



## Applying Sebeok's Typology of Signs to the Study of Flags

**Steven A. Knowlton**

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The study of flags is sometimes dismissed as a useful bit of knowledge for protocol officers and the like; the Library of Congress classifies it as one of the "Auxiliary Sciences of History". However, the broader truth is that flags are one of the primary means by which political identities are signified, and vexillology has much to offer the student of communications.

While flags, as visual stimuli, do have neurophysiological effects on the viewer,<sup>1</sup> the primary reasons that flags provoke emotional responses have to do with flags' roles as signs. Flags serve as visual representatives of human groups, from nations, ethnic groups, and international organizations down to universities and Boy Scout troops. The nature of the entity being represented may be ambiguous—in the case of national flags, the flag may represent the government of that nation, the people collectively, simply the main ethnic group (e.g., English ethnic chauvinists displaying St. George's cross to intimidate immigrants),<sup>2</sup> or even the language spoken in that country (such as on Internet translation pages). But reaction to a flag is really reaction to the entity represented by the flag: "The flag becomes an expression of a collective experience, a way of constructing communities."<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of such ambiguity, the fact remains that flags are important elements in human society, and as Scot Guenter has noted, "flags should be studied as cultural artifacts that individuals, groups, and institutions employ in an ongoing social construction of reality."<sup>4</sup> The role of flags in representative roles can be assessed using the tools of semiotics.

## SEMIOTICS AND VEXILLOLOGY

Semiotics is the discipline that studies how communication occurs when one thing (a word, gesture, spoor, visual image) represents another (an idea, emotion, animal, nation) to an observing third party. Charles S. Peirce, the founder of modern semiotics, observed a "triadic" relationship in such communication: a sign communicates its object via an interpretant, which is the observer's understanding of the sign,<sup>5</sup> or, as Umberto Eco wrote: "something stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity."<sup>6</sup> (Other terms used by semioticians for the "object" include "signified" and "denotata"; the interpretant may be called the "signifier" or "receiver".) For any coded communication to occur, all three components must be in place. An unobserved flag communicates no message; neither does a flag whose design is unfamiliar to the observer.<sup>7</sup>

Semiotics is closely related to the philosophical discipline of pragmatism and is also concerned with linguistics. Much of human communication involves the use of verbal signs (that is, words). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore those connections. However, semiotics also studies non-verbal communication, from animal body language to visual imagery. In particular, the subdiscipline of *semantics* studies the relationships of signs to objects, as contrasted with *syntactics* (which studies the relationships of signs to other signs), and *pragmatics* (which studies the relationships of signs to their observers and interpreters).<sup>8</sup>

Because a flag can be "described in emotive terms as a symbol of collective identity,"<sup>9</sup> many philosophers and linguists have explored the *pragmatics* of flags as signs. Sasha Weitman was an early proponent of this line of research, determining that the extremely high level of congruence in shapes and colors deployed in national flags had sociological significance regarding the self-image that national states wish to project in international relations;<sup>10</sup> more recently, Torin Alter suggested a philosophical framework to assess whether the flying of the Confederate Battle Flag in the 21st century is a racist act,<sup>11</sup> Susanne Reichl explored the meaning of "Englishness" and "Britishness" as understood by those flying St. George's Cross or the Union Jack,<sup>12</sup> Srirupa Roy traced the imposition of meaning upon India's *tiranga* as political actors shaped national identity,<sup>13</sup> C. P. Champion identified the persistence of ethnic identity symbolism in Canada's maple leaf,<sup>14</sup> Yves Hersant discussed the "semiological weakness" of the European Union flag,<sup>15</sup> and Eran Shalev found the stars of the United States flag to carry political meanings familiar to Enlightenment-era Europeans.<sup>16</sup>

Vexillologists have also explored the pragmatics of flag symbolism. Georges Pasch explored the optical-psychological effect of various colors on the brains of flag observers,<sup>17</sup> Whitney Smith identified political meanings in the "bad heraldry" found in seals and flags of American states and municipalities,<sup>18</sup> Ron Hassner described the evolution of charismatic objects into national flags and the continued religious significance of national flags to many who view them,<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Jilek described both the semiological and the psychophysiological impact of the design of Nazi and Communist flags,<sup>20</sup> and Perry Dane suggested ways in which flag design *per se* can impart meaning to a viewer.<sup>21</sup>

However, the scholarly discussion has left the *semantics* of flags untouched; we may therefore turn to a general theory of signs to inform our understanding of the relationships of flags to the entities they represent.

## SEBEOK'S TYPOLOGY OF SIGNS

One of the leading semioticians, Thomas A. Sebeok, developed a typology of signs which may be used in examining flags as signs. The work of Sebeok (1920–2001) is applicable to the study of flags because of his pioneering work extending the study of signs beyond linguistics. Sebeok recognized that "linguistic ability is but a small, albeit crucial, part of human endowment. Sebeok's concept of communication, rooted in evolutionism and information theory, encompasses all the realms of nature and strives toward a truly pansemiotic understanding of the universe."<sup>22</sup> He considered that communication is not solely a human phenomenon—animals, plants, and even unicellular organisms find ways to communicate with other beings. Sebeok's typology of signs, therefore, is an appropriate tool to analyze non-linguistic communication methods such as flags.

Sebeok, refining a scheme by Peirce, identified six species of sign:

- "(1) SIGNAL. When a sign token mechanically or conventionally triggers some action on the part of the receiver, it is said to function as a signal...
- (2) SYMPTOM. A compulsive, automatic, nonarbitrary sign, such that the signifier is coupled with the signified in the manner of a natural link...
- (3) ICON. A sign is said to be iconic when there is a topological similarity between a signifier and its denotata...

