

Can Flags 'Speak Security'?

Written by Robert Aston

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Flags are political symbols, inherently linked to collective identities, they do not mean anything in themselves, but are ascribed meaning in a specific intersubjective context. Ideally flags are a unifying emblem for the nation, however in divided societies the flag takes on new meaning, and its presence becomes highly politicised and controversial. As flags embody a community, once they come under threat, it is symbolic of the community itself becoming endangered – and once the survival of an identity is threatened by an existential group, securitising moves by agents may be taken to protect their imagined community, moving 'beyond' the realm of 'normal politics'. Thus, the abstracted ideas embodied in the flag has real world implications, and in this way flags can 'speak security', perhaps more powerfully and emotively than speech acts. Using the 2012 Flag Protests in Belfast as a case study, I hope to show that fragile national identities can become embodied, and even dependent upon this symbol. The Union Jack coming down from Belfast City Hall was perceived as an existential threat to the survival of the Loyalist community within the 'new Northern Ireland' – this threat was amplified by perceived political alienation and the normalisation of security practices within the province. I contend that flags will continue to be a central security concern in Northern Ireland at a grassroots level, and will be a major stumbling block to desecuritisation unless the macrosecuritisation narrative of mutually sectarian hostility can be challenged.

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Security is an essentially contested subject, a social construction with differing and interacting referent objects (Booth 2005). Yet, this does not mean the concept has become entirely subjective; instead security concerns issues of the survival of collective identities (Donnelly 2013). Securitisation occurs when a group of agents believe a credible threat is posed by an existential 'other' which thereby permits the use of 'extraordinary measures', to bring their actions outside the realm of 'normal politics' (Peoples, and Vaughan-Williams 2014). The Copenhagen School has championed this widening of the security agenda by forwarding constructivist and poststructuralist scholarship, heavily focused on the role of 'speech acts' (normally by elites) in constructing the threat to a level which would legitimate securitisation. Indeed, Wæver's theory of language holds that 'utterances are equivalent to actions', and the subsequent discourse has substantial real-world implications on securitising actions (*ibid* p.42). In other words, anything can be spoken of as a 'threat to security', and if this stance becomes salient among the public, then reactionary and exceptional measures may be taken in order to alleviate the threat. Yet, the role of visual symbolism in constructing security threats has been under-examined (Hansen 2011). I would argue that visuals with dense symbolic meaning, such as flags, can in fact 'speak security'. Visuals undoubtedly have an impact on the public imagination, along with speech-acts they help the audience frame the discourse of securitisation – indeed visuals can 'speak security' more immediately and in more emotional, and abstracted ways than speech acts (*ibid*). Images function as communicative acts – impacting audiences, and securitising consequences follow from this fact; the visual thus is a powerful tool to mobilise people (Williams 2014). The image of the drowned child awash on a British shoreline which made the front page of the Daily Mail, and the screaming Vietnamese girl who was a victim of Napalm bombing had more of an influence on the public opinion of securitisation processes concerning the current refugee crisis or the Vietnam War respectively, than any speech given by a politician. It is important to remember that the visual cannot 'speak' by itself however, instead a voice is projected onto the image to create meaning –and visuals attributed to having some of the densest symbolic meanings and competing interpretations are national flags.

Durkheimian theory posits the flag is a totem; a condensed object, invested with magical powers – rich in symbolic and political connotations (Eriksen 2007). The flag acts to signify a shared identity, exclusive norms, and indeed shape the nature of society by creating a 'metaphoric kin group' for the nation (*ibid* 12). Nationalism is beyond geography, the community has to be imagined because it is conceived to 'stretch beyond immediate experience', creating a 'mystic bond', which seeps into every everyday consciousness- flags embody this bond, and are important signifiers of identity (Billig 1995: 74). Within the state a flag is ideally supposed to provide security by being raised to a status of an 'icon', and shaping the collective visual memory around the imagined community of the nation (Anderson 2006); however, in divided societies, flags have the potential to become symbols of provocation, and result in insecurity (Eriksen 2007). This is not achieved by the image itself, but the symbolism attached to the flag is given such power through, often differing, interpretations of history. The Union Jack is open to a host of competing interpretations; for Unionists the flag may conjure images of the Plantations, the victorious Williamite Wars, and the bloody legacy of The Troubles – thus, the suffering toil and achievement of their forefathers is embodied by the flag, it is their 'legacy'. Conversely, Irish Nationalists may view the same flag as a symbol of imperialist occupation, and as a threatening or taunting emblem (Halliday and Ferguson 2015). Thus, for both sides of the divide, the Union Jack is intertwined with highly emotional connotations, which have substantial consequences for securitisation processes.

