

# Flag Waving a.k.a. the Sliding of the Signifier

*Denne tekst er en redigeret version af en opgave, Tone O. Nielsen skrev som studerende på UCLA, Los Angeles, december 2001.*

**This paper attempts to read the current waving of flags in the U.S. from a Lacanian perspective. It is to be regarded as my attempt to come to terms with psychoanalysis as an approach that, similarly to a cultural materialist one, excludes metaphysical explanations of the mind and the world, but seems to allow you to pose the question to your subject matter in a somewhat different manner. In this paper, I will thus refrain from viewing the current waving of flags as given texts in a broader cultural-political history and zoom in how the flags mean and what aim their wavers take in this act.**

## Scene 1

I am in Denmark, my native country, for the summer. I have been gone for a whole year, studying in the U.S. It is my nephew's birthday. Friends and family are gathered around the dining table, which is beautifully decorated with small paper Danish flags mounted on wooden sticks. You can buy these in every Danish grocery store. They come in plastic bags and are usually found in the aisle with birthday cake candles and gift wrapping paper. I can't remember a single birthday party without these flags.

The Danish flag reappears at the end of my stay, more specifically in Copenhagen Airport, where I am waiting for my flight back to Los Angeles. The Departure Terminal is quiet, almost empty. Not many people are traveling after the September 11 attacks. But in the Arrivals Terminal, excited parents, lovers, and friends are gathering around the sliding doors of the Customs Zone. Some of them are carrying Danish flags, which you can buy in the kiosk located in the far end of the Arrivals Terminal in case you forgot to bring some. Others are not. But the ones who are all start waving their flags frantically

as their loved one walks through the sliding doors. To me this is customary – I have in fact waved such a flag in the airport myself on a number of occasions – but I cannot help noticing the surprised and wondering look on the faces of the people who are just setting foot in Denmark for the first time.

## Scene 2

I have just arrived at LAX (Los Angeles International Airport). The airport is even more quiet than the Copenhagen one. I get into a shuttle. Someone has attached an American flag to its antenna. On the freeway back to my house in Silverlake, I notice hundreds of cars with similar flags attached to them. In the morning, my jet lag gets me up way to early and I notice that my neighbors have hung an American flag out their window. This surprises me, as I believed them to be “progressive liberals.” Driving around Los Angeles during the next couple of days, I see flags everywhere, hanging from wealthy mansions as well as run-down apartment buildings. And the flags on every tenth car or so that I pass keep astonishing me. I speak to friends and colleagues about it: “The flag on the brand new SUV driven by a Chicana UCLA student or the ‘United We Stand’ window sticker on the Mercedes of a white female executive director can't possibly mean the same as the flag on the pick-up truck of a Mexican gardener or the bumper sticker on the Cadillac of a gay couple,” I say. Or rather, the flag cannot signify the same for these diversified drivers. When did the flag ever do anything for the rights of gays or illegal immigrants?

## Scene 3

The U.S. has just bombed strategic targets in Afghanistan for the first time. The state of mourning in the country has been replaced by a state of warfare and with that the waving of the Stars and Stripes seems to take on new meaning. I am getting truly frustrated and want to voice my protest in a direct fashion. I contemplate hang-

ing a white handkerchief from the antenna of my Datsun, wanting to articulate my disbelief in the significance of the nation-state flag as well as well as the military solution to the “terrorist problem” (which has become the official excuse for the capitalist war aggression against the Middle East to once and for all consolidate neo-liberalism), but am scared of the reactions I might get.

I end up buying a prefabricated blue peace flag with a white dove on it at an anti-war demonstration downtown. During the next couple of days while driving around, I have people giving me the finger or pulling up to me, wanting to know where I got the flag. But what really surprises me is how my own emotions toward the flag change on a daily basis, ranging from pride, to insecurity, to inadequacy, depending on which neighborhood I move through. After a while, the peace flag doesn't do it for me anymore. I still drive around with it, but am presently thinking of adding to it the white handkerchief and the Stars and Stripes. Three flags waving side by side from my elastic antenna. I wonder how they will contaminate each other.

