

The Exhibition of Communist Objects and Symbols in Berlin's Urban Landscape as Alternative Narratives of the Communist Past

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The objective of this article is to investigate the different approaches at play in the material and symbolic production of the urban space through the study of the transformations of the East-Berlin urban landscape since the German reunification. I will show how the official accounts of the ex-GDR have crystallised in the Berlin urban space through the construction of a negative heritage. I will then focus on how the increase in historic tourism in the capital has contributed to the emergence of legible micro-accounts related to the local communist past in the urban space that compete with the official interpretations of this past.

Key words: Berlin, symbolism, communism, heritage

Introduction

Urban space can be considered as a privileged place where one can observe the work of self-definition undertaken by societies. This is because human beings take their place in a physical environment by materialising their being-in-the-world. The urban landscape is defined by Mariusz Czepczyński as a 'visible and communicative media through which thoughts, ideas and feelings, as well as powers and social constructions are represented in a space' (Czepczyński 2010: 67).

In the process outlined above, the narrativisation of the past and its inscription in the urban space is a phenomenon of primary importance. Our cities' landscapes are linked to memory in a dynamic process which constantly urges societies to visualise themselves, to imagine the future and to represent themselves in it. Memory proceeds by simplification, mixing or reinterpreting history, and can be considered as a sort of symbolic common fund which supplies the materials needed to give meaning to urban landscapes. The past inscribed in stone (the material traces referring to past times and activities) is thus reinvested according to the issues of the present, and is ultimately used to support the construction of local, regional or national cultural and political identities. The social practices of spatialisation of memory – the heritagisation, the musealisation and the memorial marking of territory – actively contribute to the semioticisation of the past (Assmann 2010). This allows us to communicate values and visions both of the world and of the self.

The inscription of the past in the urban space can also be analysed in terms of tourism development. Taking over old places, symbols and icons for promotional purposes contributes to create and legitimise an image of self-identity, and is partly determined by the tourist market. For many countries, and cities, tourism is a set of 'highly significant means of self-promotion to the wider international community' (Light 2001: 1053-1054).

The exploitation of the past for political and economic reasons requires a process of semioticisation which develops according to different approaches and on several levels. On the level of urban government, it is carried out through the construction and care of public spaces and buildings as well as through the creation of an image of the city. On the micro local level, the traces and icons of the past are exploited by the city inhabitants, artists and

entrepreneurs who mark their presence by transforming the urban landscape, thus making their identity perceivable. Finally, through their daily practices in the urban space, users take part in the interpretation of the landscape. This results in a palimpsestic city – a sedimentation of meanings, signs, legends and facts linked to the urban landscape – which contributes to mould our imagination and our urban practices. Moreover, this contributes to determine our ‘mentalities’ and ‘collective behaviour’ (Baczko 1984).

Considering the transformations that it has undergone since reunification, the East-Berlin urban landscape is particularly interesting for us to understand how the approaches that I have just mentioned interweave to produce the urban space, concretely and symbolically. The end of the German Democratic Republic (from now on, GDR), the fall of the Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union meant the victory of the ‘free world’ and the failure of the communist ideological model. In this sense, the German reunification was an unprecedented opportunity to make the Western ‘free world’ victorious in history, as well as to demonstrate the political and economic viability of the democratic order and the capitalist system. The political, economic, social and cultural changes that took place after the fall of the Wall became tangible through the condemnation of the model of popular democracies. It was necessary to convert the populations socialised under the GDR to democratic and liberal ways. This conversion consisted, among other things, in making legible the changes that were in progress, which was accomplished by exploiting some vestiges of the dictatorial past, of the border regime and of the social control of the GDR State security system. Thus, public memory policies tended to highlight a topography of ‘places of remembrance and learning’ which enabled the diffusion of educational messages on distinct aspects of the communist past, each of these messages being clearly identifiable in the city space.

However, the fascination aroused by the history of communism among tourists in search of exoticism has generated forms of exploitation of an imaginary vision of the East. This is visible in the ‘re-use’ of old symbols, icons and objects specific to communist societies, which involves a whole process of reinterpretation, diversion and aestheticisation. On the individual level, consumption – including tourism – is a way of distinguishing oneself, of displaying the values to which one adheres and of marking one’s social and cultural belonging (Bourdieu 1979). On a collective level, it seems that tourism has been more and more closely linked to the creation and promotion of identities in order to arouse the interest of potential visitors. We can therefore say that the aforementioned process – which takes place through the creation of alternative accounts of the communist past – can establish new relations with the past which in themselves are bearers of new forms of identification.

