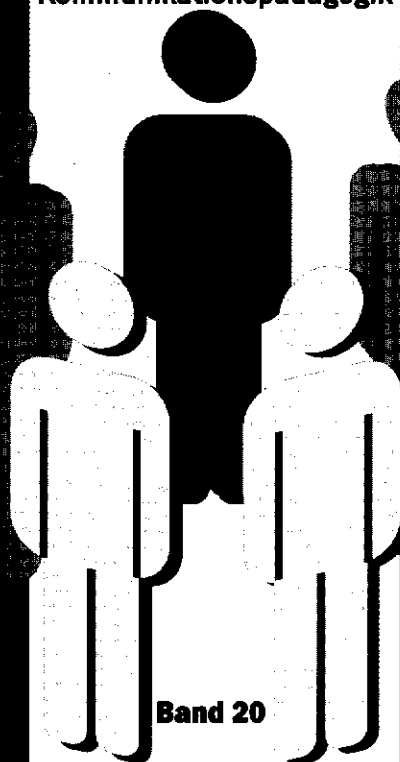Henner Barthel
Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.)

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Henner Barthel

Communication at the Central Round Table of the GDR

Can Round Tables Provide a Viable Alternative to Parliaments?

During the first revolution on German soil that was both successful and non-violent, the Central Round Table (CRT) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was a prime focus of action and attention. The debates and discussions of the Round Table (RT) placed the events of the landmark upheaval in 1989 and 1990 in sharp focus. The verbatim protocols and documents (Thaysen 2000) of the 16 meetings that took place from December 7, 1989 until March 12, 1990 authentically portray the qualities and deficits of this much-debated (political) institution. Furthermore, they demonstrate its merits as an "instrument for the democratic transformation of a totalitarian state" (2000, XVII): The CRT of the GDR ensured that the upheaval was non-violent to the very end and served as a guarantee for democratic elections. This in itself is an historic achievement.

Today, the RT is still being portrayed as the "focus of demands and hopes for the option of a 'third way'" and a "focus for concepts of the future [...] both for 'real socialism' as practiced in the GDR and for the system of the Federal Republic of Germany" (Thaysen 1990a, 11). In view of this, at least one issue needs to be critically assessed: Can round tables present a superior alternative to the legitimate parliaments of open civil societies?

The definition of the term "round table" is vague at best. Accordingly, its history is rather uncertain.

Some analogues and forerunners for the term's current use do exist, however. While some historians view early Christian communities (Thaysen 1997, 672f.) as the first RTs as we know them, others believe King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table to be the original source.

The circular shape of the table expressed the notion that all participants were deemed equal – an idea that has determined political decision-making since the time of the French Revolution. As a concept of modern politics, the RT entered European consciousness in the form of "round-table talks" via the English language.

As a rule, round tables are convened as (political) institutions wherever socially relevant groups (of political subjects) need to exchange opinions on a contentious issue that must be resolved despite conflicting interests. This conflict of interest brought to a head is one of the prerequisites for round table talks as we know them. Viewed in this light, the RT is an "organizational form of political communication" (237) that requires all participants to commit to strive for a compromise without any guarantee of success. Round tables serve as a final means of achieving consensus in the interests of all those concerned. They are thus the physical manifestation of a desire to achieve consensus in situations of dissent. As a rule, round tables can be convened in all public fields of communication, in business, science and culture, but most frequently in politics.

Today, the term "Round Table" no longer even prescribes a circular shape. The central RT of the GDR is a case in point: it was rectangular.

The fact that RTs are primarily viewed as instruments of political communication has to do with the very nature of politics. Political action is primarily geared towards power – be it the gaining and retention of power, or of power as the legitimate basis for successful political action. In democratic systems, the respective constellation of power is achieved by means of elections, thus giving legitimacy to the power of political

subjects. This (realistic) political definition clashes with the definition of politics in terms of normative ethics that goes back to Aristotle. His definition focuses on the ideal of reaching a decision by means of deliberation and for the benefit of the community. In the light of this tradition, the RT must be viewed as an "institutionalization of negotiation as a form of interaction" (240), its essence being the temporary suspension of power.

