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Malaise dans la représentation

Representation struggles, visibility struggles

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Representation struggles, visibility struggles

Notes on the political iconography and iconology of the dominated

Maxime Boidy

- 1 Representation is in crisis. At least this is what some journalists and observers keep bringing up after every electoral poll, when it is marked by a high abstention rate or the high score of some party at the fringe of the political spectrum. Over the past few years, this fact has been readily associated with the rise of “populism,” a loose term reinvested so as to materialise the idea of an endangerment of representative democracy.¹ However, this term should be used with caution. Although it cannot be denied that Western democracies are faced with the rise of political organisations that base their argument on conflation targeting every ruling elite,² political representation is also criticised through other initiatives: forms of direct democracy in which the exercise of citizenship calls for an immediate hold of the decision-making levers at the local or national level; emergence of forms of public advocacy embodied by non-professional political figures, whose reputation is sometimes won in other social spaces (world of culture, sport, etc.). As a place of “representation struggles” opposing established figures and new players, the political sphere would not actually be “in crisis.” Rather, it seems to be going through difficulties, insofar as the criticisms do not so much focus on the political power as on the professionals who have a tendency to monopolise it.³
- 2 Tackling the issue of representation, this time outside the mere contemporary political field, leads one to draw other useful conclusions. Presently, representation is not so much a concept in crisis as it is a “crisis-concept,” ever torn between antinomic scopes and acceptations. In his classic study on Louis XIV’s absolute power, art historian Louis Marin already observes that representation does not only refer to the existence of an absence, with which it is often associated. Sometimes, it is indeed the *strengthening of a presence*: “The dictionary also mentions: ‘To represent: to exhibit, to produce before one’s eyes. To represent one’s license, passport, certificate of existence. To represent somebody, to summon them in person, to hand them back over the persons who

initially placed them in one's custody.' Representing thus amounts to showing, heightening, intensifying a presence,"⁴ concludes Marin. As for him, historian Carlo Ginzburg remarks that the visual and political acceptations "basically have something in common: the idea of substitution, of replacement (evocative of absence)."⁵ Nevertheless, his study deals with the issue of the historical role of the royal and imperial effigies in the Western funeral rites since Ancient Rome, or in other words (and once more), of the systems of political existence. A concept with contradictory meanings, representation closely links political and aesthetic acceptations that can never be completely separated.

- 3 This article will focus on the past and present ambiguities of the political and the visible, which are inherent to the idea of representation.⁶ The objective is to show how some political practices have been embodying "representation struggles" in singular visual forms, the analysis of which requires the conceptual and methodological set of tools designed for political iconography, insufficiently used by social sciences thus far.⁷ Our reflections will also demand that we define "political iconography" from a programmatic perspective. We will get back to this in our conclusion. Two complementary theses will be defended in support of certain analyses of representation policies, conducted in various fields of academic knowledge over the past twenty-five years. On one end, the "struggles" characterising contemporary practices fall within the long-established antinomies of the concept of representation. On the other, outside these "representation struggles," certain practices now mark "visibility struggles." If our societies are beset by unrest, this one mainly results from visibility struggles, made tangible by the increase in the academic, militant and ordinary uses of the term, which are as antinomic as representation is.

Representation in political theory and academic knowledge

- 4 Such investigations demand that this introduction be further developed. First and foremost, in political theory, the antinomies of representation centre around its necessary or nonessential nature. To put the problem in simpler terms: is representation a fact that is *inherent* to politics or is it a *supplement* – in which case, is it possible to eliminate it outright, unconditionally? There are two opposing sides on this issue. The first side regards representation as an unchanging component of the political and the democratic ideal: not because the existing representative democracies would constitute its historical outcome, but because representation would indeed be at the heart of the political fact. The theory of populism proposed by Argentinian philosopher Ernesto Laclau perfectly illustrates this position. Laclau describes the basic mechanism of the political as an antagonism induced by the aggregation of heterogeneous demands around a shared claim (an "empty signifier") and a common opponent – he gives the simple example of a slum where the absence of both decent housing, accessible water, education, etc., leads to a collective claim addressed to the public authorities. Now, according to Laclau, such an aggregation "*represents* a chain of equivalence"⁸ of the various demands. Since the creation of this chain is considered as a defining criterion of the political process, this also holds true for the representation operation.