In this article, I will show how official accounts of the ex-GDR have become visible in the Berlin urban space through the construction of a negative heritage and through the condemnation of the GDR system. I will also explore how the increase in historical tourism in the capital has led to the emergence of tangible micro-accounts in the urban space which, in a certain way, compete with the official interpretations of the communist past.

The Construction of a Negative Heritage and the Condemnation of the GDR System in the Berlin Landscape

After reunification, the local and federal authorities, anxious to cancel the GDR irrevocably, sought to confine this recent past in certain appropriate spaces. The majority of these spaces are memorials, museums and record and documentation centres established by citizen initiatives and encouraged by public funds. These establishments focus on themes of repression such as the Ministry for State Security,¹ the dictatorship of the SED² and the border regime that was set up after the construction of the Berlin Wall. Here, in order to shed light on this recent past, I shall mention several significant places which are part of the Berlin topography of the places of remembrance and learning linked to the past of the ex-GDR

First, let us consider the *Erinnerungsstätte Notaufnahmelager Marienfelde* (Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial), which traces the history of the Germans fleeing from the east to the west. This former refugee transit camp for East Germans has been turned into a memorial thanks to the action of a citizen initiative. Since 2009, it has been placed under the responsibility of the *Stiftung Berliner Mauer* (Berlin Wall Foundation), whose creation was voted in September 2008 by the Berlin Senate and which also encompasses the *Gedenkstättenensemble Berliner Mauer* (Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauerstrasse). The Berlin Wall Memorial recently received the support of the Senate for the reconstitution of the part of the Wall located between Eberswalderstrasse and Nordbahnhof. This reconstitution consists in a series of illustrated stations that link the history of the site to that of the partition. The traces of the Wall are shown and explained along this itinerary. A commemorative panel called *Fenster des Gedenkens* (Window of Remembrance) shows photographs of people who were trying to flee to the west. This large information and commemorative network is completed by an exhibition at the rail station Nordbahnhof on the ‘absurdity of the separation’, evoking the effects of separation on the underground, tram and railway lines.

A second example is given by the *Museum Haus am Checkpoint Charlie*, established by Rainer Hildebrandt shortly after the erection of the Wall (the museum officially opened to the public in June 1963). This museum is located near the border post (from which it takes its name), between the former Soviet and American zones. The exhibits mainly concern the Wall, the inter-German frontier and the different methods used by some East German citizens to go over to the West clandestinely.

Another establishment which should be taken into account is the *Gedenkstätte Berlin Hohenschönhausen* (Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial of the MfS prison)³ which focuses on the theme of oppression and social control in the former GDR. Established in 1992 by former prisoners of the State security services, this initiative led to the establishment of the *Gedenkstätte Berlin-Hohenschönhausen* (Memorial Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Foundation), which was partly financed by the Land and by the Bund following a vote by the Berlin Senate in June 2000.

¹ *Ministerium für Staatsicherheit*, also known as Stasi.

² *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* – the Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

³ *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* – Ministry for State security.

The Research and Memorial Centre on Normannenstrasse – located on the premises of the former headquarters of the East German Ministry for State Security in Berlin-Lichtenberg – offers a contrasting reading of the past. On the one hand, it condemns the system of domination and social control; on the other hand, it praises the opposition and resistance in the GDR. This memorial project was proposed in 1990 by the interim government of the GDR and was subsequently run by the ASTAK association,⁴ a group of opponents and defenders of civil rights who participated in the process of dissolution of the Stasi services in Berlin.

Lastly, I shall mention the Information and Documentation centre (IDZ) set up by the BStU,⁵ which also describes the Stasi as an instrument of power and social control by the SED.

Many of the museums and memorials described above embody an *in situ* memory. They evoke memory by putting visitors in places that, by virtue of their authenticity, call on the visitors' emotional world. 'This concern for contact with the thing' comes, according to Daniel Fabre, 'from a pedagogical formula' which consists in 'making the presence of the past truly felt' (Fabre 2001: 31). In other words, 'the feelings of the past' are recreated in order 'to be shared' (Fabre 2001: 31). The real places, still imbued with memories of the executioners (*Täter*), physically confront visitors with the 'hard and repressive side of the East German dictatorship' (Lindenberger 2003: 33). Admittedly, visiting these places 'directly involves the visitor's body', and the media that are employed in this process – artefacts as well as witnesses – 'do not address only the rationality of language, but [...] also call on emotion' (Wahnich 2005: 30). Horror and indignation are precisely the feelings on which the transmission of the educational messages delivered by these commemorative places is based.

