

## **The relationship between flags and identity is multifaceted and complex. Discuss.**

Flags, held high, are waved and flown everywhere, in every country across the world. Whilst at first glance, they usually appear simplistically as a rectangular or square colourful piece of fabric, it is crucial to recognise that they have meaning transcending the actual object, standing for and symbolising something so much bigger. Flags can be regarded as symbols of identity because they “are both an emblematic picture and a symbolic object that have semiotic codes attached to them” (Andersen et al. 2016, 137). Through what they represent, strong feelings of identity and belonging may be invoked in both individuals and groups, but this varies from case to case because the flag’s constructed nature allows it to mean different things to different people in various circumstances. It can therefore be perceived as a “thing that unites and divides” (ibid., 138). The same flag that one sees their identity embodied in might make another feel insecure or misrepresented, meaning they do not personally associate with it. This essay will discuss the way in which the relationship between flags and identity is multifaceted and complex, outlining that flags can be tied to identity in a variety of ways because their meaning is not fixed, giving them the power to both unite and divide people. It will highlight how the relationship between a flag and identity is fostered through the emotional power of flags, before illustrating how national flags can represent individual citizens of a nation’s identity, as well as construct a shared sense of national identity, uniting a population together. Additionally, it will be demonstrated that national flags can be a source of division, with some disagreeing with and challenging what it symbolises, feeling that their identity is misrepresented or unrepresented by it. It will also show that division and conflict can take place because of unsettled tensions between groups regarding flags and identity.

Marshall’s statement that a “flag’s meaning comes from the emotion it inspires” (2017, 5) tells us of the emotional value flags can possess. The colours and symbols represented on the faces of flags represent more than mere decoration, providing them with greater meaning and purpose that people can relate to and connect with. It is through their symbolism that flags gain the emotional power to become “symbols of identity” (Shanafelt 2009, 13), representative of groups and ideas that are important to them. The emotion encompassed within a flag sometimes even has the ability to evoke such strong feelings of identity that some will sacrifice their lives fighting for what their national flag symbolises, as recognised by Durkheim in his comment: “a flag is only a bit of cloth, nevertheless, a soldier will die to save it” (1974, 87 cited in Linklater 2019, 931). This ability for a flag to provide a sense of identity can often evoke a shared set of understanding between a group or community of people and act as a “group’s collective representation of itself” (Shanafelt 2009, 14), bringing them together in solidarity. This is often seen in the case of national flags unifying individuals of a nation

because they see themselves embodied in their flag. This is not to say, however, that a flag cannot also divide people because they are such symbolic objects. Some may oppose what a flag stands for and feel that it cannot represent their identity. Such different relationships with flags could be said to exist because of their constructed nature. A flag's meaning has the ability to change and this is "first and foremost a function of what and whom they are being associated with" (Kolstø 2006, 696) and is often dependent on time, context and circumstances. Ultimately, what is clear is the ability for flags to represent identities, which in turn can both unite and divide people, and this is why the relationship between flags and identity can be considered as multifaceted and complex.

The ability for a national flag to represent national identity is indisputable. Cerulo even suggests that national symbols such as flags "provide perhaps the strongest, clearest statement of national identity" (1993, 244). A country's flag is essentially an embodiment of what the nation stands for and is usually symbolic of its history, people, and values through its shape, colours, and design. Through its symbolism, it can invoke feelings of patriotism and pride amongst citizens due to the "strong emotional attachments felt for one's nation" (Becker et al. 2017, 335). Such significance of meaning is assigned to some national flags that there are rules in place to protect them, for example in Norway there are norms written down regarding the use of flags, one of them being that the flag should never touch the ground (Eriksen 2007, 12). Similarly, there are a multitude of complex laws regarding the handling of the American flag. It is treated as if a living thing and must be properly looked after and stored correctly, meaning that "to cut it, tear it, or burn it is to do it injury as if to the person or the entire nation" (Shanafelt 2009, 14). The change of a country's flag may also have repercussions for those who closely associate their identity with it as its meaning may alter, possibly bringing them discomfort and making them question if they still identify themselves with it. (Cunha et al. 2020, 413). National flags are thus intrinsically linked with national identification, rendering one's identity as a member of the nation important, giving them a sense of belonging and purpose.