- (4) INDEX. A sign is said to be indexical insofar as its signifier is contiguous with its signified, or is a sample of it....
- (5) SYMBOL. A sign without either similarity or contiguity, but only with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata, and with an intentional class for its designatum, is called a symbol....
- (6) NAME. A sign which has an extensional class for its designatum is called a name.<sup>23</sup>

Flags may be Signals, Icons, Indexes, and Symbols. Although there are many flags in use, this paper will address the flags of political units (nation, subnational territories, cities, etc.). As discussed above, flags often provoke emotions because of the entities for which they serve as signs; reactions to signs representing political units often involve feelings of nationalism in which, according to John Agnew, "the very space occupied by the group is seen as part and parcel of the group's identity."<sup>24</sup> Ron Hassner notes that "flags crystallize national identity, create bonds among citizens through common public usage (during ceremonies and pledges of allegiance, for example) or by means of their design—often combining ethnic and religious symbols on a single flag."<sup>25</sup>

In Sebeok's definition of symptom we find the term "nonarbitrary". Arbitrariness is a vital consideration in the understanding of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure explained it thus: "The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker...; I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e., arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified."<sup>26</sup>

## FLAGS AS "SIGNALS"

Some flags function only as signals, those signs which trigger some action by the receiver. Examples are the colored flags used in auto racing, which direct the drivers to begin racing, pull over for repairs, or perform other actions.<sup>27</sup> Racing flags are purely signals; but within the realm of political flags, some conventional understandings operate to cause flags to act as signals in addition to their other semiotic roles. Many American men, particularly military veterans, will remove their hats without prompting when a U.S. flag passes on parade or is raised. (Although such behavior is codified in the U.S. Flag Code, this section of law "does not prescribe any penalties for non-compliance nor does it include enforcement provisions; rather the Code functions simply as a guide to be voluntarily followed by civilians and civilian groups.")<sup>28</sup>

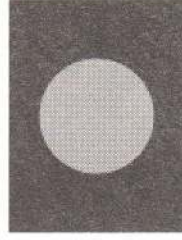
## FLAGS AS "SYMBOLS"

In Sebeok's typology, the symbol is a sign with nothing in common with the signified, other than an assigned meaning, known by either the preparer of the sign or the receiver, or both; Eco calls this shared understanding "projective conventions."<sup>29</sup> In Saussure's formulation, they are arbitrary signs.

Regarding the arbitrary sign of *scales* to signify *justice*, Benjamin Bradley writes, "The bond between scales and justice or an eagle and freedom is less 'natural' than *narratable* within the culture(s) that read(s) it as symbolic. Thus we can easily tell a story that links justice and scales by means of the metaphor of weighing: a jury 'weighs up' the evidence for and against the accused. But there is nothing natural about this except that it seems obvious in a culture used to weighing."<sup>30</sup>

Most flags are symbols in this sense. France's flag, for example, is three vertical bars of blue, white, and red; neither the land of France nor its people can accurately be described as sharing any attributes with the flag. Yet, by shared understanding, people who view the flag with vertical bars of blue, white, and red recognize it as a sign for France.

Symbols may have meanings beyond just representing the signified, which are often assigned by an official body. The government of France claims "*le blanc représentant la monarchie, le bleu et le rouge, la ville de Paris*" [white represents the monarchy, blue and red the city of Paris],<sup>31</sup> which recounts how the flag was designed during the Revolution, but only affirms the arbitrary assignment of colors to the signified—Louis XVI was not white in color, and the city of Paris is neither red nor blue.



Racing flag: Repairs required ("Meatball flag")



France

The same color may have many different meanings assigned to it. Red, for example, is said to represent "the blood shed in the struggle for national existence" (Armenia), "the unity of the people" (Vanuatu), "love, daring, courage"

(Lithuania), “bravery” (Bulgaria), “the sun and victory” (Tajikistan), “sovereignty” (Madagascar), “the blood Jesus shed” (Tonga), or “courage, zeal, and fervency” (United States).<sup>32</sup> Further, the same meaning may be represented by more than one color: agricultural bounty is represented by green in many flags (Mali, Gambia, Dominica) but by yellow in Ukraine’s flag.

Almost all flags are designed using solid blocks of color, with six colors dominant in the distribution (white, yellow, blue, red, green, and black—orange is seldom seen, and purple is almost unknown among flag colors).<sup>33</sup> Solid blocks have a practical explanation: printed textiles were unknown to the earliest flag makers (they date in Europe from the late 17th century), and were unavailable in cotton, the preferred fabric for flags, due to political pressure on legislators and bureaucrats from woolen and silk manufacturers. In any case, the logistical aspects of assuring distribution of the proper prints to all flag makers seem daunting.<sup>34</sup>

But there may also be an explanation for solid blocks within a semiotic framework. Georges Pasch notes that pure colors in regular geometric shapes are more serviceable for symbolic use than are visual images that more closely resemble natural objects: “If some idea is conveyed by means of a color, this color must be embodied in the form of a field, which is thus a ‘word’ expressing the idea. In contrast, an object expresses ideas first by shape, only secondarily by color.”<sup>35</sup>

Ironically for a purely visual sign, the use of color for symbolic purposes in flags is dependent on the linguistic framework which the viewer applies to visual information. There are languages (such as Burarra and Warlpiri) with no word for the concept embodied in the English word “color” and its cognates in other tongues. For speakers of such languages, distinctions between “red”, “blue”, and “yellow” are not made, while other distinctions, such as “readily visible at night” and “not readily visible at night”, are relevant.<sup>36</sup> None of the national flags appear to have been created by vexillographers from such cultures.

Most national flags, then, are purely symbols in Sebeok’s typology: they are combinations of colors and shapes arbitrarily assigned to represent a political entity. Evidence of the arbitrariness is found in the fact that Romania and Chad—two nations with almost no common bonds of ethnicity, language, religion, climate, economy, or history—share an identical pattern on their flags. To reiterate Saussure’s point, “arbitrary” does not mean “pulled out of a hat”. The Romanian and Chadian vexillographers had good reasons for choosing

the designs they did,<sup>37</sup> but there is no correspondence between the flag and any physical or political facts about the country the flag represents.



Romania



Chad

Flag patterns can also be symbolic. All the Scandinavian countries bear a particular style of cross, with the upright bar shifted toward the hoist. By common understanding, this style of flag is known to represent a Scandinavian political entity (even dependencies of Scandinavian countries use this pattern). But the use of this style of cross to represent Scandinavian entities is arbitrary.



