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Sites of Memory and Event Politics

A comment on Barack Obama's stump speech on July 24th on the "17th June Street" in Berlin.

An Essay by Sven Sebastian Grundmann¹

1. Introduction

Democratic politics depends on the continuous legitimation of intentions, actions and successes. To a large extent the power of politicians is based upon their ability to present themselves as legitimate representatives of the public interest. Authority – i.e. the acknowledgment of politicians as representatives of the people – is a basic condition of power. Everyone who is able to cause change through the power of words is an authority of meaning production and meaning enforcement (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 19). In western societies, where elections are celebrated as events in the mass media, self-aggrandizement and image creation become an essential part of the political business in order to gain authority. Only those politicians who are able to play along with the mass media have chances to win high political mandates. Even though the intentional and performative core of symbolic politics and self-presentation is probably as old as politics itself, a qualitatively new situation arose with the dispersion of mass media. In the early 60's, Daniel J. Boorstin described this new phenomenon with the term "event politics". Event politics sugarcoats the reality, or even worse, it produces an illusion, which only looks like reality (Boorstin 1992: 36, Meyer 2003: 16). According to Boorstin, press conferences and presidential debates are typical examples for event politics. These pseudo-events only exist because there is a media system which reports on them. The content of these events fades into the background, as the producer's only aim is to set up (or maintain) the image of a capable actor, or a capable institution. Within the scope of this paper I would like to describe the process of authority construction. From my point of view, this process is not accomplished in a vacuum; in fact it relies on a past, which is still alive in collective memory. Pierre Nora's idea of »Sites of Memory« seems to be an appropriate concept to explain, how political actors use collective memory to establish an image. Symbolic references, or what is called "site" by Nora, are not objective (scientized) reconstructions of the past, but they are rather symbolic artifacts on which collective memories crystallize. Each site of memory corresponds with a certain set of values, attitudes and

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conceivabilities, which can be used by political actors to create their own image or to legitimize their political agenda. By using Barack Obama's stump speech in Berlin as an example, I would like to illustrate how Pierre Nora's concept of »Sites of Memory« could contribute to a better understanding of self-aggrandizement and image creation in the mass media.

Presidential candidate Barack Obama visited Berlin on June 24th 2008. His political opponent, John McCain, had accused him of not having enough experience in foreign policy. Therefore, according to McCain, Obama should not be voted for president (Cooper 2008). In order to invalidate McCain's claim and to create a more positive media image on his foreign policy competencies, Obama's campaign trail stopped over in Berlin. For Obama's only speech in public during his political "Tour D'Europe" his campaign strategists favored the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, but the German administration deprecated that request. Finally, both sides agreed on "17th June Street" as the location for Obama's public speech.

Some significant American personalities, whose speeches are still well remembered, had spoken in Berlin before Obama entered the stage, for example John F. Kennedy on the occasion of the 15th Anniversary of the Berlin airlift. In front of the Schöneberg city hall, Kennedy explained his solidarity with the West-Berliners with the words "Ich bin ein Berliner." (I am a citizen of Berlin) (Kennedy 2003). On the 750th anniversary of Berlin in front of the Brandenburg Gate Ronald Reagan urged Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall (Reagan 1987). Obama's speech is embedded in a historical context, which needs to be explicated. How is Berlin – as a site of memory – used by Obama for his own agenda?

This article is divided into three parts. First, I will introduce the theory of »Sites of Memory« developed by Pierre Nora. In the second part I will explain and illustrate the »Sites of Memory« which are mentioned by Obama. The focus of the analysis lies on the function of »Sites of Memory« within the argument and the prospective image outcome. Finally, I will take a glimpse into possible, more detailed studies.

