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“Still Underexposed”? – Some Remarks On The Problematic Relationship Between Visual Communication, Political Science, and Civic Education

Abstract

Political science in the German-speaking world is only concerned peripherally with pictures. In the course of the “iconic turn” during the 1990s visual political communication became an issue of more weight, but other disciplines like art history still have more competence when it comes to analysing pictures. Thus, the basic question remains: How can we achieve a sustainable “iconic turn” in political science and civic education? The article proposes an answer in three parts: Its first chapter describes the relationship between political science, civic education, and visual communication in the German-speaking world. The effort to map this scattered research landscape ought to be a contribution to its transnational connectivity. The second part reflects on the special “power of pictures”. It argues that pictures probably have specific persuasive power, but nonetheless are neutral political tools (just like words). Obviously they can be exploited by liars, but quite as well they can serve as helpful information resources (e.g. in civic education). Finally, the third chapter claims that political science should try and learn from visually more competent disciplines like art history or communication science. All in all this leads to the final conclusion that political communication research should turn its attention to pictoriality.

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Keywords

Visual communication, political communication, iconic turn, pictoriality, visual history, political science, civic education, visual competence

Introduction

Visual communication and political science share a problematic relationship. Evidently, visual communication is quite central to political processes in media societies. By contrast, political science (at least in the German-speaking world) still is only concerned with pictures at the sidelines. When the “iconic turn” (alias “pictorial turn”) consolidated transdisciplinary pictorial research during the 1990s visual political communication became an issue of more weight in political science, too. But still, other disciplines (like art history) seem to have more

competence when it comes to analysing pictures. Thus, the following text poses the basic questions: How can we achieve a sustainable “iconic turn” in political science? How can we provide researchers and students with visual literacy, visual competence, or awareness of pictorial problems?

Trying to answer these questions, the article is split in three parts: At first it addresses some short remarks on the relationship between political science, civic education, and visual communication in the German-speaking world. Hopefully the effort to map this scattered research landscape will be a contribution to its sustainability and to its transnational connectivity. The second chapter gives an outline of another problematic relationship, i.e. the fundamental connection between visibility and political communication. In contrast to positions which overemphasise the role of pictures in propaganda and manipulation of public spheres, I would argue in favour of a more complex and pragmatic perspective. In the first place pictures are neutral political tools. Obviously they can support the work of propagandists, but quite as well they can be helpful brokers of information badly needed or even visualise truisms. Thus, it is important to describe the special properties which are attributed to visual media in public and scientific discourse: The article argues that these supposed qualities make pictures interesting to policy-makers. Equally, some of these pictorial properties can make pictures interesting to civic education, too. Finally, the third chapter sketches out some ideas of how to develop and stabilize a sustainable “iconic turn” in political science. It argues that political science (and civic education) should try and learn from visually more competent disciplines like art history or communication science.

1. Visual Communication and Political Science

Political pictures and pictorial politics have always been objects of transdisciplinary research. But broadly speaking political science (in the German-speaking world) has been rather hesitantly according to pictures until very recently. On the one hand there were exceptional case studies in the 1980s of course (e.g. Loiperdinger 1987; Paul 1984; Freier 1984). Yet, on the other hand, browsing through standard works like handbooks and lexicons of the 1990s it is easy to see that visual competence was still not really important for the mainstream of our discipline then: One will hardly find descriptions of terms like “political picture”, “political iconography”, or “visual political communication” there (e.g. Nohlen 1998; Drechsler, Hilligen, Neumann 1995). When the “iconic turn” consolidated transdisciplinary pictorial research during the 1990s visibility became an issue of more weight in political science, too. But Ulrich Sarcinelli (2005, 100), who has been very important in establishing political communication research and teaching in Germany, correctly writes that pictures are “still underexposed” there.¹

One major problem in this respect is the basic perspective of political science (and civic education; see Besand 2006) on pictorial questions. When visual communication was made a subject of discussion during the 1990s it was often connected with propaganda respectively manipulation. Some very well thought-out publications took up this position, too (e.g. Meyer 1992; Paul 1990). But on the whole it seems like a common prejudice of “genuine” political phenomena beneath the surface of pictures and visual staging barred the way to a sophisticated mainstream dispute on the public role of visual communication in political science. Even nowadays, visual communication is rather often thought of as non-political as such and all on the surface. From this perspective visual media have replaced deliberation by a superficial and propagandistic media democracy (Meyer 2001).