Sweden



Faroe Islands



Finland



Denmark

## FLAGS AS “ICONS”

Sebeok identified iconic signs as those sharing a topological likeness with the signified. He used the example of a photograph of a reproduction of the painting *La Gioconda* (a.k.a. *Mona Lisa*).<sup>38</sup> The photograph is an icon representing the reproduction as well as the painting and Mona Lisa the woman. Topological similarity need not be restricted to portraits or even caricatures. Topology, broadly defined, is “the way in which constituent parts are interrelated or arranged.”<sup>39</sup>

There are many flags which bear topological likenesses to the political entities which they represent. These likenesses are found in the realm of political geography, which is the description of the boundaries and subunits that compose the entity.<sup>40</sup> (Other disciplines of geography, namely physical geography and cultural geography, inform the indexical function of flags, discussed below.)

For the reasons of color block design discussed by Pasch, few flags bear actual depictions of the landscape within a political entity: Alberta's Rocky Mountain landscape with bounteous grain is perhaps the most prominent example. Even that flag, however, does not bear a topological likeness, for the Rocky Mountains and the wheat fields are only some elements of Alberta's geography. Albertans also live in boreal forests, wetlands, river valleys, and urban streets.<sup>41</sup> So even a "portrait" cannot be topologically similar for a political entity the way it can be for an individual object or person; rather, it serves as an index.

However, there is a type of depiction frequently found on flags that is iconic: the map. Mason Kaye identified 370 "mappy flags" at all political levels.<sup>42</sup> Maps are topologically similar to the entities they represent in that they demonstrate the arrangement of the constituent parts of a political entity. Maps indicate which areas are included in the entity, and which are excluded. Furthermore, maps are an abstract representation of the arrangement. Except for islands and those bounded by rivers, no country's borders can be seen (although they can be marked, for example with fences). Maps are visual shorthand for geographic features that exist only as conventions of human culture.

"Mappy flags" for nations are rare. This author knows of only three: Cyprus, Cambodia (1991–93), and Bangladesh (1971–72). In each case, the flag was adopted in the circumstances of civil war, when the use of flags to signify any particular ideals may have been considered unwise. As Kaye points out, "As a representation of a territory—rather than of an idea, party, or religion—a map is the ultimate symbol without bias." This neutrality of signification also motivates the use of maps on flags of international organizations, such as the United Nations and the African Union.<sup>43</sup>

There is a variation on this theme—flags which serve as maps (such as Nauru and Tuvalu). These are indexical signs and will be discussed in that section.

Topological likenesses need not concern merely the boundaries of a nation. They can also extend to establishing a similarity between the elements of a flag and the constituent parts of a political entity. The most common example of



Alberta



Cyprus



Cambodia, 1991–93



Bangladesh, 1971–72



United Nations



African Union

this is a flag with stripes or stars whose number matches the number of high-level political subunits. The fourteen stripes on the flag of Malaysia correspond to thirteen states and one capital region, the seven points on the largest star of the Australian flag correspond to six states and one capital region, the four stars of Micronesia stand for four island groups, the seven stars on Grenada's flag are for seven parishes, and the fifty stars in the United States flag stand for fifty states.



Malaysia



Australia



Federated States of Micronesia



Grenada

## FLAGS AS "INDEXES"

Sebeok's definition of the index contains a specialized use of the word "contiguous": "A sign is said to be indexic insofar as its signifier is contiguous with its signified, or is a sample of it." He means that the sign has something in common with the signified. As an example, he uses a footprint in the sand; the foot that made the print and the print itself share a shape.<sup>44</sup> He lists as "quasi-synonyms" for index the following terms: *cue, clue, track, and trail*.<sup>45</sup> It may be helpful to remember that the English word "index" is derived from the Latin for "pointing";<sup>46</sup> the index is the type of sign that serves as an indication, clue, or allusion to some fact about the signified. This is in contrast to the icon, which represents the signified in its parts or arrangement.

Of importance is the fact that, unlike symbols but like icons, indexes are non-arbitrary. Indexical signs represent the signified through revelation of some fact of physical or cultural geography, or through repetition of other signs already in use. Physical geography (the form of the topography, bodies of water, and flora and fauna)<sup>47</sup> and cultural geography (aspects of society such as language and religion)<sup>48</sup> are attributes of a political entity that may be influenced but are not determined by governmental decisions, as opposed to political geography, which reflects the strictly governmental aspects of a nation's makeup.

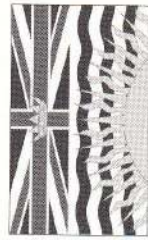
Indexical flags represent the most abundant type of non-arbitrary sign in flags, and may be grouped according to the type of fact alluded to: physical geographical, cultural, historical, astronomical, and heraldic.

## Physical Geography

The physical geography of a political entity plays an important role in the life of its citizens and for that reason is often powerfully evocative for them. We have seen how even an ambitious attempt to portray the physical geography of Alberta fails to topologically encompass the province; however, the flag's image is indexical of a significant amount of the province's territory. Few other flags attempt landscape portraiture (although Kiribati and British Columbia have seascapes on their flags); however, many do point to significant individual features. Mountains feature in the flags of Slovenia (Triglav, the highest mountain in the Slovene Alps), the Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria (Mt. Elbrus, the highest in Europe), the Malaysian state of Sabah (Mt. Kinabalu), and the Dutch colony of St. Eustatius (a silhouette of the volcanic island).



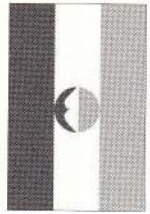
*Kiribati*



*British Columbia*



*Slovenia*



*Kabardino-Balkaria  
(Russia)*



*Sabah (Malaysia)*



*St. Eustatius  
(Netherlands)*



*Nauru*



*Tuvalu*

Some flags serve as more-or-less stylized maps of a nation. Nauru is an island just south of the equator, and its flag uses a line and a star to signify its location. Tuvalu, an archipelago, uses the arrangement of stars to indicate the position of its islands relative to one another. The Gambia is a nation which consists almost exclusively of the two banks of the Gambia River; the middle blue stripe of its flag corresponds not only to the river conceptually, but to the arrangement of the river between the banks as seen on a map with north oriented to the top.



