



Flags and their influence on social behavior

Las banderas y su influencia en la conducta social

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A group of people of various ages, genders, and races are shown different flags and asked to express their feelings upon seeing them. Their responses are as varied as themselves: Beauty. Love. Unity. Family. Acceptance. Inclusion and freedom. Fear. Hate. Anger. Genocide. Barbarism. Propaganda. Sense of pride, security. Dream and

seek happiness. Division. Oppression. Confusion. Disappointment.

Flags can terrify and divide, but they can also unite. They can express who we are and what we want. They mean different things to different people, can be the most powerful and also one of the most dangerous tools in the world. How can it

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be that a piece of cloth can unite and divide us at the same time? Why does it have so much power?

The flags elicit a warm response from every heart. It is a basic human feeling to be part of something, and it is the reason why we form tribes, clans and religions. That is why when our team wins, we feel that success as our own, and when it loses we personally feel trauma, even if it is not based on our own experience. We merge our personal identity with that of the group and the flag represents that group. The flag is a strong ideological marker of our cultural repertoire.

Before giving this symbology, the flags were simple tools. The first people used them to warn when a ruler or an enemy was coming. The ships used them to send messages and they were crucial in battles where it was necessary to know where the allies and enemies were. The first flags were made of animal hair or metal. But about 6,000 years ago in ancient China, silk fabrics were first made, and spread rapidly along the road that precisely bears its name. They used it for the most prestigious flags such as those of monarchs and heads of state.

In the 19th century there were two revolutions. Thanks to one of them, the technological revolution, people were better informed of what was happening in their country; the other was the political revolution. Through it, kings and rulers were dethroned and new types of political entities known as nation-states emerged. Therefore, without monarchs, a new identity was needed to unite the people and to create a feeling of belonging to the nation-state. A brand strategy was worked on. A shared belief system was needed and the flag helped to create it. As the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said: "A country starts from a name and a flag, and then becomes them, just as a man fulfills his destiny."

Many years later after the original apartheid flag which represented the settlers, was changed to the current South African flag, Nelson Mandela said, "I have cherished the ideal of a free and democratic society. It is an ideal for which I am willing to die." On the same continent, Ethiopia was the only African country that was never co-

lonized and was the first to adopt a national flag. Its flag changed over the years as power shifted between monarchies and communist governments, until the republic was finally born. Outside of Ethiopia, the flag represented the liberation of the continent, so when African countries freed themselves from colonialism and created their own flags, many were inspired by that of Ethiopia.

Closer to our geography and our Latin American history, we see two unique facts. The first of them, the origin that Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador share could be the reason that explains the same colors on their flag. History indicates that these three countries were born after the Bourbon reforms regrouped their territories under the name of the Viceroyalty of New Granada. Although the Liberator Simón Bolívar tried to maintain this unity under the name of Gran Colombia, some imperial interests prevailed and dissolved this ideal of the procer. Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela are part of the great Bolivarian dream. The yellow, blue and red on their flags have the same meaning in all three nations: yellow reflects wealth; blue, the sea that separates them from Spain; and red, the blood shed by the heroes.

On the other hand, if you look at Central America, you can see that there are flags similar to Argentina's, but how is it possible that they share the same identity if they are located miles and miles apart? For this, we must refer to the outbreak of the May Revolution of 1810. In Buenos Aires, the French sailor Hipólito Bouchard arrived at the port and put himself at the service of the First Triumvirate as a corsair (pirate under the command of the government). At the command of the ship named "La Argentina", Bouchard would embark on an adventure that would take him to various oceans and continents, harassing Spanish ships and flying the Argentine flag at the top. It was in one of those Bouchard's adventures that in 1818, Hawaii (then a kingdom) was the first country to recognize the independence of Argentina at that time the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata (1816). His journey, however, would not end there, since weeks later he would occupy the port of Santa Barbara, California for a few days.

