

Liminals and Marginals

Creating Religious Identification in an Eastern District of Berlin

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Abstract:

This essay proposes an ethnographic account of the tension-ridden process of collective identification to urban space by looking at one rather poor district of East Berlin. Specific problems of this district, such as the presence of right-wing extremists, are thematised through the politics of image which are determined by both locals' relation to the area and the marketing strategies of local politicians. In such a situation a discourse about cultural pluralism develops to which various local actors contribute, some of them being religious. In this essay the focus goes on a Baptist community active in the area which struggles in a context of high secularity to offer possible religious points of identification. Religious actors are a minority in the area and their impact seems to be particularly successful on "liminal" characters. The author here proposes to have a closer look at ex-inmates which are present in the area and often converted to Christianity.

In one area of an eastern district of Berlin (the “Weitlingkiez” in Lichtenberg), which was, during the German Democratic Republic (GDR), one of the commercially liveliest places of East Berlin, political power still is in the hands of the current left-wing party. Local authorities make an effort to keep the socialist memory alive by naming streets and squares in the area after local socialist victims of the Nazi period. In mass media discourse, however, the now economically poor area is rather known as a centre of violent right-wing activities.¹ As a matter of fact when walking around the area, one is much more likely to meet “skinheads” than in any other area of Berlin.² Under the conditions of this strong political contrast and of the public sensitivity concerning right-wing extremism in Germany, political authorities have started in the last years to offer financial support for initiatives to fight violence and racism and to favour cultural pluralism in the area. Some local religious groups did not hesitate to jump on the occasion and integrated their activities into the promotion of pluralism. By doing so they had, however, not simply in mind to fight right-wing extremists – who are finally only a limited number of individuals – but rather to reach the rest of the population whose background is a solid socialist and atheistic one. It is known, indeed, that the case of the former GDR represents worldwide, probably the most secularised society ever. Contrary to West Germany, where more than 70% of the population is affiliated to Christian Churches, in the East the *religious norm* is “non-belonging”.³

In the following pages I shall first describe the social situation in this part of the city and secondly relate about some experiences of one religious group active in the district.⁴ The area finds itself confronted with multiple marginalities: economical, cultural, political and religious. The reverse side of this situation in Lichtenberg is that for some social actors, one could characterise as liminals according to Victor Turner’s notion the area ironically appears as attractive. The idea of liminality shall shed a critical light on the roles of the different actors involved in the contested process of collective identity construction in an urban setting: religion, politics, and mass media.

The Weitlingkiez in Media and Politics

Only a couple of minutes away from Alexanderplatz, the inner-city train reaches the railway station Lichtenberg. In this station, while crucial traffic lines intersect, people rather try to avoid each others’

¹ cf. Luzar 2006.

² For the notion of right-wing extremism in Germany I refer to Jaschke1994, p. 31.

³ cf. Wohlrab-Sahr and Schmidt 2003.

⁴ I spent one year observing a housing program for ex-convicts in the area in 2006/07. I chose to present this religious group since it was one of the most active during that year.

