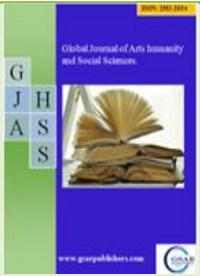
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The Storming of the Capitol." On the iconography of the political

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Summary

The question of this article is of what contribution an iconographic analysis can make to political reflection. The representation sought here takes the events at the Capitol in Washington as the occasion for an interdisciplinary examination. It is a confrontation between levels of contemporary political history. The value of the liberal way of life is under threat; the contemporary historical images show how fragile and sensitive this way of life is. The urgent question of how to counteract the long-term trend towards the devaluation of democratic cultures is dealt with here in a roundabout way. The aim is to point out the contradictions, but also the interplay between an upstanding "political culture" and the apolitical or "uncultivated" forces.

Keywords: Political and politics - political ideas - political icons – violence

Introduction

One of the most memorable images in recent history is probably the so-called storming of the Capitol in Washington on January 6, 2021. You can recall the images, which are ubiquitously available thanks to new image media; you can also call the events of those days "contemporary history", play down their significance or exaggerate them. In any case, the sociological and historical perspective is complicated. It is true that the circumstances have been clarified and security aspects have been sufficiently discussed. However, the cultural and political ruptures run deep and cannot be considered to have been overcome too quickly.

The aim here is neither a critical socio-political analysis nor an exact historical depiction, but rather the question of what contribution an iconographic analysis can make to political reflection. The representation sought here takes the events in Washington as the occasion for an interdisciplinary examination. It brings together aspects of contemporary history, political iconography and political reflection. It is therefore a confrontation between two levels of contemporary political history, the further course of which is highly uncertain. The value of the liberal way of life is under threat; the contemporary historical images show how fragile and sensitive this way of life is. The urgent question of how

to counteract the long-term trend towards the devaluation of democratic cultures is dealt with here in a roundabout way. The aim is to point out the contradictions, but also the interplay between an upstanding "political culture" and the apolitical or "uncultivated" forces, without placing one area in absolute opposition to the other. An iconological perspective is helpful here. It leads the considerations to socio-psychological aspects and finally to an existential-philosophical definition of the basic political situation.

The events can be briefly summarized: on 6 January 2021, an event took place that was unique and unprecedented in US history. President Trump, who had been voted out of office at the time, called on his supporters to take part in the "Save America March" at a protest rally. In his speech to tens of thousands of supporters, he falsely claimed that his defeat in the election against his political opponent Joe Biden was due to large-scale electoral fraud by the Democratic Party. His call to go to the Capitol and challenge the vote of the Electoral College was immediately put into action by militant groups. Numerous violent demonstrators stormed the parliament building and gained access to the Senate chamber and the offices of the MPs. The events, in which police officers were attacked and several people were killed, are today assessed by the law enforcement authorities as domestic terrorism;



for many political observers, they were part of an attempted coup d'état.¹

As indicated, we do not intend to reconstruct the legal details. Only one question should be addressed: how this chapter can be placed in a larger development of political culture. The "case", or rather the story surrounding the storming of the Capitol, is of course only an excerpt from a particular cultural situation and cannot be taken for the global political whole. However, the signatures and traces left behind by these events are so deep and lasting that they are certainly suitable for a social-theoretical debate.

1. The iconography of the political

In general, we regard the political as an intelligible form with its possible determinations. Politics - and, in a comparable sense, history - is subject to the cognitive description of a form of life. *To live politically* means to agree on the conditions under which one wants to deal with one another. This description will be taken as a basis here, although we will point out a further dimension of the political.

The political can be represented - beyond the above definition - in its physical, material or iconographic dimension. This statement is not surprising. Of the many dimensions that can be attributed to the political, the iconographic dimension is a special one. The history of events, which also includes recent contemporary history, is surrounded by media carriers that are familiar to us. Hardly any image that defines a supposedly historical moment in space and time escapes the attention of the media. But this flood of images is, as we know, surrounded by a sphere of images that is eminently political. However, the political language of these images is ambivalent in the present. For we need images in order to understand the relationships between past and present. However, the certainty that we can gain a sharper or more enlightened awareness of the political by looking at political iconography is increasingly being lost. It is unsettled by the density of events, the rapid development of technology, but also by the succession of violent events in real time.

However, this is not about the debatable change in visual language. The focus is on the depiction of historical events for which images are used. These refer to the deeper resistances of contemporary political culture. What can be learned from the example of the storming of the Capitol is that the expressive power of political icons no longer applies today and that the political is lost in a confusion to which the image spheres have contributed their part. This does not mean, however, that we should give in to postmodern arbitrariness and resignation. The question is rather how an authentic political visual language can be positioned today against a supposedly apolitical, "regressive" violence through images. Somewhat exaggeratedly, one could speak here of a search

for the forgotten place of the political, which is obscured by the aforementioned events, but also by a universal power of images.

At the same time, it is important to warn against short-sighted conclusions. The constellation outlined here should not be misunderstood as "value-conservative" or nostalgic. Rather, as we will show, the conviction of a twofold reading of history lies in the background. The cultivation of rule, or the political, is the target horizon; in order to achieve this, however, the uncultivated, "raw" nature of the political must also be taken into account.

The following presentation comprises various elements. These elements are not suspected of being political per se. And yet we can establish references to the political from the elements. The connection between the material and the iconic level becomes clear in the course of the observation.

The empty throne

The images of the storming of the Capitol are still confusing. They were and are accompanied by linguistic images that are anything but reassuring. The backlash was to a certain extent "natural", efforts were made to emphasize the value of democracy and to charge it symbolically. The parliament of a democratic system is considered the center and anchor, the heart of the system. Interfering with this center can have fatal consequences.

There is also a striking image that seems equally symbolically overloaded: a Republican supporter had invaded the office of Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the House of Representatives, and showed himself in a self-assured and defiant pose with his feet on the table.

