

The Political Portrait: Leadership, Image and Power, Edited by Luciano Cheles and Alessandro Giacone, ISBN: 9781138054233, Routledge, 368 pages. Hardback £120.00; E-Book £33.29

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Political-Portrait-Leadership-Image-and-Power/Cheles-Giacone/p/book/9781138054233>

Visuals are a key aspect of branding and marketing. Carefully constructed images convey information about the brand's values, its target market and the core message of the moment. Billboards and advertising across the media environment are a part of the visual landscape we inhabit, with only the most isolated communities out of their reach. The use of visuals in politics predates commercial advertising. From the busts and frescos of the ancient world, to the portraits of the emperors and monarchs, to the current age where political leaders appear across newspaper headlines, news bulletins and social media feeds. Cheles and Giacone's collection of studies explore one hundred years of the portraiture of leaders, capturing the fall of the ancient regime, the era of European dictators and subsequent rise of a democratic, semi-democratic and autocratic regimes. The work charts the significant differences between regimes and periods, as well as the similarities and the way symbolism denote the differing forms of power leaders exercise. The period also sees the end of total control over image management. Whereas once the official portrait became the one 'true' image of the leader, the ages of television and more recently social media has given greater control over how a leader is perceived to journalists, satirists and the creators of memes, mash-ups and even deepfakes.

The study opens with a discussion of the portraits of Tzars, Emperors and Kings, and how these reflected their exulted status and claim to a divine right to rule. Parallels are drawn to the portraiture of dictators, showing how notions of divine right gave way to the cult of personality. The omnipresence of Mussolini, Stalin, Mao and the South Korean Kim dynasty placed them at the heart of the lives of their nation. Imagery portrayed their strength, their heroic role in their nation's narrative and, particularly in the cases of Mao and Kim, as the guide of the nation and its people. The personification of Mao as the 'Great Teacher', which remains a part of the brand of the Chinese Communist party, is a thread linking current leaders to Maoist mythology. While some leaders, like Romania's Ceaușescu attempted to replicate these tactics, adopting the moniker of 'beloved leader' and forging images of protests to insert his face, other 20th Century dictators showed greater modesty. Spain's Franco branded himself as the personification of serenity, strength and regal aloofness, combining an image of the Army General with that of a monarch adorned with robes. Iraq's Saddam Hussein meanwhile was depicted as a devoted fighter, portrayed in murals alongside Saladin, defending Muslims within and beyond his national borders.

Elected leaders largely offer a stark contrast to the flamboyant personification of personal power which is at the heart of the brand of the totalitarian. Some democratic leaders branded themselves deliberately as the antithesis of the fascist or communist dictator, nowhere more so than in post-fascist Germany. The study of German chancellors from Adenauer to Merkel shows their campaign posters creating an image that blended ordinariness with dynamism while having minimal concern about their physical appearance. Schröder is the exception, portrayed wearing designer suits and surrounded by the symbols of power others eschewed. Cheles argues that this largely standard portrayal, adopted also by French and Italian presidents is driven by the advice of marketing consultants who instruct democratic leaders to appear sombre and business-like.

Even US presidents conformed to this model, although in recent years the studies show the pendulum swinging back to a more personality-based style of image management. In this vein we see Reagan depicted as the patriotic cowboy pitted against the Soviet enemy or George H. W. Bush

as war hero redefining the US after the Cold War. More recently Obama's portrayal as the post 9/11 noble visionary, or Trump as the deal maker, suggest the strategy is to brand a president according to the context of his period in office. Similar trends can be found among UK leaders. Churchill personified the fighting 'bulldog' spirit as wartime leader. Harold Wilson, two decades later, was portrayed as the humble and ordinary man of the people striving to drive through economic and social reform. Tony Blair meanwhile evoked a cool, man of the 90s with vision, persona. The latter's celebrity image chimes with changes in Italian politics, with Berlusconi opening opportunities for comedians, glamour models and porn stars to use their cultural capital as a springboard into politics.

The work thus provides insights into the connections between the national culture and the broader zeitgeist to show how leaders have developed strategic portrayals of themselves to make them a marketable product for their time. Visuals play an important role in branding, they can be laden with semiotics which become mental associations in the minds of voters. If a leader can ensure enough people associate them with the qualities that those people feel are necessary for a particular context, they have a strong chance of winning and maintaining their hold over power. The emperors, monarchs and dictators employed propaganda to ensure a constant and consistent presence in the minds of those they ruled. The modern-day democrat does not have that luxury. While the book focuses on official portrayals at points the works hint at the complexities of the current information environment. Every president and prime minister attempts to control their image during campaigns, on media appearances and social media profiles. But unofficial images have the power to undermine their efforts and the associations voters have are as likely to those produced by opponents, satirists or paparazzi. Cheles and Giaccone's collection of studies of leader's official portraits and propaganda gives fascinating insights into the evolution of image management over the last century, however in the modern age one must ask who has the true power over the image of a political leader.