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## Cultural Turns and Political History

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Thomas Mergel

## Cultural Turns and Political History

### Abstract

*The article analyses the impact that cultural turn had on political history. Some main elements included in the broader concept of cultural turn are examined: the linguistic turn connected with constructivist philosophy and based on linguistic analysis; the iconic turn that points out the pictorial side of communication and the spatial turn devoted to the study of geographical space in which social action takes place. All these strands were strongly influenced by cultural anthropology emerging in the Sixties. These different approaches to political history may be useful instruments for the understanding of political phenomena.*

Keywords: *Political History, Cultural Turn, Linguistic Turn, Iconic Turn, Spatial Turn.*

Political history has long had a well-deserved reputation for being the most conservative branch of history. Big men, strong ideas and a clear preference for decisions at the expense of processes were the main characteristics of this kind of history. Interests, ideas, and a sometimes almost mythical concept of power shaped a political history that was cognition-oriented and claimed that the actors were completely aware of what they were doing. This was all the more annoying because political history often claimed to be the queen of all history, thus belittling other historical approaches to mere ancillary sciences.

Maybe this short and begrudging description of the «old» political history is not very fair. In particular it glosses over the considerable differences among national traditions of political history. British political history has long kept local political life under scrutiny, French political history, under the influence of the *Annales* school, has placed politics within the structural frame of intense local or regional *histoires totales*. German political history, although strongly big-men-focused by tradition, already developed interesting applications of social history to political history back in the 1960s. However, the cultural turns of the past decades have left deep traces in the development of political history. In the following I will – quite briefly – discuss methodological questions as well as changing subjects in the field. Perforce I can only cover the subject in rough outline, and footnotes will have to be used sparingly since otherwise a massive overflow would not be avoidable.

«Cultural turn» is a buzzword, pointing to a new orientation towards perception, meaning, interpretation, and symbolic orders, disclaiming essentialist understandings of

reality, vivid as they were in 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism and positivism but also in many variations of 20<sup>th</sup> century social history<sup>1</sup>. Yet the buzzword mashes up a number of developments that do not necessarily merge into one. For the sake of argumentative lucidity I will distinguish four main strands: firstly, the obsession with language, as it is expressed in the *linguistic turn* (and its manifold different manifestations), following the adoption of constructivist analytical philosophy and linguistics. Secondly, all those developments that have emerged as a consequence of widespread adoption of *anthropological approaches*. Thus, the symbolic dimension of social action and societies has come to the awareness of historians and social scientists anew. Within this context, the performative turn has focused on rituals and symbolic communication, the Bourdieu-influenced praxeological approach has placed new emphasis on the practices themselves.

Thirdly, the *iconic turn* brings about a new awareness of the visuality of the world; it has focused on the pictorial side of communication, in part challenging the language obsession, though partly complementing it. And, finally, the *spatial turn*, emerging from constructivist geography, pointing out the fact that all social action takes place in spaces, shaping and constructing them. For historians, the spatial turn includes the disturbing message that time is not the only dimension they have to take care of.

There are certainly more developments claiming the fashionable characteristic of a «turn» – that is to say, a radically new perspective, possibly a changing paradigm. Some of them are but specifications of the developments mentioned above: the «interpretive» as well as the «reflexive/literary turn» or the «translational turn» claim a lot of what appears here under the heading of «anthropological approaches», namely the very relative position of «objective» analytical vantage points. The «postcolonial turn» postulates something similar, above all, that perspectives claiming to be «real» or «objective» are, in the end, a matter of rule and superiority. The «material turn» wants things and objects as well as non-human beings to be taken more seriously, in their materiality as well as in their agency. And so on.

Not every discussion amounts to a turn, and not every fresh perspective offers a paradigm shift. As Bachmann-Medick points out, there seems to be a real danger of «whiplashes» as an effect of the many turns. Therefore I will stick to the four developments described because they link up new attention for certain types of material with methodological innovations. And I think they ought to be taken seriously.