It was a trivial, everyday act. The gap between the historical symbolism and the historical moment could not be greater. It can be assumed that the perpetrator did not fully understand the cultural traditions of the unoccupied chair. The chair in the office of the high house became a throne. The empty throne, however, has a strong symbolism, it stands for the absence of the ruler and the expected ceremonial of enthronement. The political iconography of the empty throne dates back to antiquity, and its models were continued in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the early modern period, there was a revival of the symbolism, with detailed specifications from the so-called ceremonial sciences. The "European Court Ceremonial" states that the throne is spanned by a dais, or canopy, as a visible sign of inviolable sovereignty. "The throne, or rather the parade chair, which is supposed to signify the throne, stands under this dais. And when an ambassador grants an audience, it is moved to the right; however, it is not presented to anyone to sit on, but is reserved for the sovereign alone, as it were. Apart from the audience, it is placed against the wall so that those who view such rooms do not sit on it out of curiosity or insolence."²

¹ Claudia Brachhold et. al.: *The speech, the mob and the storming*. In: DIE ZEIT.de from January 07, 2021; Robert J. Antonio: *Democracy and Capitalism in the Interregnum. Trump's Self-Coup and After*. In: *Critical Sociology*, Volume 48, No. 6, September 2022, pp. 937-965

² Gottfried Stieve: *"Europäisches Hof-Ceremoniel, worinnen Nachrichten gegeben wird, was für eine Beschaffenheit es haben mit der Praerogativ, und dem daraus fließenden Ceremoiel."* Leipzig 1723, pp. 296-298; quoted from Jochen Sander: *Thron, leerer*. In: Uwe Fleckner/Martin



The moment when the interior of the parliament building was broken into was also a break with historical continuities. The empty seat of power was occupied, but was this an act of political self-empowerment? The lasting impression left by the occupation of the empty chair was rather one of recklessness and the mere display of skill - but without any claim to being able or willing to occupy this empty seat permanently.

The invasion of the Capitol was a surprise for the involved and uninvolved contemporaries, but at the same time it also ended a silent consensus. The gesture of presumption in taking the king's empty seat was a violation of democratic certainty - even if the act was ultimately spontaneous and, above all, thoughtless. Earlier times had cultivated the offense of *lèse majesté*, which went back to the Roman legal tradition. This was generally understood to mean any physical aggression against the ruler and members of the royal family, as well as any conspiracy, treason or high treason and disobedience against members of the family, civil servants and ministers. In the 18th century, the category of crime became clearer under the term "*crimen laesae majestatis*"³, but also more relative. Although majesty still referred to the highest authority appointed by the grace of God, the state was no longer clearly equated with a sovereign person. The supra-individual state therefore had to rethink the relationship between personal protection and state protection.⁴

In modern mass democracies, these traditions are known to be redefined. In this respect too, the powerful gesture proves to be ambivalent; on the one hand, it was empty, unconcerned, ignorant, but on the other, it had an unconscious final symbolism. It ended a centuries-long tradition without replacing it with anything substantial or creative

Can the events of contemporary history be taken as evidence of the final end of history (F. Fukuyama)? Or was it merely violence that positioned itself in social space, that provided information about what one is capable of and what one wants to be? Violence does not speak⁵, writes Jan Phillip Reemtsma, but it can also be understood as information. Violence shows a society where it stands in its cultural development.

The storm

Let's pick out another element that stretches the distance between the political and the non-political: *The storm*. The connotations are actually self-evident. As a phenomenon of nature, the storm is experienced as ominous, as an experience in which nature shows its destructive power. In terms of cultural history, both real and

social or political storms were seen as a test of good rule. This tradition has been preserved in stories and powerful images. Nature is therefore originally violent. Among other things, it can manifest itself in the form of lightning, which can sometimes be translated as divine, sometimes as political executive power. The storm, on the other hand, is considered less purposeful, blind and furious. A storm must be met with clever action, by seeking shelter, by standing firm or simply by suffering something.

In political iconography, however, the category of the storm reflects a change in 'historical self-perception'⁶. In the pre-modern era, people thought in opposites. Against the unleashed force of nature, the forces of perseverance are shown - the clever ruler or the commander demonstrates energy, leadership, courage and authority in the face of a storm that simply had to be survived. An image that unleashed different variants, such as the fragility of everyday experience, fear and horror or heroic failure.

In the 18th/19th century, however, the semantics of the storm received a groundbreaking reinterpretation. Whereas previously it had been about persevering against anonymous forces and the forces of nature, which had to be prudently appeased, it was now about the goal of unleashing political forces. The historical rupture of the 18th century revolutions is known to be profound; the social world was unhinged. People indulged in a language of storm and imagined the revolution as a necessary hurricane that would sweep away everything old. "The paradigm of the storm had become obsolete as an admonition to constancy and was used as an apologia for change. However, it was also taken up by political opponents such as Edmund Burke, who saw in the "Hurricane of Revolution" an unprecedented work of destruction"⁷

The quantity

Last but not least, the phenomenon of a set forms the occasion for a phenomenological examination. Categorical distinctions with long traditions can also be formed in the conceptual environment of crowd or mass: a crowd is a quantity that is only defined in more detail through precise observation. The semantic environment encompasses the multiplicity or multitude, the heap or the accumulation, the flood or the swarm. The political dimension emerges succinctly when we see a gathering of people, an army or a crowd instead of an abstract set of elements. The category of mass is detached from its physical origin and transferred into a social field of forces. A mass is therefore above all a social unit with a heavy weight that can be brought into the field.

From a socio-psychological perspective, a crowd is an abstract entity that becomes blurred and merely provides the coloring against which, for example, a political figure stands out more clearly. But the crowd can have equally threatening and ominous effects if it is presented as an acting unit. The references to a "Volkssturm", whose semantic ramifications we are omitting here, are obvious. From a quantitative point of view alone, the crowd

Warnke/Hendrik Ziegler (eds.): *Political Iconography. A Handbook*. 2 vols. Munich: C. H Beck 2014, pp. 422-428, here p

³ Martin Avenarius: *Majestas (Crimen majestatis)* In: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Volume 23, Stuttgart: Hirsemann 2010, Column 1135

⁴ Jan Philipp Reemtsma: *Violence does not speak. Three speeches*. Stuttgart: Reclam 2002

⁵ Hendrik Ziegler: *Majestätsbeleidigung*. In: Uwe Fleckner/Martin Warnke/Hendrik Ziegler (eds.): *Political Iconography. A Handbook*. 2 vols. Munich: C. H Beck 2014, pp. 116-125

⁶ Rainer Donandt: *Storm*. In: *Fleckner/Warnke/Ziegler, Political Iconography* 2014, pp. 407-413, here p. 408

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 411



symbolizes a potential power to act. The conditions under which the form of violence can emerge from a simple gathering could be observed in the days of January 6, 2021.

