

THE CASE OF FLAGSHIP EARTH: MEDITATIONS ON A GLOBAL BANNER

Dr. Scot M. Guenter

As we gather here in Zurich, a bastion of neutrality, in the very real political world beyond Switzerland people are fighting and dying as nations break up and various ethnic and cultural groups redefine their national identities and boundaries. The number of members of the United Nations has swelled to 183, as of 23 May 1993. Throughout the world varied movements push for recognition of different flags as symbols of universal brotherhood and solidarity. The idea of a global banner dates back at least one hundred years to the symbol of the International Co-operative Alliance; alternative world flags have been championed by various groups throughout the twentieth century¹. The cultural analysis of the designs and dissemination processes for such flags deserves more attention. Here I will only skim the surface in this area of intellectual inquiry. After suggesting some basic areas of categorisation for world flags and giving a few examples, I will detail the creation and propagation of a world flag originating near my home in California. I will close by suggesting the need to incorporate a sensitivity to multiculturalism as a pedagogical strategy and consumer culture as a global economic reality in any analysis of world flag movements in the 1990s.

The vast majority of world flags put forward for consideration tend to fall into two basic variants of design: the rainbow motif or the representation of the entire planet. As Whitney Smith has already argued in a review essay on the history and variety of rainbow flags, «the favourable symbolism of the rainbow itself stretches back for thousands of years»². Since revolutionary essayist Tom Paine suggested a rainbow flag for all neutral maritime nations in 1800, the range of the motif in international flags of peace has included the aforementioned International Co-operative Alliance, a design for the United Nations Flag suggested by Boris Artybasheff on 16 April 1945, and the «Flag of Humanity – Flag of Mankind», copyrighted in 1969, with its hand of peace and misery on a rainbow background (and an accompanying pledge of allegiance to mankind) by a Cleveland-based group of Idealists³. Vexillologist David Martucci has previously discussed the «Flag of the Races», a five colour rainbow variant that sometimes appears with either vertical or horizontal equal stripes of brown, yellow, black, white, and red. This flag symbolises unity of the red, yellow, black, white, and brown peoples. Respected California flag dealer Jim Ferrigan estimates having sold perhaps six of these flags in his entire career⁴.

The rainbow flag of [Fig. 1] has appeared annually at the «Whole Earth Festival» in Davis, California, for the past decade. Note that it includes the other world flag motif, an image of the globe. It is not coincidental that this imagery looks like the artwork of a child. A belief that childhood is a time of innocence, and the purity of a child's vision can lead us to world peace and solidarity, permeates not only the recent music and videos of Michael Jackson, but also the pedagogical movement of multiculturalism and most groups advocating the

development and usage of a world flag⁵. Although in the 1940s Brooks Harding promoted a United Nations Honour flag of four blue (or green) pillars on a field of white as a world flag with which all peoples could identify⁶ the flag of the United Nations we all recognise today most clearly epitomises the second category of world flags, those incorporating a global design or map. This flag, however, does not account for proportional distortions of land masses. Buckminster Fuller took care of this error in his famous global projection map, and licensed by Fuller's estate, in the 1980s «World Flag International» of Hong Kong produced and disseminated a white flag with a yellow world's map on a blue ground based on his map, which equally represents everyone on earth.

Inspired by a 1969 «Life» magazine high resolution photograph of our planet taken by astronauts from outer space, John McConnell went on to get a copy of the image from NASA and create his «Earth Flag», a dark blue flag with the earth globe as seen from space in natural colours. He protected it commercially with a copyright in 1970, a registered trademark in 1971⁷. This flag was used in the first «Earth Day» activities in San Francisco 21 March 1970, and in the last twenty years its use has proliferated in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. Each purchaser of the Earth Flag receives an Earth Flag Declaration, which espouses the values of environmental awareness, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and multiculturalism. From a vexillographic perspective, to my mind the most intriguing of the global image world flags is the «Earth from Space» flag [Fig. 2]. An Illinois farmer named James Cadle designed this banner «as an alternative to national flags for events like moon landings»⁸. In the 1980s, this flag flew over an Ohio State University radio observatory from which emanated the only full-time search on earth for extra-terrestrial radio signals. Part of the beauty of this flag is its semiotic potential as a model for flags of other planets in this (or other!) solar systems. Flip it upside down, frontwards or backwards, it still represents the blue planet with one white moon circling the yellow sun in the black space: that has to be Earth!

