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Criticism/Self-Criticism in East Germany: Contradictions between Theory and Practice

On November 4, 1989, Christoph Hein, East German author and internal critic, stood at the podium in Berlin's Alexanderplatz, and asked of the half million protesters gathered there to "imagine a socialism where nobody ran away." Five days later, on the same day that the wall was opened, leaders of the main opposition groups issued a public appeal called "For Our Country" reflecting a fidelity to the principles of socialism: We ask of you, remain in your homeland, stay here by us... Help us to construct a truly democratic socialism. It is no dream, if you work with us to prevent it from again being strangled at birth. We need you... (Borneman 1991: 34-35)

If one can speak of the intentionality of the changes of 1989, one can say that East Germans alone amongst citizens from Eastern bloc countries thought they were fighting a pro-socialist revolution, an attempt to save socialism from the moral debasement which was becoming its trademark in the unworthy hands of the government. Following in the tradition of classical Marxism, some of East Germany's most prominent leaders of change felt that contradiction and criticism must be integral to socialism - a living testament to the principle of dialectics. Thus they viewed their protest as efforts aimed at bettering a project in which they passionately believed. Herein they differed from those who governed them, who, in contrast, felt that all currents of criticism, in the words of Ulbricht "turn into open counter-revolution" (Croan 1962:245). The present article seeks to explore this important tension, situating it within its historical context. The data I

shall draw upon was gathered in early 1992, immediately following the opening of the Stasi files (Andrews 1998) and consisted of interviews with forty women and men in Berlin and Leipzig, most of whom had been leaders in the Bürgerbewegung, or citizens' movement (for a critique of this phrase, see Torpey 1995:185). This group was diverse in terms of age and professions (ranging from academics, people in the theatre and from the church, artists, etc.): broadly speaking, the critical intelligensia. Here I explore their ideas regarding the role of criticism in a socialist state, their thwarted attempts to implement this in the GDR, and finally, I examine why they felt the way they did when the wall came tumbling down.

Running to the End of the World

Reinhard Weissshuhn had been involved with what he calls "subversive activities" in East Germany since the mid-1970s. He was one of the core members of the underground civil rights organization, the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, and had a long and well-documented history of resistance against the state. He lives in the Pankow district of Berlin, about 200 meters from Bornholmerstr., where the Berlin Wall was first opened on the night of November 9, 1989. He describes his experience of coming home that evening.

I noticed many people all running into the same direction... they were all running to the end of the world... the street was full of cars and one could hardly walk at all... I then walked with the stream and got to the border crossing... It was so crammed full with people you couldn't move. And everybody was pushing through the crossing. ... I saw what was going on but could not grasp it. I stood there for about half an hour in this crowd and then went home... I was totally paralysed... all this continued for the next few days and it took me a whole week

before I went across.... this was such a very elementary transformation of one's existence, of ... the whole world in a way... [When I did go across] I walked through like a sleepwalker... then I stood for a very long time over at the other side in no-man's land, and could not move forwards or backwards. And then I cried. I was totally overwhelmed.¹

Irene Kukutz, one of the founding members of Women for Peace in the early 1980s and an original signatory of New Forum, the largest of the opposition groups which were formed in Autumn '89, says that she greeted the news on November 9 "with a deep depression which lasted for three days, in bed... for me that was a breakdown too." Ruth Reinecke is a repertory actress at the Maxim Gorki Theater, and was one of the organizers of the pivotal demonstration on November 4. She describes her reaction to the opening of the wall:

I was not happy. Not happy. The wall, the wall was something very special, it was in all of our heads. That it had come down, this had to be a positive thing, of course. But there were still other things which were more important... what we had stood up so vehemently for on November 4 was giving way to this new thing.

Werner Fischer, another long time dissident, and the person who was later put in charge of disbanding the Stasi, says that when he heard the news, he felt "extreme rage." To have opened the wall on the anniversary of Kristal Nacht, a date which all Germans know (November 9, 1938) was "mean and undignified." He describes the cynical attitude of those who made that decision: "it's all over. We might as well open the gates and let the stupid people run to the west." Barbel Bohley, described by the Stasi as "the mother of the underground" and by fellow

¹Unless otherwise stated, the quotations cited in this article are from data collected in 1992. The majority of the interviews were conducted in German, with the assistance of an interpreter. Several respondents, however, preferred to be interviewed in English; here, a translator was still present at the interview in case the need for assistance arose. Translations were then double-checked by the person who did the complete transcription of the interviews (i.e. in English and German) who was also a professional translator.

activist Jens Reich as the "Jeanne d'Arc of the movement," believes that the way the wall came down was "a blow against the confidence of the people." She made a stiff drink, went to bed, and pulled the covers up over her head. Sebastian Pflugbeil, leading environmentalist, one of the founding members of New Forum, a participant of Round Table talks, and member of the Volkskammer, says "I had the very same physical reaction [to hearing the news about the wall being open] as I had at the moment when I heard that the wall was being constructed in '61. I knew then immediately that...this would not end well... the entire citizens' movement collapsed from one day to the next." Only two days after the wall came down, founding members of New Forum published an open letter to their fellow citizens, registering their grave reservations: "They did not ask you then, and they did not ask you now" the authors pointed out.

Contrary to the "monolithic, mass unquestioning celebration" (Borneman 1991:58) portrayed in the Western popular media, many leaders of the East German changes of 1989 experienced deep agony, realizing that they had "helped give birth to a child that quickly turned into a rather ugly creature" (Sebastian Pflugbeil quoted in Philipsen 1993:161). As autumn turned to winter, they witnessed not the realization but the end of their dreams.

