
The power of commemorative street names

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Abstract. Street names are ostensibly visible, quintessentially mundane, and seemingly obvious. This might be the reason why social scientists have hardly addressed the issue of street names in their studies of the structures of authority and the legitimation of power. In this paper the author explores the semiotic and political operation of commemorative street names. He sheds light on the procedures of the naming and the renaming of streets and the utilization of street names for commemorative purposes as a fundamental feature of modern political culture. Further, he elaborates on how street names, in addition to their fundamental role in the spatial organization and semiotic construction of the city, are also participants in the cultural production of shared past. In addition, the author uncovers commemorative street names as a powerful mechanism for the legitimation of the sociopolitical order. Commemorative street names provide for the intersection of hegemonic ideological structures with the spatial practices of everyday life. Therefore they are instrumental in rendering natural the official version of history which they incorporate into the urban setting. The author concludes that the power of (commemorative) street names stems from their ability to implicate the national narrative of the past, though in a fragmented manner, in numerous narratives of the city.

“Then I was asked by the Alsations to command the Alsace-Lorraine brigade, and I took part in the fighting round Dannemarie some days after the death of my second wife in a clinic in the avenue Alsace-Lorraine in Brive. My third wife lived in the rue Alsace-Lorraine in Toulouse. Enough. There are a great many streets of that name in France”.

Malraux (1970, page 16)

Introduction

In his original and innovative analysis, Murray Edelman calls our attention to the role of settings in framing political acts and to the “centrality of settings to the political process” (1964, page 95) owing to the feelings and responses they evoke. He focuses upon the contrived settings of extraordinary acts. According to Edelman, such settings are “unabashedly built up to emphasize a departure from men’s daily routine, a special or heroic quality in the proceedings they are to frame. Massiveness, ornateness and formality are the most common notes struck in the design of such scenes, and they are presented upon a scale which focuses attention upon the difference between everyday life and the special occasion when one appears in court, in congress, or at an event of historic significance” (1964, page 96). Notwithstanding such distinguished political settings, whose significance and effectiveness are undeniable, even otherwise ordinary settings may be manipulated to the extent that they operate as political settings. Not only do these virtual political settings not appear as such, but the activities they frame are distinctly mundane. In this respect, these virtual political settings, as well as in their impact upon audiences, substantially differ from the settings devised for extraordinary activities and ceremonial acts.

The use of streets names for commemorative purposes is instrumental in transforming the urban environment into a virtual political setting. A setting is an active participant in a social interaction (Giddens, 1979, page 207), and “The ability to

control the meanings of such settings is an important expression of power" (Entrikin, 1991, page 52). The administrative act of naming streets is an example of the appropriation of the public domain by official agencies that have specific political agendas. Furthermore, commemorative street names, and their officially ordained meanings in particular, are instrumental in substantiating the ruling sociopolitical order and its particular 'theory of the world' in the cityscape.

Commemorative street names are a common feature of modern political culture, even though the utilization of street names for official commemorative purposes is not an obligatory norm. Alphanumerical street names, as the case of New York so convincingly demonstrates, completely fulfill the primarily practical function of street names, that is to distinguish between different streets, to provide the users of the city with spatial orientation, and to regulate administrative control over the city. The symbolic function of a street name as a vehicle for commemoration is subordinate to the practical function; a basic rule is that no two streets in a city should have one and the same name. However, this should not obscure the fact that the symbolic function is far from being of symbolical significance alone.

Distinguished squares and streets may commemorate political abstractions or values such as the 'President' or 'King', the 'Revolution', the 'Islamic Republic', or 'Independence'. Yet the vast majority of commemorative street names perpetuate in the cityscape the memory of historical figures and events found worthy of public honoring by the agencies in charge. Barry Schwartz maintains that the procedure of commemoration invests historical events and persons with extraordinary significance and that it provides "a register of sacred history" (1982, page 377). Commemorations not only celebrate extraordinary moments of history, but are also instrumental in their reification. Their impact should also be measured by the way they affect rhythms of social life and settings of human activities.

'Historical' street names are distinctive 'lieux de memoire' (Nora, 1986) of modernity. From the perspective of those in charge of molding the symbolic infrastructure of society, the main merit of commemorative street names is that they introduce an authorized version of history into ordinary settings of everyday life. Commemorative street names, together with commemorative monuments and heritage museums, not only evince a particular version of history but are also participants in the ongoing cultural production of a shared past [on heritage museums, see the fascinating analysis of Katriel (1993)]. In their capacity both as historical references and as spatial designations they provide for the conflation of history and geography. Potentially contested and eventually challenged, commemorative street names concretize hegemonic structures of power and authority.

My objective in this paper is to highlight political procedures and cultural mechanisms that govern the utilization and operation of a street name as a vehicle of commemoration and, in particular, the manner in which commemorative street names celebrate and reify an authorized version of history. In this respect, therefore, I focus upon a particular mode of spatial commemoration. I address different issues, among them the politics of naming and renaming of streets, the semiotic operation of street names, the semantic displacements that occur as the result of the conflation of history and geography, and the measure and extent of historical analysis provided by a set of commemorative street names that constitutes a particular city-text. The argumentation is buttressed by examples drawn from different political settings and historical periods. No comparative method is applied, and the examples are illustrative rather than paradigmatic or representative.

(Re)naming the past

"To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying" (Derrida, 1974, page 112).

However extreme this assertion may appear to be, naming is a taxonomic strategy that is also a manifestation of authority (see *Genesis* chapter 1, versus 19–20). At the same time, it is an act of appropriation—a prominent example being the naming of places in the course of a colonization process [for the case of Australia, see Carter (1988)]. Naming streets is an administrative and political act that is affected by the interplay of interests competing for the symbolic control of the public domain. The modern norm is that naming of streets is a prerogative of the authorities, thus making the seemingly administrative procedure an expression of power.

Traditionally street names were vernacular and designated either geographical orientation and urban function, or referred to a certain peculiarity associated with local topography and history. The modern practice of bestowing nonlocal names was introduced in Paris with the construction of the Place de l'Odeon in 1779. Later on political, administrative, and urban agendas converged in the formal subjugation of street names in general, and the naming procedure in particular, to official control. A direct and significant result of this was that the traditional linkage between the name and the local topography or the local history of the street was severed.

The introduction, in the 18th century, of postal services promoted official efforts to regulate the city and to rationalize it by means of numbering the houses and the placement of street signs. In 1763 a royal decree was introduced in Sweden which required the placement of street signs at the corners of important streets in Stockholm (Pred, 1990, page 212). In 1765 a bill was passed in England which required local councils to number houses as well as to affix street signs (Miles, 1973, page 10). In 1789 the city president of Berlin, a Prussian official, proposed to number the houses of the Prussian capital. In 1797 it was decided in Berlin to number the houses in each street. Vienna followed suit in 1803; Paris introduced its system of numbering in 1806.

