University of Groningen

Making peace visible

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Published in:
Peace & Change

DOI:
[10.1111/pech.12387](https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12387)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Vuori, J., Guillaume, X., & Andersen, R. (2020). Making peace visible: Colors in visual peace research. *Peace & Change*, 45(1), 55-77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12387>

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MAKING PEACE VISIBLE: COLORS IN VISUAL PEACE RESEARCH

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Peace is not an absence, but rather a visibly identifiable set of norms. This visualization can take place through internationally recognized signs such as the white flag and the blue helmet. These representations of norms are united in their ability to be distinguished from similar objects or signs through their use of colors. The identificatory use of color avoids confusion between parties embroiled in a conflict, making an organization or envoy stand out and creating the expectation that they are encompassed by the specific norms of warfare, which these colors make visible. Through establishing such “dumb signs” of peace, as Grotius put it, the colors of peace have, we argue, played a notable part in establishing customary international law. The aim of our contribution is to offer an illustrative chromatological analysis of how peace and its norms are made visible through objects and symbols which are not connected with peace beyond their coloring (e.g., emblems, flags, helmets, or war-zone vehicles). We show how certain colors, in their situated use, come to both symbolize and enact peace in terms of international politics.

MAKING PEACE VISIBLE: COLORS IN VISUAL PEACE RESEARCH

Paying attention to colors shows how peace is a set of international norms. As such, peace is an often elusive and difficult concept that

This article is part of a larger collaborative project on color and security partly funded by the Kone Foundation, see references below. The order of names, therefore, does not reflect a hierarchy in authorship but represent a collective author instead. Feel free to scramble the order of names as long as you get the DOI right! Earlier versions of the article were presented at the ISA conference in Atlanta 2016 and the PEC17 conference in Barcelona 2017. We would like to thank the editors of the special issue and the two anonymous referees for their insightful comments. All remaining errors and fallacies remain our own.

PEACE & CHANGE, Vol. 45, No. 1, January 2020
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tends to be defined in the negative as the absence of its opposites, namely war and violence.² Rather than being elusive, however, we argue that peace is clearly expressed through a *visibly identifiable* set of norms developed during conflicts, generalized to be recognizable beyond immediate conflict and communicated through the use of colors. This visualization can take place with internationally recognized signs, such as the white flag or the UN's blue helmet. These representations of norms of peace are united in their ability to be distinguished from similar "offensive" objects—for example, helmets or military vehicles—or "parochial" signs—for example, emblems or flags—through their use of colors. This highly visible and identificatory use of color aims at avoiding confusion between parties embroiled in a conflict. They make an organization, or its envoys stand out and be seen as requiring protection by the norms these colors make visible and, thus, make possible. At the same time, they produce the expectation—legally and among the international community, at least—that such envoys abide by the prescriptions mandated by the same norms, and that to an extent they, and the objects and symbols they carry with them, are enacting peace.

The chromatological analysis that follows shows how peace and its norms are made visible from an international political perspective. Chromatology is the study of color in relation to people, and its international political variation is thus the study of color in relation to the international political community. This article explores color relations through the objects and symbols that are commonly connected to the enactment of peace. In order to understand how peace becomes a part of our constructed visibilities, we engage with two basic questions: How is color used to symbolize peace, and how is color used to enact peace? This enhances our understanding of the interconnections of visibility and politics, and shows how the use of color is not only about design,³ but about the interpellation and production of social and political spaces.

In this article, we engage both the symbolic and performative dimensions of color to read the ambiguities of its presence or absence, and the use and transformation of the use of color to invoke and enact peace. We make an analytical distinction between the broader performativity of color use as connoting overarching ideas of peace and peacefulness, and the immediate, illocutionary⁴ performativity (i.e., acts done in making a promise or waiving a white flag) through which color use performs or interpellates a declaration of peace and

peacefulness. The article begins with an introduction to the main ideas of chromatology and its relevance for a distinction of issues in international politics, followed by a discussion of how peace is symbolized and done with colors. Next, we examine the use of color in signaling peace as it is practiced by the United Nations (UN) through the use of the blue helmet. Beyond the UN, we examine how color enacts peace in the use of the white flag. Our conclusions on how color can be used to signal and enact peace draw the article to a close.

A CHROMATOLOGY OF PEACE

Chromatology, the study of color use in relation to people, comprises of multiple theoretical and methodological analytics⁵ and can add to the emergent engagement with visualities both in peace research and security studies.⁶ How color is used allows for entry points into numerous social, political, and international political practices and processes of meaning making. This is made possible by the role colors play in a great number of “systems of signification”⁷ (i.e., consistencies of meaning among groups of signs) whether those concern the world of fashion, security, or the highway code. The chromatological analysis of both security and peace as sites, encounters, enactments, or institutions provides for the study of visual modalities (i.e., ways and manners in which something occurs, is expressed, performed, or accomplished). Such modalities are not limited to individual or sequential visual forms or shapes (drawings, photographs, videos, and so on), but are an inevitable aspect of all material practices.⁸ This approach broadens the visual study of peace and security beyond representative objects (e.g., images) that have been at the heart of much of previous visual analysis.⁹

Colors are an important locus of research for studying societal issues through their visual expressions because, through the significations attached to them, colors (can be used to) do things in a performative sense. Colors, for instance, are able to provide meaning to objects that would not otherwise have clear meanings based on their sole shape or the forms drawn on them (e.g., flags¹⁰). Furthermore, colors are a genealogical indicator of evolution in modes of being and action in specific institutions (e.g., the role of military uniforms on the battlefield¹¹). Importantly, the study of color use enables us to understand the affordances (i.e., properties that determine how things can be used) of systems of signification, and how these interact with

practices such as security or peace. Indeed, the constraints and affordances of color differ from those of text or sound.¹² Central to our argument is that color 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 makes color a central and efficient semiotic vehicle in many systems of signification (such as those operative on the battlefield) that participate in the classification, hierarchization, and marking of individuals, groups, ideas, values, and so on, into specific symbolic categories (e.g., peace or security).

