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Continuity and discontinuity of East German identity following the fall of the Berlin Wall: A case study

Nietzsche once commented that it is typically German to ask what it is to be German (McFalls 1995:143). Interest in German identity, or “the German identity problem” has endured for more than a century (Gilliar 1996:20), and indeed the project of forming a German identity is said to have begun in the 18th century, with the campaign to establish a ‘cultural nation’ (Jarausch et al 1997: 42). However long ago this fascination began, it is clear that the events of the autumn of 1989 have given it new life. In the ten years since the unification of the two Germanies, questions about German identity have increasingly permeated national consciousness. Despite the early optimism of many – epitomized by Willy Brandt’s now famous statement of November 1989, “Now grows together what belongs together” (quoted in Minkenberg 93:53) – the challenges of unification (economic, political, social and political) persist.¹ Even Chancellor Helmut Kohl has commented: “... inner unity ... will admittedly take longer and cost more than most, including myself, had originally assumed” (quoted in Steininger 2001:27).

Significantly, the passage of time has not simplified the question of national identity. Rather, it has prompted many, as Nietzsche might have predicted, to think more deeply not only about what it means to be a German, but to be a German from a particular part of Germany. In this chapter, I will examine the effect of the changes of 1989 on East Germans’ sense of their national identity. The picture I will paint is one of apparent contradictions as East Germans continue to probe, explore and struggle with who they are and where they belong.

Identities

Pickel (1997) comments upon the “essentially contested” (p. 203) nature of identity, and describes three distinct meanings of the term. First, and “politically by far the most successful” (p. 203), is national collective identity, which is based on the assumption of “the nation as a natural and homogeneous whole with essential and unchanging characteristics, a common past and common future” (p. 203). Second is the “more ‘social scientific’ conception of identity” which quantifies “measurable individual attitudes and value orientations” (p. 203). Finally, there is the post-modern perspective which regards identity as “a great diversity of constantly changing meaning structures embodied in and mediated by discourse practices and codified in a variety of texts” (p.203).

Clearly, how one conceptualises East German identity is influenced by how one understands the meaning of identity more broadly. East German national collective identity is, in Pickel’s description, roughly equivalent to the ‘official’ East German identity, that is, the concept of citizenship rights and duties as propagated by the East German state. The project of national-identity-building was high on the agenda of the socialist state, and there were a wide variety of programmes – for instance the Free German Youth (FDY) and the Young Pioneers –in which individuals were virtually required to participate, whose explicit purpose was to instil and promote a very particular concept of the duties of citizenship amongst its populous. Perhaps because of this, rather than despite it, many East Germans appeared to have “a fundamental ambivalence towards the manifest successes and failures of the East German state”

(Jarausch et. al.1997: 41). It was precisely this aspect of identity which had been in crisis long before the revolutionary changes of 1989. At no time was this more clear than when East Germans went to the polls in March 1990, to participate in the first and only democratic elections their country would know; the resounding message was a rejection not only of communism, but of the East German state. Offe (1996) comments upon “the total lack of GDR loyalty towards its own political existence” (p. 22), and writes

It turned out that the GDR had not been solidly recognized internally, that is, by its own people... How far the GDR had been from becoming a ‘nation’ through its own collective self-confidence and identity became apparent in the lack of a voice of its own during the process of unification (p. 23)

If the ‘official’ East German national identity can be said to have been in critical condition before surely this was the time of its death.

Paradoxically, however, this new situation created an opportunity for the revival, even rediscovery, of other less tangible and perhaps therefore more powerful aspects of East German identification. Jarausch et al comment: “History plays a central role in the creation of national identity.... Groups represent their fate in stories which create a feeling of community by recounting their trials and tribulations” (1997:25). The fall of the wall opened up new spaces for East Germans to experience their common history, both that which they had lived through and that which they were making. Times of political upheaval are particularly ripe conditions for collective narrative reconstruction (Roßteutscher 2000:62) and this in turn has high potential for the renewal of collective identity. If, from a post-modern perspective, identity is fragmented, multi-layered, and in constant flux, then the quality and the complexity of the psychological challenges posed by the transformation of East Germany can perhaps be best captured by a framework which problematizes homogeneity and

internal consistency, and rather emphasizes the dynamic tension inherent in identity work.