The situation and constellation of the round table might remind us of the basic elements of the term "discourse" as defined by Habermas and the ideal situation for speaking according to his Theory of Communicative Action. Here, the concept is also a debate free of and removed from power simply due to its situative structure (Habermas 1971, 138). By means of abstraction and idealization, it justifies rationality as a whole as a prerequisite for any reasoning intended to convince and without regard for the actual situations and conditions in which communication takes place.

The round table, on the other hand, is precisely the institutionalized expression of a situation of actual (political) negotiations between participants that hold diverging opinions. Here, the interpretation of "round" as a "circle of the like-minded" as defined by Rigotti (1995, 296; rough translation) receives its legitimation:

> Because there are more than two speakers, it is not sufficient to think in terms of bilateral symmetry. We must think in terms of a circular symmetry, in which all speakers are equidistant from the center. The conditions of symmetry and the expectations of reciprocity, which are fundamental concepts of morality, are built on the metaphor of the circle.

The concept of discourse without power according to Habermas can therefore not be equated with the RT as an institution.

Returning to the original question, I will now aim to:

- Determine the actual form of communication as defined by the Central Round Table of the GDR;

- Present research from the social sciences (by Glöckner-Rist & Mohler 1996) that may serve to clarify the organization of political debate, and

- Evaluate research from the field of communication studies (by Läzer 1998) regarding the debates at the Central Round Table.

The Central Round Table of the GDR

In order to understand the role of the RT during this time, one needs to be aware of the *conditions* of political communication (or lack thereof) in the GDR (cf. Barthel 1995 and 1998, 10ff.). Public political discourse was completely autonomous and hermetically sealed off from semi-official and private discourse between citizens. Putting it bluntly, there simply was no public communication on issues within society and with society itself, a fact described as follows by the citizen's rights movement "Neues Forum" (NF) in August of 1989:

> Where communication between state and society in our country (GDR; H. B.) is concerned, something is quite apparently very wrong.

Thus, this phase of political change at breakneck speed was also a time in which political communication underwent radical transformation – not merely on the streets, but also (at a later stage) in the media and political institutions (People's Parliament, parties and mass organizations) throughout the country. New forms of public political communication such as citizen's forums, town hall or Sunday debates and citizen's committees evolved as grassroots forums of democratic participation. "Big Politics"

had conquered the scene and the people had overcome its speechlessness (Läzer 1998, 248). During this time, a public forum for reasoning, debate and coming to terms with both the party and the government was lacking. Thus, the reflections of opposition movements led to debates in the form of round-table talks.

> The officials of the SED and their secret police were prepared for everything but a revolution of candles, prayer and round tables (Thaysen 1997, 673).

At this point, the SED – the East German "Socialist Unity Party" – was already on its last legs. Nevertheless, the fear remained that the party might use the advantages from its former monopoly of power to regain its previous status – with the help of Soviet weapons (as had been the case in 1953) in a worst-case scenario. Therefore, people were very apprehensive of the chaos brought about by the crisis as well as of potential outbursts of violence.

The GDR round table was directly modeled upon the round table talks that took place in Poland in February of 1989, where the Solidarno   trade union sealed the end of socialism by forcing the government to lift its ban and by paving the way for the first-ever democratic elections.

Round tables generally work under great pressure, but in a decidedly unspectacular manner. By contrast, the CRT of the GDR took place with much public attention from December 7th 1989 until March 12th 1990 – incidentally a round table that had no democratic legitimization!

Initially, its initiators had envisaged a confrontation of sorts between the old state power and new opposition movements. Thus, the contact group's first suggestion aimed for an equal division of votes between both sides. As of the second session, a total of 16 parties participated in the round tables, together holding 38 votes. The tremendously large number of (more than 200!) participants, advisors and observers as well as their constant

fluctuation certainly did not have a positive influence on the course of the negotiations. The necessary consequence was quick to follow: the RT was split into several work groups, commissions and committees. Fourteen work groups were formed to draft many bills and proposals. (Unfortunately, their meetings were not public, so that their method of working could not be studied.)

The CRT served as a means of transforming the political system of the GDR, but, significantly, was no longer an influential factor when votes were finally cast on March 18, 1990.

