

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

“Forward, But Forgetting Nothing!”

The shift in the use and meaning of socialist symbolism in East Germany since 1989¹

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Symbols and rituals held high status in East German public life.² They allowed, as is now stressed, state socialism to bind the people to the ruling system, while also affirming the links between this system and the traditions and programmes of the pre-stalinist and pre-communist labour movement and pointing to a future in which the red banners would no longer be used to conceal dilapidated facades. Moreover, they represented a society which tried to compensate its members for what they lacked materially with non-material gratification; or put another way, it replaced the struggle to distribute economic capital by a struggle for social and thus symbolic capital.

Small wonder then that the critical reference to official socialist or “real socialist” symbols played a vital role in the dramatic changes in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the eventual break with it.³ This was reinforced by the impact of the cultural pattern of the peaceful mass demonstrations in the autumn and winter of 1989/90 – that is, of communication situations characterized by an intensification, sensualization and empathization of linguistic symbols as well as the combination

¹ This is a reworking of a lecture delivered at a conference on “The Plurality of Workers’ Culture”, held on 15–19 September 1992 in Bamberg, Germany and organized by the Workers’ Culture Commission of the German Folklore Society. I am particularly grateful to Irene Dölling, Heike Müns, Dietrich Mühlberg, Eggo Müller and Dieter Strützel for criticism and additions to the lecture version of this paper.

² There is as yet no comprehensive political, socio-historical and cultural reappraisal of the public use of symbols in East German society. Recent specific studies worth mentioning include: Michael Hofmann, “Vom Schwung der Massenfeste”, pt. 1, *Kultur und Freizeit* (November 1986), pp. 22–25, and pt. 2, *ibid.* (December 1986), p. 27f; Ralf Rytlewski and Detlev Kraa, “Politische Rituale in der UdSSR und der DDR”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, supplement to *Das Parlament*, 3/87, 17 January 1987, pp. 33–48; Dieter Segert, “Fahnen, Umzüge, Abzeichen: Die Macht der Rituale und Symbole”, in Thomas Blanke and Rainer Erd (eds), *DDR: Ein Staat vergeht* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), pp. 25–35; Margot Hutzler and Klaus Schönberger, “Demonstrationskultur im Rückblick: Der 1. Mai in Jena”, in Gerd Meyer, Gerhard Riege and Dieter Strützel (eds), *Lebensweise und gesellschaftlicher Umbruch in Ostdeutschland* (Erlangen and Jena, 1992), pp. 145–168.

³ See particularly Gottfried Korff: “Rote Fahnen und Bananen: Notizen zur politischen Symbolik im Prozess der Vereinigung von DDR und BRD”, *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 86 (1990), pp. 130–158.

of statements in jointly articulated or commonly accepted signs and symbols. The emotional accessibility and shorthand of symbols also served the interests of their users: not only were they seen, but by being seen on television they fulfilled the expectations of a medium whose goal was to transform complex actions into visual grammalogue.⁴ No less useful, though, was the semantic inaccessibility or at least ambiguity toward which the language of symbols tends. This was useful both in initiating the break with state socialism and, as we shall see, in the opposition against its successors.

I should add that the East German events also provide an example of the pitfalls of symbol-oriented observations. These were illustrated by the mass media's already mentioned preference for easily communicable signals. Baudrillard's theory of simulation, stripped of its exaggeration, assumed fresh actuality in the autumn of 1989. Indeed, we may wonder how far television, in its search for visual signals, helped to bring forth the flood of banners and flags of the later Leipzig demonstrations, and how great a part the mass media played in multiplying signals which appeared particularly relevant, successful or desirable, such as the slogan "We are one nation" or the West German flag in East German hands, thus making them into the key symbols of the revolution. Political symbolism, as Ulrich Sarcinelli points out, can "bring a situation to a head".⁵ But it can also make a marginal phenomenon seem central and mere stagings seem "historic moments". The premature attribution of representativity often goes with the exaggeration of the value of symbolic acts. The speed, for example, with which many East German citizens in the spring of 1990 removed the DDR sign from their cars or state offices took the Socialist Unity Party (SED) emblems down from their walls may have been an expression of innermost conviction, but it may also have been a superficial adjustment. And the West German flag on the country cottage may also be a similar expression, but it cannot conceal the fact that the transformation of its owner into a citizen of the Federal Republic will take a long time.

