

BIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE ABOUT EAST GERMANY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS
- DIALOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HORIZONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

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I

In July 1990 the German Democratic Republic ceased to exist by joining the Federal Republic of Germany. This process, though having some similarities with the development of the other countries of the former Warsaw treaty, was remarkably singular in the way in which virtually all institutions of the socialist system were replaced within a short period by administrative routines of a Western society. Speaking of „transformation“ (as a notion quite en vogue among several social scientists) when accounting on the changes of post-socialism, makes an decisive difference when applied to the Eastern „five new states“ of the unified Germany: almost all macro-structural co-ordinates were more substituted than transformed by the skeleton which the „Rechtsstaat“ (state under the rule of law) has developed with a radically different historical exposure. Research in significant changes of social relations has therefore to look more at individual and collective attitudes articulated outside these institutions. What happened as a side-effect of the establishment of „Western Rule“ was the segregation of experience of the former responsible state servants from virtually all public discourses, either left to the scandalising Yellow Press or to penal law. To use the categories of penal law outside the limited field where retrospective punishment is legally possible, especially for inaugurating a dialogue on guilt and responsibility, has failed significantly during the last three years. Instead a remarkable silence in virtually all dominant media has been produced by „claiming confessions of guilt“, in our eyes due to a certain appeal to universal terms of responsibility, missing the serious differences between socialist and late-capitalist societies. In these days, however, a re-settling of collective remembering becomes visible, either in the „traditionalist“ branch of Democratic Socialists,

stealing successfully the show on the crisis-stricken social democrats in all the areas of the former East, or in interest groups of former functionaries engaging in societal and political debates.

II

At the edge of these movements, and somewhat before the successful and self-critical re-appropriation of the politics our project has been attracted by discussion circles, where the encounter between different groups of former East Germans was initiated, roughly described, encounter between „victims“ and „culprits“ of the society remaining as poorly more than a sort of „organised crime“ in the official records. Slowing down both the hasty and numerous calls for „final judgement“ and the „vanishing of the motives“ in descriptive research, these circles have been established to bring ‘dialogical reconstruction’ of the *horizons of responsibility* in East German institutions with more or less repressive functions on their way.

The interest of our research group lies especially in understanding the „dialogical“ principle of these discussions, which has to be produced and stabilised by a set of interventions which form (what we called) the *goal-reflexive domain* of the discussions. These interventions are expected from the anchorman and some of the old-timers of the group, nevertheless everybody has the right of making remarks considering the regulation of continuing.

The *goal-reflexive domain* is on the participants side a set of mutual acceptance for bringing the problems of collective remembering *as such* on the agenda, partly itself a part of the traditionalised knowledge of the group, as transferred in the anchorman’s introduction (where some rules are mentioned) or the casual talks before and after the meeting, partly a result of ongoing negotiations in the meetings themselves. These negotiations are framed by two of the major implicit rules of the group, (1): the *ban on self-explaining expertise* and (2): the *primacy of biography-related contributions*. (1) prescribes a certain distance towards objectified knowledge, both from social science and journalism, to encourage the participants to speak of *biography-related* contradictory and minoritarian experiences. Nevertheless we still have just formal descriptions of the *goal-reflexive domain*, transferring

