

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - The “Argument Of Continuity”



1. Introduction

Thirteen years after the revolution in the GDR and twelve years after the unification of the two Germanies, a gap still exists between East and West. One reason for this gap may be the dominance of a formerly Western discourse that has been transformed into an All-German public discourse. This overtaking of the eastern discourse by the West becomes apparent and especially interesting where the history of the two German states and its representation is concerned. Explaining the history of the GDR through a predominantly Western discourse leaves the citizens in East Germany in a difficult and ambivalent position: they may have to conclude that what they had lived by was false, and are thus lead to dissociate themselves from their own believes. Alternatively, they can take an ironic perspective by recognizing that the Western discourse functions the same way the Eastern did, and that both just tell a story from a certain standpoint; hence, that none of the stories represent the “real past”.

One of the most evident examples for this clash of discourses is the employment and transformation of what could be called the “argument of continuity”, the analogy both German states established between the other state and Nazi Germany. The “other Germany” was displayed as the successor of Nazi Germany. This analogy accomplished two tasks: it discredited the other Germany and its political system, and it fostered identification with the own state.

This paper takes a first step at analyzing the development and the effect of the Nazi-analogy in East and West Germany, with a special focus on its use since the unification. First, I will propose a view of this analogy in terms of an “argument of continuity” that functioned as a powerful tool in West as well as in East Germany, at the example of the *Braunbuch*. I will then describe the employment and transformation of this argument in contemporary public discourse at the example of the exhibition in the “Zeitgeschichtliches Forum” (“Forum of contemporary history”). By analyzing the use of the “argument of continuity”, as employed in the exhibition, through the lens of Rorty’s concepts of irony and solidarity, I will

suggest that the contemporary Western employment of the “argument of continuity” offers an insight into the function of contemporary discourse in East and West Germany. The question this paper asks is, how the discourse about this continuity is represented and altered in contemporary public discourse. I will argue, that the clash of discourses encountered by the people in East Germany may foster an ironic perspective on public discourse – an ironic perspective that might strengthen as well as weaken democracy in Germany.

2. The “argument of continuity”

Prior to 1990, setting the other German state in analogy to Nazi-Germany functioned as a central argument for the development of a West German and East German identity respectively. After 1945 most Germans simply wanted to move on without confronting the past; the members, supporters and high-rank officials of the National Socialists seemed to have vanished. The question where these Nazis went, was frequently answered by each German state with “to the other German state”. This answer served a double purpose: First, it allowed to build an own identity in clear demarcation from the other German state. Second, it exempted the citizens of both Germanies from the necessity to confront their own past of the last 12 years, as the own state was solely inhabited by the “good” Germans.

Exemplary of this “argument of continuity” is the *Braunbuch* (2002), a book edited in 1965 in the GDR by the Nationalrat der “Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland” (The National Council of the National Front of the Democratic Germany), and its West German counterpart by Kappelt (1981). The former book consists of lists of people who were high-rank officials in Germany between 1933 and 1945 and continued to be in responsible positions in the FRG, or were at least not questioned about their past after 1945. The latter presents a list of people who were not necessarily in higher positions during the time of the Nazi-regime but were members of the NSDAP and pursued a political career in the GDR.

The *Braunbuch* edited in the GDR establishes a tight link between Nazi Germany and the FRG by demanding that “auch in Westdeutschland muß die Befreiung vom Faschismus und Militarismus, die am 8. Mai 1945 eingeleitet, aber dort wieder rückgängig gemacht wurde, endlich vollendet werden.” (Podewin 2002, 12; “in West Germany, too, the liberation from facism and militarism, induced on May 8th 1945 but then taken back, finally has to be completed”). Similarly the