- 5 On the contrary, most of the libertarian criticism considers representation as not only harmful at the democratic level, but also as a secondary phenomenon of the political fact, which is therefore likely to be eliminated. As observed by Daniel Colson, in the anarchistic vocabulary “the term representation must be considered in all its acceptations, political, religious, scientific and symbolic: every time people, signs or institutions intend to replace something or to tell what something consists of.” Notably, this concept at once means that the aesthetic and visual aspects of representation are accounted for. Colson concludes that in the case of anarchy “it is not only a matter of refusing any political representation, but every form thereof, perceived as inevitably external and manipulative, distinct from the genuine forces that it appropriates and separates from their potential.”⁹
- 6 More generally, the convergences and divergences of the political, aesthetic and scientific in representation operations have drawn the attention of thinkers from every field of human and social sciences over the past decades. For sociologist Bruno Latour, an important modern sharing process has obscured the similarities between the scientific representation of non-humans and the representation of humans by political institutions. This divide is now shaken by a wide range of hybrid objects that must be reconsidered outside a strict compartmentalisation.¹⁰ In one of her famous essays on the concept of subalternity, postcolonial Indian theoretician Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposes to conduct an in-depth reflection on the sharing of representations. Adopting an approach inspired by Marxism, Spivak offers a re-reading of the distinction between the delegation of votes (*vertreten*) and the formation of a class as a collective subject (*darstellen*).¹¹ On a different note, British art anthropologist Alfred Gell has tackled the issue of political and visual representations through a detailed study on the agentivity attributable to the objects of material culture, as well as on idolatry as an empathetic and intersubjective sentiment. This inclination for the visible, in keeping with the works of Louis Marin and Carlo Ginzburg, calls for additional remarks.
- 7 According to Gell, an object of worship does not have to take on anthropomorphic or “iconic” features to be worthy of the devout person’s attention. An aniconic idol is a “‘realistic’ representation of a god who has no form (anywhere), or has an ‘arbitrary’ form, in the particular ‘body’ he inhabits for the purposes of being worshipped by his mortal devotees, here below.” The stone in which the worshipper perceives a divine presence is “a ‘representative’ of the god,” says Gell, in the same way as an ambassador’s mission is to represent their government in its absence, although they are dismissable or likely to carry out other tasks, where necessary. Realism or anthropomorphy are not the criteria best suited to the study of an idolatrous cult, the object of which is not portraits, but *bodies* that are both aesthetic, religious and diplomatic:
- The ideas of “representing” (like a picture) and “representing” (like an ambassador) are distinct, but none the less linked. An ambassador is a spatio-temporally detached fragment of his nation, who travels abroad and with whom foreigners can speak, “as if” they were speaking to his national government. Although ambassadors are real persons, they are also “fictions,” like pictures, and their embassies are fictional mini-states within the state; just as pictures show us landscapes and personages who are “not really there.”¹²
- 8 Despite their heterogeneity, the statements of Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour and Gayatri Spivak, roughly summarised here, show a significant similarity. A statement made in

the contemporary world is in a state of tension with a point of origin, located at the dawn of what one may call modernity – to stay on somewhat similar time scales. According to Latour, the “moderns” are indeed the ones who have come to terms on the fiction of the greater balance between science and politics, between humans and non-humans. The contemporary proliferation of “hybrids” does not so much represent the advent of a new era as it is closing an age-old parenthesis based on the certainty that arbitrarily distinguished spheres are utterly separate. As for Spivak, she puts forward a criticism of colonialism as the defining process of European modernity, as well as of the necessary conditions of its historiography. As for Gell, he seeks to bring out the origins and motives of the Western “aesthetic attitude,” which he considers as “the historical product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment and the rise of Western science.”¹³ Consequently, this quick theoretical overview is a prerequisite for our study, as it raises our awareness of the complexity and historicity of the issues tackled here. In the light of the many implications of representation, the very idea of an exclusively contemporary “disturbance” is re-orientated and restored in the long-term.

