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# 1 Some questions about flags

*Thomas Hylland Eriksen*

Samuel Huntington begins his controversial book on 'civilisational clashes' (Huntington 1996) with a reflection about flags and cultural identity, retelling an anecdote about an international scholarly meeting in Moscow in 1992, where the Russian hosts had accidentally hung their national flag upside-down. Signifying uncertainty on the part of the reinvented Russians, who had been Soviets only a couple of years earlier, the event was – in Huntington's view – about a stage of transition. Further down the page, he notes that 'more and more the flags are flying high and true', indicating a return of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe after communism (but see Kolstø 2006 for a more complex account).

Huntington goes on to relate a few more anecdotes about flags and their importance as symbols of cultural identity in the modern world. He mentions the inhabitants of Sarajevo who, at the height of the siege of the city in 1994, waved Saudi Arabian and Turkish flags instead of Western ones, and thereby 'identified themselves with their fellow Muslims' (Huntington 2006: 19). However, it could equally well be argued that the demonstration was meant to voice dissatisfaction over Western attempts to stop the war, not a wish to align with Muslim countries. As Sarajevans today are quick to point out, when they were forced into exile during the war, nearly everybody went to Western Europe, not to Libya or Saudi Arabia.

Huntington also mentions a demonstration in Los Angeles where Mexican immigrants waved Mexican flags in a bid to demand equal rights. When it was commented that they should have waved US flags instead, some of them did, a couple of weeks later, but carried them upside down.

The theory of an imminent 'clash of civilisations' has been criticised for its simplistic view of culture and deterministic view of conflict by very many scholars in the field, and there is no need to reiterate the arguments. However, Huntington is right when he points to the importance of community symbols and the continued power of postulated primordial – ethnic, cultural, religious, national or regional – attachments in the contemporary world. It is also a matter of some interest that he chooses to begin his book with a brief rumination on the symbolic importance of the flag.

The flag, for all its rich symbolic and political connotations, its long history harking back to medieval heraldry, its ubiquity and emotional power,

has been relatively neglected in research on nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Most theorists of nationalism make passing references to flags as symbols of the nation, but rarely treat the flag systematically (Billig 1995 is an exception here, and it must be added that a substantial literature on the American flag exists). The flag is nonetheless a pillar of nationhood, along with institutions such as the population census (Anderson 1991; Kertzer and Arel 2002), the universal educational system (Gellner 1983; Meyer *et al.* 1992), the shared historical narrative (Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 1991), and so on. Yet flags have been poorly theorised so far, and have scarcely been treated comparatively (although see Elgenius 2005a).

This volume brings together a group of scholars from different academic disciplines – anthropology, folklore studies, geography, history, literature, political science, sociology – who make a collective attempt to give flags their proper place in the theory of nationalism. All the main cases are taken from a cluster of culturally closely related societies; Scandinavia, the UK including Northern Ireland, and the USA. There are, in other words, no studies of flag issues in post-colonial countries or Eastern Europe, to mention two obviously different contexts from the ones we have concentrated on. Certainly, some dimensions would have been added if we had decided to broaden the canvas. Controversies over flags in post-communist societies, which include both new and old states, would have brought conflict of a different kind into the discussion; and third world countries with no pre-colonial flag history illuminate, through the indifference often displayed towards the flag among the citizenry, the gulf between state and society in many new countries.

Our decision to restrict ourselves to discussing flag issues from a group of North Atlantic societies nevertheless has some advantages. It limits the range of substantial issues raised, but may, as a compensation, lead to a focus on the *nature* of the flag, showing what a flag *is*, rather than showing what flags *can be* in a number of sharply contrasting cases. Flags are symbolic containers, but what do they contain?