Although much has been written about the revolutionary changes in East Germany which occurred in the Autumn of 1989 (Borneman 1991; Darnton 1991; Francisco 1993; Hirschman 1993; Joppke 1995; Maier 1997; Marcuse 1991; Millar 1992; Philipsen 1993; Opp, Gern 1993; Terrill 1994; Torpey 1995), these accounts tend to focus on the larger picture: why did a people, passive if not acquiescent for so many years of life under dictatorship, suddenly become mobilized and take to the streets in the hundreds of thousands? Why 1989? Why did these same people retreat equally quickly, but not before they had voted away the existence of their country? The present article has a very different focus, concentrating on the leaders of the citizen's

movement who had for the most part been engaged in underground anti-state activity for many years. What was the vision they sought to articulate? What was its history? Why did their star fall so quickly?

The Role of Criticism in the GDR

Much of the western literature which discusses anti-state political activism in the GDR refers to dissidents as "the opposition." Notably, however, the term "opposition" is one which is only very selectively used by the people it is meant to describe. The problem is not one of semantics. Those who use the term about themselves do so very guardedly; they identify a very particular moment in time when they crossed the line over into becoming opposition. Usually that moment came just before the very end of the existence of the country. The activists who fought against the abuses of the state did not see themselves as trying to bring down the government, much less the state. For a long time, many of them perceived themselves to be fighting for a better socialism, advocates of "socialism with a human face" as it was called following the Prague Spring of '68.

As stated earlier, the critical intelligentsia of East Germany were unique amongst dissidents in the Soviet bloc, in their conviction that socialism could be reformed from within. The effect of the brutal events in Prague '68 had been that, with the exception of East Germany, "socialism as an emancipatory goal for the future had been considered, among dissidents within the Soviet sphere of influence, as irretrievably discredited by the reality of Stalinist and neo-Stalinist regimes" (Philipsen 1993:12). Joppke (1995) analyzes the exceptionalism of East German intellectuals amongst their East European counterparts, claiming that they alone never made the transition from revisionism to dissidence; genuine dissidence, he argues, never existed in East German (p.185). While perhaps this overstates the case, the point is both interesting and crucial

to understanding the basis of the underground citizens' movement which developed sporadically in the forty years of that country's existence.

Revisionism, which concerns itself with the gulf between the theory and practice of Marxism, from a Marxist perspective, has a long and involved history (Labeledz 1962), beginning with Eduard Bernstein's re-examination of Marxian tenets in the late 19th century. Bernstein knew both Marx and Engels - indeed Engels appointed him as his executor - had debated their ideas with them and indeed perceived himself to be simultaneously sympathetic to and critical of their theory. Revisionism gained much popularity at the turn of the century, and then reappeared some sixty years later. 'Modern revisionism' as its reincarnation became known, took as its task the re-establishment of contact between theory and practice, the abandonment of myths for reality, and an open analysis of the contradictions within the collectivist system, instead of their concealment (Froncois Fetjo, *Etudes* 1960, cited in Labeledz 1962:18).

While revisionism has met with harsh and sustained critiques, particularly from the Soviet Union, its supporters regard themselves as more true to the spirit of Marxism than those who would condemn them. Because East Germany was often regarded, and indeed regarded itself, as the model Soviet satellite, revisionism never appeared to enjoy great popularity. Still, it was not without its supporters, including self-acknowledged revisionist Wolfgang Harich² who in the 1950s launched a particularly virulent attack on the government, offering a radical programme for the doctrinal and organizational transformation of the East German Communist Party (the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or the SED). But while the public appeal remained limited, there were "manifestations of revisionism ... in all spheres of East German intellectual

² The label 'revisionist' is one from which many have recoiled, due in large measure to the overtones of disloyalty which it has taken on in more orthodox circles.

life" (Croan 1962:245). Even at this early stage in the history of East Germany, "critical ideas of whatever direction and magnitude" appeared to the government "as powerful weapons of the enemy" (Ibid).

What is important to note about the intellectual history of Marxist ideas in East Germany is that even while orthodox Marxism had its critics, these critics virtually always positioned themselves as Marxists. In the language of Michael Walzer, they were "connected critics" (1988:x) who expressed their "faithfulness in criticism" (1988:xi).

There are several reasons why East Germans continued to hold on to their belief in the theory of socialism, if not the reality, well past the point when citizens of other Soviet-dominated countries had abandoned it. Firstly, by identifying themselves as socialists, East Germans could also cling to the heritage of anti-fascism, and thus spare themselves the burden of "working through the past" - identifying the roots of fascism in the society, and trying to eliminate them - which preoccupied portions of West Germany. Moreover, unlike the other Soviet bloc countries, socialism was in reality the "raison d'être" of the GDR, which was forever defining itself in terms of its distinction from West Germany. The peculiarities of the German-German situation resulted in a widespread conviction amongst the East Germans that "socialism alone was [its] differentia specific (Meuschel 1990:23).

Thus, many of those who are described as members of "the opposition" instead offer the phrase "internal critic"; they did not see themselves as opposing the system as such, but rather as citizens of East Germany looking to build a better East Germany. Torpey (1995) found in his interviews with East German longtime independent political activists that many felt the term "opposition" was "a label pinned on them by the 'bourgeois' media of the West" (p.9). Their

audience was not the west, but rather their fellow citizens. Thus it is necessary to distinguish between those who really were opposing the state, and those who were critical, but wished to enter into dialogue nonetheless.

Historically, in the GDR those who were openly critical of the state were, virtually always, prepared to enter into dialogue with it, and indeed much of their political work was directed at making this possible. However, by 1989, the political landscape had changed considerably.³ There were many, many more of the population who openly expressed criticism, and some who were even in opposition. Still in all, there was never a black and white distinction between these positions, only degrees of gradation; although individual activists may be placed at various points along a continuum, and indeed shift positions over time, there is evidence of both orientations in the political philosophy of many activists.