Though always more or less peripheral and scattered, visual political communication has been an object of transdisciplinary research throughout the 20th century. Historian Frank Kämpfer (e.g. 1978 + 1997) for instance has published basic literature concerning pictorial politics ever since the 1970s. During the 1990s visual political communication research was performed by historians like Kämpfer, communication scientists, and as well by art historians.

¹In the original: „Dabei kommt dem Bild für die Politikvermittlung nicht erst in der Gegenwart eine zentrale, in der politischen Kommunikationsforschung nach wie vor unterbelichtete Rolle zu“.

"Political iconography" for example was institutionally established by Martin Warnke (e.g. 1994) in the WARBURG-HAUS <http://www.warburg-haus.de> in Hamburg. Art historian studies close to this tradition have fostered our knowledge of visual roots in political theory (Bredekamp 1999) or of public pictures (Diers 1997) for example. Marion G. Müller (e.g. 1997) as well as Dietmar Schiller (e.g. 2002) connected political iconography with political science, while Andreas Dörner (e.g. 2000) used a semiotic approach. Furthermore, the German Political Science Association established a subgroup called "Visual politics" ("VISUELLE POLITIK" <http://www.visuelle-politik.net>) in 1995 which has been rather productive for more than a decade now (e.g. Hofmann 1999 + 2006). Besides, some established political scientists like Herfried Münkler (1994+1995), Klaus von Beyme (1998), or Wilhelm Hennis (2000) have tried to broaden the visual horizon of their discipline. Thus, since the second half of the 1990s, something like a "small iconic turn" was being established in political science. Which are the reasons for this increasing interest in visual political questions? One major factor is "zeitgeist": An inflation of "cultural turns" in humanities was complemented during the 1990s by the "iconic turn" throughout cultural studies and social sciences (see Bachmann-Medick 2006). Thus, it was only a matter of time when political scientists would try and combine both turns, which Wilhelm Hofmann (2004) for example did explicitly in an anthology called "Politikwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft". Additionally, popular theses of American authors like Vicky Goldberg (1991) or Susan Sontag (e.g. 2003) concerning visual political communication were adopted in German-speaking scientific communities, too. And it is also the fact that in the course of contemporary media events from the "Gulf War" to the "Iraq War" (sometimes labelled as "Bilderkrieg", see Paul 2005), as well as "9-11", or the "Death of Pope John Paul II" important aspects of visual political communication have repeatedly been disputed in arenas of public discourse – a tendency which of course affects scientific discourse, too.

In the meantime visual political communication as a research landscape has become somewhat more coherent. There is an increase of relevant conferences, seminars, or lectures and a new generation of transdisciplinary scientists is working in this field: Many of them are trained in art history and/or political science, but their research topics go beyond the traditional scope of these disciplines (though some art historians have implemented equivalent research projects already decades ago; e.g. Warnke 1977; Bredekamp 1975): Their publications concern a broad range of issues like the value of photographs as political scientific sources (Matjan 2002), the problematic relationship of (visual) aesthetics and civic education (Besand 2004), the relation of body images and power (Diehl 2005), the political role of digital picture libraries (Drechsel 2005), non-authorized portraits of policy-makers in advertising (Zenk 2006), the visual language of printed political media (Wolf 2006), or the underestimation of visual political perception by traditional research (Mayerhofer 2006). Obviously, visual propaganda remains an important research topic, if not the most important one, in those studies as well (e.g. Klotz 2006; Loch 2006).