This much said, it should be added that the variety of perspectives and substantial issues raised in this book is, in our view, perfectly adequate. Who outside the region would have guessed, for example, that flag use and perceptions of the flag differ so enormously between the three Scandinavian countries? The contrast between the ambivalent, often lukewarm attitude to the St George's Cross in England and the huge density and variety of flags among Protestants in Northern Ireland, politically part of the same country, is also thought-provoking. The enthusiasm displayed for the Southern Cross in parts of the United States, furthermore, contrasts sharply with the complex attitudes to the Stars and Stripes, a flag which signifies a different kind of imagined community, prevailing among other Americans. This handful of studies from Northern Europe and the USA brings out enough variety as it is, and hopefully they will inspire scholars working in other parts of the world to undertake similar endeavours.

### Flags as condensed symbols

Durkheim and Mauss, in their *Primitive Classification*, first published in 1903 (Durkheim and Mauss 1963/1903), commented on the analogy between primitive totems and flags. A totem is usually an object (more rarely a naturally occurring phenomenon such as lightning) which signifies shared identity, mutual obligations and certain exclusive norms, such as food taboos, among the members of a kin group in many traditional societies in Australia, Africa and the Americas. As Lévi-Strauss (1962) showed in his magisterial treatment of totemism, the plants and animals which become totemic are taken on not because they are economically useful, but because they are 'good to think with' (*bons à penser*). They shape thought about the nature of society, its (presumed) natural divisions and internal relationships, and the relationship between society and nature.

Others working in traditional societies have also occasionally pointed out parallels between symbols of cohesion there and in modern nation-states. For example, one of Victor Turner's Ndembu-educated informants told him, in an attempt to explain the central place and multiple meanings of a particular tree species (the 'milk tree') in Ndembu culture, that these trees were like the flags of the white people (Turner 1967).

In the European Middle Ages, flags had an instrumental function, in that they made it possible to distinguish between friends and enemies on the battle ground. However, heraldic flags were also associated with kinship, origins and place. Aristocratic families had their flags, powerful Scottish families had their tartans, and many Europeans belonging to the establishment had their coat of arms.

In the modern era of the nation-state, with which this book is concerned, flags signify, at an abstract large scale, some of the same things that totems and heraldic symbols have done in the past, but – in the case of national flags – they signify the metaphoric kin group of the nation rather than other groups. As all the chapters in this book show, disputes over flag design, which flag to use, and how to use it, reveal conflicts which are ultimately concerned with the nature of 'we-hood'. Flags are, in Turner's terminology, *condensed symbols*, or *key symbols* (Ortner 1973). They compress a broad range of meanings and are rich in aesthetic and emotional connotations. For example, when my son decided to become an Arsenal supporter, at the age of eight, I suspected the underlying reason was that our local Oslo club, FC Lyn, where he is an active player, uses the same red and white colours as Arsenal.

It is impossible to express the condensed meanings expressed through flags because they differ so in their cultural significance and substantial meaning. In many countries, flags have little importance in everyday life, and are associated with the state, not the people. In some societies, such as twentieth-century Sweden, flags were unwaved, to use Billig's (1995) useful term. Overt nationalism was considered vulgar, but at the same time, the patriotism of the Swedes was never in doubt. In neighbouring Norway, flags were everywhere

during the same period, leading many Swedes to suspect Norwegians of being victims to childish and ultimately destructive nationalist sentiments. Yet, the very ubiquity of Norwegian flags meant that they were uncontroversial, multivocal and quotidian. When Norwegians see a flag, some think about ice-cream (a rare treat in the 1950s, but abundant on Constitution Day, along with thousands of flags); some associate it with the achievements of the national athletes (usually in winter sports); others, probably many, think about the pure air and open spaces of Norwegian nature; while a few associate it with Christmas, since Norwegian Christmas trees are decorated (albeit not exclusively) with streams of tiny flags.

As a result of the omnipresence of the flag, it was impossible for extreme right-wing groups in Norway to appropriate the flag. In Sweden, where flag use was less everyday, neo-nazis were, especially in the 1980s, prone to use the Swedish flag as a symbol of racism and ethnic nationalism. Discovering that they were about to lose a main symbol of the country, other Swedes re-appropriated the flag, waved or unwaved as the case might be (see Löfgren's chapter in this collection).

