# The Political as Communicative Space in History: The Bielefeld Approach

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## Political History and its Discontents: Towards a New Consensus?

There was a time when political history was declared outdated by prominent members of the historical profession in most Western countries. The high point of the assault on political history was reached in the 1970s and 1980s under the double blow of, first, social history, and second, cultural history. It is true that the traditional topics of political history – the rise and fall of nations, the making and unmaking of constitutions, the strategies of political parties, the encounters between great leaders and the people, in short: the business of government – continued to dominate teaching in schools and universities as well as TV documentaries and popular textbooks. However, although still an important subject, this kind of conventional political history had lost much of its former attraction by the 1970s, especially among younger scholars. The slackening of interest was due partly to the fascination exerted by new and until then largely unexplored fields such as gender history, the history of the body and sexuality, or the history of marginal and subaltern groups. Furthermore, critics were dissatisfied with the unresponsiveness of traditional political historians to new methods and approaches such as comparison, discourse analysis, or the study of images. At times, these discontents culminated in more fundamental calls for a paradigm shift in the entire discipline. Politics, it was claimed, was only a dependent variable in the historical process. The real forces shaping long-term developments were assumed to be either socio-economic »structural« constraints, or the mentalities and sign systems that – together – make up the »culture« inhabited by the historical agents and informing their beliefs and behaviour. Political history, the critics argued, had to be dethroned from its top position, because social history, or respectively cultural history, possessed much more explanatory potential.

The French historians of the *Annales* school were among the earliest, and most outspoken, opponents of political history. They not only refused the positivistic traditions of French republican history, but struggled against the priority of politics in historical writings in general. As Jacques Le Goff stated in 1978 – nearly fifty years after the founding of the *Annales* journal – the fight was not over yet: »Detrôner l'histoire politique, ce fut l'objectif numéro un des Annales, et cela reste un souci de premier rang de l'histoire nouvelle.«[1] Not surprisingly, this massive challenge caused angry reactions and a stiffening of attitudes with some practitioners of old-style political history, whereas it encouraged others, in France and elsewhere, to promote revisions and apply new concepts to the historical study of politics. Thus, René Rémond, historian of the French Right, coordinated a volume defending political history in 1988 in which he defined its goal in almost Weberian terms: to study the political as an »activité qui se rapporte à la conquête, à l'exercice, à la pratique du pouvoir.«[2] And Jacques Julliard, historian of the French Left and labour movement, directed the attention of historians to the »strategies of actors in the face of historical necessities» and stated that »in modern societies, the interrelations are sufficiently numerous to give birth to events, institutions, and even structures that are sufficiently complex for the word ›political‹ to remain the only one capable of describing them.«[3] Political history as a history of structures, not just events, became conceivable.

From another angle, cultural history in France was particularly productive in questioning the practice of political history. Important works on political culture, such as Mona Ozouf's study on revolutionary celebrations (1976),[4] as well as a sustained interest in national myths and the rituals of memory were outcomes of this shift of focus. Pierre Nora's project on the French *Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1992) found international followers and brought the content, form, agents, and effects of myth making and memory building to the attention of political historians.[5] In spite of, or

1 Le Goff, Jacques (1978). L'histoire nouvelle. In Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (eds.), *La nouvelle histoire*. Paris: Retz, 226.

2 Rémond, René (1988). Du politique. In René Rémond (ed.). *Pour une histoire politique*. Paris: Seuil, 381.

3 Julliard, Jacques (1982). Political history in the 1980s. In Theodore K. Rapp and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.). *The new history. The 1980s and beyond*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 30–47, at 44.

4 Ozouf, Mona (1976). *La fête révolutionnaire: 1789–1799*. Paris: Gallimard.

5 Nora, Pierre (ed.) (1997). *Les Lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard.

rather because of the *Annales* historians' criticisms, and inspired also by the works of social scientists like Pierre Rosanvallon, Claude Lefort, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu, French political history has again become a differentiated and lively field of historical research.

Objections to conventional political history were less pronounced in Anglo-American academia than in France. British historian Susan Pedersen could state in a 2002 article on the prospects of the discipline, that the »study of politics has always been the British historian's first concern«, and she only cautiously criticised her fellow political historians for still concentrating primarily on the doings of statesmen and stateswomen, party organisations, parliamentary affairs, and governmental and electoral politics.[6] Similarly, Mark H. Leff adopted only a mildly revisionist tone in his 1995 article on the state of U.S. political history for the centennial issue of the *American Historical Review*. As a »working definition« that reflected »common practice«, he put forward that »political history deals with the development and impact of governmental institutions, along with the proximate influences on their actions.«[7] While he had some harsh words to say about conservative historians who abhorred multiculturalism and wanted to impose an orthodox, »patriotic« view of U.S. political history, the only innovations he found worth commenting upon were, first, the abortive »new political history« of the 1960s and 1970s relying solely on quantitative methods; second, the more successful, qualitative approach of »new institutionalists« such as Theda Skocpol who aimed at explaining how public policy was shaped by complex »interactions between governmental structure, legislative actions, private groups, and underlying social assumptions«, and third, the endeavours of some historians of labour, gender, and race relations to more thoroughly consider the »infrapolitics of oppressed groups« as yet another element for explaining institutional and policy changes.[8]

In the meantime, however, major challenges for political history in the Anglophone world came from the sidelines rather than the core of the discipline. As in France, cultural history and the (comparative) history of nation building introduced new themes, approaches, and concepts to po-

6 Pedersen, Susan (2002). What is political history now. In David Cannadine (ed.). *What is history now?* New York, NY: Palgrave, 36–56, at 39.

