
‘Hostile take-over’

A political history of the red flag

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Abstract

Today, no one would doubt that the colour red and the red flag symbolise socialism, communism and revolution. However, that we all agree on these symbolic qualities is a rather recent historical phenomenon, since for thousands of years the colour red (and even more so: purple) had been reserved for the ruling elites or members of the clergy in different parts of the world. This article examines how the red flag emerged as a revolutionary symbol, with particular attention given to the transcultural transfer of knowledge and argues that this eventually became a fierce struggle for recognition.

Key words: red flag, symbolism, recognition, political colours

Something red can be destroyed, but red cannot be destroyed, and that is why the meaning of the word ‘red’ is independent of the existence of a red thing.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

For much of human history red has been the most symbolic and political of all colours. As the Alliance of Red Front Fighters in Germany declared in 1925: ‘Red is the historical colour of international class struggle and international solidarity. Red is therefore the flag and colours of the Alliance of Red-Front Fighters’.¹ That red has become the signifier for revolution and the proletariat was in fact the result of long-lasting social struggle and the contestation of *symbolic power*. With this article I want to look at the contentious history of this *symbolic social order* and the unsettling experience of the dispossession of the traditional colour of the ruling classes.

This history is, for the most part, that of a prolonged struggle across the West, but for the events of taking possession of the red flag in the eighteenth and nineteenth century I will focus mainly on Germany and France, since it was here that the impact of revolutionary upheaval and of an organised working class were most evident. Although there have been a vast number of publications on the cultural and historical role of colours within societies over the last two centuries, a more focused examination of the *longue durée* of the colour red as a political symbol has yet to be written. Recently, Michel Pastoureau published his seminal work on the history of the colour red, but this only partially covers its political aspects.² There is still no extensive study in English on the history of the red flag while only two older books in French and German touch on the issue.³ This article will therefore shed new light on the transnational transformation of the symbolic meaning of the red flag, while also exemplifying how much of a lasting social and political impact these struggles have had over time.

In terms of the colour's symbolic value, let us first look at some basics of human biology: for most people, red literally pushes itself into the field of vision. Since the crystalline lens of the human eye shows some chromatic aberration, we are actually seeing 'wrongly', as red objects appear to be closer to us than, for example, blue ones. The colour red therefore triggers a much greater stimulus – with its effect being more intuitive.⁴ Red is the essence of colour – it appears to come out of the human itself. Close your eyes while facing towards a bright light, and you will see red.

The immediate impressions of the colour red become apparent if we look at two fundamental anthropological experiences which have shaped the human subconscious since its early history: blood and fire. In most cultures since the Stone Age, red was connected with a mythical, religious or mystical and finally power-representing symbolism. Moreover, in most cultures red is typically considered the most beautiful and appealing of all colours with the terms 'red' and 'beautiful' often having the same semantic roots or even being identical. The ancient Hebrew word *ādām*, for example, meant 'human' as well as 'red'.⁵ Indeed, from the very beginning of human culture colours have been used as 'semiotic devices', as Umberto Eco has pointed out: 'Human societies do not only speak of colours, but also with colours'.⁶ This specific history is about the transformations and struggles within symbolic representations, which are at the core of the political. These material foundations are central to political conflicts, as can be seen, for instance, in iconoclastic acts where throughout history, especially during revolutions or regime change, the artefacts of symbolic power have been repeatedly destroyed.

State of emergency and capital punishment

In ancient Rome, not only did the Roman emperor wear crimson or purple red, but his legions used the colour for their military insignia. The field sign, called *Vexillum*, an early version of a banner, was itself made of red cloth as well as the red streamers of the Roman cavalry, which were therefore called *flammulae*.⁷ It was also a signal for the god of war, Mars, that was used to initiate the attack during battle – symbolically announcing that blood would flow. In this regard the red banner developed into a proclamation of general danger (war and *tumultus*) and ultimately into the sign for a state of emergency.⁸ During classical antiquity, however, red also began to signify something more abstract, more detached from the human body – beyond a reddish paint on skin or vestimentary expressions like the toga.

Besides its influence on the power of the Catholic Church, ancient Roman symbolism had an impact on secular and legal authority during the Middle Ages as well. The red banner remained the sign of the state of emergency and military attack formations, and it lived on in different regions of Europe. In the Holy Roman Empire, and later the Italian states, the red banner prevailed as the flag of the empire and the flag of blood (*vexillum imperiale sive sanguineum*). It served as the emblem of Imperial judgement over life and death, the highest-ranking Imperial symbol, and therefore divine jurisdiction under which the blood court was held with traditional places of trial being termed ‘red trench’ or ‘red tower’.⁹ Consequently, the headsman would mostly wear a red hood. The emperor, accordingly, handed the blood banner to his lieges who would feature a red field or banner in their coat of arms: the *Regalienfeld* or blood panel.¹⁰ Whenever the red banner was on display, so it was believed, fear and terror would spread.

In its significance the simple red banner, called the firebanner, stood even above the imperial banner with its black eagle.¹¹ The mythical *Oriflamme* (Golden Flame), which was introduced by Charlemagne and later served as the battle standard of the French kings, could be regarded as a model for this.¹² Besides functioning as a signifier of power, the red war banner had another meaning. During the Hundred Years’ War in particular, the *Oriflamme* would be set up to indicate a *guerre mortelle*. In this case, no prisoners would be taken, with the colour red, in heraldry, coming to symbolise ferocity and mercilessness in battle.¹³

The powers of the old European order, secular or ecclesiastical, chose to present themselves as a punishing tribunal and, where necessary, would

rely on the dissemination of fear to shore up their claim to power. No other sign for the threat of punishment would evoke their subjects' fears like the red banner of martial law and the state of emergency. Out of this tradition, red also became the colour of High Justice, as can be observed today when we look at the robes worn by supreme court justices across most of Europe.

