

The Heritagisation of Democracy in Germany's Built Landscape

JOHANNA BLOKKER

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Erstarren des Populismus und ein revitalisierter Nationalismus in Deutschland hat in den letzten Jahren dazu geführt, dass staatliche Stellen und Bürgerinitiativen die demokratische Geschichte und Traditionen des Landes stärker betonen und versuchen, diese neben dem dominierenden „negativen Gedächtnis“ (Reinhart Koselleck) der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft und des DDR-Regimes in der öffentlichen Erinnerungskultur zu etablieren. Dabei kommt Gebäuden und Orten eine zentrale Rolle zu: Auf höchster politischer Ebene wird gefordert, die Erinnerungsorte der demokratischen Geschichte Deutschlands stärker in den Blick zu nehmen und ihre Aufwertung als zentrale Elemente des kulturellen Erbes mit mehr öffentlichen Mitteln zu fördern. Das Ergebnis war eine landesweite Kampagne bei der Millionen von Euro ausgegeben und Hunderte von Objekten neu entdeckt oder als Orte der deutschen Demokratiegeschichte umgedeutet wurden. Dieser Beitrag stellt die *Heritagisation* der Demokratie in Deutschland seit dem Start dieser Bemühungen 2019 vor. Der Beitrag untersucht den Diskurs über den Nutzen von Gebäuden und Orten zur Stärkung des Engagements für die Demokratie und bietet dann eine theoriegestützte Analyse und Kritik der Interpretationsmethoden und -strategien, die zur Konstituierung ausgewählter Orte als demokratisches Erbe verwendet werden. Ziel ist es, die Diskussion über die politische Rolle und Funktion des kulturellen Erbes voranzutreiben.

ABSTRACT

The rise of populism and renewed nationalism in Germany in recent years has prompted government agencies and citizens' organisations in that country to place increased emphasis on the country's democratic history and traditions, and to try to establish these in public memory culture alongside the dominant "negative memory" (Reinhart Koselleck) of the National Socialist and East German regimes. In this effort, buildings and sites have been assigned a central role: political leaders at the highest levels are calling for greater attention to the *Erinnerungsorte* (sites of memory) of Germany's democratic history, and for increased public funding for their valorisation as key elements of the country's cultural heritage. The result has been a nation-wide campaign of heritage-making, with millions of euros spent and hundreds of objects newly discovered or else reinterpreted as *Orte der deutschen Demokratiegeschichte* (sites of the history of German democracy). This chapter presents the heritagisation of democracy in Germany since the launch of these efforts in 2019. It examines the discourse surrounding the utility of buildings and sites in strengthening commitments to democracy, then offers a theory-based analysis and critique of the interpretive methods and strategies used to constitute selected sites as democratic heritage. The aim is to advance the discussion on the political role and functioning of cultural heritage.

Democracy as Positive Memory

In Germany today, there is frustration in some quarters with the cultural politics of memory and identity that have come to characterise public and political discourse since the 1990s. It is a politics built on what Reinhart Koselleck has called the “negative memory”¹ of National Socialism and the Holocaust, as well as the East German dictatorial regime. This “cosmopolitan memory”,² to use another term for it, is one that encourages a critical coming-to-terms with the difficult past in order to counter nationalism and advance a transnational normative framework of universal human rights.³ It is this framework that in part underlies the European Union, for example. But some, as noted, are frustrated with this negative, cosmopolitan memory, which “has not delivered on its promises in recent decades”⁴ – above all in the states of the former East Germany.

This frustration has been expressed by Björn Höcke, the leader of the extreme-right populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in the state of Thuringia, who denounces Germany's dominant cosmopolitan memory culture as “absurd” and “idiotic”, as having a “paralysing” effect on the country.⁵ He and others on the far right have called for a “180-degree turn” to a more “positive memory”,⁶ one in which National Socialism and the Holocaust are considered just one topic among many; in their view, public memory culture should promote an unproblematic sense of national identity. The most notorious statement of this position came from Alexander Gauland, head of the AfD delegation to Germany's national parliament (Bundestag), during a speech in 2018: there he described the National Socialists as “just a blip” in an otherwise long and glorious history that included not just Hitler but also the emperors Charlemagne and Charles V, then the Prussian King Frederick the Great, and after them Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.⁷ He then evoked cultural heritage as expressive of this proud and heroic national history and memory: in opposition to Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, characterised by Höcke as Germany's “Monument of Shame” (*Denkmal der Schande*) in the heart of its capital,⁸ Gauland positioned the Bamberg Rider and the famous medieval sculptures at Naumburg Cathedral as expressive of an heroic national history and memory.⁹