In the context constructed here, the concepts of mass and quantity prove to be particularly complex in their cultural and historical dimensions. For it is well known that political history passes through stages of self-empowerment. The theme of the crowd as an active force took on different forms in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, these political-historical determinations have an ambivalent relationship to the aesthetic perception of the masses. Contemporary diagnoses of the times take up this aestheticization; they recognize indeterminacy, interchangeability and facelessness in cultural-theoretical references. We will reconstruct this path in the following in order to finally arrive at the decisive cultural-theoretical question.

A cultural-theoretical as well as an image-historical consideration of the crowd leads quite directly to the early modern period, especially to revolutionary Paris. A mass of people had, of course, already been framed in images before, but one can rightly claim that the idea of an active, active and violent mass was brought forth as a pictorial representation at that time. Jacques-Louis David's Ballhaus Oath of 1791 marks the threshold after which the images of the mass of people were given a different signature.

The monumental painting of David was designed to measure 8.65 meters by 11.65 meters. An intoxicated, acclamating or protesting crowd had also been a subject of art before; the "people" or ordinary people of the early modern period had certainly been "worthy of painting". But before the revolution, depictions were primarily concerned with scattered groups, small collectives or individual people in their everyday lives. The great and overwhelming nature of the revolution was now also to be depicted here, in order to emphasize an equally great idea: that collectives make history.

The art historical perspective illuminates the historical space. The tradition of the crowd portrait broke with "the older conventions of representation, which either melt a large crowd into an indistinguishable and inactive whole or break it up into small groups made up of typical representatives of classes, professions, age groups and genders".⁸ What is deliberately staged here is a politically immense process in which the dispersed crowd becomes a political collective. If we concentrate solely on the visual representation, a fundamental aesthetic and political problem becomes visible. As is well known, the aim was to filter an active collective out of a crowd; to depict something that existed as an aspiration, idea and vision. This implementation was by no means easy for the artistic offensive either, as the aim was to depict the "extremely heightened physical expression of the will of the many"⁹. To put it simply: the moment in which the masses free themselves from their unconscious situation was to be depicted.

⁸ Wolfgang Kemp: *Crowd of the people*. In: Fleckner/Warnke/Ziegler, *Political Iconography* 2014, pp. 517-527

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 522

The solution is as elegant as it is complex; the foreground of the pen and ink drawing shows a relief of people acting and acclaiming, while the background is formed by a shimmering, unrest-inducing crowd. The historical moment, which will later preoccupy the protagonists of the revolution, is initially perceptible as an atmospheric mood and as a mere force, emphasized by the open windows through which gusts of wind are blowing.

As is well known, the concept of the masses would make a career for itself in the 19th and 20th centuries; its significance for revolutionary upheavals and the history of war is undeniable. There is no need to emphasize that the "totalitarian moment" was far removed from the original motives of the Enlightenment. But it is worth noting that in the course of the late 19th century, the signatures of gestalt and mass psychology became increasingly blurred. From an iconographic point of view, the mass is now taken as an object per se and decoupled from its political forms of action. The mass is now perceived as a dynamized form of social unification that remains entirely related to the moment. Its connection with the motif of power becomes more sensitive and indeterminate. Despite the banners held aloft, it is no longer clear "what the masses want."¹⁰ The references to the "March to the Capitol" are obvious, because what characterized these events above all was that they appeared as a form of empty, indeterminate violence. The presence in one place and the ability to penetrate for a moment into the center of the political was not covered by any recognizable idea - apart from the relevant rhetoric of agitprop and set pieces of history. It is difficult to speak of an ideology. This violence was self-sufficient, it managed without any substantial semantics, which is probably what makes it so dangerous.

In "Mass and Power", Elias Canetti wrote about man's fear of the unknown and the foreign. It is a fear that can only be redeemed through inclusion in the masses. The "fear of contact"¹¹ can only be resolved in a structure guided by emotions, because only here can healing discharges occur and the stranger be overcome.

Canetti's thinking focused on power structures when a mass is bound to the totalitarian moment. This perspective is of course indispensable for analyzing proto-fascist developments. However, from an aesthetic point of view, the shift from the political to the non-political and abstract must be noted. The mass loses its consistency, a purposeful will becomes an indeterminate being, fluctuating, flickering, aimless. The motif of the monstrosity of the mass extends across an extremely broad field of cultural theory of modernity¹². It leads from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man in the

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 526

¹¹ Elias Canetti: *Mass and Power*. Hamburg: Claassen 1960

¹² The philosophical references are just as wide-ranging: we find analogies in cultural philosophy, post-history and art history. The entry into modernity is often read as a departure from all positive determinations. Knowledge is "only" reflexive and the lack of being - i.e. the indeterminacy of all categorical patterns, which is inherent to this modern world reference, can only be experienced ironically broken (Gerhard Gamm: *Flucht aus der Kategorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1994). Baudrillard, the doyen of posthistory, went so far as to see a fractal hermeneutics at work in history that rejects any attempt to reanimate the

Crowd" via Gestalt psychology to Futurism, which explored the "fluid and unstable nature of the masses" and their "swarm behavior"¹³

For the iconographic representation of domination, the political aspects under which the masses are perceived are probably decisive. The negative aspects are known to include facelessness and anonymity, as well as their negative status. Is the modern mass "still" a phenomenon for which we can take political categories of subjectivity into account? The scepticism towards the ideal of enlightened political subjectivation is correspondingly great.

2. The rise and fall of political ideas: the development of political judgment

This presentation is less oriented towards the narrative structure that is usually taken as a basis in this context. This narrative is often polar in structure, oriented towards the old dualism of rise and fall, gain and loss. At present, skeptical diagnoses of society, which observe a diffuse and complex decline of the political, dominate with good reason. Some of the reasons for this are quite obvious, but some are also latent.