Iconographies of political representation

- 9 The past and present antinomies of representation are not limited to academic knowledge. They are also found in the militant aesthetics and anti-establishment political iconography. Their most remarkable present forms were born or perpetuated as the anti-globalist movement developed at the turn of the 2000s, like the Italian “*tute bianche*.”¹⁴ Named after the white suits worn by its militants, this group was formed during the 1990s, alongside the traditional Italian left-wing organisations, before it was disbanded in the wake of the violent riots that blotted the G8 summit held in Genoa in July 2001. The simplicity of this monochrome symbolic clothing is only an appearance: it shows a *critical aesthetic representation of the political non-representation* as perceived by its subjects.
- 10 As far as representation is concerned, other aesthetics are even more intriguing, such as the case of the *black bloc*. This urban tactic consists in demonstrating while wearing a mask and black clothes, so as to ensure the activist anonymity of the group. A former West Germany far-left wing product of the 1980s, it quickly spread in a durable way at the transnational level, and even regularly marred the protests against the French “labour law” in the spring of 2016.¹⁵ Unlike the *tute bianche*, the *black bloc* does not constitute a critical visual representation of a political non-representation, although it is an aesthetic of the political. It is rather a form of aesthetic representation operating a *criticism of political representation itself* (fig. 1). The visibility of the tactic is in keeping with a long Western history of the visualisation of the “political bodies,” illustrated by the classic figure of the giant on the frontispiece to English philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (fig. 2).¹⁶ Now it is the imagery that sends us in time, back to the origins of Western political modernity. “Combining aspects without mixing them up allows multiple images to represent [...] collective entities through the individuals who form them and are subjected to them,”¹⁷ says art historian Dario Gamboni on Hobbes’s frontispiece. On the contrary, the *black bloc* combines and amalgamates elements without any hierarchical relationship. The tactic shows an alternative political corporeality, the components of which aim at indiscernibility and anonymity.

- 11 These bodies of images reveal other historical connections that also jeopardise the idea of a specifically contemporary disturbance in representation. The critical aesthetic of political representation displayed by the *black bloc*'s tactic has precedents in the iconography of the Luddite movement. Born in England in the early 1810s, this labour movement is characterised by the destruction of weaving machinery as a form of protest against the growing industrialisation of the spinning operations.¹⁸ Initially derived from the legendary "General Ludd," famous for having commanded his troupes' operations in the field, the term Luddite is now reinvested to refer to various political movements against industrialisation or critical of technology. However, this character does not exist historically, except in writings and visual depictions such as the 1812 "leader of the Luddites" showing a giant in women's clothes (fig. 3).

fig. 1

Mike Flugenock, *We are a Black Bloc of One*, 2001. Reproduction of a poster, courtesy of the artist.
© Mike Flugenock

fig. 2

Abraham Bosse, frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, 1651. London, British Library.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

fig. 3

Anonymous, *The Leader of the Luddites*, 1812.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

- 12 On another level, the videos capturing political acts of violence, now referred to as “riot porn,” also have aesthetic precedents in the history of the labour movement, and more specifically in the political theory of direct action syndicalism.¹⁹ This historicity sheds a different light on the implication of the *riotporn* category, namely the idea of a specifically contemporary perverse voyeurism, which consists in enjoying visual representations without a rational analysis of the political representation processes that the use of riots puts in jeopardy. A notable antecedent can be found in socialist thinker Georges Sorel’s writings on the moral and political issues of proletarian violence. According to Sorel – a fierce opponent of the parliamentary and verbal representation of proletariat –, the working class’s self-awareness is to be achieved through aesthetic and visual representation, via the “picture” (a recurrent term in his *Réflexions sur la violence*) composed by the general strike:

To be in line with the trade unionist orientation, the oppositions shall be brought out rather than reduced; the opposing groups shall be made as tangible as possible; eventually, the movements of the revolting masses shall be represented in such a way that the souls of the rebels are endowed with a fully empowering impression. Language alone cannot suffice to ensure such results; one must draw on sets of images capable of evoking *completely and by intuition only*, before any rational analysis, all the feelings corresponding to the various manifestations of the war waged by socialism on the modern society.²⁰

- 13 From Sorel’s reflections on proletarian violence to contemporary *riotporn*, another significant issue is outlined, this time outside the formal aesthetics of political representation. This issue consists in determining the meaning of political voyeurism, which must initially be considered as modes of subjective, individual and collective

construction rather than as the product of passive positions or pathological considerations.

