

# National flags and political rhetoric: a semiotic comparison between Italy and Brazil<sup>a</sup>

## *Bandeiras nacionais e retórica política: Uma comparação semiótica entre Itália e Brasil*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the semantic and symbolic complexity of flags in contemporary culture. Discussing specific examples in Italy, we analyzed how a variety of contexts employ flags, showing their socio-political, communication, and cultural connotations. We used semiotic theories to describe the relation between flags and their meanings in different situations, highlighting the ambiguity inherent in these symbols and their role in expressing national identity, protest, and power. This study also addresses the influence of material, color, and context on the interpretation of flags.

**Keywords:** Flags, semiotics, national identity, cultural symbols, protest, symbolic ambiguity

### RESUMO

Este artigo explora a complexidade semântica e simbólica das bandeiras na cultura contemporânea. Discutindo exemplos específicos da Itália, o texto analisa como as bandeiras são empregadas em contextos variados, revelando suas conotações sociopolíticas, comunicacionais e culturais. Ele utiliza teorias semióticas para desvendar a relação entre as bandeiras e seus significados em diferentes situações, destacando a ambiguidade inerente a esses símbolos e seu papel na expressão de identidade nacional, protesto e poder. O artigo aborda também a influência do material, cor e contexto na interpretação das bandeiras.

**Palavras-chave:** Bandeiras, semiótica, identidade nacional, símbolos culturais, protesto, ambiguidade simbólica

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*Yet a flag has no real significance for peaceful uses.*

H.G. Wells, *The World of William Clissold*

THE SEMIOTIC RELEVANCE of flags is evident: Ferdinand de Saussure mentioned “*les signaux militaires*” [the military signs], probably also referring to military flags, in the passage in which he first hypothesized the desirable development of a new discipline called “semiology” (Chandler, 2022; Saussure, 1971, p. 33). He most likely intended to study flags as units of a predominantly symbolic system of signs, in which an ordered code unites a signifier and a signified. In this case and in similar ones, flags are or were adopted precisely to increase the visibility of communication and, as a consequence, to reduce its ambiguity.

Flags that are used as signs, however, are not the most interesting topic of semiotic investigation.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of the code that underpins the use of a flag-based signaling system is useful, but does not open the field for interpretation: the waving of a given flag, or series of flags, corresponds to a semantic content that is determined by the code, leaving no room for alternative interpretations. In these circumstances, only inadequate knowledge of the code can give rise to duplicate readings of the signifier.

## A HISTORY OF TWO FLAGS

Nevertheless, flags are not just signs. Their most interesting semiotic instances are exactly those in which their manifestations express a whole set of sociocultural meanings, which often overlap, and sometimes intertwine.<sup>2</sup> Before moving forward with the theory, the article will now propose a shocking example.

On January 31, 2018, Italian police found two large carts on the outskirts of Macerata, in central Italy. They contained the dismembered corpse of Pamela Mastropietro, an 18-year-old girl from Rome who had disappeared two days earlier from a rehabilitation clinic where she was trying to cure her drug addiction. The body parts had been thoroughly cleaned and drained of blood. Security camera footage and other evidence allowed police to immediately prosecute Innocent Oseghale, a 29-year-old Nigerian man already known to law enforcement for drug trafficking.

The following Saturday morning, February 3, 2018, Luca Traini, a 28-year-old Italian, began driving through the city of Macerata, shooting at African immigrants. He injured six people, one of them seriously, before being blocked and arrested by police. Just moments before his arrest, Traini, whose head was

<sup>1</sup> On the different semiotic aspects of a flag, see Sebeok (1997); for more information, refer to Knowlton (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Literature on the semiotics of national flags is abundant; the classic observations are already in Durkheim (1912): “the soldier who falls defending his flag certainly does not believe he has sacrificed himself to a piece of cloth” (p. 29; our translation); for an anthropological view, see Firth (1973, p. 328-367); a sociological perspective is in Weitman (1998), and a critique of Weitman’s “vexillology” is in Pasch (1975). The literature also includes semiotic analyses of specific flags, such as the study of the cross on the Scottish flag in Pelkey (2017, p. 60-63), and for a postcolonial analysis, see Ogenga (2014). Research into the relationship between semiotics and vexillology is in *Consider Vexillology* (2013). For a general introduction to vexillology, refer to Smith (1975). Some analyses are limited to a first-level reading of flags without problematizing all of their semiotic dimensions (for example, Mangiapane and Migliore, 2021); the most important and in-depth study of the semiotics of flags is Wagner and Marusek (2021).