publication *Die Wahrheit über Oberländer* (*The truth about Oberländer*), which appeared in the GDR in 1960 and aimed at proving that the West German minister Theodor Oberländer had been a leading figure of the Nazi-Regime, was heavily founded on the argument that the West German state was basically the Nazi-state in disguise. This analogy was established subtly as well as explicitly. "Adenauer und die deutschen Militaristen decken Faschisten wie Oberländer, weil sie in ihr aggressives politisches Konzept passen. (...) Ist es ein Wunder, daß in Westdeutschland antisemitische Sudeleien wieder an der Tagesordnung sind, daß Synagogen-Schänder und andere Tausendjährige wieder Oberwasser haben, wenn Rassentheoretiker und Massenmörder jüdischer Menschen wie Oberländer und Globke in die höchsten Staatsämter aufsteigen können?" (4, "Adenauer and the other German militarists cover up for fascists like Oberländer, because these fascists fit into their aggressive political concept. ... No wonder, that once again antisemitist scibblings are on the agenda, that synagog desecrators and the other 'Millennials' have the upper hand again, when race-theorists and mass murderer of Jewish people like Oberländer and Globke can achieve highest offices."). In formulations like "Hitler as well as Adenauer ..." (see 175 & 182) with respect to Oberländer and his position and political influence in Nazi Germany and West Germany the analogy is made even more explicit. At one place the editors of *The truth about Oberländer* depict Adenauer as going even further than Hitler: "Was Oberländer unter Hitler noch nicht gelang, ermöglicht ihm der Adenauer-Staat: er wurde Minister." (171 "What Oberländer did not achieve under Hitler, is made possible for him in the Adenauer-state: he became Secretary of State."). Also referring to West Germany as the "Adenauer-state", in clear analogy to the common term of the Hitler-state oder Hitler-Germany, shows the tight link the editors wished to establish between Nazi Germany and West Germany.

In 1981 a West German version of the Braunbuch appeared, the *Braunbuch DDR* by Kappelt, accusing the GDR of being itself a state in continuity of the Nazi-regime. This tight link between Nazi Germany and the GDR is explicitly established in the foreword by von Habsburg who refers to Honecker and Breschnew as "zumindest genauso totalitäre Gewaltherrscher wie es der Führer des Tausendjährigen Reiches war" (9; "at least as totalitarian in their tyranny as the leader of the *Tausendjähriges Reich*"). Not only is the GDR depicted as a state in continuity of Nazi Germany, but West Germany is also presented as the better state, thereby showing the role the argument of continuity played for the identity-building process in the FRG. "Ohne politisches Mitläufertum könnte

selbst eine Diktatur auf Dauer nicht existieren. Dies hat Gültigkeit für den Nationalsozialismus wie den Sozialismus in der DDR. 1945 zogen viele Deutsche im Westen die Konsequenz aus dem Scheitern der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft und verschrieben sich freiheitlichen Idealen. Die Gewaltpolitik in Deutschland fand jedoch in der DDR durch Kommunisten die jahrzehntelange Fortsetzung." (Kappelt 1981, 11; "Even a dictatorship could not exist without political opportunism. This is as true for the National Socialism as it is for the Socialism of the GDR. In 1945 many Germans in the West drew the conclusions from the failure of National Socialism and subscribed to liberal ideals. But in the GDR the tyranny in Germany had its continuation through the communists for decades.").

However, the *Braunbuch DDR* by Kappelt differs in an important feature from the *Braunbuch* edited in the GDR. While the former is written by an author who is not in office, the latter is edited by a committee that was closely bound to the government and thus expresses not one among many opinions but what was meant to be the ruling public opinion. In both cases, it is obvious that the close connection between the other German state and Nazi Germany was employed in both parts of Germany.

In this paper I refer with the term "argument of continuity" to this argumentative practice of each German state to portray the other Germany as being the direct successor of Nazi Germany. This argument sets the given state in analogy to Nazi Germany and thereby projects fascist structures on it.

3. The "argument of continuity" as analogy

The "argument of continuity", depicting the other German state as holding on to the political system of the Nazi-regime, can be thought of as functioning as a powerful tool in the discourse between the two Germanies in the postwar period and throughout the Cold War. The strength of the argument can be linked to its special character as an analogy consisting of only three determinants.

