

Lecture

Germany 20 years after reunification

Why the two parts that belong together won't grow together

by Klaus Schroeder

Germans are jointly whining, swearing, and cheering about a lot of things by now and people from abroad wouldn't even be able to tell whether a person is from the eastern- or western part of Germany. Nevertheless beneath this seemingly unitary surface there are underlying forces of lives spent in different political systems that are continuing to have an effect and to some extent hinder the process of reunification. People who lived most of their lives in the socialist GDR are still suffering from its mental poison, while people from former West Germany continue to yearn for the good old days. As a consequence a new beginning was blocked in many areas. It is not about rebuilding the pillars of German public and political order or social life but rather about a new calibration of their concurrence and driving forces.

A joint departure, which could have brought about the potential to create a new sense of shared identity and togetherness, failed to appear till now. Apparently long-forgotten stereotypes from times when East and West were divided (like that of the dangerous communist or the bad

capitalist) as well as the resurgence of old mentalities to some extent still shape the two separate societies that are still existent in silhouettes and keep the country from growing together into one nation. The mental condition of its people till now keeps Germany from managing the tasks and challenges it faces. Public debate is too much dominated by the past and flashbacks to supposedly more positive times. Who would have thought on November 10 of 1989 that hardly 21 years later we would still be speaking of East and West, of “second class citizens” or Jammerossi (a derogative term for a person from the eastern part of Germany who is always complaining, never satisfied and full of nostalgic reminiscences of life in the GDR) or Besserwessi (describing someone from the West who acts like an arrogant know-it-all especially belittling people from the eastern part of Germany)?

Lingering differences between East and West, which originate from the two opposing political systems, reveal themselves in voting behaviour, political commitment and voluntary work as well as in the attitude towards the state, economy, and society. In these fields few has been growing together in the past twenty years. Though attitudes have changed one way or another since 1990 and sometimes have even grown closer, the gap in the minds and political opinions still remains.

More than their fellow citizens in the western part of Germany, people in the East often share the same motivations when it comes to the elections and also have similar expectations concerning the party they vote for. Their set of values however tends to be still very much influenced by the “real life” socialism of the past. People from eastern Germany mostly have more in common with their countrymen from the East even though they vote differently, than with people from the western part of Germany, who vote for the same political party. Besides, local branches of the major political parties in the East in many cases have the same agendas with topics specific to the East and the differences in their programs are harder to distinguish than in their counterparts in the West, where election campaigns are led in a more polarized manner.

One legacy of a socialization that took place predominantly in the GDR is that east German politicians still just love “short cut” procedures. This does not help to change the fact that many people from eastern Germany have little confidence in the competence of local governments. At the same time, as it was very common in the GDR to send in letters of complaint, today people confront the state and governments with high expectations on what they feel is just and should be done for them. In many regions and districts the willingness for political engagement is weak and there are oftentimes more open jobs in local governments than there are people who run as candidates.

As opposed to the West, where people traditionally stick to one political party and the programs for which they stand, election campaigns in the East are mostly designed around a person. Like in the United States top candidates play a much more dominant role. The West is likely to approximate the East in that matter to the extent that the big parties differ less and less programatically.

The lingering mental rift

People from eastern Germany had to orient themselves almost overnight in a new order of society that was very much different from the one they were accustomed to. The process of adjustment which started almost immediately could not proceed without breaches and friction losses. In addition to that there was no time at all to reflect on their experiences in the GDR and draw their own conclusions. Instead the past was repressed in order to concentrate on the current challenges of everyday life that was so tremendously different in comparison to the life they had known.

Many former citizens of the GDR had not had the chance to learn the values and norms that were necessary after reunification. There was a shortage of independent thinking, self-confidence, an adequate handling of freedom, and responsibility for the individual as well as the community. It is no wonder that these dimensions of a civil society were not more

than a delicate plant. Of course this is neither valid for all citizens nor can the individual be blamed for it. These are moreover the late consequences of a totalitarian socialistic regime that failed.