I wish to cite in a bit more detail the genesis and dissemination of a global flag originating near my home in northern California. My purpose is not to advocate this particular banner, but rather to suggest common grounds in the ongoing cultural process of social activity associated with these flags which we should begin to evaluate. In 1986, John Jerry Ross was a student at San Jose State University doing his student teaching at Luther Burbank Elementary School in San Jose, California. He recalls that one day during a classroom discussion on flags a third grade Vietnamese girl named Ngan Tran queried with concern and innocence: «Why can't there be a flag for everyone?»⁹ Inspired by her youthful idealism and optimistic vision, Ross dedicated himself to designing and distributing such a flag, to be used as a pedagogical tool in teaching children international goodwill, social consciousness, and a deep and abiding respect for Mother Earth [Fig. 3]. He named it the «Children's Global Flag», and by 1988 had authored the articles, incorporated, and obtained tax-exempt

status for the «Flagship Earth Foundation», an organisation to oversee the distribution of these flags with pedagogical lesson plans he dubbed «study modules». As his good friend Stephen T. Groark describes it: «(Ross) envisioned a holistic secular program of ethics needed to create an attitude of global citizenry among children who will inherit the twenty first century.»⁹

Any school on the planet is invited to join the «Friends of Flagship Earth», according to a 10-Point Application Protocol Procedure distributed by the «Flagship Earth Foundation». Officials must type, sign, and date a formal letter of application, agreeing to prominently display the «Children's Global Flag» each school day throughout the year. They are strongly encouraged to make it their official school flag. They also must explain how they will employ the various study guides distributed by the Foundation, all authored by Ross, as well as demonstrate commitments to environmentalism and multiculturalism. Having met these requirements, the school will be awarded a flag by the Foundation. Since 1988 the «Children's Global Flag» has spread from San Jose to several thousand schools in every state of the US and to at least 36 other countries. From a vexillological perspective, the use of the script «Many Cultures - One World / a living planet for all humanity and diversity of life / Flagship Earth» is clearly lamentable; the semiotic suggestion that English should be the dominant world language carries with it the hegemonic connection to those cultures and societies that employ it as a mother tongue.

In a communication dated 22 March 1989, using the nom de plume L. L. Gaia, Ross explained the significance of the flag's colours: «Most simply stated, blue on the flag stands for proper stewardship of the Home Planet, home for all evolved life including Homo Sapiens. The golden-yellow aura around the globe represents a solar eclipse. The light is a new dawn arising on all horizons of the planet... It is a light that reveals the natural beauty of all cultures and colours of children»¹⁰. The full «Colours of the Flag» lesson, intended to be taught to celebrate the vernal equinox, was joined in 1991 by the «Declaration for a Living Planet» for the autumnal equinox, a «12-Point Moral Compass» for the summer solstice, and a «Code of Conduct» pledge for the winter solstice, all attributed to L. L. Gaia, all copyrighted¹² [see Appendix].

Why the pseudonym? Well, «the «Gaia Hypothesis», a concept of the Earth and its life forms as being of equal parts, was advanced as a theory in the 1970s by biochemist James Lovelock, who named it after the Greek Earth goddess». Many adherents of the concept can be found in the New Age movement. In September 1992, some fundamentalist and Mormon parents in San Jose successfully lobbied to have the Children's Global Flag removed from Lone Hill Elementary School¹³. They objected to «pagan philosophies» represented by the flag. Although they agreed in general with the Foundation's philosophy of environmentalism and multiculturalism, they were suspicious that earth worship was surreptitiously replacing respect for Jehovah, and demanded no New Age religion be taught in the school.

To defend Flagship Earth, Ngan Tran, by then 15, returned to Luther Burbank School in November 1992

to give a talk on the flag's origin and purpose. «The flag is not about religion», she said, «it is about children and abolishing racism»⁴. Tran reported in a private conversation with me in July 1993 that she first found out about the ongoing «Children's Global Flag» project in 1990, and has followed its development with interest since then. California schools plan to sponsor her on a trip to Vietnam in September 1993, at which time she will lecture and present a flag to a Vietnamese school. The origin story focusing on a Vietnamese girl in San Jose, a major centre of Vietnamese migration in recent decades, synthesises quite nicely themes of international peace and brotherhood. Ross's pedagogy is undeniably that of multiculturalism, an academic movement of considerable force in North America which has continued to gain strength in the last decade and to which I also adhere intellectually. Multiculturalism is not, however, the force that will overcome the corrosive effects of corporate capitalism. David Rieff is on target when he describes it as «perhaps the most salient cultural epiphenomenon of an increasingly globalised capitalist system»¹⁵. Pushes for multiculturalism themselves occur within and participate amidst the consumer culture that is spreading and intensifying around this entire planet. Thus, Ross got trademark protection for «Flagship Earth» in 1991. He did the same thing for «Children's Global Flag» and «Global Flag» in 1992.

If and when the true World Flag arises, it will be confirmed through usage and no one will own the right to it. I don't think it will be a Rainbow Flag. Perhaps my perception is skewed living near San Francisco, but I believe the Rainbow Flag has been too successfully appropriated by the international gay and lesbian movements to be accepted as a universal symbol for all mankind in the 1990s¹⁶. Therefore, a more likely world flag will employ some global image, but it must not be an image anyone can own. With a global consumer culture, how can a universal banner be accepted and disseminated without avoiding the process of commodification? An excellent question. Thinking back on H. G. Wells's «War of the Worlds» perhaps the one crisis that might finally bring all humanity together with a sense of solidarity is terror when confronted by some alien extra-terrestrial Other. It was man's continuing exploration of space that inspired both McConnell and Serwatowski's calls for World Flags.