For those interested in the quantifiable aspects of identity – Pickel’s second meaning – statistics abound. As a result of unification, there was massive reorganization of East German social structures. Kolinsky (1995b) comments “... the collapse of state socialism and the integration of East Germany into the western polity had the hallmarks of a transformation: nothing remained unchanged, unquestioned or predictable” (p. 13). Nowhere can the effects of the changes be seen more clearly than in the alteration in the rates of birth, marriage and divorce.

The incorporation of the GDR into the political, social and economic system of the old Federal Republic has been accompanied by a series of dramatic changes to the pattern of family life in the five new Länder. These changes have found vivid expression in the precipitous fall in the marriage, divorce and birth rates of around 66 per cent, 80 percent and 60 percent respectively between 1988 and 1992 (Dennis 1998:83).

Employment – “the core of ... life and the yardstick to measure all the value of all things and of all people” (*Bauernmoral* 1908, cited in Knabe 1995:71) – was severely effected by the changes of 1989. In 1988, the workforce was 9.7 million (out of a population of 16 million); within five years, it had fallen by 5 million (Knabe 1995: 73). In all areas of life, the changes were most dramatic for East German women: under state socialism, women were “as numerous as in the labour force as men, enjoyed equal access to education, and were as likely as men to obtain vocational qualifications, although less likely to reach advanced levels anywhere” (Kolinsky 1995c:177). For a variety of reasons, most of this has changed in the decade since unification, and as a result, East German women have proven to be particularly vulnerable to the previously unknown phenomenon of poverty.

Judging from these statistics, one might assume, along with Kolinsky, that “nothing has remained unchanged” (1995:13), including that elusive phenomenon, East German identity. However, while the scale of structural change is well-documented, the underlying meanings which East Germans attribute to these changes is less understood. Initial research into “shifts in the collective attitudes towards key policy issues that were triggered by the process of unification... suggest[s] both major changes and astounding continuities” (Jarausch 1997b:8). Indeed, the deeper one probes into the effects of unification on East German identity, the less uniform the picture.

In the first half of 1992, I was in Berlin collecting life stories from forty women and men who had been leaders in the citizens' movements which spearheaded the revolutionary changes of East Germany in 1989, or what one of my respondent's, documentary film maker and later parliamentarian Konrad Weiß, refers to as “the German Autumn.” I arrived only weeks after the Stasi files had been opened to the public, and the general atmosphere in those grey winter months was of a very raw society. Conversations about identity were commonplace - where to get one, how to lose one, how to find one which had been lost. Wolfgang Herzberg, East Germany's first oral historian, told me that identity had become "a fashionable word." People of East Germany, he said, had "lost their old identity, which has always been a bit unstable. Now they are looking for a new identity." Major social changes had occurred in East Germany between the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and when I collected my data in 1992; writing in 1994, German historian Jurgen Kocka observed: "Germany has changed more in the last four years than it has in the last four decades"

(1994:173). What I witnessed in the months I spent there was a revolution of memory and identity. In this chapter, I will explore the complex interplay between the continuity and discontinuity of identity as articulated in my interviews with these forty East Germans.

‘Mauer in Kopf’ – the wall in the mind

Reinhard Weißhuhn is an East German who had been part of the small underground opposition in his country for more than twenty years when, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was opened. Here he describes his reaction to this momentous event:

This was such a ... a very elementary transformation of one's existence, of the... well, the total... world in a way. I'll try to explain. I have lived... [For 20 years...] I have always lived 200 metres from the wall. And this wall, to me, has become a symbol of captivity in every respect, also in a metaphoric, symbolic sense. And this is what I have been ramming my head against for the last 20 years. And I had... as a way of survival, I had resolved to ignore this wall as far as I could, you know by reason. You see, in other words, I have suppressed the problem of 'the wall' tried to suppress it. I tried to do the same throughout the week when the wall had gone. I did not only try to suppress the fact that the wall had been there previously, but I also tried to suppress the fact that it had gone. And it didn't work...

The conversations I had with East Germans were full of descriptions of the Wall, and its function as an organizing principle in their lives. Clearly, the wall was both physical – 45 miles long, and, at places, ten foot thick, concrete re-enforced with steel rods - and metaphorical. For many years, the wall was a prominent feature in the dreams of East Germans. Although the wall took more than two years to dismantle, its psychological hold is even more enduring.

Wolfgang Templin, once identified by Eric Honecker as “the number one enemy of the state,” tells a very different story from that of Weißhuhn above. Although both men, as co-founders of the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, were well

established figures of East Germany's underground opposition, on the night the wall opened, they found themselves living on opposite sides of the wall, due to the fact of Templin's forced exile to the west in 1988.