For the population of the former GDR life immensely changed when the process of reunification took its course. At first people lost the stability of their daily routines but they were also relieved from the dictatorial framework of their lives. What they gained were freedom and democracy but it was also expected from them that they would take over more responsibility for their lives. Change was easily implemented in institutions but proceeded slower in the minds of people. The gravity of human attitudes and patterns of behavior as well as the accelerating dynamics of globalization in the aftermath of the regime change can be counted as factors influencing the mental condition of people who had to find their way into a new life. It is important to consider these preconditions in order to understand why people in the East and West are still not able to bridge some mental gaps. In addition to that the fallback to old patterns of behavior like subordination, accommodation, and demureness was giving back a certain amount of feigned stability to their lives while any critique of the socialist regime they were forced to live under is often mistaken as personal critique. If the political system, the dictatorship, the rule of injustice are denounced, people feel personally offended as if they were accused of being responsible for what

happened in the former GDR. Enduring differences of values, attitudes, and mentalities in part can be explained with the different social structure of the two parts of Germany. Due to the proletarian spirit of the past a majority of people from eastern Germany are still choosing blue-collar jobs and accordingly would label themselves working class while western Germany counts more members of the middle and upper class. As a consequence many differences are not uniquely east-west specific but rather frictions between different social classes.

Since the beginning of the nineties attitudes and values are starting to change as more and more west German institutions are established in eastern Germany and as people experience the new political and social order. In the first years after reunification they were ostensibly approaching west German patterns only to distance themselves again after a while. There is no such thing as a linear process of assimilation. A different upbringing and experience of socialization are still overlying the constitution of a new society's values. This is sometimes even true for the generation that was already born in the new society. The process of reunification and the encounters with people from the eastern part of the country also influenced the west German population. Some values of the East were adopted but in many areas the distance remains or has even increased. The simultaneousness of assimilation and drifting apart can

be witnessed best in the divided perspective on the political and economic order.

In the past hedonistic values have mostly been associated with the West. Since their significance is rising in the East, the mental gap between the two societies has become smaller. Meanwhile typically “eastern” secondary virtues like punctuality, discipline, reliability, diligence, and a sense of order are gaining ground in the younger generations of the West. With hindsight it seems ridiculous to expect a society’s values to change so easily in only a couple of years in eastern Germany, considering that western Germany had more than three decades to internalize and live up to the values of a democratic society. The establishment of west German institutions in eastern Germany (which are perceived as alien by a large percentage of the eastern population by the way) is not enough to a guarantee mental assimilation.

The greater the perceived difference is among east and west Germans the more equal they are perceived abroad. The common “typically German” character traits like the inclination to perfectionism, finicky technical jobs, the insistence on the Absolute as well as the change from one extreme to the other are recognized as continuities more often than the actual diversity and rifts. A majority of Germans shares a strong leaning toward tangible assets. This is even more true for the East than

for the West, as there people feel the need to catch up after years of destitution.

Perspectives for the youth

For most East German kids and adolescents living conditions improved tremendously after the Fall of the Wall. Assuming they receive proper education and mentoring, they have the chance to develop their individuality and also have a better perspective for the future. On the quantitative level east German students even receive better care than their fellows in the West. The teacher-to -student-relation is better than the national average in all east German States. In (west German) Hesse for example there are 18,5 students to one teacher, in (east German) Thuringia only 13,2.

Other than in the centralist educational system of the GDR, where the number of A-level students as well as students in universities was limited, in reunited Germany all students with good grades can do their A-levels and attend university after graduating. A lot of students in eastern Germany go ahead and take their chance. The number of highschool graduates who made their A-levels tripped in the last 20 years. Since the turn of the millennium the percentage of students who take A-levels in the East is considerably higher than the one in West Germany.

Young people in East and West do not have different expectations of life and the future anymore. Nearly all want a family, a fulfilling job, children, prosperity and so on. Even given the fact that at the moment schools are not able to compensate the familial disadvantages of children of lower educated parents completely, there is still the opportunity to climb the social ladder with the help of a good education.

The possibilities improve dramatically for east German students who graduate from schools of higher education. They can enter the profession they like or go to university, move to the West or abroad and have nearly the same chances as young people from the West. Adolescents who graduate with bad grades or not at all on the contrary are having trouble finding a vocational training or a job. Those who are willing to relocate go to prosperous regions in the West while those who stick to their home communities often start their adult lives entering the vicious circle of welfare.