The following essay on the symbolic revolution in East Germany will try to bear these problems in mind. It will look at aspects of the changes

⁴ The accentuation of specific symbolic communicative achievements implies a criticism of "substantialist" concepts which interpret the multiple use of symbolic forms, as during the 1989 demonstrations in East Germany, not so much as the choice of a medium appropriate to the situation as the expression of a restricted capacity for speech or argument or of irrational attitudes. See Gottfried Korff, "Symbolgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte? Zehn vorläufige Notizen zu den Bild- und Zeichensystemen sozialer Bewegungen in Deutschland", in Bernd Jürgen Warneken (ed.), *Massenmedium Strasse: Zur Kulturgeschichte der Demonstration* (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1991), pp. 17–37, esp. pp. 18–22, and Korff, "Rote Fahnen und Bananen", p. 131.

⁵ Ulrich Sarcinelli, "'Staatsrepräsentationen' als Problem politischer Alltagskommunikation: Politische Symbolik und symbolische Politik", in Jörg-Dieter Gauger and Justin Stagl (eds), *Staatsrepräsentation* (Berlin, 1992), p. 163.

in the socialist symbols, and will not try to represent the political attitudes of the users of the symbols or East German developments as a whole.

The empirical work underlying this paper consists on the one hand of continuous monitoring of several East and West German daily newspapers, video recordings of East and West German television programmes and eyewitness reports in print, and on the other of more or less participant observation of some demonstrations and rallies in East Berlin and a May Day celebration in Potsdam as well as several interviews. Not all the themes examined can be discussed below. As regards material symbols, the paper focuses on the political rather than the everyday cultural use of red flags and their derivatives and on emblems of the SED and Free German Trade Union Confederation (FDGB); as regards symbolic acts, it focuses on protest demonstrations, the trade unions' May Day celebrations, and memorial services at the monuments or graves of Lenin, Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Traditional socialist songs and slogans which played a role in these acts and rituals are also covered in part.

The article begins with the first phase of the upheaval in East Germany, dating from the beginning of the mass protests in September to the adoption of the reunification formula in December 1989. Although many generalizing retrospectives claim otherwise, this phase was not yet characterized by a mass renunciation of socialist symbols. The autumn demonstrations saw many adaptations of the socialist arsenal together with the emergence of symbols rooted in Christianity, pacifism and the American and German civil rights movements. This provided an illustration of how the significance of individual symbols can change if they are taken out of their previous system of reference, if the groups using them change, if they are placed in new situational contexts, or if they are just adopted in a new way. In the biggest mass event of the upheaval, the East Berlin demonstration on 4 November 1989, the participants broke with the "militant demonstrations" ("Kampfdemonstrationen") of the past with a wealth of banners which they had brought themselves and which differed greatly in form and content. And the traditional meaning of probably the only placard still to bear the SED clasped-hands symbol was completely inverted by the addition of the word "Tschüss!" ("Bye Bye!"). As the politburo member Schabowski began to speak, it was raised in front of the podium amid great laughter (Figure 1). But the red of the labour movement had not disappeared from the scene, although it no longer dominated. A bright red banner, as wide as the street with the slogan "Protest Demonstration" written on it, was borne at the head of the demonstration. There were no flags or emblems on the podium, but it was decorated in a simple improvised way with some red ribbons. In the crowd some red banners were to be seen along with white, yellow, blue and black ones. It was reported that this represented not so much recognition of an intellectual heritage, but was rooted in very practical considerations: in contrast to the theatres



Figure 1 Banner with fraternal hands and *Tschüss* (bye-bye): protest demonstration in East Berlin, 4 November 1989 (photograph: Volker Döring)

and the art college, for example, which had access to large stocks of cloth or black curtain material, many factories only had stocks of red material to fall back on for large banners.

Workers' red experienced a quantitative setback but a qualitative liberation, as the sterile colour of acclaim again became the colour of protest in the context of oppositional activity. The liberation from East German traditions manifested itself not only contextually but also iconographically: the red placards bore unique hand-painted emblems rather than the printed ones which in the past had meant that the texts were produced or vetted by the party; and the usual East German combination of a red background and white lettering was generally abandoned. The words "Protest Demonstration" on the leading banner of the demonstration were in black not white lettering; gold on red (perhaps made from the cloth of an East German flag) could be seen, and an East German Social Democratic Party banner had "SDP" in red on a white background. In each case the red in a way changed from a uniform colour into the colour of cloth newly or still-to-be cut.

