Theories and Methodologies

Split the Flag

SARA NADAL-MELSIÓ

> Those red and black banners wave over us mourning our dead and wave over our hopes for the dawn that is breaking.
>
> —Louise Michel

> But do you really want to impede me with my little writing factory located right in the middle of Berlin West quite simply because of my imperious need to distinguish myself from a neighborhood that for certain reasons I must accept—do you want to prevent me from hanging a red flag out of my window, saying that it is only a little piece of cloth?
>
> —Walter Benjamin

Politically, red is not a color. Therein lies its gathering force: not as color but as the clamor of protest, contestation, and becoming. Red is the place where saturation and accumulation, both chromatic and acoustic, gather to become massified and remain stubbornly indeterminate. In its inception, a red flag is not a flag but rather an internationalist critique of what a flag is. The red flag would abolish flags altogether. The red flag therefore overlaps and joins forces with the anarchist black flag as the two emerge together in nineteenth-century anticapitalist and abolitionist mass struggles. The red and the black flags were, for a time, interchangeable. This motility can be read as an instantiation, conscious or not, of a militant protocol for mass uprisings, one that prevents either of the two flags from becoming self-identical and, thus, from being fully instrumentalized in the name of a determinate ideological program.

Both red and black flags were the negation of national and colonial flags and their serial instrumentalizations: those of war, colonialism, racial capitalism, extractivism, and various other forms of violent

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expropriation. Gathering under red and black flags, communists, anarchists, workers, the colonized, and the enslaved were part of an international and internationalist coalition activated through the logic of negation, abolition, strike, and deposition. Howard J. Ehrlich puts it beautifully when he writes about the anarchist adoption of the black flag: "black is negation, is anger, is outrage, is mourning, is beauty, is hope, is the fostering and sheltering of new forms of human life and relationship on and with this earth" (31).

It is worth noting that the Paris Commune (and its red flag) was contemporary with the Reconstruction that followed the American Civil War, a "splendid failure" in W. E. B. Du Bois's precise and cutting formulation, that ended with state-sponsored white supremacist terror (*Black Reconstruction* 708). Eduardo Cadava and I cover his intensive study of this failed American experiment of "abolition-democracy" (185) in *Politically Red.* My aim here, in reintroducing the book, and doing so through the figure of the flag, is to pull another of the many red and black threads sewn into the archives of collective grief and resistance that is our book's affective and political armature. I do so in the hope of encouraging others to tease out and pull on the many more threads that red and black flags briefly stitch together before they are scattered again. I would like in this way to show that *Politically Red* carries within it a logic of serialization and massification that, on the one hand, necessarily makes the book incomplete and, on the other, invites further writing and reading. The many parentheses, erasures, and silences that traverse our collective, multitemporal, and entangled historical contingency are always infinitely more complex, more devastatingly violent, and yet also somehow more hopeful, even in their organized pessimism, than we dare imagine. In Du Bois's words, this is "a hope not hopeful, but unhopeful" (*Souls* 141).

All these forces of negation and massification are traceable in the few threads I follow here, stretching beyond those that the book archives: in the obstinate appearance and reappearance of raggedy black and red flags in a New Caledonia anticolonial rebellion, a Parisian demonstration, a bourgeois Berlin neighborhood, a 1936 comic film, and a 2024 art installation in New York City.

The Black Flag

The anarchist feminist and anticolonial activist Louise Michel joins the Paris Commune in 1871 and leads a battalion to defend it. After Michel's arrest and trial, one of the many that followed the brutal repression of 25,000 Communards, she is deported to New Caledonia, a penal colony and a colonially occupied territory, where she supports the resistance of the Kanak against French imperialists.

