Writing the history of the victors?

Discourse, social change and (radical) democracy

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Recently, interest in radical democracy and communism has increased dramatically among cultural theorists. This paper draws attention to two other fields in which a similar shift is visible. First, popular scholarly writing on communism, anarchism and socialism. Second, curricular materials for history teaching. Drawing on ethnographic field work at an educational publishing house in Germany, the paper analyses the production of a history textbook. Analysis identifies ambiguities and tensions in the way forms of political organisation and practice are discussed and changes made. One change involves the subtle revalorization of the 1918 revolution and the early days of the Weimar Republic, which could be considered an attempt at shaping a 'radical democracy'. The study contributes to emerging work on discourse and social change which aims to not only critique dominant discourse but also explore fissures in hegemonic formations. By analysing the production of these history materials, we explore competing discursive possibilities – ways of understanding and enacting democracy – circulating today.

Keywords: history, democracy, textbooks, discourse analysis, ethnography, editorial meetings, political theory

1. Introduction

"The word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth." (Voloshinov 1973: 19)

Over the past few years, interest in "radical democracy" and the "idea of communism" (Douzinas & Žižek 2010) has increased dramatically in theoretical circles, as the broad range of publications, conferences, workshops, etc. illustrates. Liberal commentators on these political debates have dismissed them as relevant to only a marginal group of cultural theorists (e.g. John Gray in Barker 2011). Drawing on ethnographic data, this paper suggests that a discursive shift towards a revalorization of radical democracy can be traced not only in the flamboyant
political theory of Žižek, Badiou, Mouffe, Rancière, Norval and others, but also in recent popular scholarly writing on the histories of communism, socialism and anarchism and – albeit more subtly – in curricular materials for teaching history.

The paper, then, has a three-fold aim. First, on a substantive level, we focus on the everyday, mundane practices of an author team’s debate during the production of a history textbook. We tease out how ambiguities and tensions over conceptions of “radical democracy” are entextualized, both in the meeting talk and the published history textbook, and we explore the broader implications of particular textual changes for contemporary understandings of democracy.

Second, on a methodological level, our analysis demonstrates (i) how what some would call “linguistic ethnography” and others “ethnographic discourse analysis” can make visible the dynamic ambiguities in everyday practices which constitute social change and which cannot be captured by textual analysis or cultural theorising alone (cf. Rampton 2007; 2; MacGilchrist & Van Hout 2011), and (ii) how conceptualising the discursive field as open and indeterminate (in a Foucauldian sense) enables analysis not only of those changes which strengthen and stabilize current hegemonic formations but also of those which destabilise and fissure such formations.

Third, the broader theoretical/philosophical issue to which the data speak pertains to contemporary theoretical debates on forms of democratic organisation, such as agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2000, 2005) and aversive democracy (Norval 2007), and on resignifications of the concepts of democracy (Rancière 1999, 2006) and communism (Badiou 2010; Žižek 2000, 2009). Although different in several respects, these approaches share a broad conception that dissent rather than consensus is constitutive of democracy. In this perspective, parliamentary or representative democracy, in which politics is delegated to parliaments, is a “pale shadow” of democracy (Eagleton 2011:201). Democracy is truly democratic only when popular sovereignty is taken seriously across all arenas of political and economic life. Rancière, for instance, argues that “there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as democratic government” since government “is always exercised by the minority over the majority” and is thus “oligarchic” (Rancière 2006:52). Voting is thus for Rancière not the democratic expression of the people’s voice. Voting means expressing consent to a superior (oligarchic) power. Radical democracy is in play, for these thinkers, when forms of social order (inclusion, exclusion, voice, popular sovereignty, etc) are linked to “a social politics of justice and equality” (Fraser 1996:207). On this third, theoretical level, then, this paper contributes to a strand of (critical) research on discourse and social change which moves away from critique, i.e. investigating how language and other forms of semiosis figure in establishing and stabilizing “new capitalism” and “the global knowledge economy” (e.g. Adie 2008; Faber 2003; Fairclough 1992, 2005; Graham 2002), and instead,
focuses on *ambiguity and fissures* in discourse (Rodriguez 2001) by adopting a process approach to investigate tensions and ambivalences among competing situated (discursive) practices (cf. NewsTalk & Text Research Group 2011; Van Praet 2010), and exploring, for instance, conflicts or negotiations over meaning in situated practice (e.g. Fyben & Napier-Moore 2009; Gebhard 2004).

2. Data collection and selection

The data below are drawn from 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in leading commercial educational publishers in Germany from 2009 to 2011. Field work included interviews, informal chats, discourse-based interviews on particular extracts, and participant observation at "author meetings" in which author teams discussed manuscripts for textbooks and other curricular materials (CD-ROMs, workbooks, teacher’s notes, etc.). The latter led to over 200 hours of recorded meeting talk.

In this paper, we focus on one particular two-hour meeting during the production of a history textbook for secondary school grades 9 and 10 (i.e. for students aged 15 and 16) (Henceforward: *History 9/10*). The meeting took place in a small hotel conference room in Northern Germany. It was chaired by the in-house editor, Larissa Lehnhardt (all names are pseudonyms), with five of the authors attending the meeting, including Andreas Siegele, the primary author of the chapter under revision: “The Weimar Republic – Design for a democratic society”. The authors and external editor are practicing or retired teachers and teacher-trainers. Most of the team know each other from work on previous textbooks. During the production of *History 9/10* the team met five times. The first meeting dealt with overall conceptual planning for the book; in the next four meetings, the team discussed manuscripts in their first or second drafts.

