

# History of Symbols as Social History?

## Ten preliminary notes on the image and sign systems of social movements in Germany

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### I

The last two centuries have produced, transformed and destroyed a myriad of political symbols of a linguistic, visual and ritual form. Between, say 1790 and 1990 the political sphere witnessed both an explosion in the generation of symbols and a radical decline of symbols. This calls for explanations.

Mary Douglas and Serge Moscovici have provided insightful reflections on the theory and history of political symbols of modern social movements. In Moscovici the analysis of symbols is part of a political psychology which aims to interpret the behaviour and conceptions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century mass movements.<sup>1</sup> Moscovici's basic premise is that, due to the emergence of new forms of collective conditions of existence, society's perception of itself has been determined since the French Revolution by the image of the mass, by the concept of political mass movements. The extent of the revolutionary processes which determined and accompanied the progress into modernity, and the political reaction following them, were defined by the category "mass" by those directly involved as well observers. The "mass" was not just a category but also a strategy: the "mass movement" and the "mass action" were seen as the goals of political action. Reaching this goal required collective representations in the form of linguistic, visual and ritual symbols. Signs, images and gestures created and consolidated collective identities.<sup>2</sup>

Political symbols are means of communication in a mass society. Symbols enable the development of group identities and the contraction of linguistic communication processes.<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth-century French literature, which, unlike that of other European countries, often set up "society" as the hero of novel, offers impressive insights into the use and significance of new political signs and symbols, of flags, clothing and gestures.<sup>4</sup> A prime example is provided by the five volumes of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), which describe in precise detail the political symbols of the period

<sup>1</sup> Serge Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd. A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (Cambridge 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Bernhard Giesen, *Die Entdinglichung des Sozialen* (Frankfurt/M., 1991), p.240.

<sup>4</sup> See Wolfgang Kemp, "Das Bild der Menge, 1789–1830", *Städte-Jahrbuch*, NF 4 (1973), pp. 249–270.

between 1815 and 1830 covered by the novel. The same is the case in Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885), which depicts the emerging symbolic orientations of the politicizing French working class.

## II

Moscovici points to formal structural elements and relations of modern society to explain the rise and consolidation of specific political symbols in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mary Douglas, on the other hand, primarily locates symbolic understanding in the society's class structure, in the social hierarchy of "industrial societies".<sup>5</sup> This allows her to explain not only the emergence, but also the differentiation and erosion, of political systems. In her analysis Douglas relies on the work of the sociolinguist Basil Bernstein, and in some sense she argues along sociolinguistic lines. The lower classes of urban industrialized society, the bedrock of social movements, are not integrated into the system of political discourse of bourgeois society because they are restricted in their linguistic behaviour and their political articulacy. The restricted language code is compensated by highly ritualized communication types, which are emotional and affective rather than logical and discursive. Restricted language code and ritual are correlated to each other. The rituals, Douglas observes, are used to adorn and strengthen the group cultures. The non-discursive behavioural logic of the lower-class collective has to rely on symbols to enable it to fit into the political scheme of general society. At the same time cultural and social self-images and collective identities are developed. Collective identities, however short-lived they may be, derive a consistency through their sign and image systems, and thus fit recognizably into a social reality.

Douglas' considerations not only place political symbolism in a social context, in the class structure of a society, but also in a historical context. She observes a gradual decline of symbolic orientations in industrial society, caused by a reduced receptivity to symbols, due in turn to a steady extension of discursive forms of communication in western industrial society.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly symbolic forms are replaced by linguistic forms. It may be that in her analysis Douglas has been too much influenced by a "simple" ethnological conception of symbolism – something to which, according to Victor Turner, ethnologists and anthropologists often succumb because they tend to miss the "watershed division" between "symbolic systems and genres belonging to cultures which have developed before and after the Industrial Revolution"<sup>7</sup> – and that she has therefore not given sufficient

<sup>5</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols. Exploration in Cosmology* (London 1970), esp. "To Inner Experience", pp. 40–58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63 and p. 55

<sup>7</sup> Victor Turner *From Ritual to Theater. The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982), p. 30.



Figure 1. "A Salute to the May day celebration." May Day postcard from circa 1910

weight to the increased power of symbols deriving from the greater aesthetic sophistication and the impact of the mass media and to their "ludic" and "experimental" significance in the reality of modern society (and even more so of post-modern society). Symbols are not only the expression of a restricted (i.e. non-linguistic culture), but also the expression of a "ludic" culture, which means that political symbols still remain part of our image worlds even after they have lost their political significance. This is evident particularly in the history of symbols of the left. Political symbols no longer seem necessary as orientation signs, but they are still known. That explains their random, playful or "ludic" usage. Not infrequently political symbols mutate into do-it-yourself and play elements of subcultural groups and thus lose their political significance and instrumentality. The hammer-and-sickle emblem becomes a fashion accessory.<sup>8</sup>

### III

In conjunction with Moscovici's model Douglas' observations offer an explanation of the rise and decline of political symbols, particularly those

