

Marco Solaroli

**Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, No Caption Needed. Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 419 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/35876)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2011

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed. Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 419 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/35876

In common sense discourse, the term “icon” usually refers to a person, a concrete object or more often an image which is argued to have a widely shared symbolic value and the power to “fix” whole, complex events in a memorable, condensed form. For this reason, it eventually comes to be crystallized in the public memory and becomes a powerful source of identification and an easily recallable reference for future narratives. However, from a theoretical viewpoint, notwithstanding the insights offered by a variety of disciplinary attempts (from art history to political studies, from semiotics to, more recently, visual culture studies), there can be no doubt whatsoever that contemporary social theory lacks an interpretative framework to seriously account for the complexity and contingency of the different yet interrelated dimensions of production, diffusion, and consumption of the iconic images, the symbolic struggles on their meaning and the creation of their “iconic power.” In the sociology of the media, particularly in the study of photojournalism, over the last two decades pioneering researches have highlighted the most critical aspects of the processes of iconic construction, showing the multiple ways in which photojournalistic icons have often been strategically produced, framed, and employed for the benefit of the ideological interests of the dominant political elites or more merely of different media logics. However, as a whole, scarce attention was paid to their potential social and political effects, usually taken-for-granted and defined in generic terms on the basis of a naively passive conception of media consumers. Moreover, methodologically, these approaches have never been able or willing to integrate even very refined textual analyses of the word-image relationship with, on the one hand, an institutional/organizational investigation of the practices of production, the struggles for legitimation, and the conflictual dynamics of power in the professional photojournalistic field and, on the other hand, an epistemologically convincing problematization of the relationship between the media frames of particular pictures and the wider dominant cultural narratives of a specific society at a given time.

In this context, *No Caption Needed* unquestionably represents a crucial turning point. Hariman and Lucaites have developed a strikingly rich, articulated, and fertile conceptual framework to investigate a series of renowned cases of iconic photographs of the last century: Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1936), Alfred Eisenstaedt’s *Times Square Kiss* (1945), Joe Rosenthal’s *Raising the Flag on Mount Suribachi* at Iwo Jima (1945) together with Thomas Franklin’s *Three Firefighters Raising the American Flag at Ground Zero* (2001), John Filo’s *Kent State University Massacre* (1970), Nick Ut’s *Accidental Napalm* (the naked and wounded girl running away from a destroyed village in Vietnam, 1972), together with the picture of the now-adult girl with her child, as well as other well-known images of that period such as Eddie Adams’s South Vietnam policeman executing a suspect Viet Cong member, Stuart Franklin’s *Tiananmen Square* (the Chinese man in front of the tanks, 1989), Sam Shere’s *Explosion of the Hindenburg*

(1936) with NASA photographers' *Explosion of the Challenger* (1986). They have also outlined a preliminary analysis of the competition for the iconic status among the news photographs of more recent events, most notably the conflict in Iraq.

Without abandoning or undervaluing a critical perspective on the loss of a great deal of social and visual experience and on the sterile reduction of public memory of crucial events caused by the diffusion and commemoration of a very few iconic photographs, the authors deepen their analysis by reconstructing the paths of reproduction and more or less creative and politically connoted appropriation, parody and celebration of the iconic images over time throughout a broad social spectrum. By widening and refining the methodological tool-kit in order to offer a "thick" description of the processes of construction of their iconic power, the authors focus the attention on the pictures' potential civic role, their ability to performatively resonate with dominant US public and moral discourse as well as to coordinate conflictual strategies of identification by connecting with and activating what they call (inexplicitly recalling Raymond Williams) "cultural structures of feeling." At the beginning, Hariman and Lucaites define iconic photographs as "photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics" [p. 27]. On the basis of their conceptual model, their definition of "icon" comes to be analytically refined as "an aesthetically familiar form of civic performance coordinating an array of semiotic transcriptions that project an emotional scenario to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis" [p. 29]. As such quotations show, the authors's approach integrates a specific analytical attention on both the image's semiotic-aesthetic design and the public response – the processes of visual consumption and their political and social effects. In fact, their interpretative model deconstructs the multiple dimensions of meaning which take a unique form in the icon through five different vectors of influence: reproducing ideology, communicating social knowledge, shaping collective memory, modelling citizenship and providing figural resources for communicative action. According to this perspective, the significance of the five factors can be empirically assessed by reconstructing the relationship between the journalistic, aesthetic and symbolic value of the image and its history of circulation and appropriation within different contexts.

As the book clearly shows, the iconic photographs acquire their rhetorical power not only by offering a representation of the events on the basis of widely shared visual-cultural conventions, but also by re-articulating those aesthetic forms in order to stir up emotions, to facilitate the comprehension, to motivate social action, and to shape memory. In other words, icons function evoking and activating experiential repertoires of social behavior, constructing a scenario in which emotions can become a vehicle to comprehension and re-action. Iconic photographs performatively fuse multiple cultural codes thanks to a deep-rooted process of semiotic transcription through which they can stimulate and coordinate different paths of identification and therefore become resources to interpret relevant events and reduce complexity (a clear example, in this sense, was the picture of *Three Firefighters Raising the American Flag at Ground Zero* recalling the "Iwo Jima" picture of World War Two). The icon's success depends on its ability to activate the cultural structures of feeling by "keying" the emotional dimension of the event and

effectively fusing together the production, the object of the representation, the wider socio-cultural context and the publics. In this sense, iconic photographs are definable “civic performances combining semiotic complexity and emotional connection” [p. 36], which can play a crucial role during public and political crises.