We selected this particular meeting for closer analysis on the basis of three observations:

(i) *Time spent on the discussion*

First, remarkably, the editor and the authors spend one hour discussing what, in terms of numbers of pages, seems only a marginal fraction in *History 9/10*. The manuscript section “Revolution in Germany – A strained new beginning” which was discussed during the meeting covers only one double page spread (p. 130–131). In other author meetings, generally between five and 15 minutes were spent discussing any given double page spread. There seems therefore to be a disproportion between the time spent discussing this particular historical event and the space the event occupies in the textbook.

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(ii) Relative vibrancy of discussion
Second, in most meetings we attended during the fieldwork, the teams had good rapport, discussed various changes and occasionally argued about specific points. In fieldnotes for this particular manuscript section, however, we noted that the discussion was more vibrant and engaged than most other discussions. Brows are furrowed at suggestions made by other participants; there is a good deal of sighing, and speakers are often interrupted with contesting arguments.

(iii) Reflection on the role of history writer
Third, participants explicitly reflect on their representation of this early phase of the Weimar Republic. This was rare in other author meetings attended. On two occasions authors make explicit the perception that they “are writing the history of the victors”.

3. Data analysis

3.1 Background
During fieldwork with the team of authors and editors producing History 9/10, we observed a debate over how to represent the November revolution of 1918 and the early stages of the Weimar Republic, a phase of history which is considered vital to understanding democracy in today’s Germany. The Weimar Republic refers to the parliamentary republic established in 1919 in Germany to replace the previous imperial rule. The manuscript section “Revolution in Germany – A strained new beginning” describes the early phase of the Weimar Republic. It touches on the November revolution in 1918, when soldiers refused to follow the orders of the imperial rulers; on the establishment of soldier and worker councils, similar to the soviets of the 1917 Russian Revolution; on the struggles between the various political positions in Germany at the time about which kind of political organisation should replace the Kaiser (e.g. MSPD, social democrats in favour of parliamentary democracy; USPD, more left-wing socialists; Spartacists, in favour of council democracy; and KPD, the communist party which emerged from the Spartacists); and on the meeting of the national assembly in Weimar (January 1919) which then wrote the new constitution.

Particularly relevant for this section of the manuscript is the concept of the councils of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies. Council democracy (also called soviet democracy) refers to a political system in which the population exercises political control through directly elected councils, i.e. it can be seen as a radical form of direct democracy. In the Weimar Republic itself, the propaganda of the time associated the councils (Rätesystem) with Bolshevism. The council system was
demonsed as a tool of the “anti-democratic bogeyman” that was the Soviet Union (cf. Engel et al. 2002: xxviii). In 1918, parliamentary democracy, separating legislative and executive branches, was proposed as the only plausible form of democracy available. Since then, although the demonising is no longer so virulent, the revolutionary actions of the councils have, in popular and educational discourse, still largely been associated with the Soviet Union and violent uprisings.

The more we analysed authors’ talk about these issues during the meeting, the more we discovered disagreement behind agreements, tensions between what the author team said and what they published, and different implications for the same — or were they the same? — ideas. Particularly striking and ambiguous were two instances where, during the debate on how to represent this revolutionary period, two authors echoed the well-known quote attributed to Winston Churchill that “we are writing the history of the victors”.

(1)
Thomas: aber wir schreiben die geschichte der sieger, das ist die der parlamentarischen demokratie. deswegen läuft das—
‘but we’re writing the history of the victors, that is that of parliamentary democracy, that’s why it’s going like—’

(line 0943)

(2)
Nadine: jaja es ist eben auch so wir wir schreiben die geschichte der sieger. na klar. (.) ist so.
‘yes yes, that’s just the way it is we we’re writing the history of the victors. for sure. (.) that’s the way it is.’

(line 1067)

As noted above, the victors’ version of history has traditionally positioned parliamentary democracy in Germany as the only plausible form of democracy available in (and since) 1918. In other words, Thomas’ comment and Nadine’s repetition slightly later signalled both an awareness of and concern over the maintenance and reproduction of this dominant system of meaning.

When we listed the specific textual changes made to the manuscript, ensuing from the meeting, explicit textual evidence for a revalorization of parliamentary democracy (see detailed analysis below) was abundant, indeed suggesting that the textbook contributes in its own small way to the stabilization of the hegemony of this form of social order in the new capitalism. ‘Hegemony’, we should perhaps note, is understood here as a dynamic, fragile and precarious practice of gaining and maintaining power, which requires constant work and modification to remain
(temporarily) stable. Hegemonic articulation is invariably accompanied by con-
testing articulations and hegemonic projects (cf. Carpentier & Cammaerts 2006;
Laclau 1990, 2006; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Macgillchrist 2011).

Simultaneously, however, a further, quite different, concern was voiced at the
meeting: during the debate, authors voiced critique over (i) the reduction of materi-
als on council democracy, i.e. the radical form of direct democracy which emerged
during the November 1918 revolution in which the population began to exercise
political control through directly elected councils rather than parliamentary rep-
resentatives, (ii) the one-sided, dramaturgical representation of the councils as dan-
gerous, threatening and violent, and (iii) their association with the Soviet Union.

For instance, one of the two authors who demonstrated a recognition that the
team was writing the history of the victors (Extract 2) also expressed dismay that
the textbook they were producing no longer offered the material to teach a lesson comparing the parliamentary and council systems:

(3)

Nadine: also ich hab immer ne stunde gemacht
wo ich parlamentarisches parlamentarismus
und rätesystem richtig verglichen habe.
aber das kann man hier raus natürlich gar nicht
ziehen.

‘well i always did a class where i really
compared parliamentary parliamentarism and
the council system. but one certainly can’t pull
that from this at all.’