The common definition of analogy as argument scheme is that it is used to conclude something unknown from something known (see Hoenen 1992, 498). Thus, an analogy consists of four parts: A is to B as C is to D, with A and C belonging to different areas or spheres. Given this definition, the argument of continuity does not constitute an analogy. The argument of continuity formulated from the West German perspective reads as follows:

The GDR is to democracy/justice/liberty as the Nazi-regime was to

democracy/justice/liberty.

Hence, it consists of only three distinguishable parts. However, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argue, that an analogy may as well contain less than four distinct terms. "Although the typical analogy comprises four terms, an analogy will quite often have only three terms. One of the three will appear twice in the scheme, which then will have the form: B is to A as C is to B." (375). The argument of continuity is not only restricted to three parts, it also does not just refer to three different *terms* but to political and social *systems*, thereby offering a broad range of associations and implications. Thereby the argument of continuity represents what Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca label rich analogy. "Whenever we say that every analogy involves a relation among four terms, we are, of course, giving a schematized picture of things. In fact, each term may correspond to a complex situation, and such a situation is precisely what makes a *rich analogy*." (375, emphasis by the authors). The argument of continuity can be treated as an analogy, an argument scheme that is fundamentally epistemological in function.

One question that arises is, in how far the different terms in the given example really belong to different spheres, a criterium that Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) regard as "essential for the existence of an analogy" (375). Does the GDR (or FRG respectively) belong to a different sphere than Nazi Germany? On the one side, they certainly do not, as both stand for different political systems and national entities. A closer look at the different forms of analogy and those argument schemes that function similarly to analogies may be helpful. Kienpointner (1992, 384) distinguishes argumentation by analogy from argumentation by example. An analogy will refer in most cases to a single instance and draw themes from different spheres, whereas argumentation by example refers to a common sphere and points further than the single instance. In addition to argumentation by analogy and argumentation by example, Kienpointner introduces argument by comparison (384) as a third closely related scheme, although he admits that the distinction between the three schemes may not always be clearly applicable. In terms of Kienpointner's classification the given example may represent an argument by comparison.

On the other side, the argument of continuity gains its strength from the fact, that the terror of Nazi Germany and the character of the fascist regime *do* belong to different spheres than the post-war Germanies, as the crimes committed by this

state are incomparable. Thus, it can be argued, that the argument of continuity basically functions as a form of analogical argument – an argument structure that is at the basis of historical arguments and serves epistemological functions. As Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) put it: “Analogies are important in invention and argumentation fundamentally because they facilitate the development and extension of thought” (385). The argument of continuity viewed as an analogical argument structure suggests that, especially because it functions as a structure within a historical argument, this argument has the capacity to work as a very powerful means in public discourse.

4. The exhibition in the “Zeitgeschichtliches Forum”

The permanent exhibition in the “Zeitgeschichtliches Forum” opened on October 9th 1999 in Leipzig, 10 years after one of the largest demonstrations against the totalitarian regime of the SED took place in Leipzig. It shows the development of what was to become the GDR in 1949 from its beginning in 1945 to the peaceful revolution in 1989. The exhibition thereby plays the role of the eastern sibling of the “Haus der Geschichte” (“house of history”) in Bonn, which tells the story of the FRG.

Being raised in the West but having lived in the East for several years, I considered this exhibition to be a good opportunity to learn about the state I never really got to know, but with whose former citizens I lived. I found the exhibition insightful, although somewhat black and white in its description about the beginning years of the GDR – I left with the impression of having learned a lot; I thought I understood East Germany much better now.