Colors can also be used both to reinforce and to tune down other dimensions of a system of signification, whether these are linguistic, material, or practical. This also means that color use can be researched as an aspect of the signaling of peace in ways that are different from, but do not exclude, the aspects that visual studies of peace and security have previously concentrated on.¹³ Here, the engagement has mainly been with how to depict or represent peace, particularly in photography, and thus not with how peace is a visual practice, something that is in part “done” visually. While we argue that colors interpellate and thus are active in constituting subjects, Möller’s¹⁴ analysis highlights the agency of spectators vis-à-vis the images of peace or violence they are confronted with. This, perhaps, speaks to conditions of spectatorship that are already stabilized and secure, whereas confronting colors in their daily use in insecure environments highlights their constitutive powers.

As we have demonstrated elsewhere,¹⁵ it is possible to approach color use from a multitude of angles without a necessity of coalescing into a unified “theory of color.” From the viewpoint of peace research, it makes sense to concentrate on the logics in the use of color.¹⁶ Our intent therefore is not to posit a general theory of the visibility of peace from a chromatological perspective, but rather to provide an analysis illustrative of how situated uses of color in communicating and enacting peace can be a starting point for studying peace. There are too many conventions of color use to make any kind of overarching determination of their meaning, which is why our focus here is particularly on the international political use and meaning of colors in relation to peace.

Indeed, it is possible to discern more limited and specialized color uses that follow detectable conventions. Such codifications can be

analyzed in order to understand how they are interlaced with power and politics that concern peace and also to gauge the extent and limits of a visual community or culture. While we posit that for the international political community, peace is a set of visually enacted norms, the signification attached to these same colors can be very different, for instance, for the local communities subjected to peace operations. Poignantly, after the numerous scandals involving peacekeepers, it is not difficult to imagine that to some communities blue helmets may signal the general presence of danger or specific threats such as sexual violence, rather than produce the expectation of peace in terms of international relations.¹⁷ This is why detailed case studies need to be based on social semiotics that allows for exploring the never completely identical meanings attached to colors by specific groups, and also why we highlight below how peace, and its colors, can also be contested.

Just as colors can have multiple interpretations, so the meanings and uses of color have their own histories. As color historian Michel Pastoureau notes, “colors foremost are conventions, tags, social codes. Their primary function is to distinguish, to classify, to associate, to oppose, to hierarchize.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the codes or conventions that structure such distinction, classification, association, opposition, and hierarchization are not static. The evolution and reconfiguration of color meanings allow for longitudinal and transversal analyses of societal and political connotations of a number of phenomena, with peace being one among them. The meanings attached to colors not only evolve through time, but also both vary and circulate across the symbolic boundaries of political and societal groups or institutions and their related visual cultures. Indeed, while symbols that stand for peace can remain the same, how peace is understood changes.¹⁹

Analyzing the color use embroiled in discourses and enactive practices of peace reveals peace as a multi-dimensional meaning-making practice that combines analytics of the international, the political, and the sociological²⁰ with the chromatological. To begin, we consider three properties of color. First, color can be a particular visual modality in human communication.²¹ In light of peace research, colors invite us to think of the political function, performance, and subversion of the colors of peace and their material or symbolic expression on objects, such as helmets, flags, or vehicles. Second, color use can be a part of systems of signification that participate in meaning making in social fields like the military, police, or peacekeeping.²² In these ways,

the coloration of peace helps to reconstruct the system of signification of peace in (post)conflict situations by interweaving it into other systems of signification such as war and conflict. This allows for weighing the connotative strength of systems of signification in regard to each other in specific sites, moments, encounters, and so on.

Finally, color use in systems of signification is part of what Rancière²³ terms systems of the sensible: systems that modulate what is considered sensible rather than noise, what can be seen rather than remain unseen, and so on. Analyzing color use in relation to peace enables us to see how specific affordances may interpellate audiences (those enmeshed in a conflict or more broadly those concerned with peace) and become a political modality beyond the norms and regulations enshrined in international humanitarian law. Interpellation here refers to a process by which individuals are constituted as particular kinds of subjects via “a quotidian practice, submitted to a precise ritual,” and through such a process are subjected to an ideology.²⁴ In other words, interpellation is the instance when norms, rules, or more broadly speaking an ideology is acknowledged by individuals to whom these rules or norms aim to apply. By being acknowledged, such norms, rules, and ideologies constitute individuals as subjects bounded by them. Therefore, succinctly put, interpellation invites individuals into particular subject positions.

DOING PEACE WITH COLORS

Colors do political work in the world; they are performative and, as we shall see below, have given rise to very specific, legally codified meanings and identities connected to certain situations. This means that colors in general can operate as performative in Butler's²⁵ sense of the term and occasionally can have effects via what speech act theory calls illocutionary force²⁶ (i.e., the capacity of doing things with “words” or other units of meaning). Some uses of color may even have “conventional consequences”²⁷: to wear a blue helmet redefines a soldier's function from a modality of destruction to a modality of protection in a zone of conflict. Here, a soldier is outside the realm of war while remaining liminal to it; a *peacekeeper* or a *peacebuilder* is not necessarily outside all of the logics of war.²⁸ In this way, the blue helmet makes the “peacekeeper innovation”²⁹ visible. Yet, as with other kinds of speech acts, such color acts may fail or be used to deceive. For example, when peacekeepers commit crimes and abuse,

they betray the norms such as neutrality and impartiality that their colors represent.³⁰

This chromatological approach sets a clear task for peace research.³¹ If peace research is interested in the nonviolent coexistence of people, it should be concerned with the meeting of color use and peace, be that in the use of color to enact peace,³² or to symbolize peace, or to stoke fear and proclaim threats to peace. As the focus of this contribution is peace studies rather than security or war studies, we concentrate on the former two: How is color used to symbolize and to enact peace?