In Denmark, by contrast again, the flag is associated with *hygge*, cosiness, and the good life. As Jenkins shows in his chapter in this collection (see also Jenkins 1998), Danish flags appear on tins of ham, on beer bottles, hanging from the ceiling in shopping centres and in a lot of other contexts which encourage consumption. The flag somehow makes you want to enjoy yourself through consuming. In the neighbouring countries, this meaning is not conferred on the flag: in Sweden, the Danish practice is seen as slightly cheesy, in Norway as profaning a sacred symbol.

There is, in other words, no single recipe for creating an efficient unifying symbol in a complex society, where the inhabitants are in most respect quite different from each other. Both the unwaved flags of Sweden, the noisily waved Norwegian ones and the commercialised Danish flags seem to bolster and confirm the sense of identification among most of the inhabitants. To what extent immigrants and other ethnic minorities identify with the flag is a different question. In 2005, there was a stir in the Oslo press when members of the indigenous Sámi minority wished to use the Sámi flag during the 17th May (Constitution Day) parade. People who argued against the idea were not against including the Sámi in the Norwegian nation; on the contrary, they felt that the Norwegian cross (a tricolour inspired by the Danish and Swedish flags) was wide enough in its symbolic connotations to include every citizen regardless of ethnic identity.

In spite of the many variations, a few common denominators are nevertheless minimal requirements for a flag to serve as a basis for identification for a sprawling and diverse citizenship. First, the shared identity must be based on something else in addition to the flag. In itself, a flag does nothing; if it doesn't work emotionally, it is nothing more than a piece of cloth. This can be the case for the majority of the population in many post-colonial African countries, many of them ethnically diverse, where the state has a

weak legitimacy, where there may be no shared language and few public arenas for the enactment of abstract solidarity (such as religion or international sport).

Second, the flag must be as empty a vessel as possible; it ought to be possible to fill it with many things. If it is associated with particular regional, political, religious or ethnic interests in a diverse country, it is bound to be divisive. Or, if the country is largely homogeneous, it may still work as a unifying symbol, but at the cost of categorically excluding the minorities. To take a Swedish example again: in the mid-1970s, Sweden had two athletes of global significance. The alpine skier Ingmar Stenmark won everything in his field, and the tennis player Björn Borg won about half of the Grand Slam tournaments for several successive years. Still, Stenmark became a national symbol, while Borg did not. The reason is probably that Stenmark functioned as an empty symbol, a bit like royalty who (ideally, if not in practice) behave modestly, have uncontroversial private lives and stay out of politics. Nobody knew anything about Stenmark, except for his unusual skills in racing fast down a snowclad hill. Borg, representing a more powerful and prestigious sport, ought to have become a national symbol by virtue of his achievements, but did not. The reason is probably that his personality was too distinctive and therefore controversial. At a tender age, Borg became associated with a hedonistic lifestyle; he was a tax refugee living in Monaco much of the time, he drove fast cars and was seen with far too many, far too glamorous women. Sweden was divided over Borg because he offered substance, whereas with Stenmark there was no argument over anything. Now, a flag, in order to unite people who are otherwise very different, must be capable of making them *feel similar before the flag*. It should work like a Rorschach test, or as Neumann says in his chapter in this book, it should ideally 'be all things to all people, anytime, anywhere'. Indeed, when Ortner (1973: 1339–40) usefully distinguished between 'summarising' and 'elaborating' symbols, she invoked the American flag as an exemplar of the former, standing for 'a conglomerate of ideas and feelings'.

Third, ambiguity must vanish at the boundary. Most border crossings in the world are marked with flagpoles on both sides. There should be no doubt as to which side you are on. Some of the flag controversies dealt with in this book – notably the Confederate battle flag in the USA, dealt with by Leib and Webster, and the omnipresence of flags in Belfast discussed by Bryan and Jarman – show either that loyalties are disputed, or that they are absolute but entrenched in a sea of people waving other flags.