That the theory of the liberation of socialist red from its state socialist connections is not an overinterpretation can be shown by looking at analogous instances of the transformation or reconstruction of traditional socialist slogans. In the autumn demonstrations, alongside ironic and polemic distortions such as "Proletarians of all countries, forgive me

(Karl Marx)", there were many placards and chants which far from reproaching the state party for the tradition of the workers' movement in fact disputed its right to it: "Privileged of all countries, stand aside", "All power to the revolutionary councils", "The Karl Marx Order, not for Ceausescu but for Stefan Heym", "Forward to Marx". There were also references to Bertolt Brecht, for instance on a placard saying "We must look after ourselves ourselves" (from Brecht and Dessau's Free German Youth, FDJ, song of 1948) or the often quoted "Forward, but forgetting nothing!" with its small but subtle rewording of Brecht's and Eisler's Solidarity Song of 1931: "Forward, but don't forget (the solidarity [. . .])".⁶

This technique of usurpation is not a product of the East German autumn of 1989, it has been part of the practice of the East German opposition movement for many years. Its best-known effort was probably a banner bearing Luxemburg's words "Freedom is also the freedom of those of a different opinion" at the official Luxemburg-Liebkecht celebration. In the final years of the GDR the Internationale was also used for opposition ends. For instance, at Whitsun in 1987 young East Berliners began singing it when the police tried to force them back from the Wall where they were listening to a rock concert in the West.⁷ In the East German autumn, demonstrators in Leipzig and Berlin again sang "Nations, hear the signals!" as the security forces approached. Officially this was decried as "abuse of the symbols of the working class". But a young policeman from Leipzig reports otherwise: "We were deeply moved when we heard that thousands of people had sung the Internationale because they wanted to. This time it had not been forced on them. Somehow we all noticed that".⁸ Here the irritation, the uncertainty on the part of the police and the SED corresponded to the indecisive attitude of the singers themselves. It is not clear to what extent "The Internationale fights for human rights" was sung as a genuine expression of the protesters' aims, "half ironically" or, as a demonstrator in Leipzig recounted, "from fear" and as a protective magic.⁹ That all these interpretations were possible at least guaranteed that the singing was able to bring different interests together, while producing a paralysing effect externally among political opponents confronted with their own culture. This ambiguity, whose exact blend could probably only have been clarified by research on the spot, no doubt also applies in a similar way to the liberation of the other symbolic levels already mentioned. All reconstructed the political symbolism of the socialist movement as anti-hegemonic protest symbolism, and

⁶ The banner texts at the Berlin demonstration of 4 November 1989 are documented in Annegret Hahn *et al.*, *4.11.89: Protestdemonstration in Berlin DDR* (Berlin, 1989).

⁷ See Wolfgang Rüdtenklau, *Störenfriede: DDR-Opposition 1986–1989* (Berlin, 1992), p. 95.

⁸ See Andreas Voigt, "Gespräch mit Wehrpflichtigen der 5. VP-Bereitschaft in Leipzig", in *Oktober 1989: Wider den Schlaf der Vernunft* (Leipzig, 1989), p. 77.

⁹ The first quote is from *die tageszeitung*, 9 October 1989. The second is attributed to Alexandra K. from Berlin, in Vera-Maier Behr (ed.), *Wir denken erst seit Gorbatschow: Protokolle von Jugendlichen aus der DDR* (Recklinghausen, 1990), p. 60.

for many it was certainly the case, as observers such as Lutz Niethammer stated, that the civic movement of the early autumn tried to rescue the repressed heritage of the left-wing workers' movement from the bankruptcy of the SED.¹⁰ However, it is conceivable that other adaptations of the socialist system of signals conceal a hysteresis effect, a lagging of the vocabulary behind changing meanings, and that this effect eased the abandonment of real socialism by making it seem not completely unheard-of and therefore scandalous.

More clearly than in the first phase of the upheaval, the phenomenon of symbolic continuity facilitating practical change was demonstrated when reunification was first demanded in November/December 1989. As we know it was particularly often expressed in "Deutschland, einig Vaterland" ([. . .] united fatherland"), from the first verse of the GDR anthem which had not been sung in public since 1971 and was certainly not even familiar to many East Germans. At a mass meeting in Leipzig on 18 November a speaker urged people to "Take another look at the words of the national anthem, particularly the first verse".¹¹ Moreover, the supporters of reunification had not wanted to exchange the East German flag for another, but merely to rid it of the hammer and sickle. So the continuity of symbolism allowed the rejection of the accusation or the self-reproach of desertion and the representation of the demand for reunification simply as a redefinition of the values to which one had been committed by yesterday's social rituals.¹²

And so the second phase of the East German upheaval began.¹³ The aim of "German unification" overwhelmed the idea of a socialist reform project. The slogan "Wir sind ein Volk" ("We are one nation") was presented as a natural development of "Wir sind das Volk" ("We are the

¹⁰ See Lutz Niethammer's epilogue to Charles Schüddekopf (ed.), *"Wir sind das Volk!": Flugschriften, Aufrufe und Texte einer deutschen Revolution* (Reinbek, 1990), p. 269.

¹¹ Rainer Tetzner, *Leipziger Ring: Aufzeichnungen eines Montagsdemonstranten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), p. 54.