(line 0798)

This reduction of the materials dealing with the councils was justified by the lead
author of the chapter. Mobilising his collaborative work with the second editor of
the textbook, and supported by another author, Andreas positions the council sys-
tem as no longer a model for the future, i.e. the discussion on councils is out-dated:

(4)

Andreas: also ich ich äh würde hier gerne mal (sagen)
dass klaus und ich das auch bewusst
ganz weg- rausgehalten haben weil wir ja
eigentlich äh beide der meinung sind dass
.hhh nachdem (den sowjet) nun so n system
ist was wirklich nicht mehr zukunftsmodell
ist äh also das ist das ist ne diskussion
die wir in den 70er jahren geführt haben und
dann hat man das rätesystem=

Niklas: oh: ja:
Andreas: -ewig ewig i- immer wieder gemacht und so
Andreas: ‘well i i eh would like to (say) here that klaus and i also deliberately completely left out- kept it out because we actually eh both think that that. hhh after (the soviet) is now a system that is really not a model for the future eh well that is that is a discussion that we had in the 70s and then the council system was=

Niklas: oh: ye:s
Andreas: =endlessly endlessly done a- again and again and all’

(lines 0810–0812)

Drawing on these observations, in what follows we explore in a more analytical detail the diverging, conflicting and changing interpretations of the November Revolution, both in editorial meeting talk and in the published History 9/10. Section 4 then turns to broader issues, reflecting on shifting contemporary conceptions of (radical) democracy. The specific research questions we address, then, are: (1) How are interpretations of the November Revolution in 1918 articulated, contested and manifested and (2) What do these everyday, mundane practices say about contemporary conceptions of (radical) democracy? The selection of data fragments centres on two contrasting poles of the debate: Section 3.2 explores the discursive work which tends towards a revalorization of parliamentary democracy and a stabilization of the ‘victors’ version’ of history, whereas Section 3.3 turns to discursive work which revalorizes the worker and soldier councils (Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte) and (radical) democracy, thus destabilizing the victors’ history. Analysis illustrates the conflictual discussion, a selection of subsequent textbook changes made, and the way these changes are related to cautious forms of expressing critique, editorial practices, historical accuracy, students’ understanding, and teaching practice.

3.2 Writing the history of the victors

One of the central issues discussed by the team is how the Weimar Republic as a whole should be represented.9 A first disagreement centres on the representation of the Weimar Republic: Do we represent the Weimar era as a time of strikingly progressive achievements and even greater promise? Or do we focus on the problematic issues arising from this turbulent period? Conflicting positions over this issue are triggered by Larissa, the editor. Using hedges which preface disagreement,
and casting her voice as just one of a number of possible voices by subjectivizing it (‘mir fehlt so ein bisschen ne?’), Larissa contests the one-sided representation of Weimar in the manuscript:

(5)

Larissa: und ich finde also jetzt geht’s ja hier hinten auch um die problematischen bestimmungen der weimarer verfassung. ob man nicht dann wirklich auf dieser seite groß das verfassungsschema bringen sollte und überhaupt noch mal einige bestimmungen erst mal nennen. weil irgendwie f- also ehrlich gesagt mir fehlt das so ein bisschen ne? das das einfach noch mal gesagt wird also ähm also hier geht’s gleich mit dem pro problematischen bestimmungen äh los ne?

Andreas: aber eigentlich kann man das- soll man das eigentliche schema nehmen können denke ich mir

Larissa: aber zum beispiel n- notverord- oder naja ok notverordnungen kommen dann ja als problematische bestimmung

Larissa: ‘and i think well now back here it’s about the problematic provisions in the weimar constitution. perhaps one should put the diagram of the constitution big on this page and just generally first name a few provisions. because somehow i- well to be honest i kind of miss it here, you know? that that is simply said again and ehm well it starts straight off with the pro problematic provisions ehm, eh?

Andreas: but one can actually- should be able to take the actual diagram i would think

Larissa: but for example, e-emergency de- or ok ok emergency decrees are there as problematic provisions’

(lines 0379–0381)

In Extract 5, Larissa refers to the textbox headlined “Problematic provisions of the Weimar constitution” (see Table 1), which lists five problematic aspects of the Weimar constitution. After considering the text-editorial issue of whether
the diagram of the constitution should be pulled forward to this earlier page, she argues that the sole focus of the textbox on problematic issues is unbalanced.

Without explicitly underpinning her argument as such, Larissa’s critique on the missing potential and opportunity of Weimar Republic for German history can be traced back to the core curriculum. Under the heading “Expected Competences, Years 9 and 10”, the core curriculum lists the following core competences for this respective period (“Changes in Europe and the Weimar Republic”): Students should be able to “present the internal and external pressures, but also the opportunities of the first German democracy”. The contrast formulated by the core curriculum’s instructive guideline mirrors – or should we say foreshadows – the dispute in the editorial meeting. Without explicitly mentioning the guidelines, Larissa, Niklas, Thomas and Nadine (see below) all self-correct and adjust the manuscript along this line, in that way subtly entextualizing its core message and conforming to its requirements.

In what follows, Andreas (the primary author) disagrees with Larissa’s critique. He suggests taking up the issue later and insists on the need for a concise textbox, giving an overview, at this stage in the textbook. Thomas, however, joins in the discussion and builds on Larissa’s intervention, allying with her position to focus on Weimar’s progressive achievements:

(6)

Thomas: ja das atmet so n bisschen schon die auflösung der weimarer republik als äh

():

mmm

Thomas: perspektive und nicht die chancen die in der weimarer republik gesteckt haben. und äh deswegen fand ich etwas äh schwierig wenn man nur die problematischen bestimmungen da nennt und nicht auch etwas deutlicher die fortgesch- fortschrittlichen bestimmungen die ja drin waren.

Thomas: ‘yes it does already kind of breathe the disintegration of the weimar republic as eh

():

mmm

Thomas: perspective and not the chances that were in the weimar republic. and eh that’s why i find it somewhat eh difficult if one only names the problematic provisions there and not also a bit more clearly the progress- progressive provisions which were in it.’