The French Revolution set an example for the use of names of streets and squares for the purpose of political representation. In 1792 the statue of Louis XV in the Place Louis XV, erected in 1763, was demolished. In its stead a colossal figure of Liberty was erected and the square was appropriately renamed Place de la Revolution (today Place de la Concorde). The practice of commemoration by street and square names in the capital became a component of French political symbolism. This was evident in the context of the project of Abbé Gregoire in 1794, and in the names introduced during the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte—among them the rue Napoleon that was opened in 1806.

The new practice was soon implemented in other European capitals. In December 1813, after the reemergence of the Prussian state after the expulsion of the French from Germany, a Prussian royal decree proclaimed that the street names of the three Prussian residential towns—Berlin, Potsdam, and Charlottenburg (which was part of Greater Berlin from 1920) were property of the Prussian state; this amounted in effect to the nationalization of the names and making the naming a matter for the state rather than for the municipal authorities (Katzur, 1968, page 5). Already in 1814, the names of three squares in the center of Berlin commemorated the victory over Imperial France, among them the Pariser Platz in front of the Brandenburg Gate. In 1819, in the wake of the rebuilding of Helsinki (Finland was then a Grand Duchy under Russian rule), the issue of naming of streets arose.

Subsequently, only a few context-related names were retained whereas the others were determined according to the new French system and were officially ordained, nonlocal, and therefore—at least at the time of their introduction—foreign both to the streets and to their residents (Palonen, 1993, page 113). In 1885, after major construction works in the Swedish capital, the city council of Stockholm initiated a large-scale (re)naming operation; in its course some 70 unnamed streets were given names and 109 preexisting names were revised (Pred, 1990, page 203).

The examples of Paris and Berlin are early ones of the utilization of names of streets, squares, and avenues of capitals as demonstrative ideological statements. Another issue was the use of official street names as an additional measure to regulate space and to control the residents of the city, especially the lower classes, in a period of increasing social tensions and political radicalism. The authority in charge, on behalf of the Prussian state, of the naming of Berlin's streets was the police president who was also in charge of the enforcement of law and public order. In his study of the Stockholm of the late 19th century Allan Pred points out that "The city planning that created the seventy streets and squares initially named in 1885 also involved efforts to solidify order, to eliminate chaos and potential anarchy, to reform the threatening 'under class'" (1990, page 209). He further maintains that "For [the Stockholm] authorities and for their counterparts in Paris, London, Berlin and elsewhere, the ordering of space and the ordering of people were to be combined".

From the late 19th century on commemorating historical heroes and events by street names was not limited to celebrating dynastic glory, but was increasingly associated with nation-building measures. The historian, George Mosse referred to the 'nationalization of the masses' (1975). The 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) of nation building included national monuments and festivals, whose dramatic effect is undeniable, and also the ostensibly mundane street names. The street names that appeared in Stockholm in the late 19th century, for instance, also introduced Swedish national mythology (Pred, 1990, pages 204 and 211). In a similar vein, after the unification of Germany under Prussian hegemony in 1871, street names in Berlin commemorated not only members of the ruling Hohenzollern dynasty but also mythical heroes structured in the fabric of German nationhood, for example the medieval Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa and prominent figures of German national culture such as Goethe and Schiller. After the death of Bismarck, the Prussian Junker and the architect of German unity, streets were named after him in virtually every German city and town. Together with the almost 400 monuments erected in his memory all over Germany, these street names concretized in the German landscape the cult of Bismarck which featured prominently in the conservative mythology of German nationalism.

The association of commemorative street names with nation building became paramount in the 20th century in numerous cases of successful ethnic revivals and postcolonial state formations. A distinguished case of the relationship between street names and national revival is provided by Tel Aviv. Founded as a Jewish settlement in 1909 in the outskirts of Jaffa, Tel Aviv soon emerged as the major Jewish city of British Mandatory Palestine and as the political and cultural center of the Jewish Yishuv (Kellerman, 1993, pages 147–188). Its symbolic significance for, and mythic stature in, the Zionist project of national revival was also articulated in its celebration as the 'first Hebrew city'. The main source of names for the streets of Tel Aviv was "the history of the People of Israel" (Ben-Yishai, 1952, page 37). Different ideological approaches and political emphases with Zionism and their bearing upon the naming procedure notwithstanding, the commitment to Zionist

values and the Zionist version of Jewish national history has dominated the selection of names for the streets of Tel Aviv. The urban expansion of Tel Aviv, which occurred from the 1920s into the 1950s, created new streets whose names incorporated Jewish and Zionist history into the urban texture of the 'first Hebrew city'. On 24 March 1954, for instance, Tel Aviv's city council approved almost 300 new street names; according to the official categorization, these names included "names of writers, artists and political activists of the Jewish Yishuv", "Jewish personalities from abroad who contributed to the Zionist reconstruction", "names commemorating Jewish communities in the Diaspora (destroyed in the Holocaust)", as well as "names associated with the struggle of the Jewish Yishuv for independence and the (Israeli) War of Independence" (Ben-Yishai, 1955, page 24).

The representative value assigned to street names is especially manifest in the naming policy applied by the national authorities in areas which are politically sensitive. Named after the member states of the Union, the avenues of Washington DC incorporate the political-territorial structure of the USA into the symbolic (infra)structure of the federal capital (Zelinsky, 1988, page 179). In 1964, the ministerial committee in charge of the Kirya, the Israeli government district in west Jerusalem, decided in accordance with the request of the prime minister to name the streets in this district after the "patriarchs, judges, kings and prophets" of the Old Testament (Israeli State Archive, 1964). A significant political statement, this particular choice of street names was meant to highlight the Old Testament as a source of Zionist legitimacy and to provide for a direct symbolic linkage between the modern State of Israel and ancient Jewish history in the land of the ancestors.

The extensive use of street names (as well as names of ships, hospitals, schools, and towns) for the commemoration of Soviet leaders was a prominent feature of Soviet political culture. This practice was introduced after the death of Lenin in 1924, and reached extreme proportions in the personality cult of Stalin in the 1930s and the 1940s. The last to be ritually commemorated was the Soviet leader Chernenko, who died in 1984. The heading of the announcement of the TASS news agency, transmitted by Reuters, announced "Siberian town and Moscow streets to be named after Chernenko" (Reuters, 1984).