As shown by the examples that I have given, the readings of the GDR in the Berlin urban landscape are mainly formed through the evocation of the repressive and iniquitous nature of the regime. The musealisation of the GDR, which occurred at the same time as the process of reunification,⁶ tends to represent East Germany as a negative model against which the national model of the new Germany gains full meaning and strength. The memorial image of the GDR – both controlled and sanctioned by past public policies from the Land and the Bund – is thus seen as a negative national heritage.

All this points to the links between social memory and material persistence in space. When a change occurs, a spatial modification supports the historical rupture (Connerton, 2000: 65). In the recent history of Germany the reunification was a serious symbolic and factual rupture which gave rise to new readings of the national past. In this context, the

⁴ This is the *Antistalinistische Aktion Berlin Normannenstrasse* – Normannenstrasse Berlin Anti-Stalinist Action.

⁵ This acronym stands for *Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* – Federal Commissioner for the Records of the Ministry of State Security in the former German Democratic Republic.

⁶ The first exhibitions were organised when the East German state was still in the process of disappearing. The very first exhibit focused on the demonstrators' placards of the autumn of 1989. In this way, the very recent past was immediately documented and 'cooled down'.

representations of East Germany as a negative model offer an exclusive dimension. The listed features of this negative heritage ‘are interesting markers of the rulers’ pedagogical drive, as they contribute to put across their rhetoric about the “right things to do”, and the attendant criteria of inclusion and exclusion’ (Pardo 2012: 68). I shall not discuss here the legitimacy and the merits of the confrontation with the communist past introduced after the fall of the Wall. This process proved to be salutary in numerous of its aspects.⁷ However, the history of the GDR is a period of the recent history which refers to the construction of a Manichean past’s representation. This Manichaeism was occasionally exploited by the public authorities and the media, causing the resentment of those who did not recognise themselves in these ‘dark’ visions of the communist period. Thus, it could be said that the brutality that marked the beginning of the confrontation with the communist past in the reunified Germany probably contributed – in some spheres of the East German society – to a tendency to give a nostalgic look to the past.

Historic Tourism and the Increase in the Musealisation of the Communist Past

It would appear that the musealisation of the GDR was also determined by the development of the local tourist economy. Even though the memorial institutions dedicated to the local communist past are intended for groups of schoolchildren of all ages, students and apprentices, they nonetheless attract crowds of tourists. Many of them – foreigners and former Länder citizens alike – travel to Berlin to learn more about the history of the division, to find themselves among authentic traces of the past and to relive the great events that marked the Cold War era in their imagination.

The Karl-Marx-Allee (formerly Stalinallee) and the Frankfurter Tor are interesting examples of how the preservation and promotion of certain traces of the communist past are exploited by tourism. Designed in the post-war urban development schemes according to the principles of Socialist Realism – socialist in content and national in form – this former prestigious avenue of East Berlin is included in the local heritage because of its touristic attraction. The growing number of companies offering thematic guided visits by bicycle or by bus that focus on themes concerning the communist past of the city attests to the importance of the historic tourism market in Berlin. Most Berlin souvenir shops located in prestigious spots in the centre of Mitte (on Unter den Linden or around the Gendarmenmarkt), whose dimensions are sometimes impressive, have at least one section selling different kind of GDR-merchandising.⁸

The inauguration of the DDR Museum in 2006 right in the centre of Mitte also clearly testifies to this set-up. Located just opposite the Berliner Dom, this institution is far from

⁷ First of all it allowed to break the taboo on this part of the recent history. Further, it contributed to guarantee the victims’ rehabilitation.

⁸ These products include several types of souvenirs as well as books (collections of photographs about the daily life in East Germany, design and cookbooks, but also works on the Wall or the SED dictatorship).

irrelevant when one considers the wave of *Ostalgie*⁹ that has hit Berlin over the last several years. This project was aimed at making up for the under-representation of daily life in East Germany in the local communist memorial landscape. Thus, the museum offers an experience of daily East German life by welcoming the visitor in a reconstructed typical GDR space. The whole experience is animated with numerous theatrical and interactive devices.