(lines 0390–0392)
Thomas makes more explicit than Larissa why he is critical of the manuscript’s representation of the constitution. Also hedging (“kind of”), and subjectivizing his position (“eh that’s why i find it somewhat eh difficult”) he states that “it does already kind of breathe the disintegration of the Weimar Republic” and repeats Larissa’s argument that the manuscript does not focus on the chances which were in the Weimar Republic. In both Larissa’s and Thomas’ early interventions, the criticism is hedged (“kind of”, “somewhat eh difficult”, “a bit more clearly”, etc.), demonstrating fairness and courtesy to alternative views, in particular the primary authors’ view. The critique is nonetheless straightforward and clear.

After some talk of specific changes in terminology, Nadine jumps in and returns to the critique that the manuscript breathes the disintegration of the Weimar Republic, in her turn alllying with Larissa and Thomas.

(7)

\textbf{Nadine:} die idee war ja erst mal eben dass es so: demokratisch ist dass alle gehört werden. das heißt ich finde auch das atmet sehr sozusagen das ende. wir wissen was daraus geworden ist.

\textbf{Larissa: mmm}


\textbf{Thomas:} man kann das ja-

\textbf{Nadine:} den schüler das dann so zu präsentieren-

\textbf{Nadine:} ’the idea was originally that it is just so: democratic that everyone is heard. that means. i also think that that breathes very much sort of the end. we know what it led to.

\textbf{Larissa: mmm}

\textbf{Nadine:} i think i thought that that was a bit strange too to put it there as a box one should should eh i find it strange i have to say.

\textbf{Thomas:} one can-

\textbf{Nadine:} to present it like that to the students-

(lines 0406–0410)

In her argument that she finds it strange to list the problematic aspects of the constitution, Nadine mobilizes her expertise both as a historian and as a teacher. She shifts between these two roles, coupling strong language (“very much”) with hedges (“sort of”). Her main argument claims that the textbox is actually what should result from a classroom discussion among students and teacher (“and this
here is really actually the result of the discussion"). The textbox would therefore prevent students from working out for themselves what the Weimar constitution means for today's society. The disagreement persists with Nadine criticizing that the text pushes the interpretation in one particular direction.

(8)

Nadine: und so- außerdem ist es natürlich schon man drängt es dann sehr in eine bestimmte richtung ne? statt darüber zu diskutieren wie ist es nun mit der 5% klausel das ist ein ergebnis der weimarer geschichte und deshalb haben wir die heute wird gesagt ((haut auf Tisch)) so. zack.

Nadine: 'and so- anyway it is certainly one pushes it very much in a particular direction, right?
instead of discussing how it is now with the 5% clause that is a result of the weimar history and that's why we have it today it is said ((bangs on table)) so. bam.'

(line 0422)

Nadine contrasts ("instead of") an opening up of classroom discussion and a closing down of the dialogue. In the former, she mobilizes classroom practice in the form of potential future discussions of the role of the Weimar Republic in contemporary German politics. In the latter, she assembles a physical bang on the table with words of speed ("bam") to critique the manuscript's presentation of one particular direction of interpretation as uncontestable and non-negotiable.

In sum, the extracts above illustrate the multiple discursive moves made by members of the author team. They simultaneously demonstrate tentativeness and certainty. Their critique is embedded in cautious, provisional language; yet the argument for the need to give the Weimar republic a chance is clearly stated. They encourage Andreas to rewrite this section to evaluate the constitution less negatively; the textbook should enable classroom discussion of the central issues. Simultaneously however, participants observe that this very aim of opening up discussion to include the positive potential of the Weimar republic itself contributes to 'writing the history of the victors'. Two authors explicitly demonstrate dissatisfaction with producing a textbook which describes parliamentary democracy in such glowing terms (Extracts 1 and 2). This positive evaluation, taken together with the lack of attention paid to the council system as an alternative form of democratically organising society suggests that it was the
only plausible democratic alternative available in 1918/19. It offers no alternative plausible form of democratically organising society today. At this stage, the ambiguity evident in the meeting discourse is entextualized as quite dramatic transformations to the manuscript which seem to revalorize the Weimar constitution. For this reason we suggest that the final published textbook stabilizes the current (‘western’) hegemonic formation in which this type of social order is the only desirable/possible type in today’s world. Table 1 compares the manuscript text (left column) and the published text (right column) (for German, see Appendix).

Table 1. Revalorizing the Weimar constitution: Entextualisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manuscript (textbox)</th>
<th>Published text (textbox)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problematic provisions of the Weimar constitution</strong></td>
<td>The Weimar constitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There was no threshold, like today’s five percent clause, for a party to enter parliament. For every 60,000 votes there was one Member of Parliament mandate. Thus very many parties, also extremely small parties, were represented in the parliament, sometimes over 30.</td>
<td>The very liberal [freieheitliche] and democratic constitution was the first which had to prove itself in Germany. It gave all citizens political voice and guaranteed basic rights. This included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- That meant that forming a government was often difficult. An increasing number of parties had to form a coalition. Their politics were therefore often not continuous, but shaped by unpopular compromises.</td>
<td>- equality for all before the law,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Weak governments meant frequent changes of government (17 times in 14 years!), and often new elections, which, however, mostly just made the problem worse.</td>
<td>- inviolability of the person, the home, as well as privacy of correspondence and telecommunications,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The more splintered the parliament and the weaker the government, the stronger the position of the already very prominent president became (see diagram). He could appoint governments and could govern with the help of emergency article 48, if there was no opposing majority in the parliament.</td>
<td>- freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, religious freedom and the freedom of property.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Since the constitution was supposed to be particularly liberal [freieheitlich], it contained no way of dealing with those parties which had no other intention than to fight, or even to overthrow, the Weimar Republic.</td>
<td>- In addition, it included protection of young people and gave workers the right to participate in corporate decision-making.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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As can be observed in Table 1, the manuscript discussed during the meeting presented a largely negative evaluation of the constitution. This begins in the heading “Problematic provisions”, and continues with the description of e.g. what the constitution lacked (“there was no threshold”, “not continuous”), extreme-case formulations (“also extremely small parties”), negatively connoted lexical items (“difficult”, “unpopular”, “weak”, “problem”, “splintered”, “weaker”) and modals suggesting the government lacked agency (“had to form”) and the constitution was not what it claimed to be (“supposed to be particularly liberal”).