A revolutionary symbol emerges

Following the crises and social revolts of the late medieval and early modern eras, it was not only the foundations of aristocratic rule that were shaken, but also those of the symbolic social order at large. Throughout these times, we find reports of revolts and upheavals in which the angry masses took possession of a makeshift red flag or pennant. On several occasions during urban revolts from the fourteenth century onwards, also known as 'guild revolutions', unruly guild members would march on the town halls behind their hallowed guild banners.¹⁴ During one such uprising in 1403, guildsmen in the Hanseatic City of Lübeck reportedly marched through its alleys behind a red flag.¹⁵ Even more common were upheavals in the Italian city-states, where guild revolts and popular upheaval occurred regularly. When Florence and other cities went to war against Pope Gregory XI in 1375, the rebels marched under a banner they called the 'large flag' that showed *LIBERTAS* in golden letters on a red background.¹⁶ Such sneering and hateful appropriations of the authorities' symbol of punishment could only be regarded as a tremendous provocation.

What had happened? After the beginnings of the Reformation in Europe and the 'discovery' of the Americas, a new, alternative, world now seemed possible – a world beyond the Atlantic as well as beyond existing Catholic orthodoxy and the old order of European feudalism. Another world was possible – a utopian thought with heretical power.

In these tumultuous times, the red banner first appeared as a formal revolutionary symbol during the German peasant war of 1524-25, when the 10,000-strong peasant army of Baltringen marched on Ulm under 'the red pennant'.¹⁷ At this point the red flag was by no means the universal sign of revolt, but was seen as the traditional symbol of divine justice and, in this capacity, was used to lend legitimacy to the demands of pre-modern rebels. It had never served as a territorial flag but represented the old order that had been executed by the liege lord. This made it universally transferable, as Ernst Pffleging observed: "The ancient Blood-and Firebanner, the sign of God's sovereignty and the "freedoms" and

personal affiliations under his protection could therefore become the banner of social revolution'.¹⁸

On a more global scale, around the beginning of the early modern era, the red flag began to not only be viewed as a military sign, but a symbol which could also be appropriated and 'turned over': pirates operating in the Caribbean, for example, flew the red flag to announce they would not take any prisoners.¹⁹ Indeed, before the eighteenth century, the red flag remained in common usage within Caribbean piracy. Even the term 'Jolly Roger' is believed to have originally been a corruption of the French *Joli rouge* (Pretty Red Flag). Furthermore, the growing number of mutinies within the eighteenth-century British fleet meant that the conventional red naval flag was also frequently displayed, acquiring a very different meaning. By the 1775 sailors' strike in Liverpool, thousands marched under a red ship's banner towards the city's stock exchange demanding the release of their imprisoned comrades.²⁰ In general, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the red banner increasingly came to symbolise revolt.

'A bas le drapeau rouge!'

It was not until the French Revolution, however, that the red Phrygian cap and the red flag became synonymous with revolution, the latter as an expression of anti-bourgeois radicalisation. Here the cultural transfer from Britain's former American Colonies to France should not be underestimated. Revolutionary symbolism, as a learned tradition, crossed the Atlantic in both directions, but in this case the liberty cap was brought back to Europe, newly charged with subversive meaning. The artist, Augustin Dupré, who had designed the first *Libertas Americana* medal at the behest of Benjamin Franklin six years prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution, was mostly responsible for this development. Back in Paris, Dupré used a similar image showing the lady of liberty holding a Phrygian cap on top of a stick on a medal that he designed in the summer of 1789.²¹ What happened after can be seen as a process of sacralising the *bonnet rouge* into the canon of revolutionary symbolism. This reached its culmination in August 1792 when a Parisian mob stormed the Tuileries palace and forced King Louis XVI to don the red cap they brought for him – symbolically displacing the crown.²²

Already a year earlier, social unrest had broken out along Paris's Champ de Mars on 17 July 1791, when the angry masses and republican leaders rallied against the National Assembly's decision to keep Louis

XVI as a constitutional monarch.²³ In reaction to this large demonstration, the city council raised the red flag outside the town hall to declare a state of emergency. The Parisian civil commotion law of 1789 stated that the National Guard, if it was called to quell riots, had to display a red flag. As a warning that armed force would be used, a red flag was to also be shown at the town hall's main window and only replaced with a white flag once the unrest had been quelled.²⁴ In reaction to the disturbances, the city's mayor, Jean Sylvain Bailly, eventually ordered the troops to open fire as the crowd shouted angrily: 'Down with the red flag – down with the bayonets!'.²⁵ The dozens of casualties resulting from the Champ de Mars massacre became part of the mythology of the French Revolution, as well as the so-called 'Blood Banner', exemplifying how far the bourgeoisie had set itself apart from the revolutionary masses. The flag itself was eventually immortalised a year later in the *Marseillaise*:

*Contre nous de la tyrannie,
L'étendard sanglant est levé.*

From 1792 onwards, the red flag was carried through the streets of Paris as a much-despised symbol of the bourgeois state of emergency and therefore served as a *negative* icon. Indeed, when Bailly himself was later sentenced to death, the executioner's cart that brought him to the scaffold was adorned with red flags.²⁶

As the years passed, however, the meaning of the red flag gradually began to change with the chant of 'Down with the red flag' being replaced with 'Raise the red flag!'. Control of the state of emergency and its standard had by then been taken over by the revolutionary masses, demonstrating the sovereignty of the people. As a consequence, the Jacobins decided to make a red flag the official symbol of the popular movement, bearing the inscription 'The people's martial law against the revolt of the court'.²⁷ The red flag truly had been appropriated by this stage, becoming more than a symbol for mere vengeance. The *Ancien Régime* had been toppled and with it the old symbolic social order. Revolutions, unlike mere changes of regime, involve the replacement of founding myths and the institutionalising of new ones in order to legitimise one's rule. The political symbolism and the representations of the new order were therefore transmogrified. As Lynn Hunt notes: 'Political symbols and rituals were not metaphors of power; they were the means and ends of power itself'.²⁸ By decree of the Constituent Assembly, any 'signs of feudalism' had to go and in the following period Paris saw a festival of iconoclasm.²⁹