Well, my sentiments of this night were different from those of other people, because I was on the wrong side of the wall... I immediately rang friends and said "if the wall comes down then my route back into the GDR is free," and I was ecstatic... 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. Well, I was overjoyed and it was in that mood that I re-entered the GDR... Two, three weeks later, we all, that is my children, my family, moved back here.

The wall had always been something which structured one's very existence, physically and psychologically. Wolfgang Ullmann, senior churchman and member of the Bundestag, explains "If you live beside the wall, it's strange, untenable, and so unnatural. When I took a little walk with my wife in the churchyard... you always had the soldiers watching you from the towers." Even now, the long-term psychological consequences of the presence of the wall for more than a quarter of a century are difficult to ascertain. The phrase "the Wall in our minds," attributed to West Berlin author Peter Schneider (1983), "assumes that 45 years of communist rule have had a profound cultural and political impact" (Klingermann and Hofferbert 1994:38). The phrase is now commonplace in discussions of the transition to post-communism, and its updated version "rests on the assumption that the trend of current developments is toward the heightening of barriers between eastern and western Germany, especially as regards attitudes and behaviour" (Klingermann and Hofferbert 1994:38). Jens Reich, a senior East German biologist and key leader of the citizen's movement, compares himself to his children, who, at the time of our interview – less than three years after the opening of the wall – were already living, working and studying in the west.

[they live] without looking any longer at that inner wall. But for me the inner wall is still present... You always pass a border when you go through Wollenstraße, [you] feel people are different, the unspoken. Conventions are different.... you don't feel depressed in any way, but it's different...

Ironically, as the Berlin Wall came down, the inner wall - the wall which marked the psychological distance between eastern and western Germany - was for many strengthened. Prior to 1989, East Germans had had ample exposure to West German culture particularly through the medium of television; however, actual contact between the two parts of Germany only served to highlight differences.

Ruth Reinecke is an actress at the Maxim Gorki Repertoire Theatre in Berlin, and was one of the organizers of the November 4th demonstration in Alexanderplatz, which precipitated the opening of the wall five days later. She describes that time in her life as "difficult to analyse, because the events took place so rapidly, one was chasing the next. Not only the events in the street, but the events inside the self." As the Berlin Wall was opened, Reinecke was immediately aware that this would have vast implications, not only for the political situation in the GDR, but for her very personal sense of self.

When the wall was opened, suddenly another world existed, which I did not know, which I would have to live in, whether I wanted it or not. There was of course a great curiosity to explore the world, this still exists. On the other hand I had the fear somehow whether I would be capable of making this new world... my own... Maybe there was also some fear that I could not stay any more the same person I had been so far.

For Reinecke, as for Weißhuhn, the opening of the wall had an immediate and profound impact on "the events inside the self." For her, deep personal reflection and change are inevitable, and this is both frightening and exciting. One of the most intriguing aspects of the many conversations I had with East Germans was the extent to which they intimately experienced the dynamic relationship between their own

biography and the forces of history. Many felt that they had helped to make history and that history was most definitely changing not only their life circumstances, but their very selves.ⁱⁱ

National identity: Imagined community vs. real boundaries

The events of and subsequent to that autumn caused many East Germans to re-evaluate their relationship to their country. Ruth Reinecke explains to me:

I believe for myself the GDR has left behind a very decisive influence on my life which cannot be extinguished. On the other hand I believe that I am still at an age in which I can actively cope with the new things which have come. Certain things I cannot lose, nor do I want to lose. I do not want to extinguish my life, my former life as a citizen of the GDR.

Reinecke's phrase "my life, my former life as a citizen of the GDR" reveals an ambivalence towards this aspect of her identity which is also evident in other interviews. Is she still East German, or is she not?

One of the questions I asked in my interviews was "When you are asked where are you from, what do you say?" Most interview participants paused over their response, but eventually gave some form of the answer "the GDR" - in the present tense, with comments such as "throughout my life I will remain a citizen of the GDR."

(Variations on this included one respondent describing himself as "coming from the east of Germany" and another saying she was from "the other Germany.") Several respondents said they did not feel German at all, but rather European. Virtually no one responded that they felt they were from "Germany."ⁱⁱⁱ This question provoked a strong response from Jens Reich:

I am from the GDR. I've lived in the GDR, I was brought up in the GDR. I've no misgivings of any sort in saying it. I never use the word *ehemalig* [former, as in the former GDR]... I find it ridiculous. The GDR is a fact, an historical fact. You don't say the *ehemalig* German Reich; it [simply] doesn't exist any

longer... This emphasis on *ehemalig* and on the disassociation of yourself from it ... is a sign of psychic instability in those people [who use this word.]

