

Ruling by Different “Scripts”: Hegemony in Marxist and Democratic East German Local Politics.

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Democracy is . . . an ‘essentially contestable concept.’ . . . Like ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’, ‘human rights’, and so forth, ‘democracy’ is a term which . . . will always signify for many a cherished political principle or ideal, and for that reason alone it is never likely to achieve a single agreed meaning (Arblaster 1987, 5).

The inspiration for this paper occurred in 1994, when I was deep in the archives of the city of Reußstadt, following events in the former German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik/GDR) -- from the first public demonstrations of the late summer of 1989 to the opening of the Berlin wall on november 9th of same year -- the beginning of the Wende1 that was to result in a reunified Germany on October 3, 1990 (Bahrmann & Links, 1994 & 1995; Jarauschk 1994, Knopp & Kuhn 1990, Teltschik 1991). As I was reading through the city council minutes for early 1989, I stumbled on quite a surprise: There was a ‘script’ issued three to five days prior to each council meeting, one that listed speakers, their speeches, and voting results of elections yet to be held. I hadn’t realized how completely the regional and national Social Unity Party officials (Sozialeinheitspartei, hereafter SED) had controlled local politics, a control that allowed no input, whatsoever, that deviated from the current political line. From that point on, I began to view council minutes as a script capturing local political history from which the evolution of power relationships could be evaluated, especially in Reußstadt, that was undergoing such drastic change.

This report will trace the development of power relations in Reußstadt, using minutes from council meetings -- intentionally scripted in the beginning -- as the primary data. Patterns revealed in these meetings will form the basis of my discussion of shifting local hegemonic forces. For brevity, I will not discuss the definitional complexities or the usefulness of the concept of hegemony (Scott 1985; Roseberry 1989), but will follow William roseberry's recent (1996) formulation of its nature, which is "not . . . a finished and monolithic ideological formation but . . . a problematic, contexted, political process (emphasis in the original) of domination and struggle" (77).

The Setting

Reußstadt², with approximately 30,000 inhabitants, lies in southeastern Thuringia, less than 50 km from the Czech border, 5 km from the Saxony border, and about 70 km from Bavaria. In GDR times the city had been an industrial center whose factories manufactured textiles, chemicals, paper, and other products. Formerly a tiny principality ruled from 1306 until 1918 by various branches of the Reuß family, Reußstadt has retained characteristics that reflect this historical background, especially the two palaces and a Rococo summer residence set in the extensive park within the city (Crummenerl 1990). Prosperity, linked to 19th century industrial expansion, resulted in thriving factories, luxurious villas, and gracious, tree-lined streets, with worker housing located at the periphery. Early in the twentieth century the city expanded, sprawling outward to the Saxony border, engulfing small agrarian villages in the process. Fortunes reversed, however, as World War II placed demands on human and material resources, and defeat brought refugees to the town³ at a time when food, shelter, clothing, and medical supplies were practically nonexistent. The Soviet army dismantled factories, plundered villas, froze funds in banks, which accelerated a decline that brought chronic economic problems including substandard housing⁴ and nutrition, that lingered for decades.⁵ Though the city remained an important chemical and textile center, little new investment occurred, in part due to the government's focus on heavier industries, in part because of the city's location close to two 'foreign' borders: Czechoslovakia and Bavaria. By 1989, a woefully shabby Reußstadt, with a marginally functional, aging industrial base, had become a haven for artists and writers, some of whom took to the streets and hastened the bloodless revolution that brought the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

Reusstadt council meetings:⁶ then and now

1. Puppets of the SED

In January 1989, Reußstadt local politicians virtually rubber stamped regional and national SED directives. According to the predetermined script, they addressed the minutia of local politics: from approving the ominous state-issued petitions that citizens, registered as

criminally "endangered," be put in "protective custody" (incarcerated); to lesser concerns such as reviewing requests to open small businesses;⁷ organizing local elections and political celebrations;⁸ supervising minor repairs and beautification projects scheduled around these elections and celebrations;⁹ establishing plans for sports events and youth delegations; and implementing new contests to motivate work brigades.¹⁰ In reality, many of these plans were never completed due to lack of raw materials and/or government funding. While politicians continued their optimistic and mostly fictitious projections for the future, however, the general population had become increasingly restive.