<sup>8</sup> See also Gottfried Korff, "Notizen zur Symbolbedeutung der Sichel im 20. Jahrhundert", in Silke Göttisch and Kai Detlev Sievers, (eds.), *Forschungsfeld Museum. Festschrift für Arnold Lühning zum 65. Geburtstag* (Kiel, 1988), pp. 195–225, esp. pp. 212f. On the sale of "socialist" symbols during and following the dissolution of East Germany, see Monika Flacke-Knoch, "Die verkaufte Biographie", in *Bilder vom Neuen Deutschland: Eine deutsch-deutsche Ausstellungscollage*, exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 13–22 July 1990 (Düsseldorf, 1990), p. 25.

of the nineteenth and twentieth-century social movements. Symbols, we know, extend well beyond the reach of verbal understanding. They are of key importance above all in environments characterized by linguistic and other restrictions. This means that the role of symbols and signs in identity and group formation will be particularly significant within social groups that are disadvantaged in their verbal, cognitive and intellectual development because of a restrictive working life, living conditions and forms of communication. Richard Hoggart put the situation of working people succinctly: "They had little or no training in the handling of ideas or in analysis."<sup>9</sup> A similar point is made by Paul A. Pickering in his essay "Class without Words", which investigates the role of symbolic forms of communication in the British Chartist movement.<sup>10</sup> As the masses pushed towards political articulation, symbols and expressive signs played an important role in the forging of identity and unity. This applies especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, when there existed as yet no other media and institutions for social communication like political associations and parties.

Max Weber was the first to note the irrational, emotional behaviour of the politically unorganized mass, "irrational mob rule", as he called it.<sup>11</sup> For him it is irrational because it is unformed or unmediated, neither by parties as "organized political interest groups" nor by intentional symbols. Weber sees symbols as transitional forms, as transitory media, as communicative aids in the creation of "communal action based on agreement", which is distinguished from "uniform mass action" and "mass-determined action" by a sense of purpose. A precondition for the rise of political action groups is the organization of a "plurality of people by means of similar purposive usage of specific externally similar symbols."<sup>12</sup> Since they support political activities in a suggestive and affective way, symbols become obsolete as the rationality potential grows in the parties. Parties, according to Weber, are concerned with the realization of "specific political goals."<sup>13</sup> The unorganized mass on the street – suspect as far as Weber was concerned because it tends towards "coups, sabotage and similar excesses"<sup>13</sup> – forms and directs itself in its aims by means of symbols, images and signs. In so doing it develops politically mature and functional organizational structures, which in the long term make symbols redundant. The politics of democratization and mass communication is determined by the word, a trend which is also encouraged by the technical media.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life with Special Preference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Paul A. Pickering, "Class without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist movement", *Past and Present*, 112 (1986), pp. 144–162.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen 1972), p. 868.

<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, *Soziologie: Weltgeschichtliche Analysen: Politik*, third edn. (Stuttgart 1964), p. 127; see also Giesen, *Die Entdinglichung des Sozialen*, p. 207.

<sup>13</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, p. 839.