*The Gambia (flag)*



*The Gambia (map)*

A number of American city flags allude to the geography of their cities.<sup>49</sup> For example, St. Louis's three wavy lines join to indicate the city's location at the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers; similarly, the white bar in the flag of Memphis has an angular border which mimics the angle at which the Mississippi River passes the city, while the border between the bars of red and blue follows the state line between Tennessee and Mississippi (again, as seen on a map with north on top).

Fort Wayne depicts the city's location at the junction of the St. Joseph, St. Mary's, and Maumee Rivers; Indianapolis depicts the streets around the city's landmark Soldiers and Sailors Monument; Jefferson City displays the city's central location on a state map while simultaneously identifying its situation on the banks of the Missouri River at a smaller scale. Madison's location on the (northeast-southwest oriented) isthmus between Lakes Mendota and Monona is depicted by the sun-sign on a diagonal stripe and Portland, Oregon, uses blue stripes to indicate the convergence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers.



St. Louis, Missouri



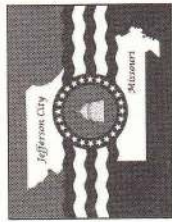
Memphis, Tennessee



Fort Wayne, Indiana



Indianapolis, Indiana



Jefferson City, Missouri



Madison, Wisconsin



Portland, Oregon

Other flags use elements to signify physical geography without mapping them. Tennessee's three Grand Divisions are primarily geologic (mountains in East Tennessee, rolling hills in Middle Tennessee, floodplains in West Tennessee) but are nonetheless a significant factor in the economic and political life of the state and are represented by three stars on its flag. Neither St. Kitts & Nevis nor São Tomé & Príncipe is a federal state, so the two stars on their flags are not iconic; they do, however, index the number of major islands in each country.



Tennessee



St. Kitts and Nevis



São Tomé and Príncipe

The flora and fauna of an area are convenient indexical signs; although it is rarely true that a species lives only in one political entity, it is often the case that a species is so abundant that it serves as a representative of the area. Flora and fauna on flags, then, serve as indexical signs in that both the flag and the entity are places where the species might be seen. Floral emblems on flags include Canada's maple leaf, the orchid of Hong Kong, South Carolina's palmetto tree, the cedar of Lebanon, *namele* fern leaves for Vanuatu, nutmeg for Grenada, and the Stuart's desert rose of the Northern Territory of Australia.



Canada



Hong Kong



South Carolina



Lebanon



Vanuatu



Northern Territory (Australia)

Animals as signs include Western Australia's black swan, the bird of paradise for Papua New Guinea, Dominica's parrot, California's grizzly bear (which is now extinct in California<sup>50</sup>—perhaps meaning that this flag is a historical index), the bison of Wyoming and Manitoba, and Uganda's crested crane. A number of flags use animals found in heraldic devices, such as Fiji's lion or Albania's eagle. These are, in fact, arbitrary symbols (lions are not native to Fiji) and are discussed below.

Another important aspect of physical geography is mineral resources. The color of copper is found in flags of Cyprus, Arizona, and Zambia—in each case, indexing the veins of copper found in each entity's mines.



Western Australia



Papua New Guinea



Dominica



California



Wyoming



Manitoba



Uganda



Arizona



Zambia

### Cultural Geography

The religion, dress, and material culture of the people who live in a political entity are all rich sources of indexical signs. The Christian and Muslim populations of the world's nations have many flags representing them. In a sense, these flags are a combination of symbol (arbitrary) and index (non-arbitrary). To take the case of Christians: in all flags, they are represented by the cross. (Many other signs for Christians exist, of course, but none are found on national flags.) The cross itself is indexical to Jesus of Nazareth, pointing to a fact about him (the manner of his death). It is symbolic to Christians, in that Christians themselves (with the exception of some early martyrs) are not themselves crucified; therefore, the cross is meaningful as a sign for Christians only by common understanding. On a flag of a country populated by Christians, however, the cross is indexical, as the flag bears the same image that represents the people. Another symbolic aspect of cross flags is the assignment of colors: use of a yellow cross for Sweden is arbitrary, color-wise.

Flags with crosses are very common: all the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, Tonga, the United Kingdom (which combines three cross flags into one banner), the Basque Country, Greece, and the Republic of Georgia all use crosses in their flags.



Switzerland



Tonga



United Kingdom



Basque Country



Greece



Republic of Georgia

Muslims are represented in many countries' flags by a crescent moon, often accompanied by a star.<sup>51</sup> These signs appear in the flags of Turkey, Tunisia, Malaysia, Mauritania, Pakistan, Maldives, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Libya, and Azerbaijan. However, in other flags, Muslims are represented by Koranic inscriptions,<sup>52</sup> as in the flags of Saudi Arabia and Somaliland.



Turkey



Tunisia



Mauritania



Pakistan



Maldives



Libya



Azerbaijan



Somaliland



Buddhists are indexed by the *bo* leaves in Sri Lanka's flag, Taoists by the *taeguk* (yin-yang) and trigrams of South Korea, and Jews by the Magen David on the flag of Israel.



Sri Lanka



South Korea



Israel

Beyond religious signs, material culture is another aspect of cultural geography present in flags. In these cases, the flag contains an image of an artifact used by the entity's people; thus, the flag bears evidence of the people's lifestyle. Clothing styles are often a distinctive mark for an ethnic group and, in fact, may be the main mark of distinction among peoples who otherwise share a language and religion.<sup>53</sup> Lesotho's flag displays a hat of a style commonly worn by the Basotho people, while Swaziland and Kenya display leather shields in the styles of some of their warriors. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan's flags incorporate patterns used, respectively, in indigenous styles of carpet weaving and embroidery. The blue and white stripes on Israel's flag are reminiscent of the striped *tallit*, or prayer shawl, worn by many observant Jews. Other elements of material culture represented in flags include the *latte* stone (an architectural element in traditional houses) and flower wreath shown on the flag of the Northern Mariana Islands, the machete of Angola, the coconut shell cup of Pohnpei, the mosque (which is also a religious image) of Afghanistan, and the stylized roof thatching of Kyrgyzstan. The shields of Swaziland and Kenya are complemented by the many flags depicting weapons. The AK-47 rifle shown on Mozambique's flag may not be indigenous, but it certainly was an important part of its revolutionary culture. Guatemala's flag depicts a pair of 19th-century rifles, while blade weapons are found in the flags of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and American Samoa.