Approximation versus distance

Positive changes in health care, nutrition and overall mental condition as well as – to a minor degree – the decreasing suicide rate all add up to a spectacular extension of the average life-expectancy considering the relatively short amount of time. In the immediate aftermath of reunification the East entered a phase of escalating assimilation. The

average life-expectancy rose by more than four years in the first decade only. In the following years this trend continued in both parts of the country. Meanwhile women in the East have drawn level with west German women and their men are only one year behind west German men. Since 1990 the average life-expectancy of east German women has risen about 5,7 years and that of east German men even about 6,6 years. Older generations also benefit from the improvement of living conditions. The life-expectancy of people who are sixty years old for example has also been rising to almost the same level as their west German brothers and sisters.

This abrupt rise which is unprecedented in recent history undermines the thesis of a nearly complete adjustment of living conditions across all social classes as far as tangible assets are concerned. The differences that are remaining have nothing to do with either life-expectancy or living conditions. It is more than was hoped for and at the same time clearly illustrates the negative influence the GDR-regime had on its people.

Contrary to the supposition that was uttered in the immediate aftermath of the Fall of the Wall, that suicide rates were likely to increase after the collapse of the socialist system because leading government officials would see their life's work destroyed and commit suicide, the opposite

happened: suicide rates in the East dropped to a level comparable to the West.

Nevertheless many Germans in East and West still remain strangers twenty years after reunification and mostly care for their own personal interests. Although west Germans are bearing most of the high costs of reunification and had to put up with losses of wealth in the past twenty years, they seldom criticize east Germans or reunification. In the East critics of reunification from the beginning had the PDS (the Party of Democratic Socialism) as a mouthpiece but in the West there was no platform to voice dissatisfaction, at least in the political realm. The majority does not care about reunification (or east Germans) and well-nigh fatalistically accepts its consequences. Especially in economically underdeveloped regions in the West there surely can be found a certain amount of subliminal lack of understanding for some of east Germany's frustration with the current circumstances. The fact that billions of Euros in financial aid for the East are apparently being taken for granted is met with a shake of the head in the West.

Many east Germans are very touchy when people from the West dare to criticize them. Regardless whether the criticism is justified or not, they feel misunderstood, defamed, and in any case personally offended. Reports of west Germans who moved to the East and were bothered by

the east German's alleged unrefined manners, their subsidy mentality and ungratefulness were met with popular outrage. As public criticism was not possible in the GDR, recent debates about reunification and its consequences still mirror the inability to constructively deal with criticism.

There are numerous reasons for the discomfort with reunification and the discrepancy of the actual living conditions and public opinion. The most important one being the common perception that reunification was a transformation process which was imposed from the outside.

The transfer of the west German social order upon the east German federal states inevitably brought about an initial dominance of west Germans in nearly all areas. For east Germans not only the working and living conditions changed but also the cultural mechanisms of social interaction as well as the role of the individual in society and its relation to the state. The learned patterns of behavior to a certain degree had become obsolete. Conditions and rules changed even effecting every day life. The revolutionary overthrow and the dynamic process of adjustment destroyed old milieus and structures of social life while at the same time creating new ones. People were surprised by the breathtaking speed of external transformation. Many responded with insecurity, defense, and defiance, others with activity and relief.

For most west Germans lives very little changed. The high costs necessary to overcome the division is the only thing that constantly reminds them of reunification because this huge subsidization means financial losses, as they are paying a certain percentage of their wages as "solidarity tax". West Germans expect east Germans to assimilate to their customs and practices in return but are not willing to adopt certain lifestyles of their countrymen. In their opinion reunification affected only the people in east Germany.

Almost all east Germans had a wrong idea of the old Federal Republic of Germany. Astonishingly this image is still continuing to have an effect. They underestimate the social, political and cultural complexity as well as the regionally uneven split levels of prosperity. In addition to that they partly misconceive west Germans' lifestyles and habits which are very much influenced by western European and American ideals by now. Even younger people from eastern Germany maintain prejudices which are conveyed to them in their families and personal surroundings.

Adding to the general differences due to the political system was the fact that the society of the GDR in many aspects was more than two decades behind west German society. East German society was, and in part still is, more proletarian and rural.

