Two national narratives, one urban historiography: Expression of memory and identity in Berlin's central district Mitte after German reunification

Introduction

> "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 1984, p. 35).

The concept expressed in this quote from George Orwell's seminal novel is central to this paper, which seeks to examine the physical and symbolic expressions of history, memory, and identity in Berlin's central district Mitte since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The contested nature of Berlin's symbolic and memorial landscape hinges on the contested nature of Germany's symbolic rebirth in the course of German reunification, centered on questions of whose Germany it is and who decides which symbols, events, and people are included, and which are not. Indeed, as the author will try to show, the changes to the symbolic landscape of Berlin as the capital of reunified Germany were predicated on historical conflicts ranging back to the Second World War. The deep-seated nature of the conflicts is made even clearer through key actors' attempts at normalization, naturalization and consensus-building (Dellenbaugh, 2015).

The message of this quote is twofold: first, the simple concept that history does not consist of a monolithic and unquestioned narrative, an objective description of "how things happened," but can range from outright fabrication to necessary selection among versions of the same event, and second, that the disposal over the power to shape the historical narrative is elemental to the ability to influence future development. While the inclusion of dystopian fiction, and in particular Orwell, may seem a bit dramatic at this point, the author will seek to show in this paper that machinations in Berlin, conscious or unconscious, similar to those outlined in the novel have not only sought to reshape German history but also normalize this narrative by imprinting it in the landscape of the capital city.

History and Historiography

> "Oceania was at war with Eurasia: therefore Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia." (Orwell, 1984, p. 35)

When one talks about "history," the use of the term implies a single uncontested narrative; however the construction of historical narrative is fraught with conflict. In this extreme example from *1984*, complete thought and media control by the Party allowed the full fabrication of both past and present through totalitarian control. In societies with freedom of the press, this level of control is unattainable, but other more subtle forms of control are possible, for example through the hegemonic creation of consensus (Dellenbaugh, 2015; Forgacs, 2000). Orwell was however fundamentally correct in his connection between history and control; "...the past serves and legitimizes open political goals, or supports a specific genealogical or teleological representation of history or simply reinforces the dominant political culture" (De Soto, 1996, p. 45).

Postmodern critique of (often binary) modernist metanarratives highlights the highly subjective nature of history and historical narratives, and their instrumentalization to gain power and control (Dellenbaugh, 2014b, pp. 18–20); therefore, it is more appropriate to discuss not "history," which implies a factually correct and objective narrative, but rather a "historiography," a term which highlights the subjective and selective nature of historical narratives (Dellenbaugh, 2014b, pp. 18–20; Wodak, 1994). The inclusion of the Greek root "-graphia," to write, makes the active role of one or more actors transparent. "The" past therefore represents "a subjective selection, a politicized ideology, and a discursive process" (Dellenbaugh, 2014b, p. 19), and one which is not without the possible influence of political agendas.

Space as a Political and Symbolic Good

Space, especially representative spaces such as cities, plays a crucial role in these struggles for the creation of meaning (Dellenbaugh, 2013). The role of space as a means for symbolic production and hegemonic control has changed with shifts in global economic tendencies. As the author has discussed elsewhere, the postmodern turn combined with deindustrialization in the Global North has increased pressure on the symbolic aspects of space (Dellenbaugh, 2014b, p. 21). Additionally, the homogenization of spaces of commerce, communication, and travel (á la Augé, 2008) place an increased pressure on representative spaces as carriers of meaning.

In the political sense, struggles for expression of specific historiographies in space (i.e. in the form of monuments, street names, architectural styles, or the like) are tantamount to struggles for legitimization; "the results of these … struggles have a direct bearing on whose vision of 'reality' will appear to matter socially, since landscapes are not just the products of social power but also tools or resources for achieving it" (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010, p. 462f.). Political narratives become normalized through their inclusion as a "banal" part of the urban landscape (for example through a street name), and the discourses in which they are embedded become naturalized through tacit acceptance. This is particularly true in the case of street names, where the name and location are not directly connected with one another (i.e. the street name does not link to an event or location on that particular street).

These struggles are most apparent where the historiography is contested; colonies, war zones, and other contested spaces often evidence such symbolic appropriations. Thus, it is also telling that such symbolic (re)appropriations were common in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the years following the political upheaval of 1989/1990; the eastern half of Berlin and the states of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) were no exception. While the renaming of streets and the removal of monuments was a widespread phenomenon throughout the former GDR, the intensity and intent of such symbolic (re)appropriations varied spatially. Whereas, for example, the monumentally proportioned Marx monument in Chemnitz remains standing at the time of writing, some street names referring to the German socialist past of even the Weimar Republic were removed in Berlin's central district.