The intentions of political elites and the extent of popular support for these notwithstanding, the challenge to the legitimacy of names as well as the historical traditions they represent is embedded into the politics of street names. The belonging of commemorative street names to the symbolic foundations of the established order makes them, together with other symbolic expressions of power, potential focal points of political dissent and opposition, whereas the rejection of names by a population, or segments of it is a profound act of resistance. In a case where street names are perceived as being associated with political oppression, the resistance may take various forms. One possibility is to avoid altogether the use of the official name in an act that amounts to civil disobedience. In the Polish city of Lodz, for instance, local residents refrained from using the 'communist' name, Street of the Siege of Stalingrad, and in a clear act of defiance referred to the street by its former name, Street of November 11th, which had been abolished by the communist authorities because it evoked the memory of the independent Polish republic of the prewar period (Enzensberger, 1987, page 372, cited in Palonen, 1993, page 109).

Unofficial renamings may take the form of a spontaneous act of respect that, based on broad consensus, can even be officialized at a later stage. Immediately after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli premier, in the central square of Tel Aviv Kikar Malkhei Israel (The Kings of Israel's Square), spontaneous graffiti proclaimed the square as Kikar Yitzhak Rabin (Yitzhak Rabin Square, see figure 1).

The mayor of Tel Aviv, aware of the depth of popular sentiments, endorsed the renaming (Yediot Ahronot 1995). In the following days, the as-yet unofficial name was widely used by the media (Jerusalem Post 1995). The renaming was formally enacted a week later, during a mass rally held in memory of Rabin at the square where the assassination had been committed.

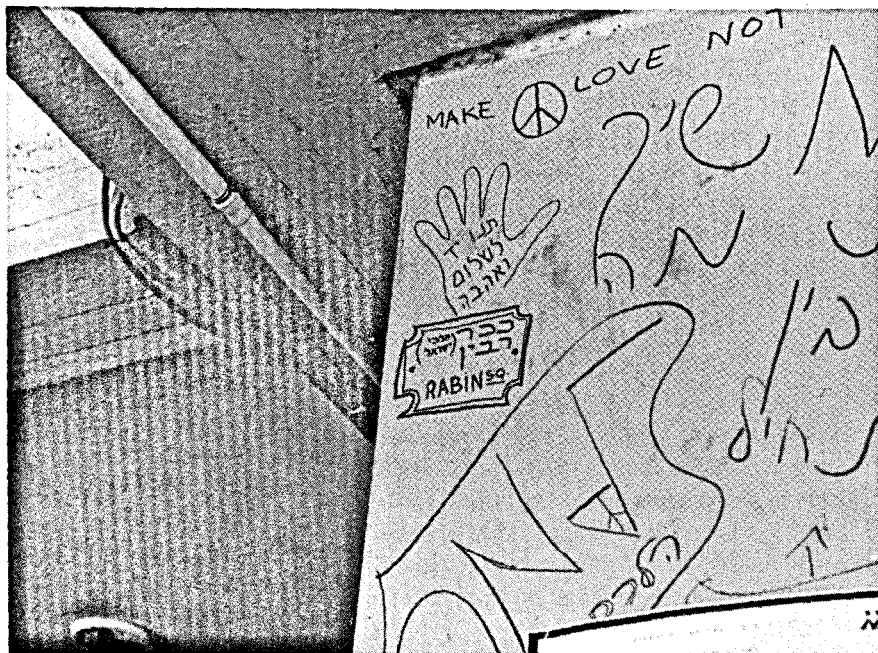


Figure 1. Graffiti proclaiming Kikar Malkhei Israel as Kikar Yitzhak Rabin.

Unauthorized renamings, however, are often a ritual of resistance and the alternative names that appear constitute a direct challenge to authority. The Czech writer Milan Kundera relates how, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, street signs and signs proclaiming the names of cities suddenly ‘disappeared’: “Overnight the country had become nameless. For seven days, Russian troops wandered the countryside, not knowing where they were” (1985, page 166). After the Czech student Jan Palach burnt himself in Prague in protest against the Soviet invasion of 1968, the official signs with the name Red Army Soldiers Square were replaced by signs proclaiming the square as Jan Palach Square (cited in Palonen, 1993, page 105). After the killing of Abu Jihad (a prominent PLO leader) in 1988, improvised street signs bearing his name were placed on walls in Nablus, in the West Bank. These signs not only commemorated a distinguished national martyr but also demonstratively defied Israeli rule. The reaction of the Israeli authorities was swift, and the unauthorized street signs were promptly removed.

Where political opposition is legitimate, the rejection of commemorative names is a subject of a public debate. In the late 1980s a campaign was waged in West Berlin against street names that commemorated the colonial past of the German Empire (Hahn, 1988). This campaign targeted specific street names, yet it provided a focal point for public discussion on a fundamental issue: what constitutes German historical legacy. In a similar vein, a public campaign was initiated in the 1980s in West Berlin to bring about the removal of the name of Dietrich Schaeffer (a philosopher admired by the Nazis) from the official register of street signs (Luikenga, 1988).

Also, in this case, the campaign against a particular street name was a part of a broader campaign—this time against ‘reaction’ and ‘fascism’.

Renaming features prominently in the procedures that determine the toponymy of a modern city. Renaming a street has a substantial effect not only on the city but also on its human experience and cognition. A rude intervention in routinized practices and traditional relations between ordinary people and their habitat effects a cognitive dissonance and mental and communication disarray, at least temporarily. Renamings also disrupt the continuous accumulation of place-specific memories that are meaningful beyond generational differences and constitute a substantial element of the urban cultural texture. A popular Israeli love song from the 1940s (“You should ring twice”) concretizes the human drama it relates by mentioning a real address. Yet the street has since been renamed and the significance of the reference to it in the song has virtually been lost.

The belonging of commemorative street names to the symbolic infrastructure of power and authority makes them vulnerable to political changes. A politically motivated renaming involves a twofold procedure: decommemoration and commemoration. With the collapse of the imperial regime in France in 1814, rue Napoleon was renamed rue de la Paix. The renaming of streets featured prominently in Paris after the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870. The invention of distinct republican traditions was articulated by numerous monuments and ceremonies that reified and celebrated the Republic and its historical heritage (Hobsbawm, 1983, pages 270–273). These efforts were also manifest by extensive renamings of streets in the French capital, which was the seat of the republican government.

