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Emma Osbourn

University of Lincoln, UK, info@emmaosbourn.co.uk

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The Political Handkerchief, A Study of Politics and Semiotics in Textiles

Emma Osbourn

info@emmaosbourn.co.uk

www.emmaosbourn.co.uk

<https://vimeo.com/emmaosbourn/videos>

<http://www.axisweb.org/seCVPG.aspx?ARTISTID=16077>

*The individual does not so much construct material culture or language
but is rather constructed through them.*

Christopher Tilley in *The Meanings Of Things*.¹

There are as many differing definitions of semiotics as there are semioticians. The most basic definition of semiotics would be that it is the study of signs. Contemporary semioticians study these signs as part of semiotic ‘sign-systems’ (Chandler 2007, 2). I too propose to study the signs, symbols and signifiers printed onto two textiles as well as the cloth from which they are made. I propose to make a semiotic reading of these two textile objects and speculate that they themselves had a bearing on the society around them, reinforcing societal meanings and ideologies of the time. The construction of human meanings is a product of shared systems of signification, just as we construct the objects that surround us, we too are ‘constructed’ by them.

An object is constant, but the context around it changes. I am going to consider the original context of two textile objects, as far as is possible from my current position, both in time and culturally. To see how they speak to us, what messages they can yield. I will be looking underneath the exterior, to examine symbols and signifiers and show that they are redolent with messages and implication.

The two objects are a handkerchief showing George Washington and a newspaper, “Berthold’s Political Handkerchief.” It was printed onto cotton to avoid a tax on paper. The handkerchief looked very much like a conventional commemorative handkerchief, but as I looked into its historical context, I realized it had a great deal of political significance. It is covered with imagery, symbols, and words that were coded messages that would have had tremendous importance to the observer of the day. The newspaper has semiotic significance by the relationships between the fabric on which it is printed and its content. The two objects can be read as texts, literally in the case of the newspaper and more metaphorically in the case of the handkerchief. An examination of this sort can make us look more closely at the signs and signifiers that surround us and question their coded meanings. I found that there were parallels between the two, and it is through these that I propose to trace themes, and lines of similarity and difference. I will consider them in the context of Barthes’ ideas of denotation and connotation, and exploring his idea of myth.

¹ (Hodder 1991,1989, 189)



Figure 1. Attributed to John Hewson. C 1776. Washington Handkerchief [cotton handkerchief 30.5" x 33"] Collection of the New-York Historical Society.



Figure 2. Emma Osbourn. 2011. Berthold's Political Handkerchief Edition 1, 3rd September 1831 [photograph]. Image courtesy of The Janey Buchan Political Song Collection, Glasgow University.

These two objects were produced only 56 years apart, although one on each side of the Atlantic. They both have connections with revolutions, political and industrial, shifts in political order. They are both able to be concealed or revealed as the owner felt was fitting. They were both produced on cotton, a product that was both a tie and a division between the US and Britain.

“Cloth, in practical and metaphorical ways has played a key role in both daily life and in establishing social structures for centuries. Cloth is a mode of communication within and between civilizations,”(Livingstone, Ploof c2007). Over many thousands of years there have been political and social meanings woven into the very fabric of cloth. For example tapestries served as status symbols, showing the power and wealth of the owner, as well as portraying allegorical imagery. Colors, patterns, fabrics and textures of clothing could not only denote a person’s social class but also show commitment to the politics of another social class.

Handkerchiefs had been known since Roman times but were associated with the rich. Advances in printing and the industrialization of the textile industry in the 18th centuries meant that cloth could be produced more quickly and more cheaply. “The topical, ephemeral nature of the images suited a localized market, and aided the printed handkerchief’s transition from a useful object into a souvenir,”(c1988, 3) writes Mary Schoesser in *Printed Handkerchiefs*. If handkerchiefs were printed with commemorative imagery, a continuous turnover of sales could be guaranteed. So a tradition quickly built up of producing commemorative designs. They were produced to mark victories in battle, royal events, informational texts and even maps. Handkerchiefs with satirical political or religious scenes also became popular. They became an object of the masses; they had a practical purpose, and more than they could signify a political allegiance, either allied to state politics or contrary to it. It was also evident that propaganda could be easily mass-produced and disseminated in this medium.

