

Racist Symbols: Reply to George Schedler

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A symbol might have racist connotations in the sense that a substantial portion of the relevant population associates it with racist values or institutions. A governmental symbol display might therefore carry racist connotations that the government doesn't intend, including connotations that haven't always been attached to the symbol. So I claimed recently in the pages of this journal (Alter 2000b). I also explained how those claims create problems for some of George Schedler's (1998) main views about governmental displays of the Confederate battle flag. In his response, Schedler rejects my claims, arguing that they lead to absurdities when applied to various examples. He adds that one of his examples brings into question my "political savvy" (Schedler 2000, p. 5). Be that as it may, his arguments against my claims are entirely without force, and serve to confirm the weakness of his initial position. So I'll argue. I'll also identify a problematic assumption in our dispute, which is not uncommon in discussions of symbolic meaning and racist speech.

Schedler's Position and Mine

Is the Confederate battle flag a racist symbol? According to Schedler, the answer depends on a variety of contextual factors, including historical origin and communicator intention. In 1963 George Wallace raised the battle flag over the capital dome in Montgomery as part of his opposition to integration. Similar twentieth-century racist agenda lay behind the flying of the battle flag over South Carolina's state house and the

incorporation of the battle flag in Georgia's state flag. Schedler concludes that those uses of the battle flag were racist. But, on his view, other governmental displays of Confederate symbols aren't racist. He writes, "it is logically impossible for the state flags of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and even Arkansas, adopted as they were in the nineteenth century, to have the racist connotations of the 1940s and beyond" (p. 45).

In my article, I criticized Schedler's account for failing to allow for the possibility of a symbol display having connotations that the displayer doesn't intend, and which the symbol hasn't always had. Imagine a government form that hasn't been changed since the 1950's, and which refers to African Americans as "colored". When the form was originally printed, the term lacked racist connotations (or so I'll assume for the sake of argument). None of those responsible for the form's current printing have racist intentions. It's just that, in their minds, the term means only what it used to mean, and so they see no reason to change the form.¹ There's a fairly clear sense in which they're mistaken. The term has racist connotations as it occurs in the form, despite the communicators' non-racist intentions, and despite the term's non-racist origins. If so, then the same is possible for flag displays: a flag display might have connotations which the displayer doesn't intend, and which the flag hasn't always had. If so, then not only is it possible for state flags adopted in the nineteenth century to have racist connotations that relate to twentieth-century phenomena; such flags can have those connotations even if that runs contrary to the intentions of the relevant (present) state governments (or government officials). If that reasoning is sound, then Schedler exaggerates the

¹ I didn't use this particular example in my article, but I did make the point the example illustrates.

significance of communicator intention and historical origin in determining whether the battle-flag displays in question are racist. So I argued.

Schedler's Response

Regarding my claim that the connotations of “colored person” have changed from benign to malign, Schedler writes, “the implication is that anyone using ‘colored person’ today must intend the recent derogatory meaning, even if the speaker were a senior citizen unaware of the change” (Schedler 2000, p. 6). Not so. “Colored person” has acquired negative connotations in the straightforward sense that the average American now associates it with racist stereotypes. Precisely nothing follows about what someone who’s unaware of that fact intends to say in using the term. Likewise, state officials responsible for the continued display of a flag that has only recently acquired racist connotations might be unaware of that change in meaning, and thus have no racist intentions. But the display might have racist connotations anyway, just as a currently issued government form that refers to African Americans as “colored” might have racist connotations despite the non-racist intentions of those responsible for the form’s text.

Underlying the foregoing reasoning is the idea that what a symbol connotes to many people may contribute to its public meaning. I formulated that idea as the following *public-association principle*: “if the association of a symbol *s* with a connotative meaning *m* is strong, widespread, and longstanding, then *s* has *m*” (Alter 2000a, p. 3). Schedler uses some real and imaginary examples to challenge that principle. In one of his examples, we’re to suppose that Native Americans associate Old Glory with racism, but that most other Americans do not. He objects that my view, “would dictate [that] the

symbol of oppression could never be racist, so long as the oppressors themselves do not make the association” (Schedler 2000, p. 7). But I didn’t say that a symbol lacks racist connotations unless the majority associates the symbol with racism. That claim is obviously false. Suppose the Ku Klux Klan abandons the battle flag and replaces it with some novel symbol. The new KKK symbol would clearly have racist connotations, even if the majority of Americans never see it. I proposed a sufficient condition, not a necessary condition. Schedler has confused “if” with “only if”.²

Such elementary errors underlie all of Schedler’s main responses to my criticisms.³ In another example, he has us suppose there’s a racist group that appropriates the Star of David, scrawling it wherever they commit their crimes against Arab-Americans. Most Americans, including many Jews, come to associate the Star with that racist group. The racist meaning becomes dominant, although an enlightened minority insists that the Star’s true meaning isn’t racist.