The published text, on the other hand, presents a largely positive account of the constitution. The heading avoids evaluative language (“The Weimar constitution”). It begins with lexical items which in today’s Germany are positively connotated (“very liberal [literally: the adjective form of “freedom”] and democratic”) and foregrounds the agency of the constitution (“It gave”). Bullet points list the positive aspects of the constitution. Formulations of potential (“enabled”, right column) are used rather than formulations of lack (“contained no way of dealing”, left column). To conclude this section, so far the final textual product contextualizes Thomas’ and Nadine’s claim (Extracts 1 and 2) that the team is writing the history of the victors.

3.3 Revalorizing the vanquished

A second issue leading to extensive disagreement and debate during the meeting is the question of whether the council system (Rätesystem) should be afforded more space in the chapter, and, closely linked to this issue, whether the evaluative language used to describe the worker and soldier councils (Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte) is not altogether too theatrical, biased and worked up.

Disagreement over evaluative language (Wertungen) is triggered by Niklas, who starts off praising the manuscript (“very many interesting issues”), thereby minimizing the threat to Andreas’ positive face, and refers to the preceding discussion on giving the republic a chance, demonstrating fairness and courtesy to alternative views:

(9)  
Niklas: sehr viele interessante themen und man muss ja der republik natürlich auch ne chance geben, das ist ja jetzt hier gesagt worden, und äh hier sind auch so einige wertungen drin, die finde ich so ein bisschen
problematisch, ganz am anfang ähm hhh
unsinniger befehl, fragwürdiger befehl. oder
befehl. oder?
Andreas: ich find schon dass man
Thomas: ja es ist es ist wirklich ne grundsätzliche
entscheidung die wir treffen für ein
kapitel und auch für das lehrbuch, in wie
weit geben wir wertungen vor, das find ich sehr
wichtig, dass wir noch mal {klar haben
Niklas: [äh linksparteien
wurde ich auch nicht sagen, ich wurde dann
arbeiterparteien sagen, das ist
verschiedentlich, das kommt auch noch im NS
capitel. also ich stoß mich nicht an vielem,
aber dies hier äh da würde ich dazu raten,
Larissa: wo ist das denn mit den linksparteien?
Niklas: ‘very many interesting issues and one does have
to give the republic a chance too of course,
that has been said here now, and eh there are
also a few evaluations in here that I find a
little bit problematic, right at the start ehm
hhh absurd command, questionable commend. or
command? or?
Andreas: i do think that one
Thomas: yes it is it is really a fundamental decision
that we have to make for a chapter and
also for the textbook, to what extent do
we provide evaluations, i find that very
important that
we again [clarify that
Niklas: [eh leftist parties i wouldn't say,
i would say workers’ parties, that is
different, that appears in the NS chapter too.
i don’t get riled by much, but there here eh
i would advise,
Larissa: where is that with the leftist parties?’
(lines 0447–0451)

Critiquing particular instances of problematic evaluation (“absurd command, questionable commend”). Niklas builds up his argument, relying on a complex arrangement of persuasive strategies in order to convince the other authors (and the editor) of the importance and necessity of the values he proclaims. Although
very subtly, already at this stage of the argument, it is clear that Niklas is less concerned with adhering and conforming to the dominant discourse, i.e. that they should (re-)write the success story of parliamentary democracy. Niklas hardly intervened during the previous discussion, and while politely echoing the need for emphasis on the chances of the republic with an evaluative “of course” (“natürlich”), he uses an impersonal sentence construction (“has been said”), suggesting that he recognizes and accepts the overall shared viewpoint, but prefers to switch to another critique/issue in the manuscript.

In what follows, Niklas is interrupted by Andreas, indicating disagreement with his critique, but subsequently supported by Thomas who cuts off Andreas’ interruption alloying with Niklas and manifestly confirming that this is definitely a “fundamental decision” which he finds very important. In the ensuing turns, Niklas continues with his critique of particular evaluations, triggering a joint search for the location of the particular words in the manuscript, and their replacement, e.g. “leftist party” is replaced by “workers’ party”; the photo caption “A truck seized with [sic] revolutionary sailors and soldiers goes through the Brandenburg Gate on 9 November” (“Ein mit revolutionären Matrosen und Soldaten besetztes Lastauto fährt am 9. November durch das Brandenburger Tor”) is replaced by “Sailors and soldiers drive through the Brandenburg Gate” (“Matrosen und Soldaten fahren durch das Brandenburger Tor”).

Further on in the debate, Niklas repeats his argument, pleading for explicit revalorization of the councils (“they are not that dangerous”, “simply organised suppliers”, “completely peaceable”), before coming down to his main argument, i.e. the claim that the worker and soldier councils be “de-dramatised”:

(10)

Niklas: also das mal grundsätzlich ne? (4) und deswegen rate ich ja da ein bisschen zu entdramatisieren. und und mal zu zeigen an einem- an einer stadt wie sie- wie das da eig- wie simpel das abgelaufen ist.

‘s o that’s a fundamental thing, eh? (4) and that’s why I advise here to de-dramatise a bit. andand to show for once in one- in one town how they-how that act- how easily it all proceeded.’