### The symbolism of boundaries

The multivocality of flags is evident everywhere, but so are their excluding and boundary-marking qualities. Encompassing many cultural meanings, they also signify social boundaries. In Grimnes' discussion of the invention and phenomenological transformation of the Norwegian flag, it becomes

clear that not only was the new Norwegian flag an affront to Swedes (who had become accustomed to living in a union with their lesser neighbour), but it also divided the domestic population between Norwegian nationalists and Scandinavian nationalists. When a flag has established itself as authoritative, there is no turning back.

At the same time, different flags may co-exist. In Britain, as noted by Groom, the recent re-emergence of the cross of St George, the English flag, has scarcely made the Union Jack obsolete (see also Groom 2006). Instead, there have been suggestions from ethnic minorities to include some thin black stripes in the latter, to remind the citizens of the living legacy of colonialism. The Union Jack<sup>2</sup> is already an amalgam of three pre-existing flags, the crosses of St George (England), St Andrew (Scotland) and St Patrick (Ireland); the argument is that a fourth 'cross' might be added, for the sake of contemporary relevance.

A more radical case can be witnessed daily in cities like Barcelona, where four flags may often be seen side by side: the city flag of Barcelona (signifying place), the Catalanian flag (signifying ethnicity and language), the Spanish flag (signifying a federal union), and the flag of the European Union (signifying international integration). Depicting the identities of city-dwellers as a series of concentric circles, this multiple flag use suggests that even the multivocality of a single flag cannot do justice to all the moral obligations and levels of belonging experienced by a city-dweller. One might add the flags of Barcelona Football Team and the UN flag, making things even more complex; but one may also note that the significance of each flag varies situationally.

Flags signifying different identities may nevertheless conflict with each other. In countries with strong socialist and trade union movements, the red flags waved on May Day stand in an uneasy relationship with the national flag, which for many signifies vertical solidarity and treason to the class cause.

In any case, the flexibility of a flag allows diverse groups to identify with it, provided there are also other bases of solidarity. A few years ago, a Norwegian of Pakistani origin allowed herself to be photographed naked, but painted with the colours of the Norwegian flag, on the front page of a newspaper's Saturday magazine. By doing this, she said several things at once: people of Pakistani origin can be Norwegian, and it is okay for a girl with a Muslim background to pose in the nude. The Danish pop group Shu-bi-dua, composed entirely of ethnic Danes, communicated something very different when they used the Danish flag on the cover of one of their albums. As Jenkins points out, the Danish flag 'is in fact many flags'; by posing the way she did, the Pakistani-Norwegian invented a new Norwegian flag which had probably never even been imagined before her stunt. She may have enlarged the compass of Norwegianness, but simultaneously reduced the cohesion of the substantial Pakistani-Norwegian community.

Sometimes, the signification of flags may be extended metaphorically. While Palestinian and Israeli flags have obvious meanings in the Middle East

and in areas elsewhere populated by Arabs or Jews, it is less obvious that they should be used in Belfast. Nevertheless, Palestinian flags are occasionally seen, waving in the wind or painted on walls, in Belfast (Bryan 2000; Jarman 1997), since Northern Irish Catholics sometimes interpret the Protestant–Catholic relationship as analogous to the Israeli–Palestinian one. Flags can, in other words, even be transposed to alien contexts, and this may not be as uncommon as it seems at first blush. American flags are sometimes used by non-Americans in places far from the USA, to demarcate a point of view which is not necessarily overtly political, but could be mainly aesthetic or cultural.

Notwithstanding the unifying character of flags, flags also naturally divide, or rather come to signify divisions as well as the unity of a nation. Moreover, interest groups may try to monopolise the use of the flag, to appropriate it for their purposes. In 1994, two important events involving national sentiment took place in Norway: the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer (February), and the referendum over European Union membership (November). Flags were in widespread use on both occasions; at Lillehammer, thousands of spectators even had their faces decorated with the Norwegian cross. Interestingly, the people who used the flags on the two occasions probably overlapped only partly, and the flags were invoked for completely different purposes. At Lillehammer, the driving force was commercial and outward-looking; the motivation was to give Norway its fifteen minutes of fame and to attract foreign tourists. At the referendum, the purpose was inward-looking and political; used almost exclusively by the ‘No’ side, flags were taken to signify sovereignty and independence from the Union. These brief vignettes indicate both the multivocality of flags and their divisive potential.