The more obvious reason for the boom in stories of decay lies in the "return" of political and apolitical forces that are seen as harmful to the core of democratic spheres. On the surface, this "return of the apolitical" seems to refer to past times that are believed to have been left behind. In this context, there is talk of a *great regression* or *times of anger*. Behind the scenes, these things prove to be painful. The longing for an original, "pure" core of the political does not seem to be fulfilled.¹⁴

The task that arises in this context is first and foremost a methodological one. Other questions need to be asked and other forms of presentation chosen than those that are usually expected in this context. We would expect a debate that confronts the unfavorable developments with well-intentioned prescriptions. At the end of such a reflection, there are prospects of better times, in which the authentic, the true, the civil would reappear - the "forgotten realm" of the political - such as the free gathering of equals in the sense of Hannah Arendt.

This realm was obviously infinitely distant when a protesting mass invaded the heart of the political culture of the United States. It is difficult to categorize these events as something in which the usual course of history was momentarily abandoned. A relapse? A stuttering of history caused by a crowd illegitimately staging a half-hearted riot?

The linguistic view, trained in political ethos, does not meet the requirements if one assumes that it was simply about the return of

raw, apolitical forces. The speculation clearly leads nowhere. Is it even possible to connect the levels of political norm expectations and (supposedly) apolitical deviation?

What do the various disciplines have to say about this? The developmental psychology of humanity - to take one example - examines the phylogenetic and ontogenetic progression curves and looks for possible parallels between the history of political and ethical ideas and individual imagery. Put simply, the question is whether the development of political ideas is reflected in the modern psyche. The basic idea has of course already been formulated by developmental psychology, for example with regard to the development of moral judgment. Here, however, we are dealing with a dimension that goes further. On the one hand, one can examine individual political judgments to see to what extent they are an expression of a high level of political judgment. On the other hand, we can also investigate the *overall process* that drives the history of political ideas.

Heuristic models are therefore conceivable if we want to understand how human development has progressed in the area of political judgment. Their informative value is of course limited - but informative for the history of the political. There are good reasons to assume a positive dialectic.

Does the history of human culture proceed like a single biography? We will want to refrain from making such a statement. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to ask under what circumstances a positive development is set in motion and to what extent a level once reached is lost again. So how is it that humanity does not become smarter and that the high-quality ideas of philosophers practically "crash" into the brutality of domination?

These insights are as old as the ideas that were once developed and the answers usually lead to a well-founded cultural pessimism. At the bottom of a well-founded morality, man has historically shown himself to be a creature of power. Even the best ethical models and the deepest moral intuitions offer no guarantee against the abuse of power. Morality and power are to a certain extent two antagonistic forces and it would be surprising and downright bizarre if man were to develop as a higher moral being without ever falling prey to the insinuations of power.

Up to this point, one can speak of skeptical historiography without drawing parallels to the moral understanding of past times in Nietzsche's sense. The only question is: how far does the cognitive schema go when it comes to the developmental progress of humanity? Developmental psychology has to limit itself to case vignettes. On the basis of a - certainly limited - empirical study, specific levels can be distinguished that individual educational subjects acquire¹⁵. But then the gap to the political subjects and their capacity for violence - as exemplified in the situation in front of the Capitol - becomes excessive. We are faced with an extreme contradiction: in evolutionary psychology, the ability to make well-

original historically powerful subject. Jean Baudrillard: *Why hasn't everything already disappeared?* Berlin: Matthes and Seitz 2008

¹³ Kemp, *Volksmenge*, 2014, p. 526

¹⁴ Heinrich Geiselberger (ed.): *The Great Regression. An international debate on the intellectual situation of our time.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2017; Thomas Bedorf/Kurt Röttgers (eds.): *Das Politische und die Politik.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2010

¹⁵ Fritz Oser: *Political judgment: The rise and fall of political ideas.* In: Gerd Jüttemann: *The development of the psyche in the history of mankind.* Lengerich: Pabst Publishers 2013, pp. 334-345

founded political and moral judgments has increased; in real history, on the other hand, brute force is gaining ground - seemingly more and more drastically. One could refer to the events before the Capitol, but also find other contemporary historical evidence.

What exactly is the contradiction between theory and real history? Is developmental psychology "merely" a formal theory that formulates its statements in abstract terms, but has no contact with contemporary history? Sociology would intervene here with clever socio-political diagnoses and bring some weighty motives into play. But let's stick to the abstract confrontation between political judgment and the history of events.

The challenge is to bring *the same and the possible changes* to the level of a binding insight. Many approaches fail due to this contradiction, because the scheme of rise and decline is taken as a one-sided basis. It is questionable what theory can and should achieve here at all. Perhaps the time of grand narratives that tend to predict a rise for the better or an unstoppable decline in history is over. It is not for nothing that postmodern philosophy and posthistoire (J. Baudrillard) have removed history from its solid ground. There is no telos and no end, but also no positive anticipation of history as a unit of meaning.

However, this is not the end of the task of thinking and so we must persist in asking questions of history, in the knowledge that the answers are only provisional. It is not the question of the end or the rise that is helpful, but how the heterogeneous and contradictory can be brought into a context.

"Farewell to the history of advancement" - this diagnosis is painful. However, it does not necessarily mean its opposite of impending doom. Human history can only be viewed as a holistic event to a very limited extent, as it is divided into different areas that contain both the scenario of upward development and the possibility of decline. But what sense do models of progress still make that are based on the assumption of accumulation and qualitative increase?

What is the overall state of the curve of political ideas that might give rise to the hope that a kind of developmental history of political judgment and political goodness can be traced? It is at least problematic to search unilaterally for the cognitivist progress that is expressed in the possibility of making a high-level political judgment.

We are faced with a dilemma here. On the one hand, we must deny unconditional progress in terms of political judgment; on the other hand, we can and should exclude areas in which something new must be determined with undiminished energy in new constellations of contemporary history. How can this be translated into a suitable language? The approach presented here is risky because it cannot rule out misunderstandings from the outset. One of the peculiarities of contemporary culture is the challenge of defining the category of resistance to all unpleasant historical experiences; in other words, not to prematurely assign it to a realm of the apolitical, supposedly "barbaric". The very question of when

resistance is mixed up with legitimate counter-violence and at what point the line is to be drawn leads reflection into a no man's land. In this respect, the contemporary historical situation in the USA is an important excerpt, but cannot be taken as a whole.