In several personal discussions about the exhibition with people who grew up in the GDR it became apparent, however, that they were very sceptical about the way the exhibition presents the history of the GDR. Their scepticism was grounded in the fact that they knew the arguments the “Zeitgeschichtliches Forum” puts forward in order to establish the continuity between the GDR and Nazi Germany very well – but from the “other side”, presented against the FRG. Thus, the argumentative structure, appropriated by the exhibition in order to tell the story of the GDR and to show the weaknesses of the system, is in part the same as the one they had grown up with: just that the latter was directed against the FRG and not the GDR. Hence, for those “learned GDR-citizens” the exhibition represented a capturing of an East German by a West German discourse.

This overtaking becomes especially apparent in the exhibition, where the self-

concept of the GDR as a democratic and antifascist state is concerned. The founding of the GDR was framed as an antithesis to Nazi Germany by legitimizing its existence to a large extent through its antifascist stance. The exhibition describes this legitimation in several ways. In the part of the exhibition titled *Machtverhältnisse* (Power structures) it says: “[...] Unter der Kontrolle der sowjetischen Besatzungsmacht schaffen sie die Grundlagen einer neuen Ordnung: den ‘antifaschistisch demokratischen Neuaufbau’.” (“Under the control of the soviet occupator they build the foundation for a new order: the ‘anti-fascist-democratic reconstruction’.”). The quotation marks show already that the character of this reconstruction is not considered to be really anti-fascist and democratic.

The antifascist character of the GDR is contested in other parts of the exhibition, too, through a, sometimes ironic, reference to a structural and personal continuity between Nazi-Germany and the GDR. Under the headline *Antifaschistischer Neuanfang?* (An anti-fascist new beginning?) a continuity is established between the NSDAP and the parties NDPD and DBD, which were open for former members of the NSDAP. Under the headline *Gründung der DDR* (Founding of the German Democratic Republic) it is more or less ironically stated “[...] Die DDR betont, das ‘bessere Deutschland’ zu sein. Der ‘Antifaschismus’ wird zum Propagandamittel und besonders gegen die Bundesrepublik eingesetzt. [...]” (...The GDR emphasizes to be the ‘better Germany’. The ‘anti-fascism’ becomes an instrument of propaganda especially directed against the FRG.). Through this treatment of the argument of continuity in the exhibition, it is only presented from the Western perspective.

Interestingly, in the section about the *Gründung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Founding of the Federal Republic of Germany) neither the NS-past nor antifascism are mentioned. Thus, the argument of continuity is used against the GDR by ironising its founding theme, whereas the question of continuity between Nazi Germany and the FRG stays unmentioned. One might interject at this point, that it is not the purpose of the exhibition to explore the history of West Germany. However, the exhibition in Leipzig is not just a part of a bigger exhibition but acts on its own. And, as will be discussed later, at certain keypoints the West German history is put in contrast to its East German counterpart. The argumentative structure in the exhibition stands in direct contrast to the argumentation put forward by the GDR as shown by the example of the *Braunbuch* and *Die Wahrheit über Oberländer*. This clash of discourses becomes especially apparent in the section on the re-militarization of the two Germanies and the description of the

first uniforms of the two German armies.

5. *Uniforms and the continuity of military traditions*

An issue that exemplifies how the story of the anti-fascist GDR is being retold from a Western perspective in the “Zeitgeschichtliches Forum” is the treatment of army-uniforms. Both German states engaged in a policy of re-militarization in the Fifties and built new armies in 1956: the “Bundeswehr” in the FRG, the “Nationale Volksarmee” in the GDR. The exhibition displays the first uniforms of both armies, facing each other on the sides of an aisle; visually set in opposition to each other.

The descriptions of the two uniforms differ fundamentally. The uniform of the “Nationale Volksarmee” is displayed in the same area as the discussion about the “argument of continuity” and how it was directed against the FRG by means of publications like the *Braunbuch* and *Die Wahrheit über Oberländer*. This closeness in location suggests a juxtaposition of different forms of continuity: on the one side the accusation put forward by the GDR against a systematic continuity of Nazi-elites in West Germany, on the other side the presentation of the GDR as a state in continuity to the Nazi-Regime itself.