It is recorded that Martha Washington gave a copy of a mezzotint ascribed to Alexander Campbell to Calico printer John Hewson to produce a handkerchief, probably in 1775 (Longmore c1988). Hewson furthers the statement on the mezzotint. Washington’s figure represents a potent symbol, on a horse with sword drawn, as if he is about to lead a charge into battle. “Horses were a means of personal display” (ibid., 10) to the Virginian landowners, states Philip K Longmore in *The Invention of George Washington*. He quotes an unnamed English traveler; the horse was an “adjunct to virile self-presentation...”(ibid., 10).



Figure 3. Alexander Campbell, “George Washington, Esqr. General and Commander in Chief of the Continental Army in America,” September 9, 1775. Mezzotint. Yale University Art Gallery, John Hill Morgan Collection, B.A. 1893, M.A. (Hon.) 1929, Collection.

Revolutionary Americans reluctantly gave up their adherence to the King, “From 1767 to 1773 nearly every anti-monarchical polemic published in the colonies originated in England” (Longmore c1988, 187). Their ideal would have been a British Monarch who ruled over them equitably, a Patriot King. George III was not to be that monarch. It finally became clear that he would never fulfill that role. “When revolutionary Americans expelled George III from their hearts, they immediately adopted a native hero and leader” (ibid., 194), states Longmore. Washington’s victory at Boston consolidated his position. Just as commemorative handkerchiefs depicting George II would have been popular, so the Washington handkerchief was produced. But the symbols and signifiers point, not backwards to the old country but forwards, epitomizing the new nationhood. On the Common-Place Website, Catherine E. Kelly quotes William Spohn Baker from his 1880 book, *The Engraved Prints of Washington*, who states that any image of Washington represented, “the nobility of his character, the dignity of his manhood, his truth and patriotism” (Kelly).

At that time in the US the textile industry was in its infancy. The British government had never intended for a textile industry to be established in the colonies of British America. They were destined to be a market rather than producers, in fact the governor of New Hampshire in 1743 made tentative enquiries about establishing a linen manufactory, he received the following reply,

“It is our Express Will & Pleasure, that you do not upon any Pretense whatever – give your consent to a Law or Laws for setting up Manufactures – which are hurtful or prejudicial to this Kingdom” (Little, p59)

Taxation, including the Stamp Act of 1765, resulted in a great determination for the colonists to establish their own manufacturing industries. The British Government banned skilled British textile workers from emigrating to North America. There was also a ban on the export of any of the new textile technology, such as mechanized spinning equipment and power looms.

The effects of an earlier Stamp Act were also felt in Britain. In the early 1830s a huge number of journals and pamphlets were published that disseminated information about politics, they were usually contrary to state ideology. This was known as the Pauper Press. The stamp duty imposed on printed paper was “designed to price [them] out of existence”(1992, p176) as described by John Hartley in *The Politics of Pictures*. It could as much as double their cost. However, newspapers or pamphlets were still very popular; it was possible to hire one from a vendor for short periods. People pooled resources to buy them; even old out of date papers had a value. Coffee houses would have had them for their patrons.

Revolutions had happened in the US and France. The Industrial Revolution meant that populations grew markedly and although average income increased, wages for the greater part were very low. The majority of workers lived in squalor, while the factory owners lived in splendor. There was probably no other time in British History that social inequality was so marked. It was out of this inequality that revolutionaries such as Henry Berthold came. In 1831 he published a newspaper, it was printed onto cloth to avoid this stamp duty. It appears only 10 editions were ever printed. “Berthold's Political Handkerchief” is a literal example of cloth as a medium of communication. A notable difference between this and the Washington handkerchief is an idea that was explored by Barthes, the difference between denotation and connotation. The denotation is the literal meaning, this publication has a straightforward literal meaning, and it suggests the reader consider revolution. Most of the “paper’s”

front page is taken up with a “suppressed passage” from the memoirs of Napoleon, although it is more likely that it is all of Berthold’s invention. “[I]n less than fifteen years from the present time... the whole European system will be changed. Revolution will succeed revolution until every nation becomes acquainted with its individual rights” (1831a, 1). It continues, “The people have only to know that all power emanates from themselves” (ibid.).



Figure 4, left. Emma Osbourn. 2011. Berthold’s Political Handkerchief Edition 1, 3rd September 1831 [photograph]. Image courtesy of The Janey Buchan Political Song Collection, Glasgow University.