The memorial institutions devoted to the communist past are now trying to satisfy tourists' need for leisure and culture, their interest in looking for 'the red Berlin'. Cities have long become valued destinations for tourists. Indeed, long stays at sea or mountain resorts have been partly replaced by short trips to the city or to the countryside. '[These] new tourist flows [become] a major resource in the development of areas, particularly urban ones' (Bonard, Felli 2008: 2). The German capital thus aims at intensifying a specific type of tourism: the historic one. Thanks to its tourist appeal the city has more chances to be seen as dynamic setting boasting an interesting past, and thus it attracts the attention of investors and potential new residents (Harvey 2004). From this point of view, the musealisation of the GDR is an instrument in the promotion of the city and in the enhancement of its global territory.

Does the Re-use of Communist Objects and Icons Lead to New Forms of Identification?

It appears that the local authorities have become gradually aware of the fact that the past of East Berlin represents an element of the whole city's identity, as well as a potential for its tourist appeal. In other words, they have realised the profitability of certain aspects of the GDR – undeniably, a card to play from a commercial viewpoint. Next, I shall explore how the interest in Berlin's communist past has led to a process of commodification of the past.

Many people have started to exploit an imaginary vision of the East in the broad sense by opening thematic bars, which sometimes go well beyond the simple evocation of the GDR. An example is the CCCP club in Mitte, a club resembling a kitsch saloon bar, which was originally established on the site of a former office issuing visas to people who wished to travel to Western Europe and to Soviet Union nationals.¹⁰ Another example is *Die Tagung* in the Friedrichshain district. This is a bar decorated with portraits of great figures in the history of the Soviet and East German communism. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find such cafés in big east European cities (think, for example, of the *Propaganda bar* in Krakow).

The Café Sybille, which opened on the Karl-Marx-Allee in the 1960s, was taken over in the late 1990s by an association helping people suffering from psychological disorders to integrate into the labour market. This café sits next to the saloon bar. The latter is decorated with East German furniture and includes a little museum on the history of the Karl-Marx-Allee. The exhibition mostly includes photographs and texts, but also displays East German objects and toys dating from the 1950s. The visitor can make a virtual visit of the former

⁹ This is a German term referring to nostalgia for aspects of life in East Germany. It derives from the words Ost (east) and Nostalgie (nostalgia). The concept of Ostalgie designates 'a positive retrospective judgment on the former GDR which partly refers to a rational comparison between the skills of the GDR and the skills of the FRG [...], and partly refers to an emotional idealisation hiding the well-known negative aspects of the GDR regime'. (Neller and Thaidigsmann, 2002: 425).

¹⁰ Since a couple of years the CCCP is located on the corner of Linienstrasse and Rosenthaler Strasse.

Stalinallee whilst listening to accounts of the stages of its construction and of the neighbourhood's history during the GDR period with an audio-guide.

Equally interesting is the *DDR Design Hostel* (or *Ostel*) designed and opened by a former tightrope walker of the GDR State Circus. This establishment, near the east train station (Ostbahnhof) is decorated like an East German hotel, giving prominence to the furniture and furnishings of the 1970s design in the GDR. Tourists can book a room and enjoy the pleasures of Socialist Realism in an entirely reconstructed environment, which is truly extraordinary considering that the *Berolina* and *Unter-den-Linden* East German hotels were demolished in 1996 and 2006 respectively.

Apart from individuals who exploited an imaginary vision of the East with the aim of promoting their establishments, other individuals started to buy a large number of East German pieces of furniture, books, decorative and everyday objects, and opened shops in the 'fashionable parts' of the city (the central-eastern quarters). Thus the *Vorwende-Laden* (the Shop From Before the Turn) located in Thaerstrasse in Friedrichshain sells civic books, comic strips, crockery and souvenirs manufactured in East Germany. The *VEB Orange* (*Volkseigene Betrieb* – The People's Business) in Oderbergerstrasse (a street of Prenzlauer Berg very popular among Berliners and tourists) sells a large number of pieces of furniture, retro objects, postcards and clothes 'made in the GDR'. These antique dealers of the East flourish in the Prenzlauer Berg, Mitte and Friedrichshain districts and are part of the very peculiar Berlin atmosphere of which Western tourists are so fond.

