Images, Identity and Security

Bringing Together International Politics and Media Research[*]

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Let me take this opportunity also to thank the organizing committee for inviting me. It has been a great pleasure to be able to participate in this conference, not least in that it has given me the opportunity to sit in on the sessions of the working group on Visual Culture which I have enjoyed tremendously.

This conference is also a strong indication of the width and depth of media research. As a political scientist working primarily in the field of International Relations and Security Studies, it is obvious to me that Security Studies needs the expertise of media researchers to tackle two of the most important questions on the global political agenda, namely the use of visual representations by political actors seeking to mobilize their constituencies and the significance of different forms of media for the instantaneous circulation of images. The Muhammad Cartoon Crisis that arose in Denmark in 2005-2006 is a case in point as the publication of 12 cartoons in the Danish daily *Jyllands-posten* escalated into the burning of embassies and violent demonstrations during which somewhere between 50 and 100 people were killed. This unfolding of events came as a great chock to Danish editors, politicians and the public who could not fathom the massive "securitization" – in Danish Security scholar Ole Wæver's terminology – of something as "innocent" as editorial cartoons. A series of other recent cases, including the US's army's ban on photos of caskets shipped out of Iraq, the snapshots from Abu Ghraib, and the video postings on YouTube by Western troops in Iraq, also indicate the security significance of visual representation.

Thus far the field of International Relations has however been rather slow in taking the importance of visuals on board. The most well-known body of work is probably on the so-called CNN-effect that is the ability of media coverage, particularly if including striking images of suffering, violence or humiliation, to influence foreign policy decision-making. Yet, while pointing to a crucial set of questions, this work is also marred by its reliance upon a causal epistemology that tries to identify a cause-effect relationship between images and policy. This requires that images (and the manner in which they are selected) can be separated from foreign policies – that policies are dependent, and visuals independent variables. In political reality, this is however a problematic assumption. Politicians may be directly involved in controlling which visuals can be shown – as in the various visuals bans imposed by the US in Iraq – and the media may be prone to cover events and locals that are on the political agenda already, thus creating a complex set of inter-linkages between images and policy rather than a simple causal relationship. At a

deeper theoretical level the problem of the causal research design is its presupposition that a specific policy demand arises from a particular visual representation. This however is rarely the case. The case of the photos of emaciated prisoners from the camps uncovered in Northern Bosnia in the summer of 1992 illustrates this well. To some observers these photos articulated a clear link to the images of Holocaust victims and genocide and thus a demand for Western intervention. Yet, to others they were an indication of the savagery of the Balkans, or so-called ancient hatred, a representation that warned against rather than called for military intervention. The image is in short constituted through – but not determined by – the larger political context in which it is situated.

Turning from the question of the visual and security politics to the broader questions of identity and the media that were raised in the opening plenary session of this conference, I wish to stress that the non-causal relationship between visual and policy is indicative of a more general co-constitutive, non-causal relationship between identities and policy. Foreign policies always need to situate themselves inside a narrative or a discourse that constitutes Us and Them, places and people that are intervened into, threatened, threatening, cherished or feared. Discourses may come in many media forms, through text, photo, speech or video, and they assign different normative status and qualities to "their" subjects. Some categories, like "terrorists" or "evil" block any inclusion or transformation, while others articulate the possibility for similarity and assistance. The study of the politics of identity thus becomes crucial: policies reply upon representations of identity to legitimize themselves, but is also through policy discourses that identities are produced and reproduced.

It is significant furthermore that we study not only the constructed identities of Self and Other, but also the way in which media and genres establish epistemic and political authority. There are numerous ways in which those speaking foreign policy may constitute themselves as "knowledgeable", including subjective, experiential and emotive forms of speaking and knowing.

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This was an attempt to give you a few basic principles for how we may understand the politics of identity. Let me use the rest of my time here by making 4 more specific points that also speak to the plenary session and its discussion on identity, particularly national identity while linking to the example of Denmark.

First, we need to understand national identity as always in need of reproduction, as never simply "there", and thus potentially open to crisis and contestation. Analytically, identity debates may take place along both domestic and international axes – although the two may also become blurred. In Denmark, the two crucial identity debates of the past 15 years have been the one on the EU (external) and immigration (internal). In Denmark the concept of nation is a cultural, ethnic, genealogical one, and the tight fit between nation and state since 1920 has produced a virtual overlap between state and nation. This has made it difficult to think political community in terms other than states and it has at times made European integration appear as a threat – "how would the nation survive, if the state is going to Brussels"?

