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Demarcations and Exclusions: Terrorism, State Violence, and the Left in German Novels of the 1970s and 1980s

In the 1970s, the West German state faced an eruption of terrorist violence, most of which was conducted by leftist groups.¹ During the mid to late sixties, a widespread movement among rebellious students had propagated direct political action in an effort to achieve fundamental changes in the political sphere. Some factions within this larger spectrum radicalized their strategies. In May 1970, a group called the *Red Army Faction* (Rote Armee Fraktion, RAF) was established, whose members considered themselves to be engaged in a worldwide anti-imperialistic struggle. They adopted the concept of armed guerilla warfare, applied it to a metropolitan setting, and declared war on the German state. By the fall of 1977, the so-called “Deutscher Herbst”, the situation had escalated to the point where an abduction, the hijacking of a passenger airplane, and the death of three RAF inmates all coincided within the space of a few weeks. The government of the time, a Social Democratic and Liberal Party coalition, decided to respond with both vigorous police action and tightened legislation. Civil rights were restricted and the system of police surveillance was expanded, with the state extending its reach far into the private lives of its citizens.

At the same time, the majority of German intellectuals – many of Germany’s most renowned writers among them – exhibited a strong leaning toward leftist positions.² From Günter Grass, who supported the electoral campaigns of the Social Democratic Party in the late 1960s, to Peter-Paul Zahl, who was imprisoned for ten years for shooting at a policeman, a whole spectrum of political stances existed. But whatever their leftist inclinations, the overwhelming majority of the West German intelligentsia always favoured a peaceful and processual reform of German democracy, not its violent overturning.

¹ For an overview – and an insightful analysis – see Sebastian Scheerer (1988).

² The history of the relationship between the intellectuals and the West German state is most usefully delineated by Wilfried van der Will (1989).

Nevertheless, in the 1970s, the West German population was confronted with an unprecedented radicalization in the political sphere. Not surprisingly, language did not and could not remain unaffected by these developments, language as the instrument of political debate, as a tool of media coverage, and as the medium of literature. In their own way, the three respective agents – politicians, journalists, and writers – knew all too well that their particular use of language in this politically charged environment would have an impact on contemporary political culture. In many cases, the political rhetoric was deliberately designed to have a polarizing and radicalizing effect – and more often than not it succeeded. As a result, language in the public sphere became highly contested. To give an example: To merely use the term “terrorism” often already implied taking a stand, since the terms “terrorism” and “terrorists” were used predominantly by representatives of the state and the right wing press to designate not just the extreme, i.e. violent, forms of left-wing activities. The political left, by contrast, preferred to speak of “armed action”, referring instead to the *state* as the agent of (institutional) terrorism, a terrorism conducted by the state (and the disciples of capitalism) in order to oppress the people.

This example alone suffices to demonstrate the high level of polarization within West German political discourse of the time. Under such extreme circumstances it was difficult to remain neutral. Language was so highly charged that no one could escape taking sides. Every speaker was subjected to the many pressures that these competing discourses exerted on every utterance. And every political group seemed to have their own lines of demarcation, their own idiosyncratic way to distinguish between tolerated and intolerable positions. Linguistic demarcations entail social and political exclusions. That is to say, although we are “merely” dealing with language, the results and consequences of these linguistic division lines could be very real and tangible violations or limitations of political and social freedoms.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find the struggle for hegemony over the use of politically charged language in the public sphere closely linked to the emergence and the legitimacy of political action. These struggles for hegemony were not carried out in terms of a Habermasian vision of discourse in which potentially violent relationships between political opponents and their equally distorted and distorting modes of communication are overcome by rational and peaceful dialogue. Rather, many an act of communication and many a polarized utterance seemed doomed to condense into violence, which, in turn, had many a repercussion for the citizens of West Germany and that country’s political sphere and discourse.

In what follows I wish to focus my attention first on some examples of the emergence of such exclusionary demarcations and second on their negotiation within literary discourse. Although the discourses of politics and literature overlap quite considerably, politics and art nevertheless do provide distinct modes of dealing with polarized language and its political implications. My

overall thesis is that polarization within the discourse about terrorism affected not only the relationship between the state and the political left; the emergence of violence and counter-violence in West Germany more interestingly also led to a reshaping, or regrouping, within the left itself. And much of the literature that is written by left-leaning authors and that simultaneously deals with terrorism can be shown to reflect precisely this changing self-perception and diversification of the left. On the one hand, literature directly participates in contemporary political debate through the medium of language and narration. On the other hand, and by dint of its “literary” nature and its ability to create an imagined alternative space between the extremes of polarized discourse, it can remain detached from direct political action even when it seems to advocate such action.

The first of the three literary examples I wish to discuss is Heinrich Böll’s highly acclaimed and widely received short story *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (*Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*), published in 1974. Böll tells the story of the housekeeper Katharina Blum who falls in love with a left-wing activist (albeit not a terrorist) and is subsequently subjected to a humiliating smear campaign by the right-wing press. After having spent the night together, Katharina helps the man to escape from the police. Rather than being driven by any political motivation, her sole desire is to be loyal to the person she loves. Before this incident, she has never disobeyed the law. Completely ignoring her motives, the ensuing media campaign paints her, if not as a terrorist, then at least as a terrorist’s accomplice; as a result, she soon finds her environment turning hostile, with formerly friendly neighbors and other acquaintances eager to cast her out. Feeling misunderstood, hurt, and betrayed, her stance toward the media as well as toward society in general begins to radicalize; by the end of the story, Katharina decides to lure the journalist, who has slandered her name and destroyed her livelihood, into her apartment where she shoots and kills him.

Thus, the linguistic demarcation between “us” (non-criminals) and “them” (those defined by the press as criminals) is shown to have tangible repercussions – to the point where it can destroy a person’s life. The demarcation singles out certain individuals and places them outside of the community of law-abiding citizens. Böll’s story illustrates how this process of labeling and stigmatizing causes someone to be excluded from community life, which in turn can induce a radicalization of the person excluded – as is the case with Katharina who turns into the murderer the press portrayed her to be. Hence, the condition of polarization has minimized the space between the extremes. Being without the appropriate means to respond to the onslaught of the press, Katharina is forced into the position of a victim. Only through murder is she able to momentarily regain the sovereignty that the journalist Tötges had caused her to lose – an action, of course, that places her squarely in the position of the outlaw that Katharina never dreamt of becoming.

Böll's tale shows that, in some instances, law and ethics, or what is legal and what seems the right thing to do, do not coincide. This is especially true in cases of resistance that derive from civil dissent. Asking the question "Should I harbor a terrorist for a night without telling the police?" was not an unusual scenario in left wing circles. Implied were questions as "Are the claims by the opposition legitimate?" Applied to Böll's story the question reads "Is Katharina to blame, when she initially privileges loyalty to her lover over loyalty to the state?" In his exploration of these and related questions, Böll deploys literature as a medium to achieve the opposite of what he describes in the story. Where the press (and in particular the tabloid *Bild*, which is called DIE ZEITUNG in Böll's story) tended to polarize discourse and diminish the space for political, social and moral differentiation, Böll enlarges this space by constantly referring to the grey zone of moral imponderability, which can only be found between the extremes.

As is well known, in 1972, the year that Böll was awarded the Nobel Prize, he himself became the target of a press campaign. He knew Ulrike Meinhof, one of the founding members of the RAF, personally. Before her decision to resort to violence, Meinhof had been a dedicated and politically active journalist who had also written a theatre play. As soon as the RAF had begun carrying out its first actions, the West German government and the right-wing press attempted to isolate the terrorists. What outraged Böll in particular was the coverage by *Bild*. This widely circulated and popular newspaper not only initiated a smear campaign against the RAF, it also frequently accused the group of having committed crimes even before the police were able to provide any evidence: *Bild's* coverage of a bank robbery in Kaiserslautern on December 22, 1971, was titled "Baader-Meinhof-Gruppe mordet weiter." This attitude of (pre)judging before the police had investigated the crime and caught the perpetrators infuriated Böll. He railed:

Ich kann nicht annehmen, daß Polizeibehörden und zuständige Minister über Helfershelfer wie *Bild* glücklich sein können – oder sollten sie's doch sein? [...] Das ist nicht mehr kryptofaschistisch, nicht mehr faschistoid, das ist nackter Faschismus. (Böll: 1979, 283)

But the right-wing media went one step further; from the early 1970s on, they targeted not just the terrorists but also uninvolved left-wing intellectuals, including most prominently of course Heinrich Böll himself. They coined the label "sympathizer" (*Sympathisant*), suggesting that these intellectuals were nearly as dangerous as the terrorists themselves. Throughout the seventies, Böll and others faced smear campaigns in which they were denounced as the spiritual fathers of terrorism. Erich Fried, for example, a left-wing German writer living in England, endured numerous slanders, some ending up in court, throughout this and the following decade. However, neither he nor Böll had ever approved of or incited armed action against the Federal Republic of Germany. Despite this obvious and crucial distinction, the self-declared voice

of mainstream Germany, the *Bild-Zeitung* and other Springer-newspapers and journals, continued with their accusations. In implementing certain laws – for example the “Extremistenbeschluß”, a law that was passed on January 28, 1972, to bar purported extremists from joining the Civil Service, hence the term “Berufsverbote” – the state not only supported but actively began to enforce the new demarcations introduced into the German language primarily by the right-wing press.

If in this first example I focused on a specific strategy of effecting increased political polarization, and hence exclusion, on behalf of the state and the right-wing press, in my second example the focus is on left-wing attempts to polarize contemporary discourse. In Böll’s 1972 *Spiegel*-article in support of Ulrike Meinhof and against *Bild*’s in his opinion counter-productive campaign against the terrorists, he not only reproached the tabloid for its use of language, calling it “Verhetzung, Lüge, Dreck” (Böll: 1979, 283), he also characterized *Bild*’s journalism as fascist; but in this he echoed the RAF’s own programmatic 1971 text *Das Konzept Stadtguerilla*, in which one could find the terrorists’ critique of Germany’s right-wing press condensed into such phrases as “Daß fast alles, was die Zeitungen über uns Schreiben [...] gelogen ist, ist klar. [...] – das ist alles nur Dreck” (Rote Armee Fraktion: 1988, 5). Clearly, the phenomenon of linguistic polarization was not confined to the state and the right-wing press: many in the left, and not just the extreme left, such as the Baader-Meinhof-group or some of the “Kommunarden”, picked up on it as well. A whole culture of confrontation emerged, where the left not only rejected the policies of the state but also refused to use mainstream language. Instead, it tried to establish a counter-culture that would provide an alternative sphere for interaction and communication outside of state and media control. The *Red Army Faction* itself, of course, represented only the most extreme form of this rupture with the state apparatus, the media and their sphere of legality. Most groups on the left, by contrast, preferred to act within the legal boundaries (excepting an occasional stone thrown at a demonstration), yet tried at the same time to establish some form of network that would allow them to bypass the state’s institutions. Here lie the roots of the ecological movement as well as the Green Party – just to mention two phenomena that have since then moved into the mainstream of German political life.

Despite Böll’s call to give themselves up before worse happens, the RAF insisted on their decision to resort to violence in their self-proclaimed revolutionary struggle against the West German state. The following programmatic sentence by Mao symptomatically served as the motto for *Das Konzept Stadtguerilla*: “Zwischen uns und dem Feind einen klaren Trennungsstrich ziehen!” The creation of an “out-group”, regarded as “the enemy”, and a corresponding “in-group” was part of the RAF’s policy. They translated this into a verbal strategy, which comprised a particular amalgam of everyday language, slang, and polarized vocabulary in order to create an in-group

language all their own. For example, they invariably referred to politicians as “Schweine” (“pigs”) and to policemen as bulls (“Bullen”). Böll did not support this practice where it involved degrading or humiliating people. But nor did he want to become complicit in the ferocious campaigns directed by the state and the press at the RAF. In this highly polarized situation, and with little space to manoeuvre, writers and intellectuals like Böll were sometimes forced to decide whether to address the official public sphere in one tongue or to speak exclusively to the opposition in another. More often than not, Böll tended to rely on the traditional public channels of opinion making which automatically disqualified him in the eyes of the RAF members.

But other authors’ writings were informed by a much closer affinity with the RAF’s discourse. For his role in the early years of the movement, Bernward Vesper, who committed suicide in 1971, has to be mentioned; as his autobiographical novel-essay *Die Reise* (1977) illustrates, he shared the RAF’s contempt for bourgeois society, and he deliberately set out to employ colloquial and in-group language to stake out this position.³ Another author who maintained close ties with the RAF and who detached himself from the public sphere was Christian Geissler. The most obvious difference between Böll’s and Geissler’s texts is who they address. Whereas Böll wrote in a plain style using everyday language, Geissler’s choice of vocabulary excluded the mainstream public as his readership; he spoke to the left, if not exclusively to the small in-group of terrorists and their sympathizers. In a 1986 epilogue to his novel *Das Brot mit der Feile* (1973), Geissler referred to a conversation he once had with Böll in 1973:

„böll hat damals zu mir gesagt, in sorge um jedes leben, wir dürfen nichts schreiben, nichts, kein wort, das auch nur einen einzigen genossen noch künftig ermuntert, sich gegen das pack (böll kannte den feind) zu bewaffnen.“ Geissler responded, „jeder text, der sorgfältig leidenschaftlich von uns gearbeitet ist, begründet ist, ist aus sich selbst ein schritt zur bewaffnung der klasse. denn wo immer wir frei unser leben meinen, da meinen sie gnadenlos unsern tod.“ (Geissler: 1986, 480)

While Böll aimed at a de-escalation and reconciliation with the public sphere, Geissler sought to underscore the dividing line between the imagined groups of “us” and “them” – the terrorists and their sympathizers on the one hand and their state-supporting enemies on the other.

Geissler’s writings partly fulfilled this task. In *kamalatta* (1988), for example, his *chef d’œuvre*, we encounter unfiltered hate speech by members of a leftist terrorist group, which is of course not referred to as terrorist. Geissler consciously employed the terminology of the RAF and other groups of the far left and he wrote in minuscules, thus mimicking the written

³ Vesper, however, did not participate in acts of violence, unlike Peter Paul Zahl, author of various books, among them *Die Glücklichen* (1979), and Peter Jürgen Boock, who wrote about his breaking away from the RAF in *Abgang* (1988).

statements of the RAF. Hence one layer of this novel replicates the radical left's enthusiastic rhetoric against the state. The respective utterances of various left-wing adherents expose the reader to a constantly present demand to join the struggle. However, Geissler himself never took up arms. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that the text of *kamalatta* also contains a layer with a non-political, almost defeatist thrust, which is working against the enthusiastic statements of the political activists. This textual layer is inspired by the modernist writings of the classical avant-garde. Here, a multi-voiced, decentered text unfolds with mutilated sentences and poem-like passages of lyrical prose. This kind of contradictory textual movement can be interpreted as a subversion of literature (see Kramer: 1996). It is caught in a double bind: with the first layer, the novel incites its reader to "leap" into the political struggle, thus subverting the very medium of literature. At the same time, it is literature itself that is transmitting this message, thus reinstating the power of the text as a tool for a politically stimulating reading experience. It is the text's second layer that responds to this tendency. *Kamalatta* does not reconcile the rift between these textual features. The novel remains as fissured and discordant as the political left itself.

Although in a certain sense Geissler took literature to its limits, his texts nevertheless share a central feature with other texts of the seventies and the eighties that used terrorism as their subject. Unlike those politically minded writers in the sixties who experimented with art as a means of political action and direct intervention, the authors of the seventies contented themselves with a separation of these roles by being, on the one hand, traditional writers of a somewhat detached literature of reflection and, on the other, highly regarded intellectuals who made political statements in the public sphere. It seems that the shooting of the student Benno Ohnesorg during a demonstration in 1967 brought the experiments with art as a form of direct political intervention, which were current in the previous years, to a halt (see Briegleb: 1993). In a situation of increased polarization and emerging violence, leftist policies and leftist art diverged once again.

The discussion of Geissler's novel leads to my third example of the literary formulation of such demarcations and exclusions. Not only did the state and the right-wing press attempt to exclude leftist individuals from participating in public discourse, and not only did the West German left attack the state and the right-wing media while trying to establish their own independent counter-culture, but the left was simultaneously preoccupied with processes of in-grouping and out-grouping, i.e., defining demarcations and exclusions, within their own sphere.

Certain factions within the left drew a distinct line between themselves and their fellows in opposition. In Geissler's novel *kamalatta*, the parting line between the armed unit and other members of the left is a key concern. The terrorist unit excludes the main protagonist, who, as a result of his exclusion, commits suicide, highlighting the impossibility of living out his desire to

occupy a position between armed and unarmed resistance, between legality and illegality. Geissler points out the need to make a decision, to position oneself in one camp or the other; his novel thus reflects the extreme degree of coercion that any such highly polarized political environment exerts on an individual, especially a politically engaged one.

In his 1992 novel *Himmelfahrt eines Staatsfeindes*, Friedrich Christian Delius also focuses on this issue. In this book, being the concluding part of the “Deutscher Herbst” trilogy, a terrorist group member is portrayed as wanting to back out. Delius describes the mechanisms within the group in terms of the segregating, exclusionary language used:

Das haben sie uns ja auch vorgeworfen die legalen Linken wir hätten sie dauernd unter Druck gesetzt mit der Knarre imperialistisch sie gezwungen ja oder nein zu sagen na gut ach diese Scheißwörter [...] Schießwörter Scheißwörter man müßte nein ich müßte eigentlich mal wieder reden ohne solche Wörter ohne die Kommandosprache ohne abchecken abcovern abknallen. (Delius: 1992, 136)

Delius provides an interesting case. In the sixties and seventies he composed numerous poems which debunked the language of the state and of big business. In a 1975 collection of poems entitled *Ein Bankier auf der Flucht*, he even visualized the business magnate Helmut Horten’s natural death, adding the verse: “Ihr wißt schon: Nicht immer endet der Kapitalist / so einfach, idyllisch, ohne Kampf, ohne List” (Delius: 1975, 53). Delius’s sympathy for armed opposition is tangible.⁴ In his novel *Ein Held der inneren Sicherheit* (1981), the first part of the aforementioned trilogy, Delius tells the story of the abduction of a business manager, focussing on the euphemistic language of the media and the business sector, while from *Mogadischu Fensterplatz* (1987) onwards his critical focus shifts toward the terrorist scene. *Himmelfahrt eines Staatsfeindes*, the last in this series, representing a kind of conclusion to this development, can be read as a carnevalesque ridicule of both the state and the terrorists. As with many on the left, Delius’s disaffection with and critical stance toward terrorism had grown over the years, and by the time *Himmelfahrt eines Staatsfeindes* was published in the early 1990s no residue of sympathy remains. Whereas Geissler in his texts never gave up expressing his solidarity with the RAF, Delius gradually removed all traces of sympathy for militant action from his.

A younger writer, Rainald Goetz, born in 1954, represents yet another stance. In his novel *Kontrolliert*, published in 1988, the first person narrator re-enacts his attitude toward terrorism ten years after the “Deutscher Herbst” of 1977. Through the form of an inner monologue, the narrator visualizes the thoughts and feelings he experienced during the year 1977. Goetz primarily employs two techniques. First, he depicts recollection as a transforming practice. Through their retrieval, the memories are subjected to a controlling

⁴ This was a quite common feature at the time. In an anonymous leaflet, for example, a student expressed a “clandestine delight” about the assassination of Generalbundesanwalt Siegfried Buback in April 1977.

mechanism; the narrative consciousness domesticates them. Thus, the book exhibits not just the belatedness of these reflections, but also the impossibility of stepping back in time to authentically recreate the debates of that era. Second, Goetz refers his reader to a singular mechanism of identification; the text illustrates the peculiar way of how an average student's thoughts hyperactively revolve around the terrorists' actions. Without ever seriously posing the question of whether he should join the terrorist group, the first-person narrator's concern hinges on the extent to which he can identify with the terrorists. While leading an unspectacular life himself, his imagination seems to be transfixed on the terrorist's lifestyle, at once dangerous and exciting.

Goetz conceived the narrating consciousness, the "I", as a tool or means to illustrate a young man's problems of identification and dissociation with terrorism. By detaching the narrator's reflections from political practice, Goetz exposes the establishment of demarcations as an imaginary practice. By the same token, the whole novel is woven out of fragments of quotations; no controlling position beyond or outside of this web of signification is provided for. Assimilated and distorted textual material from a wide range of sources forms the medium through which the "I" tries to analyze and rationally reconfigure his past and present political and personal situation. Through the texture of his novel, Goetz reenacts how discourse, by providing a set vocabulary and a matrix of fixed rhetorical patterns, imposes limitations upon our consciousness and the way we perceive the world. Inevitably, and from the outset, pre-established discourse permeates everything that is spoken – or even thought – about terrorism. A non-discursive, neutral starting point does not exist. Through his literary technique, Goetz makes his reader aware of this process, thereby turning it into a productive textual movement. Being detached from political action, the text allows us to venture into the realm of political identifications, projections, desires and hidden agendas and to explore the imaginary spheres of the (West German) state and its political opponents. The novelty of *Kontrolliert* – and the force of Goetz's narrative – is defined by the very consistency with which the author has applied this technique.

At the time of its publication, Goetz's fictitious confrontation with the most radical form of recent German leftist activity, RAF terrorism, served as an interesting test case for the degree to which the left still existed as a collective concept, albeit maybe only an imaginary identificational one. It was this very concept of the left as a unified whole that was at stake for most of these authors. This issue of the unity of the left was emotionally particularly charged because most intellectuals of the period in question shared the belief that National Socialism had come to power only because the left had been disunited at the end of the Weimar era.

In his stunning, and as yet untranslated, three-volume novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (The Aesthetics of Resistance), which appeared between

1975 and 1981, Peter Weiss mapped out some of the complexities surrounding this issue of a unified left. As we saw, the RAF's "leap" into illegality and its deliberate use of hate speech repelled many potential supporters and isolated the terrorists within the left. But it was precisely this that propelled many less radical left-wing intellectuals and activists to develop the notion of a diversity within the left – a diversity that, *nota bene*, could even encompass forms of revolutionary violence without automatically dissolving or destroying the envisaged unity.

This leads to my conclusion. Conflicts in many other parts of the world, as well as international terrorism, no doubt influenced domestic German terrorism; but in spite of this, West German terrorism was largely, and rightly, regarded as homespun. The battleground was the self-perception of the West German population as a whole and of the left in particular. Both groups were still trying to cope and come to terms with the legacy of National Socialism – the general public with the acknowledgement of its support for the Nazis and its responsibility for the Holocaust, the left with the acknowledgement of its failure first to stop and later to oust Hitler. The state and the political right labeled the terrorists as enemies, thus excluding this group from participating in the discourse of the public sphere, a participation the RAF for its part never sought. But the crucial question for most left-leaning writers and intellectuals remained, in light of West German terrorism, how to modify their self-perception and realign themselves in this fluid political environment. Whereas the state and the political right denied any relationship with the terrorists and externalized them as the "other", the left struggled to detach themselves from the terrorists who, after all, had developed from within their ranks; hence their major problems with the issue of solidarity.

Needless to say, since September 11, 2001, this situation has changed fundamentally. With German terrorism rooted out, this new wave of terrorism can be construed as something external, pertaining to other countries and other peoples, something that has nothing to do with "us", is imported, and therefore need not engender questions about German self-perception. But again, demarcations entail exclusions: yet again, the state and media have identified an "other", whether it be Islamic fanaticism in general or Al Qaeda more specifically. What is left to do is once again to exorcise the evil with overwhelming force, or "shock and awe". But whereas in the 1970s the discourse about terrorism – at least in Germany – seemed in constant flux, today it appears static and dogmatic – especially in the USA. This reflects a state of affairs in which an overwhelming part of the American public is no longer preoccupied with questions of self-definition because it relies on the assumption that the USA, the only remaining superpower, embodies moral superiority.

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