### **Waved and unwaved flags**

To what extent active and ostentatious flag use signifies a degree of commitment to a community is debatable, as Löfgren’s Swedish material suggests. Billig has argued that symbols may be at their most efficient when they are not noticed: the unwaved, unnoticed flag hanging outside official buildings, taken for granted by passers-by, testifies to a deeper and more confident national identity than fervently waved flags. This view has been challenged by Kolstø (2006), who points out that ‘massive’ flag-waving takes place in the post-9/11 United States and, it may be added, flag-waving is also occasionally conspicuous in a well-established country like France, where the degree of national identity is, overall, high for the majority.

Billig’s description of ‘banal’ nationalism, the everyday and taken-for-granted – the weather forecast, the playing of the national anthem, the patriotism of sport commentators on television – is original and important. A country which doesn’t have to remind itself all the time that it is a country, because it knows that it is one, is usually better integrated, and its state



enjoys a higher degree of legitimacy, than one where state propaganda and ostentatious displays of patriotism are the order of the day. In Mauritius, to mention a post-colonial country with which I am familiar, flags are rarely used in private contexts. They appear in government publications, in 'responsible' media, in front of public buildings such as ministries and schools, but no Mauritian in his right mind would – like Scandinavians – own a private flagpole to hoist the Mauritian flag on the President's birthday. In Norway, where the informal nationalism of the *demos* runs deep, and flagpoles are common, naked flagpoles on Constitution Day are always noticed, and unspoken alliances are formed between those who hoist their flags on May Day.

Billig's contrast between the waved and the unwaved is reminiscent of Geertz's (1973) comparison between 'deep' and 'shallow' play. In his celebrated account of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz argues that the participants who actively bet on the roosters, who may own a rooster themselves, and who stand in the front row during a fight, cheering the poor combatants on in loud voices, engage in 'deeper' play than the others and are in a better position to understand the nature of the ritual.

We all understand intuitively what Geertz means; listening to a concert in deep concentration is much more rewarding than chatting with your friends at the bar while the band plays. However, Billig's material, and several of the chapters in this book, make the argument more complicated. In fact, Billig seems to argue that the 'shallow' play of near-indifference before the flag works at a deeper level than ostentatious flag-waving. Kapferer (1984) has criticised Geertz along similar (but not identical) lines when noting, in a discussion of an exorcism in Sri Lanka, that the people who watch from a distance are in the best position to reflect on the ritual, moving between an insider's and an outsider's perspective.

There is no decisive answer to this question, and besides, Geertz was interested not in reflexivity, but in degrees of emotional immersion. In any case, some of the most committed flag-wavers presented in this book (cf. Jarman and Bryan on Northern Ireland, Leib and Webster on Southern Cross enthusiasts) obviously have a reflexive and reasoned (if also deeply emotional) relationship to the flag. At the same time, they are all part of contexts where flag use is contested and controversial, which means that it cannot be taken for granted. In many countries, citizens don't even notice it when they see the national flag, but in Northern Ireland they do.

The situation in Sweden for most of the twentieth century (before recent globalisation, EU membership and substantial immigration) would clearly be that of the unwaved flag. A Mauritian poet, who always used the sea as a metaphor in his poetry, sat with his back to the ocean while being interviewed, and commented that he didn't have to see the ocean as long as he knew that it was there.

A third kind of context, which transcends the shallow-deep and waved-unwaved dichotomies, is that of massive commercialisation of the

flag. Groom and Jenkins show, in their chapters, how the Union Jack and *Dannebrog* are used in marketing contexts. The Union Jack was in fact considered sexy for a while, appearing on beer mugs, fashionable t-shirts and knickers in the shops of Carnaby Street. It is still treated in a much more relaxed way than most other national flags, appearing on all kinds of tourist trinkets sold in Britain. Foreigners who see the Union Jack may associate it with the Beatles, with English football, Big Ben or the Buckingham Palace. Neither German nor Dutch nor French flags have quite the same connotations, although the Italian tricolour has a strong association with food.