The complexity of standpoint of the connected critic is expressed in the words of Bertolt Brecht: "Let others speak of their shame, I shall speak of mine" (Woods 1986: 200). The paradox of this position, embodying both a sense of identification with, as well a critical stance apart from, the object of its scrutiny, was evident throughout my interviews. Why, I asked my respondents, did they do what they did? How did they respond to the social and political changes which they helped to create? Although I had begun my interviews with a keen interest in what I termed "politics of opposition" I soon learned that this phrase itself had a very particular meaning. Thus it was that I subsequently began most interviews with a discussion about the term opposition and its relationship to internal criticism. Through these many conversations, I came to a better

³Although there were numerous critical elements which combined to alter what was politically feasible in East Germany between 1986 and 1989, first amongst these was the change in the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev's push for glasnost and perestroika. No longer could East Germany rely on Soviet back-up to suppress a citizens' uprising. Indeed, during Gorbachev's visit to mark the fortieth anniversary of the GDR in October '89, he told East Germans "If you really want democracy, then take it, and you will get it" (Reich 1990:85).

appreciation of the complex nature of criticism, theoretical and actual, as it functioned in the one-party state of East Germany.

In the forty years of its existence, the SED never developed a comprehensive and consistent policy regarding the role of critics in East German society. A review of the country's constitution is instructive here. According to East German propaganda, socialist states were seen to have evolved beyond the conflict and antagonism characteristic of bourgeois states. This being the case, then, there was officially no basis for opposition. Accordingly, any opposition against the party was regarded as opposition against the people of the country, since the party was by definition the embodiment of "the people." Dissent was meant to have disappeared with the building of communism, and therefore any dissent which did exist must, by this logic, be anti-socialist.

Evidence of this reasoning abounds in official documents of the SED., as well as in private communications. One example of this is in a "secret speech" given by Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security (the "Stasi") for more than thirty years, to his propaganda officers in October 1978. The late 1970s were a time of much political ferment in East Germany, and criticism of the state became more widespread as a result of events such as the expulsion of the popular folk singer Wolf Biermann from the GDR in November 1976. In the communiqué to his officers, Mielke asserts that:

The aggressive and subversive nature (of the enemy) is apparent ... from the fact that... he is concentrating the ideological offensive much more specifically on inspiring and organizing 'internal opposition' and underground political activity in the socialist states (Woods 1986:128).

What Mielke ascribes to the ideological offensive of "leading imperialist forces" - his term - is in

fact a genuine response on the part of a small sector of the East German people to their government's flagrant abuse of power. Of course it is true that western governments, most particularly Bonn, were buoyed by signs of internal discontent, but they did not have the same power as the East German government to stimulate response from the East German people. The SED could not entertain the possibility that the criticisms which were being made were from anything but a pro-capitalist, anti-socialist perspective. To have received the critiques in any other way would have meant conceding deficiencies in the socialism practiced in the GDR - an ideological risk they were not willing to take. Thus all critique of the system was uniformly dismissed, and the sources from whence it came severely punished.

But the SED was, at the same time, caught in a bind. The repressive measures which were routinely practiced against the citizens were in direct violation of the country's constitution. This document, as it was published on October 7, 1949 (thus establishing the country) explicitly guarantees its citizens rights which they were never, in practice, to enjoy.⁴ These rights include freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. Article 9 of the constitution asserts:

All citizens have the right within the limits of the laws applying to everyone to express the opinions freely and publicly, and to assemble peacefully and without weapons for this purpose. ... No one may be disadvantaged for making use of this right....There is no censorship of the press (Thomanek, Mellis 1989:51).

⁴The original version of the constitution guarantees other rights which fared equally well as that of freedom of expression. Article 10 states: "Every citizen has the right to emigrate" and Article 41 states "The right to carry on one's religion undisturbed is protected by the Republic" (Thomanek, Mellis 1989:51-53). However, it is important to note that the role of the constitution in the context of state socialism is very different from its function in other societies; it is not meant to be a neutral document, but rather an ideological and political statement of the Party. Hence it is not uncommon for there to be amendments and changes to the text of the constitution. Still, it is not unknown even in Western democracies where law is meant to follow directly from principles established in the constitution, for there to be a considerable chasm between the ideal and the reality of the rights of citizens.

In 1968, the constitution was amended, and the edited version of what had been Article 9 became Article 27. The edits are significant:

Every citizen of the German Democratic Republic has the right to express his opinion freely and publicly within the principles of this constitution... No one may be disadvantaged for making use of this right...The freedom of the press, of radio and of television is guaranteed (Thomaneck, Mellis 1989:62)

Although superficially these articles may seem very similar, the alteration of the first sentence is crucial. Article 9 gives citizens the right to express themselves within the confines of the law; a legal document can hardly be expected to confer the right to break the law. Article 27 states that persons have freedom of expression, provided it is "within the principles of this constitution." Although Robert Havemann, symbol of East German resistance, expressed faith in the "honest intentions of our constitution" (Woods 1986:124) in reference to this particular article, it does seem that, at the very least, its rephrasing left it open to abuse. Specifically, in 1977, the Penal Code was reformed, and Paragraph 106 explicitly outlaws "agitation against the state":

Persons who attack the constitutional foundations of the socialist order of state and society in the German Democratic Republic or incite opposition to them ... shall be sentenced to between one and eight years' imprisonment (Woods 1986:86-87).