¹² See also the banner at the Leipzig Monday demonstration of 27 November 1989 which combined the West German eagle and East German emblem on a black-red-gold background and bore the inscription: "May the sun shine on Germany as never before." (*Bild*, 29 November 1989). Here we can only deal in passing with the question to what extent socialist symbolic traditions form part of the transformation of East Germany at a deeper level. The sea of West German flags at the later Leipzig Monday demonstrations – unusual in West Germany itself – was reminiscent of the rallies and unity rituals of the SED era. It does not seem unwarranted to see in banner slogans such as "Helmut, take our hand, show us the way to the economic wonderland", which appeared in Leipzig on 14 March 1990, an affinity to the same emphatic hopes for the future and the exaggerated confidence in the party leadership familiar in the socialist tradition. (The "Helmut" (= Kohl) banner is quoted in, among others, Ekkehard Kuhn, *Einigkeit, Recht und Freiheit: Die nationalen Symbole der Deutschen* (Berlin, 1991), p. 127.)

¹³ It is not possible and would not be sensible to provide an overview here of all the developments between 1990 and today. I can only illustrate some of the key patterns of symbolic change during this period.

people”) (which itself had followed on from the SED’s “people’s democratic” discourse) and thus helped to absorb the shock of the change. Only now did a mass departure take place not only from the symbols of East German socialism but also from the symbolic culture of the labour movement as a whole. But this break was not complete either, however, and one can discern various degrees of partial survival and partial revitalization of the shattered system of symbol and ritual. We can take two examples to illustrate this: the clasped-hands emblem already mentioned and the red flag.

The key symbol of “socialism in the colours of the GDR”, the entwined hands, proved to be so discredited that the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the SED’s successor, abandoned it as early as January 1990.¹⁴ Honecker later said in response to an interviewer’s question about his “worst moments” during the upheaval that “A particularly bad moment for me was the removal of the party insignia from the central committee building (Figure 2) and the fact that the party chairman, Gysi, stood there and made jokes about it.”¹⁵ In April 1990 the FDGB, which had similarly traded under the clasped hands, also parted company with its emblem. Some interpretative rescue attempts were made here, but the suggestion that the symbol – a stylization from a photograph of Wilhelm Pieck (KPD) and Otto Grotewohl (SPD) shaking hands – signified for the FDGB “a unified trade union, the solidarity of the workers” was ignored.¹⁶ The handshake, the oldest symbol of the German labour movement, dating back to the Workers’ Fraternalization of 1848, could not free itself from the clutches of the SED.¹⁷

The transformation of the red flag and the colour red came about quite differently. For one thing, unlike the above-mentioned emblems, red is not a signifier produced or reserved for “socialism”; and secondly, its political use stands not only for GDR socialism but for all the wings of the labour movement, including democratic socialism. This dual indeterminacy is the structural basis for the very different usages of political red which have developed in East Germany since 1990.

¹⁴ Its downfall also had a prelude for years. Long before the 1989 upheaval the handshake symbol was widely known as “one hand washing the other” in East German slang.

¹⁵ Reinhold Andert and Wolfgang Herzberg, *Der Sturz: Erich Honecker im Kreuzverhör* (Berlin and Weimar, 1990), p. 39.

¹⁶ Heinz Kallabis, *Ade, DDR! Tagebuchblätter* (Berlin, 1990), p. 231.

¹⁷ In 1990 there was also a rather curious attempt at a reinterpretation of the East German emblem. When the conservative member of the last GDR parliament, Koch, proposed the removal of the GDR emblem from public buildings in May 1990, he identified the hammer, sickle and corn wreath as symbols of the socialist alliance of workers and peasants, and added – perhaps with the intention of exonerating his own lifetime under this symbol – that “the ears of corn are also, thank God, regarded as a symbol of rebirth, especially Mary’s” and that the hammer “had also been used as a symbol of law by Celts and Slavs”. (See Dietmar Keller and Joachim Scholz, *Volkskammerspiele: Eine Dokumentation aus der Arbeit des letzten Parlaments der DDR* (Berlin, 1990), p. 140.)