During the first leg of her long voyage, aboard the *Comète* (an astronomical allusion that would not have escaped her friend Auguste Blanqui), Michel wears a black mourning veil for the massacred Communards while she keeps her red scarf well hidden in her baggage to protect it from any police search.[1] The scarf is now illegal contraband, just as the Communards are illegal French citizens subject to deportation. During the second part of the voyage, aboard the warship *Virginie*—an inscription of gendered and colonial fantasies of the *terra nullius*—the Communards are put in cages and communicate with one another by smuggling letters and poems "across the grates" (Michel 92). Even then, with no books at hand, Michel continues to read. She reads the ocean, the sky, the winds, the smells and sounds of an ever-expanding world, and this is the true legacy of the Commune—another form of literacy, an unusual and militant one, anchored in curiosity, love, and an endless capacity for surprise.[2] Michel knows—like Rosa Luxemburg, Du Bois, Blanqui, and Karl Marx—that searching for an opening when doors and borders have been locked is part of the unceasing task of insurrectionary movements.

Those letters and poems, smuggled between crates of deportees, end up hidden in Michel's sewing box. They are ultimately discovered, confiscated—box and all—by the French colonial police, and lost. Yet Michel inscribes them in her memoirs, in one of the many passages where she reminds her readers that her account is not just a personal record but the amalgamation of many voices of dissent. Those voices belong to a series of defeated uprisings that

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accumulate and survive in the slow and incomplete constitution of a red common-wealth and in a communal grief that gathers the fragments of repeated colonial and capitalist shipwrecks.

Exiled and imprisoned in the South Pacific archipelago, Michel remains a dissident as most of her fellow deported Communards side with the French colonialists and fight to extinguish the Kanak uprising of 1878, choosing whiteness over political affinity or revolutionary principle. That the Kanak are labelled Black by the French is key, since colonialists rally white supremacy to enlist both the Communards and deported Kabyle Algerians—who had revolted in the months following the Paris Commune—against a Black revolt. It is yet another instantiation of Du Bois's "shibboleth of race," one that ensures that solidarity will be stillborn and the color line will not be crossed (*Black Reconstruction* 680). The Kanak tribal leader Ataï leads the rebellion to recover stolen land and to protect the native crops that the imported European livestock is destroying (see Eichner).[3] The revolt is violently repressed. Ataï is betrayed and decapitated. His head is put on display in the Paris Museum of Natural History. Michel recounts his death in her memoirs, and in a letter, she describes French colonists as "faraway torturers" (126). She also points out, perhaps strangely, that the Kanak uprising is "deadly serious" but that she will not attempt to describe it (112). Instead, she tells us that "my red scarf, the red scarf of the Commune that I had hidden from every search, was divided in two pieces one night." This splitting of the flag, a mobile figure of revolt and revolutionary becoming, is yet another act of massification and multiplication that could be added to the ones we trace in *Politically Red*.

Like all the writers we read in *Politically Red*, even as a deportee and an inmate, Michel finds freedom in the motility of language and its world-making and world-shattering force. In her description of her first encounter with the Kanak, Michel's keen revolutionary ear already hears a revolt. Daoumi, the first Kanak she meets and befriends, sings a war song: "a threat howled through its tune in quarter tones, and the farewell at the end came out as a true cry; the Kanaks get those quarter tones from the cyclone, just as the Arabs draw from the hot and violent wind of the desert" (96).[4] Daoumi goes on to teach the Kanak languages and cosmologies to Michel, who records these teachings and publishes them after her return to France.[5] The feminist historian Carolyn J. Eichner suggests that Michel finds an alternative to instrumentalized racialization in the compositional structure of the Kanak language and its intense creolization. Like Walter Benjamin's pseudo-Nahuatl coinage *anaquivitzli*, the amalgamated word that closes *Politically Red* and becomes its shibboleth, the oral Kanak Bichelamar, a mixture of English, French, Portuguese, Polynesian, and Southeast Asian dialects that predates colonization and remained in use until the twentieth century, archives another kind of revolutionary strategy. The name *Bichelamar* perhaps comes from the Portuguese *bicho de mar* ("sea creature") or from the English *beach* combined with the Portuguese or Spanish *mar*. To Michel, Bichelamar is a living internationalist language that matches the motility of the Kanak revolutionary black flag. It is an archive that will remain a resource once it is embraced as the militant box that it is, one of the many that *Politically Red* gathers and accumulates without turning them into mausoleums or antiquarian repositories.