2. Between History and Memory: The Theory of »Sites of Memory«

Tradition is not the storage of ashes, but the passing on of the fire! Pierre Nora illustrates the essence of this old German proverb by juxtaposing memory and history. From his perspective, memory is an essential part of life:

"It is always carried by living groups and therefore constantly in development, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, not aware of the sequence of its deformation, and hereby a vulnerable source to all sorts of uses and manipulations (...). History is the always problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what dwindled away. Memory is a recent phenomenon, an experienced bond to an eternal past. In contrast, history can only represent the past. Because memory is affective and magical, it retains only the details, which fortifies it. Nurtured by blurred, mixed and unsteady commemorations – with a special or symbolic content – memory is capable of all transfers, fades, cuts or projections. Since history is

an intellectual and secular procedure, it requires analysis and critical reasoning. Memory transforms commemoration to a sacred field, whereas history displaces commemoration, their goal is disenchantment" (Nora 1998: 13f, Translation Grundmann).

Within the disenchantment of the world through science and technology, memory communities have disappeared. According to Nora, the ideal type of a memory community was the Jewry, the people of the tradition. Every gesture, even the most common, was seen as a religious repetition of what had always been done (Nora 2008: 13). Today, there are »Sites of Memory« because the memory communities disappeared.

»Sites of Memory« belong to both spheres: history and memory. Their headstone is the intention to protect a heritage through the stream of time. Hereby, »Sites of Memory« form a memory between desacralization and a provisional retrieved sacredness. "An irrational, flannelly bond, that turns us into recipients of what has made us, but at the same time a historical alienation, which pledges us to observe the heritage with a sober view" (Nora 1998: 21, Translation Grundmann). »Sites of Memory« live from their ability of metamorphosis, which makes them highly interesting. Through the incessant re-emergence of their meanings, the past transcends into the future (cf. Nora 1998: 33). Resistance fighters, like Martin Luther King, make us realize that people had to fight for their social rights. It is our responsibility to protect this heritage and take a role model on them, if similar conflicts appear. A Holocaust memorial, which reminds us of the abyss of human existence and invokes – in the shadow of the past – a "never again". An event like September 11th, which uncovered the vulnerability of the West, is open to controversial interpretations, whose imaginary consequences reach from the end of imperial superpower, to terrorism against terrorism. Rites, monuments, pictures, texts, sounds and bodies are subjects which crystallize within »Sites of Memory«. As symbolic representations, »Sites of Memory« form a junction between individual and collective experiences and stretch a space of versatile projections. This feature makes them attractive for staging (and event politics), on behalf of their quality of being actively involved in the event itself.

Some political speeches intentionally use the past as reference in order to create an identity within society. As an affirmative relationship, identity manifests itself in the expression of common values. While speaking in public, the »Site of Memory« enfolds a »coat of commemoration« around the speaker; he/she appears on the podium as a legitimate authority of the collective heritage. Furthermore, the magic of the »Site of Memory« is transmitted to the speaker. On the one hand, the audiences project their expectations on this person. On the other hand, the »Site of Memory« supports him/her to fill the general totality of the »Site of Memory« with a concrete content. Up to this point, memory politics and event politics seem – from the perspective of the audience – almost identical (cf. Nora 1998: 40, and Tenschler 1998: 185). While memory politics puts the speaker and the »Site of Memory« in a dialectical movement, event politics reduces the magic to calculated effect, so that the audiences are captivated for the speaker's interest. Authentic memory means that the speaker lives and reflects the values of the »Site of Memory«.

Event politics, however, uses only the staging capacity of »Sites of Memory« to establish an image. Certainly only an *ex post* analysis can show, if a speaker acted according to his words. In the next section I will try to reveal how Obama makes use of the hidden power of »Sites of Memory«.

3. »Sites of Memory« within political speeches: "People of the world, look at Berlin!"