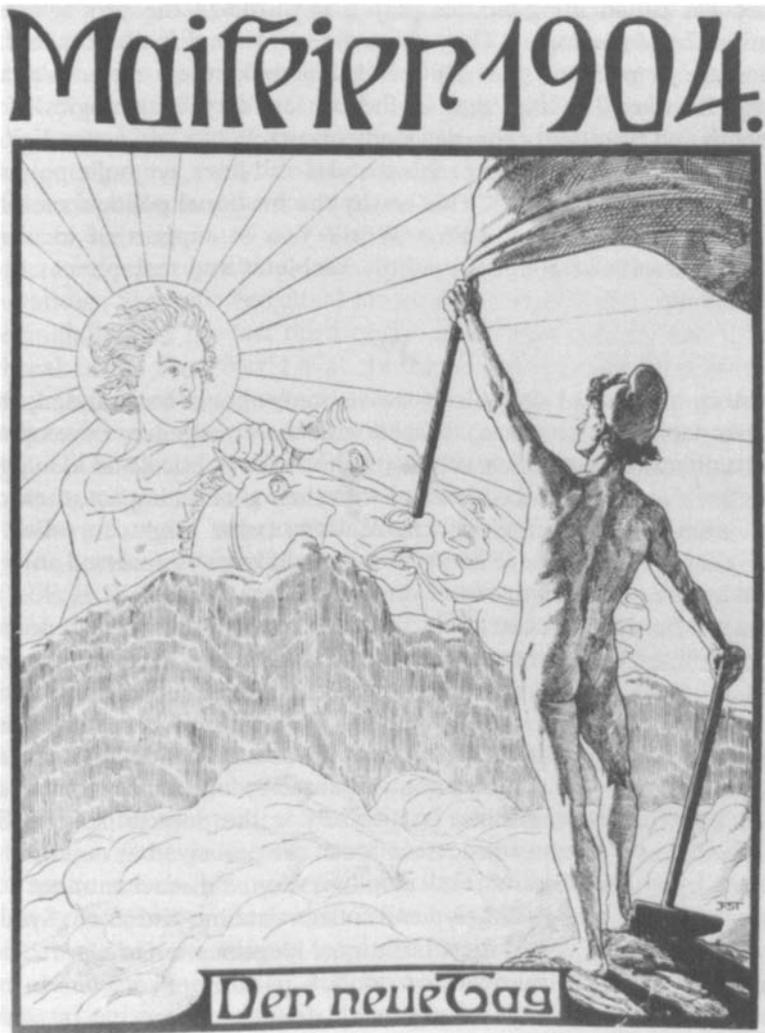


Figure 2. Cover page illustration of the May 1904 issue of *Vorwärts*

Unlike Weber, Robert Michels observes the rise of a “new” irrationalism as a result of the ideologization of politics, and he has described this in relation to party symbols and rituals.<sup>14</sup> And indeed, symbols should be seen in relation to the political ideologies of the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century – the “age of ideologies”, as Karl Dietrich

<sup>14</sup> Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie: Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens* (Stuttgart, 1970), pp. 57–64 (“Das Verehrungsbedürfnis der Massen”), and “Psychologie der antikapitalistischen Massenbewegungen”, in *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*, vol. 9, part viii (Tübingen, 1926), pp. 343–349 (“Das Bedürfnis nach Symbolik”)

Bracher has called it.<sup>15</sup> Symbols play a key role in the propagandistic dissemination of ideologies. They abbreviate and simplify the contents and the message of political statements and thus make them memorable and socially effective. The fact that in the context of the ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many observers talk of “new religions” and “new myths” shows that political styles still have symbolic potencies in the “disenchanted” world. This is why the irrational political mobilization of the masses after the First World War in support of ideologies produced a wealth of political symbols, emblems and metaphors.

#### IV

The history of political symbols in mass society should be analysed, then, from two perspectives: one concerned with the emergence, development and consolidation of specific symbols (in short, the political and ideological perspective); and a second concerned with their general impact, their conceptual transformations and informalizations (what might be called the ethnological perspective). When symbolic behaviour is analysed solely in political science terms, important dimensions are ignored. It is true that political symbols play an essential role in the system of power and domination (as outlined by Murray Edelman).<sup>16</sup> But they also have an “elementary” function, as it were, insofar as they offer guidelines for the relationship between people, society and politics. Political symbols satisfy a need not only for building political identities and transmitting ideology, but also for clarity, security and confirmation, because modern society has become complex and incomprehensible, particularly in the political sphere. This has happened as a result of processes which are perceived as contrary and contradictory: objectification and ideologization, “disenchantment” and mythologization, individualization and collectivization, and so on. Symbols satisfy the individual’s need for non-rational identification in mass society. If there exists a structural need for symbols in modern societies (a need which, contrary to what Weber expected, disenchantment has intensified rather than diminished), then the issue of symbols should be addressed not merely in relation to political organizations, movements and ideologies, but also in the context of a cultural anthropology of aesthetics, an ethnology of sensual, non-discursive communication in industrial society.<sup>17</sup>

A survey of the historical, ethnological and sociological analyses of the symbols in industrial societies – which considering the political significance of the subject matter are rather few in number – gives the impression of

<sup>15</sup> Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Zeit der Ideologien: Eine Geschichte politischen Denkens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action. Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> See Alfred Lorenzer, *Das Konzil der Buchhalter: Die Zerstörung der Sinnlichkeit: Eine Religionskritik* (Frankfurt/M., 1981).

an ever evolving usage of linguistic, visual and gesticulatory symbols.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that there was an inflation of symbols in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century and a deflation of “organized” political symbols, though not of symbols in general, in the second half of the twentieth century.

An iconographic analysis of the history of symbols of the German labour movement produces a similar picture. The period during which consistent symbols were elaborated and established lasted until around 1870, with a characteristic juxtaposition and opposition of transitional forms and innovations. Symbolic and ritual forms were consolidated, officialized and ceremonialized in the last third of the nineteenth century and up to the outbreak of the First World War. In the period after the First World War new symbols were invented and created and older ones developed further and transformed. All this occurred in a productive, symbol-generating dialogue among the parties of the left, but in part also in opposition to the emergent symbolic language of fascism (not just in Germany).

It was with good reason that Walter Benjamin spoke of the conflict between aestheticized politics and politicized aesthetics during the Weimar Republic, a conflict he considered resolved in 1933 in favour of the aestheticization of politics.<sup>19</sup> In the final years of the Weimar republic and during the Third Reich technical advances in mass information and suggestion also came into a play, a phenomenon which has as yet been scarcely analysed.

After 1945 we find specific elements in Western Europe which had been absent from the earlier phases. There occurred an erosion, or more precisely, a diffusion of the proletarian and socialist symbolic legacy, caused by the end of the proletariat on the one hand and the rapid rise of the mass media and the emergence of new styles of consumption on the other. In the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe the use of political symbols was highly organized and centrally directed. Symbols were deployed extensively, but because their use was institutionalized within a context of political and ideological block formation, they also lost their dynamic power.<sup>20</sup> In 1989–90 the communist imagery, slogans and symbols collapsed as quickly as the political regimes themselves.