(line 0904)

Niklas is very insistent on this point, referring to particular historians’ books (Kolb 1972; Rurup & Brandt 1980), and his own classroom practice (“that’s how I always did it”, “you go crazy with the students”). In fact, the published textual

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changes reflect the perspective he insists on. Table 2 (emphasis added; for German, see Appendix) illustrates explicit textual shifts which entextualise the notion of de-dramatisation. Councils are dissociated from danger and the Soviet Union. The published text recalls Niklas’ comment on “how straightforwardly it all happened”. These changes, when compared to the manuscript text, revalorize the councils in a more positive light.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 2. Revalorizing the councils: Entextualizations</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manuscript</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sailors and marines mutinied against this &quot;suicide mission&quot; (&quot;Himmelfahrtskommando&quot;). They elected soldier councils as their representatives and called a general strike.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So for example in Braunschweig, where on 8 November a worker and soldier council, led by USPD and Spartakus leaders, took over the governing powers in the place of Duke August who had been forced to abdicate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim: To introduce Soviet style socialism, first in Braunschweig and from there in the whole German Reich.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As this symbolic act demonstrates, opinions are sharply divided about the future of Germany under the leftist parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo caption: A truck seized with [sic] revolutionary sailors and soldiers goes through the Brandenburg Gate on 9 November.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the textual shifts in Table 2 can be seen as a successful “de-dramatisation” of the councils. Instead of “mutiny[ing]”, sailors “decide to disobey”: They are no longer positioned as “led by USPD and Spartakus leaders”. The socialism they are aiming for is a “council system” not “Soviet style”. The socialist parties are described as “workers” parties rather than “leftist” parties. The “revolutionary sailors and soldiers” who have “seized” a car now straightforwardly “drive through” the Brandenburg Gate.

Traditionally, worker and soldier councils have been portrayed in much the same way that the MSPD portrayed them in 1919. In the propaganda of that period, councils quickly became a “synonym for council domination following a Bolshevik model and thus an anti-democratic bogeyman [Schreckgespenst]” (Engel et al. 2002: xxviii). An analysis of German history textbooks from the 1960s to 2010 illustrates that the council movement is still largely associated
with “antidemocratic thinking”; alternative interpretations of the councils as, for instance, “socialist democracy” have not been included (cf. Macgilchrist, forthcoming).

In their introduction to historical documents on the council movement, Engel and colleagues argue that the demonization of the council system as antidemocratic around the time of the November revolution contributed to the weakening of their potential to develop “democratic approaches to deepening the revolution” Engel et al. 2002: (xxx). Thus, the way History 9/10 dissociates the councils from the Soviet Union and de-dramatises their actions contests the history of the victors. The textbook destabilizes the claim that Ebert and the SPD were the only democratic alternative during the November revolution and the early stages of the Weimar Republic. It supports more recent interpretations of the councils as a form of direct democracy aiming at building an alternative (democratic) society, such as the account outlined by Engel et al. (e.g. ibid: xxxi). And, in a broader sense, if demonization in 1918 weakened the councils’ potential to develop revolutionary democratic approaches, then perhaps the obverse is also possible: the revalorization in 2010 could signal social change in which the potential to develop radical democratic approaches is once again thinkable, and not only on the margins of cultural theory.

4. Shifting contemporary conceptions of (radical) democracy

In this section, we explore how the analysis of these everyday, mundane practices speaks to broader contemporary debates on conceptions of (radical) democracy. Taking a step back from the immediate data to the broader discursive formation in which the talk takes place, we can observe two shifts of a similar kind.5

First, flamboyant cultural theory has renewed popular interest in the writings of Marx and other communist or radical democratic thinkers. This popularization has taken the shape of individual theorists such as Žižek, Badiou, Rancière, Butler or Negri; of films; much hyped conferences in London, Berlin and New York; and events such as the Festival of Dangerous Ideas in Sydney.6 This new wave of interest is explicitly philosophical, rather than party-political; it explicitly distances itself from the Soviet Union. The Guardian headlined an article on the London conference, “Move over Jacko, Idea of Communism is hottest ticket in town this weekend” (Campbell 2009). Another Guardian piece reflects on the conference and the potential of viable alternatives to liberal capitalism and the free market (Keenan 2009). It foregrounds the philosophical interest in what the concepts of “egalitarian voluntarism, self-organisation,
common ownership of common means of production, abolition of class-
structured society, and freedom from state power” can mean for contemporary
society.7

Second, historians interested in communism have begun to write in a less
politicised manner than was the case during the Cold War. In 2009, two Oxford
historians published histories of communism: Archie Brown’s (2009) The Rise and
Fall of Communism, and David Priestland’s (2009) The Red Flag: Communism and
the Making of the Modern World. The titles indicate the different approaches. While
the former, written by a professor emeritus of Soviet history, frames communism
in the traditional way as a period of history which came and went; the latter hints
at the relevance of communism for today’s world. Priestland’s book has been
acclaimed not only in the New Statesman as “a comprehensive guide to the biggest
political delusion of the 20th century” (Gray 2009), but also in The New York Times
as able to capture “the early appeal and essential optimism of communism” (Garner
2009).8 In a similar vein, Peter Marshall’s (2010) Demanding the Impossible: A his-
tory of anarchism mobilizes a range of individuals who would not immediately be
associated with anarchism e.g. Foucault, Gandhi and Camus. Describing itself as
a study of “a widely misunderstood subject”, the book dissociates anarchism from
its traditional public image of idealistic utopia or violent chaos, and rearticulates it
with, inter alia, contemporary peace, green and global justice movements. Popular
writing by political scientists, philosophers and journalists conclude that, for
instance, socialism is highly relevant today (Cohen 2009; Newman 2005) and is
deeply rooted in the history of the USA (Nichols 2011).