> In the end, [the CRT] became an institution of control dominated by the head of the GDR government (Hans Modrow, H. B.) – contrary to the self-restriction it had explicitly imposed on itself at the outset (Thaysen 1997, 674).

The tremendously quick political development that took place from December 1989 to March 1990 also led to constant changes to the *function* of the CRT. Every single meeting therefore needs to be viewed in its societal context, its respective tone being set by highly differentiated power struggles, the state of negotiations and domestic constellations of power at the time. According to Thaysen (1990a, 152f.), the activities of the RT can be divided into four distinct phases determined by its dominating function:

1. From December 12th, 1989 until January 22nd, 1990, the focus was on forming factions and overpowering the SED and its secret police;
2. From January 8th to 29th, 1990, the main focus was participation in state power culminating in the establishment of a "government of national responsibility;"
3. From February 5th until March 12th, 1990, the decision not to allow "guest speakers" from West Germany in the election campaign was made and the struggle for new power after the elections began (on March 18, 1990);
4. From February 12th until March 12th, 1990 the Round Table served as the representative of a new/old unique GDR identity in the unification process.

Taken to an extreme level of abstraction, the *achievements* of the CRT can be summarized in two statements:

(A)   The CRT in East Berlin served the important purpose of facilitating the transition from a totalitarian society into an open one without recourse to violence.

(B)   The CRT can be deemed a failure in everything it aimed to do beyond this – certainly from a subjective, but likely even from an objective point of view (Thaysen 2000, XVII).

More than any other Central or Eastern European country in transition, the process of transformation in the GDR was greatly influenced by West Germany, a country in turn influenced by Western European as well as US and Soviet interests.

The relative importance of the RT within the context of ending the Cold War here offers *one* of many perspectives for the analysis of this "institution" of sorts. To a hermeneutic in the year 2002, the two attempts at description and explanation that follow can only begin to approach and analyze the true nature of past events.

Findings on the Organization of Political Debate at the Central Round Table

In their empirical research, Glöckner-Rist and Mohler (1996) aim to describe the structure and the process of problem-solving, valuation and interaction that occurred between political protagonists.

The authors evaluate the first and eighth meeting of the CRT in order to answer questions such as the following:

- How do protagonists of different political orientations and dialogue roles contribute to the negotiation of decisions intended to help the GDR come to terms with basic economic and social problems?
- How do different participants influence the course of a debate 1) on a formal level with regard to the number and length of their contributions (i.e. independent of the content) and 2) on a content level by initiating, sequencing or terminating issues at hand? (86)

These two meetings were the first to be analyzed because they represent the beginning and end of a period at the CRT that Thaysen (1990a, 39ff.) refers to as an "old struggle for power."

On a methodical level, the study investigates two types of variables as indications of interactive and thematic aspects of discussion organization and different dimensions of speaking:

a) The first variable serves to describe the interactive organization of debates (number and length of contributions). The authors (Glöckner-Rist & Mohler 1996, 87f.) record the characteristics of the contributions by analyzing their number and the amount of words used.
b) The second variable serves to describe the thematic microstructure of discussions, analyzing this aspect on a word level.

Using the German edition of the Lasswell Value Dictionary (abbr.: LVD 1970), the authors record the thematic structure in order to demonstrate how "gains and losses" come about with regard to aspects such as *power*,

rectitude, respect and *affection* and to show the significance and definitions of topics such as *wealth, well-being, enlightenment* and *skill* in discourse.

Findings on the Interactive Organization of Debates

A comparison of the two meetings shows a shifting of focus from a discussion between "old" forces (such as the SED/PDS) and "new" forces (such as the NF) towards one dominated by the "new" political protagonists. Nevertheless, a closer look shows that a reduction in contributions is not limited to the "old" powers, just as the increase in contributions is not limited exclusively to the "new" forces. (Glöckner-Rist & Mohler 1996, 90ff.)

An analysis of contribution contents over the course of debates also proved the constant dominant role played by moderators: In both meetings, more than 50% of all contributions were made by moderators. Further analyses demonstrated that more than 90% of all participant's contributions were made in direct reaction to a moderator's contribution and that that the right to speak was granted alternately to representatives of the government and to the opposition, respectively.