The French Revolution with its powerful symbols such as the red flag and the red Phrygian cap, established revolutionary codes, discourse and icons all over Europe – a whole narrative of unrest. As George L. Mosse observed: ‘Though the cults of the revolution dominated Paris for barely one year, they provided a dress rehearsal for the new politics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany’.³⁰ In the German states in particular, the events and ideals of the French Revolution left a great impression and inspired intellectuals as well as craftsmen. The struggle for democracy, imagined as a great revolution, was by now seen as the struggle for a *red republic*. One example of this was the *Rothe Blatt* published in Koblenz by Joseph Görres, an early admirer of the revolution, between 1796 and 1798.³¹

Of even greater concern for the *Ancien Régime* were the mutinies in 1797 of British Royal Navy sailors at Spithead and the Nore, who had run up red flags on board to demonstrate their intent. As one of the observers recalled at the trial of the mutineers, ‘[t]here was a band of musick playing, and they paraded through the town of Sheerness, with a red flag’.³² Another witness, the surgeon serving aboard the mutineers’ ship, added: ‘When I saw the red flag flying, it struck me as the most daring outrage I had ever seen in the course of my life’.³³ Consequently, the authorities saw this rebellious act as an expression of sympathies with Jacobin ideas that came from the other side of the English Channel.³⁴ But looking at the court records, it remains doubtful if the mutineers knew anything about Jacobin ideology at all.

Like the Liverpool revolts twenty years earlier, the red nautical flags were once more appropriated to indicate mutiny, or, more generally, defiance. By the late eighteenth century, the rising number of attacks on the European symbolic social order was the result of a specific cultural transfer; a transfer of knowledge and growing transnational developments with mutual influences at all levels of society.³⁵ The red flag then became a historical and geographical-spatial hybrid. Practices and codes of a specific time combine and epitomise older practices and codes, rather than simply being a product of a modernising process.

Nonetheless, in the opening years of the nineteenth century, during a political climate of restoration after the Congress of Vienna, revolutionary symbols lost their appeal for some time. But the expression of secular and ecclesiastical domination through the colour red was also in a state of crisis, and the elites seemed thoroughly traumatised by the misappropriation of the symbolic colour red. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his *Theory of Colours* observed: ‘History relates many instances of the jealousy of

sovereigns with regard to the quality of red. Surrounding accompaniments of this colour always have a grave and magnificent effect'.³⁶

Mass organisations and the red flag

Following the French revolution and the beginning of industrialisation, the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of mass organisations. Here symbols and signs played a defining role for social, cultural and political articulation, although they were still of a rather spontaneous and unorganised nature. Mosse linked this new prominence of the symbolic to mythical romanticism, especially in the German case, and the newly developing nationalist ideology: 'Symbols, the objectification of popular myths, give a people their identity [...] Nationalism, which at its beginning coincided with romanticism, made symbols the essence of its style of politics'.³⁷ While this was the case for the plethora of mass organisations like the gymnasts, shooter associations and a range of patriotic choirs, it was equally true for the emerging working class associations. By the turn of the nineteenth century, modern class-based society developed competing political symbolic actions through mass organisations. At first these were episodic, such as public festivals and rallies, but then became more permanent through the formation of associations and clubs.³⁸ This rapidly changing society had, for many, become increasingly complex, alien and incomprehensible, culturally and politically. As a consequence, political symbols provided a useful form of social orientation. As Gottfried Korff remarks, they satisfied 'a need not only for building political identities and transmitting ideology, but also for clarity, security and conformation [...] Symbols satisfy the individual's need for non-rational identification in mass society'.³⁹

The red flag as a political symbol first appeared in the German states during the early decades of the nineteenth century. When textile workers in Prussian-ruled Aachen, inspired by the July Revolution in France, rebelled in 1830, someone attached a red tablecloth to a poker and waved it amid the rioting crowd. At the subsequent trial of the 74 Aachen 'rabble rousers', held in Cologne, the judge couldn't conceal his disdain: 'Now a banner is flying in front of the mutineers and the red flag symbolically reveals the meaning of the revolt and its dreadful aims'.⁴⁰ A year later, during the Merthyr Rising in Wales, a similar makeshift red banner was used to protest working and living conditions among the pauperised masses. To reaffirm the people's demand, a loaf of bread had also been impaled on the banner's staff.⁴¹ These were the first two incidents where

the red flag was flown as a deliberate symbol for workers' revolt.

The red flag gradually became associated with older traditions relating to the late medieval guilds that had emerged as the material standard bearers for merchant and workers' pride. By the nineteenth century, the *Arbeitervereine* (Friendly Societies), labour unions and workers' cultural associations emerged out of the old guild organisations, expressing working class association under banners that often depicted the handshake of workers' solidarity. Eventually, however, more socialist-proletarian iconography replaced these older symbols of guilds and their tools.⁴² The working class was ready to adopt new icons as well as a new flag.

This harking back to the revolutionary symbolism of the previous generation was much in evidence when, in June 1832, another uprising broke out in Paris. A funeral procession honouring the republican general Jean Maximilien Lamarque, turned into a mass rally that saw the red flag once again fluttering above the heads of the crowd, this time bearing the motto of the first revolution: *La Liberté ou la Mort*.⁴³ In the subsequent clashes with the authorities, both the barricade and the red flag merged to form a collective symbol of which the German visitor Heinrich Heine wrote enthusiastically:

There is something mystical about this red banner with the black fringe, on which were written in black the words 'la liberté ou la mort!', and which, like a banner of consecration unto death, rose above all the heads on the Pont d'Austerlitz.⁴⁴

The quest for recognition

The Paris insurrections, which were carried out by the lower and the working classes, finally transformed the red flag into a collective symbol of the political left. Yet its birth as a symbol had always been spontaneous, resulting from violent confrontations during periods of social upheaval. Subsequently, during the Silesian 'Weavers' Uprising' in 1844, 300 protesters marched behind a red flag that had been improvised out of an old curtain, as the local authorities looked on in horror.⁴⁵ However, it was the year of revolutions, 1848, that firmly established the red flag as *the* sign of revolution, especially within France and the German Confederation. This, to a certain extent, vindicates Hegel's notion of quantitative change becoming qualitative: throughout history, the red flag had repeatedly, and notoriously, been displayed in the midst of an unruly crowd demanding

a republic and social rights until it became associated with this symbolic quality.⁴⁶

In February 1848, revolutionaries in Paris ripped the red cloth from the luxury sofas inside the Hôtel de Ville building, the centre of the city's local administration, and displayed them in the windows. Soon after, they insisted that the red banner, rather than the *tricolore*, be made the national flag. This request was refused by Alphonse de Lamartine, a member of the provisional government, and later famously depicted, in a suitably dramatic fashion, by the artist Henri Phillippoteaux.⁴⁷ Lamartine replied to the demands of the revolutionary minded flag-bearers that it was 'the banner of terror' and expressed 'the rivers of blood' that had been spilled during the Champ-de-Mars massacre. By contrast, the *tricolore* signified liberty and the glory of the fatherland, as well as the victory of the French people.⁴⁸ The dispute eventually ended in a compromise with the *tricolore* becoming the official flag of the French Second Republic, but symbolically accompanied by a red rosette.

What these developments revealed was a determined search for recognition of the red flag as the official icon of the Republic and, by extension, a popular bid to entrench social rights and a revolutionary legacy. Indeed, it had been Hegel who had originally emphasised that striving for recognition had always been a struggle, even a struggle over life and death. It was only by asserting and demonstrating their willingness to risk their lives that the revolutionaries could hope to convince the other side that they deserved recognition, hence the slogan *la liberté ou la mort*. As Hegel concluded: 'it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence'.⁴⁹ To be recognised here was to be acknowledged as a different class, as *the other* of bourgeois society, representing an organic working-class consciousness and politics. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, recognition as well as misrecognition shape identities – in this case, class identities.⁵⁰ By recognising the red flag as the embodiment of a new symbolic social order, its bearers, and the social class that feels represented by it, would gain an identifiable pattern in the social fabric of their country. Unsurprisingly, Karl Marx had been a keen observer of the events in France, and soon praised the new revolutionary banner:

So swiftly had the march of the revolution ripened conditions that the friends of reform of all shades, the most moderate claims of the middle classes, were compelled to group themselves around the banner of the most extreme party of revolution, around the *red flag*.⁵¹

Within the German Confederation, the meaning of the red flag as a political symbol had also changed. While the appropriation of the red banner was previously motivated by hatred against it as an expression of historic domination, and had been understood as a negative sign of rejection, this had changed with the temporary success of the liberal revolutions of 1848. Displaying the red flag, or the red cockade, now reflected a sense of pride in the movements' achievements, while also symbolising the dawn of a new era. One of the first of these 'professional' proletarian red flags was the official banner of the *Demokratische Gesellschaft*, of which Marx and Engels were members, that was founded in Cologne on 25 April 1848. Bordered by a golden fringe, its ensign included the slogan of the French Revolution, *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit*, inscribed on red cloth.⁵² Within the new political realities of mid-nineteenth-century Europe, the red insignia now delineated a specific stance.

Banning the banner: repression and control

The events that transpired in Paris in February 1848, left a lasting impression in Berlin where protesters were keen to adopt the same radical symbolism as the French. In March of that year, the *Vossische Zeitung* reported that, 'a mob of more than a thousand men marched on Berlin town hall, carrying a quickly improvised red flag'. Furthermore, red flags could be seen flying from windows in Berlin's 'proletarian quarters'.⁵³ Of course, the members of the Communist League did not wish to fall behind and attempted to seize this revolutionary impetus. As a protocol from a League meeting, held on 9 March 1848, stated: 'Marx proposes that all members of the League shall wear a *red* ribbon. Agreed unanimously'.⁵⁴ Soon, the red flag stood for the democratic, republican movement, becoming associated with a radical political agenda during the summer of 1848.

The red flag also had evolved from a means of political communication into a metaphor whose semantic content was increasingly charged and broadened. As the then revolutionary poet Ferdinand Freiligrath wrote: 'He grasps the rusted gun once more, and swings the battered blade, while the red banners flap the air from every barricade!'⁵⁵ By this point, the red flag had also represented a radical differentiation from the liberal faction that had rallied around the German tricolour, and with some agitators even demanding that it replace the federal black, red and gold. At a people's assembly near Cologne in September 1848, for instance, several thousand workers called for a 'democratic – social – red Republic'. The organised working class was now being called the *Rote Partei*.⁵⁶ The *Rote*

Republik (Red Republic), for example, was frequently referenced in Karl Marx's 1850 essay 'The Class Struggles in France', later becoming common parlance among the early German Social Democrats.⁵⁷ More than this, however, the *Rote Republik* – illustrated by the red flag – manifested as a horrifying vision for the ruling class and its increasing hostility to socialism. In 1848, Berlin's city council had even reported imminent danger, noting that members of the local workers' associations 'had repeatedly unrolled the red flag'.⁵⁸ Like the French Revolution, a state of emergency was now being declared by the working class and as an attack on the ruling elites, eliciting fear and panic within the ranks of the bourgeoisie, especially among the press. The newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung*, for instance, wrote about the people's assembly held near Cologne and warned of 'the red revolution flag and its cannibalistic barbarism'.⁵⁹ Even King Frederick William IV of Prussia had reportedly been furious when the 'red flag of the republic' was waved in the streets of Berlin.⁶⁰

The wave of repression that followed the revolution from late 1848 onwards, included efforts to control public symbols, leading to a ban on red flags, red feathers, the red sash and other revolutionary insignia.⁶¹ Six months later, as these laws were further tightened and rigid censorship was reintroduced, it even became a criminal offence to wear any sign that was dominated by the colour red.⁶² All these measures exemplify how the forces of reaction were focused on repressing the colour red; prior to it being banned outright, the final issue of Karl Marx' *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, published on 19 May 1849, included a farewell address printed in full red.⁶³