Visibility struggles

- 14 This historical overview should not lead us to conclude that there is no such thing as a specific “disturbance” when it comes to the current political situation. The contemporary context is indeed a singular one. Nevertheless, it would be best to describe it as a problem of “visibility,” perceptible in the exponential uses of the concept in academic writings. These occurrences are distributed according to two main acceptations. The first one is rooted in the famous criticism of disciplinary surveillance initiated by Michel Foucault and describing the visibilities of panoptic architecture as a “trap.”²¹ The second paradigm is illustrated by German philosopher Axel Honneth’s reflections on the epistemology of intersubjective recognition. According to Honneth, being visible does neither amount to being trapped, nor to being the object of a visual perception: it means being recognised as a human subject *per se*.²²
- 15 Yet another sign of a contemporary problem, these two antagonistic scholarly acceptations both find their counterpart in the militant debate. This is particularly perceptible in some of the discourses of the *tutebianche* or *black blocs*, whose visibility (provided by their clothes) has already been observed from an iconographic perspective (see above). An anonymous activist describes the urban actions in these terms:
- 16 We have chosen to send strong images and signals to make our intentions perfectly clear. Therefore, after searching in ancient history books, we have designed protection devices, such as Plexiglas shields, which we use in tortoise formation, foam rubber armors, and cords made out of inner tubes, to dodge the policemen’s batons. All of this was very visible and obviously designed for our defense [...]. All of this can be seen on televised images which are impossible to tamper with.²³
- 17 Through its use of synonyms for visibility, this account hints at a quest for media representation in response to the absence of political representation. Conversely, other militant writings advocating the tactical use of the *black bloc* emphasise the traps of visibility previously pointed out by Foucault. The most famous of these occurrences lies in the manifesto entitled *L’Insurrection qui vient* by the Comité invisible, published in 2007: “To be visible is to be exposed, which above all means to be vulnerable.”²⁴ In addition to Foucault’s definition of surveillance, this acceptation of visibility uses and interweaves other theoretical references (such as the Situationist criticism of the entertainment industry).²⁵
- 18 The iconography of political (non)representation has a long history that contrasts with the copious uses of critical concepts of visibility for less than two decades. One conclusion is clear: we are now confronted with a “disturbance in visibility” rather than a “disturbance in representation.” More specifically, it is through the notions of visibility and invisibility that the contemporary issues of aesthetic and political representations have found an alternative expression, both in the academic knowledge and the activists’ discourses.

Conclusion: from political iconography to political iconology

- 19 Following these analyses, three conclusive observations can be drawn from the antinomies of representation, their iconographic formalisation and their ability to be expressed in discourses. The first one is of a thematic nature. The imagery of the anti-globalist and Luddite movements show the common historiographic thread of a “political iconography of the dominated,” the study of which must complement (if not shift) the lessons of the “political iconography of the dominant,” still prevailing in the scientific literature.²⁶ Again, this is a major issue. It is not only a matter of historicising the visual representations of the struggling subaltern groups, emancipation movements, political processes of revolt or revolution. It is above all a matter of typologising the contentious relations of political and visual representation from the perspective of the dominated populations. Through this article, we have identified three nuances: the simple visual representation of political non-representation (Luddite movement); the critical visual representation of political non-representation (*tutebianche*); the critical visual representation of political representation as such (*black bloc*). The latter two cases incidentally illustrate the hypothetical existence of representation struggles between different aesthetic modes, in other words the possibility of their antagonistic co-construction in specific contexts.²⁷ As for the historical Luddite movement and the tactic of the *black bloc*, they are connected by certain critical categories, such as the concept of “civil Luddite movement” developed by political specialist George Katsiaficas to describe the urban destructions and practices of direct action by the German autonomists.²⁸
- 20 The second observation is of a conceptual order. This article paves the way for a historical comparative analysis of certain concepts defining the political collectives, based on their display. The main, prevailing concept is without a doubt that of “body,” as classically illustrated by the frontispiece to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (fig. 2). The elements of the corpus that are drawn on here outline and define the ramifications of another, matching concept. The “bloc” presents occurrences at the iconographic level (fig. 1), but also at the political theory level, much like the “sets of images” described by Georges Sorel, “capable of evoking *completely and by intuition only*” the political reality of revolutionary socialism. While this kind of survey resembles a traditional historiography of political ideas, it cannot but analyse the iconographic materials and conceptual tools that remain underexploited in the social and political sciences in French language, by comparison with German and English.
- 21 The third observation is of an epistemological and methodological order. The political iconography, defined as the analysis, description and interpretation of the political imagery in all of its material forms (paintings, drawings, photographs, engravings, postcards, etc.) cannot suffice to pinpoint the complex issues of the visual analysis of the modes of political representation. This approach must be complemented with a *political iconology*. The latter must allow for the conceptualization of the political relationships between the utterable and the visible, between text and image, both in terms of their ability to be expressed (in the case of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, the visualisation of the textual theory through the engraving on the frontispiece) and in terms of complementarity, or even antagonism. “The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs,