This paragraph of the Penal Code, which was routinely used to incarcerate leading dissidents in the GDR, blatantly denies citizens the right to freedom of expression as stated in the original version of the constitution. However, once freedom of expression is limited to those areas which fall "within the principles of the constitution," the right itself is being threatened. The edited version of this article is vulnerable to perverse interpretation - of which Paragraph 106 is an example - and effectively permits the government to dictate what citizens are allowed to express themselves freely about. Freedom of speech means nothing if there are strict confines imposed

upon the contents of the speech. Moreover, as stated above, there is not a hard and fast distinction between what might formally be considered "opposition" and internal criticism. Thus Paragraph 106 of the Penal Code could be used, and indeed was used, to silence any criticism of the state, even that which was offered from a pro-socialist argument. Regarding this law, Havemann writes to a leading member of the SED:

Repeal the unconstitutional Paragraph 106 in the GDR's Penal Code... which is being used to turn every attempt to exercise the right of free speech into a criminal act. Release all the prisoners who were sentenced under Paragraph 106. Open the newspapers and publications of the GDR to the voices of your critics and conduct an uninhibited public debate without reprisals against anyone (Woods 1986: 127).

The last sentence of Havemann's plea is very telling; he asks not only for citizens to be able to exercise their constitutional rights, but to do so "without reprisals". Isn't it a tautology that exercise of constitutional rights is not a legal offence (by definition it cannot be) and therefore is not punishable by law? What else would a "right" mean other than that one could engage in these activities without suffering consequences for so doing? But both the original article protecting freedom of expression, and its edited version, explicitly protect citizens' rights to exercise their rights (free of punishment). The sad irony is, of course, that in the GDR, citizens were punished for exercising their constitutional right to express themselves freely. In this context, Havemann's entreaty is understandable.

But did the SED really desire complete conformity from all of the population? It was important from the Party's point of view that "conflict of opinion" be seen to exist. Havemann, in his autobiography, recalls Ulbricht asking him "to write an article

advocating such conflict of opinion" (Torpey 1995:237). Under Honecker, social scientists were not dissuaded from adopting seemingly critical stances, as this was seen to give "substance to the concept of criticism and self-criticism" (Woods 1986:20).

Werner Fischer, long-term dissident mentioned in the opening of this essay, gives voice to related concerns, when asking himself:

Do I know in how far I, as a so-called victim who was in prison and so on, contributed in a certain way to a stabilization of the system? Because the Stasi strengthened this apparatus, could only strengthen it by constant referral to the opposition, that is how the system legitimized itself. In that respect I belong to the criminals, who ensured that the Stasi found more and more reason to expand.

Who can judge this?

Did the existence of internal criticism in fact only serve to validate the state? Was the only path for registering criticism of the state complete nonengagement - in the case of East Germany, leaving for the west? Clearly this is what some people felt, but, as we shall see later, many of those who criticized their own state had no desire to go elsewhere. They simply wanted a better socialism, in their own country.

Moreover, the theory, if not the reality of Marxist-Leninism identifies a crucial role for "criticism and self-criticism" within socialist societies. This is paradoxical, given the hard line of the party that "there is no objective or political or social basis for opposition" (Woods 1986:3). Nevertheless, classical communist theory addresses the inevitability, as well as the importance of contradiction. Marx was fascinated by Hegel's concept of contradiction, and while he argued that Hegel did not suitably recognize the fundamental irreconcilability of some sets of opposites, this concept "played a role of vital analytical significance in his work" (Wilde 1991:275). Marx

regarded Hegel as the "architect of modern dialectics" (Wilde 1991:276) which was to form the cornerstone of his theory. In Anti-Duhring, Engels affirms its centrality: "Motion itself is a contradiction." This theme of contradiction was later to be taken up by Lenin, who was fascinated by "the law of the unity of opposites" : every thing contains within itself its own contradiction. Moreover, "The splitting in two of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts.... is the essence ... of dialectics" (Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics", quoted in McLellan 1986:305).

The concept of contradiction lies at the heart of dialectics, and as such need not be regarded as threatening the existence of a thing but rather as its affirmation thereof. But the SED aligned itself uniformly with Stalin's most rigid construction of dialectical materialism, which ascribes very limited parameters to that which is considered constructive criticism. Thus the role of the critical intelligentsia, historically so important in communist theory, became truncated, as the conditions necessary for its existence (e.g. freedom of the press) were not present.

The official line of the SED on the role of criticism and self-criticism was, then, as follows:

Criticism and self-criticism are developed, in the first place, as one of the norms of the party life propounded by Lenin within the Marxist-Leninist party as a special way of systematically applying the dialectic of contradictions... Criticism and self-criticism are an important driving-force behind social development under socialism. The constant aim is constructively to overcome outdated conditions, shortcomings, misconceptions, etc., to encourage the activity and initiative of the working people, and thereby to contribute to the positive development of socialist society (Woods 1986:85).

The same document, however, also states that "criticism and self-criticism are ... quite distinct

from that destructive form of criticism which arises from a nihilistic and sceptical outlook, and never transcends the purely negative" (Ibid.). Elsewhere in official documents of the SED, the party claims to "encourage criticism and self-criticism in all circumstances" (Woods 1986: 78). Clearly what is and is not considered to be constructive criticism is the pivotal question. In the case of the GDR, it seems that almost any form of criticism, even sometimes that issued from members of the party, was perceived by the party as being anti-socialist. The SED was self-contradictory in its approach to contradiction and criticism within socialism.