Still, the relevant research landscape is rather scattered because there are hardly any canonical textbooks, websites, or outstanding periodicals exclusively concerning visual political communication (efforts to change this are e.g. <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/>; <http://politik-visuell.de>; <http://www.bildpolitik.de>). Thus it is difficult to get a complete overview. But lately some researchers have started publishing surveys in an effort to map significant parts of the scientific approaches towards the analysis of visual political communication in the German-speaking world (e.g. Grittmann 2007; Paul 2006; Müller 2003). Furthermore, Thomas Knieper and Marion G. Müller (e.g. 2001 + 2004) have published a series of anthologies concerning visual questions which are helpful in this respect, too. Seen altogether it seems rather plausible that the "iconic turn" in cultural studies and social sciences is affecting political science, but it is not clear where this trend will lead to finally. Especially transdisciplinary approaches like political iconography or "Visual History" (Paul 2006) seem to be a chance in creating the needed coherence of research topics and organisations. Events like the 46th German "Historikertag" in 2006 with its leitmotif "Geschichtsbilder" are important steps towards creating a stable scientific community concerned with pictorial politics (<http://www.uni-konstanz.de/historikertag>). Finally, this trend might lead to the usual canonisation of certain methods, authors, and political media icons –

for instance Gerhard Paul (2008) is currently editing a large-scale publication called “Das Jahrhundert der Bilder”, and there are other quite similar scientific projects in the making.

2. The Power of Pictures

Independent of the research conjunctures commented on above, pictures are and have always been central to political communication. Rather easily, one can find a broad range of relevant topics concerning much more than just public manipulation: This broad range varies from different media such as political architecture, memorials, press photography, or party websites to problem areas like national symbols, propaganda, public visibility (versus public invisibility), or the visual construction of individual and collective identity.

Speaking generally, pictures have been connected with political cultures throughout human history. In order to understand this connection more accurately it is important to distinguish different genres, formats, and phenomena of visual political communication in different spaces and times. In this respect historical knowledge is important: Oil paintings for instance nowadays have obviously a smaller role in representing or remembering sovereigns than school books, documentary films, and press photography in European societies. But the paintings were very important for the representation of power during early modern times when film and photography did not yet exist (Warnke 2006). The progress of media influences visual politics; thus, the change to digital media since the end of the 20th century is likely to alter politics in some ways, too (from a non-visual point of view e.g. Bieber/Meyer 2007; Bieber/Leggewie 2001). On the other hand, special formats of visual political communication like monuments seem to be spatially and historically ubiquitous. Thus, whereas content of pictorial politics is perpetually changing, it is very plausible that visual communication will remain a central part of global political cultures during the 21st century. Evidently, pictures are important to the work of policy-makers – but why? What is the “power of pictures” making them so attractive to political agents? In order to answer these questions, it is important to describe the special properties which are attributed (whether rightfully or wrongfully) to visual media in public and scientific discourse. Most of them concern especially photography, TV, and virtual reality, but, in a weaker sense, other pictorial formats as well: First of all, it is often said that visual media attract much more attention than written texts and draw their viewers into a world of their own (e.g. Faßler 2002, 146f; Meckel 2001, 26). One can observe this (audio-)visual power when a child is placed in front of a TV and sits there like being hypnotized. But we should be aware of the fact that not all pictures by far are that immersive (thinking of social scientific information graphics e.g.), and that written text can be very immersive, too – one of our days most prominent examples is the “Harry Potter” series of novels that drew the attention of readers all over the world since the late 1990s. However, immersive kinds of pictures are interesting to political agents, because they can help to communicate their concerns in an attractive manner. That is to say, visuality fits perfectly into political communication strategies trying to arouse public attention by dramatising, staging, ritualising, personalising, or emotionalising political processes (see e.g. Meyer 2001; Tenschler 1998). Closely connected to these strategies is the “realistic” effect, which makes information documentary films or photographs deliver seemingly authentic and trustworthy. Because of this mimetic potential “realistic” pictures are often handled like doubles of reality (Boehm 1995, 35). They seem to speak for themselves (Sarcinelli 1998, 151) – though in fact they are constructions and have to be de-constructed just like written text. Elke Grittmann (2007) for instance has shown in detail how “realism” conventions of political pictures in newspapers work. Anyway, one should be rather cautious with the alleged power of pictorial “realism”: First of all these ambitions are limited to special visual genres like press photography – abstract painting for example has a different relationship to reality. Secondly, (post-)modern media recipients might have more elaborate strategies in deconstructing visual texts than researchers sometimes tend to think. And thirdly, no picture has one given meaning: Visual media are semantically polyvalent and thus objects of highly differing interpretations. Nevertheless, it is true that “realistic” visual formats like documentary