Under the headline “Deutsche Uniform” (“German uniform”) the uniform of the Nationale Volkarmee is depicted as establishing a continuity from the Reichwehr, the army of the Weimar republic, to the army of the GDR. “Die Bekleidung der Nationalen Volksarmee ist bewusst nach dem Vorbild der Reichswehr-Uniform gestaltet. Sie steht für militärische Traditionen und Tugenden. Die SED möchte sie auf die Armee der DDR übertragen.” (“The garments of the national peoples army have been consciously modelled after the Reichwehr-uniform. It stands for military traditions and virtues. The SED wants to project these values on the army of the GDR.”). Therewith, the “Nationale Volksarmee” is presented as an army in the tradition of the “Reichswehr” – a “Reichwehr” which developed into a state within the state during the 1920ies and 30ies and did never form a democratic institution (see for example Rosenberg 1991). The virtues and traditions of the “Reichswehr” are by no means democratic and anti-fascist but rather authoritarian and sympathetic to fascist structures.

By drawing a line from the Reichswehr to the Nationale Volksarmee, the exhibition draws a line that crosses the Wehrmacht as the army of Nazi-Germany. The continuity between the “Reichwehr” and the “Nationale Volksarmee” may suggest, that there also exists a continuity between the Wehrmacht and the

Nationale Volksarmee. This suggestive notion is strengthened by two features. First, the uniforms, as already mentioned, are displayed in the same area as the discussion of the *Braunbuch* and other documents, published by committees of the GDR in order to show the continuity between Nazi Germany and the FRG. Thus, the headline above the whole section could as well be *Continuities*. In this context the comparison of the uniform of the Nationale Volksarmee with the uniform of the Reichswehr, can be read as a comparison between the army of the GDR and the Wehrmacht. This comparison works as a synecdochy: the uniform represents the army and the state.

Second, the display of the uniforms is the only instance in which the history of the GDR is accompanied by the a description of the complementary development in the FRG. Not only the East German uniform is on display but also its equivalent from West Germany. Through the constructed opposition between the two, the suggestive character of the continuity between the Reichswehr and the Nationale Volksarmee is strengthened.

Set in opposition to the "Nationale Volksarmee" the "Bundeswehr", as the army of the FRG, is presented very differently. It is depicted as a democratic army, which consciously broke the German military tradition. Under the headline *Neubeginn* (A new beginning) the new uniform is described as follows: "Die erste Bundeswehr-Uniform zeigt das Bemühen, sich von der deutschen Militärtradition abzuheben; das ‚Affenjäckchen‘ ist jedoch bei den Soldaten wegen seines kurzen, zivilen Schnitts nicht beliebt." ("The first Bundeswehr uniform shows the FRG's effort to distance itself from the German military tradition. However, because of its very short, civil fit, the soldiers do not appreciate the "monkey-jacket".). The Bundeswehr, and thereby the FRG, is clearly presented as the German state that broke with traditions, explicitly with military traditions. Treating the uniforms as a synecdochy for the armies and states they represent, leads to the conclusion, that the FRG broke systematically with Nazi Germany.

It is important to bear in mind that these arguments are presented in East Germany in an exhibition about the GDR. They are telling the story of the GDR and in a way they are retelling it. These arguments are not new to "learned GDR-citizens"; they have heard them before, but from the other, the East German perspective. As well as the western politicians were a target of the argument of continuity in order to establish the GDR as the only antifascist and democratic Germany, so were the uniforms. One reason given in the GDR for accusing the

other German state as being a direct successor of Nazi Germany was, that their uniforms resembled those of the Wehrmacht, thereby establishing a direct link. (Despite the lack of written testimony of this argument by now, friends assured me, that they remember this argument well.) Thus, with respect to the uniforms of the two German states and their resemblance with the Wehrmacht-uniform, the exhibition tells a story the citizens of the former GDR have heard before – just the other way around.