To undertake an analysis of how color is used in connection to a social phenomenon such as peace is to engage both the socio-material and socio-technological. Colors are social and part of society. They are also technologies that depend on material factors (e.g., pigment availability and technologies of display) that give colors a distinguishable and specific semiotic affordance compared to other vehicles of meaning making.³³ Human “visibilities” are constructed,³⁴ and color is part and parcel of our visibilities. In this sense, we do not see things as “having” a color, but rather as being actively “colored.” This dimension of chromatology opens an analytical window into practices of drawing and diverting attention and suggesting certain meanings. It also shows how they may interpellate and enact social or political norms. The approach we advocate here conceives of color as *constitutive* of meaning, identity, and situations, as a societal operation that is both learned and constantly reconfigured.

SYMBOLIC COLOR USE: A COLOR OF/FOR PEACE?

Color has for a long time been prominent in what is commonly referred to in different cultures and societies as symbols³⁵ of peace: the white dove, the green olive branch, the “peace sign,” the rainbow flag, the white poppy, and so on. More often than not, such signs and symbols are “mobile” in the sense that they can be carried on clothes, placed on vehicles,³⁶ and even when stationary, they tend to be non-permanent as in stickers and stencils in urban street art. This mobile quality, the different connotations the drawing/shape of the symbol can take, and how a symbol is colored constitute the material semiotic quality of colors: They give meaning to shapes and contours that would otherwise be either meaningless or ambiguously meaningful without their elements of color (think for instance about flags and

how many possess similar contours undecipherable outside of their coloring³⁷).

Some of the most widely recognized and used “Western” symbols of peace have long histories of use. The use of an olive branch as a symbol of peace presumably dates to the 5th century B.C. and is thus perhaps one of the oldest identifiable symbols of peace, even older than the white dove in the Judaic tradition.³⁸ While it is difficult if not impossible to trace the origins of such symbols, for some more recent peace symbols, the origins are quite readily detectable. For example, the “peace symbol” was designed by Gerald Holtom in 1958 as a visual sign that stood for nuclear disarmament.³⁹ Yet even here, as the symbol began to circulate, it eventually lost both its specific meaning of disarmament and the tree of life that had been the inspirations of its creator. Indeed, the sign stands for all kinds of cultural forms of dissent and is often accompanied with rainbow colors. Just as the uses of such symbols have changed, so has the meaning of peace.⁴⁰ This may have a consequence for considering whether or not there is a color of peace at all, and whether this is an adequate analytical question in the first place.

It is beyond the scope of this article to foray into the specific historical or religious connotations of such symbols of peace,⁴¹ but what is relevant for our present contribution is that such symbols have often been connoted in relations to colors: the white and red poppy’s symbolism and the political controversies related to them in the UK and Ireland after the First World War⁴² is a case in point. The poppy and the color red, for instance, is laden with differentiated meanings across political communities as it is related, from the perspective of Republican Irish, to “British rule and the Orange movement in Ulster.”⁴³ A first important point is to note the absence of a universal or widely acknowledged symbolic color of peace or peacefulness, one that would travel across cultural contexts, or could be invoked beyond its inscription in specific legal settings (such as the white flag or the UN blue which are inscribed in the UN legal system or in international humanitarian law as described below). Such an absence may not be an issue per se. As Dietrich⁴⁴ suggests, the search for a single definition of peace is not only fruitless, but even harmful as it is an attempt to universalize diverse practices. Attempts at defining “one peace,” as he terms it, may thus be “part of a larger universalist mode of thinking that in its totality rests upon disrespectful and thus unpeaceful basic assumptions.”⁴⁵ Dietrich’s observation can also be read as an

invitation to move away from an analysis of “what is the color of peace” to “what are the color-uses of/for peace.” How can we analyze color-uses in the discourses, practices, and material uses of symbols or objects that implicate peace?

Beyond culturally or contextually specific polysemic symbols (i.e., symbols with multiple possible interpretations of meaning) and their attachment to specific colors, this contribution concentrates on two internationally recognized colors—(light/UN) blue and white—that have become associated with peace through the United Nations system and international humanitarian law. As we will see, both institutions have brought in rules or norms regarding the colors of/for peace whether in the context of peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations or of the laws of war. We discuss how UN blue has become a color of peace as part of a process of meaning making, while we consider how “white” can be seen as a color interpellating or calling upon a situation of peace when it is displayed, thus providing it with an illocutionary force.

Universalism and the Symbolic Color of Peace: UN Blue

The history of the UN blue is, largely, accidental. It does not result from a clear and extensive reflection on different ideas of color and their symbolic meaning. Rather, what has become the associated color of the UN emerged through the mundane moments behind the production of the UN as an institution. The badge for the delegates of the 1945 San Francisco United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO), where the UN Charter was drafted and signed, became the prototype for the UN color and logo. The badge was a “design created by members of the Presentation Branch of the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in April 1945, in response to a request for a button design for the San Francisco Conference.”⁴⁶ Beyond that basic description, the coloration of peace is contested. One of the designers, Oliver Lincoln Lundquist, has talked about the coloring in a newspaper report: “The distinctive blue in the design, Mr. Lundquist explained, was ‘the opposite of red, the war color.’ He continued, ‘It was a gray blue, a little different than the modern United Nations flag.’”⁴⁷ In opposition to Lundquist’s description, Donal McLaughlin, Chief of Graphics at the OSS Presentation Branch and the designer of the UN emblem, describes the production of the color like this: “We mixed a color for the field, a smoky blue

not found in any member nation's flag, and christened it Stettinius Blue in honor of the head of our delegation," and describes how a badge "substituting flame red instead of smoky blue was struck for identifying members of the Press."⁴⁸