The presence of a great number of unwaved, barely noticed flags may indicate a strong, confident and therefore implicit national identity, but it may also signify the opposite, not least in those Third World countries where flags are associated with a remote and useless government. Similarly, fervent flag-waving may suggest great national enthusiasm, but it can also bear witness to ruthless exploitation by a tyrannical state forcing citizens to feign loyalty. Omnipresence of flags shows the need, either by the state or by parts of the *demos*, to give material evidence for a postulated imagined community.

### State and civil society

It is necessary to distinguish between flag-waving from above and from below (see Eriksen 1993, on formal and informal nationalism). None of the chapters of this book, with the partial exception of Elgenius' overview, discuss state efforts to instil patriotism, in otherwise fragmented populations, through flags. This can be a risky endeavour, as Kolstø points out in a comparative discussion of the new Russian and Bosnian flags (Kolstø 2006), since, in 'new, insecure nations the flags . . . often fail to fulfil their most important function as promoters of national unity. On the contrary, they often bring to the fore strong divisions' (Kolstø 2006: 679). Flag use from above may thus be met with indifference, cynicism or downright hostility. However, divisiveness may equally well come about in societies undergoing change, or where social movements have created tension between established elites and other groups. In France, regional flags may often be seen in rural areas, which can be interpreted as a quiet rebellion against the centralised state. 'New Danes', many of them Muslims who neither drink alcohol nor eat pork, are unlikely to identify strongly with the *Dannebrog*, a symbol used on Faxe beer cans and tins of ham.

The civil society element, involving flag use from below, is strong in all the countries discussed in this book. Flags may be contested (the American Deep South, Northern Ireland), their inclusiveness may be variable (immigrants may not identify with the Norwegian flag, Scots dislike the Union Jack), but their use is largely informal. Flag pins are worn on lapels in the USA on the Fourth of July, Swedes and Norwegians hoist their flags on special occasions (which could be as private as a birthday in the family), supporters of the Confederate flag use it in ways often deemed provocative by others, and

during the 'marching season', flags of very many kinds can be seen in the Protestant areas of Belfast, often to the despair of the political authorities. In Great Britain, admittedly, the situation is more complicated. The Cross of St George is becoming increasingly familiar in England itself, the Union Jack being something often treated with humour and irreverence, or downright hostility (as on some classic punk record sleeves).

By contrast, the civil society element, or informal nationalism, is weak in many other countries. In Mauritius, the only occasion where I have seen a large number of small Mauritian flags carried voluntarily by ordinary people has been in connection with major sport events. It is through entering relationships with non-Mauritians that Mauritian identity becomes relevant. And during the break-up of East African collaboration over railways and air traffic in the mid-1970s, for example, which led to a cooling of the relationship between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, lots of Kenyans identified *as* Kenyans, something many of them had never done before.

Like all symbols of identity, flags are invested with emotions, but they only work when the entity represented by the flag is legitimate, be it an existing state (e.g. Ireland), a projected state (e.g. Palestine or Khalistan) or a competitor to the state (e.g. Catalonia or the southern states represented through the Southern Cross). In other words, the degree of intensity in flag use varies with the degree to which the identity represented through it is challenged, and with the extent of personal emotional resources invested into it.

Just like the ritual symbols described by Victor Turner (1967), flags representing modern nation-states have an *emotional* and an *instrumental* pole in their range of signification. The emotional pole attaches the individual to an abstract collective entity, a metaphoric kin group. The instrumental pole may be political or commercial, intended to mobilise for conflict or to integrate peacefully. Symbols of unity, flags nevertheless always have divisive potential within the group and outwards, and the less ambivalent and multi-vocal a flag becomes in political practice, the higher its conflict potential. Ambiguity tends to go away at relational boundary markers.