In 1882, a British observer commented on the street names of Paris. In writing a tourist guide book, his main concern was the practical aspect of street names as spatial markers and the manner in which they provided for spatial orientation. Accordingly, he complemented Paris on the fact that almost no name appeared more than once—unlike London, with its “eleven Queen Streets, a dozen King Streets, and Duke Streets without number” (*Dickens’s Dictionary of Paris* page 243). The Parisian practice, of course, substantially reduced the possibility for spatial confusion. Yet the sharp-eyed observer, accustomed to the stability and continuity characteristic of a map of London, disapproved of the recurrent renaming of streets in Paris. For a tourist, of course, renamings mean spatial confusion, especially before a stage of equilibrium is reached and the city maps are again trustworthy as ‘true’ representations of the city. The British observer reacted to the aftermath of the establishment of the Third Republic and the subsequent change of street names. Less interested in the political context of the efforts made by the republican government to utilize the street names of the capital for propagating the republican version of French national history, his judgment was that the authorities in charge showed an “excess of zeal”. In his comment, intended for a British audience, he noted that “The frequent changing of names of their streets is not to be commended; and under the present Republic the practice seems to have been pushed to an unusual extent” (*Dickens’s Dictionary of Paris* page 243). The critique was not directed specifically against the republican ideology, but rather against the practice itself and its negative effect on the stability of the cityscape.

Late 19th-century Paris set an example that became recurrent in the 20th century in the context of major political upheavals. Of special significance are the renamings that occur during a revolutionary transformation or in its wake. These constitute a distinguished ‘ritual of revolution’ [on such rituals, though not explicitly on renamings, see Kertzer (1988, pages 151–173)]. Henri Lefebvre maintains that

"A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed, it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions and political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space—though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas" (1991, page 54). Renaming streets (and other public spaces) has an immediate effect on daily life, on language, and on space.

The renaming of streets is a conventional manifestation of a stage of liminal transition in political history, when the need of the new regime for legitimacy and self-presentation is especially high. In a revolutionary context, the renaming of streets, in addition to the more spectacular pulling-down of monuments, is an act of political propaganda with immense proclamative value and public resonance. Through renamings, the new regime proclaims the beginning of a new era while demonstrating both its resoluteness and its self-confidence. The act of renaming asserts that a radical restructuring of power relations in society has indeed been accomplished, or is underway, and it indicates a profound reconstruction of social and political institutions. As is often the case in such circumstances, renaming streets is both a celebration of triumph and a mechanism for settling scores with the vanquished regime. The transformation of Iran from an absolute monarchy into an Islamic Republic was encapsulated by the renaming of a main thoroughfare in Teheran—the Shah Avenue—to the Avenue of the Islamic Republic. Croatian independence and the rejection of the communist, all-Yugoslav past was also manifest in Zagreb by the renaming of the Square of the Fighters against Fascism as the Square of Croatian Greats.

In the Soviet Union decommemorations indicated major political changes. The end of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union, as well as in other East European communist states, was sealed in 1961 with an orchestrated decommemoration of Stalin manifest by renaming of streets as well as of cities, and pulling-down of statues. These efforts were meant to eradicate Stalin's symbolic presence from the public realm. At the height of 'perestroika', the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided to strip Leonid Brezhnev of the public honors bestowed upon him after his death in 1982 and to rename a large square in Leningrad, a famed Moscow suburb, and a city whose names perpetuated his memory (*Jerusalem Post* 1988). In this context it is worth noting that the final collapse of communism in the Soviet Union was also articulated by a symbolic reconstruction of public space which also included an extensive wave of renaming of cities (the case of Leningrad being the most publicized in the West) and streets, as well as the pulling-down of statues commemorating heroes of the communist regime.

In his Berlin film *One, Two, Three* the director Billy Wilder ridicules the successive renamings of a certain imaginary hotel; yet in this he also captures a substantial element of the 'Berlin condition' of the 20th century: the instability of Berlin's toponymy both effected by and evincing changing political circumstances. The transition from a monarchy to a republic, the rise of Hitler to power, the surrender of Nazi Germany, national division, and reunification were all manifest in corresponding renaming of streets (Azaryahu, 1990, pages 40–46). The numbers were substantial: between May 1945 and the end of 1951 200 streets in West Berlin and 227 streets in East Berlin were renamed (Karwelat, 1988, page 20), and in April and May of 1951, 159 streets in East Berlin were renamed in a well-orchestrated renaming operation aimed at decommemorating the Prussian tradition from the street signs of the capital of the German Democratic Republic (Azaryahu, 1992, pages 55–66).

Certain streets and squares were renamed two and even three times throughout the century. The Koenigsplatz (Kings Square) in front of the Reichstag, the political center of Germany, was renamed Platz der Republik (Republic Square) in 1926 in an effective demonstration of republican power (Azaryahu, 1988, pages 248-249). In 1933 the Nazis restored the traditional name, but in 1945 the short-lived Platz der Republik was restored as the name of this square. Another example is provided by the Reichskanzlerplatz in West Berlin. The Nazis renamed this square Adolf-Hitler-Platz. In 1945 the former name was restored, later to be changed to Theodor-Heuss-Platz in memory of the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1949 the Frankfurter Allee in East Berlin was renamed Stalinallee (Azaryahu, 1986, pages 588-589); in 1961 the street signs were de-Stalinized and the thoroughfare was renamed Karl-Marx-Allee. The decommemoration of Karl Marx has been on the agenda since the reunification of Berlin in 1990; one of the peculiar features of divided Berlin was the commemoration of Karl Marx on the street signs of both West Berlin and East Berlin.

The past: commemorated and naturalized

In their intriguing article "(Re)Reading landscapes", James Duncan and Nancy Duncan (1988) suggest that a landscape, or more precisely its inattentive reading within a certain ideological/cultural framework of interpretation, can be instrumental in 'naturalizing' social reality. Landscapes, they argue, because of their "being so tangible, so natural, so familiar ... unquestioned" are instrumental in the naturalization of the social relations inscribed in them (page 123). Landscapes do not merely reflect and articulate social relations; by reifying them, they are also active in legitimating these same relations. Commemorative street names, which are a conventional element of the urban texture, play a special role in naturalizing a prime cultural construct: an hegemonic version of history.

History, that is the story of how things evolved, provides both an explanation and a justification for the present. Culturally constructed and potentially contested, the historical account is an effective strategy for legitimizing and consolidating sociopolitical structures and formations, for example political regimes, ethnic communities, and nation-states. Potentially challenged, official versions of the past and canonical histories are celebrated as definitive representations and interpretations of the past. Imbued with political interests and agendas, their hegemonic status concretizes and reflects specific power relations in society.

The legitimating and explanatory role of a version of history is embedded in the narrative structure of the conventional historical account. In its simplest and most effective form, the past is designed as a chronological narrative, in which temporal progression corresponds to causal explanation (see Hodge and Kress, 1988, pages 229-230, for a discussion of narrative). This is a conventional form found in textbooks. The historical narrative is constructed of sequential and causal chains that lead linearly to the present and to the sociopolitical order it represents. This narrative structure 'explains' and celebrates the present, which is identified with the status quo embodied by the ruling sociopolitical order, as the only possible, and hence inevitable, outcome of the 'objective' course of history. A direct result of this cultural procedure is the reification of the present.