These incipiently very different turns have soon intermingled, and more and more research tries to merge them into coherent perspectives. Thus we can justifiably talk about one common cultural turn today. Most historians who subscribe to this kind of history would agree that all social action is symbolically based; most would accept that language is the essential device by which not only to understand but also to shape the world around us. Many of them would also support the idea that not only language but pictures count as well. And more and more it is acknowledged that all social action and therefore all history takes place in space. So the differentiation is more or less an ideal-typological one today.

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive description and discussion of the matter: D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2016.

In what follows I will first – very briefly – discuss these turns with a focus on the changes in historical understanding that they brought about: In what way could these turns change the way we treat politics and policies? Thereafter I will discuss some fundamental developments in the concept of politics that have emerged with these new approaches. A certain emphasis is placed on German-speaking historiography, not only because this is the one I know best, but also because apparently the suggestions of the various cultural turns have had the deepest impact here, not only theoretically<sup>2</sup>, but also when it comes to integrating different approaches<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. The Linguistic Turn

The turn to language as the constituting factor of every reality is the first, most all-embracing and also for a long time most controversial of all cultural turns<sup>4</sup>. Born out of linguistics and language philosophy<sup>5</sup>, the linguistic turn claimed that reality cannot be existent except through linguistic construction. Jacques Derrida's famous quote «il n'y a pas de hors-texte» has often been misunderstood, just as if Derrida had claimed that there was no reality outside texts. Which he did not. Yet it was a productive misunderstanding, since it pushed the idea that discourses shape what we can understand by «reality». However, can politics be comprehended only as a play of words, as mere chitchat? Indeed, in most cases politics is simply the exertion of language. Even if we leave aside parliamentary debates or the like: every political decision takes the form of words and sentences; each action (be it peaceful or not) has to be planned, ordered, or decided: that is all words. This does not mean to say that political violence is a mere discourse. No, of course there is political action which is nonverbal, but even this kind of political action needs words to become reality.

So it took some time until political history was open to language-analysis approaches. But even old-fashioned political historians could understand that politics is not carried out silently, and of course they shared the view that political ideas live off words. So the history of political ideas became one of the gateways of linguistic approaches. In the English-speaking world, the Cambridge School with John G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner as the leading figures from the Sixties on developed an approach to the history of political ideas that tried to carve out various different «political languages»: sets of linguistic signs that shape specific understandings of political reality<sup>6</sup>. One can, as Pocock has demonstrated, describe the political world in terms of corruption and virtue; one can also describe it with reference to its legal frames, as Skinner

<sup>2</sup> Theoretically this discussion has been reflected in the concept of a «cultural history of politics» or «the political». See T. Weidner, *Die Geschichte des Politischen in der Diskussion*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2012; W. Steinmetz et al. (eds.), *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the respective texts in their English or, if possible, in their Italian version.

<sup>4</sup> For the following see T. Mergel, *Geschichtswissenschaften*, in J. Kilian et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Sprache und Politik*, Bremen, Hempen, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Apparently the term was introduced by the language philosopher R. Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn. Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> The classical references are: J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1975; Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols., Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1978.

has developed as a decisive feature of the modern world. In Germany with its rich hermeneutic traditions it was mainly Reinhart Koselleck who developed the so-called history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) that tried to prove how new terms or newly coined old terms introduced new understandings of the world around 1800, hence offering new linguistic modes to express political requirements or claims<sup>7</sup>. This approach (which can also be considered as a linguistic expression of modernization theory) has stimulated a rich research far beyond the German language and at the same time for contemporary history too<sup>8</sup>. In France, Michel Foucault's discourse-analytical concept – to mention the third important influence – laid the groundwork for his analysis of *gouvernementalité*: a modern governing technique which is largely self-governing, thus superseding the need to constrain or to violate<sup>9</sup>.

These three dominant older branches of language-based political history encountered some criticism and enhancements which were partly based on the reception of other strands of the cultural turn. Probably the most important one is based on the argument that most of the texts these older approaches have in mind are in fact *written* texts. Yet politics is always in the making, that is: actual interaction, verbal arguments, real battles of words. In other words: politics is a *practice* of speaking. Parliamentary discourse is not the exchange of manuscripts but actual arguing. Party conventions live by the charisma of speakers and not of writers, and the words are framed by pictures and performance. Even on television people speak. Of course, speaking takes part in discourses, but it is enacted, performed, in part born out of the moment, and because of that, the symbolic and the spontaneous dimension is much more visible<sup>10</sup>. It was mainly under the influence of speech-act theory that one branch of political history tried to carve out a concept of political speaking as interaction. So Willibald Steinmetz analysed parliamentary debates in 19<sup>th</sup> century England as being moved by the purpose of «how do I have to speak in order to win?», as the endeavour to connect or to disrupt communication<sup>11</sup>. Language has thus gained importance also as a performative mode of political communication.