Schedler notes that on his view, “the minority’s position is rationally grounded: they are insisting that the real referent here is their oppression, which is the true meaning that belies the majority’s claim about the actual meaning” (Schedler 2000, p. 9). I don’t know whether the minority’s position is rationally grounded. That depends on what they

²I explicitly cautioned against that error: “I will not attempt to provide a necessary condition for symbolic meaning. In my view, the sources of symbolic meaning are diverse, and attempting to discuss them all would take us too far afield. But I will suggest a sufficient condition” (Alter 200b, p. 3).

³ Some of his reasoning is bizarre. For example, at one point he criticizes me for claiming that the battle flag may have *longstanding* racist associations even while I grant *arguendo* that its connection to the

mean by the Star's "true meaning". Most charitably, they mean that the Star used to lack racist connotations in the public mind, and that they want that to be the case once again. If so, then their position is perfectly reasonable, and nothing I've said implies otherwise. But if they mean that the Star has a "true meaning" that somehow makes it logically impossible for it to represent what the most of the population takes it to represent—which seems to be Schedler's view—then their position is as baseless as his. The lesson here is simple: flags, like any other symbol, aren't logically tied to particular meanings. The Star of David could come to connote racism just as any other symbol could. After all, as Schedler notes, the swastika existed long before it acquired its racist connotations.

Schedler complains that on my view, "no correction of strong, widespread, and longstanding impressions is possible, whether the issue is prejudice or merely bad history" (Schedler 2000, p. 9). If the possibility of correction entails that a public symbol has a "true meaning" in the sense that it's impossible for its meaning to change, then my view does have that implication. Any acceptable view would. But nothing I've said conflicts with the possibility of correcting longstanding associations, if that means causing people to associate a symbol with something it used (or was originally designed) to connote.

In another of Schedler's examples, he has us imagine a society in which the vast majority are holocaust deniers, who associate the swastika with good luck. He writes, "In such a society, the swastika, on Alter's view, simply would mean good luck, and any minority of enlightened non-racists who object would be laboring under conceptual

Confederacy doesn't render it racist—as though the flag's associations with segregation and the KKK are too recent to be considered longstanding (Schedler 2000, p. 6).

confusion” (Schedler 2000, p. 8). Again, that depends. If the minority claims that it’s logically impossible for the swastika to lose its racist connotations, they are indeed confused. The swastika could in principle lose its Nazi, and therefore racist, connotations, hard as that might be to imagine.

But the enlightened minority might not be confused. On a more charitable interpretation of the example, their disagreement with the majority doesn’t concern whether the swastika is a symbol of Nazism. The minority and majority agree that it is, presumably because it’s widely associated with the Nazis. Rather, their disagreement concerns whether Nazism was a racist institution. The majority denies that it was. They believe that characterizing Nazism as racist results from “bad history”—from mistakes about what the Nazis stood for and did. Of course, it’s they who are mistaken. As the minority knows, Nazism was deeply imbued with racism. So, in the imagined scenario, the swastika stands for a racist institution, even though the majority would deny that it does.

Does Schedler’s example refute the public-association principle? On the contrary, even in the imagined society the reason the swastika represents Nazism is presumably that most people associate it with the Nazis. What the example refutes is the claim that a symbol may represent a racist institution only if the majority would describe what it represents as racist—a claim no one in her right mind would maintain and which is implied neither by the public-association principle nor by anything else I wrote.

Schedler provides other alleged counterexamples to the public-association principle. Here are three:

First, at the reburial of the remains of Confederate soldiers in November, 1999 in magnolia cemetery in Charleston, South Carolina, the caskets were draped with battle flags. Second, a color guard for a Maryland National Guard unit carried a Confederate battle flag along with the Maryland state flag and the stars and stripes. The third is the “n”-word itself. Though clearly racist when a white person refers to an African-American, it is not such when black males use the term in jocular conversation. (Schedler 2000, p. 8).

Evidently, Schedler thinks that, in the first two of those three examples, it’s clear that the battle-flag displays lack all racist connotations. It’s not. Perhaps in those contexts the battle flag’s associations with twentieth-century racism are absent. But its association with the Confederacy is present, and it’s at least arguable that the Confederacy was a racist institution. After all, defending slavery was one of the Confederacy’s primary objectives in the American Civil War.

But put that point aside. The main problem with Schedler’s alleged counterexamples is that they’re irrelevant. The assumption that the battle-flag displays in his first two examples lacked racist connotations is perfectly consistent with the public-association principle. So are his claims about the “n”-word. The public-association principle expresses sufficient conditions for a symbol’s having a public meaning. The principle is meant to explain why a display might have racist connotations that the displayer doesn’t intend. The idea is that the display might have racist connotations because the symbol does, i.e., because in the relevant population the symbol is widely associated with racist values or institutions. But the principle doesn’t imply that just any display of a racist symbol has racist connotations, regardless of context.

Recall the case of the government form that still uses the term “colored” to refer to African Americans. In that context, the term has racist connotations, not because of communicator intention or the form’s origins, but rather because the term is now widely associated with a racist meaning. That explanation doesn’t imply that the term can’t be used in non-racist ways: it can. Nor does the explanation imply that context is irrelevant to whether a given use is racist: it’s not. Exactly the same points apply to the claim that a government symbol display might have racist connotations because of the meaning the public associates with the symbol. That explanation doesn’t imply that a symbol widely associated with racist values or institutions can’t be used in non-racist ways: it can. Nor does the explanation imply that context is irrelevant to whether a given use of the symbol is racist: it’s not.