The Kanak Black Flag Revolt, as the 1870s rebellion against French colonial settlers came to be known, was defeated. Yet the black flag would be raised again, carrying within it an obscured but resilient inscription of Blackness that far exceeds racial categorization to become a sign of revolt, refusal, negation, and strike—not a color but rather an accumulating and revolutionary force of intensification.

Dead Candidacies

Question: You asked for a black flag?
MICHEL: Yes, and someone brought me a black flag.
Question: Who gave it to you?
MICHEL: A person I didn't know.
Question: You don't find a flag so easily and accidentally at the Esplanade of les Invalides.

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> MICHEL: All you need to do is find a broomstick and a black rag.
>
> —Transcript of the Superior Court of the Seine District, 21 June 1883

After a general amnesty is granted to both French and Algerian Kabyle inmates in the South Pacific, Michel returns to France to begin a series of political gestures that highlight the negation at the core of her revolutionary commitments.

In 1881, Michel and Paule Minke are put forth as "dead candidates" in the general election. As women, they can neither vote nor hold office. Michel reads their condition in the light of a revolutionary negativity that these dead candidacies share with the black flag. She writes:

> Dead candidacies are both flag and demand. They are pure idea, the idea of the Social Revolution soaring without individuality, an idea that can be neither struck at nor destroyed, an idea as invincible and implacable as death.
>
> Illegal candidacies are just. (125)

Here severing the purported relation between justice and the law—a gesture that she shares with Benjamin, Luxemburg, Marx, Blanqui, and Du Bois—Michel deposes the logic of the state by, paradoxically, participating in an election.

In 1882, she is arrested on the anniversary of Blanqui's death for defamation of the police. She reports, "Someone is being murdered" at the police station to denounce several police officers beating up a peaceful protester (134). She is sent to prison for two weeks in accordance with Article 224 of the Penal Code. When she is released, her friend and comrade Marie Ferré falls ill and dies. Michel then uses her red shawl, given to her because, if needed, it could quicky be transformed into a red banner, as Marie's shroud. As she puts it, "It's the same thing" (135). The flag of course belongs to them both—the dead and the living are forever entangled in the accumulation of defeats that is the true wealth of a revolutionary archive, an archive that will survive only if it also remembers.

In 1883, Michel waves a black flag to lead a demonstration of five hundred unemployed and hungry Parisians who stormed several bakeries. This flag, as she puts it, is the flag of those who lack—bread, employment, and the rights of citizenship—and of those who are united in the force of their negation. This is the first reported use of the black flag in Europe, and it then becomes a symbol of anarchism.

Michel's citation of the black flag and the Kanak uprising is a cypher that remains opaque to those who wave it, flattening its profound revolutionary force. There is concealment in this citation. Yet this force endures because the black flag is always a militant black box, one capable of accumulating negation itself and where nothing, not even in the most absolute opacity, is lacking. The black flag thus echoes Jared Sexton's radical mobilization of Bertrand Russell's logical "black paradox" to prove that "Black is inclusive of all color and colors without failing to be itself. It is inclusive insofar as it is itself. Black lacks for nothing."

After the incident, Michel is sentenced to six years in solitary confinement. She is released in 1886, the same day as her fellow anarchist Pietr Kropotkin, and, after immigrating to London, she founds a school for the children of political refugees, the International Anarchist School. When she dies in Marseille in 1905, her Paris funeral is attended by more than 100,000 people, like Luxemburg's in Berlin only fourteen years later and Kropotkin's in Moscow in 1921.[6] The mourners wave red and black flags. A force of coalition with the dead, the defeated, the silenced, and the erased, these flags emblematize a gathering of strength through the sociality of communal grief.

Michel's black and red flag, then, is always on the move and it can be made from any piece of fabric—a rag, a scarf, a shawl. Movement and mobilization are its defining characteristics. Written in red and black ink, life and death, Michel's flag carries within it the promise of becoming and transformation but offers no guarantees. It offers hope in hopelessness, and it is the only flag that might do justice, if there were justice, to Du Bois's general strike—the strike that unmasks the racial violence that structures capitalist expropriation and that, as we argue in *Politically Red*, carries all the force of abolition that no national flag could ever embrace.

