

Research Statement

Democracy and the theory of the symbol: categoriality and visuality

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I have two major research projects currently ongoing. The first addresses the history of philosophical classifications of knowledge. Every age has drawn the map of knowledge differently. Indeed, even the map analogy as the dominant way of thinking about the arrangement of knowledge is itself a historic product; earlier centuries preferred the image of the tree, which actually remains in widespread use in contemporary culture as a form of data visualisation. The aim of the project is to identify and explain the major shifts that have taken place in Western thought with respect to the various forms of knowledge.

The outline of the story is well-known: in ancient thought metaphysics is taken to be the master discipline. In the medieval world it is supplanted by theology, which in turn is displaced by science in modernity. Post-modernity is the crumbling of this picture, without, it would seem, any positive account to replace it. The overall argument here is that in fact knowledge has always been more pluralistic and diverse than the traditional account suggests, and that the post-modernism of modern democratic societies is largely a symptom of the very belated recognition of this fact.

The second project explores the politics of visual culture. The study of political theory is traditionally very textually oriented and concerned with abstract ideas. But politics as practised and consumed always has an important visual dimension. This is a genuine cultural universal: we know of no civilization of any sophistication in which we do not find political meanings attached to appearances, be they to do with ethnicity, dress, public space, the arts, or, in the context of modern Western democracies, digital and technological imagery.

There is now a great deal of work in 'visual studies', an offshoot of cultural studies which in turn developed from critical theory, on various aspects of this theme, but there is no overall theoretical account that ties the various different elements of the politics of visual culture together. Taking a dialectical approach that begins with the natural eye and spreads across the body before moving out into space and ultimately returning to the eye as the focus of digital technology, my research aims to show how it is possible to unite the disparate elements of visual studies as currently practiced so that they appear as integrated investigations of a common subject.

The common link between these two projects is the theory of the symbol. All knowledge can be treated in symbolic fashion, as a variety of philosophical approaches, whether Idealist, pragmatic, or analytic, have demonstrated. But the symbolism here is linguistic, whereas in the politics of visual culture we are primarily concerned with the image. But in both fields we find in practice that there is a constant interchange between words and pictures.

At Sciences Po I would like to offer a seminar on 'Democratic Theory' to the students which will address the themes of democracy and knowledge and democracy and visual culture. I may also take up other aspects of democratic thought such as radical equality based on my current seminar on Thomas Hobbes. To the Research Centre AGORA I would like to present some of my work on the problem of studying classification in the history of ideas. I also look forward to being able to work with Catherine Marshall in particular on some of the common interests we share in Idealist thought.