7 Leff, Mark H. (1995). Revisioning U.S. political history. *American Historical Review*, 100, 829–853, at 829.

8 Ibid., at 848, 851, 853.

litical history. Lynn Hunt's books on the symbolic and gendered dimensions of political culture in the French Revolution (1984, 1992), Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's collection of essays on the »invention« of tradition (1983), Linda Colley's work on the »forging« of Britons and the British nation (1992), and, most notably, the path-breaking study on »imagined communities« by Benedict Anderson, specialist on South East Asian history (1983), all helped historians to contend with the fact that the political communities they wrote about: states, nations, peoples, empires, and so on, were »constructed« entities in the first place, entities that could not be treated as given, but whose emergence had to be part of the story.[9] The construction of the polity itself, and along with it, the notions of identity and difference, of citizenship and political space thus came to the fore in the writings of English-speaking political historians.[10]

From the 1980s onwards, the linguistic turn posed another – worldwide – challenge to traditional political history. In Britain, dissatisfaction with socio-economic, often Marxist explanations of political decisions and structural changes caused a growing interest in the discursive practices by which political actors described themselves, their own ideas, activities and opponents, and the community as a whole. Gareth Stedman Jones's essays on competing conceptualisations of »class«, and particularly his linguistically informed reinterpretation of Chartism, sparked off a debate that is still ongoing about the political dimension of verbally and symbolically produced class (and other) divisions in society.[11] Since the 1990s, the debate has not only brought English-speaking historians to reflect more

9 Hunt, Lynn (1984). *Politics, culture and class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Hunt, Lynn (1992). *The family romance of the French Revolution*. London: Routledge; Hobsbawm, Eric J. and Terence Ranger (eds.) (1983). *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Colley, Linda (1992). *Britons: Forging the nation 1707–1837*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

10 For the broad spectrum of themes and approaches now discussed in American political history, see American Historical Association (ed.), Political history today: Plural perspectives on a protean culture (*Perspectives on History*, May 2011), available online at http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1105, accessed at 3 Oct, 2012.

11 Jones, Gareth Stedman (1983). *Languages of class. Studies in English working class history 1832–1982*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; the essay on Chartism ibid., at 90–178; for a succinct overview of these debates, see Mares, Detlev (1997). Viktorianische Arbeiterbewegung, politische Sozialgeschichte und linguistic turn in England. *Neue Politische Literatur*, 42, 378–394.

deeply on the demarcations between »the political« and »the social« in general, but has also inspired a host of new empirical studies on political parties, electioneering, and other aspects of popular, or »low« politics in contrast to a conservative »high-politics« vision of the political process.[12]

Conceptual history in the tradition of Reinhart Koselleck (*Begriffsgeschichte*), which can be seen as a German variant of the linguistic turn, went a step further and problematised »politics« and »the political« as categories of human self-description having histories of their own that must needs be dealt with in any kind of political history. Extensive comparative studies by the Finnish political scientist Kari Palonen and others provided insights into the peculiarities of national or group-specific conceptualisations and, more importantly, the contingent emergence of the very concept of »politics« itself.[13] From a post-colonial perspective, Dipesh Chakrabarty made the same point in a more radical way: Taking issue with Western historians who referred to the peasantry of India as being »prepolitical«, he accused them of universalising their own, Western conceptual apparatus, in this case their (secular) concept of the political. What he commended instead was a willingness to extend the semantic scope of the concept itself so as to include, for example, gods and spirits as political actors and thus to embrace the Indian peasants' world view into the concept.[14]

Apart from theoretical challenges such as the linguistic turn and post-colonialism, debates on (supposedly) specific national features of political life could also serve as starting points for a revival of interest in a renewed political history. An example is the thesis of »pillarisation« (verzuiling) in the Netherlands. This conception points to the internal division of Dutch society since the late nineteenth century into three moral communities: the orthodox Protestants, the Catholics, and the Social Democrats. According to the pillarisation thesis, these communities almost resembled corporate

12 For a highly useful review article comparing British and German approaches, see Brückweh, Kerstin, and Martina Steber (2010). Aufregende Zeiten. Ein Forschungsbericht zu Neuansätzen der britischen Zeitgeschichte des Politischen. *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 50, 671–701; see also Craig, David (2010). »High politics« and the »new political history«. *Historical Journal*, 53, 453–475, and Michael Freeden's chapter in this volume, below, at 127–145.

13 Among Palonen's numerous works, see especially Palonen, Kari (2006). *The struggle with time. A conceptual history of ›politics‹ as an activity*. Münster: Lit Verlag. See also the chapters in section II of this volume, below, 37–145.