Obama introduced himself as a proud citizen of the United States of America, and a fellow citizen of the world to the people on the "17th June Street" in Berlin, as well as the viewers and listeners around the world, who followed his speech on radio and television. Already in the introduction, he linked his own family history with the symbolic framework of the speech:

„I know that I don't look like the Americans who've previously spoken in this great city. The journey that led me here is improbable. My mother was born in the heartland of America, but my father grew up herding goats in Kenya. His father – my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. At the height of the Cold War, my father decided, like so many others in the forgotten corners of the world, that his yearning – his dream – required the freedom and opportunity promised by the West. And so he wrote letter after letter to universities all across America until somebody, somewhere answered his prayer for a better life. That is why I'm here. And you are here because you too know that yearning. This city, of all cities, knows the dream of freedom. And you know that the only reason we stand here tonight is because men and women from both of our nations came together to work, and struggle, and sacrifice for that better life." (Obama 2008).

This short quote contains a phenomenon which I described earlier in reference to Nora as a »coat of commemoration«. The clever combination of the personal family destiny, within the as freedom struggle interpreted world history, shows Obama as a predestined authority for a better life. By relating his personal experience of the American dream with the city of Berlin, Obama gives the audience the impression that he knows exactly what he is talking about. Obama's story about his grandfather – from a cook to a university graduate – is a variation of the often cited American dream from dishwasher to millionaire. The insertion of the American collective memory conduces to the voters back home as a projection space which they can identify with. By linking the American dream to the history of Berlin, the American dream turns into a universal dream of the human species history: "This city, of all cities, knows the dream of freedom" (Obama 2008). Thus, the postwar history of Berlin appears to be the story of freedom, to be applicable as future guideline to international policy:

"But in the darkest hours, the people of Berlin kept the flame of hope burning. The people of Berlin refused to give up. And on one fall day, hundreds of thousands of Berliners came here, to the Tiergarten, and heard the city's mayor implore the world not to give up on freedom. "There is only one possibility," he said. "For us to stand together united until this battle is won...The people of Berlin have spoken. We have done our duty, and we will keep on doing our duty. People of the world: now do your duty...People of the world, look at Berlin!" People of the world – look at Berlin! Look at Berlin, where Germans and Americans learned to work together and trust each other less than three years after facing each other on the field of battle. Look at Berlin, where the determination of a people met the generosity of the

Marshall Plan and created a German miracle; where a victory over tyranny gave rise to NATO, the greatest alliance ever formed to defend our common security. Look at Berlin, where the bullet holes in the buildings and the somber stones and pillars near the Brandenburg Gate insist that we never forget our common humanity. People of the world – look at Berlin, where a wall came down, a continent came together, and history proved that there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one” (Obama 2008).

Not a particular place in Berlin or a single event, but the entire city and its postwar history forms the »Site of Memory«, to which Obama refers. The phrase "People of the world, look at Berlin!" is a quote by Ernst Reuter, the first postwar mayor of West Berlin. Reuter delivered his speech on September 9th 1948. Within the collective memory, the speech is remembered as a protest against the blockade of the three western sectors of the city which is already divided but not entirely separated by the strip of death. Although this interpretation is not fundamentally wrong, the occasion of this speech was a different one. On September 6th 1948, the SED (Socialist Unity Party) had prevented the city council meeting for the third time in a row. Against the jamming of the Berlin city parliament through the SED, all democratic parties called for a mass rally on September 9th 1948, which has become the scene for Reuters historic speech (Kellerhoff 2008). The location of this rally was not – as Obama says – the Tiergarten, but the front of the battered Reichstag. Obama by contrast, delivers his speech close the Victory Column on the 17th June street, which runs through the Tiergarten. Either Obama does not know the historical facts, or he intentionally refers to the Tiergarten as the place of Reuter’s historic speech. A reason could be the intention to create for the audience the mood that they are in a magical place, where history has been written and history will be written. This presumption can be supported by the fact that Obama always points out the specificity of the *genius loci*, as a priest would remind his parish of being in a sacred place. The reference to the past at the venue does not surprise, since Nora considers »Sites of Memory« as threatened by the grip of history. They must continuously be enriched with emotional content, otherwise they’ll turn to places where history freezes. While scientists reconstruct the past with regard to places, »Sites of Memory« – as collective memory phenomena – are ambiguous and open to change. Reuter’s speech to the reestablishment of the city council has become a speech against the divided city in general. Obama adverts to the aspect of division and uses it for his interpretation of the world. He also converts the »Site of Memory« by relocating Reuter’s speech.