Nevertheless, although the German working-class movement had been defeated for the time being, the red flag remained a subversive symbol, appearing at workers' funerals and prompting police officers to cut any red ribbons from the wreaths.⁶⁴ Nevertheless for Ferdinand Lassalle and the emerging German social democrat movement of the 1860s, their red flag with its embroidered handshake depicting workers' fraternisation was the most important sign by which they could distinguish themselves from the reformist bloc. The red flag would keep this delimiting role for the next 100 years, remaining an outward expression of high hopes and great fears. Moreover, following the introduction of the synthetic red dye alizarin in the late 1860s, red ceased to be an expensive or elitist colour. Red flags could now be readily obtained as they were being industrially produced in mass quantities. The red banner continued to serve as the most aggressive form of expressions within the symbolic arsenal of the Left. In its crimson dyed cloth, the long history of bloody conflict had been inscribed.⁶⁵

Pejorative metaphors of red were at the centre of the anti-communist discourse that also developed in the late nineteenth century, especially in view of the bloodshed that followed the Paris Commune in 1871. Around the world, Marxists projected their hopes, and the bourgeois projected their fears, onto this urban model society. Although only lasting a few short weeks, under the Commune the red banner became an official municipal symbol for the first time in history. As one decree from the city's revolutionary commission stipulated: 'The flag of the Commune, the red flag, is to be raised over all the public monuments in the district'. No other flag was to be shown or hoisted in communist Paris – for the first time it was the red flag, not the *tricolore*, that flew above the Hôtel de Ville.⁶⁶

However, the state repression that followed the bloody defeat of the Commune put an end to this: no more red flags flew in the streets of Paris, with it even being banned in neighbouring Switzerland.⁶⁷ Yet out of this defeat a new, more peaceful, symbol of the working class emerged, first extolled by the revolutionary feminist Louise Michel, who won fame as the *Vierge Rouge* ('Red Virgin') of the Commune. In bidding her fallen friend and comrade Théophile Ferré farewell, she wrote the poem *The Red Carnations*.⁶⁸ Subsequently, in times where the red flag was viewed as representing social unrest, and therefore a target of official persecution, it was a seemingly innocent flower that emerged as a new symbol of tacit working class pride – a subtle reminder of earlier struggles and losses but also signifying the political spring to come. Expressing meaning through secret rituals, such as specific dress codes, has been a tradition in folklore and subversive cultures before and after. After May Day was established internationally in 1890, workers would march in their Sunday best with red carnations in their button-holes. In the twentieth century, this cheap little red flower became a symbol for social democratic parties worldwide, and even – in Portugal in 1974 – the symbol for a veritable revolution.⁶⁹

A more subtle shade of red could also symbolise utopian hopes of a political spring awakening, as illustrated by the rituals that accompany the first of May celebrations, and a new dawn for the proletariat and humanity at large. Until the end of the German Empire, the rising sun became an emblematic design adorning the (red) flags of working-class organisations and an expression of eschatological expectations within the Marxist movement. As Germany's working-class organisations rapidly expanded in the 1880s, having effectively reached a new dawn after more than a decade of persecution and restoration, Lassalle, as leader of the General German

Workers' Association, exclaimed in its program with great confidence and considerable pathos:

A purple streak colours the extreme verge of the horizon blood red, announcing the new light; [...] What an hour is in this spectacle which nature presents to us every day, one or two centuries are in the far more imposing spectacle of a sunrise in the world's history.⁷⁰

For all their disdain for the red flag and its connotations, the ruling elites made no efforts to re-appropriate the colour red, increasingly deemed a lost cause. Furthermore, with the elite's growing identification with nationalist ideologies, the colours of the national flag, be it the *tricolore* or the German black, white and red, emerged as the symbolic antagonist of the red flag.⁷¹ Up to this day, the respective national colours serve as an important symbolic marker of anti-communism.

Disdain and hatred also continued to define those opposed to the Left. Even before Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws were passed in 1878, attacks on the social democrats, who had established themselves as a political party in 1863, were also focused on the use of those dangerous symbols of class struggle and upheaval. During the notorious 1872 Leipzig high treason trial against the socialist leaders and parliamentarians Wilhelm Liebknecht, August Bebel, and Adolf Hepner, the state prosecutor condemned them for using the red flag as a political metaphor in order to elicit direct agitation. Citing several articles from the socialist *Volksstaat* newspaper, the judge highlighted the dangerous aspects of promoting the revolutionary flag, citing one article that read:

You too have chosen the flag of the proletariat, the colour of mankind, the holy red! – It is not the colour of innocence, not the one of mourning, nor that of hope and not of atonement: it is the colour of human kindness, of the flame of enthusiasm that flares up from the embers of the heart, it is the colour of our lifeblood, that we have to be willing to sacrifice for the liberation of mankind!⁷²

Liebknecht commented that the judge 'seems to especially take umbrage at the "red" flag', insisting that it should not be seen as anything indecent. 'Therefore', he concluded, 'red doesn't imply "blood", but "equality", and using the red flag as a symbol for democracy dates back to the French Revolution, where she served as the antipode to the national and bourgeois *Trikolore*'.⁷³ The judge's response however, was far from

sympathetic: ‘What the red flag means, everyone in this courtroom knows, whose voice bears weight. This article involves an incitement to rape the bourgeoisie’.⁷⁴

In 1875, facing the growing electoral threat of the Social Democratic Party, the authorities made it illegal again to openly carry ‘unpatriotic ostentatious emblems’ during public events.⁷⁵ The German Anti-Socialist Laws exacerbated this by outlawing all public meetings liable to spread social democratic principles, along with trade unions and dozens of newspapers. Nevertheless, the social democrats survived – and thrived – underground, hiding the symbols of class war and working-class pride. When faced with state persecution, some working-class associations took great care to preserve their material expressions of social democracy, including shipping their organisations’ red flags to the United States for safekeeping. When these were returned with great fanfare in 1891, several ceremonial festivities were held to mark this symbolic victory.⁷⁶ Even after the Anti-Socialist Laws had been repealed, several courts in the Reich confirmed the ban on red flags and other symbols of working-class organisations. By 1891, however, the Prussian *Oberverwaltungsgericht* decided that displaying the red flag of a working men’s association at a public meeting would pose no threat to public order and the constitution.⁷⁷ This mirrored the initial thaw in domestic politics after Bismarck’s downfall – later repressive bills by emperor Wilhelm II were rejected by parliament. It seemed that the red flag became just one material expression of political organisation among many, having apparently lost much of its threatening quality.