Figure 5, right. Emma Osbourn. 2011. Berthold’s Political Handkerchief Edition 1, 3rd September 1831 [photograph]. Image courtesy of The Janey Buchan Political Song Collection, Glasgow University.

He urges, through the “voice” of Napoleon for people to rise up and revolt against national debt and government. It is overt and highly provocative, advocating revolution. The image of Napoleon is in a pose similar to that of Washington on the handkerchief. He is seated on a horse, rearing up, a heroic imperial figure, which gives us messages of connotation. Both the Washington handkerchief and the “paper” have implied mythical meaning. Myth is generally associated with classical fables, but for the semiotician, there is a different meaning. For Barthes, myth is the combination of denotation, the literal meaning and connotation, the implied meaning. The myth becomes a signifier of an ideology. Napoleon symbolizes revolution, the turning of the old order. Myth transforms story into nature, making cultural or ideological values seem natural, normal or self-evident. Textiles, especially functional ones have a way of covertly creeping into our consciousness.

The handkerchief declares Washington to be the “Founder and Protector of America’s Liberty and Independence”. He is surrounded by a series of eight flags. It has imperialistic overtones. Contemporary correspondence suggests he was very aware of “image management”. There was also the dichotomy of

seeking power, but never seeming to be seeking it. There was a fear “of the social destructiveness of untrammelled egoism and ambition”. Longmore says, “basic to the ideology and psychology of the American revolution was a fear of power, almost an obsession with it as expansive and corrupting and ultimately oppressive”(Longmore c1988, 171).

The flags surrounding Washington are generally described as “flags of local militia” states John R Monsky in “Finding America in its First Political Textile” (2002, 244), but they have a much deeper significance for the observer of the day. The red and white striped flag was the symbol of revolutionary unity. A symbol under which the colonial states could unite. At the time that this textile was probably produced, no one flag had been adopted. The “Stars and Stripes” was formally adopted on June 14th 1777. A flag with the thirteen stripes and a Union Jack in the canton had been used, but it had caused Washington problems. When he raised it outside Boston on 1st January 1776, the British mistook it as a sign of surrender. Therefore, the Union Jack was dropped and the thirteen stripes remained, reflecting the ‘union’ of the 13 colonies, although nothing had been formalized at this point. It therefore seems possible that this handkerchief was produced after 1st January 1776, but before June 14th 1777(ibid., 245).

The flag with the Pine tree was associated with New England, the tree being a symbol of the timber industry. It would have had a further semiotic significance, reminding the observer of the time of the “Pine Tree Riots” of 1772, an act of resistance to British Authority and one of the many events leading up to the Revolution. The third flag is the Rattlesnake Flag, the predecessor of this flag bore the snake and the motto “Join or Die” it had been the rallying call, urging colonists to unite and fight in the French and Indian War. It became widely used in protests in 1765 and 1774. The symbolism of the rattlesnake was very potent to the colonists; firstly it was indigenous to the Americas. It also represented that, they, like the rattlesnake they were not looking for trouble, but if provoked they were more than capable of defending themselves. The last flag could well be the designer’s attempt to make a truly American Flag, it shows the thirteen stripes rearranged as spokes (ibid., 246).



Figure 6. Attributed to John Hewson. C 1776. Washington Handkerchief [cotton handkerchief 30.5” x 33”] Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

Napoleon was a soldier who had risen through the ranks and became a general and had made himself Emperor. Berthold's connoted message could be that the ordinary person can overcome the ruling classes, however Napoleon made himself a de facto monarch, was deposed and died in exile. A contemporary publication, "The Tatler" is quoted in the second edition, saying that the contents of the newspaper are "pungent" and declaims Napoleon as a bad example of democracy. It was common for newspapers at this time to quote from each other and from literature in general. The extract from the Tatler then goes on to speak about the significance of the "paper" being printed on cloth, stating that cloth has been always been full of meaning, but in the past it had only been used in displays of nationalism, in the use of flags or as a signification of religions affiliations, but now the role of fabric had changed (Berthold 1831b, 3).