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A Red Rag

A fragment of a letter Benjamin writes to Gershom Scholem in 1931 offers another glimpse of a red flag, this time hypothetically planted in a bourgeois neighborhood in West Berlin. In the letter, which we read in full in *Politically Red*, Benjamin strings together a series of questions about what it means to wave a red flag, questions that become sufficiently mobile and indeterminate to escape ideological instrumentalization. He then imagines a slightly comedic scene in which he sticks a little red flag out of his window. The red flag stands here in contrast to the force of the red that begins to saturate Benjamin's prose. The passage points to the impossibility of containing the color in one place. His tattered red flag continues to move because it cannot be instrumentalized, absorbed, incorporated, or put to use by any political formation, even a communist one. It blends with the black ink of a text that is its imaginative infrastructure and begins to resemble the black flag of anarchism—even if it remains unaware of its deeper revolutionary undertones.

Benjamin's "little piece of [red] cloth" (378) brings to mind another raggedy flag, one that is also as red as it is black, in Charlie Chaplin's 1936 *Modern Times*. The film marks the final appearance of the Tramp, who, on this occasion, is described in the intertitles simply as a "factory worker." In this black-and-white silent film, in a scene of unprovoked police brutality, the now unemployed Tramp picks up a rag that has fallen off a truck, put there presumably to warn pedestrians of the possible danger of falling cargo and, therefore, viewers are led to assume, red, though in this medium, red is black.[7] A few seconds later, unbeknownst to the Tramp, his little rag becomes the flag that leads a socialist demonstration, with signs in English and Spanish demanding workers' rights, which he finds himself now heading. He is taken to be the leader of the demonstration and arrested; several more arrests take place subsequently in the film. Throughout the film, however, red (as an index of revolution but also of violence, danger, and generalized uncertainty) spills over and continues to saturate the remaining scenes of Chaplin's first openly political film. This is not a simple transgression (those, we know well, easily play into the hands of the law and its police) or mere opposition. This red raggedy flag is there to tell us not what a flag is but, more importantly, what a flag, one that is both red and black, can become if it does not abandon its relentless motility.

Chaplin's Tramp has no agency in the role he plays, since he either misreads or remains oblivious to the context of his actions in an uncertain world where meaning is in flux. The Tramp functions like a misplaced sign that the audience reads to comic effect. Indeed, it is through the figure's refusal to identify, through his negation of the possibility of individual agency, that the impersonality of his characterization becomes mobilized. Because he never identifies with anything, the audience can identify with him, or rather, with the void he signals by being always both out of place and out of time. In this way, the figure of the Tramp is an oddly apt repository of the force of negativity.

Crossing the Darién

Since 2014, more than seven million Venezuelans have become economic and political refugees. Their forced displacement is a testament to the ravages of authoritarianism of any variety and to the ease with which leftist slogans can be instrumentalized in the name of a police state.

In 2024, Andrea Arias, José Díaz, Luisandra Escalona, Leonardo Mesa, Nazareth Merentes, Jesús Ramírez, Omar Ríos, and Mariana Vargas, all Venezuelan refugees who now live and work in New York City, collaborate with the artist Javier Téllez, a Venezuelan immigrant belonging to the diasporic Latin American cultural elite, in the writing and production of a short film, *Amerika*. Téllez, who is a reader, a cinephile, and a collector in the most Benjaminian of senses, operates a small film theater out of his Queens apartment that screens his collection of 16mm films. His *Cine Capitol*, part art project and part family memoir, is an homage to his grandfather's theater of the same name, founded in 1914 in Turmero, Aragua State. He screens *Amerika* on the second floor of the Center for Art,