As Gorbachev's pleas for openness were realized in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and East German officials tightened their political control, the apparently apathetic East Germans "voted": sometimes with their feet¹¹ (Knopp & Kuhn 1990; Jarausch 1994, Merkl 1993); others refrained from voting in the May 7th local elections. This spontaneous protest meant that, for the first time, a significant minority in East Germany, in effect, 'voted' by not voting. Subsequently, most Reußstaders were shocked when the government reported a 98.85% turnout for these elections (Fisher 1995, 110). Anger at this voting fraud, among other things, fueled the growing exodus from the country¹² and the first attempts at organized protest. On September 4, 1989, a few young people left the sanctuary of the Nikolai Church in Leipzig to demand "an open country with free people" (Bahrmann & Links 1994; Jarausch 1994, 33). At first, they experienced arrests, detention, even physical violence. By October 2, twenty thousand peaceful demonstrators caused police, army and secret service personnel to question the official explanation that only a few 'rowdies' and 'deviants' were involved. By October 7th things reached a head when police openly beat demonstrators at the SED 40th anniversary celebrations in Berlin, while water cannon forced back the crowd of mostly young people. Two days later, in a church service infiltrated by SED officials and Stasi undercover agents, Lutheran bishop Hempel cautioned those assembled not to respond with force. Attending SED members urged open public discussion and, instead of the feared violence, 70,000 peaceful demonstrators were allowed to march unhindered (Jarausch 1994, 33-52). The SED had changed their policies after many police and army personnel refused to resort to violence; demonstrators were not harmed after that event.

How did Reußstadt officials react to these events? Initially, business continued as usual: In the first council meeting following the fraudulent local elections, the SED script was carefully

followed. Indeed, the mayor claimed the elections ‘gave an unambiguous demonstration of the power of the workers and farmers’ and of their unwavering support for SED policies over the last forty years. By September, in a much shorter speech, the mayor accused West Germany of ‘wooing away’ East German citizens, with Hungary as a willing accomplice.

Whereas citizens of Leipzig bravely took to the streets in early September, the more cautious Reußstadters waited until mid-October to protest in the plaza in front of city hall. There they challenged the mayor, other local politicians and administrators to improve city conditions. On November 1st, the council rejected the script prepared on October 20th; instead, 20 council members addressed problems and complaints from their constituencies -- from the inconvenient location of the People’s Festival, inadequate parking facilities, and the early closing hours of many state-owned stores, to complaints about absent council members and demands for open council discussion.

In December, the script was replaced by a standard agenda. For the first time since 1950, seven council members voted against an agenda item and four council members were recalled.¹³ More revolutionarily, the parties and organizations belonging to the National Front and subsumed under the SED "unity" list, formed separate caucuses to develop independent positions on the issues. The mayor, instead of reading his usual prepared speech, approved by regional headquarters, gave an extemporaneous, honest evaluation of local problems. He focused especially on the crisis in the public service sector, with hospitals, nursing homes, and schools unable to operate, as more and more young and skilled East Germans fled to the West. He also expressed his bitter disillusionment with the corruption and extravagance of SED party leaders, revealed since the Wall had fallen.

By the fifth meeting, scheduled for February 14th, apathy had replaced the energy unleashed by protest: Less than half of the council was present; without a quorum, the meeting degenerated into a discussion session. The mayor announced that sixteen West German towns and cities were seeking city partnerships, the first hint of West German hegemony. No additional minutes from that electoral period have been preserved; unable to reach a quorum, the council waited for the forthcoming May elections.

2. Copies of the CDU14

On May 6, 1990, Reußstadt held its first fully democratic local elections since 1932. Under conservative CDU control, the city fared poorly over the next four years, in spite of new freedom and West German resources flowing into city coffers. West Germans rushed to the city and prospered,¹⁵ as Reußstadters continued their westward migration. The rapid move towards reunification complicated the political situation: From blind obedience to scripted policies, the Reußstadt council had to adhere to the complex West German legal code in order to create a new "script."