look. When arriving, travelers usually hurry outside the unfriendly place onto the streets. South of the station a long street, the Weitlingstrasse, leads to shops and restaurants. While north of the railway station huge prefabricated houses and the former State security buildings impress any visitor, the houses south of the station, have all been built before World War II and have at most five floors. About five to six thousand inhabitants live in this area. The area undergoes a state-planned massive restoration since the houses, originally built for manual workers, are outdated. For this reason the social, demographic and architectural profile of the area is well documented. Municipality commissioned an urban investigation office, TOPOS, to follow closely its development since 1997. Overall, the population here can be characterised as socially disadvantaged.⁵ The unemployment rates are high and no tourists or students are really attracted here. There is no cinema, no theater, only a shopping mall and a couple of squares are animated during the day. However, it is not a “typical” tension-ridden urban area comparable to those of “global cities”⁶, facing demographic overpopulation and massive migratory movements. On the contrary, the area rather runs the risk of social degradation with its numerous houses left empty after depopulation and becoming increasingly cheap. One further crucial characteristic is that here, the percentage of non-Germans, even of non-East-Germans is particularly low (less than 10%, cf. TOPOS 2007: 84/85). The area, the studies conclude, does not appear as a unity fostering some kind of identification (TOPOS 2007: 86), it looks unattractive since it has not a character, not an identity of its own. According to them, the low level of non-Germans, combined with this non-identity, make it possible that in public space right wing activists appear in a dominant and undisturbed way. Elias (1965)⁷ already pointed to the difficulty for socially disadvantaged areas to control their public image and in Lichtenberg the struggle about the image is at least as intense as the political struggles on the streets. While media regularly relate and give ample space to violent events linked to right-wing groups in the area, the rest of the inhabitants is clearly frustrated to see their area constantly reduced to the image of a right-wing “no-go” place. As a reaction they downplay the importance of right-wing activities while political authorities finance generously local programs to promote anti-racism. It was part of the active politics of the district mayor to favour convergences of the civil forces around anti-racism in order to let the area be identified with them rather than with skinheads. All the activities with this aim refer to the area as a *Kiez* - an evocative expression used in northern Germany to refer to a small part of town demarcated by local dwellers usually around one main street, forming some kind of distinctive unity and offering a bottom-up identification in the spirit of a village. Calling this area a *Kiez* stands in sharp contrast to

⁵ cf. TOPOS 2007.

⁶ Sassen 1991, Wacquant 2006.

⁷ Elias 1965.

the idea of a violent “no-go” area, as it was targeted also during the football world cup in 2007.⁸ Among the actors who benefit from this political will there are several religious actors. While in the *Kiez* only about one out of four inhabitants belongs to some religious community at all, there is a remarkably high number of religious groups. At least four churches are located in the area: two belong to the main Protestant church, one to Baptists and a further one to the Neo-Apostolic community. I shall here concentrate on one quite successful case: the Baptist church.

Baptists and the Force to Convert

The most active religious community, albeit very small (135 members in Lichtenberg), in trying to reach out to the population in the *Kiez* is probably the „Evangelisch Freikirchliche Gemeinde Berlin-Lichtenberg“ (Evangelical Free Church Community). Last year the community celebrated loudly its 75th anniversary in the *Kiez* thereby emphasising their belonging to the *Kiez* since pre-socialist times. Their church is an ample building characterised by a tall crucifix at the entrance gate. According to the pastor of the community, their identification to the *Kiez* is strong.⁹ They try in numerous ways to reach out to the enviroing society: in September 2006, they organised religious services in one room of the railway station - „just next to McDonald's“, as the pastor said. A big choir of 30 persons sang the Gospel and more than 150 persons attended the service. For the organisers it was very important to be placed next to McDonald's, so that many – “who were only on their way to some fast-food” – could stop by and probably „enter a church for the first time in their life“, using again the pastor’s words¹⁰. This community is also the only religious group participating at the *Forum Weitlingkiez* – a civil society movement initiated and supported by the local administration to coordinate and encourage social and cultural activities in the *Kiez*.¹¹ This reference to the high degree of secularity in the enviroing society is constant and shapes the action of religious actors.

As soon as the *Forum Weitlingkiez* was created in 2006, the pastor of the church started participating actively in it. During the meetings he would often stand up to express his opinion – obviously he was an experienced preacher – and introduce the community to the others. As he told me, it was for him much easier to talk about religion with East Germans who had no pre-conceptions about Baptists – they would simply not know who they are – than to West Germans,

⁸ *World Cup Guide Highlights Germany's Racist Hotspots*, Deutsche Welle, May, 3rd 2006. cf. <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,1991934,00.html> last accessed in January 2009.

⁹ I interviewed him, a West German who wanted to come to the “*Neue Bundesländer*”, as he said, to grasp the challenge of working in a very secular environment, in March, 2007.

¹⁰ At the meeting of the *Forum Weitlingkiez* on January, 9th, 2007.

