

WHAT WAS THE EAST GERMANS' POLITICAL ENERGY, AND HOW DID IT END?

A SPEECH GIVEN AT THE MEMBERS' MEETING OF THE
AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE, AUTUMN 2019 (8–10 NOVEMBER)

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0.

Three decades after the great upheaval, one would think that the underlying developments that led to it and dictated its form would become visible and enter public consciousness. The opposite is the case. The Federal Republic continues talking to itself about East Germany – but these days no one there is listening anymore.

1.

How did we get here? In the beginning there is a very precise date and even a single person. It is 10 September 1989 and her name is Bärbel Bohley. For a whole year this small woman has been preparing the meeting of thirty oppositionists from the fifteen districts of the German Democratic Republic, at which the “New Forum” citizens’ movement is now being founded. (The basic idea, incidentally, was to anchor it aside from the church and outside the opposition).

Of course, such a vortex of world history as it unfolds in the autumn of 1989 has one hundred conditions and one thousand surrounding conditions – but the form of action that people (will) take was defined here. Dialogue. General discussion of all political currents in the country. Grassroots democracy within the movement itself. The non-violence of both sides. This was the modus operandi of East German democracy, and it remained the basic stance of its actions until around the end of 1993.

2.

Where exactly in the GDR’s spectrum of political attitudes did the breakthrough for democratisation occur? One can basically divide these positions into four quarters to understand them. Each quarter developed different powers of influence, repulsion,

or cohesion at different times. From left to right, we have the following: the first quarter actively supported the socialist endeavour, the second quarter passively sympathised with it, the third quarter passively rejected it, and the fourth quarter more or less actively rejected it.

If one asks about the acceptance of the socialist project in this configuration, it is striking that there was a left and a conservative half of the population. The democratic movement began in the second quarter of the political spectrum; here the 1980s opposition was at home. Its momentum immediately swept over to both the left and right, i.e. into the first and third quarters, because here too the basic stance reflected pent-up democratic needs.

3.

There it was suddenly, the great time, the miracle year. Immediately recognisable from the fact that people carried their heads higher, both at work and in the street, they looked each other in the face and were open to conversation. Openness began as an action in its own right. What had been founded as the New Forum captured the minds of 200,000 members within eight weeks and served as a starting point throughout the country for real political differentiation. However, that was just the political movement. More than in any other country in Eastern Europe, autonomy spread exponentially across the whole country, permeating all areas of life and penetrating all social structures. At first it was the demonstrations, but soon the ousting of mayors, the election of new factory managers by workforce meetings, the formation of impromptu citizens’ committees which ordered the opening of barracks gates, and precisely those Erfurt women who first closed and sealed a district administration of the Ministry of State Security on 4 December. On 7 December the Central Round Table was inaugurated in Berlin as the highest authority of the transitional period, followed by hundreds of municipal and specialised round tables at which real administrative decisions were made, until well into 1990. There was no leadership, it was self-organised. Up and down the country, citizens acted on their own initiative.

4.

Where had they learned to do this?” the East German sociologist Wolfgang Engler already pointedly and aptly asked twenty years ago. Apparently this could only have happened in the GDR. But how come? Because the vast majority of citizens had experienced social equalisation first-hand. This was evidently less obvious to Western eyes.

Since the 1970s, there had been a shift in the GDR’s internal social balance. In response to the inflexible nationalisations,

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a new social behaviour developed. Since property ownership was suspended, the equalisation of people was of real consequence. In the factories, at least the bottom three or four levels of the old hierarchy were abolished, workers and employees were placed on an equal footing, even the foreman was dependent on the executive brigade; engineers, scientists, and doctors were regarded as workers among other workers. People respected each other rather than adhering to hierarchies and pursuing opportunities for career advancement.

A social dynamic of its own developed, leaning toward a reversal of hierarchies and expanding the politically set framework on a daily basis, actually changing it and enabling it to be exploited for individual areas of life. The opposite of Western socialisation based on market opportunities. That was the long history of and preparation for 1989, and in the end only the government was left in a "niche", and by no means the majority of the population. And the so often cited "peaceful revolution turned out to be a powerful legacy that the German Democratic Republic passed on to its citizens.

5.

The fall of the Wall, however, abruptly changed the composition and prospects of the democratic movement. Only now did the fourth, conservative quarter of the political spectrum emerge from its waiting state. With it and its impact on the third quarter (whose position I earlier described as passive rejection), the immediate political objective shifted from rebuilding the GDR to nation-state reunification. From the end of December onwards, the goal of unification dominated public opinion in East Germany.

From now on, all four quarters were actually on the move, and all political positions, whether they had built up, carried, tolerated, or suffered the GDR, were now mobilised and stood face to face. The totality of this overall involvement of East Germans can still be seen in the huge voter turnout on 18 March 1990; it was 93.4 per cent.

6.

Of those election results, most people only know the political outcome: with a 47 per cent share of the vote, the East German Christian Democratic Union, adorned with civil rights activists and backed by Helmut Kohl, was able to declare itself the winner. This also paved the way for the fastest possible state merger.

However, the other election results show something else: 16 per cent for the Party of Democratic Socialism, 22 per cent for the (East German) Social Democratic Party, and 5 per cent for the two citizens' movement lists.

This is where the political attitudes from the first three quarters of the political spectrum find their expression. Together, these votes add up to 43 per cent. Even now, at the hour of the reformers' most profound humiliation, one can still see the two halves of the GDR populace, the left and the conservative, shining through with 43 to 47 points.

I would like to add that, after thirty years of state-organised unity, the same block of 44 per cent for the Red-Red-Green coalition has just re-emerged in the state of Thuringia.

