

National Symbols across Time and Space

Preliminary Remarks

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National symbols never leave one indifferent: they either appeal or repeal. It is therefore very important to know how symbols appeal to people and to whom, by whom and under what circumstances they appeal. This special issue provides some relevant examples that illustrate the place of national symbols at various times and in different countries.

The starting point for all of the authors of the issue was the relation between symbols and the national. What does the expression *national symbol* mean? What are the characteristics of national symbols? These were the questions we asked the authors.

The term *symbol* is often used in various disciplines, and it therefore has an uncertain character, although its meaning is highly regarded by those who use them. Each discipline proposes its own definition of what symbols actually are and its own insight into the place they have in life. This issue assumes a pluridisciplinary perspective. It includes various approaches used in area studies, history, literature, and sociolinguistics. In order to unify all of these different discussions on national symbols, we would like to start these presentations with a very general definition of the term *symbol* from a well-known dictionary: “something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance” (Merriam-Webster). Each contributor to this issue presents his or her own understanding of what a national symbol is, based on the material analysed.

As will be seen, very different elements are analysed here: from concrete, material symbols that always represent a nation such as flags and coat of arms, to intangible and rather abstract symbols such as the local language, images, historical events, and links to historical narratives. Among these abstract or intangible symbols, different types of relationships can be distinguished. On the one hand, facts and events found in the historical or literary past of a nation may be reconstructed as symbols; on the other hand, practices of everyday life of each nation may acquire a symbolic role (like the language).

Symbols play an important role in shaping national identity. They can provide form to the invisible and describe the intangible, constituting in effect a masked pattern of culture. They can unify a group of people and mark belonging to one group, and they can also divide people because the attitude to the same facts, events, or features (such as language) may be very different.

Who chooses objects, facts, and events from our everyday life and transforms them into symbols? Several articles in this issue seek to answer this question. Moreover, although symbols are often understood as abstract universals (Piercy 2013), raising the question of whether national symbols reflect universal patterns in symbolic systems, it emerges from the analysis in this issue that symbols are usually interpreted in relation to the particular features of different

nations and various national discourses that vary over time. It would be interesting to discover which factors influence this different perception of the same elements in different societies and how our own perception may change when influenced by others. This may be a question for further investigation.

What place do symbols have in a lifeworld characterized by modernisation and migration? Modernity is often seen as a crossroads of two opposing tendencies: the weakening of the nation and the national due to cultural globalization, together with the strengthening of new forms of nationalism utilizing both new and renewed symbols. The desire to preserve national belonging when moving to another country goes hand by hand with the aspiration to integrate into a new society. There is also a dimension of historical time. Can it be said that attitudes towards symbols do not change over the centuries? There are many examples of resurrected national symbols, sometimes with a new (often more radical) meaning. Does the relationship to them become stronger? Do they lose their status of stable elements anchored to reality and become flexible, like the modern world in which people conserve the most important symbols, acquire new ones, create other symbols, or simply reject everything in an attempt to live in a world without symbols? Is it possible to live without symbols? Or perhaps the idea itself of “a world without symbols” can become a symbol in itself.