Why are some spaces "cleansed" of unwanted historiographies and their attendant symbols, and other spaces are not? Even within Berlin itself, less central districts had fewer street name changes after reunification. This variation can be explained in part through the fourfold process by which a selected past is normalized in the landscape; the four steps are *selection, representation, presentation,* and *normalization*. First, actors agree upon a historical narrative or

historiography by *selecting* among all possible historiographies. Contested spaces, spaces with multiple narratives, or spaces of parallel histories serve as good examples for such issues. In the second step, an appropriate symbol to adequately *represent* the desired cultural hegemony is chosen. Common examples include a person, body, or quality that is revered by the dominant group (Martin-Luther-King Boulevard, Fountain of Peace, United Nations Square) or a critical event in the historiography of the dominant group (*Straße des 17. Juni*, a street name in Berlin commemorating the East Berlin worker uprising of 17 June 1953). This symbol is then *presented*, i.e. placed in a space where it will be seen or experienced. The more important the space in question, the more important it will be that the symbol assigned to it conforms to the hegemonic worldview and political agendas. Equally, symbols of great importance will be assigned to the most important, central, and representative spaces. Thus, an examination of a hierarchy of spaces within a city or country can play a central part in understanding the symbols of the dominant worldview. In the last step, assuming that resistance to the symbolic change is either not voiced or not effectively collectivized (for example in the form of petitions, protests, media coverage, etc.), the symbol becomes *normalized* through "a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 4).

Symbolic changes to the landscape are attended by opportunity costs. Opportunity cost, a concept from economics, refers to the cost of the next best option that one forgoes in order to pursue a line of action under conditions of limited resources (Investopedia, n.d.); i.e. a farmer who plants crop X must forgo the profit he could have earned by planting crop Y on the same field. While symbolic changes such as renaming are not expensive in and of themselves, a look at what one forgoes in order to pursue such actions can be illustrative as to just how important they in fact are. The political changes of 1898/1990 in CEE were attended by fundamental economic changes as well; thus, an even larger pressure was being placed on the resources at hand to handle the restructuring in all spheres. Therefore, the tradeoffs implied in the insistence on symbolic restructuring at all costs while there was a pressing need for resource allocation in numerous other areas indicates the importance of the symbolic aspect in an indirect way.

To summarize, central spaces are a prized resource for the creation of meaning and the establishment of cultural dominance through the normalization of political discourses. Because symbolic restructurings are attended by tradeoffs in limited administrative budgets, symbolic appropriation in time of resource scarcity indicates the fundamental importance of symbolic landscapes for the establishment of legitimacy and consensus. The following sections will examine this theoretical background in Berlin's central district, Mitte, where symbolic restructuring took drastic proportions after German reunification.

Berlin's Division and Political and Symbolic Struggles During and After the Cold War

Berlin's role in the symbolic struggles during and after the Cold War means that its urban landscape was instrumentalized to further political agendas in various ways, from billboards whose height and brightness was intended to project some messages while inhibiting the reading of others (Castillo, 2014, p. 127), to the demolition of the remains of the Hohenzollern city palace and the construction of a parade ground on its location (Birkholz, 2008), to the construction of a socialist modernist axis from the socialist city center pointing symbolically

towards Moscow (Hain, 1992, 1998, 1999). These more radical planning measures were accompanied by symbolic changes such as monuments and street names (as in other parts of CEE), however the significance of both halves of Berlin as showcases for the "other side" was lost on neither the East nor the West. Indeed, Berlin became one of the most significant spaces of discursive representation in the Global North in the latter half of the 20th century.