## 2. Influences from Anthropology

It is not easy to integrate all the influences that came from an intensified perception of social and cultural anthropology since the 1960s under the heading of one common «turn». However, it is undisputed that Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, above all, and also ethnomethodologists like Erving Goffman received an immense reappraisal not only from history but from the social and cultural sciences as a whole. The main concern of this research perspective is to accept the strangeness of «other» realities (and most realities are «other»), which

<sup>7</sup> As an overview see M. Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts. A Critical Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1995.

<sup>8</sup> W. Steinmetz (ed.), *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes*, Oxford, Oxford U.P. 2011.

<sup>9</sup> M. Foucault, *De la gouvernementalité*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> See T. Mergel, „Sehr verehrter Herr Kollege“. *Zur Symbolik der Sprache im Reichstag der Weimarer Republik*, in B. Giesen, R. Schlögl, J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Die Wirklichkeit der Symbole. Grundlagen der Kommunikation in historischen und gegenwärtigen Gesellschaften*, Konstanz, UVK, 2004, pp. 369-394.

<sup>11</sup> W. Steinmetz, *Das Sagbare und das Machbare. Zum Wandel politischer Handlungsspielräume, England 1780-1867*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1993.

is a challenge because they cannot be analysed in a strict, «objective» sense but have rather to be grasped with their own specific logics, in their otherness. That is why in this field the different «turns» overlap so closely. The foremost conceptual change coming along with this development was a new attentiveness to society as a symbolic universe and in particular to social action as *symbolic* action. This was not so new for pre- and early modern history, still less for modern history, where a strong assumption of less symbolism and more rationality than in pre-modern times has shaped the concept of the period from the outset. Symbols in general, rituals, and along with this a new attention to the non-cognitive, to different worlds of meaning (*Sinnwelten*): all this underwent an out-and-out boom. The main characteristic of symbols and symbolic action – that all signs bear more than one meaning and are thus open to differing interpretations – now made for new attention to the polysemous character of political communication. Political language, political signs and events could be interpreted not as unambiguous statements but as polyvalent, complex utterances, open to different understandings. Communication – the very word points to a certain attention to politics as interaction. Just like speech-act oriented approaches, this made up the possibility of a micro-historical political history. It set the pace for a stronger attention to contexts, the non-political, non-programmatic dimensions. Politics could be analysed as some kind of interaction where social orders and values were negotiated. Surprisingly, the well-developed contemporary political anthropology was apparently not perceived so intensely<sup>12</sup>.

As part of the anthropological shift, the performative dimension of social relations and actions came to the fore. Mainly Victor Turner's concept of ritual as part of a «social drama» had a far-reaching influence<sup>13</sup>. Conflicts, crises and *rites de passages* are managed through performative practices and exposures. Bodily symbolic practices that produce meaning: this happens at every political convention, it happens, when politicians meet people and kings meet each other<sup>14</sup>. The performative turn as a special expression of attention to the symbolic spheres opened the eyes not only to the explicit moments of staging in politics but also to the implicit, non-intentional dimensions of bodily behaviour. Erving Goffman's concept of self-presentation, of social life as a stage, exerted a similar impact<sup>15</sup>. All the more so since metaphors of the stage have been part of the discourse on politics at least since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>. The ceremonial side of politics was thus newly appreciated as more than a mere surface, indeed a central feature of the political process<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> As a classic see: F.G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils. A Social Anthropology of Politics*, Boulder, Westview, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*, New York, PAJ Publications, 1969.

<sup>14</sup> J. Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1959.

<sup>16</sup> D. Blackbourn, *Politics as Theatre: Metaphors of the Stage in German History*, in «Transactions of the Royal Historical Society», 37 (1987), pp. 149-167.