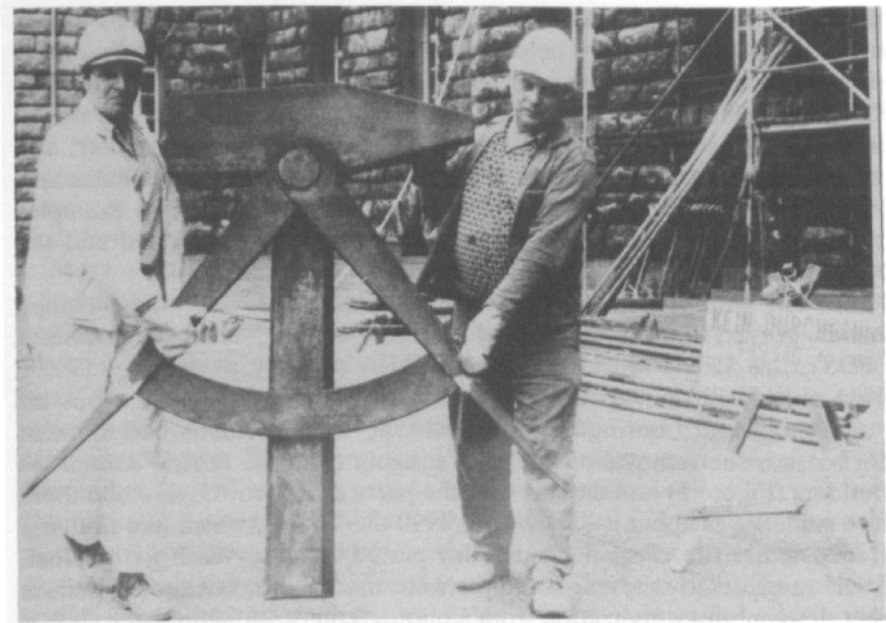


Figure 2 Removal of the SED symbol from the Central Committee building in East Berlin, 1990 (press photograph)

Particularly during the phase of the angry rejection of SED-style socialism and hopeful anticipation of West German capitalism, the effect of this indeterminacy was that the “SED” imprint was often read into the red of SPD leaflets. In the eyes of many these leaflets clearly represented an amalgam of SPD and PDS, a point which the CDU’s electoral propaganda tried to tap into with the lettering “SPDSPDS” – a ploy rather obvious and for this reason probably not very effective.

Subsequently the development of trade unions along West German lines and the increasing indignation about mass unemployment provided political red with a somewhat larger presence and probably also wider acceptance. In any case, red flags and banners were much in evidence at the new “Monday demonstrations” in Leipzig between February and April 1991 and at numerous rallies against industrial closures. Most of them were the flags of trade unions: IG Metall, ÖTV and IG Bergbau und Energie. Their bearers obviously hoped that their West German emblems would no longer be swallowed by SED-associated red but on the contrary would purify the discredited colour. The mixed and even contradictory feelings aroused by the phenomenon of workers’ symbols imported from the West, doubtless a usual experience for East Germans, have not as yet been closely examined.

But not only the red used in slogans and emblems is important in the former GDR; there is also the blank, emblem- and text-free red. Though

quantitatively insignificant, it is of some interest in a qualitative sense. The silent-meaningful red can be found on squatted buildings and among groups of young people at demonstrations. Streetlights, trees and monuments are often decorated red by anonymous hands, and on May Day 1990 activists planted red flags on Erfurt cathedral.¹⁸ (These actions raise the question to what extent the activists and their sympathizers were seeking to establish links with the tradition of “partisan-like” flag-raising during the Anti-Socialist Laws and under fascism. The metasymbolism of these acts might then be that the present opponents of socialism will be defeated as the earlier ones were.)

Angry citizens tend to attribute these actions to the PDS, which is certainly often true, but by no means always. The point of these symbolic acts is that even when they emanate from the party they do not appear party-linked. At the 1992 May Day demonstration in Leipzig young people interrupted the Saxon prime minister’s speech by chanting not “We want the PDS!” or “We want to have the GDR back!” but simply “We want red!”.¹⁹ Naked red replaces faith in a discredited system and a discredited party programme with faith in a not very clearly defined opposition movement.²⁰ One could say that red here is post-socialist even in content, standing no longer for specific negation but for freedom to differ.²¹ It is interesting to note that a similar extension of the meaning of red has taken place on the other side of the political spectrum. The slur “you red sock”, popular since 1990, is now applied in everyday usage not only to former SED members but to “troublemakers” of all kinds, to Greens, opponents of German unification and the disenchanting in general.

Far more intricate decoding problems are raised by a public use of red which I first noticed at the 1992 May Day rally in Potsdam. Many of the participants who gathered there under the blue flag of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), to my mind an uncommonly large number, were wearing some red article of clothing: red shoes, trousers, skirts,

¹⁸ *Thüringer Tageblatt*, 2 May 1990.

¹⁹ *Berliner Zeitung*, 2–3 May 1992.

²⁰ This development also set in before 1989. For instance, an East Berliner recounted how her circle of acquaintances had deliberately not used the East German flag on May Day for years, and had instead raised the red flag, which was regarded as less loyal to the authorities. Hutzler and Schönberger discovered in their research on the history of May Day in Jena that until the mid-1980s the republican flag held pride of place at the ceremonies for apprentices at the Zeiss factory, followed by the FDJ flag and then the red flag; later this order was reversed. (See Hutzler and Schönberger, “Demonstrationskultur im Rückblick”, p. 15.) It should be added that the display of the East German flag since German unification has taken on a more obvious significance: it now stands not so much for loyalty to a state as to one’s own past in the GDR.