## V

The point is proved by the history of the red flag, May Day and the clenched fist. These three symbols belong to different phases of the labour

<sup>18</sup> An overview is provided by Rüdiger Voigt (ed.), *Symbole der Politik, Politik der Symbole* (Opladen 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt/M., 1963), pp. 48–51.

<sup>20</sup> Ralf Rylewski, Birgit Sauer and Ulrike Treziak, *Politische Kultur in Deutschland: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Opladen, 1987), pp. 247–257.



Figure 3. "We attack." May Day postcard from 1931

movement. The red flag represents the early labour movement before and during the 1848 revolutions and before the foundation of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). It has of course accompanied the labour movement in changing forms until the present day. May Day represents the labour movement at the height of its organized development in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the streets in Germany had been reconquered for the politics of the masses after the repeal of the Anti-Socialist Law. May Day became the triumphal public act of the proletarian class. The clenched fist originated in the turbulent early years of the Weiman republic and became a symbol initially of the communist

half of the divided labour movement. It was adopted by the "Iron Front" (albeit in combination with the slogan "Freedom!") and later became, particularly through its adoption by the Popular Front in France and during the Spanish Civil War, the international socialist sign of recognition and ceremonial greeting. After 1933 the Nazis either proscribed or destroyed the socialist symbols or "nationalized" them, thereby destroying them in two ways, by liquidation and transformation (a precondition of the Nazi appropriation). An impressive series of photographs of Walter Ballhaus illustrates the opposition of the red flag and the swastika during the occupation of the trade union headquarters in Hanover on 2 May 1933. One of the photographs shows how the swastika flag is raised; a second shows the burning of the red flag and its remains as a heap of ashes.<sup>21</sup>

The origins of the red flag indicate how much the socialist proletarian symbols were generated in the tension between spontaneity and organization.<sup>22</sup> They also, incidentally, bear witness to the strongly international orientation even of the early labour movement. The colour red as a republican-socialist symbol has its roots in the Jacobin tradition of the French revolution, as we know from the thorough work by Maurice Dommanget.<sup>23</sup> Red appeared on the political stage, first sparingly, then more frequently, in the period leading up to 1848 and during the revolutions of that year as the symbol that distinguished the proletarian activists from the bourgeois and petty bourgeois elements among the revolutionaries. It was the "new masses", those collectives which defined themselves as "neither estate nor class", which rallied around the red flag. But the symbol had to be created first. Many reports indicate that the flags of socialist red emerged spontaneously, in the course of political activities, as the product of symbol-creating *bricolage*. The red flag is a symbol "born in struggle" during the events of 1848 and the campaign for constitutional reforms in Germany. In future the colour red would terrify the bourgeoisie.<sup>24</sup> It was adopted by the Lassalle-led labour movement and the Paris Commune, which further strengthened its fear value. The purpose of the new symbol was to delineate the left from the strategic logic of bourgeois and petty bourgeois groups and to encourage action. It should be borne in mind here that because this symbol emerged out of political action, it was not planned or

<sup>21</sup> Walter Ballhaus, *Licht und Schatten der dreissiger Jahre: Foto-Dokumente aus dem Alltag* (Munich, 1985) pp. 159f.

<sup>22</sup> See Gottfried Korff, "Rote Fahnen und Tableaux Vivants: Zum Symbolverständnis der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung im 19. Jahrhundert", in Albrecht Lehmann (ed.), *Studien zur Arbeiterkultur* (Münster, 1984), pp. 103–140.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Dommanget, *La Revolution de 1848 et le drapeau rouge* (Paris, 1948) (Collection Spartacus 2/17); Gabriel Perreux, *Les origines du drapeau rouge en France* (Paris, 1930).

<sup>24</sup> In the annotations to Alfred Rethel's "Auch ein Totentanz" (1849) the "hero of the red republic" is represented as the harbinger of destruction. This caused Rethel's series of woodcuts to be regarded as anti-revolutionary conservative propaganda. A plausible reinterpretation has recently been offered in Peter Paret, *Kunst als Geschichte: Kultur und Politik von Menzel bis Fontane* (Munich, 1990), pp. 124–154.

directed in any way: it acquired its contours from a specific local interplay of spontaneity, ritualism, protest and programme.

Because they originated in the course of political activity, the red flags flying on the barricades or carried at demonstrations were often a matter of improvisation. Improvisations on the red theme appeared time and again in 1948–49; adapted clothing, torn-up bedlinen, red-dyed straw mattresses. “In some cases women’s underwear tied to a pole sufficed as a means of influencing and enthusing the masses”, Robert Michels observed.<sup>25</sup> This points to the interplay of political meaning and spontaneous, almost wild, usage in a local revolutionary act which was characteristic of the red symbol’s development.