> Thus, the course of discussion in both meetings was formally regulated by the moderators, limiting the possibility of influencing the course of debate by the number and placement of one's own contributions as given in other discourse. (99)

The authors Glöckner-Rist & Mohler (1996, 100) find it to be conspicuous and worthy of further investigation "...that that moderators in both meetings are among those that utter the highest number of words despite their comparatively short contributions." In a second step, it would therefore be worthy of investigation to determine "... to what extent

moderators have also contributed to the discussion on a content level and whether differences between the representatives of different churches can be determined."

Excursus/digression: According to Thaysen (1990b, 82), the course of the meeting was characterized to a significant extent by the "synodic style of the chair." Even in individual contributions, a 'clerical' tone of voice seems to have been dominant; this is not surprising in view of the fact that many of the participants were priests or ministers (Ullmann, Eppelmann, Meckel and others) – in addition to several lawyers (Gysi, Schnur, de Maizière). Conceivably, the patient but also persistent and circumspect activity of the moderators may have been responsible for the consensus reached in several cases.

Findings on the Thematic Structure of Debates

It can be said of all speakers that only about 50% of the words used were taken from the LVD (Glöckner-Rist & Mohler 1996, 94ff.), the rest being chiefly function words (particles, auxiliary verbs and articles).

More than half of all politically relevant segments of contents were hardly noticed by most participants. The authors (101f.) also note that participants of differing political orientation and dialogue roles not only differed with regard to how actively they participated in these debates, but also in their impact on the thematic structure of debates.

The thematic *macro*structure has yet to be evaluated with regard to their connection to microstructural thematic references. It is thus conceivable that the moderators regulated the change of speakers to a much greater extent than previous observations make it appear by interrupting, preventing and demanding contributions, for instance.

Such an interpretation of the organization of debates could be complemented by an analysis of the para- and extraverbal means of expression used.

Findings on the Reasoning at the CRT

It was only at the CRT that "proposal, counter-proposal and re-proposal" became possible in the GDR (Thaysen 2000, XX). This is where Abraham Lincoln's appeal to use "...not bloody bullets, but peaceful ballots only..." (The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations) was literally implemented by the passing of electoral laws. "Ballot box, not bullets!" thus remains what is probably the greatest achievement of the RT.

Läzer (1998, 243) views the RT as a model for "a subtype of negotiation" superior to existing institutions in the GDR at that time, to say the least. Using the disputes concerning preparation for the first free elections by secret ballot in the GDR as an example, the author analyzes (250ff.) two *sequences of negotiation* (during the 11th meeting on February 5th, 1990) with regard to the different strategies of reasoning used by participating political forces:

- The debate regarding the date of the elections (originally scheduled for May 6th, but later rescheduled to March 18th, 1990)

1. Reasoning geared towards the matter at hand and towards consensus (proposal and substantiation of a motion);
2. Confrontation on an emotional level and by stigmatizing one's opponent (for example, the "incapacity of old" and "new incompetence").

- The debate regarding the admission of speakers from the Federal Republic of Germany during the GDR election campaign

3. Dissociation by thematic shifting of the issue (no guest speakers from the West);

4. References to value concepts from the time of transition and reunification (for example "equal opportunity" and "fairness");

5. "Out the window"-style reasoning (265), i.e. addressing both the person opposite and the television viewer (for example "responsible citizen" and "democratic controversy").

Läzer argues that the strategies of reasoning in particular (3 - 5), clearly have features of a dispute between political opponents, as is the case in election campaigns where there can be only winners or losers. (This practice of political dispute is directly opposed to the original RT concept, however.)

(A brief reminder: The parties subsequently did not feel bound by the decision not to allow speakers from the West in the election campaign. This led to a situation where politicians from West Germany dominated the campaign.)

Historians might do well to follow the example set by the social and communication sciences and attempt to eradicate other "blind spots" of history by analyzing the verbatim CRT report, which is, all things considered, a core document of Germany history (and of parliamentary history in Germany in particular).

Linguists, in turn, are now also attempting to eliminate 'blind spots' of this kind (see for example Auer & Hausendorf 2000) by determining significant differences in speech nuances on either side of the Berlin wall, of barbed wire and the river Elbe after 40 years of division.