²¹ The irritating effect that this use of red can have was illustrated by Miguel Rodríguez in France, where the police sometimes considered blank red more threatening and attacked it more severely than inscribed red, which indicated the originators and/or their intentions and thus had a less portentous effect. See Miguel Rodríguez, “Ein Zeichen genügt: Symbole des Ersten Mai in Frankreich 1890 bis 1940”, in Warneken, *Massenmedium Strasse*, p. 174.

blouses, shirts, coats, caps. The situation was most exquisitely ambivalent: was this an open and yet covert demonstration of certain convictions, or was an over-excited researcher of symbols projecting his or her fantasies on to harmless spring fashions? A timid attempt at questioning on the spot led nowhere, and a letter to the Potsdam branch of the DGB, which had previously responded to a request, brought no response this time. Sociologist colleagues from East Berlin pointed out that red was in fact in fashion that year. But when I was about to give up, I met an East Berliner who considered herself a socialist. After ascertaining that I was researching in good faith, she revealed that yes, she had bought a red scarf, a red jumper, red gloves and red socks and she did wear them at meetings of citizens' initiatives, at rallies and similar public events. Red socks were difficult to come by and usually expensive, but she knew a pensioner who had started knitting them and was trying to satisfy the considerable demand.

Further investigation and information gathering confirmed and complemented what has been reported here. PDS deputies, I was told, had deliberately worn something red at the first all-German session of the Bundestag on 3 October 1990; red socks as well as red flags shone out from a "procession of the recalcitrant" which marched to the DGB rally in Berlin's Lustgarten on May Day 1992; and red clothes were similarly in fashion at the alternative unification rally in Schwerin on 3 October 1992. It is clear then that the red flag is actually trying to survive as part of the red of everyday culture; though part of the significance of this symbolic practice is also that it remains unclear how many participants in the Potsdam rally were playing along and how many non-political jackets and hats were drawn unwittingly into the twilight by those wearing political red.

My earlier observations on changes in use and meaning have concentrated on aspects linked to the specific indeterminacy and contextuality of symbolic expression. I shall continue by investigating changes at another semantic level, the cultic quality of socialist symbols. Here the question of the cult value of a sign or ritual means firstly the degree and quality of its emotional make-up, and secondly the sacral value of the action through which symbolic substance is acquired. On the question of sacrality, developments seem to me contradictory: the divergence is partly though not exclusively attributable to different user groups and to an extent it comes down to the individuals themselves.

On the one hand there is doubtless a trend towards deritualization. This is shown for instance by the May Day celebrations in East Germany, which since 1989 have shrunk to sometimes quite small numbers of participants and have of course also changed in form. "Walker's pace rather than marching in step", the *Gothaer Allgemeine* headlined its report on May Day 1990, after the march past the local dignitaries was cancelled for the first time.²² The May Day rally became more informal and more pluralized.

²² *Gothaer Allgemeine*, 2 May 1990.

This trend – already evident before 1989²³ – even extends to the communal singing of the trade union anthems still usual in the West: in Berlin's Lustgarten in 1992 the band had to intone "Brothers, to the sun, to freedom" twice before at least some of the audience joined in.²⁴ At the small May Day celebration in Potsdam, whose musical elements included brass and pop music as well as a West German SPD choir mainly singing spring-time songs, this ritual was dropped right from the start. Here too the May Day rally turned into a public fair and an informal meeting-point, the scene was set with snack and beer halls alongside the trade union stands, and the speeches were received sitting down and in passing rather than standing up and paying close attention. The discursive counterpart was provided by the speech of a young works' council member who addressed the audience not as a collective but as "many individuals" with "different principles and different backgrounds" and analogously described trade union campaigns as the "bringing together of the most varied interests".²⁵

It is not just the trade unions and SPD-affiliated organizations which are engaged in the deritualization and dehieratization of socialist symbolism. The PDS's electoral campaign, for instance, introduced the informality of advertising language both in content and form with slogans such as "Don't worry, take Gysi", and took the pomposity out of the socialist heritage with the riposte "Red socks are better than cold feet". Youth culture was also leaving its mark, as in the "Red Sox" graffiti I often found in Berlin and Potsdam (Figure 3), which fused the "red socks" and the name of a well-known American baseball team, the Boston Red Sox, that is traditional socialist symbols and American pop culture. The Red Sox sign was spray-painted by anti-fascist youth groups among others. A letter to the *Jena Wochenpost* of 20 August 1992 reported another way in which the socialist heritage is surviving. "Before the changes", the correspondent wrote about his circle of friends, "we would not have dreamt of intoning

²³ As early as 1986 and 1987 Michael Hofmann ("Vom Schwung der Massenfeste") and Birgit Sauer ("Volksfeste in der DDR: Zum Verhältnis von Volkskultur und Arbeiterkultur", *Der Bürger im Staat*, 39/3 (1989), pp. 213–217) found a definite shift in the symbolism of the labour movement towards popular cultural forms of celebration. The central ritual of the march past the party leadership continued but, as eyewitnesses reported, this was increasingly avoided in the years before the change or was transformed: as people passed the platform some of them became consciously more relaxed, chatted with their companions or bent over to their children, instead of attentively waving to political leaders. See also Hutzler and Schönberger, "Demonstrationskultur im Rückblick", p. 157.