Reforming Socialism

That there was not room to criticize the SED, even from within its own ranks, is evidenced by cases of two of East Germany's most prominent dissident intellectuals, Robert Havemann and Rudolf Bahro. Havemann, who had been a member of the German Communist Party before the war, was convicted of high treason by the Nazis, and sentenced to death. This experience made him and others like him well-disposed towards the Soviet Union, which they regarded as unique in its anti-fascist credentials. He was of the generation which helped to build the GDR, and had even spent time with Honecker, another anti-fascist fighter, in Berlin's Brandenburg Prison during the war.⁵ Havemann spent the early years in the GDR as a member of the Volkskammer, the "People's Assembly" or the East German Parliament, and later became Professor of Physical Chemistry at Humboldt University. However, the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, in which Khrushchev denounced the excesses of Stalin, was a turning point for Havemann. From that moment, he began his journey to become one of Stalinism's greatest critics, all the while

⁵History will remember Honecker, however, as something very different from a brave fighter of anti-fascism. As Darnton (1991) comments: "Poor Honecker. As soon as the merciless eye of the television camera spanned over the furniture in his not so impressive hunting lodge, his spotless record of opposition to Nazism disappeared from view" (p.94).

describing himself "Not as one disappointed in the socialist idea but as its confirmed partisan" (Allen 1991:62) It was from this perspective that he offered his critique of "the perversion of the essentially democratic character of Socialism" (Ibid.). In 1962, Havemann delivered a series of lectures in Leipzig and East Berlin, in which he criticized the ideology of the SED as lacking in both dialectics and materialism. In 1964, after thousands of students had heard his lectures, Havemann was officially condemned by the Party, and expelled from it, with the justification offered at the fifth session of the central committee that his position was fundamentally anti-Marxist-Leninist and had gone beyond productive criticism and self-criticism. Havemann was dismissed from Humboldt University in 1964, and removed from the GDR Academy of Sciences in 1966. Ten days after Wolf Biermann was expatriated from East Germany in November 1976, Havemann was put under house arrest, which lasted until May 1979. He died three years later. In the last twenty years of his life, Havemann was tireless in his attempts to steer socialism back on to what he perceived as the right track. In a letter to Kurt Hager, then Secretary of the SED Central Committee for Culture and Science, Havemann comments:

I never cease to be surprised at the low opinion you have of the persuasiveness of your own arguments. Are the positions you adopt really so weak that you think you have got to use the harshest methods of persecution to suppress all criticism, however tame? (Woods 1986:125).

Implicitly, Havemann accuses senior members of SED of not believing in socialism enough to trust it to work, without repressive measures. Ultimately, he criticizes them for not being good socialists.

Havemann went so far in this criticism as to state that the leaders of the country did not really believe, in practice, in the merits of a planned economy. Along with other East German dissidents and economists who developed the concept of "etatism," Havemann argued that

socialism must not take its lead from capitalism, but must be a genuinely different blueprint for society, and more than simply a system in opposition to capitalism. "...to ensure its historic survival" Havemann wrote in 1977,

socialism must be different from capitalism, and that means in its economic objectives too...One must conclude that the economic goals of capitalism can, of course, be achieved with much greater success in a capitalist than in a socialist economy (Woods 1986: 161-162).

The example which Havemann felt most clearly illuminated the tendency of a socialist country wrongly trying to emulate the ways of capitalism is that of the automobile.⁶ Havemann outlines the merits of an automated public transport system "by which all local destinations could be reached more quickly by everyone" and which would require "a fraction of the materials and energy that cars currently swallow up." He then poses the question:

It is entirely in keeping with the class structure of capitalism, which lives off the constant incitement to individual consumption, that it should have bred the car as its key social status symbol. But how to explain, or indeed justify, the same process being repeated, in a most frightening manner, in the socialist countries? (Woods 1986: 160-161).

Havemann then answers his own question: "The abolition of democratic rights and liberties... is the underlying cause both of the economic failure of socialism hitherto, and of the progressive erosion of its international standing" (Woods 1986: 162). Havemann strongly attacks "the Stalinist pseudo-socialis[t] motto" which is "unfreedom as necessity." What socialism needs is

⁶The example of the automobile would be used again, years later, by Barbel Bohley to explain why the population overwhelmingly embraced the west in the first and only free elections that East Germany would ever have: "we did not take to the streets to campaign for better cars but for an improved transport system." Many East Germans, however, suffered from "Trabbie fatigue" and for them, the prospect of a new and better car was quite attractive. Konrad Weiss would later describe this discrepancy between the general population and the leaders of the citizens' movements as "the scissors which opened up between our hopes and the hopes of the population."

not cars, but freedom.

It is true it will not be a carbon copy of bourgeois freedom, nor can it possibly be so. For socialism can create freedoms which in bourgeois society were merely hopes and dreams: the freedom of the individual from all material dependence on others (p.165).

Havemann's arguments and critiques were dismissed by the state as, in Mielke's words, "anti-socialist nonsense" (Woods 1986: 128). In contrast, Havemann regarded himself, and indeed was regarded by many others, as more a believer in socialism than those who called themselves socialists but ran the country in a way which did not adhere to socialist principles.

Rudolf Bahro is generally credited as being the foremost theoretician on the discrepancy between the theory and practice of socialism.⁷ In August 1977, Der Spiegel published a chapter of his book, Die Alternative; the following day he was arrested. He was tried and convicted on charges of espionage, and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. Fifteen months later, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the GDR, he was released and deported to West Germany. Like Havemann, Bahro was a member of the Communist Party, who was ultimately expelled for his anti-socialist views. But "the alternative" - the title of his book - which he advocates is a "radical communist alternative" (p. 140). "The communist movement must be created afresh" he pleads (Woods 1986: 152). He faults the modern day communists "even those who really are communists" for knowing but not understanding "what Marx actually understood by

⁷Although "really existing socialism" is a phrase which is attributed to Bahro, in his writing he refers to "the system's self-appellation as 'socialism as it actually exists'... [which] by implication concede[s] one thing: that there is a difference between the traditional socialist ideal which they claim still to cherish, and the reality of the new society" (Woods 1986:143).

socialism and communism" (p.141). He very explicitly uses the language of Marxism to criticize what is practiced under its name, accusing the new order of "deliberate hypocrisy and the conscious inculcation of false consciousness" (p. 140). Further, he writes "Ours is a state-machine the like of which Marx and Engels wanted the proletarian revolution to smash" (p. 142). As in the case of Havemann, Bahro certainly does not think of himself as being anti-socialist. Indeed, just the contrary; he refuses to use the word socialism to describe the situation he confronts because of his deep socialist convictions, about which he is unequivocal.