Although the narrative structure of history is an efficient strategy for the naturalization of the present, the commemoration of the past is a powerful means for the reification of a certain version of history. Spatial commemorations in particular, which merge history and physical environment, are instrumental in the naturalization of the commemorated past. In his treatment of the 'poetic landscapes' of ethnic and

national revivals, Smith points out the significance of the naturalization of historic sites and monuments for the accomplishment of the fusion between a community and the terrain which it perceives as its homeland (1986, pages 183–190). Smith refers to ancient historical monuments that “entered the imaginative fabric of the community over the centuries, by appearing to fuse with a surrounding nature and become one with the habitat” and are “indispensable components of our imaginative landscapes and therefore essential ‘foundations’ for the revived life of the ethnic” (page 186).

Although Smith’s argument focuses on such elements of the landscapes that are permeated with the aura of antiquity and of times immemorial, the naturalization of the past also applies to commemorations where, in the case of spatial commemorations that superimpose history onto the terrain, the fusion of the past and human habitat is officially ordained and administratively regulated. Commemorative monuments, street names, and memorial plaques are conventional elements of the landscape that merge the past and its myths with the landscape. The effect of this is twofold. On the one hand, the landscape is invested with symbolic meanings. On the other hand, the commemorated past is reified by its integration into the physical environment and its subsequent identification with the ‘natural order of the things in the world’.

A naming procedure is an example of the effect that administrative–political processes have on semiotic procedures. The authorities decide upon what should be commemorated and where; but they can hardly regulate the different contexts in which the name is used, the extent and context of its evocation, or the responses to the past thus evoked. As the result of public commemoration, the past which is commemorated is a concrete semiotic reality rather than a platonic idea or a mere mental abstraction. A primary effect of public commemoration is that the ‘past’, that is, an authorized version of history, is potentially a shared cultural experience (see MacCannel, 1989, pages 23–29, for a discussion of ‘cultural experience’). Of course, the influence of such experiences and individual responses to them are to a large extent governed by preconditioned ideological dispositions and political attitudes, and are dependent upon the context in which the evocation of a particular name takes place.

Street names are ordinary components of the urban setting. In rare cases, the encounter with a historical name may invest a situation (such as a social event or a particular state of mind) with extra symbolic meaning. André Malraux relates in his memoirs how, after meeting de Gaulle and while walking the streets of Paris, reflecting on the significance of priests and military orders “[he] glanced up casually before crossing a street: rue Saint Dominique” (1970, page 105). This experience, however, is an exception rather than the norm. Commonly, the encounter with the name is casual. It usually takes place in the context of mundane activities and does not involve any substantial spiritual experience. The ensuing interaction with the historical name commonly brings about a minimal transfer of symbolic meanings that pertain to the commemorated past. This type of ‘low-voltage interaction’ can be compared with a ‘high-voltage interaction’ with the past represented by a commemorative monument that occurs in a ceremonial context, for example a memorial rite. In such ritualized situations the sacred becomes predominant and the participants are fully aware of taking part in an extraordinary event that may culminate in an experience of communion. The ceremonial context tends to reinforce the transfer of meanings, and their internalization by the individual is also facilitated by a greater measure of attentiveness on the part of the participant. However, the formal character of such public events and their rigid structure, in which social norms and hierarchies are brought to the fore, may alienate the individual and act as a barrier to the internalization of collective meanings.

A street name has a twofold function—a symbolic one, and a practical one as a marker of location—and it is in the context of the latter that the interaction with the name, and consequently with the history it is intended to evoke, mostly occurs. A commemorative monument, on the other hand, has only a symbolic function and it is permeated with the sacred that is exuded by physical objects whose role is to represent transcendental entities (most prominently a deity or the dead).

The main virtue of street names as a means of introducing history into social communication is that everybody uses them but hardly anyone pays attention to their specific historical meaning and to the fact that they belong to the structures of power. Unlike commemorative monuments, street signs do not induce pathos, are not laden with sentimentality, and are not charged with the sacred. On the other hand, the utilization of street names for commemorative purposes enables an official version of history to be incorporated into spheres of social life which seem to be totally detached from political contexts or communal obligations, and to be integrated into intimate realms of human interactions and activities.

Commemorative street names provide a distinguished example of the intersection of hegemonic ideological structures with the spatial practices of everyday life. Their apparent dailiness and apparent insignificance as well as their recurrent and unreflected use in various contexts, both ordinary and extraordinary, renders the past they represent tangible and intimately familiar. The continuous use of street names amounts to an erratic recitation of significant historical moments and heroes which is not institutionalized or officially controlled. Street names are not intended to fulfill any cultic purposes. They are intended to assert and to reaffirm the validity of the history they reify as a constituent of social reality. Their power lies in their ability to make a version of history an inseparable element of reality as it is constantly constructed, experienced, and perceived on a daily basis. History is interwoven with daily life and thus gains the appearance of naturalness; a most desired effect in the light of the function of history as a legitimizing factor.

Semantic displacements

A place, argues Cosgrove, “is a physical location imbued with human meaning” (Cosgrove, 1989, page 104). Bestowing a name onto a street does not only transform a location into a place, but at the same time also distinguishes the street as a well-defined urban element. The official name given to a street also invests the street with the official meaning assigned to the particular historical referent. In spite of its significance, however, this officially ordained meaning can, in practice, be no more than a suggestion. The meanings of a street name, anchored as they are in reputations, mythologies, images, and sociospatial practices, are historically dynamic. Though often determined by personal experiences, they may be further differentiated according to social, ethnic, gender, and generational divisions. The importance of the official name, however, is paramount. Contested as it may be politically, and in spite of the inherent instability of its meanings in the course of time and for different audiences, the official name provides a fixed point of reference in the official geography of the city and in most cases also in its folk geography.

The semiotic operation of street names is based upon semantic displacements that disconnect the meaning of the name from its original historical referent without, however, denying the existence of such a referent. Michel de Certeau maintains that the naming of streets after ‘real’ historical figures means that the names cease to be ‘proper’ (1985, page 140). He further suggests that they “... become things apart from the places they were intended to define and turn into imaginary meeting-places

in the journeys they map out, having become metaphors, for reasons foreign to their original validity, however known/unknown to the passers by" (page 140).