“In the winter, a heavy fog filled the sky above, and many planes were forced to turn back without dropping off the needed supplies. The streets where we stand were filled with hungry families who had no comfort from the cold. (...). Here, at the base of a column built to mark victory in war, we meet in the center of a Europe at peace. (...) It was this spirit that led airlift planes to appear in the sky above our heads, and people to assemble where we stand today. (Obama 2008)”

A number of places that belong to Berlin’s major sights or became monuments of the Cold War, are mentioned by Obama. For example the Brandenburg Gate, which was behind the Berlin Wall, the Tempelhof Airport, as a supply base during the Berlin airlift, or the Victory Column as a symbol of a Europe of wars. Even though Obama addresses the incidents associated with the »Sites

of Memory«, his comments are often diffuse. Cause and effect of those historical events remain vague and are papered over by a reduction of complexity which divides the world into good and evil. Amazingly, the name of the place where he speaks is not mentioned in his speech. The 17th June Street is dedicated to the uprising in East Germany in 1953. Within the »Sites of Memory« in Berlin the Airlift and the Berlin Wall compose the most remarkable references. While the airlift emphasizes the aspect of support from the West, representing a cooperative approach, the Berlin Wall serves as a metaphor for the challenges of international politics.

“Sixty years after the airlift, we are called upon again. History has led us to a new crossroad, with new promise and new peril. When you, the German people, tore down that wall – a wall that divided East and West; freedom and tyranny; fear and hope – walls came tumbling down around the world. From Kiev to Cape Town, prison camps were closed, and the doors of democracy were opened. Markets opened too, and the spread of information and technology reduced barriers to opportunity and prosperity. (...) Yes, there have been differences between America and Europe. No doubt, there will be differences in the future. But the burdens of global citizenship continue to bind us together. (...) In this new century, Americans and Europeans alike will be required to do more – not less. Partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity. That is why the greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another. *The walls between old allies on either side of the Atlantic cannot stand. The walls between the countries with the most and those with the least cannot stand. The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down* [Accentuation: Grundmann]. (...) This is the moment when we must renew our resolve to rout the terrorists who threaten our security in Afghanistan, and the traffickers who sell drugs on your streets. No one welcomes war. I recognize the enormous difficulties in Afghanistan. But my country and yours have a stake in seeing that NATO’s first mission beyond Europe’s borders is a success. For the people of Afghanistan, and for our shared security, the work must be done. America cannot do this alone. The Afghan people need our troops and your troops; our support and your support to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, to develop their economy, and to help them rebuild their nation. We have too much at stake to turn back now” (Obama 2008).

»Sites of Memory« are based on self-identity; they express normative values without any specific reference. In political speeches, they can create a sense of community, because the audience identifies with them. As discursive intersections of individual and collective experience, they suspend the boundaries of space and time. The spirit of the airlift and the deployment of U.S. and European soldiers in the war against "global terrorism" are put together to a common denominator. The quoted excerpt from Obama’s speech uses Berlin as a »Site of Memory« to demand loyalty and a stronger engagement from Germany and Europe in the Afghanistan war. Obama disclaims reflecting on what the spirit of the airlift means for a military operation, what actions should be taken and if a comparison – given the historical differences – is permissible. Instead, he stages his position for military actions, for free markets and for democratization.

4. Concluding Remarks

The present study was an attempt to use Pierre Nora's analytical framework of »Sites of Memory« for a political speech analysis. Overall, the approach is an interesting basis for further research. However, many questions remain unanswered. Is Obama's performance only a pseudo-event to create an image, or does he continue a tradition with a real impact on world politics? Is the media coverage in the service of campaign strategists, or is the event reflected in a critical manner? Is the speech perceived differently in Germany and the U.S.? For further research, linguistic and praxeological theories, as well as comparative methods of qualitative research, seem to me promising to decipher the hidden mechanisms of memory politics and event politics.

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