

Please cite the Published Version

Buzdugan, Stephen R (2022) Book review: The Political Portrait: Leadership, Image and Power. Italian Studies, 77 (3). pp. 362-363. ISSN 0075-1634

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2022.2088670>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/630143/>

Usage rights:  [Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Additional Information: Book review of The Political Portrait: Leadership, Image and Power edited by Luciano Cheles and Alessandro Giacone, New York & London, Routledge, 2020, 348 pp., £120 (hardback), ISBN 9781138054233

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

As the political science scholar Roland Bleiker has recently put it, 'we live in a visual age...[the] omnipresence of images is political and has changed fundamentally how we live and interact in today's world'. *The Political Portrait: Leadership, Image and Power* arrives at a time when visual images dominate the political landscape, especially through social media. As Luciano Cheles and Pierre Sorlin put it in their thought-provoking opening chapter:

The great leaders of this world have lost part of their aura: they have come down to our level and talk about their family and daily concerns. Members of royal families such as the Prince of Wales and the Queen of Spain would not object to pose with us on a selfie, if we asked them. Considered in the long term, such evolution evidences a profound transformation in the relationship between the citizens and their leaders.

Yet, there is also a rich history of images that were used for, or that otherwise served, political purposes that lie behind the contemporary ubiquity of political images available to the public. Luciano Cheles and Alessandro Giacone have assembled an excellent book that therefore explores the historical and contemporary forms of images of political leadership across a variety of political arenas, and indeed political figures, across the world.

The Political Portrait also arrives at a time when 'visual politics' is gaining ground as a field of study within political science. Poststructuralism is certainly not new in political science but it is overwhelmed by textual forms of analysis that only give us insight into one dimension of the expression of human thought and language, and its relationship to power. Visual language has its own complex forms of expression and meaning, which therefore requires a unique form of interpretation and analysis to draw insights and derive meaning from it.

In *The Political Portrait*, Cheles, Giacone and impressive list of authors attempt a much-needed deciphering and interpretation of the visual language of politics in terms of leadership and power. The chapters in the book explore the historical and contemporary images that have been used by political leaders, their supporters and their opponents. In some cases, as in the chapters on political portraits in the United States (US), Italy, France, the Soviet Union and Russia, the chapters seek to explain the use of political portraits through time in a national, and sometimes international, context. In others, such as in the chapters on the portraits of Benito Mussolini, Engelbert Dollfuss, Francisco Franco, Mao Zedong and Nicolae Ceaucescu, the chapters home in on one political leader and explore the often myriad forms in which this leader had been portrayed in images throughout their period of and close to political power.

From an historical point of view, the chapters in *The Political Portrait* explain the ways in which political leaders, their advisors and the artists themselves, were very conscious of the visual styles they were adopting for their portraits, seeking to evoke a particular form of response from the viewers of these images in the body politic. In one example, Steven A. Seidman, in his chapter on

portraits of US presidents and presidential candidates, cites how the artist Gilbert Stuart portrayed George Washington in 1796 using a visual language of a European “Grand Manner” style that was derived from images of European monarchs, thereby conferring power and authority upon the subject of the image. However, Seidman points out that Stuart sought to subvert the monarchical image through the omission of regal robes, the inclusion of the Federalist papers and symbols of America’s independence and purity after its revolution. As another example, Alessandra Angola Swan, in her chapter on Benito Mussolini, shows how photographs of him were carefully manipulated to enhance qualities of ‘strength, determination and sense of leadership’ necessary to ‘mythologize his public persona’ and legitimise his power.

By rooting the analyses of the images of leaders within their domestic, and sometimes international, political, social and temporal contexts, the chapters within *The Political Portrait* make a careful effort to avoid interpretation of these images through contemporary ‘Western’ lenses. These contexts are important, as are the need to examine counter-hegemonic images of leaders created to challenge the visual narratives they were promoting of themselves. In this case, a number of chapters include images of leaders created by opposition parties, newspapers and protesters that sought to undermine the power of these individuals. For instance, Cheles, in his chapter on political portraiture in Italy from the fall of fascism to the present, cites the work of left-wing activist Mark Bernardini in creating a website that invited satirical images of Forza Italia’s 2001 election campaign, featuring an image of Silvio Berlusconi as the Pope, ‘to ridicule his limitless ambitions’.

The Political Portrait makes an important and timely contribution to the literature on leaders, leadership, ideas and power, in addition to the literature on the politics of the countries covered by the chapters in the book. The chapters are engaging, well-researched, insightful and well-illustrated. Furthermore, in engaging with visual politics, the book covers new ground not only with regard to its topic but also with regard to scholarly inquiry into politics and the nature of power. With regard to the latter, theorisation of the connection between visual language and power is nascent and *The Political Portrait* gives much interesting and much needed food for thought for the development of such theory.

Dr Stephen R. Buzdugan
Senior Lecturer in International Political Economy
Manchester Metropolitan University