It is indeed striking that a member of the US Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the CIA, took red to unambiguously be "the war color." It is also worth noting that blue has an interesting historical connotation in the west. Michel Pastoureau, in his small book dedicated to the color blue, notes that blue is not an aggressive, nor a transgressive color.⁴⁹ It is therefore unsurprising that many international organizations, from the League of Nations to the United Nations, and the Council of Europe to the European Union, adorn such a color. Indeed, blue may have become "an international color in charge of promoting peace and concord between people ... Blue has become the most peaceful, the most neutral of all colors. Even the color white seems to possess a greater, more precise and focused symbolic power."⁵⁰ Pastoureau and Simmonet even advance the idea that since blue has become such a unifying symbol, it may in the end have lost its symbolic power.⁵¹

As such, the specific color used in the UN emblem has stabilized only with time. The emblem was converted into a flag in 1947, again in a rather *ad hoc* manner rather than through a meticulously planned process. Indeed, the primary intention of an identifiable UN color was connected to what we term, and explain in the next section, the visual interpellation function of color rather than its symbolic connotation: "an unofficial flag was designed by the Secretariat," so that the Commission of Investigation concerning Greek Frontier Incidents "might enjoy the protection of and be identified by a neutral symbol while travelling through troubled areas or sitting at meetings under the jurisdiction of several countries."⁵² This original function is echoed in the status of UN officials as noncombatants, still customarily associated with the UN blue in war zones.⁵³

Although there were more than 100 alternative designs on display at the UN Headquarters in 1947, "the Secretary-General feels that the design already used bearing the United Nations emblem, but without encircling words, possesses the essential requirements of simplicity and dignity to a greater extent than any other design which has been submitted."⁵⁴ Accordingly, the Secretary-General proposed to the General Assembly (GA) a resolution that would designate the flag of the UN composed of the emblem earlier adopted "printed at the centre of a

background of light blue”⁵⁵ without further specifying the color. The GA adopted the resolution with the emblem as “centred on a light blue ground.”⁵⁶ In the 1952 “UN flag code and regulations,” the color is at once unspecified and treated as already unproblematic and known, as the denomination “light blue” is here replaced by “United Nations blue.”⁵⁷ Only the UN’s Dag Hammarskjöld Library webpage dedicated to the history of the flag and emblem specifies the “light blue” ground color as PMS 279.^{58,59}

This distinctive UN blue, now visually associated with UN peace keepers’ “blue helmets” or “blue berets,” generally stands in as the operational color of peace. Its presence on the ground indicates that those wearing it are *de facto* in contrast to the usual color palettes and troops on modern battlefields.⁶⁰ It has come to symbolize the difference between UN-related troops and “regular” troops, as the UN possesses an “unequalled position as an ‘authoritative expositor of international values.’ The Blue Berets [therefore] symbolize these values. An attack on a UN force deployed to uphold international values is different from an attack on other multinational forces without this moral clout.”⁶¹ As such, UN blue symbolizes a stance in a conflict, and it marks soldiers as being outside of it with a purpose to maintain or establish peace. This means that UN blue can, as is implicit in the dimension of *peacebuilding*, also perform the function of a visual (“speech”) act to interpellate specific norms.

UN blue may interpellate a commitment to the rules and regulations that concern battlefields and the laws of war by communicating specific expectations in an encounter with this particularly colored soldier on the battlefield. In this way, the color enforces rather than blurs the lines embedded in the rules and regulations of battlefields which are otherwise structured by the predominance of camouflage colors.⁶² Yet, beyond their particularly colored headdress, peacekeeping or peacebuilding soldiers are still wearing standard issue uniforms, often camouflaged, and are also usually armed. This also potentially interpellates encountering parties that when the rules of engagement prescribe and allow, the UN blue soldiers are also able to resort to the (lethal) use of force should the blue interpellation of peace fail. This points to the performative use of colors on the battlefield or in war zones as a quasi-legal visual “speech” act of peace, an issue we now turn to by concentrating on the other accepted color of peace: white.

PERFORMATIVE COLOR USE: COLORS DOING PEACE

Beyond the postwar establishment of the UN and the development of peacekeeping forces, color use on the battlefield has enjoyed a customary and even legal status for some time now. Some uses, such as the white flag, are recognized in international customary law⁶³ or are even codified in international conventions, such as the 1907 Hague Convention.⁶⁴ This usage above all points to how the battlefield is a juridical and social space that has evolved through time and how it, even if only formally codified in modern times, has long been saturated with quasi-juridical color acts.⁶⁵ Battlefields, key markers for regular warfare, have always been replete with visual and phonic symbols to mark a warrior's (later soldiers') identity (one has only to think about Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's description of the fall of Troy in the Book 2 of the *Aeneid*), enabling coordinated actions within a unit and between different units and arms, whether in the forms of pennants, flags, drums, helmets, trumpets, insignias, or crests.

The current international legal norms of the battlefield as a juridical space emerged with the modern European state, synchronously with regular armies. Color use has been integral to this development, both in relation to formal requirements in regard to the delimitation of battlefields and parties—the *jus in bello*—and in relation to informal social norms governing and giving meaning to war. Colors, through their semiotic affordance of being present everywhere, and easily applicable to cloth or painted on vehicles, have long been an important semiotic marker for differentiating between different armies, soldiers, and civilians, between ranks and arms, as well as for communicating messages between army units, particularly on the high seas. By designating peaceful intentions and spaces, some colors are by custom or by law part of the “series of understandings about [the battlefield's] purpose and its rules” structuring “what it means to do battle.”⁶⁶ More currently, color-uses of fighting forces on the battlefield have become quite fluid, and the interpellations of the norms of warring have become loosened.⁶⁷ Yet, negative peace, in Galtung's⁶⁸ sense, is still represented on the battlefield by a set of colorful practices recognized in customary international law and enshrined in the first set of Hague Conventions.