The general consciousness understandably tends to look for progress in development. We find it in individual cultural, aesthetic and technological areas. However, development as a holistic history, as it was written by the ancients, today eludes the will to increase. This is precisely why we need a different form of representation to explain the glaring discrepancy between individual and generic historical development. Metaphorical, visual, iconic, but also anthropological strategies as heuristic devices offer an alternative way of thinking. As we will see, they lead us out of the narrow realm of narratives of progress, which sooner or later lapse into scenarios of decline.

3. Cultivating meaningful rule - how can the history of civilization be told?

What about the possibility of forming an emphatic concept of the political today? The burden of justification for such a project is immense; not only do you have to fight your way through a thicket of controversies, you also sometimes come under suspicion of cultivating nostalgic relationships with the past. Against all reservations, a substantial and normative concept of the political should be maintained here. The challenge is to bring the cultivation of rule into a narrative form. However, this must distance itself from the older narratives.

The thesis to be defended here merely states that it is entirely possible to counter the dominance of stories of decay with well-founded "narratives of state and rule". The task, of course, is to establish the embodiment of rule as a kind of counter-narrative. How can this be achieved? The preference for democratic forms of state and rule is assumed here; however, it is precisely this self-image that becomes problematic when cognitive validity is accompanied by real ruptures. It is a creeping process that leads to the feared decline of political culture or even the end of democracy.¹⁶

In general, the cause of evil is related to the categories of power and powerlessness. This powerlessness is particularly evident in more recent diagnoses of social theory. Quite a few theorists refer to the gap between the political and the pre-political, or to the difference between politics and the political. The political is the noble, "sacred" core of a practice of freedom that is located in ideal situations. No further definition is required for this archetype of the political; it is sufficient that the opening of an ideal situation is conceived - one can certainly refer here to the situation described in the ballroom in Paris.

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Guehenno: *The End of Democracy*, Munich: dtv 1996; Alex Hochuli/Ales Hoare/Phillipe Cunliffe: *The End of the End of History. Post-politics, anti-politics and the collapse of liberal democracy*. Vienna: Promedia 2022

The reference to Hannah Arendt's political theory is obvious. The Greek polis laid the foundations of a political culture that endured into the modern era: the political opens up a realm of freedom that is distinct from the realm of necessity, production and labor. The economy sets coercion and violence; through the encounter of equals, on the other hand, a common response to the fragility of human things is sought and found¹⁷

However, this ideal form should be seen as an exception. Thus, with the beginning of political historiography, as it were, the political was overshadowed by the establishment of power. Politics in this sense was to a certain extent the antithesis of the "pure" political. In the forms of power, the enforcement and determination of rule, the political was displaced as the actual measure of a practice of freedom.

If you think this distinction through to the end, you get the impression of a counterfactual illusion. The political would therefore be the expression of a beautiful thought, a wish that has always been thwarted in reality. Postmodern philosophy has recognized this difference. One can certainly speak here of a tradition of lamentation, in which the loss of an ideal space is mourned. The potentiality of joint action remains on the horizon of political thought, infinitely distant, without ever becoming tangible.

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The question of how the anti-totalitarian core of the political can be preserved and how the meaning of the political can be embodied has remained unanswered to this point.

We are faced with a major dilemma here. The political is inherently difficult to portray, while the fractures of realpolitik are all the more apparent. Modern politics is characterized by deep and far-reaching doubts. These include, in the broadest sense:

- *The aspect of identity.* The representation of a political entity has become questionable. In the global context, politics is being shaken by a diversity of forms. The older guiding concepts - such as the "Westphalian order" - are losing their connection to reality, but remain as concepts of meaning. The world view of a stable and homogeneous world of states has not only cracked; it has long since given way to a reality in which powerful forces undermine the political. The ability of politics to act can therefore no longer be maintained insofar as politics is combined with strong motives of identity. The diversity of identity concepts and the requirement of inclusion in the political system greatly irritate the "operation of politics in the global society".¹⁸
- *The aspect of representation.* Politics in the global society is considered to be highly presuppositional;

however, there are increasing doubts as to whether it is even possible to speak of politics in the traditional sense. This includes the experience shared by everyone that politics is being deprived of its ground because everything in global society interacts and no individual political decision is any longer perceived as sovereign - beyond the question of asserting power or authoritarian politics. The simple question of how citizens find their way in a society is lost in the endless orbits of the so-called transnational and supranational world society¹⁹. But it also affects politics in the international dimension. The world has moved closer together, a networked global public communicates every "world event". But this does not correspond to a stable authority that could meet the requirements of world morality. Whichever way you look at it, we are dealing with deep uncertainty and the question of how to represent the peoples of the world remains unanswered.²⁰

- *The aspect of violence.* The aspect of violence also reaches into the gap between politics and the political. The aforementioned anti-totalitarian tradition wants to make us forget the motif of violence. More precisely, the absence of motives of violence is characteristic of the heart of the political. Where language and commonality prevail in action, there is no room for violence. This is contradicted by more recent research into violence, which recognizes a close connection between politics and violence.²¹ In politics - now turned against the idealistic linguistic-philosophical tradition - lies the motif of the power of action, which determines the constitutive nature of power within the framework of political orders. At the core of politics lies the pursuit of power. This power shimmers; that is, it becomes productive, formative, but it also tends towards violence. Violence and design are two constitutive elements without which politics cannot exist. This problem has a history. A political order has always been called upon to provide an answer to dealing with violence. Today, the primacy of violence has shifted; violence is considered legitimate when it acts as a police force and provides cover. The fact that it uses violence at all to maintain order, however, puts it in a twilight. At present, politics is faced with the contradiction that it is supposed to embody various characteristics without the order being identifiable as an order of violence.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt: *Power and Violence*. Munich: Piper 1970; This: *Vita Activa oder vom tätigen Leben*. Munich: Piper 1981

¹⁸ Mathias Albert: *Politics of identity and identity of politics*. In: Armin Nassehi/Markus Schroer (eds.) *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Baden Baden: Nomos 2003, pp. 557-571, here p. 567

¹⁹ Claus Leggewie: *The questionability of political representation. Parliamentary and extra-parliamentary answers*. In: Armin Nassehi/Markus Schroer (eds.) *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Baden Baden: Nomos 2003, pp. 441-471

²⁰ *Constructive perspectives can nevertheless be found, see: Claus Leggewie/Harald Welzer: The end of the world as we knew it. Climate, future and the chances of democracy*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer 2009