each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a 'nature' to which only it has access"²⁹; based on this statement, American theoretician W.J.T. Mitchell has redefined the concept of iconology on which we draw here, as a war between the utterable and the visible, full of value judgments regarding the respective semiotic, pragmatic and representational possibilities of language or imagery. It is precisely this war of signs and representations that Georges Sorel illustrates in his *Réflexions sur la violence*, as this socialist thinker rejects the category of the utterable, of verbal delegation, in favour of the visibilities of the proletarian picture resulting from the general strike.

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NOTES

1. For a large overview of the contemporary acceptations and logics of application of the category of populism, see Pierre Birnbaum, Laurent Jeanpierre and Philippe Roger (eds.), "Populismes," *Critique*, no. 776-777, 2012.
2. In France, everyone has heard about the label "UMPS," created by the Front National to amalgamate the two main French political parties through their acronyms, namely the Parti Socialiste (PS) and the late Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) – renamed Les Républicains in May 2015.
3. On these "representation struggles" and the distinction between crisis and disturbance, see Assia Boutaleb and Violaine Roussel, "Introduction," *Sociétés contemporaines*, no. 74, 2009, p. 5-17. The "disturbance in representation," after which this publication is titled, applies exclusively to the political field.
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5. Carlo Ginzburg, "Représentation: le mot, l'idée, la chose," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, no. 46.6, 1991, p. 1220.
6. More generally, these reflections fall within a research program called "Pour une iconographie politique des dominé(e)s" ("Toward a political iconography of the dominated"), under the

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14. Maxime Boidy, “Visibilities in Words, Visibilities on Bodies: Academic Sociopolitical Theories of Visibility and Militant Teachings from the Genoa Summit of July 2001,” *FQS – Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung*, t. 18, no. 2, 2017 [in press].
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17. Dario Gamboni, “Voir double: théorie de l’image et méthodologie de l’interprétation,” in Jean-Hubert Martin (ed.), *Une image peut en cacher une autre. Arcimboldo - Dalí - Raetz*, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, 2009, p. XIX.
18. Kirkpatrick Sale, *La Révolte luddite. Briseurs de machines à l’ère de l’industrialisation*, translation by Celia Izoard, Montreuil, L’Échappée, 2006.
19. See Ulrike Lune Riboni, “Riotporn: de quoi parle-t-on ?,” 7 January 2016. [Online] <http://window.hypotheses.org/267> [accessed 24 February 2017].
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26. For an innovative approach to this research field in political sciences, see Xavier Crettiez and Pierre Piazza (eds.), “Iconographies rebelles,” *Cultures & Conflits*, no. 91-92, 2013.
27. Maxime Boidy, “Visibilities in Words, Visibilities on Bodies: Academic Sociopolitical Theories of Visibility and Militant Teachings from the Genoa Summit of July 2001,” *FQS – Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung*, t. 18, no. 2, 2017 [in press].

28. “The desperation felt by many at the perceived invasion of their neighborhood lies behind the civil Luddism they practice. Although not as acceptable as passive arrest, such actions are a form of civil disobedience. Many autonomists believe that, in order to preserve their way of life, they must smash the machinery of consumer society and contest all the forces that seek to colonize their community” (George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics. European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, AK Press, 2006, p. 174).

29. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 43.

ABSTRACTS

This case study in political iconography and iconology considers some past and present ambiguities of the political and visible aspects of the very idea of representation. It attempts to show how certain political practices epitomise “representation struggles” into visual forms. Two arguments are articulated after an overview of general considerations on the politics of representation in several scholarly fields during the last twenty-five years. On the one hand, the “struggles” linked with contemporary practices are in keeping with a long history of antinomies of the concept of representation. On the other hand, several practices are now better described as “visibility struggles” rather than “representation struggles.” If our societies are currently feeling a “disturbance,” it is rather a “disturbance in visibility,” made blatant by the multiplication of scholarly, activist and everyday uses of the latter term.

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Keywords: domination, political iconography, political iconology, representation, visibilities

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