### Political Culture

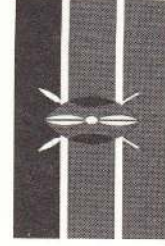
Another aspect of cultural geography that may be expressed in flags is the political culture of a nation. In one-party states the signs for the party are often adopted as signs for the nation. The party/national flag is another symbol-combined-with-index. The party's sign is a symbol, being arbitrary (such as a



Lesotho



Swaziland



Kenya



Turkmenistan



Kazakhstan



Northern Mariana Islands



Angola



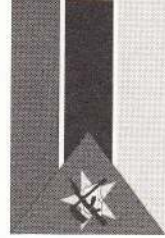
Pohnpei



Afghanistan



Kyrgyzstan



Mozambique



Guatemala



Saudi Arabia



Oman



American Samoa

swastika or a red star.) But the symbol's presence on the flag of the nation is indexical, pointing to the fact that the nation is ruled by members of the party.

Well-known examples of party/national flags include the flag of Germany under Hitler (1935–45), which was identical to the Nazi party flag; the flag of Zaire under Mobutu's Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (1971–97), which featured the logo of the MPR; and the flag of the Soviet Union (1923–91), which incorporated the colors and symbols of the Communist Party. Other communist nations, such as the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic

of Vietnam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the People's Republic of Angola, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1946–92), Democratic Kampuchea (1975–79), the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–89), the People's Republic of the Congo (1969–91), and the People's Republic of Benin (1975–90), have used national flags which partly or completely replicate flags originally used by the Communist Party in that nation. Outside of communist nations, the Republic of Georgia and Eritrea also employ national flags modeled on the flags of ruling parties.



*German Reich (1935–45)*



*Zaire (1971–97)*



*Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (1923–91)*



*People's Republic of China*



*Socialist Republic of Vietnam*



*Lao People's Democratic Republic*



*Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1946–92)*



*Democratic Kampuchea (1975–79)*



*People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–89)*



*People's Republic of the Congo (1969–91)*



*People's Republic of Benin (1975–90)*



*Eritrea*

In most cases, this type of flag is changed when the ruling party is removed from power; however, in some cases such as Uganda, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vanuatu, and the Philippines, the party's flag has remained a national standard even as the parties in power have changed.

While a number of flags feature crowns, a traditional indexical sign of monarchy, in only one case does the crown represent an actual monarch: the prince of Liechtenstein. In other cases, the crown is an element of a coat of arms which formerly represented a monarch and now represents a sovereign state (see discussion below on "Arms and Seals").



*Republic of China (Taiwan)*



*Philippines*



*Liechtenstein*

### Historical Signs

A number of flags incorporate signs that formerly may have been iconic or indexical, but are of historic significance in the current day. For instance, the United States flag has thirteen stripes, which were iconic in 1776 when the nation had thirteen states.

A common occurrence is the presence of the British flag in the canton of other flags. These flags originated in the flag scheme of the British Empire, which assigned a uniform template for all British colonies and dependencies: a British flag in the canton and a sign for the colony in the fly. For political entities which are still subject to the United Kingdom, such as Montserrat, Bermuda, St. Helena, or the Pitcairn Islands, the flag is indexical of the colonial relationship—just as the people of the colony are ruled by the British government, the colony's sign is in a place of less prominence than the sign for the United Kingdom.

However, the Union Flag retains its prominence on several flags of nations which have severed their colonial ties to Great Britain—Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Tuvalu, as well as all Australian states and several Canadian provinces.

These nations are among the countries which are called dominions—each is an independent constitutional monarchy (except Fiji), but the monarch is the same person who is also the monarch of the United Kingdom.<sup>54,55</sup> Each was formerly a British colony as well. However, the presence of the Union Flag in the canton of these flags does not bear the same indexical significance that it does on flags of British colonies. In the case of dominions, there is no political subjection to Britain; there is only a history of British rule.

Dominion status does not require the presence of a Union Flag in the canton—of the 15 dominions,<sup>56</sup> only three have flags bearing the Union Flag.



Montserrat



Bermuda



St. Helena



Pitcairn Islands



New Zealand



Fiji

The process of a formerly subordinate entity retaining its flag into independence also works in reverse, when formerly independent entities that are now parts of larger nations continue to fly the flags that were used when the entities were sovereign. Hawaii<sup>57</sup> and Texas are two U.S. states that fly former national flags, while the *land* of Bavaria in Germany, the region of Veneto (Venice) in Italy, and the Mexican state of Yucatán are also instances of this form of historical allusion in flag use.

A number of southern U.S. states have flags which either directly incorporate or strongly allude to flags of the Confederate States of America. Mississippi has a Confederate Battle Flag as its canton, while Arkansas and Tennessee are also strongly reminiscent of the Battle Flag. Florida and Alabama bear salutes which may or may not be directly derived from the rebel flag, and Georgia's flag is patterned on the first Confederate national flag (the "Stars and Bars").



Hawaii



Texas



Bavaria



Veneto (Italy)



Yucatán (México)



Confederate Battle Flag



Mississippi



Arkansas



Alabama



Florida



First Confederate Flag



Georgia

In all cases, flags with historical allusions are indexical in their typology. The flag bears a sign which does not relate to any current topology; neither is the sign a purely arbitrary symbol. Rather, it refers to some historical fact about the entity (such as, "This entity was part of the British Empire", or "This entity was part of the Confederate States"). The allusion to historical fact makes the flag an index of the entity's history.

**Astronomy**

Another indexical sign used in flags is constellations. The viewer of the flag sees an astronomical phenomenon that residents of a country can also see, providing a shared visual experience.