Berlin's central district Mitte was paramount to these struggles for the GDR. Berlin, or as it was known, "*Berlin, Hauptstadt der DDR*" ("Berlin, capital of the GDR"), was a critical showcase for eastern propaganda, and, in the intervening 40 years, the German socialists transformed the eastern half of the city into a socialist capital worthy of the name. The multi-phase reconstruction of the central district involved the removal of badly damaged industrial-era and pre-industrial-era buildings and the creation of a monumental central axis with the extensive use of slab construction, bounded at one end by the Palace of the Republic and the other by the Television Tower. The complete and fundamental modification of the built space of the inner city went hand in hand with the symbolic restructuring of the same space. Extensive street renaming and the construction of monuments to Lenin, Marx, Engels, and other heroes of the socialist and communist discourse complemented the significant changes to the built space of the central district. This thoroughness combined with the stark binarity at the East-West border and the ferocity of the ideological rift between capitalism and socialism during the Cold-War-era had a direct influence on the fate of these spaces post-1990, since the politicians, bureaucrats, and other key actors who took the reins after 1990 had been socialized during the heyday of this animosity.

These persons became the key actors in the construction efforts in reunified Berlin following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and while much ado was made semantically about a single German people ("*Wir sind ein Volk*" – "We are one people") and the German reunification (as the bringing back together of two things that belong together, ignoring of course the variations in Germany's national borders in the two centuries before), personal and regional identity constructions split the "*Wessis*" (West Germans) from the "*Ossis*" (East Germans). As the author has demonstrated elsewhere (Dellenbaugh, 2014a), the valuation of built space forms hinged on the voice in charge of the dominant aesthetic and cultural norms; in Berlin, the power lay firmly in the hands of a small group of West German political and intellectual elites and their postmodern and West-oriented aesthetic and historical discourses (Dellenbaugh, 2014a, 2014b). Thus, the imperatives borne of this particular constellation of opposing historical discourses, intensive instrumentalization of the urban symbolic landscape, and control over the post-reunification discourse in the hands of a select number of West Germans combined to create the perfect conditions for the "de-socialization" of the landscape; the 1993 decision to move the capital of Germany back to Berlin only added clout and federal backing to this process.

It can therefore be said that the main difference between Berlin and other CEE capital cities is the fact that East Berlin's and East Germany's accession to West Berlin and West Germany meant not the creation of a new identity within a continuum of development including the socialist period, but rather the reinterpretation and difficult reconciliation of two parallel (and often contradictory) narratives and their respective toponymic inscription (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). What ensued was not the conflicted relationship with the built space and symbolism of the socialist or communist period that can be seen in other CEE, Baltic, and Balkan countries, but the systematic replacement of one historiography and its attendant symbols with the icons of the new hegemony.

"Who controls the present controls the past"

Returning to our literary framework, let's examine the introductory quote for the example of Berlin's central district, Mitte.

The expunging of one group's historiography from the landscape removes their spaces of historical legitimation, as space itself is used to create consensus and normalize hegemonic values and goals. In the words of Lefebvre, "one of the consistent ways to limit the economic and political rights of groups has been to constrain social reproduction by limiting access to space" (De Soto, 1996, p. 33). The debates were particularly difficult around street names. Although street renaming ostensibly took place in the entire city, in reality only a handful of streets in the western half of the city were renamed; more than 90% of the street renaming took place in the East (Dellenbaugh, 2013).

Especially in connection with the new significance attributed Berlin as the new/old German capital, the changing of the symbolic capital of the central city near the new government quarter was particularly intransigent. This is exemplified by a quote from the 1994 document outlining the guidelines for which streets were to be renamed:

> "(1) persons who actively helped to destroy the Weimar Republic should not be honored; (2) persons who fought after 1933 against the National Socialists in order to construct a communist dictatorship should not be honored; (3) only those persons should be honored who fought for human as well as citizen rights, and for the rule of law and for democracy; (4) new names for streets would be suggested from those persons who fought for a *Rechtstaat* (state based on bourgeois law), who defended the Weimar Republic, and who fought against the dictatorships of the National Socialists and the German Democratic Republic" (De Soto, 1996, p. 34).

The semantic equivalence of the National Socialists and the GDR as dictatorships further legitimizes the removal of socialist German symbolic capital. This type of framing represents what Bruce Sterling has coined as the "major consensus narrative" (Sterling, 2001), a term bringing together the social constructionist aspects of historiography. Indeed, the "truth" is only an agreed-upon narrative which both describes the past and guides future development in a path-dependent way. Thus, the framing of the GDR as totalitarian was, to quote Winston Churchill, the right of the victors to write history, and one which served important ends, as will be described in the next section.