14 Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000, 2nd ed. 2008). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, at 12–15.

bodies. As such, they were in competition for political power and the spoils of administration, whereas the »political« life of individual Dutch citizens was thought to take place mainly inside these communities. Until the 1980s, pillarisation was treated as a peculiar feature of Dutch democracy, but since then it has been more and more recognised as a form of organising the political sphere that could evolve almost everywhere, although with different repercussions on the style of politics in each particular case. Thus, in the Netherlands, a flourishing, highly developed and often agonistic civic culture, centred on the communities, went along with a remarkably unemotional and calm conduct of parliamentary and governmental business on the national level,[15] whereas in other countries (Israel, for example), a similarly »pillarised« society can give rise to a highly antagonistic political culture on the local as well as national level.

In the German context, the notorious debates on the German *Sonderweg* gave a special twist to the debates on the place of political history within the discipline as a whole. During the 1970s and 1980s, the controversies between (conservative) political historians and (left-wing) social historians were at least as fierce and aggressive as in France; however, even the most outspoken critics of »traditional« political history, social historians such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, never lost sight of politics. In fact, the peculiar course of German society – and politics – towards National Socialism remained the main *explanandum* in their social histories. The left-wing social historians shared this guiding question, and the focus on the German nation state, with their conservative opponents, the main difference being that they emphasised the explanatory power of socio-economic instead of high-political factors.

Major impulses to redefine the field of political history in Germany came primarily from other sub-disciplines less concerned with the *Sonderweg* question: historical anthropology, gender history, and cultural history. The reception of anthropological methods is one of the particularities of the

15 See Velde, Henk te (2002). *Stijlen van leideschap. Persoon en politiek vy Thorbecke tot Den Uyl*. Amsterdam: Rede; Velde, Henk te (2003). *Het theater van de politiek*. Amsterdam: Rede; Tanja, Erie (2011). *Goede politiek. De parlementaire cultuur van de Tweede Kamer, 1866–1940*. Nijmegen (PhD). Schrover, Marlou (2010). Pillarization, multiculturalism and cultural freezing. Dutch migration history and the enforcement of essentialist Ideas. In Klaas van Berkel and Leeonie de Goei (eds.). *The international relevance of Dutch history*. The Hague: Royal Netherlands Historical Society, 329–354; Velde, Henk te (2010). The international relevance of Dutch history: Closing comment. In van Berkel and de Goei (2010), *Relevance*, 355–365.

German *Alltagsgeschichte*, which is interested in a history from below and generally concentrates on different experiences of men and women in history. Alf Lüdtke contributed significantly to open up *Alltagsgeschichte* to political questions when he coined the notion of »*Eigensinn*« to describe attitudes of industrial workers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[16] In his view, workers' self-definitions and self-affirmations isolated them from others and can explain their resistance towards trade unions and political parties. Gender history posed another challenge to traditional political history. From the 1980s onwards, gender historians have used the constructivist approach to question the »natural« legitimation of sexual differences and to underline their cultural and political construction. In this perspective, the field of the political was not only dominated by men, but tended to reproduce the gender hierarchy by its vocabularies, mechanisms, and values.[17] Gender history also made the construction of boundaries a major concern of historical research by exploring the convergence (or divergence) of boundaries drawn between the public and the private on the one hand and the political and the non-political on the other hand.

In a more direct way, the field of political history has been renewed in Germany by an approach called the cultural history of politics, or the cultural history of the political (*Kulturgeschichte der Politik*, or *Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*). One of its prominent proponents is Thomas Mergel.[18] His interest in the symbolic constitution of politics led him to reinterpret parliamentary life in the Weimar Republic and electoral contests in West Germany after 1945.[19] In both works, he focussed not only on parliamen-

16 Lüdtke, Alf (1993). *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*. Hamburg: Ergebnisse-Verlag; for a short English résumé, see Lüdtke, Alf (2002). From ties that bind to ties that relieve. Eigensinn and Bindung among industrial workers in 20th century Germany. In Yehuda Elkana, Ivan Krastev, Elisio Macamo and Shalini Randeria (eds.). *Unraveling ties. From social cohesion to cartographies of connnectedness*. Frankfurt: Campus, 179–198.

17 For an overview, see Frevert, Ute (2005). Neue Politikgeschichte. In Ute Frevert and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.). *Neue Politikgeschichte. Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung*. Frankfurt: Campus, 7–26.

18 See his seminal article, Mergel, Thomas (2002). Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Politik. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28, 574–606. Another seminal article, more focussed on the early modern period, is Stollberg-Rilinger, Barbara (2005). Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen? Einleitung. In Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (ed.). *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* Berlin: Duncker & Humblot (Beihefte der Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, 35), 9–24.