Schedler notes that Swastikas woven into Navajo rugs may lack racist connotations, and he claims that my view implies otherwise (Schedler 2000, p. 8). But my view implies no such thing. His mistake is the same: he confuses my view with the obviously false view that, if the majority associates a symbol with a racist meaning, then any display of that symbol is racist, regardless of context. Again, nothing I wrote has that implication.⁴

⁴ One point about the Navajo-rug example is worth mentioning. The reason those rugs lack racist connotations is presumably that the Navajo’s use of the swastika belongs to a cultural tradition that’s entirely unconnected to the Nazis. By contrast, governmental battle-flag displays don’t belong to a cultural tradition that’s entirely unconnected to racist uses of the battle flag. There’s also no analogy between governmental battle-flag displays and the African-American uses of the “n”-word that Schedler mentions. However, there have been non-governmental uses of the battle flag that parallel appropriation of racist

In summary, Schedler's replies to my criticisms depend on conflating what I say with transparently false views. One of those is the view that a symbol has racist connotations if and only if the majority would describe it as having racist connotations. Another is the view that, if the majority associates a symbol with a racist meaning, then any display of that symbol is racist, regardless of context. He fails to address the view I actually proposed, on which a governmental symbol display might have racist connotations that the government doesn't intend, because to a substantial portion of the relevant population the symbol has come to represent racist values or institutions—values or institutions that are racist in fact, whether or not most would describe them as such.⁵

A Source of Confusion

Both here and in my original article, I've tried to engage Schedler's arguments on the level at which he presents them. He makes claims about what the battle flag connotes in some context, and I counter that the flag's public connotations in that context may be other than what he claims. So conceived, however, our discussion—including the public-

language by oppressed groups. NuSouth, a black-owned company, incorporates battle-flag symbolism in their clothing designs. In their products, the flags are red, black, and green—colors associated with African liberation. See <http://www.nusouth.com/>.

⁵ Schedler uses a similar strategy in his book, contrasting his view only with straw-man positions. Notably, he claims that his opponent is committed to the false view that “the meaning of a symbol consists entirely in what the audience perceives, regardless of the intent of the communicator” (Schedler 1998, p. 47). But his opponent need hold only that “what the audience perceives” may be *part* of what determines a symbol's meaning. The latter theory leaves it open that the communicator's intentions may also play an important role.

association principle—is based on a problematic assumption. The assumption is that symbols such as flags (or words for that matter) have public meanings, and that in particular there are correct answers to questions such as, “Does Mississippi’s flag have racist connotations?” My concern isn’t that such questions don’t always have determinate (yes or no) answers. My concern is with the very idea of a symbol’s public meaning.

I think I understand what it means to say that a symbol connotes or means this or that *to an individual*. By extension, I think I understand what such a claim means when applied to a group: it means that a certain portion, perhaps all, of the individuals in the group attach a certain meaning to the symbol. We could define the “public meaning” of a symbol in those terms, and thereby provide grounds for judging the correctness or incorrectness of claims about the symbol’s meaning. Or we could define its “public meaning” in other ways: for example, in terms of communicator intention, or what the symbol has meant to various people in the past. Or we could cast the definition in terms of some combination of those things. But this is a matter of stipulative definition.⁶ Once we stipulate what we mean by a symbol’s “public meaning”, we’re left with sociological/historical questions such as, “What meanings do people associate with the symbol?” and “What’s the nature of that with which people associate the symbol, e.g., if the symbol is associated with a certain institution, is that institution racist?” But, in the final analysis, I see no further philosophical questions about what determines a symbol’s

⁶ This requires minor qualification. Although one could define the notion of public meaning solely in terms of communicator intention, doing so would be highly misleading, if not incoherent; typically, communicator intention isn’t a public matter. Also, perhaps some definitions correspond to ordinary usage

public meaning, or about whether a symbol or symbol display is racist or has racist connotations.

So, to some extent, Schedler and I may be talking past each other. When I make claims about whether a governmental battle-flag display has racist connotations, I'm largely concerned with what the display represents to some portion of the relevant population. When he makes his opposing claims about the same display, he gives priority to other concerns, such as the government's (past and present) intentions. Insofar as we're assuming different notions of "having racist connotations", our disagreement is only apparent.

I suspect, however, that there are genuine issues on which Schedler and I disagree. In particular, there's the question of which matters should be most relevant to government policy. How much should it matter if, to a substantial portion of the population, the battle flag connotes racist institutions or values? How much should it matter if, to a substantial portion of the population, the battle flag has no racist connotations, and instead represents other things, which they hold dear? What if both of those claims are true? And how much weight should be placed on the government's intentions or the display's historical origins? Perhaps the issue of how to rank such concerns is what Schedler and I are, or should be, arguing about.⁷

better than others do; though I suspect the relevant notion of ordinary usage varies with interests. For an insightful discussion of these matters (with respect to language), see Chomsky 1992.

⁷ I'd like to thank Russell Daw for excellent comments and discussions.

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