### Flags and conflict

Even if the question 'Who are we?' has a straightforward answer, the related question 'What are we?' may be undecided. Even in Iceland, probably the most ethnically homogeneous country in Europe, there are self-professed pagans who denounce the Christian connotations of the Icelandic cross. No functional flag is left entirely at peace, since all delineations and substantiations of imagined communities are contestable.

The pages of this book are full of conflict. Madriaga describes the ambivalence felt by many 'non-white' Americans towards the Stars and Stripes. Bryan discusses the emotion and hostility associated with both UK and Irish state and popular flags in Northern Ireland (a case of formal nationalisms opposed to informal nationalisms). Jarman talks of Belfast in

the marching season as a city in a state of emergency, where home turf is demarcated through flags. Groom speaks of the Union Jack as a symbol surrounded by a mixture of hostility and indifference. Leib and Webster describe the Confederate battle flag as a symbol reminding some of their proud Southern heritage, others of the shameful past and menacing present. The Confederate flag also spurs unending debate about who is entitled to see themselves as Southerners. Anne Eriksen, analysing a singular event taking place in a private context, considers the possible reactions to a woman shooting the top off a Norwegian flag pole, while Grimnes vividly recreates the flag controversies in Norway, and between Sweden and Norway, during Union times. Jenkins shows that the many Danish flags can be at odds with each other, and Löfgren suggests a split between immigrant-friendly and immigrant-hostile Swedes, regarding norms regulating proper flag use.

A problem with flags, as Kolstø (2006: 679) accurately puts it, is that 'symbols that are rooted in a cultural past will more often than not be more divisive than unifying since different ethnic and political groups often hark back to different pasts.' The hidden meanings of flags, which thus are not, in practice, as empty vessels as they may seem in theory, are both historically rooted and based on contemporary usage or interpretation. There is no historical or intrinsic reason why the Italian tricolour should make me think about Barolo wines and fresh pasta, but it does. There is also nothing intrinsic about the American flag which makes people all over the world react to it with a complex emotion involving both admiration, envy and fear.

As Madriaga argues, the Stars and Stripes has hidden connotations of whiteness. At the same time, flag-burning is associated with that flag and not many others. Even in Sweden, Löfgren remarks, disgruntled, politicised youths are more likely to burn the American flag than the Swedish one. Here the American flag is taken to signify geopolitical conflicts, just as the Palestinian flag (along with the Arafat headdress) is metonymic of the struggle of oppressed people everywhere.

Sometimes, flags and the conflicts they connote are left dormant for most of the year, flaring up seasonally, as in Northern Ireland. As Jarman describes it, the flags are left on their poles, as mnemonic traces of the conflict, outside the marching season, eventually becoming bedraggled displays resembling rags more than flags. They are then replaced with new flags in time for the next marching season. Similarly, Catalan flags are never as conspicuously displayed in Barcelona as during federal election campaigns or before a football match between Barcelona and Real Madrid.

Flags can be used in peaceful and banal, even childish, displays and yet retain their menacing character for outsiders. Löfgren mentions that in the early twentieth century, German miniature flags were placed on sandcastles in the disputed areas of southern Jutland, frightening adult Danes more than their children.

Another kind of conflict surrounding flag use concerns the choice of flags for new countries. Grimnes' account of the nineteenth-century flag

controversies in Norway brings this out. A wrong step, and one is a traitor. Interestingly, during the German occupation of Norway in World War II, the Norwegian flag remained a symbol of the resistance, not of Quisling's puppet government – in spite of the latter's deep nationalist sentiments and ambitions.

Some countries have debates, frequently in the informal, everyday sphere of life, about the true meaning of their flags. Such opinionated gossip brings out not only the multivocality of flags, but also their conflict potential. The Norwegian historian Tor Bomann-Larsen, who specialises in arctic explorers and royalty, claims that the so-called cross in the Norwegian flag is really a depiction of a pair of skis.