"Now, from our youth upwards, linen hath played its part in the instruction of mankind, from the most elementary portions of it up to the manifest and most practical. Innumerable hath been the "printed cottons" that have diffused knowledge.... In short handkerchiefs have on sundry occasions given us their opinion on important matters especially those affecting our two infancies, the physical and the political. ... [W]e have now however to speak of the most talkative piece of cotton which it hath ever been our fortune to meet ... a gentleman drew forth from his pocket on the eve of last Sabbath and exhibited to our wondering eyes" (Berthold 1831b, 3).

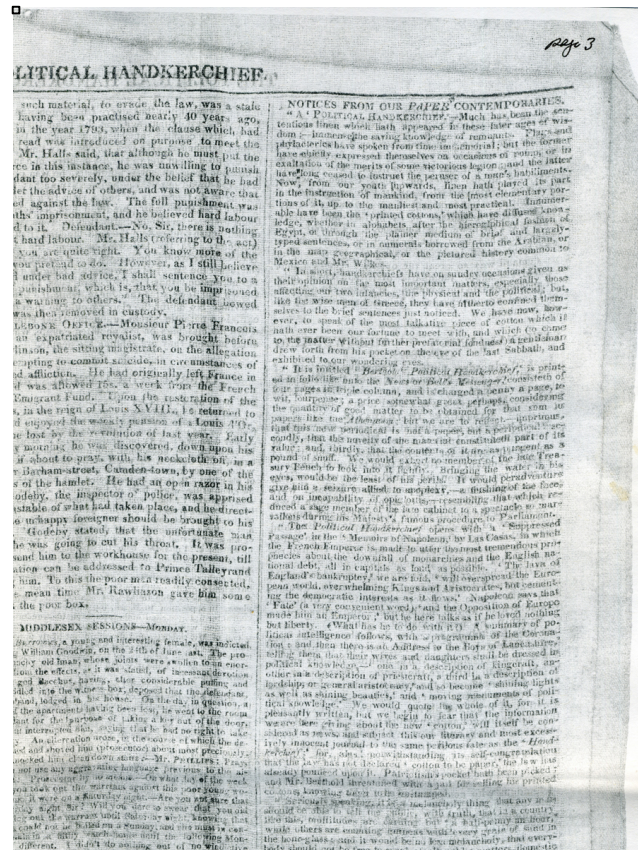


Figure 7. Bob Clarke. 2012. *Berthold's Political Handkerchief Edition 2*, 10th September 1831 [photocopy]. Image courtesy of Bob Clarke.

Both the “paper” and the handkerchief can be concealed. Cotton is the perfect medium for articles that may need to be hidden, but they can also be displayed, showing commitment to a cause. The quote also speaks about the instructive nature of cloth. Around the 1800s there was a growing awareness of the value of education, and handkerchiefs were one of many types of teaching aid. It is still possible to buy children’s handkerchiefs in the UK with the days of the week or nursery rhymes on them. A further meaning is that the handkerchief is used on children to clean and comfort as well as now to inform and teach in their “political infancy”.

Berthold then goes on to describe the forthcoming coronation of William IV in detail. It is a strange contrast to read passages that promote the idea of revolution then on the next page to describe the proceedings of a Coronation. He says, “It is well to register all these things, to see what they are, what they cost, what they are worth and what they mean” (Berthold 1831a, 2). He prefaces this by describing the “newspaper” ironically as a “Commemorative Coronation Handkerchief” and finishes saying, “perhaps this Coronation farce is the last to be played amongst the peoples of Europe, and may serve you ... as an important document of antiquity” (ibid.). In completely different ways the “paper” and the Washington Handkerchief are both “alternative” Coronation Handkerchiefs, one ironically and the other metaphorically.