Flags can also construct a wider, shared sense of identity between sets of people who will never meet. Anderson interprets the nation as an 'imagined political community', suggesting that it is imagined because individuals of a community will never get to know or meet every other member, yet "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, 6). Diverse groups of strangers can still be connected to one another, and it could be said that flags play a part in constructing this shared identity as they remind members of a community that they have something in common: they belong to the same place. The symbol is essentially "a tangible representation of the group" (Schatz & Levine 2007, 332) and it provides individuals part of such a group with a material object of identification. The flag's power to bring people together and unite a population is undeniable, take the

example of the sea of different national flags that can be seen flown and raised at an international sporting event, such as the Olympics. Spectators in the crowd of the Olympic Stadium who wave their nation's flag are unified not only with one another, but with the athletes from their home country. Despite their differences, their national identity connects them, and flags help represent this which shows that flags can be "the ultimate representation of the nation" (Dichter 2018).

Returning to the American flag, deeply revered by most of its citizens, this is one of the strongest examples of how a flag can represent an identity and truly unite its people. The Stars and Stripes seems to speak to many Americans in a way that invokes a passionate, emotional response and a great sense of trust and pride in their nation, as Marshall asserts, it is "a visual representation that captures the American dream" (2017, 9). Public displays of the flag can be spotted on the sides of buildings, in shop windows and outside citizens' homes all throughout the country emphasising, as well as invoking, feelings of patriotism. The flag has also been used to show solidarity with the nation in times of hardship, for instance in the immediate wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there was an immense increase in public display of the flag across the country (Collins 2004, 57). The ability for the US flag to unify is evident, and Ortner asserts that various groups can ascribe their national identity to it because it illustrates a symbol standing for "a conglomerate of ideas and feelings" (Ortner 1973, 1340) indicating that it can be identified with in different ways. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that not everyone ascribes the same meaning to a flag and therefore not every American citizen's relationship with the national flag is one of satisfaction or pride. Individuals of a variety of races may not see their identity in the Stars and Stripes, but in particular, many black Americans have expressed ambivalence or even contempt towards the flag because they believe it to have "hidden connotations of whiteness" (Eriksen 2007, 10). Young explains how he, alongside many others from the black community, view the flag as a threat to their identity because they believe white people who see themselves as 'true' Americans have "weaponised the flag, manipulating it to antagonise those they believe to be less American" (Young 2019). The flag for them is a source of insecurity, rather than security, therefore they do not feel comfortable associating their identity with it. Here, the flag has been used to create boundaries between 'self and 'other' which Linklater explains is done "to reassert the traditional powers and privileges of the sovereign state" (Linklater 2019, 943). The American flag is just one example of a flag that bounds people together over a shared national identity, whilst diverging others but the multiplicity of meaning and ability helps us to understand how the relationship between flags and identity is multifaceted and complex.

Building upon the idea that flags can be a source of insecurity, a flag can become a "stigma symbol" (Linklater 2019, 933) for particular communities because of its connection to a nation's colonial past, as well as slavery and racism. They cannot possibly see their identity in a flag which has a meaning

underpinned by ideas of othering and discrimination of their community, thus they might feel unrepresented by their national flag. That said, this has in some instances brought people together to dispute over symbolism in flags, with some resisting against the racial supremacy and European colonial dominance emphasised in their national flags (ibid., 949). Whilst disapproval of a flag is apparent here, it does show that people can share these feelings and come together to resist over the lack of identity it brings them, further emphasising a flag's ability to divide, but also unite people. Kolstø maintains a similar stance to Linklater, emphasising that flags "rooted in a cultural past will more often than not be more divisive than unifying since different ethnic and political groups often hark back to different pasts" (Kolstø 2006, 679). This has been seen in newly configured states when decision-making regarding the best flag to represent the new nation has ended up a contentious task. When Bosnia-Herzegovina was established as an independent state in 1992, its population makeup consisted of a range of ethnic groups: Bosnian Muslims, Serbians and Croats as well as a remaining few identifying with other groups. Various flags were designed to represent the nation, but some were associated more with particular groups than others, for instance the *fleur de lis* resonated only with the Muslims (ibid., 680). After such division over the new flag, it was decided that for it to be able to unite its national members and bring them all a sense of identity, it could not draw upon the traditions or history of any group. Whilst a future-orientated flag was decided upon, seen to be equally acceptable to all ethnic groups, many citizens found it hard to relate to or see their identity represented in it, which is why it is used less by some, especially those of Bosnian-Serbian heritage, who instead identify with the old Serbian flag (ibid., 683). This is not to say, however, that every citizen of Bosnia-Herzegovina rejects their national flag as it can be seen waved by many, exhibiting national pride. The fact that some see their identity represented through it and fly it high, whilst others feel unrepresented by it and reject the use of it exemplifies that flags are interpreted differently by different people and thus citizens' relationships between their identity and their national flag can be multifaceted and complex.