<sup>17</sup> A. Biefang et al. (eds.), *Das politische Zeremoniell im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871-1918*, Düsseldorf, Droste, 2008.

One special and very successful wing of anthropologically informed political history is the praxeological approach which dates back to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice but can also easily be traced back to the ethnomethodological approach as Harold Garfinkel developed it<sup>18</sup>. The social theory of Anthony Giddens can equally be used as a tool for a praxeological approach<sup>19</sup>.

Praxeology tries to dissolve the borders between system and subject (or: structure and agency) by seeking to find «the system» incorporated by the actor. Thus systems are not pre-existent but can only be developed and sustained through constant action and acting actors. In terms of political history, this does not mean that something like the juridical frame of politics does not exist, but that it can be actualized (i.e. interpreted, made ready for action, considered to be important or not) only through the actors. Hence praxeology follows a very pragmatistic path and tends to minimize ideology or other beliefs. On the other hand it emphasizes bodies, «doing» something, which also means: everybody is interpreting contexts in their own way<sup>20</sup>. So Margaret L. Anderson described the electoral culture in the German *Kaiserreich* as a culture of *Eigen-Sinn*, focussing on the franchise as a practice, with differing – sometimes very weird – understandings, thus revealing concepts of political participation very different from the rational idea of modern elections<sup>21</sup>. Politics, as it turns out with this research, is very much about *doing*.

### 3. The Iconic Turn

It was in particular William J.T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm who insisted right from the 1980s on the point that the world does not consist of words alone<sup>22</sup>. They postulated that our perception of reality and the modes of communication depend more on pictures and consist more of visual imagination than of linguistic signs. In particular Mitchell understood what he called the «pictorial turn» (which is more or less synonymous with the more popular «iconic turn») as an antidote to the linguistic turn, claiming that pictures do much more than just mirror the world. In fact they shape it, and through their ability to present complex contexts «on first gaze» (unlike language) they can construct realities that everyone can understand. The popularity of the iconic turn in political history was the result of various features. On the one hand, pictures could pave the way to grasping the world of the illiterate, the lower classes, and doing so preferably for former times. So the history of the French Revolution or early modern religious conflicts

<sup>18</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> T. Welskopp, *Die Dualität von Struktur und Handeln. Anthony Giddens' Strukturierungsbe-griff als „praxeologischer“ Ansatz in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, in A. Suter, M. Hettling (eds.), *Struktur und Ereignis*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001, pp. 99-119.

<sup>20</sup> As an important example: S. Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune. Milizie fasciste in Italia e in Germania*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> M.L. Anderson, *Practicing Democracy. Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000. For the influential yet untranslatable concept of «Eigen-Sinn» see T. Lindenberger, *Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance*, in «Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte» [https://docupedia.de/zg/Eigensinn\\_\(english\\_version\)](https://docupedia.de/zg/Eigensinn_(english_version)) (2017-02-16).

<sup>22</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986; G. Boehm (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?*, München, Fink, 1994.

has been greatly enriched by a growing awareness of the pictorial side of political communication. Klaus Herding and Rolf Reichardt thus decoded the visual culture of the French Revolution as a culture paralleling written discourses, aiming to draw the illiterate lower classes<sup>23</sup>.

But, more than that, the iconic turn also opened the door to political topics in the age of the photograph, cinema and television. What Gerhard Paul called «the century of images» points to a new importance of the picture in the «visual age», embracing imagination, phantasies and feelings<sup>24</sup>. Extra-pictorial reality is increasingly structured according to iconographic and media rules. Analysing politics through the pictures it produces, or, vice versa, pictures producing political meaning, be it in classical paintings, posters, copper engravings, caricatures, photographs, movies or television, thus offers a view into the political that transcends the concept of politics as a more or less rational, goal-oriented and interest-guided social system.