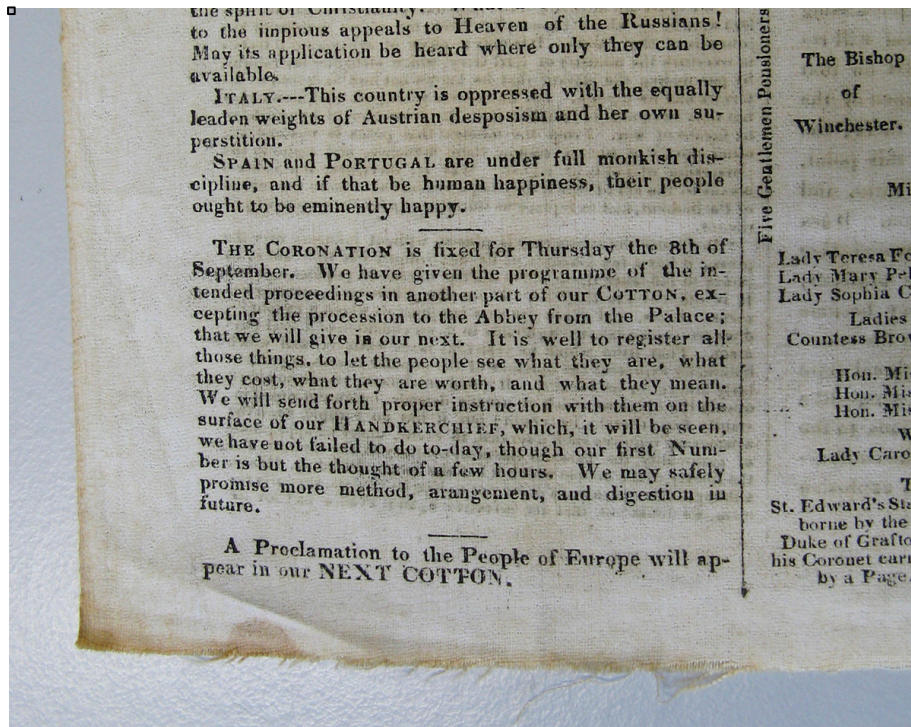


Figure 8. Emma Osbourn. 2011. Berthold’s Political Handkerchief Edition 1, 3rd September 1831 [photograph]. Image courtesy of The Janey Buchan Political Song Collection, Glasgow University.

There is further significance in a quote from the edition dated 5th September 1831: “To the Boys of Lancashire”. (By which he means Lancashire, Britain.) “Now lads put all your looms in order, here is a bit for you, a new pattern handkerchief, printed on the best article you can manufacture. We have no patent for this new pocket-handkerchief because we intend to advocate the interest of the working people, and consequently do not intend to pay any tax for our knowledge to the tyranny that oppresses us”(Berthold 1831a, 3).

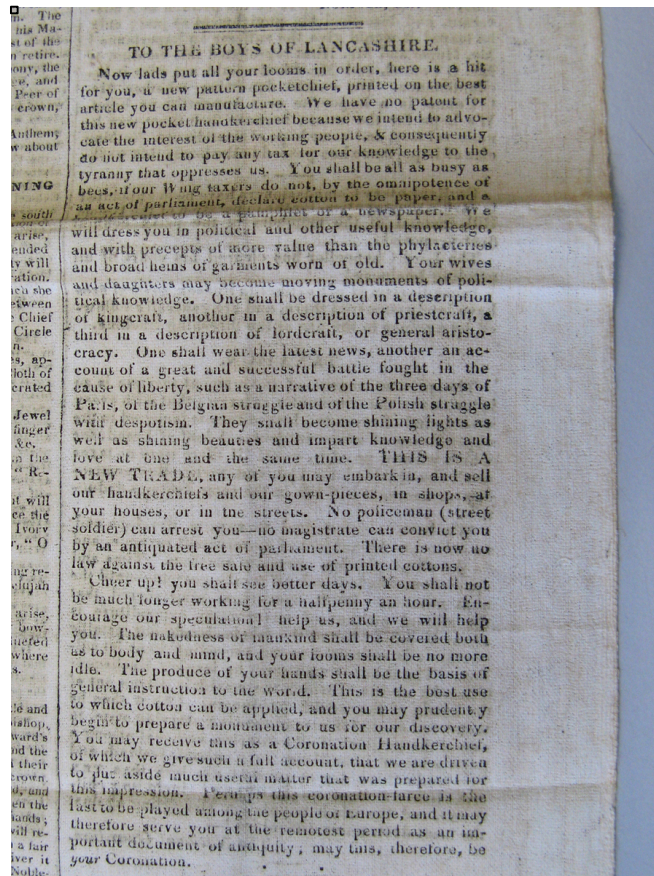


Figure 9. Emma Osbourn. 2011. Berthold's Political Handkerchief Edition 1, 3rd September 1831 [photograph]. Image courtesy of The Janey Buchan Political Song Collection, Glasgow University.