Once his mission was completed, the sailor set course for Central America, where he would continue his siege of the Spanish forces. Most historians assert that it was Bouchard who influenced Central American independence fighters to adopt the Argentine flag as gratitude. Later, the United Provinces of Central America were proclaimed, which, like Gran Colombia, grouped together several states of today's Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Although the confederation soon dissolved, the countries that emerged from it kept their light blue and white flags as a symbol of the union they were once a part of.

Flags can unify us and generate loyalty. For governments it is a great tool, which is why some countries require flags in schools. And in more than 60 countries in the world, if the national flag is desecrated, you can face fines or even jail (in the American continent this only happens in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Uruguay).

There are also elaborate codes detailing how they should be handled, treating them with a respect reserved for religious sacraments. It is a type of propaganda because a vision of something is promoted. The clearest example of this was perhaps demonstrated by Adolf Hitler, who understood it better than anyone. After World War I and the disappointment of the German people, Hitler realized that he could use a symbol to unify the population and give them a vision of a better future. He worked in the educational and propaganda branch of the army where he learned how to manipulate the masses. In his autobiography *Mein Kampf* he wrote that "a flashy emblem can be the first step in arousing interest in a movement". The Nazi flag had the power to inspire fear, but it also had the power to inspire emotion. He even created a brand manual of more than 500 pages, where one of his first decisions was to ban the old flag and establish the Nazi flag. He then forbade its use by Jews. Hence also that the flags can create an "us", but also a "them", and have played that role throughout history.

Flags were also used around the world to recruit citizens. They became an emblem of the soldier's sacrifice, and that certainly happened

with the flag of the United States. Its cult arose in the 19th century to encourage a culture of patriotism. It was the first country to have a Pledge of Allegiance, a Flag Day and a Flag Week. The Vietnam War marked a change. The anti-war movement grew, and the flag became politicized as it represented two different views and each side used it differently. This is how, after several incidents, the issue reached the Supreme Court of Justice, where Judge Scalia stated that "if people are forced to respect a political symbol, then their respect for the flag is invalid." As a result, the Supreme Court ruled, in a landmark ruling, that burning the flag is protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution, which is a right. Paradoxically, since that ruling, the American flag has become more ubiquitous. A recent survey found that six out of ten Americans display the flag at home, in the office or in their car.

A culture of patriotism can be a shield of protection against a perceived or real enemy. After the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, three things happened: people went to church, donated blood and bought flags. Walmart sold 116,000 flags that September 11 and 250,000 the next day, an increase of 20 times compared to what was sold on those days of the previous year. Curiously, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama refused to wear the flag pin on his lapel during the campaign, but seeing the negative reaction from the public, he began to use it.

Years later, another president was elected, Donald Trump, who promoted that "whoever burns the flag should go to jail for a year." In this way, he promoted the idea that with that action it was an attack on the United States. But this, in turn, unleashed a Pandora's box. In January 2021, when the Capitol was stormed, there were flags of all kinds, and some worrying: the flag of Kekistan, a fictional populist national country based on a Nazi flag, the Gadsen's flag of the American revolution, and the inevitable Confederate flags used by segregationists.

That is the reason that when flags are used, the level of their meanings is often not taken into consideration. It must be understood that flags

provoke reactions in people. They are a barometer of where we are located as a society. At the time this article is being written, we have to witness the heroism displayed by the Ukrainian people in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Technically, the flag of Ukraine is composed of two horizontal stripes of equal proportion. The blue color at the top representing the sky and the yellow at the bottom, its wheat fields, reflecting the importance of the country in this crop, being one of the world's largest grain exporters. But, in reality, what we observe is how the feeling of an entire people has lined up behind its flag in defense of its principles, its identity and its freedom. This demonstrates

to the world the power that a flag can exercise in a people criminally attacked by a neighboring military superpower, fighting and resisting the invading scourge.

The flags are not silent fabrics or simple cloths since they reflect the values and aspirations of a country, as well as its history. The flag is a screen on which everyone can project their own ideals, hopes and fears. There are questions that invite us to reflect. Who is the owner of patriotism? Who speaks for a nation? Who defines our identity and what do we identify with? We develop as a society according to what our flags represent and the feeling that inspires us.