

THEORY

FLOATING SIGNIFIER

A floating signifier is a symbol or concept (for example, the Zapatista balaclava) that's loose enough to mean many things to many people, yet specific enough to galvanize action in a particular direction.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Andrew Boyd

Andrew Boyd is an author, humorist and long-time veteran of creative campaigns for social change. He is Wrangler-in-Chief Emeritus at Beautiful Trouble.

Dave Oswald Mitchell

Dave is Beautiful Trouble's political corrections officer and the co-editor of *Beautiful Trouble: Toolbox for Revolution* and *Beautiful Rising: Creative Resistance from the Global South*.

Jonathan Matthew Smucker

Jonathan Matthew Smucker is a long-time participant, organizer, trainer, and theorist in grassroots movements for social, economic and ecological justice, and has trained thousands of change agents in campaign strategy, framing and messaging, direct action, and other grassroots organizing skills. He is co-founder and Director of Beyond the Choir, a strategy and training organization.

"FINDING THE RIGHT FLOATING SIGNIFIER CAN MAKE OR BREAK A SOCIAL MOVEMENT."

"We are . . . the face that hides itself to be seen."
—Subcomandante Marcos

The American flag inspires extreme passions . . . but what exactly does it stand for? To different people it means freedom, justice, imperialism, and terror — its meaning shifts wildly depending on context and observer. This emptiness, into which observers can pour almost any meaning or desire, is a large part of the symbol's power.

For activists, a well-crafted floating signifier can be a powerful tool for catalyzing broad-based action. Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, for example, deployed the concept of the floating signifier masterfully. Marcos described the masks the Zapatistas wore as a mirror in which all who struggle for a better world can see themselves. The Zapatistas' iconic black balaclava was not just a necessity for personal security, but became a powerful statement of unity and universality. "Behind our black mask," they declared, "we are you".

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Battle of the Camel
- Every Heartbeat Counts
- Flower Speech Campaign
- Harry Potter Alliance
- Manich Msamah
- Occupy Wall Street
- Québec Student Strike
- Reclaim the Streets
- Standing Man
- Street Graduation
- The Salt March
- Whose Tea Party?
- Yomango
- "You'll never have a home in your f***ing life!"

In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama also made masterful use of floating signifiers. His poetic rhetoric of “hope” and “change we can believe in” inspired a population weary from eight years of misrule. He became whatever his supporters wanted him to be. Obama explicitly acknowledged this phenomenon in the prologue to his campaign screed, *The Audacity of Hope*: “I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.”

Finding the right floating signifier can make or break a social movement or campaign. When a social movement hits upon such a catalyzing symbol, it’s like striking gold. One might even argue that broad social movements are constituted in the act of finding their floating signifier. Previously disparate groups suddenly congeal into a powerful aligned force. Momentum is on their side, and things that seemed impossible only yesterday become visible on the horizon.

Indeed, the power of a good floating signifier was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the overnight growth of Occupy Wall Street. Far eclipsing the literal physical occupation in Zucotti Park, Occupy Wall Street resonated so far and wide because it served as a symbol about standing up to powerful elites on their own doorstep. To many people, the “occupy” in “Occupy Wall Street” essentially stands in for the F word. Millions of Americans were waiting for someone or something to stand up to Wall Street, the big banks, the mega-corporations, and the political elite. Then one day, a relatively small crew of audacious and persistent New Yorkers became that someone or something — became the catalyzing symbol of defiance we’d been waiting for. And by having an open process, and not fixing its meaning early with a ten-point program or the like, the symbol was able to continue “floating.”

It’s not that the symbol is empty of meaning. Both “occupy” and “the 99%” carry content that strategically frames public thinking and pulls the political discourse in a clear direction. But a degree of ambiguity is absolutely necessary if such a symbol is to catalyze a broad alignment. If the symbol’s meaning becomes too particular — too associated with any one current or group within the alignment — it risks losing its powerfully broad appeal. This is why the forces defending the status quo try to nail it down. Their hope is that by fixing it to particular meanings, associating it with particular “kinds of people” and to narrower frameworks, it will no longer function as a popular symbol.

Float on, beautiful signifier. Float on.

*This article incorporates passages from a blog post by Jonathan Matthew Smucker, *The Tactic of Occupation and the Movement of the 99%*.*

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

- Zapatista Caravan

Tactics

- Culture jamming
- Distributed action
- Divestment
- Electoral guerrilla theatre
- Hashtag campaign
- Hoax
- Identity correction
- Light Brigade
- Media-jacking
- Occupation

Principles

- Balance art and message
- Brand or be branded
- Change a name to change the game
- Consider your audience
- Know your cultural terrain
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Recapture the flag
- Reframe the issue
- Seek common ground
- Seize the means of communication
- Show, don’t tell
- Think narratively
- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Use the power of ritual

Theories

- Artivism
- Ethical spectacle
- Memes
- People’s “Shock Doctrine”
- Prefigurative politics
- The tactics of everyday life

Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Ladder of engagement
- SMART objectives

TAGS

Campaign strategy,

LEARN MORE

Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings
Subcommandante Marcos, 2002

https://books.google.com/books/about/Our_Word_is_Our_Weapon.html?id=R_X-WmHOZoEC

Communications, Digital
organizing, Social media,
Movement building