Later in the interview, Reich elaborates further on this point:

I've no inner drive to deny the GDR...[which] has proven its right of historical existence in '89. By our own activity we freed ourselves and made it a decent society, for some weeks and some months. We did it at least, so ... without any feeling of shame you can say "[I am from the] GDR."

Sebastian Pflugbeil, is a physicist and leading environmentalist who, along with Reich and twenty-eight others, was a founder member of Neus Forum, the first and most significant of the citizen's groups to form in Autumn 1989. While he shares with Reich a deep sense of national pride surrounding the events of the bloodless revolution, his overall outlook is far more pessimistic.

Compared to Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, our national consciousness was very underdeveloped or non-existent... [we] were not at all proud of our history or ...proud of being a GDR citizen. Then, in the autumn of '89, within a few days, [we developed] a very strong, extremely strong, extremely pronounced national identity... But that lasted exactly until the night the wall came down. In the autumn of '89 this was a positive identity, a constructive, national identity. Now it has more the appearance of a hospital community...

Michael Passauer is a pastor, and served a vital role providing a safe place of harbour for dissident East Germans during the 1980s. He is very interested in the problem of identity, and notes marked changes which have occurred as a result of political events. Like Pflugbeil, he explains that citizens of the GDR had always had "problems with identity."

He [the East German citizen] had a hard time to say "I am German" – it is associated with, for instance, the Third Reich... but he also didn't say "I am a GDR citizen." That's not a possible thing to identify with. So he was permanently in search for an identity. In Autumn '89 ... the GDR citizen for the first time identified himself very closely ("skinclose") with the GDR.... "We are the people." This we had for about half a year, and this we, I experienced. ... we had this strong self-confidence, we were able to break down totalitarian systems. And with October 3rd [the day unification took effect], there is a new identity crisis.

Passauer outlines a collective psychological journey which resonates with the descriptions offered by other respondents. Until 1989, the historical moment of self-determination, East Germans were “vague” about their heimat, where they belonged and what was their home. Both Pflugbeil and Passauer note the lack of identification between East Germans and their state. This was “not something they felt proud of;” for reasons of history and circumstance, the German Democratic Republic was “not possible to identify with,” as discussed earlier. All this changed with the bloodless revolution, when the citizens of the GDR “proved [their country’s] right of historical existence.” But that sense of national identity, so heightened by these political events, would take different forms following unification.

Resisting Identity Appropriation

Initially, many East Germans reacted to the changes of 1989 by moving to the west, seeking to become as fully integrated into that society as possible. Andre Brie, Deputy Chairperson of the Party of Democratic Socialism (the remake of the old Communist Party), told me he felt that East Germans had been "forced into the West German identity" whereas he "would have preferred to come to a new identity... I think millions of East Germans are living at the moment as if they have no past."^{iv}

Henning Shaller, set designer for the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin and one of the key organizers for the November 4th demonstration in Alexanderplatz, echoes some of these sentiments. For him, there is a critical connection between national identity and a consciousness of history, and he too expresses concern about living as if one had no past. “This process of rapid unification,” he explains,

...led to a loss of identity, because everything which still reminds us of the old structures of the GDR is destroyed. It is difficult for people now to have their own identity. Identity in a way I believe is related to the consciousness of history. But if I ignore history, or deal with history in a selective way saying

“well I will not bear in mind this and this here,” then I won't have an identity. It cannot be denied that a great part of my life developed in this somewhat rotten state. But I can't say that everything I have done was bad, and I observe this great fear that people who are living here in this part of Germany within the shortest time have been taken over by a new identity which may be fatal in its consequences.

Bärbel Bohley, the so-called "mother of the revolution,"^v shares Brie's assessment. She explains "some people do not want to profess their identity, they feel second class citizens compared to the West Germans, so they say they are German." (Bohley's description does not apply to most of the respondents in my student who had always been and continued to be unusual East German citizens.^{vi}) She expands on this:

I think that there is an East German identity, and there are those that accept it and those that reject it. But it does exist. And even this rejection is a way of distancing oneself from it, of saying 'farewell.' We have lived here for forty years, and you cannot deny that. One can say ten times one is German, but Germany did not exist. There was the Federal Republic and there was the GDR and this formed the West Germans and the East Germans.