In both these fields, cultural theory and popular academic writing, claims are
being made that the discursive terrain has shifted. The recent books cited here,
although by no means all the books on these issues (e.g. Service 2007), position
themselves as providing feasible, reasonable accounts. They emphasise the con-
temporary relevance of the ideas/ideals and practices of (non-party-political)
socialism, communism, anarchism and/or radical (pluralist) democracy. Rather
than engaging in heated contestation of parliamentary or capitalist ideas/ideals
and practices, they begin from the assumption of a shared disenchantment with
the injustices of a capitalist system. Priestland, for instance, introduces his account
of global communism by noting the 11 September attacks in New York and the
financial crisis of 2008 and suggesting that “[t]he history of Communism there-
fore seems to be more relevant to today’s concerns than it was in the early 1990s”
(2009:xxvii). Marshall’s history of anarchism has been described in mainstream
media as a “timely read” and as “a stimulating portrait of a highly varied but dis-
tinctive political ideal, tradition, and practice arising from the enduring human
impulse to be free” (Publishers Weekly 2010).
In our reading, these descriptions suggest that the domain of the ‘sayable’ is shifting. In these writings, alternatives to representative/parliamentary democracy are no longer being portrayed as rebellion, protest or resistance from outside the system (Woodcock 1986: 404) or as failures of the past (Fukuyama 1992), but as feasible, plausible alternative ways of living and/or forms of social/economic/political organisation.

Our analysis suggests that a similar shift can be seen in a third, perhaps more unexpected, field of social interaction, in the (mundane, everyday, professional, situated) meeting talk of these curriculum materials writers. An account of the council movement which positions it as reasonable and peaceable, is successfully adopted and – to a certain extent – entextualized in the published textbook. This account of the worker and soldier councils in 1918/19 Germany is not new for historians, but it is subtly writing a history of the non-victors, paradoxically, given the simultaneous revalorization of the Weimar constitution and the explicit reflections of two participants demonstrating a feeling that they are “writing the history of the victors”.

We are not, we should note, claiming that authors and editors are mobilizing theoretical discourse on radical democracy or new Marxist philosophy. While there are explicit intertextual links to historical research (see Section 3.3), we observed no explicit or manifest intertextual references to the theoretical discourse. However, given that the “very organization of the everyday is permeated with connections that extend beyond it” (Smith 2005: 40), this extension will not always be explicit. One strength of ethnography, and the “dialectic of surprise”(Willis & Trondheim 2000: 12), i.e. the intricate process of interpreting fieldnotes and audio recordings against the researcher’s theoretical interest and back again, is precisely to enable the researcher to perceive connections and extensions which are not explicitly made by the protagonists themselves.

Indeed, the textbook by no means explicitly foregrounds a socialist perspective or presents radical/direct/council democracy as an explicitly viable alternative to parliamentary democracy. The comments reflecting on the “history of the victors” clearly demonstrate that the author team does not identify itself as revalorizing radical forms of democracy. Nevertheless, the changes we have observed during this fieldwork were occurring at the same time as the theoretical discourse has become more widespread and popularized. Our analytical move of teasing out shifting evaluations across different arenas of political, educational, economic life, even if they are not directly linked, suggests that more profound social change is underway. That it is now possible and plausible to argue that the direct democracy of the councils was a straightforward, spontaneous movement of the people is, we
suggest, both a sign of discursive and social change, and part of this discursive and social change.

5. Conclusion

The specific research questions we addressed in this paper were: (1) How are interpretations of the November Revolution in 1918 articulated, contested and manifested and (2) What do these everyday, mundane practices say about contemporary conceptions of (radical) democracy? Our findings have suggested that both the authors’ talk and the published history textbook material contest – albeit subtly, delicately and not explicitly – the history of the victors while at the same time partially reproducing it. Our central argument was that a similar shifting sense of how political life is to be organised is being signalled in two other fields which are generally thought of as quite distinct: political theory and popular academic writing.

The ambivalent and paradoxical discursive changes that we are pointing to here are not on the same level as the powerful change towards neo-liberalism and the new capitalism analysed by Fairclough (1992, 2005), Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) or others. Instead, we have pointed to apparently tiny, multiple and contradictory changes, including a – far more subtle – change in a different direction. This direction explicitly links popular sovereignty and a social politics of equality and justice to the concept of democracy. To borrow from Lefort (2008), the textual changes we have identified here point to the fragility of a political model which is generally held to be invulnerable. In turn, it thus also points to the potential of micro-level ethnographic discourse analysis to identify ambiguous or paradoxical moments of everyday experience which fissure “dominant” discourse. Perhaps this revalorization in 2010 could signal that space is opening up in which radical democratic approaches are (again) thinkable, and not only on the margins of cultural theory. This fissure may only be a tiny rip, “but”, writes Lefort, “the traces of the rip will remain even after the veil as been woven anew” (2008: 43).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the research participants in the publishing house, and especially the editor and authors of the book we have called History 9/10, for the generosity they extended during the fieldwork which led to this paper. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and encouraging reviews.

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Notes

1. In 2009, Birbeck College, London organised a conference "On the idea of communism"; in 2010, the same title was used for a conference on philosophy and art in Berlin ("Idee des Kommunismus"); in 2011, the third event in the series was held in New York. In 2011, the Humboldt University in Berlin hosted a major conference titled "Rethinking Marx: Philosophy, Critique, Practice" (20-22 May). The latter included a special event "Communism for Children". These conferences included a range of well-known political theorists such as Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Wendy Brown, Terry Eagleton, Michael Hardt, Axel Honneth, Nina Power, Jacques Rancière, Saskia Sassen and Slavoj Žižek. Similarly, a number of films explicitly considering the potential of Marxist, radical democratic or communist ideas have been produced and widely received, e.g. Michael Moore’s (2009) Capitalism: A love story, Jason Barker’s (2011) Marx Reloaded, Susan Chales de Beaulieu & Jean-Baptiste Farkas’ (2010) Marx, Alien & Co.