From artefact to metaphor to self-reference

To follow up on Wittgenstein’s observations at the beginning of this article, it could be stated that colour has an artefactual quality, having its own materiality rather than just being a signifier. As can be seen with this example, the red flag became a symbol for itself: a relic with pseudo-religious connotations. This might indicate that by the end of the nineteenth century the material cult of the red flag had become more commonly established. In his opening address to the first conference of the Second International in Paris in 1889, Paul Lafargue rejoiced that the socialist delegates would ‘unite not under the folds of the Tricolour or any other national banner; they unite under the folds of the red flag, the flag of the international proletariat’.⁷⁸ Later that same year, the Irish political activist Jim Connell’s socialist anthem *The Red Flag* was published for the

first time: 'The people's flag is deepest red, It shrouded oft our martyred dead'.⁷⁹

In what was, by then, evolving into a mass (media) society, the material object of political revolt also became a decorative element while further expanding into allegory, illustration and discourse. By the late nineteenth century, mass mobilisation was increasingly rooted in mass media with socialist newspapers, pamphlets and books having become abundant. As such, by the year 1900 there had been a shift away from the material symbol as an indicator and catalyst of cognitive change,⁸⁰ towards a metaphoric turn that affected socialist discourse and anti-socialist resentment alike. A final example, which vividly links the discursive and the material regarding the fight over the red flag, is a short pamphlet that Liebknecht published in 1889, and running to several editions. Titled *The political colour theory: a play in three acts*, Liebknecht's work covered the trial of a group of social democratic workers.⁸¹ They had been seen hiking through the landscape of Saxony, stopping for the occasional beer on their way and engaging in toasts and singing. What had been deemed politically unacceptable, said the prosecutor, was that they had been marching under a red handkerchief that was knotted to a walking stick. These were the times of the Anti-Socialist Laws, leading the judge to rule that this had been, without doubt, a rally under a red flag, which 'as everyone knows is the colour of the Social Democrats who follow republican tendencies' and who would desire a red republic.⁸² The men were subsequently sentenced to three to seven days in prison, prompting a backlash from the Social Democrats who ridiculed the verdict. To draw on that, Liebknecht affixed a reproduction of the *corpus delicti* of the trial to his 15-page pamphlet – a red handkerchief.⁸³

Industrialised society eventually saw a gradual transformation of symbolic orientations, caused by a reduced receptivity to symbols and, I would argue, an earlier discursive turn in European societies.⁸⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, around 90 per cent of the population in Germany, France and Britain were literate, an immense increase compared to just two generations previously.⁸⁵ Symbolic forms were therefore becoming framed, or even replaced, by linguistic forms.⁸⁶ Indeed, the material object of the red flag was now more a metaphor for socialist and anarchist media. In 1880, for example, *Le Drapeau Rouge* was the title of a short-lived Belgian periodical. This same title was used in Paris five years later.⁸⁷ Under the Anti-Socialist Laws, the German Social Democrats, in quite a military fashion, termed their illegal apparatus for distributing banned newspapers the *Rote Feldpost*.⁸⁸ Prior to this, Liebknecht had even

indicated that revolutionary media would eventually replace the revolutionary symbol of the red flag: 'Our best and only weapon against the hostile press is our press; as long as we possess it, it will be our flag under which we will be able to assemble'.⁸⁹

The red flag lost some of its significance as a sign for orientation, a material expression of workers' disdain and pride. However, knowledge of the traditional signs remained deeply embedded in working class mentalities as well as in metaphor and imagery. By the turn of the twentieth century, its usage had been transformed, into something more playful or ludic, echoing many of the gradual reconfigurations within working-class identity itself.⁹⁰ By then, such symbols had become historicised, marking a process of historicisation within the movement at large.

Considering the long process of symbolic signification through the different appearances of the red flag, I want to emphasise the supranational and diachronic quality of its symbolism. In this regard, there had been a shared tradition of political signifying over the last centuries that went beyond any specific cultural or territorial boundaries – first within a European, and eventually on a global scale. More than this, signs create identities and form social practice through their representational value. We could, therefore, speak of practices that reaffirm or challenge the existing *symbolic social order*. Yet this symbolic struggle was no proxy war on meaning, intending to merely grant legitimacy to a specific cause or claim to power. Symbolic power isn't simply symbolic after all. Historic attempts to topple and subvert the symbolic social order were as real and as formative as the actual physical confrontations surrounding it. Throughout history resistance against the recognition of symbols, and therefore power and domination, prevailed.

Great emphasis has been given to the symbolic form of domination extending beyond the scientific order, but remaining within the realm of language, myth and art.⁹¹ Notwithstanding this emphasis on the mythopoetic function of symbolic forms for culture and more specifically the symbolic social order of the state, what traditional interpretations have mostly overlooked, were a long history of attacks on the symbolic power and the struggles over what Pierre Bourdieu (with Max Weber) called the 'domestication of the dominated'.⁹²

This very symbolic struggle was made permanent with the founding of several Labour Parties, although it later gained further momentum with the birth of the international communist movement after 1917. Yet the fractions that were engaging in this symbolic struggle were very much defined, as were their arsenals of political symbols. As these motifs were

eventually naturalised, they were slowly transformed into mere symbolic decorations for the political discourse at large. Thus, in the early days of the expropriation of the red flag, we can observe a social practice that was based on *over-affirmation* – when the military flag was turned over and made the revolting masses the agent of a state of emergency. Subsequently, it became a practice of *anti-affirmation*, when under the red banner the existing social order was being defied. Finally, as workers' parties became more established within different European societies, the metaphorical and material uses of the colour red expressed a practice of identity formation within working class organisations and culture – they turned into *re-affirmation*. The red flags of twentieth-century state communism eventually became a static symbol of self-reference.