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theories of practice to counter-act tendencies of mutual silencing, not yet a positive definition of the shared interests of the participants. Allow me a few words at this point to mention what special kind of personal experience should be cared for or stimulated by establishing this very domain: as we claimed above, the radical institutional change and demands of final judgement were accompanied by a segregation of social experience, a loss of external reference for memory (to borrow a term from Engeström¹), on the other hand, the roughly modernised areas of intimacy (as kin, friends and lovers, cf. Giddens²) were - to a degree - deprived of the niche-functions they fulfilled in socialist times. The remembering of motives for engagement in socialism, in other (Foucault's³) words the dimensions of the productively and bottom-upwardly reproduced power, has been bypassed by the lion's share of both media (identification) and descriptive science (explanation). The dialogical process (in the mentioned group) makes the communication of these motives possible by relating different minoritarian views to (scientific/ journalistic) interpretations and to each other, the *primacy of biography-related contributions* is a condition for *proliferating external memory reference* in the group history itself. The impact of the *goal-reflexive domain* has to be specified: to the formal rules (1) and (2) we add two more: (3): participants who accept (1) and (2) are encouraged to „re-frame“ the discussion in an critical turn towards (scientific) interpretations. and (4): Negotiating the forthcoming work in the group has to relate to the articulated interests of the participants. These two rules refer to a certain group expertise proliferating the path the reconstruction of the horizons of responsibility takes when successfully related to the goal we have described as re-framing or critical turn. Though we have described here a collective frame for a *zone of proximate development*, this frame is rather idealised for two reasons: (a): whether the group will relate to all rules (1-4) successfully is an empirical question with each new meeting. (b): the *goal-reflexive domain* is defined in relation to the group process and leaves out the possible silencing of single individuals. While (a) is referring to such (visible) tendencies to subordinate and change the collective notion of the *goal-reflexive domain* i.e. towards a dominating second rule, which

¹ Yrjö Engeström, (1990) *Learning, Working and Imagining*, Helsinki, pp 196

² Anthony Giddens, (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge

³ cf. Michel Foucault, (1976) *Die Macht und die Norm*, in *Mikrophysik der Macht*, Berlin, pp 114

would move the impact of the discussions towards crises of self-experience and weaken the critical turn, (b) stands for a desideratum in our research: the collective domain remains abstract in relation to single participants and their involvement. As participating researcher on the group level, the only access to an individual stagnancy in relation to the group process we have is the *retreat*, as the „last productive contribution“ to the group process, and some knowledge we can use to discriminate the reference of these retreats to different *external memory*, as in the *moral retreat* or the *expert retreat*. To approach the participant's reasons for involvement/ retreat, their *expanded reasons for acquiring* the collective domain (to use a term from Holzkamp⁴), demands an extension and re-settling of research.

In the phase we are in these days, we are planning interviews with participants, evaluating the group work to develop a concept of topic-centred group interviews. This has to take into account that we will situate ourselves in an more influential way as *an agent of the group process itself*, where participative research has to develop a concept of mutual negotiations of notions and domains, qualifying research as (mutual) *reference-transformation*⁵.

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⁴ Klaus Holzkamp, (1993) *Lernen. Subjektwissenschaftliche Grundlegung*, Frankfurt/M., cf. Heiko Mussehl (1996), *Learning as Activity-Related World Acquisition*, draft, Copenhagen

⁵ Morten Nissen (1995), *Forskningens betydning for udviklingen af psykosocial praksis*, in *Udkast, 1*, Copenhagen

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Berlin, 27.09.1996

Dear Kalle,

thank you very much for the Helhedshuset-stuff you sent me, I leafed through it and read some parts, but was a bit puzzled with the evaluation - not because it was far away from Critical Psychology but since it seemed to be rather an unfolding of a model for such a house where I've expected an account on the political struggle/ dispute. However, this won't make me silent about the project, but puts my questions off a bit. I noticed that Regnbuen moved to Nørrebrogade, your report in the recent Udkast sounded like you have much better conditions there, so would you have moved even when were'nt forced out of Solidaritetshuset? I enclose a paper we've written for the Vygotsky conference in Moscow we're going to visit in October, hoping to make some contacts beyond the academic establishment (which is rather stiff especially in Russia). The paper itself is a somehow sociological preliminary to what we're in, the article which is in progress should tackle the psychological questions a bit more, I'll send it in late October. I suppose you're interested in what happens in Berlin's CritPsy, but since we have still university holidays, there nothing new, I'll try to account on relevant things for you as far as they appear. I still have both time and interest to read about the Danish affairs, if there'll be a seminar next time, please let me know. So far, and bonne chance for your association and work, with warm greetings to all the others I met in the arbejdsreds,

Regards,