One example of trying to say “farewell”, of living as if one had no past, is reported by Naimark, who tells of an interview with a twenty-two year old punkfrau from the GDR. Six months after having moved to West Germany, she was asked “Why did you leave the GDR?” “The GDR? Never heard of it” (1992:87).^{vii}

A one-line comment such as this has clarity and finality which a more in-depth conversation might lack. In Naimark's account, the reader is not given any information about the context in which the exchange occurred, who the young woman perceived herself as speaking to, and in whose presence. Moreover, one has no sense of her identity over time. Ten years later, how would she answer the same question. The more researchers probe questions of identity, the more complex the picture which emerges.

In 1994, Jennifer Yoder conducted a study interviewing elite parliamentarians in Brandenburg. When asked whether a particular eastern German identity exists, slightly more than half (ten out of eighteen) responded positively. Follow-up questions, however, evoked responses that revealed a distinct “eastern” dimension in terms of elites’ self identification. Typical of the responses she found were the following:

I will remain an East German in this [political rebuilding] process. I have a different political culture. I try to bring a different politics over... [I]nstead of making people feel indebted [to the West], hesitant to be active, I have to encourage them to assert their own voices (SPD member, Potsdam, May 1994)

But what exactly is meant by an “East German identity”? For one of Yoder’s respondents, it means simply having had “a common history, experiences, life relationships, upbringing, schooling, work world... and these have formed people in a special way” (1999:135) and for another, it indicates “[e]xperience under the wall and a particular socialization pattern” (1999:136). Yoder states that “the most common identification may be summed up as ‘East Germans in a united Germany’” – an identity which some interviewees referred to as “the eastern biography” (Yoder 1999: 136).

A revitalized identity?

However, with the growing realization of the appreciable differences between eastern and western Germany, noted by Bohley and others, there has been a movement towards a new grassroots post-communist eastern identity (Hogwood 2000). Bohley herself comments upon those East Germans who “are very conscious of the fact that they have lived under extraordinary conditions and have had very special experiences and they are proud of it.” In 1990, 66% of East Germans identified themselves as

more German than East German, whereas by 1995, this figure had dropped to only 34%. Correspondingly, in 1990 28% identified themselves as more East German than German, while in 1995, this figure had climbed to 60% (Yoder 1999:204-205). As Yoder explains, “a discovery of ... differences [between East and West German societies] led to a rediscovery of separate identities” (1999:205).

Yoder summarizes the revitalized appeal to a distinctive eastern identity:

... eastern identity has been rediscovered as a response to the encroachment of west German norms and rules for behaviour and the devaluation of eastern culture and identity. This rediscovery can also be interpreted as a positive/proactive development ... a process of self-assertion, an expression of pride and autonomy, and a recognition that the east was and is different from the west (1999:209).

Wiesenthal's (1998) analysis of the revival of eastern identity is more wholly reactive than that suggested by Yoder. Widespread post-unification dissatisfaction (PUD) experienced by many East Germans can be explained, at least partially, by the “treatment-response thesis.” While before unification, East Germans may have felt themselves to be very similar in terms of values and cultural patterns,

the experience of western supremacy gave way to a process of increasing cultural differentiation. Feeling labelled as more naïve, less professional, less competent, and culturally outdated, east Germans would appear to be lining up for a counter-attack. They remind themselves of ‘their’, up to now, not so deeply held ‘socialist’ and ‘communist’ values and confront ‘the west’ by claiming allegiance to a revived east German collective identity ... [which is seen to embody] ‘true’ values of egalitarianism, modesty, solidarity, social security and stability... (1998:17).

Ursel Herzberg, in her seventies, expresses views compatible with the “treatment response thesis.” Speaking from her own experience and that of others she knows, she comments:

I think that people have acquired an East German identity after the changes more than they had before. Before that they were very dissatisfied with many things in this part of Germany that was called GDR, but now they feel quite different... Now they feel that they are East Germans, or ex-GDR citizens,

much more than they did before, I think. So do I... People feel East German, also because a lot of the West Germans treat them with some arrogance, with a lot of arrogance in fact... therefore, East German people feel they have to emphasize their identity again, sort of regain their self-respect.