Skilled administrative personnel were at a premium: Reußstadt's population, relatively stable at about 37,000 since the 1970s (Crummenerl 1990), declined to 32,408 by the end of 1990 (Statistisches Landesamt Th?ringen, 191)¹⁶ Public officials who were formerly affiliated with the Stasi¹⁷ were denied employment; especially hard hit were university professors and elementary and high school teachers. Low and minimally skilled workers, especially women, swelled the ranks of the unemployed as the Treuhandanstalt closed most of Reußstadt's antiquated factories within two years¹⁸ Reußstadt's economic misery was exacerbated by the general European recession of the early 1990s; while retail stores and construction firms flourished, the industrial sector had all but vanished¹⁹. By February 1995, the Reußstadt unemployment rate (20.1%) was the highest in the state.

Minutes of the first council meeting following the June 7, 1990 elections exhaustively detail the optimism and hopes that were so quickly to disappear. Forming a grand coalition, the CDU, the Socialists (SPD), and a small local party hoped for consensus, although the New Forum²⁰ remained independent. These four parties united against the SED successor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), not awarding it any vice mayorships or other elected office²¹ Terse, hand-written minutes documented the next few meetings, revealing little. After the early months of 1991, printed summaries indicated a growing disorder and eventual shut-down of much of the city's planned projects.

The original CDU mayor, a popular choice, was recalled in October 1990 because he had been a Stasi informal collaborator²² His CDU successor, a West-German import, brightened Reußstadters' hopes. Perhaps, in spite of a decayed industrial base and impending closure of most of these factories, Reußstadt could benefit from this Westerner's expertise. The 1991

minutes record new problems: Initially, the new mayor had been given council trust and support. Most issues were dealt with professionally; most were passed unanimously. The first rift is apparent in the April 1991 minutes, when the vacated office of honorary vice mayor remained unfilled because of a CDU/SPD stalemate. By May, members were questioning the mayor's allegedly authoritarian decisions. Each month the challenges became more persistent:²³ in the December 1991 council meeting, the exasperated mayor complained:

I see no end to this campaign against my person; I have never experienced anything like it. As an individual, I have nothing to hide, but also nothing to excuse myself or to justify myself for.

The new year began with the CDU recall of the mayor. His replacement, the CDU candidate for vice mayor, served until the end of the legislative period in June 1994, in spite of a poorly-developed public persona, and a lackluster performance.

By September 30, 1992, tensions created by increased party polarization led to the formation of two opposing coalitions, a conservative group consisting of the CSU and DSU and a liberal group consisting of the SPD, NF, and FDP²⁴ The PDS remained isolated: On social issues they generally voted with the liberal coalition, which often resulted in 50/50 splits. With new state directives, this split meant an automatic rejection of pending legislation. From October 1992 until the June 12, 1994 elections, practically no controversial issues were resolved, and little legislation was passed²⁵ Such was the situation when I arrived in Reußstadt in early February 1993 for my sabbatical research.

A Belated “Third Way”: The SPD Approach

During 1992 to 1994, the SPD honorary Vice Mayor, Dr. Katz, began to develop a reputation as a consensus builder, though he was an outspoken opponent of the CDU mayor. Increasingly, committee chairs from other parties as well as his own turned to Dr. Katz for advice. He then used his wide-ranging knowledge of city problems to campaign for mayor in the 1994 local elections, a campaign focusing primarily on Reußstadt issues. SPD campaign rallies tended to be sober, issue-oriented discussions; CDU rallies, by contrast, were much more lively.

Hundreds of Reußstadters attended the CDU key-note event on June 7, 1994, five days before the election, where a folk band preceded the charismatic Thuringian Minister President,²⁶ whose speech demonized the opposition while potential voters munched on low-cost sausages and enjoyed free beer.²⁷ Only two people came to Dr. Katz's rally, scheduled two hours later. While such discrepancies in attendance might suggest a CDU victory, Reußstadt voted for reform; Dr. Katz (one of four candidates) received 47% of the vote, and won handily in the run-off two weeks later, receiving 75%. The SPD also received a plurality, which many council members perceived as a mandate to concentrate on finding solutions to local problems. Dr. Katz acknowledged this mandate at the inaugural meeting, when he pleaded for cooperation and consensus, a plea received enthusiastically by all parties except the CDU. Under the new communal ordinance, passed by the state legislature in 1993, and designed to be effective with the 1994-1999 legislative period, the mayor was granted far-reaching powers.²⁸ Dr. Katz took steps to limit his new power, allowing council members to continue as committee chairs, sharing his official duties equally with the SPD paid and NF non-paid vice mayors, and encouraging open council discussion periods, where Reußstadt citizens could address politicians and administrators with their questions and concerns.