The role of red stabilized during the “cold” phrase of the Lassalle movement. During the German Empire the red flag lived a kind of double life. On the one hand it was a ceremonialized emblem, partly heavily adorned with a mixture of traditional and new ornaments; on the other hand it was a “wild” agitation tool a rag signifying movement. The decorative ceremonial flag was, as Michels described in the same passage, “kept in the secure rooms of the movement’s sanctuaries.” The wild flag, however, continued to be raised on buildings during night-time actions and thus gave expression, as a “spontaneous” sign, to the courage, vigour and dynamism of the labour movement.

## VI

The first time May Day was celebrated as the international festival of labour was in 1890.<sup>26</sup> The labour movements in Europe had widely different strengths and organizational structures, and the nature of the May Day celebrations varied accordingly. The ambivalence of holiday and day of struggle gave May Day a unique character, but also a special elasticity which stimulated different presentational forms. In linking struggle and celebration, May Day laid claim to an epochal and international perspective. That had been the intention of the international workers’ congress in Paris in 1889, which on the occasion of the centenary on the French Revolution had sought to renew the elan of the *fêtes révolutionnaires* and thus establish the workers’ movement as the “true heirs” of the revolution.

May Day demonstrated both the political and the cultural claim of the labour movement. The eight-hour day was a demand for co-determination

<sup>25</sup> Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens*, p. 344

<sup>26</sup> On the significance of May Day, see Gottfried Korff, “Seht die Zeichen die euch gelten, Fünf Bemerkungen zur Symbolgeschichte des 1. Mai” in Inge Marssolek (ed.) *Zur Geschichte des 1. Mai* (Frankfurt/M. and Vienna, 1990), pp. 15–39; Verein zum Studium sozialer Bewegungen (ed.), *100 Jahre Erster Mai: Beiträge und Projekte zur Geschichte der Maifeiern in Deutschland: Ein Tagungsbericht* (Berlin, 1989); Andrea Panaccione (ed.), *The Memory of May Day: An Iconographic History of Origins and Implanting of a Workers’ Holiday* (Venice, 1989).

and self-determination in one. It was to increase the amount of leisure time and thus offer more freedom, greater human dignity and scope for cultural activity. The May Day celebrations showed what the labour movement had learnt since its beginnings, above all during its organized phase, in terms of imagination, strategy, discipline and direction. May Day allowed the public presentation of the workers' condition, not as a mode of existence, but rather as an enjoyable interactive activity (involving the whole family) which articulated the movement's demands for social justice and cultural freedom. May Day was the socialist labour movement's successful attempt at self-representation.

With the hindsight of history the transfer of the May Day activities to the following Sunday may appear as a sign of a lack of political energy, as conflict avoidance. But from the viewpoint of the celebrating masses it was precisely the cultural and entertaining elements which made "our very own festival" (Kurt Eisner's phrase)<sup>27</sup> into an effective medium for confident socialist politics. And, as already mentioned, the ideology of the celebration dovetailed with the political demand for the eight-hour working day, which had been the starting point of the May Day movement and to which it was dedicated in its early decades. Leisure time was seen as culture time, as an opportunity for educational and cultural self-realization.

The pivotal significance of May Day's festive character was tapped not least through the spring and rebirth metaphor. This was an integral part of the May Day rhetoric and iconography.<sup>28</sup> Two association complexes play a role here: the awakening, budding and forward-pointing aspect of nature reborn on the one hand, and on the other the airy, free and natural aspects which were so poignantly at odds with the drudgery of factory work and the deplorable living conditions of the proletariat. The symbolic elements gave the holiday a great dynamism in the decades before the First World War. This was able to assert itself effectively even when the celebrations were impeded by drastic or subtle repressive measures or were controversial within the labour movement itself.

The natural elements of the May Day iconography corresponded to the nature-related rituals exercised in practice. Forest walks, excursions, gatherings in open-air restaurants and Sunday dances were as much a part of May Day as the marches and political demonstrations. Dress was also used to symbolize the transcendence of the everyday reality. At May Day events workers would wear their best suit, tie, hat and overcoat and pin a red carnation in their buttonhole.

<sup>27</sup> Kurt Eisner, "Festlicher Kampf", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1919), pp. 92–96.

<sup>28</sup> Klaus-D. Pohl, "Allegorie und Arbeiter: Bildagatorische Didaktik und Repräsentation der SPD 1890–1914: Studien zum politischen Umgang mit bildender Kunst in den politisch-satirischen Zeitschriften 'Der wahre Jacob' und 'Süddeutscher Postillon' sowie in den Mai-festzeitungen", doctoral dissertation, University of Osnabrück (Osnabrück, 1986).