As a result of unification, some East Germans felt that they had become, as Werner Fischer described it to me “an alien in my own country.” Bärbel Bohley expresses a similar sentiment: “... we were annexed in a way. We emigrated to the Federal Republic in our entirety... against my will... the West came to me.” East German author Christ Wolf describes “the manner and the speed with which everything connected with the GDR was liquidated, considered suspect” and views herself and her fellow citizens as being “housed in a barracks under quarantine, infected with Stasi virus” (1997:241). This context makes ripe breeding ground for a siege mentality, in which self-identification is primarily reactive, and in this case at least, retrospective, a “counter-identity” as Roßteutscher describes it (2000:74). But such an unstable foundation does not bear well for long-term identity maintenance.

Why was it easier for East Germans to embrace an East German identity only after the demise of East Germany? Historically, East German national identity was primarily reactive, existing in relation to the West in general and to West Germany in particular. As Sebastian Pflugbeil commented earlier, in contrast to other Eastern bloc countries with hundreds of years of history behind them, East Germany was an artificial creation; as such, national identity had never been very strong. But another kind of GDR identity did exist “within the dominant culture ... [which] developed in at least partial opposition to the official culture” (McFalls 1995:148). It is this aspect of national identity which became revitalized after unification.

Benedict Anderson (1983) has written of the nation as an imagined community.^{viii} If one applies this definition to the case of East Germany, one can begin to decipher why the dissolution of the actual country created a new psychological space for national identity. As the parliamentarians in Yoder's study quoted above explained, the new eastern biography is based upon a sense of a shared community, and a common experience of life under the wall. It is not surprising that this could be best appreciated when in comparison to something else, in this case, with West Germany. Hogwood (2000) describes four distinctive expressions of eastern German identity which have developed over the last decade: 1) third-way socialism; 2) the 'Trotzidentität' (identity of contrariness); 3) '(N)Ostalgia' (nostalgia for the East Germany of the past), and 4) 'Ossi' pride. It is the last of these which Hogwood sees as having "the greatest potential to sustain itself as a live and lasting expression of separate easternness with a united Germany" (2000:45).

Ultimately, how enduring will eastern identity prove to be? Will Germans living in the new Länder continue to experience, if indeed they still do, a "hospital community" ethos? How long is the life of the "Stasi virus"? Will Ossi pride subside with increased integration between east and west? If much of the revived sense of eastern biography is founded on "the memory of shared experiences within the social structures of divided Germany" then will this phenomenon "be limited to the generations born in the aftermath of the Second World War" (Hogwood 2000:64-65), or will these memories survive in the form of cultural narratives, to be transmitted from one generation to the next? Writing more than a decade after unification, Hogwood warns "...it is not possible to arrive at a definitive conclusion as to whether

a distinct eastern identity will prove to be merely transitional, or will become a lasting German subculture” (2000:64).

East Germany: ‘Model case for Transformation Theory’?

The term “transformation” has been widely used to describe the ongoing changes which have occurred in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989. Indeed, while the term is pervasive in the academic discourse on these political events, the assumptions upon which it rests have been rarely analysed. Kupferberg identifies a cluster of issues associated with the transformation paradigm:

- Why did communism collapse the way it did?
- How should we craft stable democracies in societies lacking the preconditions of democracy?
- What is the possible role of the West in assisting the East European societies to create market economy conditions, assumed to be necessary for stable democracies?
- What is the relationship between democratisation and nation building?
- Which geo political strategies will be pursued by Western democracies seeking to establish new security and trade arrangements with the highly volatile societies of Eastern Europe? (Kupferberg 1999:129-130).

Implicit in the issues listed here are a set of assumptions which evade scrutiny. By definition, ‘transformation’ focuses the mind on change: *a* is transformed into *b*, and in the process *a* ceases to exist. The transformation process explores not the complex and ongoing interplay between *a* and *b*, but rather how to ensure that *b* will most closely resemble *c*. Notably, the transformation paradigm is clearly located in the standpoint of a powerful outsider.

Kupferberg (1999) has suggested that East Germany might be the “model case” for existing theories of transformation (pp.129-148). While noting East Germany’s “marginal and somewhat ambiguous role” in the literature on transformation in

Eastern Europe, Kupferberg argues that the unique historical circumstances relating to both the creation and demise of East Germany make it ideal for exploring this theoretical paradigm. It is, Kupferberg argues, a *Sonderweg*, or a particular case of transformation, a view echoed by Weiesenthal who labels it a “unique case of societal transformation” (1995:49). Offe (1996) highlights the importance of external forces in the GDR’s process of transformation: “... the GDR’s case had less to do with a transformation ‘from above’ or ‘from below’ and more with a change ‘from outside’” (p. 148). Expanding on the implications of this, Kupferberg argues:

... the objectively favourable conditions of the transition have made it subjectively more painful than in other transitional countries... By virtue of the fact that the GDR was transformed by positive legal fiat and ‘from outside’, its population was neither given the chance nor challenged to make its own, morally discerning contribution towards shaping its own future... Only in the case of Germany is the subject of transformation not identical with the object thereof (1996:152).

