

The Caucus as an Anthropological Topos

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Certain historical events may be driven by anthropological *topoi* surfacing from layers below culture and society, once the structures of society and culture allow for that to happen. Difficulties in finding a suitable term to describe a historical event may hint at such a situation. The events in autumn 1989 in the German Democratic Republic, often referred to as “peaceful revolution”, are analyzed in this regard and it is argued that in essence this was a spontaneous caucus.

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Introduction

If one purpose of the project of historical anthropology is to discover anthropological *topoi* within events of historical significance, then the autumn of 1989 in East Germany is an important example to analyze. The very fact of its enigmatic character points to some deeper layer which might explain what was going on in these fateful weeks. Over the last almost 25 years now, people have tried to grasp the meaning of this event with oxymoronic terms such as “peaceful revolution” or trivializing ones such as “U-turn” (Wende).

The term “revolution” is certainly justified in view of the profound change in East German society which ended a single party rule that had lasted for 40 years and paved the way for the end of Soviet military occupation which had been going on since the Second World War. However, no event in history that later was referred to as a “revolution”, had ever been like this before. No single shot was fired, no political speech delivered to the revolutionary masses, there was no Cromwell, no Robespierre or Lenin—all there was, is a march or rather: walk of more and more people every Monday after 5 p.m., after a normal day at work. Starting in the city of Leipzig, this phenomenon spread to all other cities within weeks. People from all parts of society gathered in the city center and just walked slowly, usually around the ring road which marks the former city walls around the medieval old-town in most German municipalities. People walked on main roads stopping the traffic and bypassing the headquarters of the almighty secret service “Stasi”, before finally dispersing without any acts of violence. The only slogan that could be heard was “we are the people” (Wir sind das Volk).

The Historical Event

Autumn 1989 in East Germany

It soon became clear that this was all about numbers—the number of participants in these calm walks, which challenged

the government simply because the government hadn’t organized them. In fact nobody organized them, they just grew out of weekly meetings of people in a church in Leipzig who were praying for peace there every Monday. The term “Monday demonstrations” was coined in an early phase long before media attention provided protection to the participants—in this period several months before the fateful autumn events there were continuous attempts of the state to quell these pivotal demonstrations, using brutal police force and activities of the secret service. State owned media tried to denounce the participants as “trouble-makers”, a minority against whom “the people”, had to be protected. The question of minority versus supposed majority became more and more acute every week, when with numbers of participants growing these “walks” started to look more and more like one of those events which had such an enormous symbolic significance in the socialist state’s self-characterization and supposed coherence between citizens and government: the Mayday demonstrations, which were celebrated every year in every single city and municipality of the G.D.R. and attested to the history of the international workers movement of the late 19th and early 20th century. The climax was reached when 70,000 people walked on Monday the 9th of October 1989 and several army battalions stood by without using their overwhelming might for the protection of “the people” against this alleged minority. When on the following day state media reported about the number of participants, giving a plausible estimate for the first time—in fact the number which used to be played down was suddenly even exaggerated—it became clear that the people chanting “We are the people”, were no longer a minority threatening “the people”, but that they in fact represented the majority. They had won the caucus.

The Anthropological Dimension

Counting Crowds

What had happened? This was an archaic event, of proto-democratic decision making—under the conditions of socialist

party dictatorship a mechanism suddenly surfaced from much deeper layers of the *condition humaine*. These deeper layers remain active even in our contemporary social activities: Imagine a caucus in Indiana or Louisiana when Democrats select their candidate for the election and one by one step out of the crowd of those who haven't made up their mind yet in order to gather around a sign with the name of their candidate—at the end the biggest crowd has won. The question that had to be decided in East Germany 1989 was: Who represents “the people”—the socialist nomenclatura, or the people chanting “We are the people”? This very slogan turned into a tautology in exactly the same moment when the new consensus was accepted by society as a whole: “The people are the people” equals $A = A$ in its logical structure. And the tautology is absolutely and irresistibly true. As French philosopher Jean Baudrillard had written in 1976 already: “Any system approaching total operationalization is doomed. The system saying ‘ $A = A$ ’ or ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ will reach both total power and total ridiculousness, i.e. imminent subversion—a small finger will suffice to topple it. Everybody knows the power of tautology, which drives the pretension of the system into complete sphericity...”