photography regularly are instrumentalised by mass media and other political agents as representations of historical reality (see e.g. Paul 2005; Hellmold 1999; Perlmutter 1998). Besides creation of attention and authenticity effects, another important reason for the usage of pictures by political agents may be the immediacy of visual information supply: Pictures seem to be much more fast and easy to read than written text (Kroeber-Riel 1993, 53). This is important to policy-makers who have to converge their time management to the rapid pace of digital mass media (Meyer 2001, 63-71). Once again, the simplicity of pictorial readability is ambiguous because only on a very superficial level pictures may be read quickly. It is hard and never ending work to grasp their iconographical and iconological meaning. A further reason for political agents to use pictures might be the fact that from antique philosophy down to present day's cultural studies pictures have been said to stir up emotions more easily than written text and to have a high memorability (e.g. Kappas/Müller 2006; Gombrich 1984, 137). In civic education this affective pictorial potential sometimes becomes a counter-argument against rational usability of visual political communication (Lesske 2005, 238). But to policy-makers it is rather an advantage, because in concert with their immersive potential, their assumed association with reality, and their putative intelligibility, the emotional capacity of pictures hints to the point that they might have a certain power of persuasion that distinguishes them from other rhetorical instruments (e.g. Hill 2004). Thus, political agents may hope that pictures being instrumentalised skilfully can stimulate attention as well as sympathy (or other positive emotions) towards their policies and improve their trustworthiness as well as the authenticity of their claims.

Civic education in Germany has reflected about pictures from time to time (e.g. Ehmer 1971; Claußen 1975 or Hoffmann 1982); especially political caricatures are in the focus of its interest (see Lesske 2005, 237). But civic education has been hesitating to benefit from pictures as supportive tools of its own work. The situation is paradoxical: On the one hand there is a strong believe in the (negative) "power of pictures", on the other hand educators often refuse to use this potential for their own purposes. Anja Besand (2004) has shown that this tendency goes together with a strong antipathy against aesthetics in general. Its genesis is quite similar to the problematic relationship between political science and pictures: Anti-iconic and anti-aesthetic perspectives claim that pictorial and aesthetic staging are always manifestations of manipulation. The argument is simple: Every picture tells a story – and every pictorial story tells a lie. Of course in political practice pictures are used often as tools of staging (see e.g. Haus der Geschichte 2000). But in stark contrast to positions which tend to overemphasise the role of pictures in propaganda and manipulation of public spheres, I would argue in favour of a more complex and pragmatic perspective. In the first place pictures are neutral political tools - just like words. Obviously they can support lies and propaganda (again: just like words). But their persuasive, mimetic, iconic, indexical, and symbolic power may be helpful in situations were information is badly needed: For example when intelligence services and police forces are searching special persons like terrorists via portraits of their faces or visualisations of their fingerprints, pictures even become political instruments in fighting against lies (see e.g. Cole 2002). However, lately the most important German institution of civic education, called "Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung" <http://www.bpb.de>, has changed its publication style (figures 1, 2):



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

at least coloured pictures are much more prominent than they were some years ago and visual political communication is being made a subject of discussion (e.g. http://www.bpb.de/themen/N49ABC,0,Bilder_in_Geschichte_und_Politik.html). This hints to the fact that in future years visibility will be an issue of particular importance not only to history didactic (see Hamann 2007) but to civic education as well.

3. Future perspectives: A sustainable “iconic turn”?

How can we achieve a sustainable “iconic turn” in political science and its reflection in civic education? How can we provide people interested in political communication with visual competence and awareness of pictorial problems? The answer is simple: Try and learn from visually more competent disciplines like art history, semiotics, philosophy, or communication science. On the one hand political science needs to improve its theoretical framework when it comes to pictures – as shown above (chapter 1) some political scientists have already started this project. On the other hand, visual studies mostly have a practical side, too, i.e. producing, seeing, and collecting of pictures are important aspects of visual literacy – and thus of visual civic education.

Pictorial competence is transdisciplinary by nature. Psychology, philosophy, design, cartography, education science, etc. – there is a long list of relevant disciplines and an endless list of their pictorial competences. Art history plays a central role in this field, so its research traditions may serve as a starting point for political scientists trying to prepare their visual studies. For example it is not coincidence that a great number of social scientists have written on the subject of the so-called “Berlin Wall”, while an art historian was the first one to write a substantial text about the fundamental visual aspect of this issue (Diers 1997, 121-141). That is to say political communication research needs to adopt visual competences or it will inevitably perpetuate blind spots like this one which have a negative effect on the validity of its research.