"Who controls the past controls the future"

The goals of the key actors' and their constituents were manifold. The reunification of Germany presented the country with the singular opportunity to break with the universal association with the atrocities of the Second World War and become the focal point of the global overthrowing of communism (Jarausch, 2010). In this light, the official adoption of Western narratives and historical tropes presented two opportunities: the association of totalitarianism in Germany with the former German Democratic Republic and the reorientation conceptually towards the West, placing the new border between western and central/eastern Europe at the Oder-Neisse line (i.e. the eastern border of Germany).

Germany's division by the Wall allowed the simultaneous development of two German histories and ideologies. In the West, the Berlin Wall became "a metaphor for the bipolar world system –

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the geographical dichotomy of freedom/repression – [which] turned the concrete wall into an existential symbol transcending immediate political significance" (Loshitzky, 1997). Above and beyond this global significance, the Berlin Wall carried an enormous significance within Germany; "the East-West division provided by the Wall permitted Germany themselves to project 'otherness' onto their fellows. … Germans could interpret official propaganda as implying that the people on the other side of the Wall monopolized the prejudiced, predatory, or authoritarian traits of the bad old days" (Ladd, 1997, p. 31). Thus, during German division, both sides could "grant the other the honor of being the Third Reich's true successor" (Ladd, 1997, p. 180), as either fascists or totalitarians. This stance was strengthened in the East by party propaganda and in the West by the so-called "historian's debate" (Jarausch, 2010; Ladd, 1997; Spittler & Knischewski, 1995). Indeed, the semantic creation of the GDR as "the second German dictatorship" (Saarinen, 2008), paralleled later tropes of reunified Germany as the "second German democracy" (Ladd, 1997, p. 210), and attempts at historical continuity with a pre-WWII historical narrative.

The discursive construction of Germany's post-reunification national narrative

> "provide[s] a convenient end-point to a national narrative of imperial hubris, Weimar failure, Third Reich transgression, GDR false start and eventual FRG redemption. From this perspective, the development of the Federal Republic has been a success story: starting from the nadir of inhuman crimes and shattering defeat, gradually it recovered dignity through political Westernization and democratization and was eventually rewarded for its 'recivilization' by the overthrow of Communism and reunification with the Eastern states" (Jarausch, 2010, p. 508).

From this point of view, German reunification represents the ultimate redemption of Germany and its return to the cadre of Western Europe and global superpowers, this time as part of the EU and the G8.

Thus it's unsurprising that place names such as *Leninplatz* (Lenin Square) were deemed "non-representative for the new Germany" (De Soto, 1996, p. 37), hungry as it was for the redemption and repositioning within the new global world order. The framing of the GDR as a totalitarian dictatorship as exemplified in the quote from the decree for street renaming allowed the further solidification of this discourse, and a carte blanche for the redesign of the city center.

Conclusion

> *"The enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil, and it followed that any*
> *past or future agreement with him was impossible." (Orwell, 1984, p. 35)*

George Orwell wrote *1984* forty years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, dying just one year after he completed the book. He therefore never knew how prescient his work of fiction was in many ways. Despite the fact that complete totalitarian control of the past with attending propaganda of the degree that Orwell envisioned never (or has not yet) materialized, other more subtle forms of history management and consensus building have been employed to achieve political ends in the modern era.

The Cold War and the global division along East-West front lines, struggles in which Berlin played a central role, were based on modernist metanarratives of us and them, good and evil,

black and white; despite the otherwise rampant rise of postmodernist "difference" as an answer to such binaries (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993), the creation of a constitutive "other" remains a powerful political tool for legitimization. Seen in this light, the renaming and reframing of Berlin's urban landscape becomes the creation of an "other" and its respective expunging from the symbolic landscape of the new German capital.

The creation of a Prussian city replete with historical built space forms such as critically reconstructed industrial-era tenement housing blocks and a reconstruction of the Hohenzollern city palace is also an example of what Eric Hobsbawm describes as the invention of tradition, which he argues are "important symptoms and therefore indicators of problems which might not otherwise be recognized" (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 12). The invention of tradition attempts to create continuity with heritage, making the present appear to follow logically in a long line of well-established historical precedents. Tradition can therefore be used to follow the same consensus-building tactics as the normalization of symbolism in the landscape, namely, the normalization of a selected history.

The historical narrative found in central Berlin's symbolic landscape today reflects the creation of a Prussian narrative through built space forms and the symbolic imprint of a historiography that links the present to a time before the violent upheavals of the 20th century. Thus, the symbolic landscape of the capital serves to reinforce political narratives of Germany's future as the "second German democracy," at the cost of the intervening 80 years.

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