organic development of the flag must match the organic development of the state, and it is notable that there are very few, but very important instances where political change warrants a wholesale change in political symbols. These include: the American Revolution; the French Revolution; the Russian Revolution. Of course there are many other instances, most notably the cases of Afghanistan of Cambodia and of Syria, where every change of government involves a change of national flag, but I would submit that these changes are of less significance in that they all take place in terms of the same national panoply. This term is useful to designate the range of available non-

7. "National Flags: A Sociological Overview" in *Semiotica, Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, VIII. 4, 1973.

8. *Ibid.* p346.

verbal symbols, which can be quite wide: including the national personality (e.g. "Uncle Sam"), nationally avowed geographic phenomena (Mount Triglav in Slovenia), and myths and legends built up to epic status (Eureka Stockade, the Alamo, etc.). Some such changes are only marginal, as in the case of the change from hawk to eagle in Egypt in 1984.

4) New ideas in flag design come into existence partly as a result of clever manipulation of what is already in use and partly by making new selections from the national panoply. A superficial examination of design competitions held since 1900 shows that the entrants have a number of objectives:

A) to follow parameters laid down in advance, either as part of the rules, or by their own semi-conscious programs. Instances would be the Australian flag competition, where the judges set the parameters in advance, and the designs sent in during the South African flag conflict, many of which referred to Afrikaner or British symbols.

B) They are looking over their shoulders at existing flags, and particularly those of states with which they think their country has, or ought to have, a lot in common.

C) They are aiming at emphasising the distinctiveness of their country-what sets it apart from the others. The latter results in such bizarre

choices as the nutmeg of Grenada, the cloves of Zanzibar, and the bread-fruit leaf of St Vincent, to mention some vegetarian ones, and the parrot of Dominica, the kangaroo of Australia and the kiwi of New Zealand, to mention some based on exotic fauna.

D) A fourth parameter is the desire to show that the proposed flag, although in a sense new, is also related in some way to previous ones, as in the use of the trident in the flag of Barbados, and-
outstandingly- the use of the temple of Angkor Wat in every flag of Cambodia.

5) Weitman overlooked this feature when analysing flag designs, partly because his sources had not emphasised it, and partly from an over-enthusiastic desire to 'deconstruct' flag colours. (9) Yet it is a fact that a large percentage of modern national flags are based on the flags of parties or of movements, many of which began in obscure circumstances. The colours and designs of the flags may have come about from the same factors as

9. *Weitman's principal sources were: Capt. E M C Barraclough, *Flags of the World*, Frederick Warne, 1969; *Flags of All Nations*, Brown Son & Ferguson, Glasgow, 1971; Mary Etling & Franklin Folsom, *Flags of All Nations*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1968 and Christian Pedersen, *The International Flag Book in Colour*, William Morrow, New York, 1971.*

influence full-fledged national flags. To take one example, that of the Nazi Party: it is clear that Hitler was constrained by the genealogy of the German flag. As an enemy of the republic he was forced to use the black-white-red colours of the Bismarck period, but at the same time he needed a new presentation that also emphasised, as he put it, 'the mission to strive for the victory of the Aryan people, and simultaneously the victory of the idea of creative work,' these being symbolised by the swastika, and the red field previously associated with socialism. (10) Modern politics is about the struggle for power between organised groups, for a long time these have acted as political parties. In non-democratic or semi-democratic states the seizure of power is often absolute, and so leads to the phenomenon of wholesale changes of symbols.

6). Yes, there are laws of flag development, and these emerge from the features listed above. Readers of some of my reference books, such as *The Complete Guide to Flags* and *The World of Flags*, will know that I favour the idea of flag genealogy, that is the creation of families of

10. *Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, Munich, 1943, p557.*

11. *W G Crampton: The Complete Guide to Flags, Grisewood & Dempsey, 1989; The World of Flags: A Pictorial History, Studio Editions, 1990.*

flags from original forebears. (11) I have generally listed these families as:

- The Dutch Tricolour
- The French Tricolour
- The Stars and Stripes
- The Ethiopian-Garvey colours, or pan-African colours
- The pan-Arab colours
- The Miranda colours
- The Belgrano colours
- The Crescent and Star
- The Red Flag
- The Scandinavian Family.

These families account for several of the Urflaggen mentioned above, indeed for all of them except the primitive red flag, the red cross and the flag of Anarchy. There is however a parallel law which states that not all flags can be fitted into any such neat scheme, and a glance at a chart of national flags will show which these are.

An important secondary rule is that a flag design may incorporate more than one trend at a time, and that membership of any of the above families is not exclusive. There is extensive exogamy. Thus the flag of Central Africa incorporates elements of both the French Tricolour and the Ethiopia-Garvey set. The pre-1912 flag of El Salvador was based on the Stars and Stripes but was in the colours of Central America. Other basics

of flag design can be references to other groups, as in the case of vertical tricolour favoured in Francophone Africa and the horizontal one favoured in Latin America. The proportions of the flag can also suggest an element of affiliation, as in the changes from 2:3 to 1:2, which occurred in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Ethiopia under Soviet influence.

Weitman suggests that not merely ideological but also "geocultural" affiliation is an important factor. The "major world realms" all have distinct "colour profiles" (e.g. with green being a predominant colour in African flags). (12) This is roughly parallel to the influence of climate on the development of species of plants and animals.

Finally there should be some testable hypotheses about future flag behaviour.

I would suggest that the flag of any new nation-state is going to be derived from design work affected by the following considerations:

- A. The exploitation of the national panoply.
- B. The desire for ideological and/or geocultural affiliation.
- C. The desire to be both distinct and similar to other countries.
- D. The desire to be both new, and mindful of the past.

E. The desire to use colours with recognisable characteristics.

F. The constraints of genealogy.

Any new flag will not be affected equally by these considerations and indeed perhaps not at all by some of them. In the last few months we have seen several new flags come into existence, and I would suggest that the flags of Slovenia and Croatia notably exploit features A, B, C, D and F above. This is partly because they are based on existing flags anyway. It remains to be seen what the future will bring.

The phylo-genesis of vexillology involves the creation of family-treelike those of the living world, and I suggest that we should now work on the production of these. Factors A-F above will help to us to place new shoots or branches as they begin to bud.

12. Weitman, *op.cit.* p347.

Example of a Major Phyle. Development of Flaf Designs from Urflage (St George's Cross) via Stars and Stripes