²¹ Trutz v. Trotha/Georg Klute: *Politics and violence*. In: Armin Nassehi/Markus Schroer (eds.) *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Baden Baden: Nomos 2003, pp. 491-517

- *The aspect of embodiment.* Finally, the relationship between politics and mediality must be addressed. Since politics is bound to the faith of the governed (Max Weber), it requires a correspondingly credible image in order to carry out its tasks. But what exactly is meant by imagery is open to question. Personal images of power have traditionally been part of the pattern of political rule, but in the modern age attention has shifted. To a certain extent, images have developed a life of their own; one can speak here of a shift in priorities. Images were used to pursue purposes and justify certain policies, i.e. to "put them in the picture". At present, however, all political action threatens to be determined by theatricalization and staging²². The pole is increasingly shifting from the sphere of joint action or the facilitation of political decisions to symbolic simplification. Belief in the legitimacy and effectiveness of politics now depends less on the substance, i.e. the persuasive power of political concepts, and political action increasingly takes on a staged character.²³

This list could easily be extended. Overall, there are signs of a deep uncertainty about the possibilities of the political. For sociology, the matter seems clear: In modern societies, politics is burdened with factual and systemic constraints that it can hardly meet. The helplessness is the result of a transformation that has not been overcome. "Old European" ideas have possibly survived, which are only perceived ironically in intellectual circles

The call for politics to return to the heart of society should be avoided here. A "return" to the true core of politics is problematic. In fact, however, the political has no place of origin and no sacred source. Of course, this also does not mean that politics can be dragged into the abyss that opened up for a moment in January 2021.

So what can we expect from a social-theoretical reflection? A viable path is emerging via the sphere of images and narratives. *Theatrical effects must of course be criticized; the use of images as a strategic tool requires an enlightened political awareness. Narratives must also be considered in their intertwining with the effects of power.* However, none of this speaks against thinking the political more closely together with the possibility of embodiment. Politics is rule that is framed in certain orders. It can thus be recognized as a constructed order, and it is precisely here that it reveals a principle that determines and preserves culture. Although

the political cannot be equated with patterns of "meaning production", they are closely linked.²⁴

This insight can be translated into an analytical perspective. Then patterns between staging, embodiment, performance and public perception become relevant. Or, from this point, the classic question of sovereignty can be posed. It has been known since Carl Schmitt that sovereign states can be recognized by the fact that they decide on the state of emergency. The sentence can be varied or misused in certain ways, but one must bear in mind that it arose in a specific historical and cultural era. A highly remarkable translation into the present was recently presented by Horst Bredekamp. A form of rule can be called sovereign if it is able to adapt to the requirements of image politics. Consequently, it consists of "accepting the uncontrollability of images in order to make being relatively at the mercy of them a condition of one's own sovereignty."²⁵ Sovereignty then characterizes the possibility of relating to images in a certain way.

This is not the place to derive advice for a courageous policy from this cultural-theoretical consideration. We merely need to ask under what conditions politics is able to present itself in images that at least come close to such sovereignty. These representations should balance the ambivalences that we have pointed out above. They should also fulfill the aforementioned intention of presenting suitable or viable "narratives of sovereignty" against the dominance of stories of decay.

The image we have of the state - consciously or unconsciously - is shaped like no other by the Leviathan. The giant, which was created by Abraham Bosse and Thomas Hobbes, combines the attributes of the political in an image whose significance cannot be overestimated. Think of the sword reaching into the sky and the crosier stretched across the landscape. The monopolized power and the containment of religion are among the characteristics of this state that are being taken up again today and often "rediscovered". As is well known, the state giant was ascribed a capacity for violence that only he could dispose of. He brought sufficient authority to bear against the wolf nature and self-interest. As is well known, this was based on the psychology of violence and fear in order to bind secular and religious dynamics.²⁶

²⁴ Gabriele Klein: *The theatricality of the political.* In: Armin Nassehi/Markus Schroer (eds.): *Der Begriff des Politischen.* Baden Baden: Nomos 2003, pp. 605-617

²⁵ Horst Bredekamp: *Sovereign is who decides with images.* In: Herfried Münkler/Jürgen Kaube/Wolfgang Schäuble et al. (eds.): *Staatserzählungen. The Germans and their political order.* Berlin: Rowohlt 2018, pp. 127-148, here p. 147

²⁶ Herfried Münkler: *Thomas Hobbes.* Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus 2001. *When one thinks of Hobbes, one rightly thinks first of political history, which is familiar as the history of the embodiment of power. Since its ancient origins, a political body has been a collective body into which individuals were integrated and which served to represent the whole. As is well known, the invocation of the body still characterized the discourse of modern times in democratic and revolutionary ideas of generality, up to the point of radical reversal. Ever since the individual was placed in relation to the political whole, we have assumed an ontological*

²² Thomas Meyer/Rüdiger Ontrup/Christian Schicha: *The staging of the political. On the theatricality of media discourse.* Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 2000

²³ Thomas Meyer: *Mediocracy. The colonization of politics by the media.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2001; Ders.: *Media Democracy.* Cambridge 2002



This image is iconic because it stems from a basic constellation of the political world that is still central today. By displaying his weapons, the sovereign creates peace within. The subjects are gathered together in the body politic. They form a dense structure that creates something greater than itself in the united will to form a state. There is no question in the original image that the authoritative supremacy of the sovereign can become a problem (and that this possibility has been excessively overstretched by totalitarian movements). But how has this iconic image evolved?

Just as the history of political ideas has evolved, the image of state representation has also changed. Two aspects of these upheavals will be highlighted here: the visualization of political participation and the sacralization of the parliamentary. These motifs can be used to show the conditions under which we can legitimately speak of a "cultivation" of the political today.

One of the more important adjustments that the modern state has had to make in the course of modernity is the self-limitation of authoritative power. The modern state - understood here as a democratic constitutional state - is not an overpowering entity, but the embodiment of a democratic will. This condition is undeniable, but as we know, it is presuppositional and quite contradictory. For iconological representations, the difficulty arises of translating the supposed humility of state power into suitable images. As is well known, the state legitimizes itself through division, not the clout of power²⁷. This requires a pictorial form that brings together contradictory elements in one motif. The difficulty goes back to the collection of the masses in Jacques-Louis David's *Ballhaus*.