Germany's mainstream political parties, rather than ignore – or unable to ignore – these calls for a positive memory, have responded first of all by presenting Germany's commitment to coming to terms

with its difficult past as something to be proud of in and of itself, and in that sense a “positive memory”. Indeed, Germany's efforts have made it a “model” for other countries,¹⁰ especially the United States with its unresolved history of slavery and its systemic racism. Thus, for Monika Grütters, Minister of Culture with Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Party in 2016, “One thing is certain: Germany owes its identity and its high standing in the world not least to its confrontation with the past”.¹¹

Second of all, and more importantly for our topic, the mainstream parties have responded by promoting even more strongly the history of democracy in Germany – chequered though that history might be – as a legacy to be acknowledged and even celebrated. Messaging to this effect had in fact been a feature of the interpretation strategy at sites connected to moments and figures playing a role in that history for some time (Fig. 1). But this positive interest in Germany's democratic past became a real trend only in the 2010s, at this moment of resurgent nationalism and populism. In Frankfurt, for example, the Revolution of 1848–49 and the so-called *Paulskirchenparlament* became the focus of renewed attention (Fig. 2). It was a trend actively pushed by the German government: already in 2013, the year the AfD was founded, the coalition agreement between Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the German Socialist Party (SPD) contained a paragraph on the importance of “*Demokratiegeschichte*”¹², and the next agreement in 2018 was expanded to include a statement of intent to develop a formal “Concept for promoting engagement with the history of democracy”.¹³ Meanwhile, Germany's Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier had made raising awareness and promoting understanding of democracy the essential task of his tenure upon taking office in 2017. In what can only be understood as a direct response to the AfD (as well as a thinly veiled reference to controversial projects to reconstruct monuments such as the *Garrisonkirche* in Potsdam and the *Stadtschloss* in Berlin), he said in 2018:

“I would like us to devote more attention, more passion and, yes, more financial resources to the places and the protagonists of our democratic history. For the self-image of our republic, we should invest in more than just the tombs of kings or the castles of princes!”¹⁴

What was needed, in fact, was a wide-ranging, concerted campaign to restore the identification with and commitment to democracy of German society as a whole, as further government messaging made clear. The tone of this messaging has meanwhile become entirely familiar: democracy is not a given, but must be actively cultivated and constantly defended, as Germany's own history shows only too clearly;¹⁵ democracy is always difficult, often frustrating and sometimes painful, and it requires patience, endurance and tolerance;¹⁶ and most importantly, democracy should be understood not just as a principle or a set of rules or a system, and not just as a concern of the professional political class, of elected representatives, or of the power elites – but as a way of life for all (*Demokratie als Lebensform*).¹⁷

“Democracy as a way of life” is not a new formulation – it was introduced by the American philosopher and educator John Dewey in the early decades of the 20th century and was absorbed into German political communication after the Second World War, most prominently by Federal President Theodor Heuss in a famous speech¹⁸ in Heilbronn in 1950 – but it is a catchphrase that has undergone a genuine renaissance in the past few years. In the ongoing discussion within the German government

on how to respond to the populist and nationalist threat and the need for an expansion of public memory discourse, this idea of democracy as a way of life has had a defining influence on shaping policy.

Heritagising Democracy

Very briefly, that policy can be summarised as follows. In June 2019, the German federal parliament passed a motion instructing Chancellor Merkel's government to fulfil its previously stated intentions and submit a “Concept for promoting engagement with the history of democracy”. More specifically, the Concept should describe a funding mechanism by which structures and sites in the built landscape that hold significant connections to the history of democracy in Germany could be made visible and valorised. For this purpose, an annual budget of ten million euros was made available.¹⁹

To provide guidance on which sites should be chosen and how much of this government funding should be awarded to each, the government should consult with the Working Group on Sites of the History of Democracy (*AG Orte der Demokratiegeschichte*).²⁰ The Working Group was formed in Hambach in 2017 as an association of 34 organisations and foundations, most of them attached to or headquartered in buildings associated with a person or event in the history of German democracy. In the meantime, its membership has risen to over 100 such organisations.²¹ Its founding document, the *Hambach Manifesto*, outlines its aims:

“[T]o promote awareness of the history of German democracy and freedom locally, regionally and throughout Germany. To this end, places and events that are already known or less well-known are to be anchored in public memory and further developed as places of learning.”²²

The Working Group itself was one of the first to receive a part of the newly available government funding, to support its project of generating a map (*Kataster*)²³ of such “already known or less well-known” sites in Germany – a kind of inventory or “monuments list” of places of significance to the cultural history of democracy. This is a key point: what the German government is doing with its funding Concept, and what the Working Group is doing with its map and its work of “anchoring” these sites in public memory and developing interpretation plans



Fig. 1: Hambach Castle, the “cradle of German democracy” (10/11/2023).

for them, is attempting to “make heritage”, to “heritagise” democracy in the built landscape.