19 Mergel, Thomas (2002, 2nd ed. 2005). *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik. Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag*. Düsseldorf:

tary and electoral discourses, on the uses of metaphors and images showing the overlapping of interests between different political camps, but also on the material organisation of political communication and its symbolic effects. A similar approach has been applied to diplomatic history and the history of international affairs. Johannes Paulmann was among the first to develop an analysis of symbols and rituals as constitutive parts of international diplomacy in his study on the meetings of European emperors, kings, and presidents during the long nineteenth century.[20] Verena Steller's book on the communicative practices of European leaders and diplomats between the 1870s and the early 1920s is another fine example showing the importance of a cultural history approach to explain not only the external outlook, but the very substance of foreign policy decision making.[21] In a similar vein, Jan Andres and Matthias Schwengelbeck, both working in the context of the Bielefeld research centre on the political, have explained how, even in the nineteenth century, the lyrics and rituals performed at German coronation ceremonies were not just ornamental to, but essential for generating and upholding political power.[22] Their findings support the general conclusion drawn by Wolfgang Braungart that the aesthetic dimension is an indispensable component of political life in all kinds of regimes – ancient or modern, monarchical, dictatorial, or democratic.[23]

It is certainly no exaggeration to claim that, since the late 1990s, debates on new approaches to political history have been comparatively lively and flourishing in Germany. This is due not least to the institutional and financial support given by the German Research Foundation (DFG) for several large collaborative research groups in the field of political history.

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Droste; Mergel, Thomas (2010). *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfs in der Bundesrepublik 1949–1990*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

20 Paulmann, Johannes (2000). *Pomp und Politik: Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg*. Paderborn: Schöningh.

21 Steller, Verena (2011). *Diplomatie von Angesicht zu Angesicht. Diplomatische Handlungsformen in den deutsch-französischen Beziehungen*. Paderborn: Schöningh. See also Mösslang, Markus, and Torsten Riotte (eds.) (2008). *The diplomats' world: A cultural history of diplomacy, 1815–1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

22 Andres, Jan (2005). *»Auf Poesie ist die Sicherheit der Throne gegründet«. Huldigungsrituale und Gelegenheitslyrik im 19. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt: Campus; Schwengelbeck, Matthias (2007). *Die Politik des Zeremoniells. Huldigungsfeiern im langen 19. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt: Campus.

23 Braungart, Wolfgang (2012). *Ästhetik der Politik, Ästhetik des Politischen. Ein Versuch in Thesen*. Göttingen: Wallstein; see also Andres, Jan, Alexa Geisthövel and Matthias Schwengelbeck (eds.) (2005). *Die Sinnlichkeit der Macht. Herrschaft und Repräsentation seit der Frühen Neuzeit*. Frankfurt: Campus.

One general feature of DFG-sponsored Collaborative Research Centres is of special importance here: Most of these groups are comparative or transnational in scope, have an interdisciplinary outlook, and are dealing with problems across long periods of world history. Historians involved in such comparative, interdisciplinary, and transepochal enterprises are therefore positively forced to spend considerable time on rethinking basic categories such as »the political« in order to be able to integrate their common research on different historical communities, epochs, and disciplines. Starting around the turn of the millennium, a number of DFG-sponsored Collaborative Research Centres have devoted themselves to study problems of political history and elaborate specific ways to analyse them. Close to the Bielefeld group (»The Political as Communicative Space in History«), a Collaborative Research Centre in the neighbouring University of Münster dealt with symbolic communication and social value systems from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution. Its central interest was the way in which political order and social values were expressed, performed, and modified through symbolic communication.[24] A similar approach was pursued in another Collaborative Research Centre located at the Humboldt University at Berlin that studied the changing representations of social transformation.[25] At the same time, an international graduate school was set up at Frankfurt University to discuss the changing patterns of political communication from Antiquity to the present age.[26] Other research centres at Konstanz and Heidelberg could be mentioned in this context.[27] All of these groups have contributed to making political history in Germany a thriving, highly diversified, and certainly much more interesting field of study than it used to be in the 1970s or 1980s.

Our very brief recapitulation of the trajectory of political history in various national historiographies has revealed many differences, but also simi-

24 See the research program of the Münster group at http://www.uni-muenster.de/sfb496/forschungsprogramme.html, accessed at 4 Nov, 2012.

25 For information on the Berlin centre, see http://www.sfb-repraesentationen.de/english, accessed at 4 Nov, 2012.

26 Information (in German) on the theme of the Frankfurt Graduate School at http://www.geschichte.uni-frankfurt.de/43284623/Kolleg, accessed at 16 Nov, 2012.

27 See the research programme of the Konstanz group »Norm und Symbol« at http://www.uni-konstanz.de/FuF/SFB485/Forschungsprogramm-EN.htm, accessed at 16 Nov, 2012; for information on the Heidelberg group on »Ritualdynamik«, see http://www.ritualdynamik.de/index.php?id=2&L=1, accessed at 16 Nov, 2012.

larities.[28] Among the latter, the most important one is probably the impact of the successive turns discussed here only in an exemplary fashion (cultural turn, linguistic turn, performative turn, post-colonial turn, visual turn, spatial turn, etc.). Most political historians would now agree that the public uses of language and symbols are not ephemeral phenomena, but crucial factors in the process of creating political spaces, actors, and events. The same can be said for the conviction that rituals and images are »means and ends of power itself«,[29] not just displays of power. And it is also a widely shared belief now that the discipline of political history should look beyond the sphere of governments, monarchs, party leaders, parliaments, or other organisations at the national level. Hardly anyone would deny that actors at the local and transnational levels (new social movements, subaltern and marginalised groups, NGO's), and, perhaps, even agents of an entirely different kind (gods, spirits, or material objects) should also be included in the picture.