Figure 4. George Grosz: *Over the tombs of March: Beware!* (1922)

## VII

The spring-like character of May Day was lost in the Weimar Republic. In fact the festival's whole iconography and choreography was transformed. Like other symbols of the labour movement, May Day suffered from a loss of socialist utopian sentiment. The joyful aspect disappeared.

harder contours came to the fore.<sup>29</sup> One reason for this was certainly the SPD's participation in government at local, regional and national level, which confronted socialist ideals with political realities. In addition, and linked to it, there was the division of the labour movement. Through competition and friction this division did, however, have a productive and creative effect on symbol development. New symbols were created or adopted from elsewhere and put at the core of new rituals, signs and gestures. The hammer-and-sickle emblem was adopted from the newly formed Soviet Union. A new development was the "clenched fist", which became the ritual greeting of the Red Front and was used as a distinguishing offensive symbol against the social democratic labour movement. Two points should be stressed in relation to the fist symbol: first, it came about as a deliberate creative act by an artist, a fact which clearly illustrates the labour movement's proximity to the artistic avantgarde; and second, it played a prominent role as a defining symbol in street demonstrations (the kind of action which typified the style of demonstrating during the Weimar republic). The Red Front's fist emblem was designed by John Heartfield on the basis of a drawing by Georges Grosz. Out of a latent elementary expression of anger he created a fixed symbolic form which as a gesture and an image was easy to transmit. The fist was a response to the greeting of Mussolini's fascist movement which emerged soon after the First World War and was later adopted by the Nazis.

Together with the slogan "Red Front!" the fist became the hallmark of the communist-oriented working class. It became a gesticulatory component of the street marches which marked the "symbol war" of the 1920s. The marches escalated into open street terror, an extension which was latent in the symbolic-affective "struggles" of the demonstration culture. The notorious street brawls of May 1929 were part of this, as was the "struggle for Berlin" organized by Joseph Goebbels.<sup>30</sup> Towards the end of the republic the "symbol war" degenerated into the "logic of the heavier stick" (in the words of Carl von Ossietzky).

Other socialist symbols succumbed to the symbol war, including the red flag, May Day, and the workers' education movement. Both left-wing parties created their own flag and May Day rhetoric, and their own May Day iconography and choreography. Once again influenced by the art of the avantgarde, both established their own education and cultural networks, with in part fascinating results. Piscator, Brecht, Hindemith, Weill,

<sup>29</sup> Gottfried Korff, "Roth Fahnen und geballte Faust: Zur Symbolik der Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik", in Peter Assion (ed.), *Transformationen der Arbeiterkultur* (Marburg, 1986), pp. 86–107.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Kampf um Berlin* (Munich, 1932); Gerhard Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder: Die NS-Propaganda vor 1933* (Bonn, 1990). The street fights could in turn generate symbols and symbolic figures: examples are the Nazi cult figure Horst Wessel and the Horst Wessel Lied.



Figure 5. Emblem, of the *Rote Frontkämpferbund* with the fist by John Heartfield (1927)

Eisler, Heartfield and Grosz all made major contributions to the cultural history of the Weimar Republic. Never before and never since has the link between the labour movement and avantgarde art been closer and more productive than in the 1920s. The loss of utopia was to some extent compensated by the competition over symbols and the artistic impulses, which helped to mould the much admired dynamism and energy of “left-wing” culture in the Weimar Republic.

Towards the end of the Weimar Republic the new mass media began to have an impact. They also gave new impulses to working-class culture. But they did not present a productive challenge, as Benjamin, Eisler and Brecht imagined and predicted, because after the Nazi takeover in 1933

the mass media were “streamlined” and manipulated to give a totalitarian direction to all aspects of public life.

## VIII

A large number of workers' symbols survived during the Nazi period because in the early years of the dictatorship many of the well-known social symbols were remodelled for a fascist application. Not all of it was a case of usurping the proletarian socialist heritage, however, since a number of political symbols of the left (the marches, uniforms and the ceremonial greetings, among others) were derived from the signs and gestures of Italian fascism. The fascist conception of symbols was based on form but above all on functional aspects, the blatantly manipulative intention which Benjamin described as the intention to “aestheticize politics”. The Third Reich's didacticism proved effective, as was the instrumentalization of mass-media techniques, with authentic means of communications bracketed with media strategies. Using the example of Nazi symbols Saul Friedländer and George L. Mosse have described with great insight the coupling of individual and mass-psychological motivations into an instrument of domination.<sup>31</sup> The symbols were used to “stage a dramatic production of the community”, in which the social contradictions of modern society were to be resolved through harmonization and manipulation.<sup>32</sup> The political messages embedded in the symbols and identities of the social movements which had arisen in the mid-nineteenth century (parties, associations and unions) were defused and “nationalized”. Justified in terms of the demands of “the people”, the whole population was permanently mobilized by means of a system of direction and ritual, enhanced and at times picturesquely decorated with the traditional symbols.<sup>33</sup>

Compared to the symbols of the Nazi era, those of the two German states after the Second World War have been very inadequately studied. Remarkable, particularly in West Germany, was a dissociation and abstention from symbols, rooted in an aversion to the political collectivism of the Nazi era, particularly its community ideology. In addition we encounter the phenomenon which has been described as the end of the proletariat.<sup>34</sup> A confident and articulate labour movement, with all its symbols,

<sup>31</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Reflets du nazisme* (Paris 1982); George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality. Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Rainer Stommer, *Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft: Die “Thing-Bewegung” im Dritten Reich* (Marburg, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> On the invocation of the “people” (*Volk*) as an instrument of domination, see Bracher *Zeit der Ideologien*, pp. 164f.