To be sure, neither the German government nor the Working Group actually describe what they are doing as “heritage-making” or “heritagisation”. Yet, the repeated emphasis on restoring “democracy as a way of life” means that people are not simply to be informed or educated about democracy and its history at these sites (although that is essential, too). Far more than this, they are to be encouraged and supported in valuing and identifying with democracy – in other words, in understanding it as heritage, with everything that this implies. And while “democracy as heritage” is easily said and often said, if taken seriously, the implications are many and profound.

Theorising Heritagisation

For this reason, it seems a pity that these efforts are not being conceptualised as heritage-making, because if they were, the approaches being taken could draw on the insights and tools offered by heritage theory, and might be more effective as a result. For, as a German member of parliament remarked, “People do not automatically become democrats when they visit a site connected to the history of democracy”.²⁴ Rather, such places have to be prepared and shaped to facilitate the processes and practices by which “heritage” emerges out of the encounter between people and buildings or sites.

Theories of heritagisation, of the dynamics of how and why heritage happens – that is, theories of how value-attribution, identification, and attachment work – can help to understand how buildings and sites come to be part of a way of life. In turn, this theory and knowledge can be instrumentalised and operationalised in stimulating heritagisation processes with the goal of cultivating democracy as a way of life. The paragraphs that follow will briefly sketch these dynamics of how and why heritage happens, how identification happens and under what conditions, and hence how it can be *made* to happen.

It makes sense to start at the point where the institutions and organisations themselves start – with a particular building or site. In the broad discourse surrounding the “Sites of the History of German Democracy” programme, there is an assumption that the heritagisation of democracy requires a medium, and that the built environment represents an ideal medium for this process. The assumption is clearly illustrated by one of the major products



Fig. 2: Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main, meeting place of Germany's first democratic parliament in 1849 (28/09/2023).



Fig. 3: Two-volume set “History of German Democracy” produced in 2020 and 2021 by the organisation *Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie* (21/02/2024).

of this discourse to date: a two-volume series on the *History of German Democracy (Deutsche Demokratiegeschichte)*, on its place in memory culture, and on the challenges of presenting it to the public, produced by a member of the Working Group, the association *Against Forgetting – For Democracy (Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie)* (Fig. 3).²⁵ The volumes are subtitled “A Task of Memory-Work” and “A Task of Interpretation-Work” respectively, and their covers make clear that, in this activity, buildings have a central role to play: both picture prominent, easily-recognisable, landmark

buildings associated with the history of democracy in Germany.

The text inside makes the connection explicit. In an essay in the first volume, the historian Bernd Faulenbach, chair of *Gegen Vergessen*, writes: “[I]n contemporary society, the history of democracy requires visualisation”.²⁶ Member of Parliament Katrin Budde (SPD) made similar comments in the Bundestag during the debate on funding the Concept: “It’s good if we also strengthen the sites of German democratic history, authentic sites where you can experience, see, and feel what democracy is and how positive it is.”²⁷ Thus, from the point of view of those involved in this case, the effective remembering and interpretation of democracy requires visible and tangible, that is, material objects, and ideally sites and buildings. Indeed, one could argue that the volumes in fact present the history of German democracy as “a task of heritagisation”.

It is likewise clear that these sites must also be “authentic” – a notoriously slippery concept.²⁸ In the *Nara Document* produced by the International Council on Monuments and Sites in 1994, authenticity is measured by its degree of “credibility”; however, it “may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture”,²⁹ and cannot be judged objectively or within fixed criteria. Taking this seriously, one may adopt the position of cultural historian Ien Ang and argue that what counts is “emotional realism”: that is, the authenticity of the feelings that a site is

able to evoke in a visitor.³⁰ This likewise requires a degree of credibility, but people are quite capable and even willing to put aside their doubts – in film studies this is called “suspension of disbelief” – and feel “real” emotions, even if the site is not “authentic” in the sense of its original form or substance.