At the beginning of the nineties some east German manners were reminiscent of west German manners in the sixties. Since west Germans considered the GDR in many respects a “pre-1968-society”, meaning that the changes of society’s values which happened in the West during that era did not occur in the East, they thought of their countrymen from the East as petty bourgeois, while in turn they were considered cocky and self-righteous by people from the East. The mutual prejudices consolidated rather than dissolved during the process of reunification. Especially people from the East are still suspicious of west Germans. As opposed to many west Germans, they have a fully positive self-perception. Within a few years after reunification a new east German identity took shape which had not existed before. It can be described as some kind of dissociative identity, which in many cases helps to compensate a lack of self-confidence.

Many west Germans think of themselves as winners of history and of east Germans accordingly as losers. They credit themselves with the superiority of the western system and deem their personal dedication and performance responsible. The failure to appreciate what east Germans accomplished in life is transferred into the process of reunification, as the ongoing economic problems are explained with the east Germans’ insufficient work motivation. Against this background the familiar image of the “rich guy from the West” looking compassionately

down on his “poor relative” from the East is coming up again. Only this time he is annoyed that taking care of the family has gotten so expensive.

The want of appreciation enforces a trend in eastern Germany to either overconform or to not conform at all. While some are acting the way they imagine the typical west German – superficial, materialistic, ruthless – others ignore the new cultural codes and pretend the GDR would still persist. Cultural differences and diverging political opinions are more unconciliatory in the East than in the West, where disparities do not attract attention in the pluralistic diversity.

The new Germany

Germany did not only change to a larger extent than most people would suspect, only because of the reunification process in the last twenty years, but also because of the dynamics of a globalized world. The consequences can be witnessed in politics as well as in every day life. Reunited Germany has not become more western but rather more eastbound, rather leftist than right-leaning, rather social democrat than liberal conservative, rather focused on the state than on the markets. In fact there still exist certain differences between old and new German citizens and their respective attitudes, values and political opinions. However, the process of transformation for a long time is not headed

unilaterally into western direction anymore, but also in the opposite direction. People who were socialized in the GDR, help shaping the new Germany: The legacy of the GDR cannot be ignored.

The grand coalition, formed after the elections for the Bundestag in 2005, which was not politically desirable but arithmetically enforced, as well as the policy of the present liberal conservative coalition (up to now) illustrate the outlined development. Chancellor Angela Merkel symbolically stands for the modified republic and even personifies the “Berlin Republic” which solely reacts and pursues a “velvet glove” policy. In the last years the CDU silently adopted many ideas of the social democrats especially in the field of social, family, and education policy. The only real reform since reunification - the so-called Hartz laws - the Republic owes to her predecessor, the Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder, whose party colleagues now distance themselves from it. In the meantime German politics are affected by the consequences of the global financial crisis.

Of course Berlin is not Bonn but it surely is not Weimar either. The new Germany is not at risk right now, but still faces practical tests which make the slogan: “Keep it up!” not advisable for politics and society. Beyond its persistent institutions a lot of issues have gained momentum in the enlarged German Republic, some of which could harm the social

and political stability. Looking on the bright side, reunited Germany has become an ordinary society, gotten rid of its special conditions and is now fighting the same problems as other countries. Negatively speaking change brought about Germany's challenge for the future: is the acceptance of the liberal democratic and pluralistic order, which developed during times of prosperity, more at risk than in countries with a long and unbroken democratic tradition? If you look at it objectively, what Germany lacks most is a consensus about basic values and beliefs, a sense of unity and guidelines for the future. We still don't know exactly who we are and what we want. This is the actual shortcoming.

As the ongoing differences between East and West show, money can do a lot but not everything. Financial solidarity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the process of merging. Germans still don't have a common identity. At the same time they can be proud of what has been accomplished in East and West since reunification. After all Germany achieved what no one had deemed possible: peaceful reunification without any airs and graces of a super power.

The current rifts between East and West can only be overcome if different experiences and attitudes are tolerated, assuming they don't shake the foundations of a democratic society. Mutual understanding calls for the willingness to understand the other and conjointly stand up

for the continuance of a liberal and democratic system and society.
Twenty years after reunification in many places there is still a shortage of
both. Grow together can only what wants to belong together!

Literatur:

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