

Interactive comment on “Erinnerungsorte und kulturelles Erbe – Spielplätze der Repräsentationen von Vergangenheit” by V. Denzer

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Received and published: 11 September 2006

(1) General comments:

The paper addresses a topical issue within the scope of Social Geography. There has been substantial debate in recent years among historians, sociologists and literary as well as media scholars about the types and forms of collective memory. Geographers have taken particular interest in the notions of "commemorative sites", "lieux de mémoire" and, more practically, in the analysis and management of historic and heritage sites.

In choosing two Eastern German "sites" as examples, the author aims at analysing the "changing focus on [of?] the presentation of the past and to interpret the con-

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notations communicated in a broader social context"(p. 65: 8-10, see also p. 70:5). The main research questions thus are: how, by whom and for whom is the past being (re-)interpreted and presented in a different way? (p. 66: 4-5).

These are interesting and pertinent research questions. However the author fails to deal with them in an adequate manner. This is partly due to theoretical shortcomings and inconsistencies in the first two sections of the paper (p. 65-69). More importantly, the first and more elaborated example (part 3, p. 70-74) does not tackle the three questions in sufficient depth. Therefore, the overall message of the paper remains too general and the theoretical and methodological implications for further research are unclear.

(2) Specific comments:

– Sections (1) and (2): Introduction - Interpretations of the Past

The main problem of these sections is the status of the subjects of collective memory or "remembrance": of those that remember. To cut a long debate short: while some authors have focussed rather on memory as something you or a people have (or not), others have conceptualized memory rather as the action of remembering - something you do (or not) (cf. Assmann 1997). Accordingly, e.g. Pierre Nora's notion has often been correctly translated into German with the word "Gedächtnis" (e.g. Nora 1998), whereas the German editors of the related three-volume opus have consciously used the more active word "Erinnerung" instead. Memory (whether individual or collective) in the sense of "Erinnerung" - and this is the term used by the author - cannot be an entirely disposable thing, it cannot be manipulated at will, and it can certainly not be installed by an "act of declaration" as the author maintains (p. 68: 9, see also p. 65: 21-24). Such a view seems also inconsistent with the author's own acknowledgement that "Erinnerung" is an "activity" (p. 68: 6) and that the "texts" of memory can be interpreted in many different ways (p. 66: 20).

"Erinnerungsorte" in the sense of François/Schulze and others, moreover, do not need

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any particular material connections to places in geographical space as the author suggests; they are "topoi" in a more abstract sense as the items dealt with in the mentioned edited collection clearly reveal. The author's inconsistent understanding of the notion is furthermore reflected in the section on the politics of memory that oscillates between concepts of a stable, durable inscription of reified memories (referring to Bourdieu) and the idea that newly created "semantics" can simply be "attached" to the collective memory (?) by interested parties (p. 69: 8-24). Here again, the question of agency is left in the air - notwithstanding the fact that the author later (rightly) highlights the importance of "the engagement of different actors and their histories" (p. 69: 28-29).

Finally a (related) problem arises through the simple equation of "Erinnerungsorte" and cultural heritage that are said to share "the same conditions of production" (?!, p. 68: 8). This claim remains all the more opaque as the author has earlier introduced cultural heritage as a "category of protection" (p. 67: 22, as e.g. in the system of UNESCO heritage sites). Once more, we are brought back to the unclear relationship of an interested politics of memory (e.g. by UN experts, by the ruling classes, by the catholic church) and the processes by which individuals or groups remember and interpret (or forget) certain events, locales, works of art etc. To sum up, the theoretical elaboration of "Erinnerungsorte" is not sufficiently clear and consistent, and the elaboration of "cultural heritage" is largely absent and doubtful in relation to the further.

– Section 3 - Chemnitz

The terminological inaccuracy and lack of theoretical clarity wouldn't be bothering if it didn't have implications for the following, empirical examples. The starting (and ending) questions have been reported above as: "How, by whom and for whom is the past being (re-)interpreted and presented in a different way?"

If we stick to the Chemnitz example first, we learn the following main points:

a) How?

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a1) the building of two large stores in the city center with "unusually" big arcades resp. an unusually large roof; a2) the protection of the architectural ensemble "zentraler Platz" including the famous sculpture of Karl-Marx' head.

b) by whom? (mentioned actors)

b1) the city of Chemnitz (p. 72:13; p. 73:23, p. 74:1, p. 74:10); b2) the executive director of the regional agency for the protection of monuments (Landeskonservator) (p. 73:2);

c) for whom?

c1) in the interest of consumerism (p. 71: 10-26) resp. a symbolic consumerism for the people; c2) to help the Chemnitz population "situating their biographical position in a larger context" (p. 74: 18).

Now it doesn't come as much of a surprise that East German cities have been generously provided with pompous shopping centers and the people in charge often welcomed their arrival. It seems also rather obvious for several reasons that not all works of art and architecture from former times in these cities were simply dismantled. True, these developments still merit detailed description. Yet in the presented paper, the account is too superficial, it lacks historical depth, an analysis of involved actors and their agendas, as well as theoretical consistency. In fact, the presented account is largely unrelated to the proposed theoretical framework. If the intention is to analyse "new" meanings, re-interpretations and the politics of memory in times of political change, then we would need: a) a clear understanding of what social groups we are looking at (see p. 69: 28-29!), b) a thorough analysis of the earlier interpretations with regard to the issue at stake (e.g. of the Marx sculpture and its 'appropriation' by different groups) and c) an analysis of the effect of the changes that took place.

There are very few lines in the paper that touch these essential points at all. Moreover, the account is rather unsystematic and a rapid appraisal of the mentioned homepage

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and related literature raises doubts e.g. as to the role of the Karl-Marx-Denkmal today (not to speak of the past!): At the city's homepage it is hard to find the monument at all and virtually impossible to locate it, and it seems it does also not figure in the official plans for the area between Brückenstraße and Roter Turm (cf. Nagler Sturm 2003).

– Section 4 - Ferropolis, Section 5 - Conclusion, Title of the paper

I will not deal with the second example, but I do not conceal that I see similar problems there. My impression is that the paper would gain if it concentrated on one issue (e.g. reworking the inner city of Chemnitz OR dealing with the industrial past). Both examples are certainly complex and interesting enough in itself to illustrate different ways of dealing with the past.

The short conclusion repeats the author's general concern that the past resp. the memories of the past can be instrumentalised for ideological and economic purposes. Along the lines of this and other parts of the paper, its title seems rather misleading. In particular the use of the metaphorical "playgrounds" (Spielplätze) does not resonate well with the "critical intentionalism" that guides the overall argument.

(3) Technical corrections:

There are several typing errors, mistakes, and omissions in the bibliography, as well as a number of misleading formulations. I will return to these at a later stage.

(4) References

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Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 2, 63, 2006.