What is required for the effective “heritagisation” of democracy are therefore visible and tangible objects that are also “credible” in the sense of “emotional realism”. Further requirements can also be identified. In order to be capable of appropriating an object and identifying with it, and to want to do so, it must be possible to attribute a value or values to it. With some objects, this is easy to do: they are “obvious” heritage³¹ by some metric: perhaps because they are visibly old or particularly aesthetically pleasing – as in Alois Riegl’s concepts of age value and artistic value;³² or perhaps because they are of high quality. Great age, beauty and quality are what can be called “affordances” for heritagisation: the term comes from cognitive psychology and describes the features of objects that guide the viewer or user and/or lead them to a certain action.³³

But what if there are no obvious affordances – what if an *Ort der Demokratiegeschichte* is the “opposite of obvious”, is “hidden” or “forgotten”;³⁴ or what if the object only possesses these properties to a very limited extent (Fig. 4)? Here, it can be useful to draw on the theory developed by Mattijs van de Port and Birgit Meyer to analyse “heritage dynamics”:



Fig. 4: Former American Club in Bonn-Plittersdorf, soon to be restored and heritagised as an “Open Embassy for Democracy” (20/02/2024).

“As heritage is not given naturally, persuasion is a necessity. ... [P]eople need to be enticed, captivated, convinced and mobilized to see such [objects] as their heritage: as something that belongs to them and that underpins their belonging, and hence is part of their identity.”³⁵

The repertoire of persuasion includes all kinds of strategies, but together they should have the effect of “emotionally and sensually entangling subjects] with heritage objects”.³⁶ The term “entanglement” is borrowed from quantum physics, where it denotes the complete identification of two bodies or entities. An entanglement strategy in heritage-making employs what Van de Port and Meyer call an “aesthetics of persuasion” – “aesthetics” because the senses and affect play a central role. They write: “[I]t is by being enveloped in a political-aesthetic regime that a form of cultural heritage ceases to be merely an object on display ... but becomes an embodied part of a lived experience”.³⁷ The relevance of such a strategy to the task of heritagising democracy as a way of life is immediately apparent.

The requirements for an effective “heritagisation” of democracy can now be summarised as follows: It is necessary to have a visible and tangible object that is “credible” in the sense of “emotional realism” and is integrated into an aesthetic regime, that is, a sensory-affective regime.

There is one last factor that deserves mention here – one that most heritage theorists agree is essential, and indeed consider to be the affordance of all affordances for heritagisation: narrativity. It must be possible to integrate an object, building, or site into a narrative, and not only into a grand narrative or a master narrative, but also into “a self-narrative that is rich in sensory experiences”.³⁸ As anthropologist David Berliner writes:

“[A]nchor[ing] in a self-narrative [is] a condition of heritage affordance. [...] Heritage defenders always have a story of themselves to tell about the relation they have with the place, the object or the practice. This narrative is biographical [and] usually highly emotional.”³⁹

What this implies in the context of a heritagisation strategy aimed at facilitating identification with democracy is the need for affordances not just for co-authoring of the narrative offered at the site – which are discussed in several contributions in this volume – but also, and importantly, affordances for *contesting* that narrative: that is, openings and opportunities for “retelling” the stories told there, for rewriting the texts inscribed in it using personal and shared memories that disrupt their constructed order.⁴⁰ Such contestation can be highly productive and is itself an eminently democratic pursuit.

Heritagisation and Manipulation

As suggested above, understanding the democracy-promoting efforts of government agencies and citizens' organisations in Germany as a process of “heritagising” the built landscape might help those groups to develop more effective strategies for cultivating democracy as a way of life. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that by operationalising what we know about heritagisation processes in order to *make* those processes happen, we are engaged in a project not just of persuasion but possibly also of manipulation. We know that heritage is never apolitical or in any way neutral; Winfried Speitkamp has described the work of heritage conservation quite rightly as “instrumental, if not manipulative in character”.⁴¹ We also know that populists and nationalists likewise use heritage and its affective and imaginative affordances to persuade others to identify with their world view.⁴² Indeed, in a very real sense, both Björn Höcke, with his insistence on a narrow focus on the “positive memory” of Germany's past as described above, and Alexander Gauland with his evocation of the Bamberg Rider, Uta of Naumburg and other well-known objects, sites and figures of German history and culture, are likewise engaged in a project of “making heritage” in the service of their own conception of the “way of life” to be embraced in this country.

With this in mind, extreme caution and careful reflection are in order. It is worth repeating that democracy is always difficult and sometimes painful; it is not necessarily the case, as was also suggested in the conference discussion, that “democratic values are values that do no harm”. While we may trust that our imperfect mastery of principles such as tolerance, openness and freedom will deliver a net good, it will therefore be necessary to remain very self-conscious and acutely aware of what we and others are doing as heritagisers.

Figures

- 1,2,4 Johanna Blokker
3 Zoonar GmbH

Endnotes

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