completely shaved and tattooed with a Nazi symbol over his right ear, took off his coat, placed an Italian flag on his shoulders (Figure 1), then climbed the stairs of a monument to the victims of war in the square where the car had been blocked, turned around, raised his right arm to give the fascist salute and shouted: “*Viva l’Italia!*”

**Figure 1**

*Luca Traini after his arrest, still with an Italian flag on his shoulders*



*Note.* Anonymous photograph in the public domain.

A few months earlier, on May 29, 2017, the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, with the Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, visited the city of Mirandola in order to pay homage to the victims of the devastating earthquake that had hit the central Italian city five years earlier. When meeting with staff and students from the Galileo Galilei secondary school, which was rebuilt, the president and minister were greeted by student and athlete Mbayeb Bousso, of African descent, wearing a long dress made by fashion students with the shape and colors of the Italian flag (Figure 2).

On June 4, 2017, Giulio Cozzani, a citizen of Pistoia, member and activist of the National Association of Soldiers and Veterans, filed a complaint with a local police station for desecration of the national flag,<sup>3</sup> stating, in particular, that wearing the flag had violated Decree No. 121 of the President of the Italian Republic, of April 7, 2000, which regulates the use of the Italian and European Union flags in Italy by state administrations and public institutions. According to Cozzani, two of the prescriptions contained therein had been violated: first, the flag should never touch the ground, and the student’s dress had a long train; second, the flag should never be worn, even less to wrap things. However, it is clear to any person who reads the decree that it does not contain any of the norms cited in Cozzani’s complaint.

<sup>3</sup> On the semiotics of flag desecration, see Hundley (1997); an extensive treatment of the same case is in Goldstein (2000), and a monograph on flag burning and its legal consequences is in Welch (2000).

**Figure 2***Mbayeb Bousso wearing the Italian flag**Note.* Anonymous photograph in the public domain.**MARKING AMBIGUITY**

These recent episodes of flag significance in current Italian culture challenge semioticians, as it is not presented as a simple task of mechanically decoding the meaning of a flag expression based on pre-existing codes, but rather requires a much more prickly task of finding the unwritten sociocultural code based on which a flag and its expression reveal a meaning in the precise pragmatic context in which such flag expression occurs.

Now, it is time to return to theory to try to articulate the semantic and pragmatic field of a flag. Hjelmslev's semiotics (1943), which further elaborates Saussure's semiology, offers a useful analytical framework. Like every sign, a flag is composed of an expression plane and a content plane. Each of these two planes, then, can be theoretically subdivided into three strata, as Hjelmslev would call, the matter, the form, and the substance of a sign.

Let us start with the expression plane. The issue concerning a flag is mainly the color. A white flag exists, and its conventional waving means surrender, but there is no transparent flag. In every flag, the color, i.e., a certain combination of brightness, saturation, and hue, is a fundamental expressive element that,

in contrast to the different colors used by different flags or by no flag at all, conveys a socially and culturally coded signified.<sup>4</sup> The color in flags, however, does not have meaning on its own, but in conjunction with the two other dimensions that, according to structural semiotics, compound the plastic level of every visual text, that is, topology and shape. This means that, first, the color in flags is delimited by specific shapes and, second, that these color shapes are arranged according to specific spatial relationships.

<sup>4</sup>On the semiotic code of flags, see Watt and Watt (1997, pp. 410-411).