As well as in new states, national flags sometimes fail to unite the populations of long-established states. Created perhaps over a century ago, some national flags may hold little to no meaning for a lot of their modern-day inhabitants because in many cases, populations are now more diverse in their make-up than they used to be. Many feel their identity is misrepresented by their flag, thus for them, the symbol does not elicit feelings of unity or attachment to their nation. Some Australians have expressed their dissatisfaction with their flag in being able to represent their identity because of the prominence of the Union Jack on its face, symbolic of the country's British heritage. Wright explains that at the time of its development, the depiction of "fidelity to the motherland was a key criterion for acceptance" (Wright 2011, 4) and there was less contestation over its design. However, as the population of Australia has shifted and become markedly more cosmopolitan, the current flag can be

understood to underrepresent the diversity of modern Australia. Many claim it “advertises Australia’s ‘Anglo-Saxon’ credentials” (ibid.) and does not remind them of who they are as an Australian citizen, calling for a change to the national symbol that instead symbolises the independence of their nation and shows that it is made up of the Aborigines and immigrants from all nations across the world, as well as British descendants. Similarly, in New Zealand there has been debate over whether the nation should adopt a new flag with less emphasis on the Union Jack. Two referendums were held in 2015 and 2016 to change the flag to a symbol that represents the country’s “modern, multicultural identity and its rich indigenous heritage” (Mercer, 2015). The majority of the nation voted to retain its original flag, but it is notable that a great deal of the population does not feel their identity is suitably represented within the flag. Instead of unifying everybody in the nation, there is a great divide in opinion over its symbolism, further illustrating the complex and multifaceted relationship that exists between flags and identity.

Having discussed the way in which flags unite nations as well as divide, it seems most appropriate to address, instead of overlook, the complex, multifaceted relationship that exists between identity and flags in Northern Ireland. Controversy, conflict, and division prevails in the territory over the display of two different flags: the Irish Tricolour flag and the British Union Jack. Each flag brings a sense of identity to a different group, the Tricolour to Republicans, typically Catholics and the Union flag to Unionists, usually Protestants. Each group tends to “occupy spatially discrete and exclusive territories” (Graham 1998, 133) within Northern Ireland and respective flags are flown, hung, painted, and marked on streets, buildings and landmarks, symbolising loyalty and identity, as well as serving as “sectarian markers of territory” (Hamber 2006, 128). Tension over the display of both of these flags has played a prominent role in the Northern Ireland conflict from the 1960s up until the present (Becker et al. 2017, 339) because the presence of each flag can invoke intense emotional dissent in the opposing group, and in some cases lead to mistreatment and violence against members of the group exhibiting their flag. Analysing flag display in Northern Ireland helps to provide yet another example of a context in which flags and identity are intrinsically connected, causing both the unity and division of groups. Regardless of which flag they perceive to represent them and their beliefs best, it seems that many Northern Irish citizens ascribe great emotional value flags and see them as closely attached to their identity. Due to its emotional power, the Union Jack can bring Protestants a sense of security in their identity, whilst it may evoke feelings of insecurity and instability in Catholics. The same can be said the other way around with the Tricolour flag, sometimes recognised by Protestants as a symbol of violent threat, particularly to their identity. The tension between the two is ongoing today and the divide in identities, represented by flags, is what contributes to the emergence of brutality and violence between each side.

Ultimately, it can be said that the relationship between flags and identity is multifaceted and complex. Flags relate to identity in many ways as their meaning can be interpreted differently depending on the person and context, meaning they have the potential to unite people, as well as divide. Some flags successfully represent an identity and others fail to do so. Through its emotional power, a national flag may act as an object of national identification for individuals and give them a sense of purpose. National flags can also help to unite a national population together by emphasising a shared sense of national identity, which is seen in the power and ability of the American flag to bind the majority of its citizens together. Despite this, some oppose what their national flags stand for and fail to see their identity represented in it. This is exemplified in the case of some black Americans' relationship with the Stars and Stripes, as well as others challenging the European colonial dominance of their national flags. Some citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina do not identify closely with their national flag, and in both Australia and New Zealand, many feel their flag is misrepresentative of their identity, calling for it to be changed. Furthermore, the Northern Ireland conflict acts as an example of a context in which there is unresolved tension over flags and identity. Through these examples, it is therefore illustrated that flags can be connected with identity in a multitude of complicated ways since they have the ability to unite and divide groups.

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