Code Red: Colouring the International

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XAVIER T. GUILLAUME, JUHA A. VUORI AND RUNE SAUGMANN ANDERSEN, APR 17 2016

The aim of this short article is to present a programmatic call for the chromatological investigation of security, and more generally to bring the analysis of colour-use to International Relations and beyond.[i] Chromatology, the study of colours in relation to people, can comprise multiple theoretical and methodological research programmes, and can add to the emergent engagement with visualities in the field of security studies (see Andersen et al., 2015a). In this paper we present some of the different analytical rationales behind mobilising a chromatology of security by presenting what colours are and why we should analytically concentrate on colour-uses rather than on what colours mean.

Colours are inherently ambiguous and plural in their social meaning, and they can come about for a variety of reasons. There is therefore a necessity to devise specific analytical and methodological strategies to make an analytics of political colour-use, what we term chromatology, a robust scholarly endeavour.

Matching Colours with Methodologies

We have already deployed three analytics and related methodological tools for this task. First, we have mobilised multimodal social semiotics in order to take the practice of colouring prisoners seriously (see Andersen et al. 2015b). Doing so, we shown how the social structures of Nazi concentration camps were at work and explained how colour–use enacted the dehumanisation and diffuse securitisation of opponents. Indeed, security practices can be read chromatically in order to understand their meaning-making processes, enactments, affordances, and appropriations.

Second, we have mobilised a genealogical analysis in order to demonstrate how the social meaning of the battlefield has evolved in western Europe since the emergence of the modern state (see Guillaume et al. 2016). Doing so, we applied a classical sociological finding – people are what they wear – to the evolution of the colouring of European military uniforms. Since the emergence of the modern state, the use of colour in battlefield uniforms has evolved from highly visible colours to camouflage. This evolution has been intimately tied to the evolution of specific modes of being and action among soldiers, and the related social imaginaries and practices of soldiering. The use of colour in battlefield uniforms, then, has operated to embody the nation, turn the citizen into a soldier, daunt the enemy, and conceal a hunter.

Finally, we have used material semiotics in order to exhibit how national flags have shaped not only social interactions in the international, but the shape of the international itself (Andersen et al. 2016). Doing so, we have shown how flags – objects that can only take on meaning through colours – are both an emblematic picture and a symbolic object. Flags not only represent states, non-state actors, and social and political movements in our most quotidian experience of the international, they are also a specific materialisation of the international. Indeed, political communities have not been included in the system of states without a flag. At the same time, the flag is able to make this abstract system tangible by allowing for acts such as the burning of a flag, stepping on one, dying for a flag, or wrapping the dead in a flag.

As the above examples illustrate, colour-use shapes and participates in social imaginaries that are of critical importance to the international, which is why it needs to be studied systematically as part of an international political

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sociology. In overall terms, we can enter such imaginaries through a three step investigation that becomes more general with every step. First, colours can be a particular visual modality in human communication (Kress, 2011). Second, colour-use can be a part of systems of signification that participate in the creation of meaning in certain fields (Barthes, 1973 [1964]). Finally, colour-use in systems of signification is part of systems of the sensible (Rancière, 2011 [2008]) that modulate what is considered sensible rather than noise, what can be seen, and so on.

Colour, What is it Good for?

Understanding colour-use can further our understanding of security as a system of signification (Barthes, 1973 [1964]) that is not necessarily limited to a delimited set of actors that define – through language and practices – what security is. The chromatological analysis of security as a site, encounter, enactment, or institution provides for the study of visual modalities that are not limited to individual or sequential visual forms or shapes (drawings, photographs, videos, etc.), but that are an inevitable aspect of all material security practices. Such an approach broadens the visual study of security beyond the current visual modalities at the heart of previous visual analyses put forth in security studies (e.g. Campbell and Shapiro, 2007; Hansen, 2011), and more broadly in the field of International Relations.

Indeed, colour-use possesses different constraints and affordances than text or sound (Kress 2010). This makes colour-use a central and efficient semiotic vehicle in many systems of signification that participate in the classification, hierarchisation, and marking of individuals, groups, ideas, values, and so on, into specific symbolic categories (e.g. class, gender, nation, race, or security). Colours can be used both to reinforce, and tone down other dimensions of a system of signification such as security, whether these are linguistic, material, or practical. Indeed, they are constantly used to draw, or divert, our attention to, or from, certain things, and to signify and communicate messages, expectations, and identities. Colour-use is part and parcel of social sorting and moulding.

Central to our argument is that colour is both materially and historically distinct from other vehicles of meaning production – it has different semiotic affordances and can therefore be used to project or mark meaning in different ways than for example speech or images. This also means that colour-use can be researched as an aspect of the enactment and appropriation of security in ways that are different from, but do not exclude, those visual security studies has previously concentrated on. As the visual study of security becomes more established, there is a need to become more nuanced in terms of the visual modalities of security as well.

Investigating colour-use, and the evolution/reconfiguration of meanings attached to colours, enables us to engage in longitudinal and transversal analyses of societal and political connotations of certain phenomena or things that relate to colours. In effect, not only the meanings attached to colours evolve through time, but they also circulate across the symbolic boundaries of multiple political and societal groups. From such a perspective, the examination of colour-use as a part of systems of signification (Barthes, 1973[1964]), systems of the sensible (Rancière, 2011 [2008]), actor networks (Law, 2009), or forms of practice (Bourdieu, 1990) provides windows into societies, institutions (e.g. the police or the military), and their practices (e.g. social sorting or the performance of norms) that pertain to security.

Our intent is not to propose the deciphering of a general semiotics of colour-use, but the examination of particular uses that are at play in certain enactments or sites that pertain to security. We cannot determine the meaning of a particular colour always and everywhere, as colours are continuously used in political communication and meaning-making in a variety of conventional ways, and these conventions are continuously changing. Yet, these conventions and the codifications on which they rely can be detected, and an understanding of how they are interlaced with power and politics is a key element of chromatological analysis. As Michel Pastoureau notes, "colours foremost are conventions, tags, social codes. Their primary function is to distinguish, to classify, to associate, to oppose, to hierarchise" (2010: 69).

Strikingly, and although there has been an increasing interest in the visual study of security, these investigations have largely, and quite paradoxically, remained a-chromatic and have concentrated on the forms, shapes or sequences of images (e.g. . Campbell and Shapiro, 2007; Hansen, 2011). This may be due to the foregrounding of certain semiotic modes (e.g. language) and the backgrounding or "automatisation" of others (Halliday, 1982),

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whereby elements such as colour "appear so normal and natural as to become invisible", or that colour is taken as "ideologically neutral [since] it can be seen to have served a wide range of aesthetic and symbolic purposes" (Gage, 1990: 518). Indeed, in their semiotic treatment of colour, Kress and van Leeuwen (2002: 347; see also van Leeuwen, 2011: ix) note that they pass over colour in their seminal work on *Reading Images* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) in favor of "design".

Yet, political communication is replete with colour and metaphors of colour, whereby scholars engaged in the analysis of politics cannot remain blind to them, or treat colour as "noise" (cf. Rancière, 2009: 24-25). Instead, we argue, security and IR scholars need to include colour as an aspect of dividing the sensible within practices and discourses. Strikingly, colour-use has many practical applications for practitioners of security, as colour is a powerful shorthand in communication (e.g. military and security uniforms), and can be used in functional ways to make something visible (e.g. reflective neon vests), to obscure (e.g. camouflage), to relay complex information efficiently (e.g. maps), to communicate identities (e.g. colour-marked protest movements), and to connect ideas with objects (e.g. corporate identities).

What makes colours a particularly fascinating locus to provide an analytics of security, or the international, is that an analytics of colour-use is "in essence a trans-documentary field of observation" (Pastoureau, 2010: 240). Colours are a social fact; more so, they are a fact of society. They are a socio-technical production, where "the historiography and historical epistemology of colour", as well as "material, political and social historical concerns" are of relevance (Saunders, 2002: 8), resulting from the "entanglements" of science, art, and security (Forsyth, 2014: 128). In other words, studying colours is studying the social (Albers, 2006 [1963]: 52), and as we have demonstrated elsewhere (Andersen et al., 2015b; Guillaume et al., 2016; Andersen et al., 2016), studying the political within security.

Therefore, security studies needs to go beyond its current chromophobia (its avoidance of colour) and see how colour-use operates in the enactment and (re-)appropriation of security. Seen from this perspective, it becomes abundantly clear that studying security, or the international, as a-chromatic, or its colour-uses as accidental or epiphenomenal, is a methodological choice that *acts*, that enacts a certain chromophobia within the social sciences (Aradau and Huysmans, 2014; Batchelor, 2000), a certain aesthetic of colour avoidance. In our work, we are trying to offer some first steps toward a possible visual security studies that takes into account colour-use. This is a move from the visual study of artefacts that communicate or are implicated in security discourses towards the study of security visualities that are present in much of security practice. Indeed, it is time for security studies to recognise the world as visible and colourful, and thus move beyond the chromophobia of the social sciences.

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[i] This article is part of a larger collaboratively written project on colour and security. The order of names, therefore, does not reflect a hierarchy in authorship but represents a collective instead.

About the author:

Xavier T. Guillaume is Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. He specialises in international political and social theory, with a focus on problématiques pertaining to the identity/alterity and

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citizenship/security nexuses. His most recent publications include his first monograph, *International Relations and Identity: A Dialogical Approach* (Routledge, 2011) and a co-edited volume entitled *Citizenship and Security: the Constitution of Political Being* (Routledge, 2013). Xavier has published in numerous journals such as the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Security Dialogue*, *Millennium*, *FQS*, *Japanstudien*, *International Political Sociology*, *Alternatives*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Juha A. Vuori is acting Professor of World Politics at the University of Helsinki, and Adjunct Professor of International Politics at the University of Tampere, both in Finland. His main research focus has been on the critical development of securitization theory through illocutionary logic, semiotics, and the application of the approach to the People's Republic of China. He is the author of *Critical Security and Chinese Politics: The Anti-Falungong Campaign* (Routledge, 2014) and co-author of *A History of the People's Republic of China* (in Finnish, Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press, 2012). He has edited a number of books and published in journals such as *European Journal of International Relations*, *Security Dialogue*, *Surveillance & Society*, *Critical Studies on Security*, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, *Issues & Studies*, and *Politologiske Studier*.

Rune Saugmann Andersen is a post-doc at the University of Tampere, Finland. His interdisciplinary research draws on new media theory, semiotics, and security theory to investigate visual understandings and visual mediation of security. His PhD at the University of Copenhagen explored how new visual media are changing both security politics and scholarship on security, leading to both new security dynamics and new forms of inquiry that challenge text-based understandings of the world and analysis. Currently, Saugmann Andersen is investigating how security is conceptualized in systems employing machine vision in security governance. His work has appeared in *Security Dialogue*, *EJIR*, *Journalism Practice*, *European Journal of Communication* and *JOMEC* as well as numerous edited collections, and can be found at saugmann.tumblr.com and on his Academia.edu page.