### THE ACTION OF FLAGS

Another plastic element, therefore, is also equally fundamental to constitute the signifier issue of a flag: the texture. It is true that we can recognize a flag when it is reproduced on a computer screen, but this is not properly a flag, and it is only by metonymy that we call it that. It is, on the contrary, the two-dimensional reproduction of a flag, a reproduction that more or less faithfully renders its color, shape, and topological relationships, but not the plastic fourth dimension of its texture.<sup>5</sup> In fact, a flag is essentially a combination of colors, shapes, and spatial relationships on a fabric.

<sup>5</sup>Umberto Eco explains the difference between a flag and the icon of a flag in Eco (1975, § 3.5.8) (pseudo-iconic signs).

The fact that a proper flag intrinsically involves a textile dimension should not be overlooked, as it plays an important role in the recent Italian chronicle episodes mentioned above. Etiologically, the connection between flags and fabrics is due to the essential pragmatics of this signifier device: a flag traditionally signifies not only by itself, but also in conjunction with human or natural agents that modify its position and kinetic behavior in relation to the environment. We all remember how the American flag lies still on the moon, where no natural agents such as wind or breeze allows it to flutter.

In the traditional pragmatics of a flag, on the contrary, it is semiotically important that it be waved by human or natural forces. This is because the movement of the flag itself, and not just its static appearance, has a meaning: when a human hand waves a flag, it emphasizes its range of meanings according to the direction and rhythm of the wave; in a stadium, for example, football fans wave their team's flag as quickly as possible, so that it occupies the largest visual space in the people's perception and, therefore, in the awareness of the team's status. When a natural agent, such as the wind, waves a flag, the resulting movement conveys the same range of meaning, but it also conveys the sense that the flag and what it represents are somehow endowed with an autonomous action, as if it was able to not only stand, but also move on its own. This is one of the reasons why flags have to primarily adopt fabric as their material and part

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of their expressive matter: their substance is that of a device of flexible meaning, moving freely in space as if animated by an internal action.

### THE SHAPE OF FLAGS

While the color delimited by shape and topology and inscribed on a fabric constitutes the expressive matter of a flag, its form is given by a more-or-less-explicit code by which these elements are determined and transformed into the signifying substance of a specific range of contents. Present-day nations prescribe explicitly and in detail the code in observance of which the form of their flags must be arranged. In Italy, for example, art. 12 of the Constitution, the most important legal document of the State, prescribes that the flag of the Republic is the Italian “*tricolore*” [tricolor flag]: green, white, and red, in three vertical bands of equal dimensions. But this is not enough, as the Prime Minister’s Decree of April 14, 2006, in art. 31, provides more detailed prescriptions regarding the chromatic definition and textual characteristics of the Italian flag, indicating its precise Pantone textile color codes, which must be applied to a specific fabric, the polyester staple: Green 17-6153, White 11-0601, and Red 18-1662. The decree also determines that the potential use of other fabrics must produce the same chromatic result.

As national flags are also collective mnemotechnics, they generally adopt combinations of a few colors.<sup>6</sup> Rainbow-shaped flags are, as a consequence, those that tend to signify a rejection of the national principle itself. National flags, on the contrary, rely on few colors because they must be remembered in their precise arrangements and in contrast to other flags. The scarcity of colors that appear on flags and the need to distinguish them from other combinations result in the need to precisely specify their hue, brightness, and saturation, even with reference to a source as formal as the Pantone code.

<sup>6</sup>On this aspect of the semiotics of flags, see Llobera (2004, p. 36-37).

### THE ETYMOLOGY OF FLAGS

As the history of flags indicates, the shape that determines the arrangement of their expressive matter into a meaningful substance evolves by more-or-less-radical changes in color, shape, and topology. The embryonic form of the Italian flag, for example, was on the hat adopted as a symbol of identity by insurrectionist students in Bologna in 1794. Modeled after the French revolutionary hat, it had green replacing blue and placed in the center, with red as the outer color. Both intentional and unintentional changes led to that initial form that current Italian law prescribes.