²⁴ See *Tagesspiegel* and *Berliner Zeitung*, 2 May 1992.

²⁵ The speaker went on: "I am glad that, in contrast to many past political things in the GDR ordered from above, the trade union really does have a broad base. I can come in as a colleague, as a Christian, and get together with people of different views and argue about our new paths, ideas and opportunities, as we make progress, and that we can really move things forward despite our different principles and different origins. The mutual tolerance, complementing each other, the coming together of the most varied interests, is incredibly important to me. We are not stereotypes and we have known forced cooperation for long enough." Thomas Erdmann, speech on May Day 1992, unpublished manuscript.



Figure 3 Graffiti in East Berlin, October 1992 (photograph: Bernd Jürgen Warneken)

'red songs'. But now it has happened that we sing workers' songs, not passionately but with gentle irony". How frequent such cases are remains unknown. But they do prove the existence of a tendency to continue to use left-wing symbolism playfully or, to quote Gottfried Korff, "ludically", although in these instances they do not appear to have "shed their political significance".²⁶ Rather, they illustrate new, non-authoritarian, individual and popular-cultural usages with political identities.

As mentioned earlier, however, there is also a contrary or rather a reactive tendency in evidence, namely the continuation of and to an extent also an increase in the sacral elements of the socialist symbolic tradition. The most spectacular ritual, still continued post-1989 on a massive scale, must be the "walk to Karl and Rosa", the visit to the socialist cemetery in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde on the second Sunday of the year, before the anniversary of the death of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg on 15 January. In 1992 the press reported that at least 50,000 took part, and in 1993 40–50,000.²⁷ The context of the cemetery and the honouring of the dead gives protection to the declaration of faith in the socialist tradition. There is no other framework in the former East Germany where socialist as well as explicitly communist symbolism flourish as uninhibitedly as here, with red flags, East German flags, FDJ flags and the clenched fist being

²⁶ See Korff, "Symbolgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte?", p. 19.

²⁷ See *Tagespiegel* and *Neues Deutschland*, 13 January 1992 and 11 January 1993.

consecrated by their proximity to graves, wreaths, candles and funereal music.

But it would be wrong to claim that East Germany is surviving here in an extraterritorial niche, as it were. At the Liebknecht and Luxemburg celebrations prior to 1990 you filed past the party leaders who, unlike on May Day, did walk at the head of the procession to Friedrichsfelde, although on arrival took up their places on a platform in front of the memorial. Now the ritual has changed. The visit to the graves is not centrally organized, there are no speeches and the visitors often go up to the graves themselves and lay red carnations or red roses, which was possible before but not nearly so widespread.²⁸ The cult significance of the ceremony is complex. It comprises an expression of loyalty – often verbalized in Liebknecht's "In spite of all that" – in the presence of the dead, and for many people probably a plea for forgiveness for earlier rejection of the Luxemburg legacy. It certainly strengthens the belief that just as socialism survived the murder of its vanguard fighters Liebknecht and Luxemburg, it will survive the shameful end of the SED and East Germany. And it possesses a latent magic component of "drawing strength" at the grave, as the *Berliner Zeitung* (then still SED-owned) called it in January 1990, the idea of restoration through the spirit of the dead.²⁹ In this context should probably also be placed *Neues Deutschland's* – now the organ of the PDS – repeated reference in January 1992 to the presence of so many young families with children at the gravesides. The description of a "mother with the red flag and her baby on her stomach" walking up to Luxemburg's grave could be interpreted as an imagined baptism.³⁰

Another example of cult elevation is provided by the events surrounding the demolition of the Lenin monument in Berlin-Friedrichshain. Supporters and opponents of the demolition often consciously or unconsciously equated the red granite statue with Lenin himself, and perceived the demolition either as the execution of "Lenin the despot and murderer" (in the words of Eberhard Diepgen, Berlin's governing mayor) or as a cowardly murder. For the supporters of the statue, the fence put around it prior to the demolition became the *Mur des Fédérés*: black ribbons were attached, flowers were laid, candles were lit and funereal music was played. *Neues Deutschland* called the demolition "grave robbing",³¹ *Berliner Linke* spoke of "bidding farewell to a man whom the Senate [government] tried to behead in its own way".³² On 12 January 1992 the mourning ritual for

²⁸ Those I questioned about the sequence of events and particularly the significance of this commemoration in the GDR era gave different answers. Some remembered the official event as an acclamatory ritual, others saw it as latently critical of the SED, not least because the East German leadership had never really come to terms with Rosa Luxemburg.