A political statement on a political statement! He is stating his allegiance with textiles workers. The publication is not only in their interest as it means their product will be more in demand, but he also allies himself with the workers as it will aid their access to knowledge, “untaxed” knowledge. Bertold’s Political Handkerchief is full of denotation. It is literally a political handkerchief, but also carries messages of connotation, aligning it with instructional textiles, and symbols of nationalism. He finishes with a political comment on the American cotton market rivaling the British one. He states his allegiance to “home” industry, appealing to the workingman, while circumventing the tax on knowledge imposed by the ruling class. He also introduces the idea that the “paper” can be reused, but this time reprinted with new information, a practical solution to the costs of newspapers. It is not clear whether the cotton for the Washington handkerchief would have been produced in the United States of America. If it were it would make it a doubly significant symbol of burgeoning American nationalism. An especially compelling symbol of America's Independence, as the textile industries had been source of contention.

The final layer of meanings can be read from the wording on the Washington handkerchief. He is depicted, surrounded by symbols that would have been unmistakable to the contemporary viewer, but further to this, the words that are arranged around his image have further significance. The term protector would have also had a strong significance to the viewer of the time, states Monsky, it brings to

mind Oliver Cromwell, who overthrew the British crown and ruled as Lord Protector of Britain and Ireland in 1653. This references the philosophical ideals of Cromwell’s revolution. In 1774 a pamphlet had been published with an image of Cromwell on the front cover, telling of Cromwell coming back to life to liberate Boston from the British, which was in fact what Washington had done. An ancestor of Hewson, Colonel John Hewson, the regicide, was one of Cromwell’s generals and had been one of those who had signed King Charles the First’s death warrant. There are of course parallels between these two historical figures referred to by these two textiles (Monsky 2002, 250).



Figure 10. Attributed to John Hewson. C 1776. Washington Handkerchief [cotton handkerchief 30.5” x 33”] Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

The final words “America’s Liberty and Independence”, as Monsky states, this was an important distinction, George Washington is upholding the Liberty of America, not the liberty of British subjects in a British Colony but a declaration of liberty and independence from the British Crown. This is an echoing of the Declaration of Independence (ibid., 251). This statement at that time would have been considered as treason against the Crown. What looks like a quaint folk textile, is in fact a bold declaration of nationhood and rebellion. It is contemporary with all the beginnings of American nationhood, confident in its revolutionary imagery. It is a symbol that engendered a “cohesive” revolution, expressing feelings that were in line with public popular opinion. The imagery on the kerchief connotes him as founder of a nation and upholder of liberty. It is a de facto coronation

handkerchief, a perfect example of Barthes' "myth". It is telling that whereas a textile is not dated, a print would have been more likely to have a date on it.

"What did they do, our grandmothers, as they sat spinning all the day? Are we not ourselves the web they wove?"(Ulrich 2001) This is an anonymous toast from *The Age of Homespun*. These two textiles are concrete, material manifestations of an ideology. They still exist probably because they were produced on cloth rather than paper. It is the cloth that gives them further significance, in the case of the handkerchief; it could be the first example of the American Nationhood, a visual declaration of independence. Possibly produced on home produced cotton, giving it further semiotic significance. It is also very much a product of its time. The "newspaper" fulfils the role of disseminating information to the working classes, circumvention a "tax on knowledge", as well as promoting a British industry. The imagery of Napoleon as a revolutionary appropriated and skewed with Berthold's politics. These objects as myth also serve to make new ideologies more acceptable. What better way to insinuate a new ideology, than in a textile object? An object that can seem unimportant, trivial or decorative can be even more powerful, as it slips into our consciousness surreptitiously. A further layer of significance comes from the cloth itself, fabric is semiotically charged even before it has any imagery added to it. As textiles are omnipresent, they can also be perceived as neutral, having little or no meaning, being of little significance. Often overlooked by historians, textiles can be seen as decorative objects, or dismissed as women's work.

How would we view this type of object today? Some commemorative handkerchiefs were produced for the recent Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth, but now people would be more likely to buy a plastic flag, or plastic Union Jack hat. At the time that these were produced I believe they were persuasive symbols, full of imagery and text that promoted new ideologies. I wonder if we could make anything today that would carry such rich denotation, connotation and myth, and mean as much to us as it would have done to the observers of the day. Now it is not so necessary to conceal and encode our politics. We, instead produce textiles with endless arrays of semiotic signifiers stating our allegiances to sports teams and huge corporations, we have moved from being revolutionaries to being consumers.

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