That socialism which Marx and Engels foresaw and which Lenin and his comrades no doubt hoped for in Russia too, *will one day come*. It must be *fought* for because more than ever it is the only alternative to a worldwide collapse of civilization (p. 141, italics in the original).

Havemann and Bahro were very different men who nonetheless shared a strong conviction that the theory of socialism had great potential, and the purpose of their attacks on that which called itself socialism came from a motivation to improve something which they felt could be made great. It was done in the spirit of criticism/self-criticism, which they took very seriously. Lenin had said "We are not afraid to admit our mistakes, and we shall judge them without emotion, so that we may learn to correct them" (Woods 1986: 133), and so these two members of the Communist Party offered their critiques. For Havemann and Bahro, socialism was theirs, to criticize and to improve.

We Are the People

In the late summer and early autumn '89, as thousands of people poured through the East German border into Hungary, thus making their great escape to west, those who stayed

behind cried out 'Wir bleiben hier. Wir sind das Volk' ("We are staying here. We are the people.") This rallying cry of the movement epitomized the ideological standpoint of many who participated in the demonstrations which occurred throughout the country. It was a direct challenge to the S.E.D.'s claims that, in line with its founding statement, it "campaigns ... for the true national interests of its own people" (Thomaneck, Mellis 1989: 23). The party elites, with their hunting lodges and other accoutrements, were being divested of the right to call themselves "of the people." (Different versions of this chant developed, including one voiced by the party rank and file as they cried out to their leaders "We are the Party.") Ingrid Koppe, prominent member of New Forum and subsequently a member of the Bundestag, explains the meaning behind the cry "We are the people."

They demanded a dialogue with the mighty. They did not demand that the mighty should go, but simply 'we want to talk with you, sit down with us around a table and let's talk.'

It was, thus, the desire to better the system, not to abolish it, that motivated many of the activists of the citizens' movement. "Couching demands in the language of the extant system" (Bauman 1992: 158) was a strategy which would prove fatal for the system because it could no longer successfully portray its critics as capitalist sympathizers, whose commentary could be summarily dismissed. Rather, the critiques which filled the air in those autumn days were from a socialist perspective and had a long history; significantly, they were perceived by the general population as being such. Barbel Bohley explains that "The premise of oppositionists in the GDR had always been: "We want to reform the existing society. We are not really an opposition... We just want to ... change things for the better'... a better socialism" (Philipsen 1993:294). It was the inability of the system to absorb this criticism which ultimately transformed connected critics into disconnected critics. Bohley explains: "the system was so rigid, we were branded as

opposition members" and eventually this is what they became. Bohley's six months of enforced exile changed her. "I realized while staying in the West that we had to accept being in the opposition, that opposition is an integral part of a normally functioning society, and that a political opposition plays an important democratic role" (Philipsen 1993:294). When she returned to East Germany, she knew she was "no longer prepared to patch up the system."

Ingrid Koppe makes an observation similar to Barbel Bohley's: "We did not want to be branded enemies by the public or by the state. We did not see ourselves as enemies of the state, but we were not given the opportunity to... well to discuss things publicly." Reinhard Weisshuhn describes the position of himself and other dissidents in the early days of their political work: "We, at that time, tried to defend the principles of socialism against socialism." Werner Fischer explains "we never questioned this system as such ... we did believe in the reformability of the system, particularly after '85, during the post-Gorbachev era. [We wanted] to adapt socialism to a more human face, as it was known to us since ... Dubcek coined this phrase in '68." Because of East Germany's very close ties with Moscow, perestroika and glasnost were the source of much hope for many dissidents. However, when it became clear that Honecker had no intention of following Gorbachev's lead, and indeed only increased the rigidity of the system, these hopes were dashed, which precipitated a transformation of political consciousness.⁸

Weisshuhn describes the critical shift in his political thinking, after years and years of working

⁸One example which dramatically reveals the severe nature of East German socialism was the state's response to the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Ironically, it was Egon Krenz who was sent to meet with the Chinese Communist Party to congratulate them on their swift and decisive action; five months later he would try to pass himself off as communism's great reformer. So enthusiastically had the East German government supported the Chinese government's actions, that there was widespread concern that they might employ "the China solution" on their own population. The weekend of October 7, the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the GDR, was pivotal in this respect. Police were given instructions to put the demonstrators down with whatever force necessary; but although initially crowds were "attacked by club-wielding riot police and water cannons" (Allen 1991:185), the violence subsided. Immediately following this, the size of the demonstrations grew exponentially.

for a better socialism. The Initiative for Peace and Human Rights was the first group to apply the term "opposition" to themselves, and this was only in 1988. There had occurred a change in the relationship with the system, that is my attitude changed from being reform oriented to one that totally rejected the system. For a long time I thought the system could be made better and slowly I started to think, it cannot be made better, it must be destroyed. Socialism must be destroyed. All that from a position on the left.

Weisshuhn elaborates on his position. The attempt to reform socialism is only possible as long as one sees the reality of socialism as something totally different from socialism. Or, in other words, as long as one doesn't recognize the really existing socialism as socialism. Then, the desire to reform is meaningful. [But] at that moment where one accepts really existing socialism as socialism, one can no longer reform it.