In the past decade, it is clear that East Germans have confronted a different set of psychological issues than their other Eastern European counterparts. Ossi pride and (N)ostalgia only make sense in the context of a united, but still divided, Germany. As challenging as East Germans may have found life since the revolutionary changes, Wiesenthal (1995) argues that in fact they have been “cushioned from the full force of the transformation to a market economy” (p. 49); “transformation by unification” (p.69) has allowed East Germans a comparatively smooth, gradual adjustment, as compared to the “shock therapy” experienced by other former communist countries. However, the important argument of the “special case” status of East Germany notwithstanding, there are significant similarities which apply across post-communist countries.

One of the most thought-provoking pieces of research challenging the assumption of the transformation paradigm has come from a group of Czech sociologists who have developed a methodology of collective autobiography, called “Ourselves’ selves,” to document the experiences of change and continuity in their lives and those with whom they live. They write:

The dominant rhetoric of discontinuity sat uncomfortably with our own experiences and observations. This is why, from the very beginning, we were fascinated most of all by everything that clearly did not transform (Konopasek with Andrews 2000:98).

These researchers argue that the very concept of transformation is built upon a “conceptual purification of a given ‘past,’ which is put in radical opposition to some equally purified ‘present.’” Rather than serving as a temporal bridge, it “disconnects and isolates” the past, present and future. By only asking about what has changed, one loses sight of all that has remained constant. A close examination of “individual people, their fates and everyday lives” revealed in their research

a far greater continuity, closeness, and temporal reversibility between the "socialist" *then* and the "transforming" *now* than we ourselves had expected. The complete break with the past, in the name of the Great Transformation in the East, is simply not taking place. ... The very concept of transformation is therefore an attempt to break away radically and totally from the past... The world has simply changed ... we belong to an essentially different time... a different world, which is, in fact, incommensurable with the past one. We are, we are told, a post-communist society (Konopasek with Andrews 2000:98-99).

One of the interesting implications of this argument is that assumptions of discontinuity with the socialist past, the Great Transforming Society, as it is ironically called, has important and disturbing personal and political consequences. If the present is wholly unconnected to the past, then prospects for western triumphalism are greatly enhanced. But from the perspective of those who helped to create and who are

living through these changes, such triumphalism is entirely inappropriate. As Bärbel Bohley comments:

... it [the events of 1989] 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 their living conditions... it was not a victory for capitalism.

The transformation model, with its bipolarities between *then* and *now*, between *communism* and *capitalism*, influences what kind of data is gathered and how it is analysed. We as western researchers in the east expect to find profoundly changed selves; when those who participate in our research do not produce the responses which we expect, we think they have not fully understood the questions we have posed, or attribute the absence of change to the (still-existing) power of living under an authoritarian regime^{ix} (Andrews 1995, 2000). Rarely, if ever, do we challenge our own assumptions. Because of the power of the transformation paradigm, it is difficult for us to imagine that the momentous events both inside and outside of the self might have been accompanied by an equally powerful and enduring sense of continuity.

However, my interviews with East Germans disclose a similar story to that depicted by the Czech sociologists: in-depth investigations into individual lives reveal a continuity of self co-existing with a profound sense of personal and political change. Ruth Reinecke comments "The GDR citizen inside myself will always accompany the movements which will take place in my life." I asked writer and activist Freya Klier – who, in 1988, had been expelled to West Germany, where she continued to live at the time of our interview – where she felt she was from. Similar to Reinecke, she responds:

From the GDR, of course... I lived there for 38 years, it was the most important time of my life... it was a very intensive time, and it is my identity... Now a new piece of identity has been added [but] the other thing is still existing... The meaning of my life does not depend on the country I live in. I did not change when I came to this part...

Klier and Reinecke minimize neither the degree nor the importance of the changes around and within themselves, but for them, identity is an additive, not substitutive, phenomenon.