Since June 1994,²⁹ Reußstadt clearly is being governed by a new script. By resolving issues by consensus, the mayor has offered an effective alternative to polarization; by sharing his power political infighting and public allegations of power abuse have virtually disappeared. Unfortunately, problems of high unemployment and declining population continue to threaten economic stability. Still, many deferred projects are now completed or are underway: New shopping centers dot the city, and the Elster bridge, unconnected to city streets for three years, is now helping to relieve serious traffic problems.

The city of Reußstadt has had a number of different 'scripts' -- in eight years each successive "script" has either contributed to the city's chaos or has offered solutions to its many problems. Do the 'scripts' mirror a wide range of hegemonic forces that have swirled around Reußstadt for so many years? If so, what do they say about the structure and function of hegemony in local political systems? It is to these forces we now turn.

Hegemonic forces, East and West

Roseberry (1996, 75) has alerted us to the power relationships behind the spoken word. I want to use his approach in discussing both the literal and figurative "scripts" that have been the focus of this report, dealing with power issues on two levels: 1) those reflected in the public arena, revealed by the scripts I have described, and 2) those existing informally, which I discovered through my interviews with informants.

For forty-four years, the GDR communist party controlled the public arena, a control that lasted until May 1989. This formal control, however, masked a parallel set of informal power relationships in the churches, the work brigades, and the leased gardens that offered "safe zones"³⁰ for the exchange of ideas, the barter of scarce materials, and individual expression, symbolically and materially (Gibson 1993). These groups were infiltrated by Stasi informers, but were relatively free from SED control. It was only when "in anticipation of moments of crisis and command, when spontaneous consent (had) failed, (that) force (was) openly resorted to" (Gramsci, cited in Scott 1985, 316). The safe zones were the crucible for the first, hesitant protests; demonstrators from networks extending far beyond these zones joined the fight, until hundreds of thousands of them took to the streets, destroying, in just a few months, a regime that had seemed so permanently entrenched.

In contrast to the evolutionary postwar takeover by the SED described elsewhere (Gibson 1994), the peaceful revolution of 1989 had no foundation on which to establish a power base. Early attempts at finding a "Third Way,"³¹ favored by intellectuals and members of the New Forum, found no voter support. Instead, the West German conservative CDU, personified by Helmut Kohl, offered a substitute power base, overwhelmingly chosen by East Germans in the state and local elections of 1990, and the choice of Reußstadters. Yet the rapid imposition of a highly-structured West German democratic system forced on East German politicians, ill-equipped to use such a system, an overreliance on West German advisors. The SED script had been supplanted by a West German script. Neither allowed for much local input.

Not every small East German city has experienced the political instability described above. In Reußstadt, however, this instability retarded the establishment of legitimized power. Once polarization set in, local parties lost any hope of influencing outcomes in the public arena.

West German political and economic domination, moreover, severely hampered the ability of Reußstaders to wrest control from the council until the elections of 1994; by using the polls as a remedy for local discontent, the voters gave their support to the fledgling democracy. Although only time will disclose whether East Germans will eventually develop their own political scripts, in Reußstadt the SPD mayor seems to have taken an important first step.

Conclusion

In the ongoing German debate over the responsibilities of the West to the East, and the appropriate response of the East to the West, this brief excursion in "Political Anthropology from below" (Vincent 1990, 400) offers a new dimension. The hegemonic forces of the SED government have been relatively easy to delineate. The more subtle hegemonic control of the West, however, may be more pernicious. In welcoming their Eastern cousins into the democratic community, West Germans imposed upon them a political and economic process that slowly had gained widespread acceptance in the West. In so doing, West Germans sent a message not dissimilar from the one promulgated by the Vatican to faithful Roman Catholics: There is strong emphasis on free will, choice, and responsibility. However, there is little opportunity for the electorate to influence the structure or the rules. The "infallibility" of the West German democratic system may create some of the same problems that the Roman Catholic Church is being forced to address today.