The first use of stars on a national flag appears to be that by the United States, with the stars symbolizing a “new constellation”, in the words of the enabling legislation.<sup>58</sup> As the placement of the stars was not specified, the stars on the flag did not correspond to any specific constellation observed by Americans stargazers. The use of five-pointed stars was not specified, either. In fact, a survey of extant early American flags shows that stars of four, six, seven, or eight points were also commonly used.<sup>59</sup> The larger number of points may indicate that early flag-makers intended the shapes as a representation of the astronomical objects as observed from earth: the phenomenon of atmospheric scintillation creates an appearance of a many-pointed object exhibiting radial symmetry. The five-pointed star bears much less resemblance to observed stars, as it is only bilaterally symmetrical and exhibits none of the “twinkle” that an eight- or nine-pointed star simulates.

The rise to dominance of the five-pointed star in later U.S. flags has not been definitively accounted for. The story that Betsy Ross created the five-pointed star design with a single cut of her scissors is almost certainly apocryphal.<sup>60</sup> The use of stars in many flags since have a mostly symbolic function, with the stars arbitrarily assigned a meaning, often “sovereignty”. (This arbitrary meaning did not originate with the U.S. flag; “early moderns witnessed the use of a powerful cosmic idiom, particularly a tendency to equate rulers of state with luminous astronomical bodies.”<sup>61</sup> The transference of sovereignty from the individual potentate to the state enabled the transference of the metaphor from the potentate-as-star to the state-as-star.)



*Bennington flag (detail)*  
(7-pointed stars)



*Scraps flag (detail)*  
(8-pointed stars)

However, there are a number of flags which use constellations in the shape in which they appear to an observer standing within the confines of the nation represented. Rather than indicating some geographical reality of the community as observed from outside, these flags convey a geographic orientation of the resident: that is, what is seen from the country.

The flag of Brazil bears a depiction of the sky above São Paulo at 8:30 AM on 15 November 1889, the moment the republic was established. The view of the constellation itself is indexical, but the flag is also iconic, as the number of stars in the constellation corresponds to the number of states in Brazil and each star is said to represent a particular state.

One of the constellations in the Brazilian flag is *Crux Australis*, popularly called the Southern Cross. *Crux Australis* is “distinctive and recognizable” throughout the southern hemisphere for most of the year, and serves a similar wayfinding role (pointing due south) as *Polaris* does in the northern hemisphere. As such, the Southern Cross is a resonant symbol of the geographic aspect of southernness, and the constellation is prominent in the flags of Australia, New Zealand, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, the Australian subdivisions of Victoria, Northern Territory, and Australian Capital Territory, the Brazilian state of Paraná, the Chilean region of Magallanes and Antártica Chilena, and



*Brazil*



*Samoa*



*Victoria (Australia)*



*Australian Capital Territory*



*Paraná (Brazil)*



*Magallanes and Antártica Chilena (Chile)*



*Santa Cruz (Argentina)*



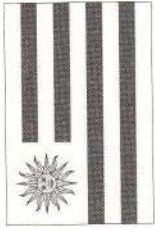
*Tierra del Fuego (Argentina)*

the Argentine provinces of Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego. A. C. Burton and John Devitt suggest that the Southern Cross has appeal not only for its prominence in the southern sky, but also as a cultural marker for Christians.<sup>62</sup>

Many flags bear images of the sun (among them are Argentina, Uruguay, Niger, Namibia, Malawi, Nepal, Rwanda, Taiwan, and Kiribati). While some places claim to receive more sunshine than others,<sup>63</sup> all the earth views the same sun. In this sense, the sun is not uniquely indexical, but is rather a symbol arbitrarily assigned to represent these nations. In many cases, the use of the sun in a national flag for a newly independent country draws upon the common trope of associating the rising sun with the beginning of a venture.<sup>64</sup>



Argentina



Uruguay



Niger



Namibia



Malawi



Nepal



Rwanda

## Arms and Seals

Perhaps the most common type of indexical flag is that which bears a sign which has already been established as representing the same political entity, but in a different form. These signs are usually either arms or seals.

Coats of arms originated in the Middle Ages as personal signs used to identify European knights during tournaments or battle. The earliest arms were displayed as designs on shields, and later developments included supporters, mottoes, and crests. Most arms are typologically symbolic, in that the association of, say, a *black chevron and scallop shells on a silver shield* with *John Hawkwood* is arbitrary. The presence of animals in heraldry is usually symbolic, as well. The most commonly depicted animal is the lion, which is not native to Europe. Another very common heraldic animal is the eagle, which is indigenous to Europe. However, because arms originated as personal, not national, signs, the indexical properties of wildlife discussed above do not pertain.

In time, the hereditary nature of arms for the peerage transformed into an institutional status for the arms of a sovereign, so that the arms of the King of France, for example, remained the same regardless of his dynasty. The use of the royal arms to represent the national government was a natural occurrence, given that the king was, according to royal political theory, the source of all political authority.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, when revolutions overturned the institution of the monarchy but retained the sovereignty of the national government, in many cases the former royal arms became the national arms. Poland, Hungary, Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, the Republic of Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal, Russia, and Romania are all republics which use

John Hawkwood  
(1376–1589)King of France  
(1376–1589)

Poland



Hungary



Czech Republic



Estonia



Finland



Lithuania



Greece



Ireland



Republic of Georgia



Portugal



Romania



Russia

Austria,  
Republic of  
(1945–current)

France



Albania

Emperor of Austria  
(1686–1918)

formerly royal arms for their national signs. A frequent emblem found within these arms is a crown; in monarchical arms, this was an indexical sign for the monarch, but under republican government the crown is an arbitrary symbol for sovereignty (other symbols, such as the fasces in the French national emblem or the helmet of Skanderbeg in Albania's arms, can also represent sovereignty).

The transference of royal arms is not the only way national arms have been developed. Early republics claimed arms of their own—the Swiss cantons are known to have had their own arms in the 13th century. And, later, British colonial governments were granted arms which often were continued in use by the independent countries which emerged from colonial rule.

