

The Political Portrait: Leadership, Image and Power

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The figure of the leader, far from a relic of twentieth-century dictatorship, still looms large in the contemporary imagination. The politics of personality are most evident in the current crop of authoritarians, like Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Vladimir Putin, but are equally essential to the appeal of liberal democrats like Barack Obama, Emmanuel Macron, and Justin Trudeau. *The Political Portrait: Leadership, Image and Power*, edited by Luciano Cheles and Alessandro Giaccone, offers a useful primer to the visual (re)presentation of political figures across a wide variety of historical and national contexts. These include some of the usual suspects – Mussolini, Mao, Stalin – but also less familiar faces like Engelbert Dollfuss, Harold Wilson, and Willy Brandt. While focusing on official-sanctioned portraiture, the contributions also extend to other forms of propaganda as well as caricatures and effigies.

In their introduction, Cheles and Pierre Sorlin describe a gradual ‘metamorphosis of political iconography’ (p. 19), whereby rulers – first kings and emperors, and later heads of nation-states – lost their ‘aura’ of remote, ‘almost supernatural’ authority and became increasingly human and accessible (p. 1). This new mode of representing leadership reflected a more ‘profound transformation in the relationship between the citizens and their leaders’ – namely, the rise of mass politics and the eclipsing of traditional elites. Consider the contrast between the likes of Paul von Hindenburg and Vittorio Emanuele III, vestiges of the old order in their moustaches and medals, and Hitler and Mussolini, twentieth-century ‘everymen’ in party shirts, communing with the masses. The authors extend this argument both beyond Europe (to the United States, China, North Korea, and Turkey) and beyond 1945. As is further elaborated in subsequent chapters, portraits of democratic leaders in the late 1940s and 1950s embraced modesty and understatement as antidotes to totalitarian cults of personality. Conventions shifted once more in the 1960s, with the rise of television and a new generation of leadership (John F. Kennedy being the paradigmatic example) and the eventual emergence of women on the political stage (Margaret Thatcher, Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi). Cheles and Sorlin continue to the social media age, although – as detailed below – their commentary on contemporary politics is somewhat bemusing.

The volume’s individual contributions, written by an impressive assemblage of historians, art historians, political scientists, curators, and artists, reiterate this trajectory across different case studies. All demonstrate a keen eye for iconographic dissection, alert to subtleties in posture, clothing, lighting, setting, allusion, and function. Sorlin, for example, notes that, in contrast to Mussolini, pictures of Francisco Franco focused more on his face than his body, seeking not only to distract from his paunchy physique but also to promote his message of conservative restoration after the Civil War; where the Duce’s body encapsulated Fascist aggression, the Caudillo’s ‘immateriality made him reassuring’ (p. 125). Forms of political portraiture influenced one another across borders but were also locally rooted. Stefan Landsberger shows how depictions of Mao borrowed from Soviet posters of

Lenin, but also echoed Buddhist art and followed Chinese colour conventions. As detailed by Manuela Marin, Nicolae Ceaușescu was increasingly depicted alongside the traditional heroes of Romanian history, reflecting his regime's shift from communist radicalism to authoritarian nationalism.

Unsurprisingly, given the editors' expertise, four chapters are devoted to Italy. Maurizio Ridolfi surveys the visual culture of socialism during the Liberal era, highlighting its importance for a rapidly expanding but widely illiterate electorate. Alessandra Antola Swan offers an interesting perspective on the cult of Mussolini by foregrounding the mechanics of photographic propaganda, like the official vetting of images, recruitment of photographers, and reproduction of pictures for political and commercial purposes. Cheles moves to the Republic, tracing the representation of leaders from the early post-war years – eager to avoid accusations of totalitarian demagoguery, no politician appeared in electoral propaganda until 1953, and thereafter only in modest, understated poses – through the intensifying personalisation of politics in the 1980s (Bettino Craxi being the most evident example) and culminating in the rise of Silvio Berlusconi and other pretenders (Salvini, Grillo, Renzi, Meloni). By contrast, Alessandro Giacone emphasises the restraint that has characterised portraits of presidents of the Republic since 1946. Even satirical cartoonists have proved reluctant to mock the august figures constitutionally designated as embodiments of national unity. Taken as a whole, these chapters provide valuable perspectives on the importance of visuality and spectacle in Italian political culture, although this argument would have been strengthened had the contributions referenced one another more explicitly and purposefully.

As this overview suggests, the chief merit of this volume lies in its breadth and diversity. Perhaps for this same reason (18 chapters surveying 11 different countries, supplemented with copious illustrations), many essays offer tantalising possibilities but lack analytical depth. Some (Ridolfi, Swan, Florian Göttke on protest effigies in the Middle East) are only a few pages long; others (Steven Seidman on American presidents from Washington to Trump, Graeme Gill on Russian leaders from Lenin to Putin) attempt to cover tremendous ground in very short order. The result is a largely descriptive enterprise that offers an accessible whirlwind tour but not much in the way of new arguments.

Towards the end of their introduction, Cheles and Sorlin claim that the representation of the leader has shifted in recent years from projecting competence and expertise to cultivating an image of 'likeability' (p. 19). In their view, this is a turn for the worse, reflecting a superficial 'culture of images' fuelled by social media that 'replaces any debate about concrete problems that must be resolved with the face and features of those who should make the decisions' (p. 20). While few would argue against the proposition that digital technology has had a deleterious effect on our public discourse, this seems an odd note to sound in a collection devoted to the persistence of leadership cults in the century between Mussolini and Trump. We may reside in a 'culture of images' today, but – as their own volume suggests – haven't we always? Fortunately, the bulk of this collection provides readers with many useful resources with which to ponder the current politics of personality.

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