²⁹ *Berliner Zeitung*, 15 January 1990.

³⁰ *Neues Deutschland*, 13 January 1992.

³¹ *Neues Deutschland*, 22 November 1992.

³² *Berliner Linke*, 47, November 1991.

the Lenin monument, which had by now come down, coincided with the commemoration of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. A procession of several thousand followed a cart laden with stones from the monument through Berlin to the Friedrichsfelde cemetery, where they were placed on the graves of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

At times the sacralization even approaches a Christianization of socialist symbols. Some elements of East German socialism were inspired by religious rituals: for example, the youth initiation ceremony (*Jugendweihe*), which resembled a confirmation,³³ or the giant portraits of party leaders carried on marches, which were quite rightly nicknamed “icons” because the idea was in fact borrowed from the Russian Orthodox procession culture by Stalin in the 1930s.³⁴ But what can be observed now goes a significant step further, or back. Elements of Christian faith and ritual are no longer being transplanted into an atheistic counterculture but are quoted positively and presented as models and images of socialism. This is demonstrated implicitly for example in the use of candles at protest rallies, where the intention was clearly to draw on the key role of this symbol in the autumn of 1989, and it is explicit in letters and poems fixed to the fencing around the Lenin monument. For example: “How about the Gethsemane church?”³⁵ From helplessness and anger grew resistance!”; and those in favour of the demolition are compared to heathens or persecutors of Christ with sentiments such as “The barbarians call themselves Christians” or “Thus the Roman emperors dreamt of the end of Christianity”.³⁶ Since the monument was demolished a quotation from the Bible has been sprayed on the empty pedestal: “And the earth was desolate and empty”.

The message of this quotation from the beginning of Genesis is a dual one: it links mourning for a loss with faith in a new beginning. In the same sense a priest proclaimed at the beginning of the demolition in Lenin Square the “certainty” that the vision of a just and peaceful world society older than Lenin, Engels and Marx would one day be realized.³⁷ There are also signs, though no clear evidence as yet, that subconscious borrowings from the belief in the resurrection play a part in the retreat from socialist science towards utopia, for instance when a gravestone in the Friedrichsfelde cemetery is inscribed with Luxemburg’s words referring to

³³ The continuing great popularity of the youth initiation ceremony would itself be worth examining. According to the *Berliner Zeitung* of 31 October 1992, by that date 4,580 youngsters, or almost a third of the 13 and 14 year olds from East Berlin, had registered for the ceremony in 1993; this was 1,500 more than at the same stage the previous year.

³⁴ See Rytlewaki and Kraa, “Politische Rituale”, p. 41.

³⁵ In 1989, the Gethsemane church in East Berlin had been a centre of protest activities against the SED government.

³⁶ See the pamphlet “Bürgerinitiative Lenindenkmal = Demokratie in Aktion” (Berlin, 1992), p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.



Figure 4 Text at Rosa Luxemburg's and Karl Liebknecht's graveside, January 1992. "I was, I am, I will be. In spite of all that" (photograph: Archiv Edith Wäscher)

the socialist revolution, "I was, I am, I shall be" (Figure 4), and formulations such as "Karl and Rosa live in our word" are used.³⁸ Or when the site of the Lenin monument was decorated at Easter 1992 with a picture of Lenin and a bunch of spring flowers.

The notion of resurrection appears in the former East Germany not only in quasi-religious forms. In the summer of 1992, when the East German "committees for justice" – an oppositional civic movement – were formed with the support of among others Gregor Gysi and other PDS leaders, one of the founder members said: "A spectre is haunting Germany again".³⁹ Since the end of "real socialism" in Germany and Europe a reference to the opening words of the Communist Manifesto must also be prepared for a meaning of "spectre" not intended by Marx and Engels, something which has not escaped the committees' critics. The journalist Reinhard Mohr called it an "association of zombies".⁴⁰ Whatever way the East German committee movement develops, whether the spectre of communism or socialism will be interpreted as a nightmare or as the beckoning of a "Spirit of Utopia" will depend on a context which – regardless of Francis Fukuyama and the "end of history" – reaches far into an undetermined future.

³⁸ *Neues Deutschland*, 14 January 1990.

³⁹ *Neue Zeit*, 20 July 1992.

⁴⁰ "die tageszeitung", 14 July 1992.