The impulses of modern constitutional law have naturally flowed into legal codifications, but also into visual forms. The form of the modern state can also be seen in political architecture. If you look at the Reichstag building on Berlin's Platz der Republik, for example, you can certainly speak of a fulfillment of the political.

Originally built between 1884 and 1894 in the Renaissance style according to the plans of architect Paul Wallot, the building was, as is well known, fundamentally redesigned by Norman Foster for its permanent use as a parliament building²⁸. The outstanding feature of the redesign of the domed building - beyond all the triumphant gestures of empowerment - is its *accessibility*. Visitors can recognize the plenary chamber as an orderly unit when they climb up the spiral ramps. Whether consciously or unconsciously, visitors are thus placed in a position of symbolic empowerment. A silent democratic gesture is implied here, as the original head of the Leviathan served above all to inspire fearful admiration. The people looked up to the holder of power; but now the "governed" can penetrate the head of the giant of the state and occupy it without violence. An allegory of democracy: the head of the fearsome giant becomes a "caput", a head with movable cells made

primacy of individual rights. Since then, we can simplify, the bodily-organizational model has been invalidated.

²⁷ Horst Bredekamp: *State*. In: Fleckner et. al.: *Political Iconography*, 2014, pp. 371-379

²⁸ Norman Foster/David Jenkins (ed.): *The new Reichstag. German adaptation by Jochen Gaile*. Leipzig/Mannheim: Brockhaus 2000

up of citizens. The image of towering, violent sovereignty loses its final persuasive power here.²⁹

To a certain extent, the walk-in dome forms the outer pole within the framework of political ideas. It embodies a claim to participation, but it can also be interpreted as the qualitative end point of a historical development. After centuries of fighting for recognition, a point has been reached beyond which one no longer really wants to go.



Image format: JPEG - Image size: 2288x1712; Image type: Photography

Beyond a positivist history of progress - for which, as we know, the air is getting thinner and thinner - the form of political representation is groundbreaking here. With the change in anthropomorphic versions of the state, it is possible to show where we stand in political history and what needs to be defended. In pre-modern times, the state was often visualized as a being, an organism or a great world machine. In different variations, it was about the collection of diversity in unity and the good interplay of the individual parts. The modern state no longer refers to these metaphors; it has also developed a natural skepticism towards any functionalist reduction. In modernity, the state cannot trivially be projected onto the person of the ruler or bundled into a strong gesture of foundation. Democracy is a process that manages without solitary decision, without monumental gestures, and thus without iconoclastic temptations. The Reichstag building corresponds to this assessment: it resolves the "contradiction between image and iconoclasm"³⁰ insofar as it relies on absolute transparency.

However, an ambivalent impression remains, which hardly anyone would dispute at present. The freedom and transparency of the political embodied in the architecture of the dome building is open

²⁹ On the swan song of the older nation state that refuses to fade away, see: Wendy Brown: *Walls. The New Isolation and the Decline of Sovereignty*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2018. It can be added that the decline of sovereignty was practised above all in strong images of decapitation. The symbolism of the French Revolution and the terror of the guillotine only applies superficially. In the image of the headless representative, the situation is taken to the extreme: the ties between the body of the king and the body of the people have now been severed once and for all.

³⁰ Bredekamp 2014, p. 376

to attack in many ways. There are reasons for this in terms of both realpolitik and social theory. By virtue of deep philosophical reflection, one will recognize that the value of transparency is indeed of great importance, but only in relation to other, no less relevant principles. The difficulties of the modern state can ultimately also (!) be traced back to the excessive demands made by the public, which result in an ultimate, absolute transparency. However, this transparency is more likely to be described as a phantasm. If one thinks the matter through to the end, one encounters the uncanny figure of a political society that achieves absolute visibility in a totality that cannot be desirable. Under the opposite, supposedly "democratic" auspices, absolute transparency would be associated with the "unholy spirit of a technical reason aimed at one-sided control, instrumental manipulation and economic exploitation of all possible information"³¹.

The modern state has changed; other problems have now emerged. The national scope is narrowing; the original thinking spaces of the political are being eroded. Above all, ties cannot simply be re-established, not with the simpler means of the past. In this respect, the modern state is weakened; some have long predicted its decline. Against these tendencies, one may call for public visibility as a refuge. In a variation of Böckenförde's motif, we can claim that this state lives from the preconditions of non-violence, which it can only guarantee in a negative form³². It is accessible and accountable for every concern of its citizens. The architectural design and political philosophy come together in a peculiar way: "Anyone looking out of the dome of the Reichstag over Berlin imagines Hobbes' Leviathan to be infinitely far away."³³ - a diagnosis whose ambivalence only becomes apparent at second glance. For the removal of the "head" of Leviathan has opened up a path to a political way of life that has never been free of ambivalence and impositions.

This becomes immediately apparent when the ideal form of the walk-in dome - as a symbol of the democratic self-image - is juxtaposed with the images of the violent occupation of the Capitol in Washington. The juxtaposition of these images triggers an unease that is primarily due to the similarity of the motifs. The abysmal nature is revealed in the disparity between the "high" political ethos and a simple, as it were meaningless gesture. In the first case, it is the citizens who enter the political sphere with harmless, merely touristic intentions, without ever coming close to

the political decisions. In the other case, the space of power had been invaded and the possibility of violent empowerment had been seized - if only for a moment - which would have sealed the end of conventional politics (as unrealistic as such scenarios may be). The example shows at least one thing: a sufficient concept of the political cannot be achieved by singling out isolated elements of democracy. Rather, it shows how heavy the burden of a democratic communitization is that is dependent on the external form of a state. The attempt to depict these transformations of the state in architecture is quite remarkable: the head of the Leviathan was removed and has now been restored. However, since its walkability has become "normal", the contradictions have become all the more apparent. This is because the state is always invoked as a strong, violent and capable state whenever threats emerge within the country. However, there is no image, no architecture and no contemporary narrative available for this "quality" of the state.

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In view of these contradictions, it is understandable that there is a growing demand for a state that lives up to its original task, which is first and foremost to respect the interests of its citizens, but above all to provide protection. However this demand is met, the dilemma between the practice of freedom and the promise of protection remains. This draws attention to another powerful iconography - *parliament as a symbol of the political*. As indicated above, the democratic way of life does not require monumentality. It cannot be equated with the coercive apparatuses of the executive or with monuments to power. What constitutes it, in turn, is to be visualized in visual form.

