

The Symbol Redeemed

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Postscript from *Swastika: A Symbol Beyond Redemption?* Allworth Press, 2008

The very first response I received upon publication of *The Swastika: A Symbol Beyond Redemption?*, was a lengthy letter accusing me of “cultural colonialism,” written by a Native American graphic designer, who was then living in the Southwest but had earlier attended the School of Visual Arts in New York. He was not so much angry as profoundly disappointed. After admitting he had been looking forward to the book, believing I would handle the issue “with sophistication and sensitivity,” he voiced his shock at what he claimed was my wholesale disregard of the swastika’s rightful place in the symbolic liturgy of his and other cultures in the Americas and elsewhere. By arguing against redemption and implicitly denying the existence of an untarnished swastika in the twenty-first century, I was perpetuating the same kind of cultural co-optation that has plagued Native Americans since the first trademark with a generic Indian was used to promote a commercial tobacco product back in the nineteenth century.

Frankly, he was right.

But I was *not* wrong.

Since 2000 when *The Swastika: A Symbol Beyond Redemption?* was first published, I have been asked numerous times, at lectures, seminars, classes, and by magazine and radio interviewers if I truly believe the swastika is indeed beyond redemption now and forever. Because the title of the book is written in the form of a question, the conclusion was not necessarily going to be definitive. There must be room for discussion, debate, then reevaluation on this issue, and I always welcome different viewpoints when presenting my polemic (and this is a polemical history, not a linear, narrative one) to students and the public. I remember being a guest on one radio call-in show shortly after publication, when an elderly woman from the Midwest asked me whether she should destroy a blanket with a swastika given to her when she was a little girl by her grandmother. She was clearly concerned that by retaining this artifact she was doing something bad. I said she should definitely keep the gift because it was made long before the Nazis came to power, and obviously had some deep sentimental value for her. Clearly not all swastikas represent the same thing.

Understanding the complexities around the swastika is important. Nevertheless, and contrary to the book’s title, I do end the first edition by strenuously questioning the symbol’s ultimate redemption. And I particularly object to the misappropriation of the Nazi swastika by punk rockers and skateboard companies who I accuse of mindlessly using the symbol for affect—and, believe me, I’m being generous in using the term “mindlessness.” Yet stupid applications of the swastika today—like in 2006 when a Hong Kong fashion chain, IZZUE, produced a range of T-shirts and pants with Nazi symbols printed on them—are not my only *betes noir*.

As long as Nazi icons are knowingly used as tools (and weapons) of prejudice and hate (witness the many scrawls on grave stones and synagogues around the world), then it is impossible to justify returning the swastika to its original meaning, particularly in Western societies where the history is still fresh in the mass consciousness—yes, even after over half a century. Moreover, and this is key for me, given that each passing year there are fewer and fewer survivors of the Holocaust, the swastika must remain one of the principle mnemonics of this horrific epoch; to reprieve it would constitute a grave injustice to the victims of genocide.

My understanding as a designer and educator of how powerful signs are over mass and individual conscious and subconscious leads me to the conclusion that images that stand for evil (if only for a brief period) should not be rehabilitated without undergoing considerable circumspection. And what symbol embodies more evil in this era than the swastika?

The reason for writing the book in the first place was to argue the point as much with myself as with readers. After all, much is “felt” about the swastika (pro and con) but less is truly known about it. Given its extraordinary longevity and expansive diaspora, as already explained in this book, it is imperative that we reflect on its historical convolution before passing definitive judgments. Admittedly, I had a bias going into the project, but I also honestly wanted to find ways of mitigating it, of “feeling” differently. But in the end, while I am not calling outright for a ban (what kind of liberal would I be), I embrace a position that may indeed be justifiably viewed as “cultural colonialism.” Just as certain words and images are taboo in specific contexts and cultures for any number of more trivial reasons, the swastika, while not the literal perpetrator of the crime, was one of the symbolic weapons used in its execution. So, like a proponent of gun control, I am an advocate of swastika control.

I’m not alone in this view. Clearly the two events quoted at the top of this essay prove that in the West, the swastika remains charged. While the Zara handbag was made in India where the green swastika, which woven into the corners, was done without malice as a token of luck, it was perceived as vile. Although the navy barracks built in the shape of a swastika could never be seen as such on the ground, users of Google Earth found it and voiced their objections. There are only two of many similar responses today to the ancient sign.

There are, however, vocal dissenters who fervently argue that Hitler’s usurpation of the swastika was merely an aberration and that the statute of limitations is now over. Others insist that only by prying the Nazi grip off the swastika, reclaiming it, and restoring it to the original benign meaning, can Hitler’s tyranny over it be expunged. There are still others who ask, rightly, why the Hammer and Sickle is not perceived as harshly, since under Stalin more people were imprisoned or murdered. And then there are those who simply refuse to cede the symbol to the forces of evil without a fight. I sympathize with these views, but I can also come up with counter argument: Nazism was an aberration, but a decidedly incredible one, and the swastika came to symbolize the worst that man can do to man. Reclaiming its original meaning is fine,

but that should not mean somehow ignoring its Nazi implications. The Hammer and Sickle, created after the October revolution, stood not for Lenin or Stalin but for the Soviet Union. Stalin had no part in designing it and it stood for the nation long after his death. Conversely, the swastika was synonymous with Hitler, in large part because it was “his” symbol for “his” regime. Now, as far as evil is concerned, a combination of historical fact and Allied propaganda made the swastika an indelible sign of horror, whether we like it or not.

I’m willing to admit that my own viewpoint is plagued by emotionalism. I have been criticized for writing a “personal” history, not a dispassionate narrative. Nonetheless, reason does play a part in my firm stand against redemption in Western cultures. The German government’s long-term prohibition of its public display in Germany, except for historical documentary purposes (even in flea markets today, black markers or tape obliterates the image on wartime memorabilia), was legislated not because the Nazis were just one of many repressive regimes that lost a war and faded into history. It was a paradigm of how terror became the official policy of a civilized state and how a populace was seduced into accepting its crimes (in fact, how crimes were made legal, as Hitler would say, “under the swastika”). Regimes come and go either by force or election—even the defeated Italian Fascists and their face’s emblem is viewed (rightly or wrongly) by history without the same revulsion as the Nazis—but only once in the twentieth century has a totalitarian entity as the Nazis with such extraordinary symbolic trappings been such a touchstone—and prime example—of the worst instincts of mankind. Politics alone does not explain why the Allies sought to stamp out all traces of Nazism in their denazification period. They understood how effectively Hitler inveigled his way into the young generation. In truth, and given its own hypocritical opportunism, because the U.S. failed to eliminate the Nazis (the State Department allowed many into the U.S.), banning the swastika was little more than a symbolic gesture, albeit one I support.

The Swastika is a tragic case. It is a historical irony that this ancient manifestation of good luck and fortune bears such a horrible stigma. But from the moment it was adopted by the Nazis, it became a mark (and as I said before, a weapon) of hate. Misappropriated as it was, Hitler referred to it as an anti-Semitic emblem under which his forces would exclude the enemy from all facets of German life. Once it was introduced as the Nazi logo, there was no turning back. Obviously, many people felt that way back in the twenties and thirties, and many individuals and companies (from Rudyard Kipling to Coca Cola) who used the swastika longer than it was in Nazi hands for commercial or personal reasons rejected any connection to it. The same principle should apply today. I believe not enough time has passed before the negative connotations are shed. Which begs the big question: what is enough time?