Weisshuhn, when asked if he uses the term "really existing socialism" responds "not any longer, not for some time now." Sebastian Pflugbeil echoes these sentiments. He says: "It is difficult to differentiate between the theoretical principles [of socialism] and the practical [reality]... It is not possible to talk seriously about the theoretical principles which the classicists, following the Marxist-Leninist dogma, had without ignoring its total, practical failure... The vision did not work and its practical realization did not come true." There came a time, after patience had worn out, when Bahro's defense of socialism, as distinct from really existing socialism, was rejected by many. Still, it is interesting to note that New Forum was alone amongst the opposition groups which were formed in Autumn '89 in its decision not to use the word "socialism" in its founding statement. Indeed, Democracy Now which had as its founding members some of East Germany's most well-established dissidents, wrote in its opening appeal "We want to see the socialist revolution, which has stagnated under state control, endowed with new life" (Frontiers

Fall/Winter 1989-1990:5). Weisshuhn comments:

It's interesting to see that the group which is referred to as opposition in the GDR and which now calls itself "opposition" used this term very late in the day, precisely because they wanted to reform and because they understood by "opposition" a kind of antagonism. And because the government as well as we ourselves took this term for meaning an intractable opponent. However, the opposition was aiming for exactly the opposite. They wanted a dialogue with the state, and this, as they themselves realized, was only possible by talking and not by opposing.

Through their actions, the so-called opposition leaders sought to give voice to criticism and to insist on the need for debate, the very demands voiced by Haveman years before. In a letter written from his home, while under house arrest, to Kurt Hager, a secretary of the SED Central Committee, he pleads for "open and fair debate, which once upon a time was so highly regarded among communists."

Would it not be a good idea to recall how Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin once publicly debated with each other on matters of principle, and yet without any personal hostility! Release Rudolf Bahro and enter into debate with him! And then it will be possible ... to discuss not just Bahro's views, but to weigh up your counter-arguments as well (Woods 1986: 127).

Ten years later, eight years after Havemann had died, New Forum would be founded in the very home from which he wrote this letter. On the weekend of September 9, 1989, thirty people from various walks of life⁹ were invited to Katja Havemann's home in Grunheide (outside Berlin),

⁹Jens Reich describes the composition of New Forum: "We wished to ensure that we were properly representative; to ensure that Neues Forum incorporated not only clergymen, not only Berliners, not only intellectuals, not only young

with the purpose of addressing the very problem which Havemann himself had identified years before. Jens Reich describes the central problem to be addressed: "The trouble was that a discourse no longer existed between the Ruling and the Ruled" (Reich 1990: 73). The very first sentence of the founding appeal of New Forum thus reads "Communication between state and society in our country has clearly broken down." It proceeds to describe why and how communication has been obstructed, and calls for "a democratic dialogue about the tasks of a constitutional state and about the economy and culture." "The broadest public participation must be sought; we need to reflect and discuss with one another, openly and throughout the entire country" (Frontiers Fall/Winter 1989-90:3). They describe themselves as "a political platform for the whole GDR"; they wanted to be, literally, a new forum in which all citizens could participate. When Jens Reich was asked whether he was trying to reform or to break the system, he replies "I didn't think that far. What I was trying to do then was to open the society and to open a dialogue." New Forum was refused permission to constitute itself legally as an organization, on the grounds that it was anti-socialist (Reich 1990: 74). Nevertheless, within two months, the group had mushroomed from its original thirty members to more than 400,000.

Clearly the citizens of East Germany wanted to talk. They wanted communication with their government. But this in itself was seen as threatening to the state. New Forum was not legalized until the day before the wall came down. Mao's words about the importance of contradiction to the party seem to have been prophetic: "If there were no contradictions in the Party and no ideological struggles to resolve them, the Party's life would come to an end" (McLellan 1986: 276). And so it did. In the end of November, Krenz announced the elimination of the "leading role of the party" and two weeks later the whole of the Politburo and the Central Committee

dropouts from the social ghetto. This criterion brought us together...the result, although not fully balanced, was a cross-section of normal people with normal professions and different political leanings" (Reich 1990: 72-73).

collectively resigned.

In an interview on November 6, 1989, Barbel Bohley described what she perceived to be as a consensus which existed amongst the various oppositional groups and the demonstrators: "The consensus is: we want to stay here, we want reforms here, we don't want to introduce capitalism" (East European Reporter Autumn 1989: 17). Whether or not this consensus continued to exist at this moment - or even whether it ever had existed - is a point of considerable contention. Clearly, however, Bohley's statement does sum up accurately and concisely the political perspective of most of the leaders in citizens' movement, and goes a long way toward explaining their reactions to the opening of the wall, described here. To understand the position of those who were demonstrating, particularly those who occupied a leading role, it is important to remember what they were not doing, namely leaving the country.

The Tragedy and the Chance of the GDR

In the forty years of its existence, 4.6 million people emigrated from East Germany to the west¹⁰ (Naimark 1992: 80). Of these, 343,854 left in 1989. Who left and why did they leave? Statistically, the great majority of émigrés were young; of those who left in 1989, a very significant 41.1% were between twenty-two and twenty-nine years old (Naimark 1992: 86). The two most frequently mentioned reasons for leaving East Germany in 1989, in more than 90% of the cases, were the general political conditions and the lack of political freedom (Naimark 1992:86).

Barbel Bohley describes the difference between the attitudes of those who left and those who stayed: "The people [demonstrating] on the streets want changes at home, they want to stay

¹⁰Interestingly, one almost never hears mention of the more than one million people who immigrated to East Germany during this same time (Naimark 1992: 80).