¹¹ The Forum meets about five times a year and comprises associations as well as individual citizens. Regularly it finances local cultural initiatives.

who usually have prejudices against all religions that are neither Catholic nor Protestant. After some meetings he was elected one of the speakers of the Forum and offered the rooms of the church for the meetings of the forum, giving the practical reason that they were “larger than those” offered by a local agency. Surprisingly enough this was well accepted, so that the Baptist community became clearly one of the most visible participant groups of the Forum. On a regular basis the community organises lunches, concerts, gatherings for kids and young people of the area and is always supported by the Forum. When it came to discussing what alternative proposals were possible to fight right-wing violence in the area, it was only among the Baptist community that there was one dark-skinned person ready to commit for anti-racism in the area. Contrary to other more political initiatives, the Baptists offered to mediate between the population and the right-wing extremists. They had a lot of faith in their capacity of persuading people while the other participants of the *Forum* were sceptical and found them rather naïve. The Baptists based their faith on their experience of converts and on the conviction that only Christian faith is capable of bridging the psychological paradox of “hating the sin without hating the sinner”¹². An example could be what happened to one East-German convert in his early forties I interviewed in February 2007. After having told a pastor in prison his violent crime committed within a right-wing group, the pastor asked him whether he actually hated the person he almost killed, or foreigners in general. The pastor asked „Have you ever hated people?“ and his answer was “Well, hate – no – but I just kept some distance.” He continued quoting the pastor “he said, that's ok, it is a question of feeling – so you never felt hate – I say no. Well so it happened that he gave me something like a questionnaire about Christian beliefs and what I belief and and and... also about religion. I was prepared... slowly for baptism and everything... and at some point I felt and felt and slowly went down that path.“ Also a further ex-convict from East Germany about the same age, now member of the Baptist community in Lichtenberg had a “successful conversion”. He told me during an interview in September 2006 that he has been an alcoholic for many years and was imprisoned in 1989 for murder. He came out only recently, that is, after the political turn. During the last seven years of his imprisonment he participated in a group therapy for alcoholics, which was organised by a committed Baptist – himself an ex-convict. Through this contact he decided to convert and is today a convinced Baptist. Although he does not live in this district, he chose to be part of the Baptist community in Lichtenberg, where the people have become a sort of “replacement for his family”. He stressed how important it is for him that the other members of the religious community know his life-story. Contrary to what he experienced in prison, the religious community offers him “human warmth and

¹² I refer here to George Herbert Mead's idea developed in his essay on punitive justice that „[it] is quite impossible psychologically to hate the sin and love the sinner.“ „The Psychology of Punitive Justice“ p. 592.

care”; he is not simply a name there, but a person “well, they want to know how you are and welcome you warmly. I never experienced such a community before.”

When Liminality and Marginality Meet

To understand such feelings we need to remember that total institutions – in particular prisons – do have a devastating impact on identity. A total institution is also a *liminal* institution, according to Victor Turner.¹³ Prisoners do not possess anything, and are neither criminals any longer nor ordinary citizens; their rights are strongly limited, and they are kept apart from society. Prisons are in many regards “betwixt-and-between established states of politico-jural structure” (Turner 1977: 37). They are often also considered “places of dying”, and they are “polluting” (Turner 1995 [1969]: 128). The link Turner establishes between *liminality* and inferiority in social status is clearly visible in prison; prisoners mostly belong to the lower social classes (Turner 1995 [1969]: 99, 100).

When they are released, many prisoners choose to live in large cities where the degree of anonymity can remain high. Interestingly, in the *Weitlingkiez* since 1997 an institution provides housing to ex-prisoners. The program in Lichtenberg is highly cherished by inmates and the fact that there is no identity of its own in the area seems highly appreciated among ex-convicts who are all quite isolated from their families, and have a very low educational level. The overall profile of the population in the area and its location in media discourse – as a marginal part of town – give ex-convicts actually the possibility to remain in a way *liminal* at least until they decide when they want to join normality. In a context such as that of Eastern Germany, the action of religiously committed persons needs to be also interpreted in terms of *liminality* and marginality. The social frame offers indeed almost no opportunity to locate religious arguments, practices or thoughts in a “normal” way. Normality is here secularity and religion can convey a *liminal* identity.

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¹³ Turner 1977 and 1995 [1969].

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