There is an awkward moment in my interview with Bärbel Bohley, in which I ask the rather leading question: “Has there been a shift in the general consciousness of what it means to be East German?” Bohley clearly bristles, and ultimately responds:

I think it [my question] is too simple. Probably you now want to hear, “we have had our experiences with a dictatorship and in the Federal Republic they have had their experiences with democracy,” but this is too simple. In my view the experiences under a democracy are not so different from those made under a dictatorship. Personal courage is always difficult, to keep one's chin up, to assert oneself, well... to stay honest. These are human experiences and it's those that are important for me. I made them against the background of a dictatorship and others made them against the background of democracy. Insofar these human experiences are much more important for me than any psychological analyses. ...Well, this is too complicated for me that I could answer that in a simple way.

Bohley rejects my question as being too simplistic, built upon naïve assumptions regarding all that has changed in her world, both inside and out. For her, the most important human qualities, such as courage and honesty, are transcendent.

Concluding our interview, I ask her if there is anything which, in retrospect, she wishes she had done differently. She rejects the “othering” which she feels is implicit in my question: “I would do many things differently,” she responds, “wouldn't you?”

Answering in this way, Bohley emphasizes our common humanity and rejects the bipolarism which she feels is inherent in the questions I ask her.

Undeniably, the events of the German autumn have precipitated profound psychological change for East Germans, but importantly, this change has occurred within a relative constancy of identity. As MP Ingrid Koppe comments to me "...the past ... is not as past as we assume. We are the result of the past and the past is in us." The more micro the analysis, the less unequivocal the evidence of discontinuity. Human beings are, by our nature, forever in the process of becoming; there is an ongoing relationship between who we have been, who we are, and who we will be. As researchers of identity, our frameworks of analysis must seek to capture this complex interplay between change and consistency which characterizes our lives and the lives of others as they struggle to meet the challenges of the new societies they are helping to create.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Less than a year later, on the day of the completion of Germany unity, Brandt moderated his earlier statement: “Today I would say that what politically belongs together from this 3rd of October onward still has to grow together” (cited in Minkenberg 1993:53).

ⁱⁱ Because state socialism did not permit public political debate, the arts had a heightened role as a forum for political expression. Performing, and even attending theatre became increasingly political engagements; the shows, often embodying controversial themes, were always followed by discussions between audience and actors. Many theatre people, including Ruth Reinecke, were key in helping to organize the demonstration which took place on November 4th, 1989. Reinecke herself had to leave Alexanderplatz at midday, for her afternoon performance. She describes the atmosphere backstage that day as electric; actors, when they were not on stage, sat huddled by transistor radios following the events at the demonstration. Rarely have life and art more simultaneously mirrored one another.

ⁱⁱⁱ The one exception to this was Wolfgang Ullmann, whose attitude towards the changes was unusual in my study. He comments to me: “It’s not the end of my country, it’s the end of this state of despotism and party governorship.... It was an awakening and revival of my country. (Q: So you don’t really feel now that you lost your country?) No, absolutely not, I got it back.”

^{iv} Interestingly, since the early 1990s, the PDS has enjoyed increasing voter popularity. As noted by Kupferberg (1999) “Ideological loyalty to the previous regime... has not disappeared. In particular the professionals and young people with higher education tend to support the... PDS” (p. 145). As Wiesenthal comments that “... many east Germans... appear to be on their way to becoming what they never were before: true believers in democratic socialism” (1998:17).

^v Bohley herself detests this label, and comments “I find the phrase ‘mother of the revolution’ stupid. Only men could have invented such a phrase. They needed it as a media hype, but I find it absolutely idiotic.”

^{vi} Leaders of East Germany’s opposition were virtually uniform in their disappointment with the ultimate outcome of the events of 1989. Werner Fischer captures the feelings of many:

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

(For an elaboration of this argument see Andrews 1998.)

^{vii} After the demise of the East German state, there were strong incentives for individuals to recast their experiences under state socialism. East German sociologist Marianne Schultz ironically comments that of the East German population of 16 million, there were 16 million who claimed to have been resistance fighters, as well as 16 million who portrayed themselves as victims (Andrews 2000:184).

^{viii} For a very stimulating discussion on the relationship between imagination and national identity, see also Reicher and Hopkins (2001).

^{ix} Ilse Schiel, a staff member of the memoir section of the old Communist Party, describes her job as “refreshing the memory of the author, strengthening his ability to remember, and steering [that ability] in the direction appropriate for the topic” (cited in Epstein 1999: 187-188). This description of the guiding of memory could similarly be applied to some of the research discussed here.