As already mentioned, the case of the two uniforms is not just an isolated example, but it is presented in the broader context of an assumed continuity between the GDR and Nazi Germany. This overarching story opens at the beginning of the exhibition by questioning the truth of the antifascist conception of the GDR. The big headline under which the founding of the GDR is described is *Antifaschistischer Neuanfang?* (antifascist new beginning?) and the question mark clearly shows the direction, which the exhibition takes. In the following sections the continuity between the GDR and Nazi Germany is established subtly, interwoven in different texts. Then, in the case of the uniforms the argument becomes articulated, especially through the juxtaposition with the West German army garment. Therefore, the depiction of the uniforms can be viewed as a synecdoche for the other German state.

6. The interchangeability of arguments and the question of irony

Which implications does the argument of continuity have for the understanding of contemporary public discourse? I want to offer two different ways in which this argument may function, although more than these two may exist.

Rorty (1989) describes the fundamental uncertainty about the finality of one's own vocabulary as well as the perspective that, when confronted with philosophical questions, the own vocabulary represents reality as well as other vocabularies do, as features of an ironic standpoint (127). An ironic perspective, according to Rorty, always takes into account that, although one lives by a certain vocabulary, one believed in other vocabularies before (127). Thereby, the central aspect of irony is distance – distance from the reasons one gives and distance from the own beliefsystem. This framework may shed light on the implications the contemporary use of the argument of continuity has. In the “Zeitgeschichtliches Forum” the argument of continuity is solely directed against the GDR, thereby retelling the story of the GDR and putting the legitimation of the GDR in jeopardy. The reasons given are similar to those formerly employed by the GDR, directed

against the FRG. The example of the uniforms of the German armies shows, how the relativism of vocabularies is underscored through the use of the same reasons for different conclusions. This exhibited relativism may result in uncertainty for the former citizens of the GDR: First, the “old vocabulary” is put into question. Second, an ironic perspective towards public discourse is fostered through the obvious interchangeability of arguments.

For Rorty (1989) an ironic perspective with respect to public discourse is a threat to liberalism, as it contradicts solidarity. “Ironie scheint ihrer Natur nach eine Privatangelegenheit.” (150, “Irony is private in nature.”). The consequence Rorty draws is that the private and the public are to be distinguished. If the analysis of the argument of continuity at the example of the army-uniforms should be symptomatic for a broader context, one could conclude with Rorty that the ironic perspective, which is fostered in East Germany, is a threat to the liberal society.

Another perspective from which the consequences of the contemporary use of the argument of continuity may be viewed, is that of critical thinking. The direct encounter of a clash of discourses may as well enforce a critical attitude in the sense of critical thinking and thereby constitute the *foundation* for a liberal democracy. The distance, which is achieved through the evident interchangeability of the argument of continuity viewed from this perspective must not necessarily lead to an ironic perspective but rather to a critical perspective in the sense that the citizens do question the arguments used in public discourse, but they do not question the necessity of public deliberation and argumentation itself: they do not distance themselves from the instrument employed.

7. Conclusion

It is important to note that this essay does not mean to make a statement in favour of one of the two positions as far as the structural and personal continuity between Nazi Germany and the FRG and GDR is concerned: in how far the two positions can be substantiated with empirical facts is a different, although important question. This paper solely aims at describing the functions of the argument of continuity and at exploring its use in contemporary public discourse in Germany.

The case of the argument of continuity, as it has been described in this essay, exemplifies in which way the West German public discourse has captured its East German counterpart. Thereby an ironic perspective on public discourse might be supported. This ironic perspective can develop into two different directions: it can

either lead to citizens removing from the public sphere, because the shift in vocabularies is set equal to the position that no “real” public discourse exists, or it can lead to a critical distance towards public discourse. Thus it can either threaten or enforce the liberal democracy in East Germany. With a look at the current state of *Politikverdrossenheit* especially in the East it seems worth the effort to carry this analysis further.

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