The more or less founded etiologies have the reputation of being at the origin of the final choice; These etiological accounts, however, explain the real meaning of the Italian flag as etymologies can explain the meaning of a word: as it is clear to linguists, the etymology of a word can be informative about its history from ancient times to the present, but does not necessarily clarify its current meaning, which is given, on the contrary, by the semantic field that a community of speakers tends to cover with such a word (Erokhina & Soboleva, 2020). Likewise, the history of the Italian flag certainly helps to explain how its colors and arrangement were finally selected, but it does not help to understand the range of meanings that modern-day Italians attribute to this signifier device. The flag that covered Luca Traini's shoulders after his attempted massacre in Macerata does not have the same meaning as the one that draped the African descent student at Mirandola secondary school.

## THE SEMANTICS OF FLAGS

According to Hjelmslev's semiotics, the dialectic between the three strata of matter, form, and substance can describe not only how the expressive plane of a system of signs works, but also how its semantic plane is articulated in order to enter into a semiology function with expression. What is the way in which the semantic plane of a flag is arranged?

Different types of cultural forms determine the meaning of flags. These types can be organized according to the extent of their coding. If verbal language, and especially written verbal language, that Lotman used to consider the primary modeling system of a semiosphere explicitly associates certain colors, shapes, topologies, and textures in a flag with certain semantic or pragmatic contents, then the cultural form that brings the meaning of the flag is, in general, highly codified.

This is the type of flag that Ferdinand de Saussure had in mind when he included them among the objects to be studied by the new discipline of semiology. A code that is explicitly verbalized and even written prescribes what military flags signal. Ambiguities in this domain are exclusively due to inaccurate knowledge of the code itself or the *aberrant decoding*, as Umberto Eco (1975) would call it.

National flags are much more complicated. As we have seen, the Italian Constitution declares that the flag of the Italian Republic is the "tricolore," and describes it briefly. Other decrees specify the code according to which the expressive plan of the Italian flag is arranged. Neither these decrees nor even the Constitution, however, determine explicitly, with the use of verbal language as meta-code, what the meaning of the Italian flag should be. This is because national

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flags are non-verbal expressions, but visual artifacts whose denotation is quite clear—a nation—but whose connotations are, on the contrary, extremely varied.

Furthermore, it would be impossible to determine by law or other type of written code the meaning of a flag; the meaning of military flags can only be codified in terms of what people should do when they are seen, not in terms of what people should believe or feel when they perceive them. In other words, while the pragmatic response to a flag can be codified and sanctioned, the cognitive reaction and, even more so, the emotional reaction to it escape coding because they escape control. A soldier who omits to pay homage to the national flag during a ceremony may be punished, but if he is not intimately permeated with patriotism when saluting the flag no one will notice nor will they be worried about it.

### THE PRAGMATIC OF FLAGS

This does not mean, however, that the range of semantic connotations attached to a flag is entirely subjective. The emotional and pragmatic responses to which these connotations give rise are, of course, much more subjective than those generated by words. Metatexts, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias, and institutions, such as language schools and academies, seek to ensure that if we are members of the Italian-speaking community and we hear the word “*cane*,” we are not concerned with a cat, but with a dog. If we think primarily about a cat, we either do not know the language or there is something deeply bizarre about the way we function cognitively and linguistically. At this level of coding, however, a flag and a word do not differ significantly. Flag repertoires, like dictionaries, prescribe that when we see a fabric presenting a juxtaposition of a red vertical stripe with a white and a green one, in that order, we should think of the nation called Italy.

However, the coding of the semantic plane of flags differs significantly from the coding of words in at least two respects: with regard to the first, metacodes prescribe not only the precise denotation but also, to some extent, the range of connotations. Regarding the word “*cane*,” for example, dictionaries record that, in the Italian-speaking community, it not only means the animal, but also connotes someone who behaves badly in a certain domain of life. Being a functioning member of the Italian-speaking community means understanding not only the phrase “*il mio cane è un bulldog*” [“my dog is a bulldog”], but also the phrase “*mio fratello è un cane*” [“my brother is a dog”].