For centuries, art historians have been collecting and saving their pictorial findings. The result can be seen nowadays in museums, photo collections, university slide libraries, or digital databases. These institutions create something like a materialistic and intellectual backbone of scientific art history. In past times copper engraving or collections of plaster casts were being used as visual material in teaching art history, nowadays jpegs and other data files are standard formats (see Bruhn 2000; Kohle 1997). Thus, media change, but visual competence stays.

Quite contrary, political science (in the German-speaking world) has no such tradition. By and large it is based on libraries and archives containing text in written form. But as visual demand in research and teaching will continue to grow, learning from art history might give us the chance to change something here. One major art history trend of the past years was the transformation of university slide libraries into digital picture libraries (see Kohle/Kwastek 2003). As these slide libraries tend to have their own structures and rules of organisation this was and is seen as a chance of creating networks between formerly monolithic collections. In Germany, the probably most prominent project of this sort is called “Prometheus” <http://www.prometheus-bildarchiv.de> – The Distributed Digital Image Archive for Research & Tuition”. Its central idea is connecting different digital picture libraries by a software and thus creating a new collection composed of all pictures in the respective databases (see Versteegen 2003). Prometheus started in April 2001 and was online a year and a half later. In 2004 it contained 150.000 pictures. In December 2007, more than 450.000 pictures were available through Prometheus. The network then consisted of 43 databases. Their content was being used via more than 6.500 single accounts.

So, what is the salient point here? Though the Prometheus project is highly controversial, it is an example of a simple collection strategy which can lead to amazing results very quickly in the case of digital picture libraries. That is to say: Political science should adopt clever collection strategies like this one (for the description of a pilot project at Giessen University see Drechsel 2005). Digital picture libraries are virtually machines of visual production,

reception, and interpretation competences, because they are creating questions like: How can we categorize our visual material? What kind of meta-information do we need? And finally: Which are the political pictures that should be part of a political scientific picture library?

Summary

Pictorial questions should (and probably will) take centre stage in 21st century political communication research, because visuality is an integral part of political communication. But there is an old tradition of thought in social sciences treating pictures as superficial and non-political. Seen from this perspective pictures are nothing but tools of manipulation and thus just surface phenomena of rational political processes. That is why visual competence and awareness of pictorial problems played no significant roles in the mainstream of political science during the 20th century (at least in the German-speaking world). But since the 1990s visual political communication as a research landscape has become somewhat more coherent. There is an increase of relevant conferences, seminars, or lectures and a generation of young scientists, which try and combine transdisciplinary visual competences, is working in this field. Corresponding to this tendency civic education in Germany seems to be on the way to taking visual literacy more and more serious. Thus, the "iconic turn" in cultural studies and social sciences is affecting and changing political communication research as well as teaching.

Visual political communication has always been a transdisciplinary field of research. Art historians, communication scientists, mediaevalists, philosophers, and others have contributed to our knowledge about the "power of images". On the one hand political science should adopt positive research and teaching traditions such as art historian's (digital) picture libraries. They can create something like an institutional backbone of relevant research and teaching. On the other hand, sophisticated debates on the theoretical framework concerning visual political communication research are needed in political science, too. In the long run pictorial phenomena should not only become self-evident issues of political communication research, but of political scientific basic literature like student's textbooks or lexicons, too. A promising approach for succeeding in this respect may be a research design aiming at analysing political icons like the previously mentioned "Berlin Wall" or the portrait of former Chinese leader Chairman Mao (see e.g. Paul 2008; Perlmutter 1998). This perspective might enable political communication research to amalgamate its "iconic turn" with another important trend in cultural studies, i.e. the "mnemonic turn", because key visuals and pictorial symbols are evidently important parts of all kinds of remembrance cultures. Furthermore, political icons "provide an accessible and centrally positioned set of images for exploring how political action (and inaction) can be constituted and controlled through visual media." (Hariman/Lucaites 2007, 5). Thus an approach focussing on iconic phenomena might be helpful in creating some still missing theories concerned with the democratic potential of pictorial media and visual communication.

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