In the end, those who had challenged the symbolic social order for centuries emerged victorious. The working class and its organisations expropriated and appropriated the colour that had formerly stood for the venerable domination of the ruling class. They turned over the red, so that today the colour has been naturalised as the signifier for social revolt, the working class and communism at large. The Red Front Fighters of the 1920s were therefore correct when they claimed that red is the historical colour of international class struggle. However, this ignored its thousands of years as a preserve of the ruling elites who had used the red flag as their means for declaring a state of emergency. Only quite recently, from a historical perspective, has its meaning been changed. Indeed, within anti-communism there seems to still survive a subliminal grudge: the ruling class has never forgiven the working class for taking away what they view as having once rightfully been 'their' colour, that of the ancient order of domination.

Notes

1. Gottfried Korff, 'Rote Fahnen und geballte Faust: Zur Symbolik der Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik', in Dietmar Petzina (ed.), *Fahnen, Fäuste, Körper: Symbolik und Kultur der Arbeiterbewegung*, Essen, 1986, p45.
2. Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Colour*, Princeton, NJ, 2017. On the importance of cochineal dye in colonial Europe, see Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage and the Quest for the Colour of Desire*, London, 2006.
3. Maurice Dommanget, *Historie du Drapeau Rouge – des Origines à la Guerre de 1939*, Paris, 1967; Friedrich Wendel, *Die rote Fahne: Ein Entwurf ihrer Geschichte als Beitrag zur deutschen Flaggenfrage*, Hamburg, 1927.

4. Frank Kämpfer, 'Der rote Keil'. *Das politische Plakat: Theorie und Geschichte*, Berlin, 1985, pp127-128.
5. See Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli (ed.), *Handbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Vol. VII, Berlin/Leipzig, 1935/36, p796. In Russian, for example, *krasnyj* [красный] used to signify red and beautiful, although it now only stands for red. Moscow's Red Square takes its name from the dual connotation of the word, since its original meaning 300 years ago was 'Beautiful Square'.
6. Umberto Eco, 'How Culture Conditions the Colours We See', in Marshall Blonsky (ed.), *On Signs*, Baltimore, 1985, p173.
7. Gabriella Elgenius, 'The origins of European national flags', in Thomas Hylland and Richard Jenkins (eds), *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America*, Milton Park, 2007, pp15-17.
8. Ernst Pflöging, 'Die rote Fahne im Wandel der Zeiten', *Die neue Gesellschaft*, 2 (1954): 64.
9. Christiane Wanzeck, *Zur Etymologie lexikalisierter Farbwortverbindungen*, Leiden, 2002, p61.
10. Brockhaus' *Konversationslexikon*, Vol 3, Leipzig, 1908, p127; Julian Franklyn, *An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Heraldry*, Oxford/New York, 1970, p277.
11. Christian Weyers, 'Das Sachsenroß: Biographie eines Hoheitszeichens', in Walter Koch and Theo Kölzer (eds), *Archiv für Diplomatik, Schriftgeschichte, Siegel- und Wappenkunde*, Vol. 54, Vienna and Cologne, 2008, p137.
12. Brage bei der Wieden et al. (eds), *Herrschaftspraxis und soziale Ordnungen im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, Hanover, 2006, pp26-27; Wendel, *Die rote Fahne*, p4; Pastoureau, *Red*, p72.
13. Michael Bryant, *A World History of War Crimes: From Antiquity to the Present*, London, 2016, p56.
14. Samuel Cline Kohn, *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425*, Cambridge and London, 2006, pp188-193.
15. Walter Behrend, *Zwei Ostseestädte: Rostock und Wismar*, Leipzig, 1909, p19.
16. Samuel K. Cohn Jr, 'The Power of Flags in Late Medieval Popular Revolts', in Peter Arnade and Michael Rocke (eds), *Power, Gender, and Ritual in Europe and the Americas*, Toronto, 2008, p195.
17. Friedrich Engels, *The German Revolutions*, Chicago, 1967, p78; Wendel, *Rote Fahne*, p18.
18. Pflöging, *Rote Fahne*, p68.
19. David F. Marley, *Pirates of the Americas*, Vol I, Santa Barbara, 2010, p345; Tim Marshall, *A Flag Worth Dying For: The Power and Politics of National Symbols*, New York, 2017, p247.
20. Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England*, Oxford, 2006, pp135-136.

21. Yvonne Korshak, 'The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France', *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, 1, 2 (1987): 61-64.
22. Ernst Gombrich, 'The Dream of Reason: Symbolism of the French Revolution', *British Journal of Eighteenth Century Studies*, 2 (1979): 198.
23. David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars*, Woodbridge, 2000, pp174-190.
24. Friedrich Perle, 'Die rote Fahne', *Die Grenzboten*, 50 (1891): 158.
25. *Journal des débats et des décrets*, 18 July 1791, p8; Klaus Deinet, *Die mimetische Revolution oder die französische Linke und die Re-Inszenierung der Französischen Revolution im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: 1830-1871*, Ostfildern, 2001, p16.
26. M. Bathild Bouniol, *Les rues de Paris*, Vol. I, Paris, 1872, p49.
27. Jean Jaurès, *Socialist History of the French Revolution*, London, 2015, p97; Gabriel Perreux, *Les origines du drapeau rouge en France*, Paris, 1930.
28. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, p54.
29. Richard Clay, *Iconoclasm in revolutionary Paris: The transformation of signs*, Oxford, 2012.
30. George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism & Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, New York, 2001, p13.
31. Joseph Görres, *Das rothe Blatt*, (reprint), Nendeln, 1972.
32. Anon, *The Trial of Richard Parker*, London, 1797, p15.
33. *Ibid.*, p14.
34. Clive Bloom, *Riot City: Protest and Rebellion in the Capital*, Basingstoke, 2012, p149.
35. See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, 1990, p64.
36. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Schriften zur Farbenlehre I, Gesamtausgabe der Werke und Schriften in zweiundzwanzig Bänden*, Vol 21, Stuttgart, 1959, p38.
37. Mosse, *Nationalization*, p7.
38. *Ibid.*, p13.
39. Gottfried Korff, 'History of Symbols as Social History? Ten preliminary notes on the image and sign systems of social movements in Germany', *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993): 110.
40. Jacob Venedey, *Darstellung der Verhandlungen vor den Assisen zu Köln über die Theilnehmer an dem am 30 August 1830 in Aachen stattgehabten Aufruhr*, Köln, 1831, p54.
41. Ian Herson, *Riot! Civil Insurrection from Peterloo to the Present Day*, London, 2006, p71. Flags played an important part during the 1819 rally and subsequent Peterloo massacre, but these were of various colours and designs. However, the red Phrygian cap was central to the symbolic décor