On the contrary, all members of the Italian sociopolitical community probably know that the “*tricolore*” is the national flag, but not everyone shares



the same interpretations of it as a vehicle of non-denotative meanings. Is the Italian flag a sign of independence and national unity, as a citizen of Turin might think, or a sign of political oppression of ethno-linguistic minorities, as a citizen of Cagliari, Sardinia, might suppose?<sup>7</sup>

We postulate the existence of a verbal language because the meaning of the word “*cane*,” in terms of its denotations and connotations, does not change in relation to the speaker position in the semiosphere. This word means the same to the native speaker and to those who have acquired Italian as a second language. The existence of a language of flags, on the contrary, cannot be positioned in the same way: depending on the position we occupy in the semiosphere, our perception of the primary denotation of flag does not change, but our beliefs and feelings regarding its connotations change, and it does not matter how precisely the law strives to determine the characteristics of its expressive plan.

The second important difference in the articulation of the semantics of flags in relation to that of words concerns the fact that, unless they are used as signs, like the military flags mentioned by Saussure, or other similar types of flags, the meaning of these signs do not derive from a syntax governed by a grammar. National flags typically do not mean something because they appear as juxtaposed with other national or supranational flags, but because they are shown in a semiotic context with a wide variety of semiotic elements, from buildings to bodies. Here, the difference lies precisely in the fact that while language contains codified meta-prescriptions about the syntax of words and the meaning they produce, the same cannot be said about flags. In other words, the pragmatic conditions of expression determine the meaning of a flag much more than they determine the meaning of a word, which depends more on codified semantics and syntax.

<sup>7</sup> A semiotic study on the “true flag of Sardinia” is in Sedda (2007).

## DESECRATION OF FLAGS

Let us return to the first episode mentioned above: while a blasphemous verbal statement can be somehow codified, a blasphemous flag statement appears to be less clear, precisely because a flag is not a sign with meaning in a context of other flags, but a sign with meaning in a context of other signs, which can include all of reality transformed into a sign.

Several commentators on Luca Traini arrest photos and videos after his attack complained that, not only before, but also during and even after he was arrested and handcuffed, the Italian flag was not removed from his shoulders. Some have surmised that this detail was not involuntary, but rather the result of the police’s philo-fascist collusion—a few weeks earlier, in Florence, the national

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police had attracted public outrage and media scrutiny after a 20-year-old Carabinieri recruit exposed in his room, in the barracks, a flag of “Imperial Germany,” (currently used by neo-Nazi groups), which was visible from outside.

Be that as it may, the Luca Traini episode shows that the meaning of a flag, although not entirely subjective, changes in relation to the observer’s position in the semiosphere, as well as in relation to the pragmatic context in which the flag expression occurs. Letting a racist neo-Nazi terrorist place the Italian flag on his shoulders while being arrested by the police inevitably configures and even legitimizes him as a kind of national avenger, sacrificing himself in order to purify Italian territory of racially impure presences. The police forces should have removed the flag from Luca Traini’s shoulders as quickly as possible, but the heroic interpretation of his gesture does not depend solely on the pragmatic context of the flag. Citizens placed in the main nucleus of the Italian sociopolitical semiosphere, in fact, should interpret the country’s flag not only and not mainly as the visual symbol of a nation, but rather and predominantly as the visual symbol of a nation where extremely diverse sociopolitical forces have met a common denominator after the end of World War II, in its opposition to fascism and Nazism. The fathers of the Italian Constitution dedicated a specific article (art. 12) to designate the “tricolore” as the Italian flag not so much because of a positive ideology, but in accordance with a negative and contrastive ideology: the flag of Italy must be the “tricolore” because other less inclusive flags, and especially the fascist or monarchical, must be rejected and considered unworthy of representing the nation.

### **CONCLUSION: SEMIOSPHERES OF FLAGS**

Lotman’s semiotics, however, points out that what is mainstream in a semiosphere can be increasingly reduced so as to become marginal or even expelled from a community’s sociocultural perimeter, while, on the contrary, cultural contents that previously were outside the semiosphere or on its margins are progressively promoted towards the core and given the status of mainstream principles.