Is it true, then, that we are witnessing a new, transnational consensus on how to write political history? Not quite so – or not yet – we would argue. One difference at least remains, which is a difference of focus rather than of specific »national« historiographic traditions. On the one side, the majority of those who would agree to be labelled as »new political historians« or »cultural historians of politics« seem to work with a rather intuitive understanding of what »politics« is and where its ultimate reference point lies. These new political historians assume politics to be concerned with preparing and producing collectively binding decisions and with providing the means to make and implement them. Following that assumption, they still tend to be prey to old notions of sovereignty and the sovereign state when it comes to choosing relevant topics of research. Although rarely mentioned explicitly, these notions still inform a good deal of research going on under the label of »new« or »cultural« history of politics. Thus, it can be observed that, despite programmatic allegations to the contrary, governments, monarchs, parties, or parliaments, and the activities directed towards influencing these agents supposed to be at the top, still get the bulk of attention in many new political histories. In that respect at least,

28 For a more thorough debate on the German debate, see Weidner, Tobias (2012). *Die Geschichte des Politischen in der Diskussion*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

29 Hunt, Lynn (1989). *The new cultural history*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 54.

the new cultural histories of politics are often closer to their more traditional counterparts than they would wish to be.

On the other side, there is a growing number of new political historians who are no longer content to just treat the field conventionally known as politics in a more innovative way, but who go on to problematise the ever changing definitions, demarcations, modalities, and enactments of »politics« and »the political« themselves. In doing so, they often adopt a long-term and comparative perspective. The Bielefeld approach, now to be presented in more detail, is part of that endeavour. It should be admitted, though, that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In the practice of historical research, they often go hand in hand; yet for the purpose of clarifying alternatives, it may be useful to distinguish them as clearly as possible.

## Exploring the Boundaries of the Political, Explaining Politicisation and Depoliticisation

Within the broad field of a renewed political history, the Bielefeld group's characteristic mark is to study the political as a communicative sphere that is subject to substantial variation in space and time, across different cultures, and in the course of world history.[30] Our main objective is to historicise the political itself – the political as a contested concept for one, but, what is more, as a distinct form of human communicative activity conducive to establishing a specific sphere, the political sphere, distinguishable from various other spheres: the religious, the legal, the economic, the scientific, the artistic, and so on. When we distinguish these communicative spheres or spaces, we are of course speaking as contemporaries of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As historians, however, we do not consider the existence of such differentiated spheres as given, but go on to examine their emergence as contingent, and hence reversible, processes. Neither do we conceive the boundaries between these spheres to be stable throughout history; nor do we take for granted that separable communicative spaces called »politics«, »religion«, »law«, »the economy«, »the sci-

30 See also the group's research programme at http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/geschichte/forschung/sfb584/SFB-584-Research-Programme.pdf, accessed at 24 Nov, 2012.

ences«, or »the arts« existed everywhere and at all times. Exploring the changing demarcations of the political, inquiring into the processes of boundary drawing (or boundary blurring) between the political and other spheres is therefore one of the core issues of the Bielefeld group's research agenda.[31]

What this might mean in practical terms is the subject of this volume's chapters and has been demonstrated more extensively in numerous books and articles published by members of the Bielefeld centre. For instance, Pascal Eitler, starting from the case of Max Horkheimer's conversion, analysed the debates on the place of religion in the West German polity of the 1960s and 1970s, which, he concludes, had a much less secular outlook than commonly assumed.[32] Fierce boundary contests of another kind, in this case between the political and the juridical sphere, were the topic of Kathrin Groh's intellectual group portrait of democratic constitutional lawyers during the Weimar Republic.[33] Looking at the same period, Claudius Torp dealt with the contentious issue of mass consumption (or its opposite: shortage) and the more or less successful attempts at regulating or legitimating it politically.[34] The conjunctures of mutual attraction and alienation between politics and the natural sciences were the theme of Tobias Weidner's study on Germany's medical profession and its allegedly »unpolitical« habitus during the long nineteenth century.[35] And the field of the

31 This research agenda owes at least some inspiration to a seminal collection of essays edited by Charles Maier as early as 1987: Maier, Charles (ed.) (1987). *Changing boundaries of the political. Essays on the evolving balance between the state and society, public and private in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. As the subtitle indicates, however, most chapters in that volume follow a more conventional, state- and government-centred view of what politics is all about.

32 Eitler, Pascal (2009). *»Gott ist tot – Gott ist rot«. Max Horkheimer und die Politisierung der Religion um 1968*. Frankfurt: Campus.

33 Groh, Kathrin (2010). *Demokratische Staatsrechtslehrer in der Weimarer Republik: Von der konstitutionellen Staatslehre zur Theorie des modernen demokratischen Verfassungsstaats (Hugo Preuß, Gerhard Anschütz, Richard Thoma, Hans Kelsen und Hermann Heller)*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. See also Kathrin Groh's and Christine Weinbach's introductory chapter in Kathrin Groh and Christine Weinbach (eds.) (2005). *Zur Genealogie des politischen Raums. Politische Strukturen im Wandel*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 9–52.