Notes

1. This term, meaning "turning point" in German, is used frequently by both German and U.S. social scientists to designate the period following the opening of the Berlin Wall.
2. I am using a pseudonym for the city and for the people mentioned in this paper.
3. By 1946, the city was bursting with 49,000 people.
4. Construction materials were scarce or non-existent throughout the GDR era and artificially low rent controls made renovation impractical in any case.
5. In the western, non-communist portion of Germany the 1948 currency reforms, the Marshall Plan, and other events led quickly to a repeal of "90 per cent of the existing price regulations ... as of July 1948" and the last foodstuff (sugar) was removed from the rationing list in April 1950.

In the east, however, food rationing persisted until May 1958, and informal rationing of meat and dairy products continued, in some areas, until 1966 (Hardach 1980, 125, 145). Of course, central planning and the rigid imposition of minimal supplies and/or high prices on certain foodstuffs such as coffee and bananas and on most consumer goods, throughout the GDR period, served as an informal rationing principle (Hardach 1980, 135-138).

6. Research on local political themes is facilitated, in Germany, by the tendency of most cities to record and retain all the paperwork involved with local government. Reu?stadt materials dated to the period after the last major fire of 1802, but these records were in a sorry state in the early years after reunification. City administrators hired ABM (Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen) workers, a temporary work force similar to the U.S. C.C.C., to organize and catalogue the archives. Those records form the basis for the subsequent discussion.

7. Until the fall of 1989, almost invariably, these requests were denied. The only private entrepreneurial firms allowed were small ones providing a service unavailable through statecontrolled operations.

8. For example, the 40th anniversary celebration of the GDR had been planned for months by the SED ruling elite. It was to be a major demonstration of East German strength, both economically and politically. In addition, it was to be a response to the 40th anniversary celebration of West Germany that was scheduled to predate their own by four and a half months.

9. A standard practice in the GDR, such investments varied in accordance with the significance of the event: National elections and celebrations generally provided the most concrete improvements while local elections generally warranted only minor window-dressing -- the repair of a street or two, a few new trees planted in the public park, a small donation of equipment to a Kindergarten or school.

10. This is technique, once more effective, had long since been ignored by all but the most zealous party members. Campaign slogans, contests, prizes, and other incentives were supposed to motivate people to provide voluntarily some services such as cleaning the streets, improving external facades of their rental houses, and beautification projects, which the city could not afford to provide.

11. At first only a few hundred were able to make their escape.

12. In July, 11,700 East German refugees fled as their neighbors' borders became more permeable. Each month the numbers increased: 21,000 in August, 33,300 in September, 57,000 in October, 133,400 in November. Once the wall fell, this "exodus" slowly subsided, but it was not until June of 1990 that it fell to 10,700. In this one-year period, 567,900 East Germans fled to the West (Jarausch 1994, 62).

13. Some had requested their resignation because they no longer felt competent to fulfill their office; others were recalled because of non-appearance at meetings.

14. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the conservative party to which Helmut Kohl

belonged, enjoyed surprising victories at the local, state, and national levels, in part because Kohl had acted quickly and decisively in the period after November 9, 1989, to hurry the reunification process (Knopp and Kuhn, 1990; Teltschik, 1991). He had also made extravagant promises about the "blossoming countryside" that would achieve prosperity in little more than four years. Many naive East Germans took these campaign speeches at face value.

15. Many wished to profit from new markets and, to some extent, from the inexperience of the elected officials unable to protect their city from unscrupulous individuals.

16. Although at a somewhat reduced rate, this decline continues; the most recent available population figures (December 31, 1995) are 29,402, a 20.5% loss in just eight years (Amtsblatt der Stadt "Reussstadt," 1997).

17. This is the common name for the secret police, which was officially called the State's Security Police (Staatssicherheitspolizei -- hence Stasi).