7.

Meanwhile, the base is increasingly detaching itself from the superstructure of national unity, swinging to both the left and right. Where does this come from and why is it necessary? It did not start in its own camp, but began with the destruction of its own media and was cemented by the radical privatisation strategy of the Treuhand (the trust agency organising the transition from nationalised to private ownership).

Barely two years after 1990, there was not a single TV station, radio station, or major newspaper in East Germany that was not headed by a West German editorship. The general debate, political awareness, social recollection – all the comprehension recently mastered by an entire population – were transformed into disempowerment and condescension. In companies, it was no longer the workforce that set the tone, but absent owners who set the pace. And instead of consulting each other, we were now required to listen only. That was a sharp reversal, which was well understood and had an immediate paralytic effect. The political debate was again pushed down to the level of private conversation. That was the very state we had come from.

Now began the relapse into mindsets people had broken away from. The anxious became anxious again, the brave lonely again, the doubter shy, the socialist stubborn, the former oppositionist either a moralist or a careerist, the Babbitt a Babbitt again, and so on, and so on."

8.

Every single relapse thinned out East German democracy. Until 1993 – the year that nine months of grand industrial action by the potash miners of Bischofferode in the Harz Mountains sparked a desperate hope – the democracy movement held onto its basic stance of '89; then it was scattered and defeated. Their revolution was over.

So how can we sum up this course of events? Since then, on our territory, a people that had become a modern society once already has been in agony – to put it in sociological terms. In

other, more contemporary words, the terms of political science: a society that had already become democratic in 1989/90 is in agony here.

9.

No East German has ever scorned democracy, not before 1989 and certainly not afterwards – he only identifies it more precisely and takes it more personally. For him, it means manageable living conditions. Back then, he wanted to add a reasonable political superstructure to them. Everyone involved had to learn the hard way, some willingly, others less so. None of the four political attitudes were spared their specific disappointments. However, if no real dialogue has emerged between West and East Germany in three decades, there must be structural reasons. Since the institutional prerequisites for a genuine dialogue are held by the FGR, the malfunctioning must be sought on that side of the republic.

10.

The buzzwords are familiar: totalitarian, second German dictatorship, unjust state, niche society, fellow-travellerism, a society dominated all the way through, and so on. So now those who had been at best spectators on the other side of the fence were in our midst, evaluating factories, skills, people, and lives they did not know and could never have known.

For example: the excessive use of “totalitarian” to describe the nature of GDR society. The event itself tells another story: the autumn of 1989 in East Germany shows, on the largest possible scale of a successful political experiment, that the social logic of the former conditions of production could not have been totalitarian. In fact this applies to the behaviour of both sides involved, as indicated by the appearance – the entrance – of East German democracy and also by the course of its wrestling with the political machinery.

Behind such conceptual masks, the society that has grown here is unrecognisable, but the conjectures made about us from the outside before '89 continue to rattle on. Yet the old concepts no longer apply. (For this level of debate, 1989 wouldn't actually have been necessary.) That's why I call it the West “talking to itself” about the East.

11.

These are only two of the blows to the head received by East German democracy, i.e. by at least half of East Germans. We are still reflecting on them.

What kind of blows the other two quarters (i.e. the conservative half) received we don't yet understand.

However, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) is not an East German product, but an entirely West German consequence. It embodies the dissociation of the lower from the greater middle class. This division will therefore also persist in the political system; it cannot be made to disappear by argumentative or cultural superiority. This rupture means a lot to the Federal Republic: as it reaches deeper, ground will continue to give way.

East Germany does not have such a middle class. Here the election success of the AfD stems from other sources. It is perhaps 5 per cent of the electorate here who really share the convictions of the party leadership. But the wound of public voicelessness has been festering for a long time, which may account for 15 per cent of the overall votes. The current 25 per cent, on the other hand, is a result of the East Germans' learning from the bad manners of protest voting.

12.

This new form of resistance from the right has two very distinct social origins. The two German societies, as they emerged from the Second World War, continue to exist. Administrative unification has so far not been able to clearly identify or constructively resolve their antagonism. It is by no means clear from where democracy will take its next steps.

Another example: together with the institutional destruction of the East German public sphere, the subject of the Stasi (State Security Service) probably forms the thematic cornerstone that prevents a real conversation. It is the deep shadow with which a West German conceptual world harasses, suppresses, and darkens the concrete memory of the East Germans. One might also call it the abuse of the subject.

Where does it come from? From the cultural imprint that the West German intelligentsia bears from its dealings with fascism. But what is the reason for the predominance of false analogies? It arises from the complete liquidation of the academic and media intelligentsia that had emerged in the German Democratic Republic. As is indicated by the hypocritical (and dishonest) framing of “two German dictatorships”.

From an analytical point of view, this is merely a self-referential phrase, but politically it has a colonialist effect.

13.

Let us finally ask: if the democratic competence of 1989 had its own voice, media, and capacity to act today, what would it say and do on its thirtieth birthday in this new life?

First of all, it would be suspicious of the idle talk of a “peaceful revolution”. It would then remember that it was not “peaceful” but months of indescribable tension. It would realise that

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it was in fact non-violence only. And that there were two sides to the nonviolence.

It would eventually say to the other side: "Well, we still disagree with you – and you probably disagree with us. But you did not shoot, and you let us go our way; you gave in to an unknown future." So, from now on, any ordered marginalisation should end. Ergo: general amnesty, an end to the "Regelanfrage" (a categorical investigation of prospective civil servants to determine any Stasi ties), and the like.

That, I think, is what it would say a generation later. And this would by no means be out of any "reconciliation", but solely out of self-respect – the self-respect of East German democracy.

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