Indeed, the white flag has emerged as a legal marker of peacefulness or civility on the battlefield. Yet, it had been used long before it became recognized as customary law and was eventually formally

codified. It remains an explicit or an implicit interpellation of peace. For instance, UN peacekeeping vehicles are often painted in white, giving birth to the familiar blue helmet and white vehicle combination that we witness in many countries where peacekeeping operations take place. This is especially relevant as it points to the role of color in establishing a signal that interpellates those who see it to act in a way consistent with the expectations the appearance of particular colors in a specific space set forth.

The White Flag of Surrender or Parley

Flags are an essential part of the international system.⁶⁹ They convey meaning by formalizing and limiting the identification of states, international organizations, and such in a way that is unambiguous and immediately legible. Another important feature of flags is that they do not merely convey meaning, but they can be used to “do” things, in a relatively similar manner as words can be used to do. A flag is a basic example of a visual telegraphic system that can be used to convey linguistic messages beyond the range of hearing.⁷⁰ But most important to this study is how the presence of an object, such as a flag, produces a “message” in itself and does the same thing as a verbal declaration. Flags can be visual interpellations, or to say it differently, they can be visual “speech” acts. Flags can enact ownership, surrendering, and identity—or, as we argue here, peace.

Flags can be considered “condensed symbols” that have become the identity and boundary makers *par excellence* of modern European states and, more particularly, of modern European nation-states.⁷¹ While most flags would possess a multivocality,⁷² by the sheer fact that there are several meanings attached to their hues depending on time and contexts, their modern (national) incarnations avoid such ambiguity.⁷³ In effect, the emergence of modern flags was intimately, yet not exclusively, linked to military developments, warring, and seafaring, which necessitated the settlement of specific declinations of what a flag looked like.⁷⁴ For flags to have such uses, they must belong to a system of visibility.⁷⁵ The white flag participates in this system by meaning and doing something that has become “common sense”⁷⁶ in the international system.

The white flag was not alone in signaling intentions. For example, a red flag was used in naval and land encounters to signal that no quarter would be given.⁷⁷ The Mexican military flew a red flag during

the siege of Alamo to indicate, as it was recognized by the besieged themselves, that no quarter will be given. This was a practice that was well recognized in the 18th century. For example, flying a red flag was understood to mean “the intention to suspend temporarily peaceful means of conflict resolution in favor of brute force,” before it shifted its meaning through a series of mariners’ mutinies.⁷⁸ These “were so successful in colonizing the meaning of the red flag that the [British] navy dropped it entirely from its official *Signal-book for the Ships of War* in 1799, thus surrendering its powerful symbolism to the global labor movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”⁷⁹

While the convention of flying the red flag to signal hostile intentions came to an end in this way, the white flag endured. This may partly be due to the even longer historical use of a piece of white cloth to signal peacefulness in warzones or during conflict than its uses in naval engagements in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Indeed, one of the first mentions of the role of the white flag is in Tacitus’ *Histories* (from 109 AD), in the story of how the soldiers from Vitelli surrendered after the battle of Bedriacum. Soon after the Vitellian officers capitulated, foot soldiers followed their lead and “displayed white bands and olive branches prominently from the walls,”⁸⁰ upon which a cease-fire followed. Despite this early connection between the white flag and olive branches as signs of surrender or truce,⁸¹ there is no universal historical or cultural uniformity in the specific use of a white flag. To give a recent example, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, or so-called Taliban regime, used a plain white flag as its symbol between 1996 and 1997 before the Shahadah was incorporated into it in 2001.⁸² While this use gives some ground to Pastoureau’s assertion that the color white tends to be almost universally associated with purity, divine light, and innocence,⁸³ the current international, customary, and legal understanding of the white flag in situations of conflict is clearly set in the backdrop of the European modern states system.

Grotius’ work on the rights of war and peace is enlightening here. In 1625, he points to an already existing tradition of indicating peacefulness with a white flag: “Among us the hanging out a white Flag is a tacit Sign of demanding a Parley, and shall be as obligatory, *as if expressed by Words*” (our emphasis).⁸⁴ These forms of gesture to express intentions in war – in this case the desire for truce, surrender, or negotiation – belong to what he calls “dumb Signs” that are sufficiently “significant through Custom” to be located in his work in the

chapter on tacit signs, under the section “Of some dumb Signs, to which Use has given a Signification.”⁸⁵ Grotius highlights the recognized character of the white flag as a key component of what was not yet known as customary international law. Among such “dumb signs” for signaling peace, we also find now-forgotten ones, such as when “the ancient *Germans*, and others in imitation of them, presented grass to the Conqueror”⁸⁶ as a sign of postbattle peacefulness.

Grotius points here to what our analysis of color use invites: Beyond a process of meaning making, colors may also have a performative force; they are a visual interpellation. Grotius notes that the agency of such signs lies in that “Consent may be declared otherwise than by Words and Letters.”⁸⁷ This brings him close to describing white flag display as something that is today understood as a (visual) speech act. It also points to how the white cloth was among those “dumb signs” which made up the early recognized practices that later became customary international law. Not only significant for its ability to declare peace, the white flag can in this way be seen as co-constitutive of customary international law. The color use practice of displaying a white cloth as a performative practice of enacting peace inspired Grotius’ description of how not only natural laws but also those established through custom can be thought to bind states even in war. The recognition of customary “dumb signs” marks the beginning of customary law. Furthermore, through Bull’s reading of Grotius, the idea that customs among a group of units can bind these units becomes foundational to his idea of an international society, a distinct society of states.⁸⁸ Rather than epiphenomena, colors are at the heart of interstate relations.