<sup>34</sup> Josef Mooser, *Arbeiterleben in Deutschland 1900–1970: Klassenlage Kultur and Politik* (Frankfurt/M., 1984); Ulrich Beck, “Jenseits von Stand und Klasse? Soziale Ungleichheiten, gesellschaftliche individualisierungsprozesse und die Entstehung neuer sozialer Formationen und Identitäten”, *Soziale Welt*, special volume (1983), pp. 35–74.

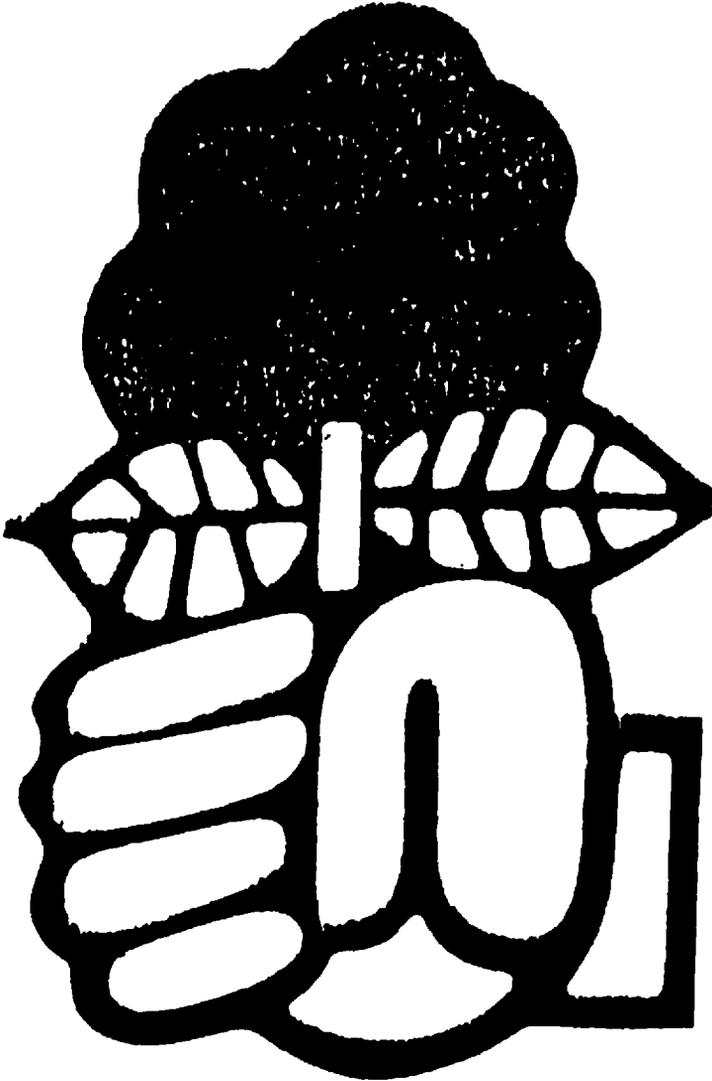


Figure 6. The European Socialist parties' fist holding a carnation

seemed no longer plausible, not least because the social movements were incorporated into the structure of mass-membership of people's parties. Individualization processes, enhanced by private media consumption, not only dissolved political blocks but also mental preconceptions.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Klaus Tenfelde, "Ende der Arbeiterkultur: Das Echo auf eine These", in Wolfgang Kaschuba, Gottfried Korff and Bernd Jürgen Warneken (eds.), *Ende oder Veränderung: Arbeiterkultur seit 1945* (Tübingen, 1991).

We must wonder whether the orientation on political symbols has not been replaced by a powerful orientation on consumption, with the aesthetic of commodities taking over the function of guiding symbols in Douglas' sense. (Another phenomenon can in fact also be observed, namely the transformation of the social movements' symbols into consumer articles or fashion accessories: the hammer and sickle as ear-rings, the fist as wall decoration, and May Day as a special folkloric event.)<sup>36</sup>

Pluralization, differentiation and privatization of the "mass" – the concentration of these processes may lead to what may be called the end of "collective political symbols". There can be no question of an end to a symbolic orientation in general, as studies of young people's perceptions or the work of Pierre Bourdieu's on the aesthetics of distinctiveness show.

## IX

The European version of the youth revolts and "student revolutions" of the late 1960s and early 1970s contributed in no small measure to the erosion of left-wing political symbols. These movements related to the "heritage" of symbolic forms in part creatively and playfully (especially in France) and in part rigidly and protectively (especially in West Germany). In general the heritage was used eclectically, and the impact of the inherited symbols was inflationary. This applied to emblems, rituals as well as words and slogans. The student and youth rebellions encouraged a trend towards the uncoupling of symbol systems from their previously relatively strong political links (to organizations, parties and associations). The political symbols lose their roots without, however, establishing themselves in their new environments, which was impossible not least because these were highly unstable ideologically and organizationally. The organizational uncoupling of left-wing political symbols by the 1968 generation fostered the random use of the semiotic heritage and opened it up to commercialization. New forms, like the Easter demonstrations (against the arms race etc.) failed to gain a structural permanence or have a lasting impact.

