

Who Is Your Black Flag Freeing? The Futility of Flags and Labels

One of my favorite things about my company is the diversity of opinion. We have liberals. We have conservatives. We have the non-political and the activists. We also have more than our fair share of people who think we'd be better off with no politics or state at all. I'm one of them.

I can easily tell some of my anarchist coworkers by the black flags on their desks. I inherited one of these black flags from a former developer, and I treat it with reverence. I do go back and forth, though, on whether it should be on my workstation.

As far as I see it, what I mean to signal with that black flag is that I don't believe in violent power or rulers. What I believe is that people ought to be free to live their lives without coercion from others, with consent in all their interactions.

That's a good thing. But there are still a few problems with having a flag (or a bumper sticker, or a yard sign, or any kind of public ideological self-label):

1. **Who cares what I think?**
2. **Flags don't carry positive messages nearly as well as I think.**
3. **Flags have a lot of baggage.**
4. **Flags are a trap.**
5. **Flags free no one.**

Having that flag there solves none of those problems.

1. Who cares what I think? *It's just a bit arrogant of me to think that anyone wants to have my politics shoved in their face whenever they visit my desk.*

2. Flags don't carry positive messages nearly as well as I think. *When has anyone ever seen a black flag and thought "you know what, I do believe that government isn't necessary anymore!" Flags communicate labels, not ideas. My black flag might suggest I "am" an anarchist. It doesn't convey what anarchism means or why it has value.*

3. Flags have a lot baggage. *Flags, like labels, mean different things to different people. If someone has the concept of anarchism as destruction/chaos/violence/communism/etc, my black flag is only going to drive them away from me and from the concept of anarchism as peace/freedom/equality of authority/mutual respect/etc.*

4. Flags are a stumbling block. *When you flash around the symbol of an ideal you become responsible for fulfilling that ideal. If you don't fulfill the ideal, you discredit the ideal at best or become a hypocrite at worst. When I'm waving my flag, someone is getting their concept of what "anarchism" and "anarchists" are like from me and my comments and demeanor. I'd rather they judge the ideas rather than me as a representative.*

5. Flags free no one. *Waving my black flag around may rah-rah the fellow liberty lovers around me (and make me feel virtuous), but it doesn't convince anyone to give up on power. It also doesn't liberate anyone from the grip of the powerful. It's a poor substitute for action.*

All of the above apply to any other belief: you bring little value to the world with your bumper sticker, your yard sign, or your flag. In fact, you may hurt your own cause.

I don't see too many benefits to the label of anarchist or to a black flag proclaiming my anarchist bent. I see plenty of benefit to acting - in work and out of it - to bring more freedom to people, bit by bit.

So I think I'll be putting the black flag back in its (honored) storage place.