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Research and Alliances as part of an installation, a reconstructed version of the Turmero theater. *Politically Red* sees writers continuing to read, even as they write, and in Téllez's *Amerika* the audience sees viewers viewing. Close-ups of the sparse audience seated in a somewhat derelict old theater are intercut with the boat and police customs scenes in Chaplin's *The Immigrant*. An audience entirely composed of nonprofessional actors, these racialized Venezuelan immigrants visibly react to the harsh conditions of the boat journey of another racialized group of immigrants and to the gratuitous violence and humiliation tactics of the American border police. This is the opening of Téllez's *Amerika*, a title that also mobilizes Kafka's unfinished American immigration novel, which was subtitled *The Missing* and was only published posthumously in 1927. The audience in the film is composed entirely of Téllez's collaborators, and what they are viewing is themselves as they begin a reenactment of their own experiences. This act of collective reading takes the form of annotation and citation. Citing Chaplin's most politically inflected works, it highlights his use of transnational filmic language amid world wars and the rise of global fascism: *The Immigrant* (1917), *Gold Rush* (1925), *Modern Times* (1936), and, of course, *The Great Dictator* (1940). The immigrant actors take turns portraying the police and the criminalized refugees, materializing a violent legal logic that functions with no relation to justice. It is yet another version of Bertolt Brecht's "reading is class struggle," one that reminds the viewer that literacy is not an exclusively textual phenomenon (80).

The film ends with still shots of Venezuelan government-issued identity cards and a voice-over retelling the refugee actors' recent crossings into economic and political exile. They speak of arduous and dangerous journeys that often involve crossing the infamous Darién jungle and take anywhere from a month and a half to seven months, through Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico.

Upon leaving the theater, audience members see a flag planted just outside the gallery installation. The Tramp's raggedy flag has exited the screen. Its color, only superficially unchanged, is now fully saturated and intensified. One would expect this flag to be red, as Chaplin's black-and-white film clearly implies, but it is not. This flag is black. Téllez's need to disambiguate Chaplin's flag must be read in the context of Venezuela's left-wing authoritarian populism, in the context of an ideological instrumentalization from which no flag is ever safe. Once Chaplin's flag has been forced to cross the Darién, Téllez tells us, it can only stay truly red by becoming black—by becoming the shadow of a flag, the shadow that is always inside a flag that must stay on the run. This hidden and saturated inside turns this flag back into a box, a militant box.

Rephrasing Emily Dickinson's "Split the Lark—and you'll find the Music," we could say here, "Split the Flag—and you'll find two colors."

Notes

1. Blanqui's command "to storm the heavens" in search of other forms of association, to take cues from stars, comets, cyclones, and tempests, resonates deeply with Michel's interest in the indigenous cosmologies of the Kanak.

2. The resonances with Rosa Luxemburg's prison letters are striking, proving that the affinities of our red common-wealth double as a form of kinship across times.

3. I thank Sarah Richter for this reference and for our conversations on anarchism over the past few months.

4. Michel returns to music making, the Kanak, and the quarter tones in another chapter: "I had my own ideas for an orchestra: I wanted to shake palm branches, strike bamboo, create a horn from shells, and use the tones produced by a leaf pressed against the lips. In short: I wanted a Kanak orchestra, complete with quarter tones" (112).

5. It goes without saying that it is perfectly possible to indict Michel for her patronizing racism in some passages, just as it is possible to condemn racist passages in Marx or misogynistic ones in Du Bois. The list goes on. Yet, neither here nor elsewhere do I have any investment in accusing or condemning the writers I read. Not because it cannot be done—it is all too easy to do—but because it misses the point. If the goal is to find resources in our shared, devastated, and devastating archives, we must salvage what we can use.

6. In 1971, to commemorate the centennial of the Paris Commune, the city of Saint-Denis commissioned the Guadeloupean French filmmaker Sarah Maldoror, her pseudonym a critical appropriation of Lautréamont's only work, to direct the film *The Commune, Louise Michel and Us*. Maybe fittingly, the film has been lost. The next year, Maldoror finished her better-known film, the 1972 *Sambizanga*. The film documents the anticolonial militancy of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola in the

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Portuguese colonial prison and torture center of Luanda. The film on Michel may have been lost, but the struggle continues and returns to the antiracist, anticolonial struggle where the black flag was first raised.

7. The Tramp is fired after one of the first and most iconic early depictions—the other being Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*—of the enforced and calculated physical and mental exhaustion of workers under capitalism's endless sequence of exploitation.

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