The display of arms on a flag may take one of two forms: the armorial banner, or the inclusion of arms within a larger design. An armorial banner is the display of the shield on a flag. Traditionally, an armorial banner is square, although only Switzerland displays a square armorial banner as a national flag. Other armorial banners include the flags of Austria and Kiribati. The Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and British Columbia, as well as the U.S. state of Maryland, also fly armorial banners.



Austria



Nova Scotia



New Brunswick



Prince Edward Island



Maryland

countries, the arms are displayed on a bicolor or tricolor, as seen in Andorra, Belize, Montenegro, Moldova, Ecuador, Spain, Poland, San Marino, Portugal, Croatia, and Equatorial Guinea.



Ontario



Tristan da Cunha (U.K.)



Andorra



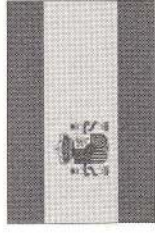
Belize



Montenegro



Moldova



Spain



Poland



San Marino



Portugal



Croatia



Equatorial Guinea

Heraldry is, of course, a tradition associated with aristocratic European culture. Many entities chose to forgo adopting arms and instead developed civic signs using other patterns. Of those found on flags, many take the form of seals or emblems.

Seals and emblems on flags include the compact triangle of Nicaragua, the Bolivian cartouche, the wreath-and-mosque of Afghanistan, the multi-faceted assemblage of Brunei, the pentagram of Ethiopia, the traditional weaponry of Oman, the stylized rendition of the Arabic script for "Allah" in Iran, the laurelled parchment of Guatemala, and the ophiophagous eagle of México.



Ecuador



Nicaragua



Brunei



Ethiopia



Iran



México

American civic and state flags abundantly employ seals in their designs. Over half of U.S. state flags feature a seal or its variant, and cities across the country use seals in their flags (for examples, see Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia). Some seals have a heraldic shape, complete with supporters, but very few have the traditional arbitrary symbols of heraldry.<sup>66</sup> Instead, most U.S. state seals are indexical of flora, fauna, industry, and material culture, and many offer landscapes. Whitney Smith proposes that the quotidian details displayed in these seals are the flowering of a new, democratic tradition in sign-making, which reflects the importance of the common citizen rather than a sovereign individual bearing arms.<sup>67</sup>



Seals on U.S. state flags



Detroit, Michigan



Houston, Texas



Los Angeles, California



New York, New York



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



A striking commonality in many state flags is using the seal as a primary design element, yet rendering it small enough within the field that, from a distance, fails to distinguish the flag from other state flags. Perry Dane proposes that the state-seal-on-a-blue-background pattern is a deliberate choice of "genre" in flag design;<sup>68</sup> in the case of U.S. states, it is one that emerged from the Civil War. Most military units in the Civil War were organized by the states, and most Union units carried a blue flag with the state emblem alongside their national flags. While it was a point of local pride to display the state seal, distinctiveness in flag design was not a priority—rather, as in most matters of military design, uniformity ruled. After the war, the military flag tradition continued in many states as they adopted flags for civilian use; in fact, the state flag of North Dakota is an exact replica of the colors carried by the First North Dakota Infantry in the Spanish-American War. One might argue that the "seal-on-blue" flag genre reflects a strain of political thought that followed the Civil War. The historian Shelby Foote pointed out that after the Civil War, subject-verb agreement changed from "The United States *are*" to "The United States *is*"—that is to say, in the (Unionist) American mind the states had ceased to be independent actors in a political partnership and had become subunits of a greater unified nation.<sup>69</sup> This strain of thinking was influential enough for strong opposition to develop when it was proposed that the states of Ohio and Indiana adopt state flags, with opponents stating that the national flag "ought to be good enough."<sup>70</sup> Thus the genre of state flags is iconic of a political theory, if one may assert such a relationship.



North Dakota



Michigan



New Hampshire



New York



Pennsylvania



Utah



Kansas



Oklahoma



Montana



Oregon



Wisconsin

## FLAGS WITH LINGUISTIC SIGNS

The sign type least likely to apply to flags is the name. A name is an arbitrary linguistic symbol for a mental concept (which may embody an entity in the physical world). It is often thought that words are auditory signs, but as Saussure points out, it is possible to conceive an idea and think about it without ever speaking.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, deaf people are able to communicate using words, so the auditory sign is only one component of a “two-sided psychological entity.”<sup>72</sup>

The arbitrary nature of names as signs is apparent in the fact that different languages assign different words to the same concepts. But arbitrariness does not equal uniqueness: consider “tire” (rubber ring on a car wheel) and “tire” (to fatigue). Proper names of political entities are more likely to be unique, but consider the two Georgias and the two Macedonias (to be sure, Caucasian Georgians call their country Sakartvelo, but both Greek and Slavic Macedonians call their countries Makedonia).

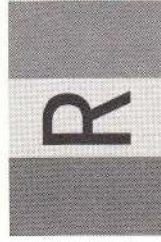
A number of flags bear an entity's name in script. Script is a code for the sound values of a name, but is again arbitrary: “there is no connection, for example, between the letter *t* and the sound that it designates.”<sup>73</sup> The use of a name on a flag is indexical, in that the flag bears the word that the residents use to refer to their homeland. The name itself is an arbitrary sign for the concept of the entity, while the script is an arbitrary collation of linguistic symbols.

Although it violates the principles of good flag design,<sup>74</sup> lettering remains a common feature on U.S. state flags. Eight states offer large letters on their

flags, and many others include the state's name as an element of a seal. One is tempted to say that the genre of “seal-on-blue”, while serving its iconic purpose of reflecting a political theory, fails in providing a distinctive visual identity, which led to the addition of the state names in the later 20th century.

No national flag bears a country's name, although the former flag of Rwanda (1962–2001) had a large *R* in the center stripe.