Werlen observes that "socially constructed artifacts may be invested with a symbolic meaning which need not coincide with the rationale underlying, and preserved in, their construction" (1993, page 174). Such is also the case with historical street names that, like other place names, are often "referents to other cultural meanings" (Entrikin, 1991, page 56). Naming a street after a historical figure or event triggers a fundamental semantic displacement as a result of the change of referential framework that occurs when a historical name becomes a spatial designation. Gradually, as a result of the implication of the name in different discourses and experiences and its use in different circumstances and contexts, the name becomes more and more detached from the historical referent and is overlaid with other symbolic meanings. The semantic displacements effect the continuous erosion of the historical meaning of the name (which in itself is open to different interpretations). Occasionally, however, the historical referent is restored ('unmasked' or 'rediscovered', depending on the perspective). Though exceptional, such occurrences are significant moments in the career of a name as, beyond the specific political context, they highlight and reaffirm the belonging of the name to the societal discourse of history. They also demonstrate that the artificially fabricated unity between history (even if it can not be properly expounded) and location is fundamental to the semiotic operation of a historical street name and that its meaning continuously unfolds between its being a historical reference and its operation as a spatial designation.

The official meaning originally assigned to the name, in its capacity as a historical referent, features prominently throughout the naming procedure and dominates the decisionmaking process that leads to the particular commemoration. This meaning is sometimes expounded on the street sign and in various publications that 'explain' the historical meaning of the names. Drastic measures such as renaming notwithstanding, a formal change of official meaning assigned to a particular historical referent may occur. In 1935, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the ascension of King George V to the throne, the British monarch was commemorated on the street signs of major cities of British Mandatory Palestine including Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem. This commemorative act paid tribute to and celebrated the colonial power. After the establishment of Israeli sovereignty following the end of British rule in Palestine, in Haifa King George Avenue was renamed Independence Avenue. In Tel Aviv the original name was not changed but its meaning was revised in a significant way. According to the new interpretation, also expounded on the street signs, King George was the British monarch in whose reign the Balfour Declaration was issued, in which Britain acknowledged the right of the Jewish people to a national homeland in Palestine. As a result of this interpretation of the meaning of the historical referent it was placed in a Zionist framework of historical interpretation. The new meaning assigned to the name also provided a legitimacy for the public honoring of the British monarch by the city that cultivated its myth as the 'first Hebrew city' and whose street names evinced the Zionist historical narrative.

Cultural differences between elites and segments of the population may lead to different evaluations of meaning, and the misunderstandings that evolve may be further ethnically and socially contextualized. Such a case is the commemoration of Spinoza on the street signs of a small lane in the Jewish-Yemenite quarter of Tel Aviv (*Ben-Yishai* 1952, page 42). The local residents pronounced the name differently, as 'Sponga' (in colloquial Hebrew, 'sponga' or 'making sponga' meant the cleaning of homes). Eventually, the name of the distinguished 17th century philosopher

(unknown to most local residents) was understood as a reference to the fact that many women of this community were employed as domestic help, and hence as an allusion to the lower social status of the Jewish-Yemenite community in general. Subsequently, the misunderstanding was resolved when Spinza Street was renamed after a distinguished Jewish-Yemenite scholar and Spinoza was 'transferred' to another neighborhood, whose street names commemorated distinguished philosophers.

Semantic displacement is also involved when the historical load of a street name comprises not only the formal historical reference but also the history of the street itself. An example is Wilhelm Strasse. This street in the center of Berlin was named after a Prussian monarch. Its international reputation was the result of the German Foreign Office being located there. The Wilhelm Strasse became a designation for the German Foreign Office and German foreign policy, and hence the imperial aspirations of the German Reich in general. When, in 1964, the East German authorities renamed the street, a traditional symbol of German superpower aspirations was erased from the map of the East German capital. After German reunification, the 'imperialistic' image of the old name was a major argument against its restoration. In the fall of 1993, the Senate of Greater Berlin intervened in favor of the restoration of the old name, thereby reinstating not only the traditional name but also its old meanings into the discourse of a German reunification (Dolak, 1993). It is interesting that the political meanings assigned to the name were not associated with the historical referent, but rather with the history of the street as a famous political address.

A profound semantic displacement occurs when a street name becomes a metonym to a pejorative name, for example rue de Vichy or Braunauer Strasse (the latter in its capacity as a reference to Hitler's birth place) (Palonen, 1993, page 107). This is a powerful, though rare, phenomenon that affects collective imaginations and can even determine the destiny of a street name. After the Nazi seizure of power, Weimarer Strasse in Berlin was renamed because the name of the Thuringian town—a traditional symbol of German humanist legacy—also connoted the Weimar Republic—the political predecessor of the Third Reich which in Nazi mythology epitomized national disgrace and betrayal of German national interests.

Urban locations may also become metonyms to certain modes of behavior or a particular way of life. The reference to a location in this context is essential to the procedure because it provides the appearance of a specificity and objectivity to a set of phenomena and processes which are anonymous, relatively vague, and diffuse. Here, a seemingly well-defined location replaces human agents and cultural dispositions while solidifying a complex set of human activities and notions about these activities into a powerful cultural reference that transcends the physical location itself.

Dizengoff Street, a central thoroughfare in Tel Aviv, is named after the first mayor of the city whose foundation and development was considered a major achievement of the Zionist enterprise. In Israeli popular culture, the activities centered upon the smart shops and coffee shops on Dizengoff Street in the 1950s introduced and featured values of a new consumption-and-leisure culture in Israel. The type of activities associated with the street provided a model of a new urban experience, for which Dizengoff Street became a celebrated cultural metonym. The significance of this metonym in Israeli popular culture was also manifest in a synthetic verb which was constructed from the street name (*le-hiz-dan-geff*) to denote the active participation in the multitude of glamorous activities and experiences associated with Dizengoff Street. Interestingly, this unique linguistic construction, which evoked the historical referent (Dizengoff) rather than the street

name (Dizengoff Street), concealed the commemorative aspect of the semiotic procedure and facilitated the verbally direct and unmediated implication of the first mayor of Tel Aviv into a distinguished experience of the city. It also provided for the fusion of the Zionist myth of the 'first Hebrew city' embodied by the figure of Dizengoff with a significant myth of Israeli popular culture.

City-text as historical narrative

In his elaboration on the Argentina of the early 1970s, V S Naipaul also observed: "But the country has as yet no idea of itself. Streets and avenues are named after presidents and generals, but there is no art of historical analysis; there is no art of biography. There is legend and antiquarian romance, but no real history. There are only annals, lists of rulers, chronicles of events" (1981, page 140).

A journalist writing about the Ivory Coast at the beginning of the 1980s observed that "Every colonial hero has his street". That the government of this postcolonial African state had not rid its capital of the symbolic legacy of the French colonial past provided tangible proof for the main argument of the report, namely, that the "Ivory Coast is culturally alienated and economically dependent on France" (Bänziger, 1983, page 11).