The ability to count is one of the oldest anthropological *topoi*. Neolithic tokens show number signs (Figure 1) and lists of items that had to be counted, including crowds of people. When two crowds of people met in those days to settle their different opinions it was usually on the battlefield, and more often than not the bigger crowd would win... In Ancient Egyptian temples the Pharaoh was depicted as a superhuman huge figure slaughtering scores of enemies—here the two crowds are irreconcilable, the Egyptians being symbolized by just one figure (Figure 2), their pharaoh, who has nothing in common with any of the much smaller enemy figures. However, at some point societies or tribes must have chosen to avoid the bloody battle for the sake of future *conviviality*; the caucus replaced the bloodshed and the smaller crowd just gave in when they had counted themselves and the number of their opponents. We know that the caucus as it exists today in US political life has developed out of ancient roots dating back to the early 18th century and probably to the time before the first Europeans had arrived. The very

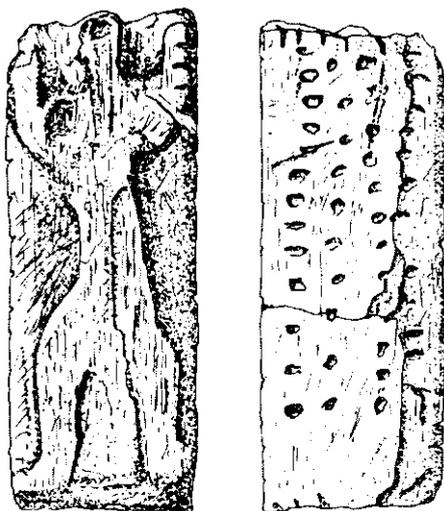


Figure 1. Ivory tablet from Geissenklösterle, Germany, with an anthropomorphic figure and number signs, 35,000/32,000 BC.

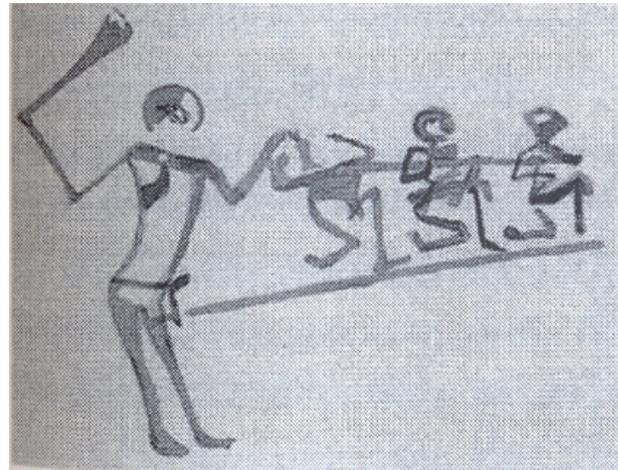


Figure 2. Wall painting in a tomb from Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Negade II time 32,000/30,000 BC.

term “caucus” is most likely derived from an Algonquin word.

How could it be possible though, that such an ancient anthropological *topos* would suddenly break through all layers of modern society at the end of the 20th century, in the middle of Europe, without any precedent and indeed without any second example in almost 25 years afterwards? How come, that lots of demonstrations have taken place in Germany since then, without ever changing a lot, despite similar numbers of participants as in 1989?

Discourse Theory of Jürgen Habermas

The Ideal Speech Situation

The explanation may be found in the theory of discourse as it was analyzed by Jürgen Habermas, again many years before the actual events in autumn 1989: he gave four conditions for the *ideal speech situation*—

1) All who are potential participants of discourse, must have equal rights to use speech acts in such a way that discourse could be permanently open to claims and counter claims, questions and answers.

2) All who participate in the discourse must have equal chances to present interpretations, to make assertions, recommendations, explanations and corrections and also equal chances to problematize (problematisieren) or challenge the validity of these presentations, to make arguments for and against.

3) Participants express their attitudes, feelings and wishes equally by representative speech acts (repräsentative Sprechakte).

4) Participants have equal chances to order and resist orders, to promise and refuse, to be accountable for one's conduct and to demand accountability from others.

Two issues seem to be important in this regard: the similarity between East German society in 1989 and proto-democratic Algonquin tribes or communities of European settlers of the early 18th century is the **equality of participants in economic terms**. Since the economy was based on public property (Volkseigentum), all participants of discourse were in fact equal and each vote had the same impact. This absolute equality was the reason why the ruling nomenclatura was so determined to prevent free discourse from ever happening, because of the

irresistible power of ideal speech acts under such circumstances. The whole state was supposedly owned by “the people” and meant to serve “the people’s welfare”—as soon as “the people” would be able to agree on certain issues on their own all tools of repression were bound to just crumble and disappear. Common property was the defining economic character of both communist and tribal societies, that’s why a caucus as soon as it took place could gain such an elementary power—the caucus in US democracy, on the other hand, is based on the mere agreement that for this single event of choosing a candidate all participants should be assumed to be equal. As soon as the candidate is found, everybody will be aware again of their different status in society and indeed the different amounts of money on their bank accounts... However, living democracy means to remember those events and to continue and defend democratic traditions.

Back to the Roots

And this is the second important issue regarding the ideal speech situation and the East German autumn of 1989: apart from their economic equality the whole discourse boiled down to just this single phrase “we are the people”. All meaning had to be sacrificed in order to achieve the broadest possible coalition, to find a slogan that everybody of “the people” could identify with.

That way the irresistible power of the tautology could be employed—however, tautology tends to come with a price, a certain feeling of hollowness on the day after... Nevertheless, the fact that ancient anthropological *topoi* like the caucus may break through any time, and change society in a way nobody would have dared to predict, proves that human nature can overcome even the most inhumane artificial constructions of society and culture.

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