18. While more than 10 million people were employed in East Germany in 1989, by the end of 1992 this number had shrunk to 5.2 million, an almost 50 per cent reduction. Of the "official" unemployed of 1,168,732, women accounted for 720,000 (61.6%). Many other women had removed themselves from an active job search and were reclassified as housewives, not a viable option in GDR times (Wermter 1993,15).

19. Ninety per cent of factory workers lost their jobs with the massive closing of the textile factories and other manufacturers; the remaining ten per cent worked mostly as skeleton crews of remaining industries still seeking new investors (Frau Jenennchen 1993, personal communication).

20. This party, the first to be recognized by the GDR government, has consistently followed a "third way" in its political dealings, losing the support of most pragmatic voters in the subsequent years (Bahrmann and Links, 1994).

21. The post-Wende council was similar in structure to that prescribed by the GDR Communal Constitution (Fuhrmann 1990). This structure was changed by the August 24, 1993 Thuringian Communal and County Ordinance, comprising elements from Bavaria and Hesse; a major change was the direct election of the mayor and the county executive (Landrat) (Kommunale Fachliteratur Thilringen, 1993).

22. As of 1997 Stasi files still have not been completely catalogued; much evidence suggests that countless files were destroyed making difficult an accurate assessment as to the number of individuals involved in this activity. Jarausch (1994, 35) gives a conservative estimate of 300,000 while Merkl (1993, 101) suggests more than 700,000 individuals may have been spying on their family and friends. If Merkl is correct, more than four per cent of the total population were so involved. From my research, new evidence continues to turn up: In the summer of 1996 my landlord had just been uncovered as a Stasi IM and was dismissed from the local high school as a result.

23. CDU members played a major role in such attacks.

24. The DSU and the FDP affiliations developed subsequently to the 1990 local elections and reflect the volatility of the council, reported in more detail elsewhere (Gibson 1994).

25. A curious aside: The conservative local paper, whose long history included support for the nobility, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi party and the Communist SED regime, moved smoothly at first towards support of the local CDU. However, as more and more electorate dissatisfaction with CDU conservative policies surfaced, the paper became more neutral during the 1994 campaign and shifted their support to the SPD once the election was over, following their established pattern.

26. He himself is a western outsider.

27. The CDU, with its superior financing, four years of experience at all levels of Thuringian governance, and its electoral know-how borrowed heavily from the tactics of Helmut Kohl, hoping to overcome the bad reputation of the local party for querulousness and personal enrichment, especially since the new mayoral candidate had spent four years as a respected county council member, with a reputation for hard work and commitment to local issues. While he, too, tended to be issue-oriented during the campaign, his somewhat aggressive tone and his occasional attempts to link Dr. Katz with the communists because of the latter's prior SED membership hinted at a continued support of confrontation as a political strategy. His ungracious behavior at the constituting council meeting in July 1994 tended to strengthen this impression. Unfortunately, he died of a massive heart attack six months later. His successor, the former mayor, has taken a slightly more conciliatory approach.

28. Modeled on the Bavarian system, the mayor is supposed to chair all committees but the one auditing city finances, to organize and run these and all council meetings (with the help of his administrative staff), and to represent the city in all significant public functions.

29. I returned to Reustadt in the summer of 1996 and continue to monitor local newspaper accounts of council developments, and read the monthly Reustadt Administrative Newspaper, both of which I receive on a regular basis.

30. During their long political domination, the SED refrained from direct intervention in the Church and in the private lives of their citizens, though unfavorable reports could ultimately lead to imprisonment or expulsion. The typical way average East Germans dealt with such ubiquitous infiltration was to assume that at least one visitor or guest was an informer, and act accordingly. So even in the "safe" zones one never felt completely safe.

31. Knopp and Kuhn 1990, and Bahrmann and Links (1994 and 1995) delineate the hopes and disappointments of a number of the early East German parties or groups that were forming right before and after the Wende; members did not favor a quick reunification, and were highly suspicious of capitalism and the free market economy. They hoped the former East Germany

could retain its independent state status and come up with a new system, borrowing the best from both socialism and capitalism.

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