In the communist states of Central and Eastern Europe the heritage was administered by the state and prescribed as political decoration. In this way political symbolism succumbed to the mechanism of a centrally manufactured ritual public sphere which left no scope for dynamic and creative developments.<sup>37</sup> The red flags and red carnations were for waving during the May Day marches, which were celebrated as state occasions.

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion of the contemporary relevance of May Day at a seminar on working-class culture held in Tübingen in 1989, published in *ibid.* See also the more recent Inge Marssolek, "100 Jahr 1. Mai: (k)ein Grund zum Feiern", *Journal Geschichte*, 5/1990, pp. 12–23.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Hoffmann, "Vom Schwung der Massenfeste: Überlegungen zur wirksameren Gestaltung traditioneller und neuer Feiertage", *Kultur und Freizeit*, 24/11 (1986), pp. 22–25, and 24/12 (1986), pp. 27f.



Figure 7. Anti-socialist poster from the French elections in Spring of 1993

The clasped hands of the 1848 labour movement became, in distortion of the iconographic tradition, the symbol of East Germany's Social Unity party (SED). No new symbols were created, with the exception of the hammer and compass on the East German coat of arms, which was closely linked to the Soviet hammer and sickle motif.

The revolutions of 1989 brought an abrupt end for several symbols, either through public abolition (state and party emblems) or private distancing (the red flags, forms of address like the familiar *Du* among party comrades). Within the space of a few months the dissolution of the GDR and the other communist regimes completed a change which had been occurring gradually in Western Europe since the Second World War. Political symbols – some of which had a more than century-long tradition –



**Figure 8.** Fabric design featuring a hammer and sickle at a New York fashion show in the mid-1980s

were transformed into “ludic” elements. The flags waved at the marches became party decorations, and SED badges became fashion accessories. The “ludic” reinterpretation of the symbols to some extent certainly amounted to a demonstrative distancing from the despised previous system.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, however, East German symbols continue to be used in political contexts, both organized and unorganized or “wild”. An example of the latter was the use of the hammer and sickle and red flags during the squatter riots in Berlin in the autumn of 1990; and in an example of organized use, the Party of Democratic Socialism, the SED’s successor, gave prominent display to the colour red at its 1990 May Day rally in front of the Berlin Reichstag.

## X

Symbols are abbreviations for ideologies. If it is true that in the last decade of the twentieth century Europe has entered a post-ideological era, then we have here another reason for the demise of the political symbols of social movements. Symbols are simplified objectifications of ideologies, and indeed, the history of the symbols of social movement is closely inter-linked with the history of political ideologies in the twentieth century. Political symbols flourished in the wake of revolutions and dictatorships in the first half of this century. And the waning of ideological commitment after the Second World War had led to a contraction in the use of political symbols, initially in the 1950s and especially since the mid-1970s. (Interestingly, the ideologically charged interlude of the late 1960s did not have a regenerative effect, but actually contributed to the decline of political symbols.)

Political symbols also play an important role beyond the ideologies. The alternative movements and countercultures which emerge in the 1980s display a wide range of emblems and signs, albeit invariably with very limited social and temporal scope. These are temporary signs of identity, of varied political origins and each time syncretically remixed. An example is the eclecticism and syncretism of the symbols used by the squatter groups and their autonomous and anti-establishment successors in the inner cities. The protest cultures within industrial society employ a wide range of symbols, including the black of anarchism, swastikas, hammer-and-sickle as well as archetypal images (snakes and dragons). Their common characteristic is dissociation from the “semantic forms” typical of the “intellectual” youth rebellion of the late 1960s. That spontaneous, politically intended but short-lived symbols are currently emerging with particular intensity in a linguistically, semantically and verbally

<sup>38</sup> Gottfried Korff, “Rote Fahnen und Bananen: Notizen zur politischen Symbolik im Prozess der Vereinigung von DDR und BRD”, *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 86 (1990), pp. 130–160.



Figure 9. Removing the SED insignia with the fraternal clasped hands from the party's Dresden headquarters (March, 1990)

undeveloped underclass – as already observed by Karl Heinz Bohrer in the late 1970s<sup>39</sup> – may be linked to Douglas' class-specific socialization and outlook. In other words, symbols and rituals are still the means by which the “lower levels” of mass industrial society organize themselves and communicate. “Such non-verbal symbols are capable of creating a structure of meanings in which individuals can relate to one another and realize their own ultimate purposes.”<sup>40</sup>

*Translated by Harry Drost*

<sup>39</sup> Karl-Heinz Bohrer, “Die drei Kulturen”, in Jürgen Habermas (ed.), *Suchworte zur “Geistigen Situation der Zeit”* vol. 2, “Politik und Kultur” (Frankfurt/M., 1979), pp. 636–668.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 73.