The validity of such readings as viable interpretations and their susceptibility to overinterpretation (Eco, 1992) notwithstanding, they highlight street names as commemorations and hence as markers of political identity. As a "systematically related collection of signs in a narrative" (Berger, 1984, page 115), the spatial configuration of historical street names defines a particular 'city-text' that pertains to a particular historical narrative (Ferguson, 1988). In the context of the current discussion, the designation 'city-text' is not meant as an analogy or a metaphor nor does it imply a reduction of the city in its entirety to a mere text (Butor, 1993), but rather it emphasizes a manifest and specific semiotic feature of the city.

A city-text provides the toponymical grid that makes the city geographically intelligible. Significantly, a city-text is not intended to be read as an entirety whereas its eventual reading as a text does not involve any obligation to a prescribed order. Whereas the reading of historical books and monuments is performed in an educational and ceremonial context, respectively, the reading of a city-text is embedded into everyday activities. Furthermore, reading street signs or referring to street names, as is repeatedly practised in the context of everyday life, mainly involves their function as markers of location and ignores the history which they introduce. Only in exceptional cases, such as those mentioned earlier, does it amount to a reading of (a version of) history. Yet the function of street names as commemorations that celebrate and canonize a certain version of history compels the evaluation of the semiotic structure of a city-text as a historical narrative, and the type and measure of historical analysis as provided by the conflation of this commemorative text and urban geography.

A measure of historical analysis

The correspondence between the significance assigned to a historical figure or event and the status of its commemoration is a prominent feature of historical consciousness. An example is provided by a poster-form calendar produced in 1988 by El Al, the Israeli national airline, on the occasion of 40 years of Israeli independence. One of the posters reproduced Israeli, unequivocally Zionist, street signs from different cities, which conflated distinct Israeli landscape features and Zionist history. Beside the visually compelling re-presentation of urban commemorations,

the rearrangement of the signs in a new context and their specific geometrical composition presented a distinct hierarchy of Zionist commemorations. For instance, the seniority of Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, was evinced by the position of 'his' street sign at the head of the poster, whereas the prominence of Ben-Gurion, the founding father of the State of Israel, was underlined by the location of 'his' street sign at the geometrical center of the poster. By virtue of this, this poster provided a version not only of Zionist mythology but also of a particular hierarchy of Zionist commemorations. Firmly anchored in a distinct historical consciousness, the hierarchy suggested by the poster was independent of the urban texture which is a primary contextual framework for the evaluation of street names as historical commemorations.

The semiotic structure of a city-text provides a built-in scale which enables the reader to determine the relative status of the commemorated events and heroes. The status hierarchy in an ideal-type text is reflected through the configuration of elements in the urban fabric, for which the underlying rule is that the strategic importance of a thoroughfare and the prestige of the associated commemoration are positively correlated and that urban and historical significance conform. Jewish localities, for example Tel Aviv, Haifa, Rehovot, and Rishon Lezion, named their main streets after Herzl as a token of honor to the Zionist visionary (on Tel Aviv see Bar-Gal, 1987, page 120). These symbolically charged commemorations were unequivocal political statements. In 1925 a distinguished street in the historical center of the German capital was named by the republican authorities after Friedrich Ebert, the Social-Democrat first president of the ill-fated republic. The resolve of the authorities to accord Ebert with an honorable commemoration was also manifest in the selection of an appropriate thoroughfare. As a representative of the Social Democrats explained, "We chose a street that enjoys a specific political significance because of its proximity to traditional historical sites" (quoted in Azaryahu, 1988, page 252).

Yet deviations from this pattern often occur as the result of the combined effect of urban dynamics and reevaluations of historical significance. One problem is the evaluation of urban prestige. It seems obvious that, from an urban perspective, a central boulevard is more significant than is a small lane on the margin of the city and that the measure of public exposure of the first is much greater than that of the latter. The evaluation of urban prestige, however, also has to take into account that different parameters may have contradictory effects on the production of prestige and status. A newly built highway may be of supreme importance from the point of view of transportation, yet the context in which its name is used is specific and may even reduce its appeal as a vehicle for commemoration in spite of the public exposure it guarantees to the name. When it was suggested that the newly built metropolitan highway in Tel Aviv be named after Menahem Begin, a former Israeli prime minister, it was pointed out that bestowing his name upon a road often plagued by traffic congestion was not necessarily a token of honor because of the specific context of the evocation of the name. Begin's name was later bestowed upon a public park in Tel Aviv.

The fact that a city-text is a product of a protracted historical process is a source of further distortions. The history of the text has a twofold effect. One is the reevaluation of the significance of historical figures and events that is an indispensable element of a societal discourse of history. This process is independent of urban developments. Second is the effect of urban dynamics on the prestige of streets and neighborhoods in general, which is independent of the academic and political discourse of history.

Commemorations reflect prevailing notions of the period about historical significance and greatness of events and persons, respectively. Unless renamings were undertaken, a city-text would conserve notions and attitudes that prevailed in the different stages of its emergence. Israeli localities founded in the 1920s and the 1930s commemorated prominent Zionist leaders of the period, yet later reevaluation of history accorded these figures much less historical significance. The urban expansion of Berlin in the late 19th century (and the tight control of the Prussian authorities) engendered the situation where numerous streets of the former West Berlin commemorate obscure Prussian generals and officials, for example Puttkammer, Motz, and Winterfeld. In both cases, the prominence of such anachronistic commemorations in the urban fabric documents notions of earlier periods rather than a contemporary historical consciousness.

Urban dynamics is a factor to be reckoned with whenever the relative status of commemorations is deduced from the significance of the thoroughfare in the urban fabric. An example is provided by the history of Herzl Street in both Tel Aviv and Haifa. As the result of the expansion of Tel Aviv to the north, the urban prestige of Herzl Street gradually diminished. A similar thing happened in Haifa, which expanded in the direction of Mount Carmel. The decline in the urban significance of these two streets did not mean a reduction of the status of Herzl as the senior member of the Zionist pantheon, but definitely effected a decline in the prestige of the commemoration.

The recurrence of particular commemorations in different city-texts is a measure of the historical significance assigned to them. A survey in Israel found that the name of Herzl is commemorated in 23 out of the 30 towns that were examined, whereas Bialik, the national poet, was accorded 27 commemorations (*Maariv* 1995). The popularity of a commemoration is a marker of status and an indicator of reputation. From the practice of street naming in France, for instance, Daniel Milo (1986, pages 306–307) deduces that Jeanne d'Arc, Hugo, Pasteur, Jaurès, Clemenceau, and Blum belong to the French national consensus and that, although Napoleon and Richelieu are highly contested, Danton, Robespierre, and Napoleon III—all salient protagonists of modern French history—'enjoy' a bad reputation (Palonen, 1993, page 106).