34 Torp, Claudius (2011). *Konsum und Politik in der Weimarer Republik*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. See also, as a more wide-ranging study, Torp, Claudius (2012). *Wachstum, Sicherheit, Moral: Politische Legitimationen des Konsums im 20. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

35 Weidner, Tobias (2012). *Die unpolitische Profession. Deutsche Mediziner im langen 19. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt: Campus.

arts and its problematic relations to politics were explored, for example, by Dorothea Kraus in a book on theatre protests in the streets and on stage during the 1960s and by Henning Marmulla's close reading of the *Kursbuch*, a literary journal edited by the German author and poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger in the same period.[36] All authors mentioned took a processual view when examining the drawing (or blurring) of boundaries between the political and the non-political in the respective periods, fields, and communities. The processes they discovered were sometimes pushed forward deliberately by the actors themselves; more often, however, they resulted from unintended consequences of their actions.

Explaining the dynamics of processes of politicisation or depoliticisation is a key feature of the Bielefeld research centre. Members of the group have enquired into politicisation and depoliticisation processes from a variety of angles. Comparative studies by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Christian Büschges on ethnic struggles, identity politics, and notions of belonging in nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Asia and Latin America were one important field in which the ways and means of politicisation, including politicisation through the use of violence, could be observed.[37] The politicisation of spaces beyond or below the level of nation states was another topic explored by several colleagues within the centre. Thus, a research team led by political scientist Mathias Albert dealt with transnational political spaces since the late nineteenth century, and the sociologist Olaf Kaltmeier recently published a short, but wide-ranging study on how border zones, landscapes, itineraries, and central hubs in global networks were redefined as »political« spaces through symbols or symbolic acts.[38] Walter Sperling also adopted a spatial perspective in a book addressing the ways in which railway construction had politicising

36 Kraus, Dorothea (2007). *Theater-Proteste. Zur Politisierung von Straße und Bühne in den 1960er Jahren*. Frankfurt: Campus; Marmulla, Henning (2011). *Enzensbergers Kursbuch. Eine Zeitschrift um 68*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

37 See Büschges, Christian, and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (eds.) (2007). *Die Ethnisierung des Politischen. Identitätspolitiken in Lateinamerika, Asien und den USA*. Frankfurt: Campus; Büschges, Christian (2012). *Demokratie und Völkermord. Ethnizität im politischen Raum*. Göttingen: Wallstein; Pfaff-Czarnecka (2012). *Zugehörigkeit in der mobilen Welt. Politiken der Verortung*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

38 Albert, Mathias, et al. (eds.) (2009). *Transnational political spaces: Agents – structures – encounters*. Frankfurt: Campus; Kaltmeier, Olaf (2012). *Politische Räume jenseits von Staat und Nation*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

effects upon the Russian provinces and their populations, including the peasants, during the late Tsarist Empire.[39]

A different approach to the study of politicisation and depoliticisation processes was chosen by Lars Behrisch who traced the effects of a new communication medium, numbers and statistics, on governmental techniques in eighteenth-century German states and in France. The effects were ambivalent: the gathering of statistics could lead to an issue being pushed into the political sphere (politicisation), but also to its neutralisation in a purely technical or bureaucratic sense (depoliticisation).[40] Corruption or, speaking in neutral terms, questionable practices of exchanging gifts, goods, or services, were yet another form of communication analysed by members of the Bielefeld group with regard to its politicising or depoliticising effects. These were dealt with in a volume of essays published by Niels Grüne and Simona Slanicka, focussing on a variety of examples from the medieval to the contemporary period, and Stephan Merl's studies on »corrupt« practices (*blat*) in the Soviet economy. The results point to the fact that, again, the effects of corrupt practices could be ambivalent: whereas the scandalisation of certain practices as »corruption« was an obvious means of politicising an issue, their tacit performance often helped to stabilise an existing order and thereby served to shield it from coming under closer political scrutiny.[41]

Finally, violence as a specific form of political communication, as well as struggles over the uses, limits, and legitimacy of violent acts, are a major theme of enquiry in the Bielefeld centre. Research teams led by Neithard Bulst, Ingrid Holtey, and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt have been working on

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39 Sperling, Walter (2011). *Der Aufbruch der Provinz. Die Eisenbahn und die Neuordnung der Räume im Zarenreich*. Frankfurt: Campus.

40 See his introductory chapter in Behrisch, Lars (ed.) (2006). *Vermessen, Zählen, Berechnen. Die politische Ordnung des Raums im 18. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt: Campus, 7–25; cf. also his chapter in this volume, below at 175–190.

41 Grüne, Niels, and Simona Slanicka (eds.) (2010). *Korruption: Historische Annäherungen an eine Grundfigur politischer Kommunikation*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Merl, Stephan (2010). Kann der Korruptionsbegriff auf Russland und die Sowjetunion angewandt werden? In Grüne and Slanicka (2010), Korruption, 247–279; Merl, Stephan (2010). The Soviet economy in the 1970s – Reflections on the relation between Socialist modernity, crisis and the administrative command economy. In Marie-Janine Calic et al. (eds.). *The crisis of Socialist modernity. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1970s*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 28–65; see also the author's comparative study on communicative practices in twentieth-century dictatorships: Merl, Stephan (2012). *Politische Kommunikation in der Diktatur: Deutschland und die Sowjetunion im Vergleich*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

case studies ranging from the peasants' wars in the late Middle Ages to various forms of violent and non-violent protest by social movements in the nineteenth century and the contemporary period.[42] These case studies, again, provide important insights into the mechanisms of politicisation and depoliticisation. They show, on the one hand, how the performance of more or less violent acts (the burning of archives, protests against price increases, blockades of motorways, or the squatting of town houses) contributed to setting new political agendas, and how the same violent acts, on the other hand, could serve the authorities as a means to criminalise their authors and thereby attempt to depoliticise their concerns. Moreover, it often happened that in the course of struggles over the interpretation of violent acts, the policing activity of the state itself, and its claim on the monopoly of legitimate physical violence, came under attack. These challenges to the monopoly of state violence *per definitionem* went to the core of what, since the early modern period, was deemed to be the political sphere.