An ever-growing number of individuals from the east and west of Berlin, but also foreigners, have understood how to surf on the wave of Ostalgie. Through their enterprises, they offer the Berlin population and visitors visions of the communist past which are out of line with the official discourse. These visions are ironic, inventive or protesting. Entrepreneurs offer glamorous, fashionable or bad-taste communism; they create micro-accounts that penetrate the city and propose alternative visions of the past and of local identities. The meeting of the tourist demand with the Ostalgie generates unpredictable reinterpretations of the past that can open the way to new forms of identification. This happens mainly for three reasons.

Firstly, it appears that the objects and icons in use during communism today embody values and practices proper to a society that has disappeared and which is sometimes idealised. Moreover, these objects and icons seem to fulfil a role in the collective memory of certain eastern Berliners. According to Dietrich Mühlberg, these artefacts are refuges that enable former GDR citizens to establish the 'conditions for a positive relation with [their own] history' (Mühlberg 2005: 11).

Secondly, it appears that the semantic reinvestment in old communist objects and icons contributes to the projection of 'new images, new stories' (Rautenberg, 2009) and, ultimately, to the production of identity. In an article about the treatment of communist objects and icons in Central and Eastern Europe, Mariusz Czepczyński emphasises the way in which communist thematic bars target 'both local clientele and the tourists, searching for something familiar and funky' (Czepczyński 2010: 76). According to Czepczyński, 'Many of those places are not only full of tourists, but usually also local students, for whom looking for

post-socialist past is the way to self-identify in a globalising and amalgamated world' (2010: 76). Indeed, some Berlin communist-theme bars could be compared with places 'where people engage in modes of expressivity that are alternatives to those imposed from above by the dominant culture' (Krase, quoting Joseph Sciorra 2012: 39).

Finally, if the urban space is a medium that enables the diffusion of ideals and visions of the world, it is also the place in which the specificities of certain groups sharing an identity, a history and cultural features can be observed. The interactionist perspective has shown 'how all sorts of people communicate through the built environment [...]. Individuals and groups interact with each other in the city through visual images that effect what people see on the streets' (Krase 2012, 5). This is also true of the objects and icons in use during the communist period, as they are invested with new meaning while exerting a peculiar fascination over tourists and certain categories of inhabitants. It seems that many entrepreneurs suggest other readings of the city's past, on which alternative visions of the local identity are based. Moreover, it appears that some of them have gone beyond a simple evocation of the Berlin communist past. They convey locally an imaginary vision of the East in its broadest sense, thus constructing Berlin as a point of convergence between Central and Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

Berlin is a place where the effects of the revision of national imagination can be observed. By looking at the changes in the capital, one is indeed able to examine the simultaneous creation of official and alternative accounts about the same period in history. In the discussion given here I have shown that the process of de-legitimisation of the East German past implemented since the reunification have little by little contributed to the construction of the GDR as the 'second German dictatorship'¹¹ and as the counter-model for a unified, free and democratic Germany. These new readings of the past crystallised through the conversion of traces of the GDR dictatorship into places which offer an emotional confrontation to these aspects of the local communist past. According to Jürgen Habermas, the aim of these places of memory consists in 'fostering the diffusion of a political culture which stabilises the legitimate democratic State' (Habermas 2005: 93). Such an exploitation of the traces of the communist past helps to transform the urban space into a 'vast framework of reference, organising [...] beliefs [and] knowledge' (Lynch 1999: 5). The same can be said, on a micro level, of the games of reinterpretation, deviation or aestheticisation of objects and icons from the communist period. These phenomena produce 'a mosaic of images and meanings' that tells us about the 'usages of the places in the city' and the 'values' that are closely linked to the 'aesthetic dimensions of the city' (Rautenberg 2009: 21-22). In this plethora of confused images, each individual makes up his or her own representation of the city by selecting and reinterpreting patterns taken from the local past.

¹¹ In the years after the reunification the similarities between the SED and the national socialist regimes, as well as between the Stasi and the Gestapo, start to be pointed out repeatedly in public discourses. This led to the condemnation of the East German regime as well as to the acceptance of its title of 'second German dictatorship'.

The observation of the processes of semanticisation occurring with the production of places, such as the treatment of the different layers of our urban landscapes, is important for two reasons. Firstly, it allows us fully to understand the way in which ‘societies cope, symbolically manipulating their space, with change and tradition’ (Micoud 1991: 7-8). Secondly, it can help us better to approach the complexity of the polymorphic, progressive and sometimes discordant processes related to the construction and the production of identities in an urban setting.

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