

Displaying Flags in the Interwar Years: Practices, Emotions, and Conflicts in the Visual Appropriation of Space (1918–1939)

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The interwar period saw the continued expansion of public flag and emblem displays, a process that had begun in the late nineteenth century. After the First World War, this phenomenon was reshaped by the redefinition of relations between victors and vanquished, geopolitical reordering, the multiplication of diplomatic exchanges, international events, the rise of fascism and communism, the massification of political engagement, and the intensification of cross-border circulation. However, as suggested by the works recently brought together by P. Lagadec and L. Le Gall in two special issues titled “What is a flag?”, published in 2023 by *20 & 21. Revue d’histoire* and *Ethnologie française*, historical scholarship benefits from approaching flags through their materiality, their uses, and their effects. From this perspective, we propose to extend the reflection on flag display as practices through which actors made themselves visible in public space, constructed collective identities (Firth, 1973; Castoriadis, 1975; Billig, 2019), and generated or intensified identity-based tensions (Lapille, 2023; Jeličić, 2024). In this respect, the interwar years provide particularly fertile ground for such an investigation, since the tensions of the 1920s and 1930s repeatedly created occasions to hoist, impose, contest, or tear down emblems (Cossart, 2001).

Flags, pennants, banners, draperies, and other visual materials broadly serving nationalist or other political agendas formed part of a symbolic décor whose agonistic dimension needs to be restored and analysed in relation to the specific contexts in which these objects were deployed. As markers of identity and allegiance, such elements did not simply signal forms of belonging. They also elicited attachment and rejection, pride, humiliation, irritation, and enthusiasm. In doing so, they invested space with affective meanings and could become sources of symbolic, even physical, conflict.

This workshop seeks to explore the evocative, affective, and conflictual potential of flag displays across settings ranging from the local to the international, as expressed through colours associated with states, nationalist movements, political organizations, and related actors (Dommanget, 1967; Elsbach, 2019). It opens onto the study of how political space was appropriated in diplomatic, national, and colonial contexts (Virmani, 1999, 2008; Hernández Navarro, 2017). This means paying attention not only to the expected sites of power and diplomacy, but also to borderlands, streets, sites of celebration, mourning, or mobilization, sporting events, and other public gatherings. While national flags are central to this reflection, proposals dealing with broader dispositifs involving pennants, garlands, streamers, or other visual forms in the colours of organizations conveying a political message are equally welcome.

Flag displays should therefore be understood not as mere ornament, but as practices of marking, hierarchizing, and claiming space (Behrenbeck, Nützenadel, 2000). They make forms of belonging visible, seek to naturalize presences, and at times challenge those of others. In this sense, they formed part of broader processes of territorialization and emotionalization of politics (Wirtz, 2017; Ory, 2020). Flagged space did not simply reflect existing power relations; it also helped to produce them, render them perceptible, and dramatize them (Connolly, 2024). To display flags was to arouse affects, invite adherence, and provoke irritation, enthusiasm, pride, resentment, or fear. It could also become the object of acceptance or resignation, processes that likewise deserve attention. The arrangement of flags and emblems helped to frame perception, orient behaviour, reinforce senses of cohesion, or, conversely, generate feelings of domination or oppression (Ory, 2000; Schatz, Lavine, 2007; Rossol, 2010).

To understand these dynamics more fully, it may be necessary to examine the design, production, marketing, circulation, procurement, and concrete uses of these objects and materials, while also taking into account the degree of spontaneity or improvisation involved in particular settings. From this perspective, flag displays can be approached as part of a material history that also contributes to a visual and, ultimately, cultural history of power.

The organizers therefore invite proposals that examine, without geographical restriction, the political, diplomatic, social, and cultural implications of flag displays in the interwar period. Contributions may also address the specific forms this phenomenon took during these years while considering territorial disparities and the

factors that shaped them. Moreover, close consideration may be given to the ways in which flag display transformed the environment, especially the urban environment, and consequently the “mental landscape” of the populations moving through these spaces.

Particular attention will be paid to papers addressing the relationship between flag displays, identity formation, and political emotions. Possible themes include, but are not limited to:

- the intended effects of flag displays and/or the ways in which they were perceived by contemporaries;
- the diplomatic uses of flags and emblems during state visits, official receptions, conferences, and within international organizations;
- flag displays as practices of marking border spaces or asserting sovereignty, especially in contested, newly integrated, or colonial territories;
- the militant and partisan uses of flags, emblems, and pennants during political gatherings, as well as the occasions, locations, and conditions of their deployment;
- the appropriation and political acceptance of emblems, as well as gestures of contestation, desecration, or removal;
- the political and legal conflicts, as well as police intervention, prompted by flag displays.

The workshop does not privilege any single methodological approach and welcomes proposals drawing on a variety of perspectives, including comparative, transnational, and microhistorical ones. Particular attention will be given to contributions based on the analysis of visual sources, as well as on testimonies that make it possible to reconstruct the perception and reception of flag displays.

Those interested are invited to complete the following form by **June 7, 2026**:
<https://framaforms.org/pavoiser-dans-lentre-deux-guerres-1775744795>

The working languages of the workshop will be French and English. In order to facilitate discussion and the publication of the workshop proceedings, participants will be asked to submit a draft paper in English three weeks before the event.

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