Looking back, then, on several years' research on politicisation and depoliticisation processes in the Bielefeld group, one might find it useful to distinguish two ways in which politicisation, or the inverse process of depoliticisation, may happen. Politicisation may, first, occur through deliberate verbal acts (semantic level). In that case, certain topics, agents, or practices are drawn into the sphere of political communication simply by being called »political«: The act of declaring something, certain consumption patterns for example, a »political« matter puts it on the political agenda. Whether, and for how long, it then remains there depends, among other factors, on the relative openness of public debate. In open regimes, chances are good that, once something has been called »political«, it will remain a political issue for quite some time. Whereas politicisation through verbal acts is easy to conceive, it is much more difficult to imagine the inverse process, successful depoliticisation, taking place merely by means of verbal acts: Calling something »non-political«, or claiming to be an »unpolitical« person, as German intellectuals like Thomas Mann did in the

42 For this cf., in particular, two collections of essays: Bulst, Neithard, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.) (2008). *Gewalt im politischen Raum. Fallanalysen vom Spätmittelalter bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt: Campus; Anders, Freia, and Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey (eds.) (2006). *Herausforderungen des staatlichen Gewaltmonopols. Recht und politisch motivierte Gewalt am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt: Campus. See also the chapters in section IV of this volume, below at 253–348, and as a synthetic overview: Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard (2012). *Gewalt und Politik im Europa des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen: Wallstein.

early decades of the twentieth century, rarely had the longed for depoliticising effect. On the contrary, such claims were almost invariably interpreted by the contemporaries themselves as semantic moves in a highly political language game, the game of defining the legitimate realm of politics.

Politicisation may, second, take place through symbolic or physical acts of various natures: gathering statistics, exchanging gifts, organising boycotts, or using violence (performative level). As has been shown, the effects were often ambivalent. The performance of such acts could be an occasion or a means to politicise an issue, whether intended or unintended; but for other agents, the same acts could serve as a pretext to depoliticise the political concerns of their opponents by labelling their acts as merely »criminal« or »corrupt« practices – that is: personal failures or abuses in an otherwise well-ordered societal order. For contemporary observers, however, it was easy to discover that such attempts at reinterpreting the meaning of certain acts were themselves nothing else but political manœuvres. Hence, depoliticisation, by putting a disparaging, non-political label on actions or practices that were originally meant to be political, often failed.

One may conclude that depoliticisation, to be effective, has to happen in a slow and unobtrusive way and that it is most effective when contemporaries do not even realise that it is taking place. Thus, it may happen that objects of political contention are removed from the sphere of public debate and relocated in another domain (jurisprudence, bureaucracy, or the economy) without anyone actually pressing for it or even noticing it. If that happens, public attention shifts from political to administrative, juridical, or economic solutions of problems: the issue is depoliticised, until someone else starts to repoliticise it. This last reflection has led the Bielefeld research group to distinguish more systematically between *attempted* depoliticisation (which often fails), and *effective* depoliticisation, which seems to be all the more successful, the less it is pursued actively and purposefully.

Exploring the drawing of boundaries between the political and the non-political, explaining processes and conjunctures of politicisation and depoliticisation: these are the two main features that distinguish the Bielefeld approach most markedly from other research strategies in the field of the »new« political history. These two major themes have served the Bielefeld group as a common guideline or framework that helps to integrate many interests that individual researchers at Bielefeld otherwise share with scholars at the various German research centres mentioned above who have

been more connected to the international mainstream of the cultural history of the political. Bielefeld researchers have therefore also been active in investigating *qualitative* transformations of political communication. They have looked at changes in the media system, they have traced the emergence of new forms of representing the political, they have examined the visual and aesthetic dimensions of politics, and they have inquired into the effects of these qualitative transformations on political practice.[43] Yet, however significant these themes may be in and of themselves, Bielefeld researchers always treated them in relation to the overarching research objectives just explained. To repeat the point: the Bielefeld group regards its own approach as complementary to the cultural history of the political, not as opposed to it.

## »Politics« and »the Political« – Implications of a Controversial Distinction

The Bielefeld group has opted for »the political«, and not »politics«, as a key concept to guide its research activities. This has been done because our object is a long-range enquiry into how a specific, yet pervasive form of communication – political communication – has been transformed throughout history and across various cultures. Our research agenda is therefore different from, and amounts to more than, tracing the emergence of a particular modern function system called »politics«. Looking at the modern and contemporary period, one might be justified in describing politics as a function system to be distinguished from economics, religion, law, the sciences, the arts, and so on. And it is no doubt worthwhile to

43 For some of the more important publications in these fields, see Footnotes 22 and 23 and, in addition, Frevert, Ute, and Wolfgang Braungart (eds.) (2004). *Sprachen des Politischen. Medien und Medialität in der Geschichte*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Brandt, Bettina (2010). *Germania und ihre Söhne. Repräsentationen von Geschlecht und Politik in der Moderne*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Vogel, Meike (2010). *Unruhe im Fernsehen: Protestbewegung und öffentliche Berichterstattung in den 1960er Jahren*. Göttingen: Wallstein. An inspiring article, summarising research in the Konstanz research centre mentioned above (Footnote 27) on early modern media revolutions and their effects on social and political order, is Schlögl, Rudolf (2008). Kommunikation und Vergesellschaftung unter Anwesenden. Formen des Sozialen und ihre Transformation in der Frühen Neuzeit. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 34, 155–224.

show how politics as a function system follows its own conceptual distinctions and internal logics.[44] However, narrowing down the focus to exploring the emergence and reproductive modes of politics as a modern function system would cause difficulties as soon as we extend our view to ancient or medieval periods or to non-Western cultures before late modernity. For these earlier periods and cultures, such a narrowing of focus would inevitably lead to a kind of history that is only capable of ascertaining deficits. The result would be a condescending kind of history that post-colonial historians very appropriately describe as a »waiting-room‹ version of history«.[45]

The Bielefeld group has taken up the challenge to conceive of a political history that avoids the failure of being geared towards a specifically modern (and Western) concept of »politics«. For this reason, the group has adopted a rather wide definition of »the political« and »political« communication. According to that definition, communication is »political« when it fulfils the following three conditions:

First, communication is political when it has in fact, or is recognised as having, a broad and sustainable impact on large segments or the whole of a given community. Second, communication is political when it aims at obligatoriness in dealing with rules of social life, power relations, or the limits of what can be said and done. Third, communication is political when it refers (explicitly or implicitly) to an imagined collective entity irrespective of whether this collective entity actually exists in an institutionalised form or not.

This threefold definition of political communication (having a broad and sustainable impact, aiming at obligatoriness, referring to an imagined collective entity) is wide enough to be applicable to both pre-modern and modern and Western and non-Western cultures. On the other hand, it still delimits a distinguishable line of enquiry that we call the history of the political. Starting from this definition, we have been able to explore the political from its margins and boundaries as well as from its supposed centres. Thus, we have discovered the political in presumably (or ostensibly) apolitical or pre-political spheres such as consumption, theatre, or expert discourses on medicine; but we have also examined how actors in the centres of political communication drew boundaries between the ins and the outs, how they conceived of their realm of action, or how they

44 See Luhmann, Niklas (2000). *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

45 Chakrabarty (2000, 2nd ed. 2008). *Provincializing Europe*, 9.

attempted to transgress the limits of what had been defined as »political« in earlier times. One form of transgressing established visions of the political is cognitive subversion, the conversion of the perception of the world. Therefore, quite a number of projects in the Bielefeld centre focused on the alteration of schemes of perception and classification by way of subversive and performative discourses.

The Bielefeld group is certainly not unique in giving preference to »the political«, instead of »politics«, as a concept guiding its research. Since the late 1980s, there has been a broad movement in political philosophy and the social sciences to revive the concept of the political as an analytical tool and to rescue it, as it were, from an extremist understanding in terms of Carl Schmitt's (in)famous friend–enemy distinction.[46] The reasons for this rediscovery of the political can partly be found in philosophical debates, remaining largely within the circles of academia, on the nature of the interrelations between citizens, society, and politics. The French debate in particular has been strongly animated by different schools of thought in political philosophy.[47] Yet there is much to indicate that the recent conjuncture over the concept of the political in academia is also a response to more popular concerns about the perceived incapacities of traditional party and governmental politics to handle many imminent and some future questions preying on peoples' minds.

Dissatisfaction with professional politics (what the Germans call *Politikverdrossenheit*) has a long tradition, in Germany and elsewhere, reaching back into the nineteenth century.[48] What seems to be rather new, though, is an experience shared by many peoples and individuals around the globe that

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46 Schmitt, Carl (2002). *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.

47 On this, see Marchart, Oliver (2010). *Die politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp; Bröckling, Ulrich, and Robert Feustel (eds.) (2010). *Das Politische denken. Zeitgenössische Positionen*. Bielefeld: transcript. See also the introduction to section II of this volume, below at 37–43. For the German debate on »the political« in the historical and social sciences, see Weidner (2012), *Geschichte des Politischen*, 30–55.

48 Severe criticism of professional politicians and calls to deprofessionalise politics were (and still are) at least as vehement in France as in Germany; for an example, see Julliard, Jacques (1977). *Contre la politique professionelle*. Paris: Seuil. The contrary attitude of praising professional politicians has been much more rare, though never non-existent, in Western countries; the first thorough historical and comparative study on this issue is Palonen, Kari (2012). *Rhetorik des Unbeliebten. Lobreden auf Politiker im Zeitalter der Demokratie*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.