Let us pray that before we head into the stars, we improve on how we treat each other here on Earth, so that should there someday be a true World Flag, the unity it would signify would not be specious.

Appendix

12-POINT MORAL COMPASS

Symbolised by the CHILDREN'S GLOBAL FLAG.

Preservation of this amazing planet as a fountainhead of life
World solidarity against ecological abuse
Regreening of this planet
Clean air & water & soil conservation
The sensible responsibility of democratic citizenship
Elimination of tyranny & racism & chauvinism
of all forms

ERRATA

Page 113, Fig. 2: The image has been inverted.

Seite 113, Fig. 2: Das Bild ist spiegelverkehrt.

Page 113, Fig. 2: L'illustration est à l'invers.

The wonderful necessity of diversity
in the human race
Child welfare: safety, health, nutritional
and educational rights
Proper funding of schools & effective
implementation of education
Human rights & fundamental freedoms
Thinking globally & acting locally
Participation, co-operation, prosperity & world peace

By L. L. Gaia
June 21, 1991
(Suggested Summer Study Module)

CODE OF CONDUCT

Symbolised by the CHILDREN'S GLOBAL FLAG

I am related to each and every human-being. I acknowledge and respect the necessity of cultural and ethnic diversity in the human race. It is clear to me that my life, my community, and my nation are all inter-dependent with life, communities, and nations around the world. My behaviour, both my speech and my actions, each and every day throughout my life, will be based upon truthfulness and honesty, fairness and decency. I will do my best to conscientiously interact with all people, with my community, and with all other aspects of the global environment. Each and every day I pledge that I will strive to be a responsible inhabitant of this amazing planet.

By L. L. Gaia
December 21, 1991
(Suggested Winter Study Module)

Notes

- ¹ Brooks Harding, «World Flag Encyclopaedia», Washington, DC, United Nations Honour Flag Committee, 1948.
- ² Whitney Smith, «The Rainbow as a Flag Symbol», in: «The Flag Bulletin», no. 27, 1988, p. 60.
- ³ Front cover and inside cover of the Flag Bulletin 27.2, 1988, [also listed as FB 125].
- ⁴ David B. Martucci, «The Red and the Black», in: «The Flag Bulletin», no. 13, 1974, p. 62.
- ⁵ Aside from «Flagship Earth», two other world flag groups holding similar values and deserving more study are: «Whole World Project», P.O. Box 1124, Fairfax CA 94930, and «Project Global Harmony», Box 705, Goffstown NH 03045
- ⁶ Kumaran Fernando, «A Short History of the United Nations Flag and Emblem», in: «NAVA News», October-December, 1978.
- ⁷ John McConnell, «The History of the Earth Flag», in: «The Flag Bulletin», 21, 1982, pp.57-58. McConnell delivered this lecture at the 9th ICV in Ottawa, Canada, 1981.
- ⁸ «Cosmic Searching, Buckeye Style», in: «Discover», March 1982, p. 24.
- ⁹ Teresa Hurteau, «Child's Innocent Question Has Unfurled the World», in: «San José Mercury News», 11 November 1992, East Extra, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Stephen T. Groark, «Children's Global Flag - Flagship Earth: Fact Sheet», press release, «Flagship Earth Foundation» Archive, 65 Washington St. #200, Santa Clara, CA 95050.
- ¹¹ L. L. Gaia, «Colours of the Flag», «Flagship Earth Foundation», 22 March 1989.
- ¹² The text of these four page lessons is published as a flier to expedite classroom photocopying, its «12-Point Moral Compass» and the «Code of Conduct» pages are included in the Appendix.
- ¹³ E. Mark Moreno, «Parents Raise Roof over Children's «Pagan» Flag», in: «San Jose Mercury News», 16 September 1992, p.B4.
- ¹⁴ Hurteau, op. cit., p. 1.
- ¹⁵ David Reiff, «Multiculturalism's Silent Partner: It's the Newly Globalised Consumer Economy, Stupid», in: «Harper's», August 1993, p. 63.
- ¹⁶ For the pre-1987 history of the Rainbow Flag as a gay symbol, see James J. Ferrigan III, «The Evolution and Adoption of the Rainbow Flag in San Francisco», in: «The Flag Bulletin», 28, 1989, pp.116-122.



Y B W/N



above: Fig. 1
«Whole Earth Festival Flag».

left above: Fig. 2
Cadle's «Earth from Space Flag».



left below: Fig. 3
Ngan Tran presenting Ross's «Children's Global Flag». This is a white flag with a globe of white on blue, surrounded by a yellow aura, and with blue lettering above and below the globe.