The debate on European integration and the debate on immigration have until recently run largely on separate tracks, politically as well as academically. But since both refer to concepts of national identity and to state identity (what makes up political community), they are in fact linked at the deeper conceptual level. The reason why the two debates

are not more explicitly connected may be that there is indeed an unstable political and empirical relationship between the two. The Danish government seeks, as does the parliament with the exception of the right and the left wing, to increase support for the EU amongst the large group of Danish EU skeptics, but the government also relies on the Danish Peoples' Party who has a strong anti-immigration agenda. It is caught therefore between opening up the Danish understanding of state-nation (required to solve the opposition to the EU) on the one hand and of preventing its reorganization (due to pressure from the Danish Peoples' Party on immigration) on the other. Put differently, it is quite likely that it would be easier to solve "the EU problem" if the immigration question, or what constitutes "Danishness" was opened up to critical scrutiny and expanded beyond its cultural, genealogical conceptualization.

Second, it is important that we focus not only on the question of national identity, but also on the relationship between state and nation(s). As brought up in the discussion at the plenary panel on Thursday, the question whether states are appropriate normative and political frameworks or whether alternative forms of governance should be sought is a difficult one. Here it is pertinent that our analysis separates between state and government, concepts which are often conflated or presumed identical, perhaps especially in the Nordic context where the alignment of nation and state and the 20th century history of a strong welfare state have contributed to seeing the two as one. Analytically, there is however a distinction between the two, and we should thus be careful to identify the concept of the state which governs political debates in a given setting, and to analyze the extent to which a particular government is constituted as a legitimate embodiment of this conceptualization. Moreover, when debating the normative status of the state, it is crucial that we ask not only whether the state is loosing its sovereignty (territorially as well as a privileged identity) vis à vis other entities and communities, but which inclusions and exclusions a particular community imply.

Third, discussions of patterns of inclusion and exclusion are often linked to the argument that identities should be theorized as overlapping, multiple, or layered. This is an important argument insofar as it stresses the contingency of all identities, including the national one, and that exclusive constellations of identity are not the only available options. It is significant, however, to stress that "multiple" identities are not simply there but depend upon political discourses that reproduce their existence. From this follows furthermore that the crucial question, particular from the perspective of a political analysis, is how "multiple identities" are prioritized and aligned and linked in situations of crisis and contestation. Such prioritization takes place in all political discourses at all times, but particularly so in cases that involves security politics, that is when somebody or something is constituted as a threat. Here we often find that the classical categories through which collective identities are constituted – nation, race, ethnicity, religion and gender – return in ways were some are privileged over others, where some are marginalized or perhaps even excluded. Analysis should, as a consequence, pay particular attention to the processes through which the openness of layered identities are in fact arrested and used to legitimize particular policies.

Fourth, when studying the way in which identity is constituted in discourse it is important that we look at the intricate ways in which subjects are formed. Political discourse often does not operate in a way where "the threatening Other" is explicitly constituted as such. Rather such processes of Othering take place through more complex articulations of boundaries, distinctions and agency. Discourse analysis operates methodologically at the level of text, speech, and visual and thus with "textual evidence",

but it is still a qualitative and interpretative methodology built on an understanding of language, not as transparent, but as flexible and as potentially strategically used by political actors. Two examples from the Danish Muhammad Cartoon crisis illustrate this point. Throughout the Crisis, the Danish government and Danish newspapers were careful to stress that they were not in opposition to "Danish Muslims", that there was no animosity towards Muslims or immigrants in Denmark, that "Muslims" were not, in short, Othered, but that there was a problem with the (small) group of fundamentalist, anti-Danish Muslims who had initiated and perpetuated the Crisis. As a consequence of this discursive construction, "Danish Muslims" were called upon to show their democratic inclination, to separate themselves from the "fundamentalist Muslims". This construction of the "good Muslims" invoked however a "Muslim" subject who was not automatically "democratic", and thus by association fully "Danish". "Danes" – or Jutlanders or Bornholmers – would not, put counterfactually be asked to prove their democratic nature, as this is taken for granted. The second example of how boundaries are more subtly, but very effectively, constituted, was the construction of the group of Danish Muslims clerics who went on a tour of the Middle East as "traitors". Many newspapers were keen to point out that considering how "Denmark" had given these people asylum or humanitarian right of residency, one should have expected gratitude rather than treason. Yet, the articulation of a subject as standing in a relationship of gratitude to the Danish state/nation is in fact itself to exclude it from the proper "Danish". The Danish construction of the welfare state citizen is through a discourse of rights and solidarity where "gratitude" is nowhere to be expected. More generally, we should note that universalistic discourse is always spoken from a particular place, making specific demands on what constitutes the universal good and right.

* This talk draws loosely on Lene Hansen's *European Integration and National Identity: The challenge of the Nordic states* (co-edited with Ole Wæver, Routledge, 2002), and *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (Routledge, 2006), as well as her new project on visual security and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis.