

MICHAEL BRIE

Classifying the GDR

*The past is not dead,
 It is not even past
 We divide it from ourselves
 And pretend to be strangers.
 Christa Wolf*

The GDR – regime of injustice, totalitarian society or dictatorship?

Just as disputed as the self-definition of the Western society also was the foreign-dominated definition of the state socialist countries. They mutually conditioned one another. The social sciences were immediately touched by this. There developed a complicated field of mutually supplementing and partly also excluding theory strings. To them belong the thesis of state socialism as »bureaucratic society«, as an »immature variant of industrial society«, and/or as specific »modernizing dictatorship«. Especially well-known became the totalitarianism theory developed after the Second World War. Beyond that one should mention Trotsky's thesis of a transitional society as well as the theory of state socialism as state capitalism developed from that, and the emergence of a new class of owners of the economic, political, and cultural as well as military means of power exertion, as well as of »integral etatism« as special form of an »authoritarian state«. Of relevance are also conceptions that explain society from the specific border situation at the edge of a militaristic and capitalist »world-system«. This list could be continued almost infinitely. During and after the events of fall 1989 in the German Democratic Republic (GDR – East Germany) these and other theories were declined ever again in ever new variations.

This scientific field was and is organic part of heaviest fights of classification. Especially in times of historical struggles there would be fights for breaking up the up to then normal order and to produce a new common sense about the social order. This would also always be a »symbolic revolution«. In this understanding scientific action creates symbolic power. This holds especially for the species names of social groups.

The debates to this day about the definition of the type of society that has reigned in the GDR and about the naming of the groups of people in this society is an almost classical example for such symbolic fights and their inherent political relevance.

In the symbolic field of the Federal Republic, however, the terms »state of injustice«, »totalitarian society« and »SED dictatorship« have established themselves for the GDR. This happened by way of a very strict and one-sided selection from the multitude of scientific possibilities that tried to capture in very different ways the contradictory complexity of GDR society. Such semantic shifts in the symbolic field also show with the same authors in the titles of their works. Here it becomes obvious why »social science ... must integrate into the theory of social world a theory of the effect of theory that passing by the installation of a more or less authorized conception of the social world influences the shaping of the reality of precisely this world« – this is a matter of »programs of perception«, »the great collective rituals of name-giving«, of »the collision between the ideas of present and future«.

The process of the selection of terms used to qualify the GDR in politics, the public and science has led to a paradoxical result – to the selection of categories that characterize extreme border situations without being contradicted by corresponding counter-notions. They tend to identify a real society and its representatives with the absolutely evil. A Manichean conception becomes scientific analysis, political explanation and public communication in a modern society.

Semantic content and symbolic power of concepts: »regime of injustice«, »totalitarian society« and »dictatorship«

We can only deal very briefly here with some connotations of these concepts before we develop theses concerning their place in the field of symbolic power of the FRG:

»Regime of injustice«

The »state of law« is in most cases defined strictly formally and then requires at a minimum freedom of speech, freedom to emigrate and possibility to change laws on the basis of the constitution. Free elections, separation of powers, independence of justice also would have to be mentioned. Yet of course not any state, which is not a state of law, is a state of injustice. These are far from complementary notions. Their semantic content is not – as so often alleged – dualistic. Human history, apart from a brief Western episode, would be nothing then but a history of unjust states.

Moreover, also a state of law can become a system of injustice – by way of an economic system, for instance, that robs an important part of the population of the right to work, the right to independent living space, to education and health care, by a system of services and consumption that undermines the ecological bases of human existence, by indirect consequences which release social catastrophes in other countries.

Systems of justice are all societies which – due to structural reasons – existentially constrain or even destroy essential conditions of reproduction of the human beings in that or in other societies. Exercising ruling power in such a society would be abuse of power. The state of law in the present of the First World is a necessary, even if not sufficient condition for preventing these societies from capsizing into systems of injustice.

System of injustice and abuse of power are border notions. They characterize dominant tendencies and can never be looked at as an exhaustive characterization of a society and as adequate definition of the exercise of power. Strictly speaking, every society bears moments of a system of injustice. Not the absence of a developed state of law in itself, but the relationship of GDR society to the concrete human reproduction requirements can allow us to judge in what ways there has been a system of injustice and to what sides of GDR society this term does not apply.

The thesis of the »totalitarian society«

The revival of the term totalitarian society or totalitarianism sets in on the identification of this society with certain structural marks of state socialism. Carl Friedrich defines totalitarianism as a society that is characterized by four features: 1. a totalitarian ideology, to which all have to commit; 2. a one-party system, with the party committed to the ideology and often led by a dictator; 3. a secret police, which finds and punishes those that are seen as enemies of the regime; 4. a monopolistic control of economic organizations, mass media and the military. A characteristic, thus Hannah Arendt, is the atomization, the isolation, the lack of normal social relationships. The build-up of a totalitarian society was seemingly linked to the fabrication of an »atomized mass society«.

The identification of totalitarianism with the relatively consolidated social structures of late state socialism among other things however ignores the peculiarity of Hitler fascism and Stalinist Soviet Union to be able to maintain »only as long as they are in movement and put everything around them in motion.« Their temporary stability lies in the continuation of their transitional character, the dominance of the state of exception. Destalinization, as partial as it may have been, has decisively broken just with this character of Soviet socialism. The »theory« of developed socialist society, of real socialism in the 1960s has made just this breach official. The deficiency of the theory of totalitarianism consists above all in that new structures and voluntaristic forms of relationships of late socialism remain completely excluded, as they cannot be reduced to simple deviations of a »totalitarian« core.

»SED dictatorship«

Especially frequently one hears the term »SED dictatorship« applied to the GDR. Its justification derives from the fact that in the GDR as in other state socialist countries, there existed a one-party rule which has not faced the democratic forms of derivation of political representation of the general will from elections and state of law procedures. »Democratic centralism« was the appearance for an »undemocratic centralism« of the official structures of power.

The statements, however, do not explain whose interests and which were realized within these forms and why, to what extent there have been tendencies of participation, where a decentralization occurred and to what extent it was possible to create and stabilize kinds of counter-powers within the existing institutions and by their reconstruction, how mass loyalty was produced over four decades and the active support by a broad elite of one's own secured. Moreover, the unambiguously hierarchically determined power fields identified with the notion of dictatorship did not exist. This is a statement of tendency with a partly greater, partly very low approximation to the real situations.

»Nomen est omen!« – tricky rites of nomenclature

The identification of the GDR with a »state of injustice« or a »totalitarian society« or rather »inhuman dictatorship« first of all raises a number of questions which make an understanding extremely risky, improbable or even impossible. One of the essential reasons is that »communicative action« – to the extent that confrontations take this form at all – is imbedded into »the contexts of life experiences«, »which would provide for backing by a massive background consensus«, neither in the relationship East-West nor East-East. The social integration of the unified state of Germany is so problematic, because the communication efforts, that are actually needed, cannot be supplied from the »resources of the already always trusted«. There no longer exists in the enlarged Federal Republic a »broad, unshakeable rock emerging from the depths, consisting of consensual patterns of interpretation, loyalties and capabilities.« This makes it however extremely difficult and even improbable to expect the accomplishment of unity primarily from the communication of citizens with each other and not to provide adequate economic, social, and political integration. The problem is only that the attempt to directly take over the GDR and the immediate formal introduction of all West German conditions has contra-productively complicated the requirements for a lasting integration. Precisely because of that, public understanding between significant social groups could be extremely overtaxed and even break down.

First: »Nomen est omen!« – The name foreshadows a meaning!

The emphasis on certain experienceable and also empirically testable real relationships as the decisive classification characteristic of societies, the distinctive naming of these societies departing from these features is identical to their relative posi-

tioning with respect to other societies and in this sense necessarily a value judgment. It is a rite of nomenclature (Bourdieu). Especially when employing such border notions it becomes obvious that action in the scientific field, contrary to Max Weber's conception even if trying to restrain to the analysis of the rationality of means and value-free information about the value guidelines, cannot be free of the quality of all action, thus Weber himself, to signify »a party taken in favour of certain values« and thereby – what today is especially often misapprehended – »regularly against others.«

Second: Nomen est numen! – To call something means to pretend knowledge!

Behind the ritual of classifying the GDR as dictatorship, system of injustice or totalitarian society stands a meta-physical program of perception. Consciously selected, torn out of historical and international contexts, robbed of all intermediate tones, this classification bars the view for everything that resists it. Precisely through the classification notions which try to produce the differentiation of real societies from descriptive, analytical or normative points of views, models of real societies are sharpened to conform to distinctive or consciously distinguished features that were identified in reality or assigned to it, the ideal type. The one-sidedness, which is necessarily linked that, can transform very quickly into a regulative structuring of perception that goes beyond the heuristic orientation function and makes one blind to the complexity of the real object or rather relegates all »deviant« phenomena to the rank of secondary or tertiary accidents and derivatives of latter order.

If to make things worse, a black-and-white classification is introduced which only knows the extremes which are after all seldom in reality, and denounces every »but« as an attempt at apology – or worse even – paving the road for a new criminal rule, then from the one-sided pushing things to a head there threatens to become the complete reversal. If one looks at the past through these glasses, only a very small minority will recognize, what it wanted to see already before 1989. To many the way to any critical memory of lived history, to be told and asked about, seems barred. Shameful suppression or defiant idealization become almost unavoidable as an answer.

Thirdly: Naming means, to carry out classifications!

The classification of GDR society and the program of its perception result in an attribution ritual for those people who lived in it. Once again Wolfgang Templin: in the consolidation of history there is a need for »a meeting between the guilty and the concerned, the perpetrators and the victims«. The roles are set.

Three more or less large boxes thus are available. They are labelled »perpetrator«, »victim« and »sympathizer«. These classifications lead to a very specific and very one-sided reconstruction of the GDR actors. In certain respects they stand in a by no means accidental continuity to the respective classifications in the GDR, where next to the »stead-fast class-

conscious comrades«, there still existed the »weak-willed comrades«, the »eternal grumblers and bickerers«, the »people« and the class enemies.

Such classifications in my opinion veil the in my opinion really decisive differences in the action motives, goals and responsibilities of concrete social actors and especially the individuals in GDR society, for whom we will still have to ask in what follows.

Fourth: Calling means to pass judgment!

The word »actor« has turned into »perpetrator«, a term of abuse. Every »victim« receives absolution. Each file by the StaSi which was opened for the observation of individuals, has become a »victim file«. Every report to the StaSi turns one into a »perpetrator«. In a weakened form this holds for the members and non-members of the SED. Any commitment to change the GDR by means of the GDR, almost independently from the content of this commitment, turns into a crime, an unjust deed.

But: was any action an unjust deed? Was any kind of sympathy really nothing else but cheap opportunism? Can the GDR be fully and completely reduced to repression and any commitment within her to repression? And conversely, must one person be acquitted for whatever reason, whereas this absolution is denied to another? Must a former collaborator of the MfS be condemned to poverty by being pensioned off? Why can all members of an organization and their family members be held accountable in such a general way for the overbearing activity of such an organization? Were most others in the GDR really nothing else but a heap of criminals, hypocrites, bootlickers, or coward niche inhabitants? Do the Germans really want to enact the Last Judgment where it says: »The cowardly, however, and the non-believers and blasphemers and murderers and obscene and magicians and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the murky pool that is burning with fire and acid«?

Any action which by »institutionalization«, keeps up »continuation and power of the existing conditions« »is in its tendency tragic«, because these conditions can already pass away again during the life-times of the concerned. But this guilt is inhuman. It is collective and just because of that leads either to inescapable and self-destructive self-accusation or to the general apology of: »We were all evil and have sinned!«

The »perpetrators«, those who in the GDR actively committed to it (however differently this »for it« may have looked like), as a rule lose essential civic and citizens' rights. Pension diminution or non-counting of years of service according to the formal character of function threatens not only all formal and informal collaborators of the MfS, but also hospital and school directors, members of scientific councils at the Ministry for University Education of the GDR, officers of the NVA (National People's Army) or all border guards etc. Public service is closed to many of them for the duration. Who got the sack in Saxony for personal or reasons of demand (!) is by strict regulation of the minister of education of 9th November 1992

»strictly excluded from reemployment at a Saxon higher educational establishment.«

And since some only fit only to one-half or three-quarters into one of the boxes, head and collar do not always find room, hybrids are invented: 30% perpetrator, 60% sympathizer and 10% victim melt in the person of Mr. XYZ to a classical GDR identity of a SED member close to the state. Scientific discourse and political and legal practice and media in this context develop homologous practices.

Calling the state socialist societies like the GDR »regime of injustice«, »totalitarian society« or »dictatorship« has on the basis of these methodological problems, willingly or unwillingly, a number of quite decisive symbolic effects: Above all they form a common denominator or generic term for German fascism and the GDR, for SS and Gestapo and the state security of the GDR, for Auschwitz and the injustice committed in the GDR. Over the detour of these terms a symbolic, highly effective equalization of these two societies occurs.

At the same time any approach for looking for an at least partial common denominator between GDR and FRG is thereby blocked at the point of departure. The GDR is being refused any kind of »normality« which is at the same time naturally assumed for the FRG. A radical symbolic wall is being erected between both societies.

Since these terms are relational concepts of attribution which at the same time constitute terms of demarcation of one's own society from that of the GDR and since these concepts are being understood absolutely, »the abuse in the sense of a unilateral, politico-ideological term of attack ... is pre-programmed.« Especially after the collapse of the European, state socialist societies, it has its renaissance. Therefore, it is also not an accident that the terms »totalitarian society«, »dictatorship« or »regime of injustice« hark back to those models, characterized like no others by a »close connection between normative-evaluating and descriptive-explanatory elements, between politico-ideological functions and theoretic-scientific analysis.«

Did the GDR, comparable to fascism, load upon itself crimes of such a historical magnitude, which would actually lead any commitment in this society forever into the vicinity of a crime? Next to militarization of public life, demarcation as per wall, repression of oppositional movements, did not also a something of peace, international understanding, social security, human care for others emanate from it? How un-normal or normal was this state really?

Fifth: to call names means to register a claim to rule!

Calling the GDR names is bare of any naïve innocence and not at all self-explanatory. It turns out to be an instrument of rule. This is not meant as a denunciation but as a statement of fact. The nomenclature of social phenomena necessarily also has this function.

The classifications, the prescriptions for perception, the attributions to categories of large groups of people, only apparently take place anonymously. Precisely because these are noti-

ons, which beyond normality only know the absolute contrast between good and evil, they in reality represent a claim to rule beyond any discussion by those who formulate legal regulations and questionnaires, represent the prosecution in commissions or preside these commissions, hand notices to others or decide about their participation in associations and tribunals. Thus ruling groups are formed and consolidated. In this way they recruit – let me pronounce the evil word – subjects. Thus these are brought to recognize the power of others over them. This as well we know from the GDR. The new possibilities to resist that must be used.

The stigmatization of few as perpetrators at the same time compels all others, to present themselves at least as sympathizers or even as victims and to bow under the triumphal arches of the new power or to erect them themselves. By each of these rituals again fear is being spread to have belonged to the »wrong ones«. Renewed adaptations are being extorted, blind obedience asked and German counter-virtues cultivated. The nascent self-hatred turns into hatred against other, even more defenceless people.

Sixth: To call names means, declare battle onto others!

There have always been in history such battles about the past. They are normal, but not innocent at all. Therefore, they have to be fought openly and democratically. In that consists the new chance. It cannot obscure the fact that the naming is a conscious selection process which 1. is being carried out by scientists and collectives of scientists, 2. defines programs of perceptions and 3. assumes for itself the authority to talk »the truth«. Since it is a matter of fundamental notions of self-understanding of societies, precisely this selection process is at the cutting edges between scientific field and other fields of social production (media, politics, economy etc.). Precisely at these cutting edges more than elsewhere, there is battle for the power to speak thus or differently. With the classification of societies by scientists, there at the same time occurs a self-classification and qualification from the outside of these scientists in the »truth discourse«, their admission or exclusion from the same.

Scientific truth, political justice and a public democratic way of dealing with GDR history in my view seem to make it absolutely necessary to say good-bye to Manichean categorical patterns, to give up the black-and-white composition, to overcome the tendency to excommunicate the respective others from the public.

Übersetzung: Carla Krüger

The author

Michael Brie – holds a PhD in Philosophy and used to be a professor of political science at the Humboldt University in Berlin; he is currently the head of the department of policy research at the headquarters of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. This text is an extract from the article »It is difficult to talk about the GDR«. The article originally appeared in Michael Brie, Dieter Klein, Der Engel der Geschichte. Befreiende Erfahrungen einer Niederlage (The Angel of History: Liberating Experiences of a Defeat), Berlin, 1993.