On a slightly more serious note, I know several Mauritians who question the official explanation of their flag. The Mauritian flag consists of four horizontal stripes – red, blue, yellow and green. Officially, the red band stands for the country's struggle for independence, the blue symbolises the Indian Ocean, the yellow stands for hope for the future, and the green represents the lush vegetation and agriculture. At least one interpretation exists which departs radically from this official one. The main divisive discourse in Mauritius, and arguably its deepest political conflict, concerns ethnicity. So the red is said to stand for the Hindus, the blue for the Franco-Mauritians (and presumably, their traditional clients, the Afro-Mauritians or Creoles), the yellow for the Chinese, and the green for the Muslims. Far from depicting the flag as a unifying symbol, this interpretation shows the potency of flags as condensed symbols with rich connotations of conflict and divisiveness.

### **Flags and the sacred**

The final major theme dealt with in this book concerns the flag as a sacred symbol. Carolyn Marvin, an American professor and flag scholar, once set fire to an American flag in front of her class, not unsurprisingly inspiring powerful emotional reactions among the students. Distinguishing between vexillodules and vexillophobes – flag-lovers and flag-haters – Marvin (2005) argues that both share a view of the flag as a mystical object invested with magical powers. Vexillophobes confess that 'this flag-waving terrifies me', seeing the flag as a false god with diabolic powers. Vexillodules, on the other hand, will have no improper flag usage and see it as a magical object capable of warding off evil.

In many countries, flag-burning is actually illegal. There are strong norms regulating flag use in a country like Norway, some of them written down in official brochures. A flag should never touch the ground, so when lowering your flag at sundown (another norm – flags should be hoisted at dawn and lowered at dusk; they should never fly in the dark) you need considerable dexterity to prevent pollution. Parents of young children who wave small Norwegian flags in Constitution Day parades never fail to reproach the

children, who tend to be tired by mid-morning, for letting their little flags hang down towards the ground.

Usually, the sacred character of the flag is contextual. Presumably, the Union Jacks flying from British naval ships leaving for the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982 had a sacred character to many British, who need not have problems tolerating beer mugs carrying the same symbol. In general, flags take on a sacred character in sport and military events, as well as in ritual celebrations of nationhood.

Using flags in an emotionally relaxed, even jocular manner, can be uncontroversial – perhaps mostly so in countries with few die-hard vexillophobes or vexillodules. In some countries, the flag of the neighbouring country can be purchased in the form of toilet paper; it is unclear whether this is an attempt to divest the neighbour's flag of its magical power, or if it is meant as a general comment on flag fetishism. Be this as it may, disposable flags are culturally problematic in countries where the magical properties of the flag are taken seriously. Before the Olympic Winter Games in Sapporo in 1972, moreover, a Norwegian firm placed advertisements featuring the butt of a used tampon against a white background above a caption wishing the athletes – 'and particularly the Japanese female ones' – good luck. The reference to the Japanese flag was unmistakable, and was noticed by, amongst others, the local Japanese embassy, which promptly filed an official complaint.

Let me end with a recent example illustrating the sacred character of flags. During the famous 'cartoon controversy' in late winter 2006, in which many Muslims felt offended because a Danish newspaper (and later a Norwegian rag) had published caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, home-made Danish and Norwegian flags were ritually burned in public spaces across the Middle East. However, as the Norwegian newspapers were quick to point out, the flag-burners had got neither the proportions nor the colours right. The navy blue of the Norwegian cross (nowadays identifiable as RGB #002868) was too light, the blue and white stripes were too thick, and the flag-burners had deviated from the strict 22:16 proportions. It transpired from some of the comments passed in Norway at the time that the evil magic conjured by the angry Muslims was bound to fail, since the ritual object they desecrated was not authentic. Had they stolen a real flag from a nearby embassy and proceeded to burn it, reactions might have been different.

## Notes

- 1 For a general introduction to the history and current variety of national flags, see: <http://www.allstates-flag.com/fotw/flags/>
- 2 The official name of the Union Jack is the Union flag but this book adopts the commonly accepted usage of Union Jack.