In contrast to the form of historical narrative common in textbooks, which presents both 'heroes' and 'villains' (though only the more prominent of the latter) and provides an evaluation of their historical significance, a city-text comprises heroes only. Hitler and Pétain are absent from contemporary German and French city-texts, respectively, in spite of their paramount significance in 20th century German and French history. Those perceived as villains, of course, are not entitled to the honor bestowed by a public commemoration, but their exclusion also means that a city-text is a one-dimensional representation of only those historical figures who are located on the 'positive' side of the 'good–evil' axis predominating in a particular rendition of the past. The opposition becomes most apparent when, as a result of political changes and the reevaluation of history that follows, heroes and villains change roles and eventually even their places on the street signs. After the establishment of a socialist–communist administration in Leipzig in 1945, the name of August Bebel, the founding father of German Social Democracy replaced that of Kaiser Wilhelm, his historical archrival, in the street signs of the Saxon metropolis.

The historical narrative of a city-text is biased in favor of 'local' history; this is evident in the names of local dignitaries, most notably mayors, and local events that are commemorated in the street signs. West Berlin commemorated Ernst Reuter,

who was its mayor during the Soviet blockade in 1948 and as such a distinguished symbol of the city's resolve against the Soviet threat. Commemorations that represent local history may also be interpreted as local contributions to a national theme. Though specifically local, street names in Haifa that commemorated the battle waged in April 1948 over the city also commemorated the Israeli War of Independence, of which the battle for Haifa was a significant chapter (Azaryahu, 1993, pages 102-104).

The spatial organization of street names does not produce any significant linear order, and the intersection of streets does not necessarily imply any temporal or thematic relationship between their names. Such intersections, however, may suggest imaginary encounters that are sometimes laden with irony or even with political drama. The intersection of the Boulevard Voltaire with rue Saint Sebastien is ironic in the light of the notorious anticlerical disposition of the 18th-century philosopher. The intersection of Ben-Gurion Street with Jabotinsky Street in the Israeli town of Ramat Gan provides a symbolic encounter between two historical figures whose political rivalry in the 1930s still epitomizes the ideological polarization between left and right Zionism in Israel. The intersection of Leibnizstrasse and Kantstrasse in Berlin-Charlottenburg is meaningful in the context of the history of German philosophy (Neiman, 1992, page 8).

A fundamental property of a city-text is that it lacks a built-in time arrow, and hence chronology. Historical figures and events coexist simultaneously, and one cannot make a distinction between 'before' and 'after'. There is no temporal progression and, therefore, no causality is implied. Only a reader with sufficient 'cultural capital' (that is, prior knowledge of history) will be able to reconstruct chronologies and causal linkages from a city-text, but these are not found in the structure of the text itself. As an assemblage of commemorations, a city-text provides a representation of a certain version of history rather than its narration. Any attempt to transform a city-text into a conventional historical narrative means a breakup of the spatial order of the text (its deconstruction) and the rearrangement of its constituent elements into a new text (reconstruction) according to an organizing principle which is not to be found in the semiotic structure of the original city-text.

An illustration of such a procedure is the reorganization of Berlin's city-text into a conventional narrative of German national history which is provided by the paper "Unsere Helden und ihre Taten in den Strassennamen von Gross-Berlin" ("Our heroes and their deeds in the street names of Greater Berlin") (Giese, 1934). In this paper, a contribution to the study of Berlin and its history made in the context of the political triumph of National Socialism, Giese endeavored to demonstrate the extent to which Berlin's street names, in their capacity as historical commemorations, represented German national history. The author's strategy was simple yet powerful: to compile a narrative account of German history based upon the historical commemorations provided by street names. This meant the weaving together of the commemorated heroes and events in a narrative form which entailed both temporal progression and causal interpretations. The various commemorations were reorganized according to their relative location on the historical time axis; the evaluation of the commemorated heroes and their 'deeds' was in a National Socialist framework of interpretation.

The historical account began with the name of Hermann (Arminus), the ancient German warrior who defeated a Roman army and was the first German mentioned by name in a historical record. Next, it included medieval emperors, for example Friedrich I (Barbarossa) and Friedrich II; Prussian electors and kings, for example Friedrich II ('the Great'), Bismarck, the architect of German unification; as well as

Prussian generals and field marshals. The culmination of the narrative account was the 'national rebirth' propagated by the Nazis and represented by six Nazi martyrs (officially celebrated as the 'blood witnesses of the movement') whose names had already been commemorated in the street signs when the article was compiled. Heroes of the Weimar Republic still publicly commemorated (and who were later decommemorated) served as the 'villains' of this historical account which emphatically celebrated the National Socialist interpretation of German national history.

A city-text is a spatialized configuration of commemorated historical figures and events which is the result of a political selection process. This text does not provide its reader with a historical story, but rather with an authorized index of such a story. Notwithstanding the aforementioned distortions which are embedded into the semiotic structure of this text, the similarity between the list of street names attached to a city map and the index of a history textbook is illuminating in this context. The list of street names and their locations attached to a city map is practically an index of an index. Thematically, the index of a city map is an exact reproduction of the city-text as it mentions all the names that appear on the map. The alphabetical order of the index of a city map implies neither spatial nor temporal order, but is essential for the utilization of street names for urban orientation, which is, after all, their primary function.

Concluding remarks

The ostensible visibility of street names tends to conceal that they belong to the structures of authority and legitimacy. In their capacity as a particular mapping of space and time, commemorative street names provide a distinguished 'map of meanings' (Jackson, 1989). Embedded into the urban experience and the imagining of the city, they belong to the societal discourse of history. The celebration of a certain version of history and its reification through its commemoration on street signs does not imply that this version of history is a feature of fundamental societal consensus, even though this may well be the case. What is significant here is the measure in which commemorative street names not only evince and substantiate a particular version of history, but are also instrumental in introducing it into spheres of social communication that seem to be outside of the realm of political control and manipulation.

The sociosemiotic power of a street name is the result of its implication in a multitude of narratives that participate in the construction of social reality. A commemorative street name pertains to an official narrative of history. At the same time, it designates a specific setting and location in numerous narratives of the city. These include ephemeral narratives, whose authors are the users of the urban environment, and narratives of more lasting impact, written by different commentators on the urban condition. In these narratives a street name is mainly a signifier of place and not of historical heritage, and its manipulative character as an administrative-political construct is not relevant to the unfolding stories. The inter-fusion of narratives guarantees the operation of the authorized version of history as a semiotic constituent of social life in its most intimate level: that of everyday life.

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