The case of Koranic inscriptions may be typologically unique. The orthodox Muslim theological understanding is that the text of the Koran is eternal, literal, and uncreated—analogueous to the orthodox Christian understanding of Christ. Therefore, rather than bearing a sign, to Muslims these flags are literally a sacred presence.<sup>75</sup> That sacred presence on the Saudi Arabian flag has caused some trouble when well-meaning groups have distributed soccer balls bearing international flags, only to discover that some Muslims feel that, “To have a verse of the Koran on something you kick with your foot would be an insult in any Muslim country around the world.”<sup>76</sup>

Rwanda  
(1962–2001)“Blasphemous” soccer  
ball (from BBC)

## CONCLUSION

The discipline of semiotics can be applied to vexillology, as flags are used to communicate in their roles as signifiers. The typology of Thomas A. Sebeok can be fruitfully applied to identify flags which serve as one of several kinds of signs. A few flags are signals or icons, while some bear linguistic signs, but most national flags are arbitrary symbols; of those that are non-arbitrary, indexical flags predominate.

Having recognized that flags can be classified according to sign types, the next line of inquiry will be for vexillologists to explore the *semiosis* of flags and their viewers. Sebeok described *semiosis* as a process of understanding and reacting to signs: “All animates are bombarded by signs emanating from their environment, which includes a *milieu intérieur*, as well as, of course, other animates sharing their environment, some conspecific, some not. Such inputs are



eventually transmuted into outputs consisting of strings of further signs. This signprocess is called semiosis.<sup>77</sup> In other words, what happens when people view flags, form mental images, and then respond with words, gestures, and other forms of communication?

Another important line of inquiry is in visual semiotical analysis, which may bear conclusions fruitful to successful flag design. The flag as a sign incorporates other signs; semiotical analysis “aims at bringing to light the interrelations between elements—rather than their hypothetical essence—in the totality that is the visual work.”<sup>78</sup> Flags are particularly changeable, as “kinetic phenomena”<sup>79</sup> which, when flying, present an ever-changing set of signs within an ever-changing set of relationships. Visual semiotical analysis considers the order in which signs are perceived (temporally and across the ocular plane), and the ways in which one sign affects the appearance of another, to garner “knowledge of the structures of organization of the works themselves, independently of the reactions, evaluations, or interpretations which the spectator adds.”<sup>80</sup> An understanding of these relationships can inform the choice and placement of signs on flags.

In addition, visual semiotical analysis may be useful in understanding the phenomenon of differing “flag-flying cultures”. Some countries are known for the enthusiasm with which citizens fly flags at their homes and offices; in others, flags are observed mostly at government facilities. A mix of governmental authority, cultural cohesion, and visual appeal of the flag may all contribute to these cultural differences, but a visual semiotical analysis of various flags in various cultures may shed some light on the power of the individual signs within the overall design to provoke the feelings that lead citizens to fly their national flags.

Vexillologists continue to build a corpus of some of the most provocative images known to humanity; by analyzing flags with the same tools that researchers use to evaluate other images, vexillology can contribute to the understanding of human cognition and behavior in ways that parallel the work of art historians, industrial designers, and political scientists. Flags play a role in nation-building, in warfare, in sports, and in politics; understanding their role in those aspects of human behavior may enlighten us more generally about those and similar activities. It is hoped that this paper will be a small contribution toward that effort.



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## End Notes

Illustrations follow the first text reference. Unless otherwise specified, they depict flags, seals, arms, and emblems in use as of 2011.

1. Wolfgang G. Jilek, "Nazi and Communist Flags: Semiotic Aspects and Psychophysiological Dynamics of 'Totalitarian Symbols'", *The Flag Bulletin* 197 (2001): 24–40.
2. For examples, see Nick Britten, "Head Cites BNP over Flag Ban", *Daily Telegraph* (London), 21 October 2011, and "Archbishop Waves Flag for England: We Must Rally Round the Symbol of St. George and Keep the Extremists at Bay, Says Sentamu", *Observer* (London), 5 April 2009.
3. Susanne Reichl, "Flying the Flag: The Intricate Semiotics of National Identity", *European Journal of English Studies* 8, no. 2 (2004): 207.
4. Scot Guenter, quoted in Peter J. Orenski, "Quo Vadimus: An Essay on the State and Future of Vexillology", *The Flag Bulletin* 200 (2001): 61.
5. Charles S. Peirce, "Sundry Logical Conceptions", in *Semiotics: Critical Concepts in Language Studies*, ed. Frederik Stjernfelt and Peer F. Bundgaard (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1:73–95.
6. Umberto Eco, "Producing Signs", in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), 176.
7. This sentence is intended to speak to general conditions, by analogy to the famous conundrum, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?" There are some situations, such as cased colors in a military ceremony, when the absence of a flag does have a communicative effect.
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52. See the discussion on linguistic signs below for more on Koranic inscriptions.
53. Joshua A. Fishman, *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 348.
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58. Milo M. Quaife, Melvin J. Weig, and Roy E. Appleman, *The History of the United States Flag* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 29.
59. Grace Rogers Cooper, *Thirteen-Star Flags: Keys to Identification* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 10–11, offers the following survey, with number of flags in parentheses: 4-pointed stars (5), 5-pointed stars (3), 6-pointed stars (5), 8-pointed stars (2). Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) displays the following samples: 5-pointed stars (14), 6-pointed stars (8), 7-pointed stars (1), 8-pointed stars (10), 12-pointed stars (2).
60. Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2005), 39.
61. Shaley, "A Republic Amidst the Stars", 39.
62. A. C. Burton and John Devitt, "Under the Sign of the Southern Cross", *Cruz Australis* 11/12, no. 46 (1995): 90–104.
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64. A. C. Burton, "Flags of the Sun", *Cruz Australis* 13, no. 54 (1999): 73–78.
65. S. E. Finer, *The Intermediate Age*, Vol. II of *The History of Government from the Earliest Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 912–919.
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67. Whitney Smith, "American Perspectives in Heraldry and Vexillology", *Raven* 6 (1999): 41–53.
68. Perry Dane, "Flags in Context".
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71. Saussure, "Nature of the Linguistic Sign".
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73. Ferdinand de Saussure, "Linguistic Value", in *Semiotics: Critical Concepts in Language Studies*, ed. F. Stjernfeld, & P. F. Bundgaard (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2:24.
74. Ted Kaye, *Good Flag, Bad Flag* (Trenton, New Jersey: North American Vexillological Association, 2006) counsels against both lettering and seals.
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