here. The population is divided: one half wants to leave, the other half wants to stay and change things here" (East European Reporter Winter 1989/90: 17). One critical difference between East Germany and its eastern allied countries was the existence and proximity of West Germany. While it is true that many people applied for exist visas and were denied them, it is also true that some citizens were forced to leave who did not want to. The case of Wolf Biermann being stripped of his East German citizenship while giving a concert in Cologne is the most well-known of these stories, but it is not unique. When activists were seen by the state to have become too disruptive, there was much pressure exerted upon them to leave. But these were the very people who did not wish to go. Freya Klier and her husband Stefan Krawczyk, two leading East German dissidents, agreed to leave rather than spend ten years in jail, which was the choice offered them. Klier explains: "In the GDR there was a certain strategy, which involved the second Germany. To this second Germany, the Stasi could expel anyone who was inconvenient to them, who was critical. Those who were forced to leave created a void, which was filled by people who were fully subordinate." Werner Fischer and Barbel Bohley found themselves in England for six months, following their participation in the Rosa Luxemburg demonstration and their subsequent incarceration. Fischer became very depressed during these months: "I spent days in bed in London, so that time would pass quicker." This was his first direct exposure to capitalism. "...in London, one can study pure capitalism... I realized that if there is to be a change then it must be within the eastern bloc, there must not be a transition to that system." Living in the west for six months brought home to Fischer what instinctively he already knew,

that my roots were here [in the GDR], that I had become firmly rooted to this soil, here was the friction that sparked controversy. I did not want to see the GDR disappear. This is how many opposition members express it today: 'better to have a stormy relationship than none at all.'

Fischer did not want to be away, he wanted to be in East Germany where he had work to do.

Konrad Weiss, a founding member of Democracy Now, another of the "opposition" groups which sprouted in Autumn '89, describes the sentiment which Fischer alludes to: "the oppositional who leaves his country will always call into hollow space." For Fischer, the time in London passed "and with military precision we arrived back in east Berlin ... after an absence of exactly six months." Others were not able to return as quickly. Wolfgang Templin, who had been identified by Honecker as "the number one enemy of the state" was exiled at the same time as Bohley and Fischer. When asked what he did on the night of night the Berlin wall opened, he describes with great warmth, that finally after nearly two years away he was allowed to come home. Fighting against the crowds pouring into the west, Templin made his way back into East Germany.

...the fall of the wall for me meant that I could go back into the GDR rather than get out of it. And purely physically I experienced this - everybody pushing past me in the opposite direction and me pushing against the stream the other way. I was overjoyed and it was in that mood that I re-entered the GDR... Two, three weeks later ... my family moved back here.

But the special situation of the two Germanies made East Germany unique amongst the eastern satellites. "For it was at once East Germany's chance and its tragedy that, unlike in Poland or Hungary, the boundaries of social self-determination and national self-determination were not the same" (Ash 1990:74). People who objected to the way the system was run did not need to stay and try to make it better; they could always leave, and indeed, if they were perceived by the state to be any sort of a threat, they were presented with strong incentives to do so.

When Hungary reneged on its commitment to "live up to the formal understanding between Warsaw Pact members not to abet 'defection' of their citizens to the West" (Allen 1991: 180) in the late summer of 1989, tens of thousands poured through its borders emigrating to West

Germany from Hungary via Austria, with cries of "wir wollen raus" - we want out. But those who stayed behind were committed to reforming East Germany, on East German soil. Those who stayed wanted change, but change within their own country, change whose terms would be dictated by those whose lives would be most effected. There was deep dissatisfaction with the way things had been run, but this was not complemented by an attraction to the west. Sebastian Pflugbeil explains "The economic structure was as unsatisfactory in the old GDR as it was then in the West. That was not a model for us." And further "The Federal Republic was never our destination... [it] alienated rather than attracted us." Ingrid Koppe confirms this opinion: "taking over the western system did not play any role in our discussions... It was definitely a matter of creating something new... We were aiming for an 'existence in solidarity' nationally as well as internationally." Barbel Bohley rejects the pro-western construction that has subsequently been put on the events of that fateful autumn.

It was simply the revolt of the humiliated people. And they did not ask why they revolted, for capitalism or socialism, they were simply fed up to live with this lie... Most certainly people did not go into the street and shout "we want capitalism." Deep down they wanted [to] change the system, change their living conditions... it was not a victory for capitalism.

Ruth Reinecke describes the November 4th demonstration in much the same way. When asked what the purpose of this great meeting was, she responds: "You can't say a purpose. It was not necessary to formulate a purpose. Over many, many years, it was inside us and more and more agitated. There was such a lot of rage inside people ... First of all, it was matter of letting out something." Later she asserts that the starting point of the demonstration was "to have more democracy, but democracy within a socialist country." The series of demonstrations were the result of years of repressed frustration. But they were a necessary component of a political process, one which many of the participants had hoped would lead to a democratic socialism. It

is not so much the fact that the wall was opened, but rather how and when, which annihilated the possibility of a future democratic East Germany. Historian Timothy Garton Ash observes

... the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November, and subsequently of the whole inter-German frontier, changed the terms of the revolution completely. Before 9 November, the issue had been how this state - the German Democratic Republic - should be governed. The people were reclaiming their so-called people's state...

After 9 November, the issue was whether this state should continue to exist at all (Ash 1990: 69).

Conclusion

Leaders of the citizens' movements were far more realistic than many of their compatriots in their immediate assessment of the implications of the opening of the wall. Thus, they could not join the others as they danced on the wall and drank champagne, for in this event they saw the end of the possibility of that which they had been working towards for so many years. Their years of political activity had been conducted in the spirit of Robert Havemann "Not as one disappointed in the socialist idea but as its confirmed partisan" (Allen 1991:62) The inability of the state to integrate the spirit of contradiction into its character ultimately spelled its demise.

Thus it was that on November 4, 1990, citizens of East Germany rallied together to mark the one year anniversary of the great demonstration in East Berlin, which had precipitated the opening of the wall five days later. Ruth Reinecke describes the atmosphere there as one of "bitterness."

People were still longing for the time which had occurred. So many things had happened in this one year. We had the West German money, we were part of the

Federal Republic of Germany... It was a desperate recall of the recent past...

People were very much aware of the fact that the thing is over. There is no alternative.

The self-criticism of the crowd was bitter and wounded, epitomized on placards which read "We were the people."

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