In the future, the Italian flag may set aside the ethnic connotations that were in the mainstream when Italy was a country that sent migrants to the world more than it received them, and become a more inclusive flag: for example, the flag of all those who share knowledge of the Italian language and observance of the Italian Constitution. If such a broadening of the semantics of belonging to the Italian flag occurs, then no one, other than on the periphery of the semiosphere or even outside it, will be shocked when a young African descent student rises the

Italian flag by wearing a dress; the mainstream, on the contrary, will be proud of the Italian society inclusion.<sup>8</sup> A different development in the semiosphere, however, could lead to a symmetrically opposite demotion and promotion in the Italian mainstream's reception of what the national flag means (Horvath, 2018): if far-right ideas continue to proliferate, then the “*tricolore*” could end up being interpreted by the majority as a visual *shibboleth* against those whose ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. are not part of the majority.

<sup>8</sup>On the semiotics of the flag identity discourse, see Cerulo (1993) and, especially, Reichl (2004).

Italian flags will continue to fly across the country for many years, but the wind that moves them can be either of empathy and solidarity or hatred and exclusion. Such wind, however, will not be natural, but human, created by the myriads of discourses and meta-discourses that we let circulate and crystallize in the semiosphere day after day. We have to therefore be extremely careful and attentive, as citizens but also as semioticians, to the new winds that form in the semiosphere, as they could end up waving our flags in a way that transforms them into completely different and unpleasant signs.

### A BRAZILIAN FOOTNOTE

During my last visit to Brazil, from July 1 to 10, 2023, on the main streets of São Paulo it was common to find groups of citizens waving the beautiful Brazilian flag and perhaps displaying the same colors and details also on t-shirts, caps, or on other clothing items. However, only someone who was completely unaware of the country's recent political history could assume that it was a gathering of fans at a Brazilian national team football game. This hypothesis or abduction, in the words of American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, would have been correct until a few years ago, that is, before the rise to power and subsequent defeat of Jair Bolsonaro, the former president of Brazil (Sousa & Braga, 2021). It is precisely in the context of “Bolsonarism,” in fact, that the Brazilian flag and, in the same way, its plastic and figurative components, changed their meaning, but, above all, changed their “logical level of meaning.”

It seems normal for fans of a national football team to wave their flags when they play against another nation's team. In this case, the flag means in football terms what it means geopolitically, that is, the union of the entire national community in support for a team that represents the country. But what happens if the same flag is adopted by a political party and its supporters? There is a logical leap in the pragmatic modalities of the semiotic use of the flag, a kind of Russell's paradox: If a national flag is created semiotically to represent the distinction of one national community from others, when that same flag is adopted as a standard by a national sub-community, for example, the followers

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of a political party or leader—who belong to the same class of individuals that the national flag would normally represent, that is, all citizens of a country—then the semantic and pragmatic implications of this class leap are inevitably violent (Welch, 2020), because they question the very existence of the national community (Gardner& Abrams, 2023). When a political party takes over the national flag, its followers say, implicitly or explicitly: citizens who are not followers of the same party are not good citizens, do not deserve nationality, or are even covert enemies of the country. This logic, as it is evident, denies the very semantics of the word “party,” which means, precisely, “political part” of a national community, which substantially does not coincide with the totality.

On the other hand, when this short-circuit occurs, those who are implicitly designated as “enemies of the country” are placed in a paradoxical situation, in which, if they want to affirm the nationality of the flag and deny the fact that it does not belong to a single political party, run the risk of displaying this flag in an ambiguous way and raising it when it is already loaded with the connotation which the opposing political party wanted to attribute to it.

The fact that a national flag becomes a symbol of a non-pluralist conception of politics and is used to try to exclude from the community of citizens those who do not support a certain leader or party is not a new fact in history; on the one hand, Bolsonaro was implicitly or explicitly inspired by Silvio Berlusconi’s “Forza Italia” movement, which also appropriated national patriotic symbols to make them the exclusive symbolic prerogative of a political party. Berlusconi is also responsible, among other things, for the verbal elaboration of the rhetoric of the “anti-Italians,” that is, those who, by not supporting the political ideas of Forza Italia, would prove to be covert enemies of the country.