## The sign as the thing-not-itself

The three scenes described above should not be considered a return to empiricism despite their observatory nature. Rather, they reveal a number of operations, which Jacques Lacan has theorized in his work. Common to all the scenes are that they have been constructed *retroactively*. My looking back at each incident and articulating them in retrospect corresponds to

guage. I cannot perceive of the world outside of language, in fact, language structures my relation to the world. In contrast to the classical philosophical notion of an originary moment which is followed by language, Lacan thus argues that the Symbolic order, that is, language and the entire realm of culture, is the primary structure and that nothing in fact exists until it is named. For Lacan, this means that the sign can never be the *thing-in-itself*; it is an illusion to think that “the signifier corresponds or answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever.”(1) To illustrate his point, Lacan introduces “0” as the signifier for this originary moment of nothingness. “0” being “the concept under which no object falls,”(2) it is a signifier without a signified. But in the same moment that the idea of the originary moment of “nothingness” is rendered visible by the signifier “0”, it becomes “something” - it becomes the first unit in the world and thus has to be represented as “1”. In other words, the signifier “0” slides under the bar and becomes signified for “1”, “1” now being the signifier for the signified “nothing.” The sign for the first originary moment is therefore not  $\frac{1}{0}$  as the Saussurian sign model would claim(3) (in which the sign means what it says and thus represents the *thing-in-itself*), but  $\frac{1}{1}$  (in which the sign does not mean what it says and is thus the *thing-not-identical-to-itself*). This sliding of the “0” under the bar creates an incessant sliding in the sense

**“There are no symbolic representations right now for the things the world really needs – equality and justice and humanity and solidarity and intelligence. The red flag is too blooded by history; the peace sign is a retro fashion accessory.”**

*Katha Pollitt, “Put Out No Flags,” in The Nation, October 8, 2001.*

Lacan's notion of reality being constructed after the fact of language, which is to say that there is no reality outside of or prior to lan-

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sure, who saw the linguistic sign as a fixed unity of, “not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image”(4) and asserted that meaning is produced from the differences between these positive sign units, Lacan thus states that it is the signifier itself that precedes and generates the signified. Hence, he reverses Saussure's sign model from  $\frac{S}{s}$  (signified over signifier) to  $\frac{s}{S}$  placing the signifier over the signified. What is crucial in this algorithm of Lacan's is that the bar separating signifier and signified becomes “a barrier resisting [stable] signification”(5) and not, as in Saussure, the “link between thought and sound.”(6) As Lacan writes: “Only the relationship of one signifier to another signifier engenders the relationship of signifier to signified”(7) and “no signification can be sustained except in its reference to another signification.”(8)

**“What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a language, to use it in order to signify something quite other than what it says. This function of speech is more worth pointing out than that of ‘disguising the thought’ (more often than not indefinable) of the subject; it is no less than the function of indicating the place of the subject in the search for the true.”**

*Jacques Lacan, “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud,” in Écrits: A Selection, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, p. 155. The essay was written in 1957.*

Building upon Lacan and Saussure, Jacques Derrida refers to this sliding in the signifying chain of language as *différance*; a term that “welds together difference [différence] and deferral [différer] and thus refers to a configuration of spatial and temporal difference together.”(9) The term accounts for the playing movement of language by which differences are produced through the opposition of signifiers in the signifying chain. The meanings of these signifiers, however, are always deferred, since these signifiers are only defined by other signifiers, which again need definitions by other signifiers, ad infinitum(10). *Différance* thus also refers to the sign's deferral of presence, meaning that the sign represents the presence of univocal meaning, truth, or origin only in their absence. Derrida thus breaks with the classical notion of the sign *supplanting* presence and talks of it instead as a “trace,”(11) arguing that the operation of supplementation is not a continuation of the presence of meaning, truth, or origin in the representation, but a break(12). All we ever have of meaning or truth are traces, which sug-

gest all the non-present meanings of the signifiers, all the possible *différance* of the signifier.

Lacan's bar or Derrida's *différance* are clearly operating in scene 1, although I am unable to see it at the time. Despite my observation of the wondering looks of the faces of people setting foot in Denmark for the first time, I am caught up in the fantasy of believing that the Danish flag is a stable sign of Danish “coziness” and “joviality” with no nationalistic connotations, whose meaning I am able to arrest and stop from disseminating further because of my Danish extraction. Hence, I am supposing that the signifier is somehow present in me, given to me at birth – and that it has a transcendental meaning, which I can decode because of my familiarity with Danish culture. It is only when I re-enter the U.S. that this fanta-

sy becomes apparent to me. All of a sudden I find myself in the place of the people in Copenhagen Airport, whose faces spelt surprise when confronted with the waving of the Danish flag. Seeing the American flag appearing in a number of different contexts and in the hands of a diversified set of wavers, it becomes impossible for me to grasp its meaning. Is the waving of the flag by my “progressive liberal” neighbors a sign of their belief in retribution or have they just turned Republican in their older age? Does the illegal Mexican gardener hope to become a legal part of the American community when sticking the Stars and Stripes to the rooftop of his truck or does he think he already is? Has the gay couple forgotten that they are not politically represented and that some officials said “their kind” was to blame for the tragedy of September 11? I realize that the flag no longer mean what it says and that context does not stop its *différance*. Context, then, is also indeterminable in the sense that context is but another signifier. And if my reading of the American flag as “patriotic,” “Republican,” and “interventionist” can no