These paintings reveal a contradictory tension³⁴. The building itself is barely recognizable in the painting because it is obscured by the enormous conflagration. The hazy perception reinforces the impression of an empathetic relationship with the political institution. It shows the limits of human power; the political ends, so to speak, at the supremacy of nature. The envelopment of fog and smoke is interrupted by light effects that lend the building a gentle mystical aura. This creates the impression of sublimity, which is all the more pronounced due to the borderline experience of human power.*

It is a common insight of political theory that power is expressed in strong images. The symbolic form is sought because power is dependent on the persuasive power of visibility. Images become "strategic", they serve the imagination, which cannot be sufficiently stimulated by arguments alone. These mechanisms are relevant, but the history of political embodiment cannot be summarized solely from this point of view.

Let us return to the initial question. We asked about the possible contribution of iconographic analysis to political reflection. Iconic representations reveal the possibilities and limits of political culture. Their value undoubtedly lies in a political way of life that cultivates and cultivates compromise and peaceful debate. Various historical situations, including the storming of the Capitol, showed

³¹ Liebsch, *Exposed to each other*, 2018, Volume II, p. 833

³² Another "narrative" that to a certain extent runs counter to the provisions of historiography. In the context of political ties, the relationship between the people, the citizenry and the leader takes center stage. Much has been written about these "ties": it is well known that the democratic state is considered a fragile entity, a political unit based on uncertain conditions. Modern democracies live with a kind of lack of guarantee for their existence; according to Böckenförde's theorem, they are not in a position to provide the foundations of their existence themselves. Reinhard Mehring/Martin Otto (eds.) *Voraussetzungen und Garantien des Staates*. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's understanding of the state. Baden-Baden: Nomos 2014

³³ Bredekamp 2020, p. 159

³⁴ Marion G. Müller: *Parliament*. In: Fleckner et. al.: *Political Iconography*, 2014, pp. 204-210



how fragile and sensitive this way of life is. The question of how to counteract the long-term tendency to devalue democratic cultures was therefore also pursued in the background.

On the one hand, it makes sense to refer to liberal traditions to answer this question. The norm of deliberative politics seems to offer itself as a strong counter-concept to counteract the tendency to devalue the political. In democratic practice, as is well known, arguments for positions are put forward and reasons are weighed up in order to make judgments. This norm of public deliberation must be based on a practice of freedom that is commonplace in Western democracies, but not a matter of course. The susceptibility to symbolic invective is obvious, but it cannot be overridden by the argument of strength alone. It is this contradiction that cannot be satisfactorily resolved, but can only be developed theoretically and visually.

The iconography of political resistance was shown at the beginning, but it does not correspond to an authoritarian counter-image. The modern visual representation of the state is not absorbed in the search for the right order. Basically, it cannot be visualized satisfactorily because the cultivation of the political depends on people's willingness to come to terms with contradictions and compromises. Just as no final argument can end the discourse, representation also remains bound to its prerequisite of self-limitation.

If one attempts to move from the level of iconography to the language of philosophy, the intrinsic value of an interexistential definition of the political becomes apparent. As will be shown in conclusion, the interexistential perspective of common political practice forms a logical conclusion to the insights outlined above. To this end, we must go back to the elementary conditions of political action in order to see the preconditions on which the political form of life rests.

Interexistential philosophy describes the totality of the conditions of meaning of human practice.³⁵ It thus enables us to rethink the fundamental political existential situation. It can also show that the visual representation of a state machine is no longer sufficient for the current definition of the political - nor for the defense of fundamental state rights. In this context, Thomas Rentsch quotes Louis Althusser's text on the "loneliness of Machiavelli":

"Instead of telling us that the state is a child of law and nature, he talks about how a state must come into being in order to remain in existence - and to be strong enough to become the state of a nation. He does not speak the language of law, he speaks the language of the armed power that is indispensable for the formation of the state; he speaks the language of the violence necessary in the beginnings of the state, the language of a politics without religion...the language of a politics that must be moral, but must also have the ability not to be, a politics that must reject hatred, but at the same time inspire fear."³⁶

³⁵ Rentsch 1999

³⁶ Louis Althusser: *Die Einsamkeit Machiavellis*, Schriften, vol. 2, Berlin: Argument 1987, p. 24, quoted from Rentsch 2000, p. 132

It has been pointed out several times that modern politics is caught between the dichotomy of non-violence and the granting of freedom. The old linguistic images of Thomas Hobbes or Niccolò Machiavelli followed this pattern; right up to the present day, the history of political ideas is filled with images of a large organism or a machine that develops sufficient techniques to ensure the rule of man. Problems in the social and political world appear, for example, as control problems; the solutions are borrowed from the pattern of social technology. However, both the technical and the authoritarian constructs of meaning are due to an underdetermination of the possibilities of human beings. From a fundamental anthropological point of view, however, the conclusion is not that, in view of the vulnerability of political forms of life, we need to remember the dualism between system and lifeworld (J Habermas). The "problems" in the political realm go deeper; at least it is not to be expected that they can be solved by recourse to the intuitive validity of lifeworld meaning or in zones of society that are free of power and violence. Rather, the critical potential at the heart of the political form of life arises from the insight into the inescapable conditions of the political form of life per se. For this, an existential lack of guarantee, the fragility of all projects and the risk of misunderstanding must be taken into account at all times. What one can hope to gain from this philosophically fundamental insight becomes apparent at second or third glance. The reference to the formal provisions of democracy is necessary, the basic ideas of enlightenment in political existence must be emphasized more than ever. This concerns both the abstract ideas of solidarity, justice and human rights as well as the practical implications of modern legal evolution. The rules of democracy, which determine legitimate procedures, the exclusion of violence and arbitrary rule or the safeguarding of the highest constitutional norms, must of course be defended. From an existentialist point of view, however, the inescapable core of political forms of life only becomes apparent when we realize that political practice is managed "under finite, fragile, asymmetrical, material and contingent conditions".³⁷

The image of the political that is created in this perspective is anything but triumphalizing. It arises solely from the most general experience of a daily confrontation: the reality characterized by lack and incompleteness meets in each individual case the awareness of the unconditional rule of law.

³⁷ S. 134