This same semiotic event can also be found, backwards, in the political connotation of the German flag: for years, even in its post-war plastic configuration, it was associated with the advent and political-state affirmation of Nazism, so that, for decades, after the defeat of this atrocious political ideology, waving a German flag during a sporting competition was a frowned-upon behavior, because it could potentially always be interpreted as nostalgic towards the historical period that marks the history of the German nation as an indelible failure. It was only recently, especially after the country’s reunification in 1989, that German flags lost this connotation and were once again flown in stadiums without the weight of the Nazi past.

In the case of the Italian flag that became the symbol of Berlusconi’s political party, and even more so in the case of the Brazilian flag, adopted as the flag of Bolsonaro’s “resistance” to Lula’s political return, the fatal overlap between the football and patriotic use of the flag has also much weight. In fact, it would be

absurd, at least in the geopolitics projected by the long wave of nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be a citizen of a certain country and support their own team during a football match against the football representation of another country. This would immediately manifest a nationality problem. However, this power of the flag to immediately signal inclusion and exclusion becomes paradoxical and potentially violent when transferred to politics. In fact, it is as if it has suggested that someone who doesn't adhere to a certain political vision doesn't belong in the country, just like someone who doesn't support the national football team.

How, then, can we dismantle the paradoxical rhetoric unleashed by those who, like the Bolsonarist movement, appropriate a flag? It is certainly not "using it," because that would play into the opponent's hands, implicitly supporting the theory that those who are against Bolsonaro are against Brazil and those who are in favor of Brazil and use its colors, are against Bolsonaro's enemies. But it is also not enough to simply use or wave this flag, because by now it has already been connoted with the partisan connotations just described. The only way to escape this forced and potentially violent political writing of the flag is to then use it but deny the meaning that the opposing political party would like to attribute to it. Nevertheless, it is clear that this cannot be done verbally, much less through a complex semiotic analysis, such as the one presented here. In fact, street demonstrations need immediate symbols, such as flags, and, unfortunately, they do not tolerate long reasoning.

A viable strategy, therefore, is to rewrite the meaning of the national flag in the opposite direction to that taken by those who would transform it into a partisan flag. This must be done, however, without diametrically exploiting Russell's paradox, for example, using the national flag with the symbols of Lula's party. On one level, this would express a political re-appropriation of the Brazilian flag, but, in a broader sense, it would play into the opponent's hands, as it would adopt the same partisan demand for the flag adopted by the Bolsonarists.

On the contrary, to remove partisan influence from the national flag it is necessary to link it to a logical leap opposite to that proposed by Bolsonarism: if Bolsonaro supporters transform the national flag into a party flag, anti-Bolsonarists should not renounce the national flag, nor claim it as flag of his own party, because, as we saw, both movements would end up playing into the opponent's hands. On the contrary, those who want to deny the partisan and violent character of the Brazilian flag must adopt it as flags in general are sometimes used, and as the Brazilian flag is often adopted, that is, as a flag that identifies not just one nation, but also those who admire their values and ways of life and who aspire to make them their own. Not many tourists leave Germany or the Netherlands wearing sandals, t-shirts or caps from those nations,

while the Brazilian flag is the object of thriving international merchandising, and not just for football reasons. In fact, the Brazilian flag, with its history, shape, and colors, represents a way of national life that many, even non-Brazilians, would sometimes like to adopt. There aren't many countries in the world that inspire a supranational love affair, but Brazil is certainly one of them.

To combat the Bolsonaroist use of the Brazilian flag, therefore, it is not necessary to leave it behind, nor to raise it as an anti-Bolsonarista symbol, but rather to appropriate it in the opposite direction, as a supranational flag, which is used and waved throughout the world as the flag of a musical and open way of life, joyful and passionate, sensual and sophisticated, as a flag of peace and diversity. Waving the Brazilian flag together with the international flag of peace is perhaps the least Bolsonaroist act that could exist. ■

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