Hariman and Lucaites’s work represents the most articulated and convincing attempt available today to elaborate a multi-dimensional interpretative model of the processes of construction of iconic photographs. Their approach surpasses the interpretative explanations methodologically focused on the analysis of the text, the content or the aesthetics, as well as those reducing the iconic power to the ability of incorporating enduring myths or dominant political-national narratives. It clearly shows the fruitfulness of paying closer analytical attention to the connections between the impact of specific images and the climate of social consciousness and civic, emotional and moral predispositions at the basis of the construction and activation of a cultural structure of public response.

At the same time, however, this crucial dimension of their work eventually and quite paradoxically turns out to constitute also the apparent limit of the whole intellectual enterprise. By adopting a highly effective expressive style that relegates most theoretical references and debates to the ninety-four pages of dense notes at the end of the book, the analysis of the empirical cases shows an enviable ability to organically and effectively apply a variety of inter-disciplinary insights as much as it opens up spaces for further integrative theoretical, analytical and methodological reflection, that could be briefly outlined around a few pieces of suggestion.

Firstly, the book conceives photojournalism as “a patently artistic form of public address” and consequently defines the iconic photograph as “the zenith of photojournalistic achievement” [p. 27]. This perspective, however, does not pay any analytical attention to the rapidly changing professional field in which photojournalists increasingly struggle to create and sell their works, the dynamics of cultural production within different news organizations, the conflictual institutional legitimation of the photojournalistic field, the relationships with the political one, and so on. Such power mechanisms can have strong effects in the diffusion and consecration of particular news photographs – and photographers. More specifically, a closer investigation of the processes of visual news gathering, selling, selection, and framing could have proved fertile in regard to two major, interrelated aspects: a) the competition among potential photojournalistic icons – the fact that often, at an early stage, a number of potential icons co-exists, and that only one or a very few of them will succeed, while all the others will fail – in the competition for the iconic status represents a crucial point which is somehow taken-for-granted in the analysis. More specifically, in future research this should be developed paying closer attention to the global news media ecology, while in this work the choice of the empirical cases and the analysis of their production and circulation was unfortunately (yet consciously) made within the borders of the US public culture. The risk, however, is to undervalue the relevance of the increasingly international flows which constitute the digital ecology of contemporary news media in the diffusion of different potential icons as well as, more importantly, of possibly different articulations of the meanings of the same ones; b) the impact of both digitalization and amateurship (e.g. citizen photojournalism) in the professional field and consequently in the competition among potential icons – an issue which is only briefly touched at the end of the book. If this absence from the

authors' conceptual framework was justifiable as they chose to analyse mainly icons of the pre-digitalization period, many cases of very important news photographs of the last decade (e.g. the coffins from Iraq at the airport, the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, the terroristic bombings in Madrid and London, the street protests from Teheran and the so-called Arab Spring, Gaddafi's murder, and so on) strongly suggest the need to pay further attention to these dimensions in future research.

Secondly, and more problematically, this book clearly sheds light on as much as it confirms the epistemological difficulty intrinsic in the ambitious task to reweave the culturally associative connections between iconic news photographs and deep moral structures of the civic society. This point is crucial to consequently understand audience response and political effects, but it cannot be addressed only on the basis of highly refined theoretical reflexion and without suitable (explicit and checkable) methodological tools. As Hariman and Lucaites recognize in their *Introduction*, this represents a huge challenge. How can we develop a methodologically and analytically refined empirical investigation of the structures of symbolic connection between images and imageries, or between specific media frames and wider cultural narratives, to better understand what and how contributes to create and radicate over time a visual-cultural hegemonic structure? In this context a few theoretical and methodological pieces of suggestion could be taken into account in future research. For example, firstly, the concept of "scopic regime," which deals with the articulated relationship between images, the visual conventions of the gaze embedded in the relations of power of a society at a given time, and the means and practices of looking, circulation and consumptions of such images. Or, again, the theoretical and empirical work developed within the "iconic turn" of the so-called "strong program" in US cultural sociology, and more specifically Jeffrey Alexander's work on "cultural trauma" (which would have been useful especially in Hariman and Lucaites's chapter on "trauma and public memory," and more widely to problematize their thesis of the shift – revealed by the analysis of successive iconic photographs across the Twentieth century – from more democratic to more liberal norms of political identity within US public culture). Or, finally, the sociological literature on media (and) rituals. As the authors write, "The iconic image [...] seems to reveal a transcendental quality in ordinary experience. The religious metaphor in the label "icon" works because of how, by staring into the image, one senses a higher power unfolding and is lifted up into awe, reaffirmed in one's relationship to that power, and moved to act accordingly" [p. 290]. What does this mean, sociologically? From this perspective, engaging more directly and deeply with the neo-Durkheimian literature on mediated rituals could have proved very fertile: over the last fifteen years, this subfield of sociological investigation has increasingly moved from Katz and Dayan's *Media Events* (which is quoted by Hariman and Lucaites) to a number of insightful pieces of research suggesting the need to problematize and update the understanding of recent mediated rituals within an analysis of the increasingly global and digital news media ecology.

These are just a few insights raised from this deeply thought-provoking, beautifully written, and most welcome book. At the end of it, it becomes clear how the authors carefully chose not to over- or under-estimate the power of the iconic news photographs, by instead intelligently problematizing their complex and conflictual patterns of creation, circulation, appropriation and crystallization in the (US) public culture and memory

within a convincingly organic conceptual framework. This precious book sets the standard every scholar working on photojournalism and iconic construction will have to confront with for future theoretical reflection and empirical research.

*Marco Solaroli*  
University of Bologna