Security perceptions are intrinsically informed by our identities – we normally only fear harm from 'the other' (Donnelly 2013). Security does not necessarily concern the survival of the state, but can also concern the survival of group identities (*ibid*). In insecure nations, such as Northern Ireland, instead of uniting, flags will bring divisions to the fore – the more the identity is challenged the more intensely the flag is used to mark territory or taunt (Eriksen 2007). As banal nationalist theory postulates its overuse is typical of insecurity – illustrating an ostentatious need by the citizens to give material evidence to a postulated imagined community (Billig 1995). In Belfast, where ideologically divided citizens live in close proximity, the politics of flag waving often breeds conflict, producing social, cultural and political distance (Mastors and Drumhillier 2015). Indeed, Unionism has been defined against the Nationalist 'other', and vice-versa, the difference being naturalised by forms of habit of thought, and entrenched through segregated housing, schooling and employment. This divide rooted in group identity has been a considerable stumbling block to the normalisation of politics and everyday life. Flags especially have long been a securitising issue, indeed, issues over flags have arisen in every decade since partition; for example 1964 saw riots ensue when a Republican candidate in West Belfast, Liam McMillan, placed a tricolour through the window of his office – the police had to intervene before a young Ian Paisley could lead a mob to tear it down (Nolan et al 2014) (Boyd 1969). A more recent example of flags

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'speaking security', came in December 2012, when nationalist councillors alongside the Alliance party formed a majority to change the policy on the Union Flag, to only being flown on 18 designated days from the City Hall, instead of 365. This decision was met with outrage by thousands of Loyalists – City Hall was stormed, dozens of police officers injured, an Alliance office was burned out, and politicians from across the divide received death threats (Nolan et al 2014). Momentum eventually died down, but relatively peaceful protests continue to this day. It is interesting that the securitisation model can help us understand the intersubjective logic of the loyalist protestors.

Images, such as flags, are not free standing entities, but are instead constructed through verbal and written discourse by 'securitising actors' (Hansen 2011). The Union Jack has been bestowed with much reverence by Unionist politicians, Orange Order, Paramilitaries etc – but as the flag is the most potent symbol of unionist identity, it was easier for emotion to enter the discourse from the grassroots (*ibid*). Security is constructed by the threat-urgency model, by emphasising the threat to their way of life the major Unionist parties started a panic amongst loyalists, in the days before the vote distributing 40,000 leaflets proclaiming 'we can't let them make Belfast a cold house for Unionists' (Nolan et al 2014). Further, the visual significance of losing the flag on the hallmark building accentuated the immediacy and emotiveness, more so than speech acts ever could – indeed Butler claims the visual represents a kind of promise that the event will continue, thus the removal of the flag was the most potent symbol imaginable that Loyalism, as they had known it, was no longer welcome in the 'New Northern Ireland' (Hansen 2011) (Intercomm and Byrne 2013). Importantly, it was not the act of flag removal which sparked the securitising response from members of the loyalist community, instead it was the establishment of the security threats. Just as the WMD's actual existence was less important than establishing the security stakes to the British and American public – the removal of the flag was less important than the proposed security threat to the collective identity which its absence symbolised (Donnelly 2013). Sinn Féin's brand of Republicanism became a tangible threat to the 'we identity' of Ulster Loyalism. That is to say, for Protestants the removal of the flag was a very real threat to the security of their imagined community – not in itself, but as far as they perceived it to be symptomatic of wider trends of encroachment on their culture; as one protestor stated "It's not just the flag, they want to take everything British away" (McDonald 2013). The protestors viewed this existential danger urgent enough to break from normal politics, and engage in violent actions. The DUP / UUP may have formally created the narrative, but once the protests turned violent the sense of threat and urgency was upheld by firestone securitising agents such as Willie Frazer and Jamie Bryson (Nolan et al 2014). Framed as 'culture war', the call to protest was successful in mobilising disaffected working-class loyalists from across the province for a substantial period, and carries on to this day (Halliday & Ferguson 2015). The flag alone thus does not constitute securitisation per se, but the actors can frame the issue around the flag, as an existential threat to the collective identity, resulting in flags 'speaking security'.