- of the mass gathering on St Peter's Field. James Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Past & Present*, 122 (1989): 79-81.
42. Jutta Zander-Seidel, "'In Freud und Leid zum Lied bereit": Fahnen in der Vereins – und Festkultur des 19 Jahrhunderts', in Roland Prügel (ed.), *Geburt der Massenkultur*, Nürnberg, 2014, p146; Wolfgang Ruppert, *Die Arbeiter. Lebensformen, Alltag und Kultur von der Frühindustrialisierung bis zum 'Wirtschaftswunder'*, München, 1986, p60.
 43. Perle, *Rote Fahne*, p162; Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*, London, 1895, p153. The slogan gained considerable prominence through the revolutionary propaganda painting by Jean-Baptiste Regnault, which bears the same name.
 44. Heinrich Heine, 'Conditions in France', in Heinrich Heine, *Selected Works*, New York, 1973, p94. Victor Hugo described a similar scene in his famous novel *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Vol. 2, Ware, 1994, pp770-771.
 45. Hans Hübner, *Aus der Geschichte der roten Fahne*, Berlin, 1962, p16.
 46. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, London, 1929, p368.
 47. Perreux, *Les origines*, pp31-32; Mona Ozouf, 'Liberty, Equality Fraternity', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, Vol. 3, *Symbols*, New York, 1998, p97-98.
 48. Pastoureaux, *Red*, p170.
 49. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, London, 1971, pp232-233.
 50. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the politics of Recognition*, Princeton, NJ, 1992, p25.
 51. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 10, London, 1978, p126.
 52. Zander-Seidel, 'In Freud und Leid', p150.
 53. Cit. in Rüdiger Hachtmann, *Berlin 1848: eine Politik – und Gesellschaftsgeschichte der Revolution*, Bonn, 1997, p163.
 54. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol VI, London, 1976, p657.
 55. 'The Death to the Living', in Michael Holzinger (ed.), *Ferdinand Freiligrath: Gedichte*, Berlin, 2014, p121.
 56. Dieter Dowe, *Aktion und Organisation: Arbeiterbewegung, sozialistische und kommunistische Bewegung in der preussischen Rheinprovinz 1820-1852*, Hannover, 1971, p190.
 57. Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol X, p125.
 58. Hachtmann, *Berlin 1848*, p643.
 59. *Kölnische Zeitung*, in Korff, 'Rote Fahnen', p111.
 60. Hachtmann, *Berlin 1848*, p685.
 61. *Ibid.*, p714.
 62. *Ibid.*, p807.

63. *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Organ der Demokratie*, 19 May 1849.
64. Arnold Rabbow, *dtv-Lexikon politischer Symbole*, München, 1970, p201.
65. Murray Edelman describes this as being 'the fetishism at the core of politics', Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, Chicago, 1988, p11.
66. Dommanget, *Historie du Drapeau Rouge*, pp160-161.
67. Robert J. Goldstein, *Political Repression in 19th century Europe*, Milton Park, 2010, p265.
68. Louise Michel, *Mémoires de Louise Michel*, Vol I, Paris, 1886, p159.
69. Korff, 'History of Symbols', p115.
70. Ferdinand Lassalle, *The working man's programme*, London, 1884, p59.
71. See E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, 1992, p102. It should also be noted that Hobsbawm, among others, was mostly researching the acceptance of nationalism and its symbols among the working class and petit bourgeoisie. However, its reception by the elites requires further attention within historiography.
72. Karl-Heinz Leidigkeit (ed.), *Der Leipziger Hochverratsprozess vom Jahre 1872*, Berlin, 1960, p201.
73. *Ibid.*, pp202-203.
74. *Ibid.*, pp203.
75. Hübner, *Geschichte der roten Fahne*, p25.
76. *Ibid.*, p29.
77. Anton Reger, *Entscheidungen der Gerichte und Verwaltungsbehörden*, Vol. 12, München, 1892, pp92-97.
78. Hübner, *Geschichte der roten Fahne*, p10.
79. Bloom, *Riot City*, p152.
80. Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*, Chicago, 1971, p34.
81. Wilhelm Liebknecht (ed.), *Zur politischen Farbenlehre. Ein Schauspiel in drei Akten*, Borsdorf, 1889.
82. *Ibid.*, p7.
83. *Ibid.*, Library of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, signature A 05-2466.
84. It could be argued that the symbolic regime under the later fascist 'aestheticization of politics' (Walter Benjamin) represented a revival of this nineteenth century political *relicism*.
85. R.A. Houston, 'Literacy', in Peter Stearns (ed.), *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, Vol. 5, Detroit, 2001, p393.
86. Korff, 'History of Symbols', p108.
87. It was only shortly after this that the black flag was to replace the red banner as the dominant symbol of the anarchist movements.
88. Knut Hickethier, 'Arbeiterpresse', in Wolfgang Ruppert (ed.), *Die Arbeiter*, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p308. However, it wasn't until 1918 that a plethora of communist periodicals were named after the red flag throughout the world.

89. Kurt Eisner, *Wilhelm Liebknecht: Sein Leben und Wirken*, Berlin, 1900, p59.
90. Korff, 'History of Symbols', p107.
91. See for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. I-IV, New Haven, CT, 1953-65.
92. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, 1992, p169.