2. We understand entextualization as the practice of de-contextualizing text or discourse from one location and re-contextualizing it in another (cf. Bauman & Briggs 1990; Silverstein & Urban 1996).

3. Our account here is highly problematic, since our analysis concerns conflict over precisely how to define and describe these central concepts. We hope our description is read as a brief, inevitably positioned and slightly reflexive, orientation to the issues rather than a definitive definition.

4. While the analysis in this section renders and respects the sequential flow of the argument, only short extracts of authors’ talk are presented. The entire transcript of the meeting is available on request.

5. The arguments made by the participants in this meeting are not new. The renewed interest in Richard Müller’s work on the history of the councils in the 1960s and 1970s was part of the explicitly radical student protests; it was radically anti-establishment. What we – tentatively and cautiously – see in the meeting talk and the entextualization of this talk in the textbook is a presentation of Müller’s (explicitly Marxist) interpretation of the councils as a straightforward, historically accurate account, rather than a source for political radicalism (cf. Müller 2002). The novelty is the way in which the actions of the councils are presented as reasonable and rational, through, for instance, Niklas’ use of the signifier de-dramatise, and also his account of the councils’ actions as simple, straightforward, peaceful, etc.

6. See Note 1 for details.

7. Online comments on the article are harshly critical, and generally refer to the Soviet Union, in particular Stalinism, or the Berlin wall. In Germany, the mainstream media reacted very negatively to the conference on the Idea of Communism, invariably linking communism with the GDR, the Soviet Union and Stalin rather than the philosophical interest in communal action foregrounded by the conference organisers.

8. Priestland’s book is not the first to offer an evaluation which is not a cold warrior attitude (see e.g. Cohen 1985; Fitzpatrick 1994). In our observation, however, what is new is that this book no longer even demonstrates the need to engage with cold warrior approaches as plausible alternatives.

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9. As with all research, “[o]ne begins fieldwork not with a tabula rasa but with a foreshadowed problem in mind” (Wilcox 1982:459). In other words, there is “a context […] to the context one is studying” (Massey 1998), and each ethnographer enters the field with a different context, including specific research questions, methodological assumptions and theoretical positioning. In our case, the field observations and analysis led us to pay particular attention to similarities across different fields. Just as “difference” is “a conceptual tool critical to our ability to observe” (Wolcott 2008:140) so is “similarity” a conceptual tool which can aid our observation and understanding of how discursive shifts in particular fields (textbook production, theory, historical writing) tie in with, and co-create, broader social change.

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Appendix

Table 1. Revalorizing the Weimar constitution: Entextualisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manuscript (textbox)</th>
<th>Published text (textbox)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problematische Bestimmungen der Weimarverfassung</td>
<td>Die Weimarer Verfassung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Es gab keine Sperrklausel, wie heutzutage die Fünfprozenthürklausel, für den Einzug der Parteien in den Reichstag. Auf 60 000 Stimmen fiel ein Abgeordnetenmandat. So waren sehr viele, auch extrem kleine Parteien im Reichstag vertreten, zeitweise über 30.</td>
<td>Die sehr freiheitliche und demokratische Verfassung war die erste, die sich in Deutschland im politischen Alltag bewähren musste. Sie gab allen Bürgerinnen und Bürgern politische Mitspracherechte und garantierte Grundrechte. Dazu gehörten:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Das bedeutete, dass die Regierungsgebildung oft schwierig war, dass sich immer mehrere Parteien zu einer Koalition zusammenzutun mussten. Ihre Politik war daher oft nicht geradlinig, sondern von unbeliebten Kompromissen geprägt.</td>
<td>- die Gleichheit aller vor dem Gesetz,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Schwache Regierungen bedeuteten einen häufigen Regierungszusammenbruch (17 mal in 14 Jahren!), oftmals Neuwahlen, die aber das Problem meist nur verstärkten.</td>
<td>- die Unverletzlichkeit der Person, der Wohnung sowie des Post- und Fernmeldegeheimnisses,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Je zerstörter der Reichstag und je schwächer die Regierungen, desto stärker die ohnehin schon herausragende (siehe Schema) Stellung des Reichspräsidenten. Er konnte die Regierungen ernennen und mithilfe des Notstandsgesetzes 48 regieren, wenn sich dagegen im Reichstag keine Mehrheit fand.</td>
<td>- die Freiheit der Meinungsausübung, die Versammlungs- und Glaubensfreiheit sowie die Freiheit des Eigentums.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Da die Verfassung besonders freiheitlich sein sollte, enthielt sie keine Möglichkeit, gegen solche Parteien vorzugehen, die nichts anderes beabsichtigten, als die Republik von Weimar zu bekämpfen, sie sogar umzustürzen.</td>
<td>- Darüber hinaus bezog sie den Schutz der Jugend ein und gab Arbeitern Mitbestimmungsrechte in den Betrieben.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Je mehr Parteien an der Regierung beteiligt waren, desto stärker war die Stellung des Reichspräsidenten. Er konnte die Regierung ernennen und mithilfe von Notverordnungen regieren, wenn sich im Reichstag keine Mehrheit fand.

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Table 2. Revalorizing the councils: Entextualizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manuscript</th>
<th>Published text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wie dieser symbolischer Akt zeigt, gehen die Meinungen über die Zukunft Deutschlands unter den Linksparteien weit auseinander.</td>
<td>Wie diese symbolischen Handlungen zeigen, gehen die Meinungen über die Zukunft Deutschlands unter den Arbeiterparteien weit auseinander.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo caption: Ein mit revolutionären Matrosen und Soldaten besetztes Lastauto fährt am 9. November durch das Brandenburger Tor.</td>
<td>Photo caption: Matrosen und Soldaten führen durch das Brandenburger Tor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>