Ironically, once the flag was removed the Union jack's display across the province significantly increased, a form of symbolic resistance from an identity under threat (Nolan et al 2014). Flags will continue to 'speak security' in such ways in NI, as long as politics is defined by identities in the region. John Hume famously stated 'you can't eat a flag', despite this truth, issues of identity continue to trump socioeconomic concerns as a source of division in Northern Ireland today (Davenport 2012). An idea inherent in the securitisation literature is that agents construct identities of a threatened self and threatening 'other' (Donnelly 2013). This is particularly evident in Northern Ireland, as Shirlow notes 'we are trapped in politics where culture is more important than poverty,' (Gilmore 2013). The province is largely divided into Unionist or Nationalist areas, and little progress towards substantial integration has been made. Yes, the flag is a potent symbol which contributes to securitisation practices, but it could only do so in the context of unresolved sectarian tensions. The loyalist community have largely perceived the peace-process since 1998 in zero-sum terms, as a sham, and given their loss of relative power to Nationalists, and recent restrictions on Orange Order parades and other symbols– a culture of political disaffection and isolationism was allowed to grow in the build up to the protests (Nolan et al 2014). Indeed, this macrosecuritisation narrative is one of a long battle against encroaching Sinn Féin and nationalist gains, which represent an existential threat to Loyalism's collective survival. It is within this security logic that the removal of the flag, and other perceived grievances intertwine with 'multifaceted structures of meaning' (Donnelly 2013: 48). It was ultimately believed that their immediate response could be significant in helping to 'draw a line', in expressing their dedication to their culture, and disdain for the power-sharing executive (Nolan et al 2014: 8). Therefore the flag speaks security in part of a much larger security dynamic; and we must hope to tackle such feelings of political alienation if we are to 'normalise' the province.

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Normalisation and the hope that flags stop speaking security appears distant, however. Indeed, in Northern Ireland the everydayness and the institutionalisation of security means that security threats are taken for granted: bureaucracies have been established to deal with emblems and marches (but in doing so act to normalise the securitised divide), segregated schooling continues, areas are 'flagged', 12th July Celebrations are inherently exclusionary etc. This has meant that securitisation has become internalised, and agents no longer have to speak security – flags therefore have become institutionalised as a referent object (Notion adapted from Donnelly 2013). It is unsurprising that the Hass talks proved unable to find a means of compromising on issues so deeply ingrained (Mitchell 2014). The upshot of this being that sources of insecurity have become so embedded and normalised into the nature of society, they have been internalised to the point where the security no longer needs to be uttered, and in this context desecuritisation remains elusive (Donnelly 2013). Therefore, with flags, speaking security becomes the norm rather than the exception, they make up 'little security nothings' in Hysman's words (which occasionally explode into bigger matters) (Donnelly 2013: 54). Consequently flags now come to reside in the localised nature of everyday situations, security thus emerges from the normal – which would explain the continued regularity of low-level confrontations and disputes.

Flags, as the most potent symbol of collective community, undoubtedly speaks security. Images can transgress linguistic boundaries, and a symbol as potent as a flag is often more effective than any speech act in securitisation. Flags do not divide by themselves, but are instead symbolic of deep-seated divisions – accordingly flags hold the power to be utilised as a means to speak security. The Northern Irish example illustrates that flags spoke security as the Loyalist community perceived an existential threat to its very existence – the protest was not so much about the flag's removal itself: but in response to a wider challenge of Britishness. Loyalist flag protestors viewed themselves as defenders of protestant culture, which was endangered in the 'new Northern Ireland,' as one protestor put it: 'these protests are about us remembering who we are.' The removal of the flag was symptomatic of the insecurity surrounding the loyalist identity. Further, many believed their representatives had abandoned them, thus they actively responded to the perceived existential threat, by securitising measures beyond 'normal politics'. The Loyalist community believed themselves to be fighting for their very survival, as a community against a perceived Republican agenda, and a growing sentiment that a 'shared future' will not accommodate traditional loyalism. For many the violence reduced any legitimacy of their actions – yet it appears they genuinely feel isolated and marginalised, and the flag as a symbol was able to speak security, with the protests becoming a visible manifestation of the disaffection with the new system. The flag ultimately became a securitised symbol of wider discontent among the community, however it is also so deeply entrenched into the 'everydayness' of the culture it is difficult to escape flag-waving and the insecurities which result. If we ever hope to move towards normalisation and integration we must solve the macrosecuritisation issues of unsettled sectarian tensions and loyalist political alienation to make sure both sides are willing to compromise in the name of a shared future – until then, flags will have a frustratingly loud voice in Northern Ireland.

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Date written: February 2016*