It is probably sheer coincidence that, along with the iconic turn, a new attention to the media gained momentum. But since the media deal a lot with pictures, the new interest in the visual has manifested itself largely in a strong, theoretically advanced interest in media history. In terms of political history, it has been pointed out that politics is, at least in the age of mass society, always media history as well. Along with this, not only has the polysemic character of pictorial politics been scrutinized, not only have the dimensions of manipulation and propaganda been focused on, but also the indirect character of media communication has gained attention. Politics through the media produces pictures that cannot be controlled either by the senders or by the recipients. On the other hand, television in particular produces mighty pictures and images that work as background foils and equally as prolongations of political concepts. Sitcoms and crime movies present images of «good societies» that can be taken as political goal descriptions<sup>25</sup>.

## 4. Spatial Dimensions

History has always been obsessed far more by time than by space. With the admissible exception of the French *Annales* School, space as a dimension of history played virtually no role for a long time. Especially in the German speaking countries, «space» was associated with the National-Socialist obsession with *Lebensraum* and therefore not mentionable. It was probably the end of the Cold War that opened the debate on space and topography again. With the readjustment of political spaces after 1990 it became possible to think about space as a dimension of history anew. Further suggestions came from the rise of global history where spatial connections between centre and periphery, or the importance of infrastructure for the enforcement of imperial rule were emphasized<sup>26</sup>. Territory as a focus of politics, as a sheer resource and as a symbolic

<sup>23</sup> K. Herding, R. Reichardt, *Die Bildpublizistik der Französischen Revolution*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> G. Paul (ed.), *The Century of Images*, 2 vols., Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009; Id., *The Visual Age. Dot and Pixel*, vol. 1, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. C. von Hodenberg, *Television's Moment. Sitcom Audiences and the Sixties Cultural Revolution*, New York, Berghahn, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World. A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 77-117.



device came into focus again<sup>27</sup>. In the wake of this, territory became increasingly historicized. For Charles Mayer, the great times of territory as the core of politics are over. Political rule is more and more focussed on other ways of control<sup>28</sup>.

Yet this refers to a rather concretist understanding of «space». Neomarxist geographers like David Harvey and Edward Soja, partly inheriting Georg Simmel, paved the way for a constructivist or at least relational understanding of space as something that is produced by social interaction. Following this approach, space is not a given entity but rather produced by the subjects that use it, through the spatial dimension of social interaction, through their ways of making use of the space and attributing meaning to it<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, space could also be understood in a metaphorical way, and this applies in particular to political history. Hannah Arendt termed the political sphere a «space», finding its expression in the public. The metaphorical «space» of the political has, especially in Germany, been understood as the sphere of a particular way of action and treatment of reality, with strong notions of Inside-Outside. «The Political» – which is a far more comprehensive thing than mere «politics» – was conceived of as a specific space of communication<sup>30</sup>.

So, space has found very different expressions in political history. There is a large span between the politics of territoriality, taking space as a concrete matter one can touch, and the metaphorical use of the political sphere as a space where social action takes place.

## 5. New Perspectives

These «turns» have by no means turned the world of political history upside down. As before, a lot of it is done within the borders of classical questions. But the turns offer new views onto an old field. They have sometimes aroused fierce resistance and heated discussions. This is, I think, owed to the fact that the questions and approaches discussed here are, at least in part, quite fundamental. I see four points<sup>31</sup>.

*Firstly* all cultural turns subscribe to a fundamental constructivism. Political problems, power and domination are socially construed and symbolically maintained. This constructivism was one main reason why the cultural turns were perceived only hesitantly in the realm of political history. Political historians claimed that politics were something fundamentally «real», because it could indeed shape and change reality. The power that could be exerted on people was real, because killing people was real. Foucault's concept of power as a relation, as a

<sup>27</sup> K. Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics*, New York, Bard Graduate Center, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> C.S. Maier, *Once Within Borders. Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500*, Harvard U.P., 2016.

<sup>29</sup> M. Löw, *The Sociology of Space. Materiality, Social Structures, and Action*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2016.

<sup>30</sup> See the Bielefeld-based Collaborative Research Center (Sonderforschungsbereich) 584 «Das Politische als Kommunikationsraum in der Geschichte». <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/geschichte/forschung/sfb584/index.html> (17-02-11)

<sup>31</sup> See T. Mergel, *Kulturgeschichte der Politik 2.0*, in: docupedia-Zeitgeschichte. [https://www.docupedia.de/zg/Kulturgeschichte\\_der\\_Politik\\_Version\\_2.0\\_Thomas\\_Mergel](https://www.docupedia.de/zg/Kulturgeschichte_der_Politik_Version_2.0_Thomas_Mergel) (2017-02-13).

productive force and as something that was inherent in a social body at every level of it was not easily palpable for traditional political history, although Max Weber's concept of power pointed in exactly the same direction<sup>32</sup>.