But what does the white flag ultimately interpellate? We argue that the white flag is a move toward negative peace in Galtung’s sense. When it appears on the battlefield, as a white flag or a white, possibly, military vehicle or even a ship⁸⁹ adorning either the UN flag or a red cross, crescent or crystal,⁹⁰ or worn on the armband of personnel,⁹¹ the color white interpellates a cessation of violence. We argue that it goes beyond being “no more than a signal,”⁹² whether it comes to opening negotiations on the battlefield or to identifying specific buildings, vehicles and medical personnel⁹³ off limits for violent engagement. In the case of medical personnel and objects, the distinctiveness of such emblems adorning a white background reflects “an underlying idea [that] has...remained unchanged: the distinctive emblem is a visible sign of the neutral status and the protection granted by international

humanitarian law to medical personnel and objects.”⁹⁴ Here again elements of shape and color go hand in hand; this is further illustrated by some international humanitarian law protecting against the misuse of the “distinctive emblem and the arms of Switzerland...as the sign most closely resembling [the distinctive emblem]”.⁹⁵ Indeed, shapes and colors can be mixed up (intentionally).

The prohibitions relative to the misuse, disguise, or subversion of the distinctive emblem actually are evidence of the performative dimension of the white flag. As it appears on the battlefield, it interpellates a nonaction, such as holding fire or not militarily engaging with an individual or a vehicle. Regardless of whether this nonaction is followed does not necessarily matter. What matters is the fact that there is a prohibition of any violation of the principle those adorning the emblem should not be engaged in a hostile manner. Furthermore, whether for international or noninternational armed conflicts, there is a customary international law rule against the “improper use of the white flag of truce,” a rule contained in “numerous military manuals. Violations of this rule constitute an offence under the legislation of many States. This rule is also supported by official statements and other practices.”⁹⁶ Beyond the possible violations of customary international law, the act of perfidy that is associated with the abuse of the white flag in times of conflict may lead to more direct forms of punishment and retribution. In effect, the potentially legitimate use of the white flag may not be regarded as genuine, if it has been tainted by acts of perfidy in a conflict by one of the parties (as in the justification offered by U.S. troops for their violations of the Iraqi troops’ use of the white flag during the Persian Gulf War).⁹⁷

Not only the white flag, but also the white color scheme has such authority that it can become tempting to re-appropriate it. This point is illustrated by how the use of unmarked white-colored vehicles by other actors than humanitarian organizations has been contested by nongovernmental actors engaged in peacebuilding operations.⁹⁸ Indeed, various forms of social capital, norms, and even worldviews have been institutionalized into colors such as those of the UN, which is why their use by a military organization like NATO is viewed as problematic, and perhaps why NATO has elected to use them in their KFOR operations, which, to NATO participants if not to others, constitute peacekeeping efforts. Colors can be used to both signal and claim institutionalized symbolic capital in particular contexts. At the same time, the use of humanitarian colors by military organizations

blurs the lines between military and civilian actors and puts civilians into jeopardy.⁹⁹

Together, the above examples show how the expectation of a specific mode of being or mode of action following an agreed upon and established norm is reflective of the performative force of the white flag, and how the use of the color white creates this expectation in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Adorning a specific color of peace in a space regulated by international norms interpellates a specific encounter between the parties at hand. Such an encounter invites the international community *to see* a specific political space that is transformed by the presence of that color. A UN blue helmet or beret, a white UN peacekeeping vehicle, or a white flag all interpellate a specific political space that transforms the modalities by which military encounters or civil–military relations are, or should be, enacted. This is also why the use of such colors by other actors, such as NATO, is seen as problematic.

Color use in relation to peace can operate both symbolically and performatively. Color use can be used to identify certain institutions or individuals as abiding by certain sets of norms, as is the case with the color of the UN in warzones. Color can also be used more directly to perform an act, as in the use of the white flag as a signal for parley or surrender. Such uses have both been codified into international conventions and formed the basis for customary international law, where states in the society of states are bound by the rules customarily observed, such as the “dumb sign” of displaying a white cloth to declare surrender or parley.

Indeed, color and its uses are not a politically irrelevant aspect of “design” or innocent “aesthetics.” Rather, color use can be part and parcel of political meaning making. This is particularly poignant in the role the white flag has played in the establishment of customary international law, which shows how color can be involved in the constitution of a peaceful society of states as such.

Crucially, colors are already embroiled in the questions that pre-occupy the larger scholarly and practitioner fields of peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Paying greater attention to what color does can help both and, at the same time, enhance our understanding of what they do. For example, The UN has considered developing “Green Helmets”

to tackle environmental conflicts that stem from “extreme weather events linked to climate change.”¹⁰⁰ This initiative to handle and combat the adverse effects of climate change has been put forth in 1998,¹⁰¹ ¹⁰² and again in 2019,¹⁰³ but has continuously failed to materialize in practice. A chromatological perspective reveals how the symbolic addition of green—which is traditionally linked to the military when it comes to uniforms, helmets, or vehicles—to the colors of peace would participate in blurring the lines between the social fields of security and development.¹⁰⁴ That such a noble mission keeps failing should caution practitioners that color use can deliver an ambiguous political message even when clarity is the goal.