Even if many such blind spots will soon be illuminated, the CRT will continue to present many questions that must remain unanswered.

Round Tables do not Present an Alternative to Parliamentary Democracy

Can Round Tables then be viewed as a 'new model of democracy'? Can they perhaps even present an alternative to the parliaments of free democratic states?

I hope to have made the significant historic achievements of the CRT in the GDR (acceleration of liberation, ensuring non-violence) clear and at the same time managed to shed some light on the organization of the debates and the reasoning used. To western observers (Thaysen 2000, XX), this recapturing of freedom of expression in 1989/90 may have been as fascinating to observe as the parliamentary routine into which it subsequently developed. It also might have surprised such an observer to witness just how quickly the round table participants of the opposition adapted to parliamentary routine.

Nevertheless, this CRT – just as RTs as a generic institution – can never present a viable alternative to a parliamentary democracy.

In order to understand why the RT as an institution cannot replace free democratic parliaments suffice it to call to mind the "other" RT that took place at Schloss Cecilienhof, the Potsdam residence no more than a few miles away: This is where the "Big Three" (W. S. Churchill, H. S. Truman and J. I. Stalin) met in July of 1945 as representatives of the allied powers after the end of WWII. One of the three, US president Harry S. Truman presided over the RT. Voting, here, was clearly *not* possible (Thaysen 1990a, 176).

This too is a lesson to be learned from the Potsdam RT: Winston Churchill, the head of the British conservatives, readily gave up his seat at the Cecilienhof RT to Labour politician C. Attlee after the British people had surprised the world by casting their ballots against the war hero and in favor of the Labour Party.

The CRT at Schloss Niederschönhausen (originally in Berlin Centre, Church Meeting Hall of the Herrenhut Brotherhood of the Bonhoeffer House in the Ziegelstrasse, not far from the East Berlin Friedrichstadtpalast), on the other hand, was – as demonstrated – anything but round. Its name was no more than a political camouflage: From the outset, this RT pursued goals that were directly opposed to a parliamentary system.

> The protagonists of the RT did not aim to mobilize the masses but on the contrary strove to calm them (Thaysen/Kloth 1995, 1794).

In direct contradiction to the "myth of symmetrical communication" (Rigotti 1995), power was indeed exerted at the CRT just as in any parliament. The small but very significant difference was that the RT held *no democratic mandate* on which this power could have been based. The decisions that pointed the way towards the future were discussed behind closed doors. In order to avoid violence, all those concerned feigned "a consensus of circulating ideas" (Thaysen 1997, 675).

The CRT – just as other RTs in the GDR – increasingly moved away from the public settlement of conflicts, instead developing tendencies towards exclusion, secrecy and conspiracy. Subsequently, the RTs lost political attention and with it, their acceptance in a country increasingly influenced by Western German activities and goals.

> Under the conditions of an ailing totalitarian system, RTs fulfilled neither their defensive nor their offensive duties. At the same time, they were

neither competent nor able to make a constructive contribution to everyday politics (Thaysen 1997).

RTs are not merely institutions typical of transformation situations and thus, in a sense, (pre-)schools of democracy. They also exist in tried and tested democracies in manifold shapes: as advisory councils, informal talks of interested parties with the German chancellor, concerted actions, as institutions of arbitration, bodies for the preliminary clarification of issues etc. RTs, as such, thus are not a contradiction in terms to the parliaments of free democratic systems. Instead, they can serve as helpful additions to pluralistic systems. What they can never be, however, is a superior alternative to the legitimate parliaments of open civil societies.

After the events of 1989, it is easier to speak and conceive of "freedom competence" than ever before. This also holds true for the Federal Republic of Germany. It would be a fallacy to believe, however, that "competence" can be used as a synonym for "reality" on a permanent basis (Geißner 1996, 407). Therefore, the questions regarding new forms of political participation raised and discussed at the RT in 1989 and 1990 ought to be debated and, in some cases, implemented. These issues hold great potential when it comes to making further improvements to the political system of a country like the reunified Germany in the medium term. Round tables can and should thus step up and take their legitimate place alongside the core values of parliamentary democracy as we know it today.

(Transl. by Eva Stabenow)

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