Thus the idea that political realities were «constructed» tended, in the eyes of conservative historians, to smooth politics and to disavow its sometimes gruesome outcomes. Yet culturally informed political histories insist that they do not deny something like «reality»; they rather point to the question how these realities are produced and how these realities can differ, when we look at different players. They problematize how politics and policies are negotiated and shaped.

One consequence of this view is, *secondly*, the constant extension of the concept of politics. Politics is not something only states, governments and statesmen are concerned with. Whenever questions of common interest are touched, we can talk about «politics». Reciprocally, naming some issue «political» is a desirable way of ascribing common interest and necessity to it. Consequently, the question whether an issue is «political» or not is itself subject to constant dispute<sup>33</sup>. Older political history quite easily distinguished between political and non-political issues. So, frequently the argument is not *within* the political but *about* the political. Recent political history analyses this distinction itself and the disputes around it as part of political history.

*Thirdly*, as part of the former, the empiric field of what has to be researched under the rubric of politics has extended as well. The outcome – decisions, e.g. – is only one focus. Much more important is the way *towards* the outcome. So, the conditions and contexts, the process of «making» politics have attained much more attention than formerly.

*Fourthly*, cultural approaches conceptualize politics as a matter of communication, and they pay attention in particular to its symbolic dimension. Thereby they undermine the traditional understanding that politics is a realm of rational interests and arguments. When taking into account not just texts but also pictures, symbols, performances, and even analysing texts as symbols, the question arises whether the politics of the past is understandable at all. When symbolic or spatial dimensions are involved, how can we grasp the logics of former political conflicts and goals?

Given these common features, it is not astonishing that recent research has tried to integrate these approaches. Especially the study of institutions has proved to be a good opportunity to blend linguistic, symbolic and performative, iconic and spatial dimensions. Parliaments have been the playground of integrating different approaches. In Germany and the Netherlands, «parliamentary cultures» have been studied as dense clusters of communications, taking place in limited spaces with a strong inside-outside code, based on language but with assertive symbolic and performative content and with (mostly underrated) visual cultures<sup>34</sup>. Another prom-

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. M. Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, in «Critical Inquiry», 8 (1982), pp. 777-795.

<sup>33</sup> See W. Steinmetz (ed.), *'Politik'. Situationen eines Wortgebrauchs im Europa der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> A. Schulz, A. Wirtsching (eds.), *Parlamentarische Kulturen in Europa. Das Parlament als Kommunikationsraum*, Düsseldorf, Droste, 2012; T. Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik. Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag (2002)*, Düsseldorf, Droste, 2012<sup>3</sup>; H. Velde, *Sprekende Politiek. Redenaars en hun publiek in de parlementaire gouden eeuw*, Amsterdam,

ising field is the study of electoral cultures, be it the electoral campaign or the event of voting (which often amount to one and the same). Ethnographic methods often apply here<sup>35</sup>. The Archimedian point of all this research lies in the description of voting as different from the normative definitions, as an expression of norms and ethics of society, as a playground of social conflicts and of clashes between local values and the values of a society that was often modernizing faster than the domestic horizon would allow one to imagine.

Political history will not be newly invented through these theoretical and methodological shifts. But they channel research interests towards an understanding of politics which tries to grasp past societies and the way they are ruled and deal with conflicts in them, often not very modern peculiarities. Investigating the cultures of Parliaments or elections offers insights into the limited reach and scope of modern political mentalities.

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Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2015; E. Tanja, *Goede politiek. De parlementaire cultuur van de Tweede Kamer, 1866-1940*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> R. Bertrand *et al.* (eds.), *Cultures of Voting. The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot*, London, Hurst & Co., 2007. Especially the English and the German electoral culture have been intensely researched. See J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2009. T. Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfes in der Bundesrepublik, 1949-1990*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2010; M.L. Anderson, *Practicing Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.