NOTES

1. Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace and Peace Research,” in *Journal of Peace Research* 6, No. 3 (1969): 167–191.
2. Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, “Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour,” in *Visual Communication* 1, No. 3 (2002): 343–368.
3. John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
4. For a programmatic presentation, see Rune S. Andersen, Juha A. Vuori and Xavier Guillaume, “Chromatology of Security: Introducing Colours to Visual Security Studies,” in *Security Dialogue* 46, No. 5 (2015): 440–457.
5. See Rune S. Andersen, Juha A. Vuori, and Can E. Mutlu, “Visuality,” in *Critical Security Methods: New Frameworks for Analysis*, eds. Claudia Aradau, Jef Huysmans, Andrew Neal, and Nadine Voelkner (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 85–117; Juha A. Vuori, and Rune S. Andersen, ed., *Visual Security Studies: Sights and Spectacles of Insecurity and War* (London: Routledge, 2018); Roland Bleiker, ed., *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018).
6. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, [1964] 1973).
7. Carey Jewitt, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011).
8. See Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, “Documenting International Relations: Documentary Film and the Creative Arrangement of Perceptibility,” in *International Studies Perspectives* 16, No. 3 (2013): 229–245; Gabi Schlag and Axel Heck, “Securitizing Images: The Female Body and the War in Afghanistan,” in *European Journal of International Relations* 19, No. 4 (2013): 891–913; Andersen et al., “Visuality.”
9. Rune S. Andersen, Xavier Guillaume, and Juha A. Vuori, “Flags,” in *Making Things International 2: Catalysts and Reactions*, ed. Mark B. Salter (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2016), 137–152.

10. Xavier Guillaume, Rune S. Andersen, and Juha A. Vuori, "Paint it Black: Colours and the Social Meaning of the Battlefield," in *European Journal of International Relations* 22, No. 1 (2016): 49–71.
11. Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
12. Frank Möller, *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship, and the Politics of Violence* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
13. Möller, *Visual Peace*; Frank Möller, "Leonardo's Security: The Participant Witness in a Time of Invisibility," in *Visual Security Studies: Sights and Spectacles of Insecurity and War*, eds. Juha A. Vuori and Rune S. Andersen (London: Routledge, 2018), 133–149; see also, Frank Möller and David S. Shim, "Visions of Peace in International Relations," in *International Studies Perspectives*, 20, No. 3 (2019): 246–264.
14. Andersen et al., "Chromatology of Security."
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, bilingual edition, ed., GEM Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 22.
16. See, for instance, Olivera Simić, "Does the Presence of Women Really Matter? Towards Combating Male Sexual Violence in Peacekeeping Operations," in *International Peacekeeping* 17, No. 2 (2010): 188–199; Paula Donovan, "JISB Interview: Immunity, Sexual Scandals and Peacekeeping," in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, No. 3 (2015): 408–417.
17. Michel Pastoureau, *Les couleurs de nos souvenirs* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 69; see also Galen Minah, "Colour as Idea: The Conceptual Basis for using Colour in Architecture and Urban Design," in *Colour: Design & Creativity* 2, No. 3 (2008): 1–9.
18. Peggy Rosenthal, "How on Earth does an Olive Branch Mean Peace?" in *Peace & Change* 19, No. 2 (1994): 165–179; 177–178.
19. See Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology*, eds. Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–14.
20. Gunther Kress, "What is a Mode?," in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, ed. Carey Jewitt (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 54–67.
21. Barthes, *Elements*.
22. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, [2008] 2011).
23. Louis Althusser, *Sur la Reproduction* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 226, note 116. Ideas of causality can be eased here by introducing an element of uncertainty through Judith Butler's realization that interpellation "cites" rather than "does" the work of hailing the subject as subject. Judith Butler, 'Excitable Speech'. *A Politics of the Performative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).
24. Butler, 'Excitable Speech.'
25. Austin, *How to do things*; for visual security, see Rune S. Andersen, *Remediating Security. A Semiotic Framework for Analyzing How Video Speaks Security* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen), chap.13.

26. Marina Sbisa, "How to Read Austin," in *Pragmatics* 17, No. 3 (2007): 461–473.
27. See note 17.
28. W. Andy Knight, *A Changing United Nations: Multilateral Evolution and the Quest for Global Governance* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000).
29. Kate Grady, "Peacekeepers: A Threat to Impartiality," in *International Peacekeeping* 17, No. 2 (2010): 215–228.
30. This article is part of an international political sociology of color-use we have been developing over the past years. See Andersen et al., "Chromatology of Security"; Guillaume et al., "Paint it Black"; Andersen et al., "Flags"; Xavier T. Guillaume, Juha A. Vuori, and Rune S. Andersen, "Making Norms Visible: Police Uniforms and the Social Meaning of Policing," in *Visual Security Studies: Sights and Spectacles of Insecurity and War*, eds. Juha A. Vuori, and Rune A. Andersen (London: Routledge, 2018), 150–170.
31. Galtung, "Violence, peace and peace research," 167.
32. MODE, "Affordance," in *Glossary of Multimodal Terms*, ed. Diane Mavers. <http://multimodalityglossary.wordpress.com/affordance/>. Accessed April 6, 2015.
33. John Rajchman, *Philosophical Events: Essays of the 80s* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).
34. The term symbol has an unhelpful double meaning. While its everyday language meaning is straightforward, "symbol" has another meaning in the semiotic theory on which we build. Here, symbolic signification is signification that works through a convention between signifier (material artefact) and signified (meaning or concept). In this logic, most if not all political color-use would be symbolic (excluding perhaps those uses that mimic naturally occurring colors, such as red and blood). Charles S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Semiotics: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Robert E. Innis (London: Hutchinson, 1985 [1987–1910]), 1–23.
35. Andrew Rigby, "A Peace Symbol's Origins," in *Peace Review* 10, No. 3 (1998): 475–479; 476.
36. Andersen et al., "Flags," 137–142.
37. Rosenthal, "How on Earth."
38. Rigby, "A Peace Symbol's," 476–477.
39. Rosenthal, "How on Earth."
40. Rosenthal, "How on Earth"; Rigby, "A Peace Symbol's."
41. Jennifer Iles, "In remembrance: The Flanders poppy," in *Mortality* 13, No. 3 (2008): 201–221.
42. Iles, "In remembrance," 208.
43. Wolfgang Dietrich, "Farewell to the One Peace," in *Peace Review* 14, No. 1 (2002): 49–55.
44. Dietrich, "Farewell," 51.
45. Steven Heller, "Oliver Lincoln Lundquist, Architect and Industrial Designer, Dies at 92," *The New York Times* (2009). <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/world/04lundquist.html>. Accessed March 7, 2016.
46. Heller, "Oliver Lincoln Lundquist."

47. Donal McLaughlin, *Origin of the Emblem and Other Recollections of the 1945 U.N. Conference* (Garrett Park, MD: Donal McLaughlin, 1995), 5.
48. Michel Pastoureau, *Bleu. Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 159.
49. Pastoureau, *Bleu*, 159.
50. Michel Pastoureau, Dominique Simonnet, *Le petit livre des couleurs* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 25.
51. UN Secretary-General, *A Flag for the United Nations* (New York, NY: United Nations, 1947), 1.
52. ICRC, Customary IHL – Rule 156. Definition of War Crimes. https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule156. Accessed March 7, 2016.
53. UN Secretary-General, *A Flag*, 1.
54. *Ibid.*, 2.
55. United Nation, *Nintety-sixth Plenary Meeting* (New York, NY: United Nations, 1947); United Nations, *Resolutions adopted on the reports of the Sixth Committee* (New York, NY: United Nations, 1947).
56. United Nations, *United Nations flag code* (New York, NY: United Nations, 1967).
57. PMS refers to the Pantone Matching System, a corporate standardization of colors to enable cross-industry collaboration, which is often used to “fix” the color definition of a product, a flag, or on anything that can be colored.
58. Department of Public Information, Dag Hammarskjöld Library, “UN Flag and Emblem,” *Dag Hammarskjöld Library – Map Library*. <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/maplib/flag.htm>. Accessed March 4, 2016.
59. Guillaume et al., “Paint it Black”.
60. Kjell Skjelsbaek, “UN Peacekeeping: Expectations, Limitations and Results: Forty Years of Mixed Experience,” in *The United Nations and Peacekeeping. Results, Limitations and Prospects: The Lessons of 40 Years of Experience*, eds. Indarjit Rikhye and Kjell Skjelsbaek (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 52–67.
61. Guillaume et al., “Paint it Black”.
62. ICRC, Customary IHL – Rule 58. Improper Use of the White Flag of Truce, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule58 [Accessed November 9, 2017].
63. Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague IV); October 18, 1907. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague04.asp. Accessed November 9, 2017; art. 23 and 33.
64. Guillaume et al., “Paint it Black”.
65. Frederic Mégret, “War and the Vanishing Battlefield,” in *Loyola University of Chicago International Law Review* 9, No. 1 (2011): 131–155; 133.
66. Guillaume et al., “Paint it Black.”
67. Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.”
68. Hylland Eriksen & Jenkins (eds), *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America* (London: Routledge, 2007), Andersen et al., “Flags.”
69. Interestingly, the lines in the “peace symbol” represent the semaphores of N and D that stood for nuclear disarmament in Holtom’s design. Rigby, “A Peace Symbol’s”.

70. Gabriella Elgenius, "The Origin of European National Flags," in *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America*, eds. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, and Richard Jenkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 14–30; Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Some Questions about Flags," in *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America*, eds. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, and Richard Jenkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 1–13; 3.

71. Hylland Eriksen, "Some questions," 7.

72. Ibid., 5.

73. Elgenius, "The Origin".

74. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 99.

75. Ibid., 102.

76. See, for instance, about the red flag at sea, Niklas Frykman, "Connections between Mutinies in European Navies," in *International Review of Social History* 58, special issue (2013), 105–107; about the red flag on land, Richard Bruce Widders, "'This Is A Cruel Truth, But I Cannot Omit It': The Origin and Effect of Mexico's No Quarter Policy in the Texas Revolution," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 120, No. 4 (2017), 420–421, 426, 436, 439.

77. Frykman, "Connections between Mutinies", 105, 107.

78. Ibid.

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80. Rosenthal, "How on Earth."

81. https://fotw.info/flags/af_talib.html

82. Pastoureau and Simmonet, *Le petit livre*, 57.

83. Hugo Grotius, *The rights of war and peace* (Indianapolis, Ind: Liberty Fund, 2005), 1636; see also Pastoureau and Simmonet, *Le petit livre*, 49.

84. Grotius, *The Rights of War*, 1636.

85. Ibid., 1633.

86. Ibid.

87. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1977), 27.

88. Wolff Heintschel von Heinegg, "The Law of Armed Conflict at Sea," in *The Handbook of International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Dieter Fleck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2nd ed.), 561.

89. Jann K. Kleffner, "Protection of the Wounded, Sick, and Shipwrecked," in *The Handbook of International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Dieter Fleck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2nd ed.), 358–365.

90. Heintschel von Heinegg, "The law of armed conflict at sea", 569.

91. Christopher Greenwood, "Scope of Application of Humanitarian Law", in *The Handbook of International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Dieter Fleck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2nd ed.), 63.

92. Jann K. Kleffner, "Protection of the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked," 326.

93. Jann K. Kleffner, "Protection of the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked," 358. The same rules can apply to cultural property, the distinctive emblem of which is "the form of a shield, pointed below, per saltire blue and white," see Roger

O'Keefe, "Protection of Cultural Property," in *The Handbook of International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Dieter Fleck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2nd ed.), 471–472.

94. *Ibid.*, 364.

95. Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, *Customary International Humanitarian Law. Volume I: Rules* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205–206.

96. See, Gabriel Palmer-Fernández, "White Flags on the Road to Basra: Surrendering Soldiers in the Persian Gulf War," in *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32, No. 2 (2001): 143–156.

97. Alexandra Gheciu, "Divided Partners: The Challenges of NATO-NGO Cooperation in Peacebuilding Operations," in *Global Governance* 17, No. 1 (2011), 95–113.

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