EASTERN GERMANY 20 YEARS AFTER
Past, Present and Future?

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*C*ologne has the Cathedral and we have the Karl Marx Monument, ("Köln hat den Dom, wir den Karl-Marx-Kopf") said a 19-year inhabitant of Chemnitz, a medium-sized city in Saxony that had been renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt during the socialist era, in response to a journalist's inquiry (*Freie Presse* on May 15, 2007). In a public debate which lasted for several months in 2007, he was among a majority of Chemnitz inhabitants who opposed the idea of transporting the thirteen-meter high bronze monument to an art exhibition in Münster, Western Germany. Although Karl Marx had never visited Chemnitz, his monument - constructed in 1971 by a Soviet sculptor, Lew Kerbel - has become a major feature of the city centre which was almost completely destroyed during the Second World War. Over time, it has become more than just an architectural detail in the urban landscape; for many inhabitants it constitutes a part of their identity.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 put an end to over 25 years of separation between East and West Germany, eventually leading to the unification of both German states on October 3rd, 1990. East Germany has literally become a foreign country belonging to the past, but it is by no means a forgotten country. Now, 20 years after the historical event of the *Wende*, the past seems actually to be playing an increasingly prominent role. Sentiments such as those expressed by the young inhabitant of Chemnitz, who himself has no first-hand experience of East German socialism, can easily be interpreted in terms of *Ostalgie*. However, *Ostalgie* is but one side of the story, and it is necessary to examine the broader contexts and developments in order to get an accurate image of Eastern Germany today. This also applies to other stereotypes that are frequently evoked in connection with Eastern Germany: not only the longing for an idealised GDR-past, but also

depopulation, high unemployment rates, xenophobia, secularism and a-religiosity. The former German Democratic Republic presents a far more multi-dimensional picture than the one usually depicted in mass media and by quantitatively oriented studies.

1.   *Ostalgie* and beyond

The feeling of nostalgia is not a uniquely East German phenomenon; it has been observed in all postsocialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Svašek 2006). A play on words has led to the concept of *Ostalgie* in the case of Eastern Germany: nostalgia about the East (Ost). The phenomenon has been widely debated in intellectual, scientific, political and media discourse. According to Neller (2006) it has become a cult word actually used more in the West than in the East. It certainly refers to the feeling of disorientation caused by a "loss of identity" (Svašek 2006). *Ostalgie* is, however, less about identification with the former GDR state but "an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory." (Berdahl 1999a: 203). While such broader definitions also include values and knowledge, most authors interested in *Ostalgie* mainly point to the consumerist aspect: the "desire to re-experience oneself as a GDR citizen through the consumption of GDR products, and by seeing television programmes which strongly idealise life under communism" (Svašek 2006: 12). While locals initially rejected everything East German immediately after unification, embracing Western products, they soon experienced disappointment and returned to the familiar.

Disenchantment with market economics ensued when it turned out that people started losing their jobs, and the atmosphere in companies changed (Müller 2007). The consumption of Western products was seen as a betrayal (Berdahl 1999a; Veenis 1999). The appearance of shops selling GDR products points, however, not only to the existence of "ostalgic" sentiments among the local population, but also demonstrates the economic viability of such goods, which attract Western tourists with a higher purchasing power. One notable example are the Trabi-tours through Berlin, organised specifically for tourists (this idea has been copied in other post socialist cities, for example in Kraków, Poland). It is ironic that the resistance against Western consumerism and consumer products has resulted in the commercialisation of Eastern German-ness. Simultaneously, commercialisation and folklorisation also create room for serious debate about GDR-history. In this regard, Rethman (2009) has rightly pointed out that in addition to reflecting trauma and resistance, *Ostalgie* –at least in its commercialised form- may be understood as a form of self-irony.

The wave of Ostalgia reached a height in the late nineties and in the early years of the new millennium. This sentimentality was well illustrated in the popular film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), in which a son undertakes every effort to keep the GDR alive for the sake of his mother, who awakes from a coma after the *Wende*. However, the film says more about the time when it was produced than about the end of the GDR. In this sense, as Berdahl rightly points out "nostalgia is about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past" (1999a: 2002). When the film first appeared, the wave of *Ostalgie* was already in decline, although nostalgic stories can still be easily found.

Certainly, there is a lot to be nostalgic about, even 20 years after the *Wende*. Two pressing developments in contemporary Eastern Germany are depopulation and unemployment. In the GDR, the population was already shrinking steadily, in contrast to the Federal Republic of Germany. This trend has exacerbated throughout the nineties, resulting in a 'brain drain' of young, educated people. According to Borneman (2000), over one million former East Germans moved to West Germany shortly after the reunification. It has left many regions facing the consequences of depopulation: an aging population, high vacancy rates, abandoned industrial parks as well as social and cultural facilities, deterioration of public services and private commerce, empty houses, and a gender imbalance, as women are more prone to leave than men. The latter development has resulted in some interesting press coverage about mayors who offer bonuses for women when they settle in a particular town or village. Furthermore, Eastern Germany continues to face the consequences of mass unemployment, with unemployment rates that are, on average, double the rate of those for the Western part of Germany. However, the differences between Eastern German regions merit attention. The federal states of Thuringia and Saxony compare favourably to the northern and eastern parts (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg). In certain regions (e.g. Thuringia) unemployment rates are actually even lower than in some Western parts of Germany (e.g. Bremen).

Furthermore, the general tendency towards depopulation should be contextualised. Migration in the opposite direction also occurs. Unfortunately, the migration from West to East does not compensate for the losses. West to East migrants are not only fewer in number, they are also concentrated in the most successful parts of Eastern Germany - in particular Leipzig and Dresden. Both cities are actually growing, and attract people from both West and East Germany. Another interesting exception is Görlitz, a town situated in the far East of Germany. It not only presents itself as a "bridge town" between Germany and Poland – indeed there is a bridge uniting Görlitz with its Polish counterpart,

Zgorzelec – but also through successful and targeted advertising which has attracted a steadily growing number of West German pensioners. The emptiness left by migration has also given space for alternative, ecological, economic, or cultural projects, but their meaning and significance have to be considered individually within their local context.

2.   LOCAL LENSES, LOCAL STRUGGLES

Ostalgie, then, is perhaps not the best lens to look at developments in Eastern Germany; not only because of the multiple meanings and usages attached to the concept, but also due to the importance of local contexts. In Saxony, for example, local patriotism has developed in opposition to a general East German identity. Among the former East German provinces, Saxony has the strongest industrial history, which is instrumental in shaping and cultivating a local identity. In 2003, a Museum of Industry opened its doors in Chemnitz, and since this date, numerous popular books have appeared with titles such as "Saxon inventions since 1650". The emphasis on local identities seems to constitute a counterweight to East German *Ostalgie*, both in place (regional) and in time (referring to the pre-socialist period).

Particularly interesting are the on-going changes in public spaces, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. After the fall of the Wall, East German cityscapes have changed tremendously, a process which is ongoing today. Architectural changes show the struggles over what is thought to be worth remembering. These changes are particularly visible in Dresden (Dyke 2001). Having been largely destroyed during the Second World War, a significant part of the city-centre until recently consisted of socialist architecture. One of the most significant losses during the war was the destruction of the *Frauenkirche*, the reconstruction of which was made possible following the reunification. An exact copy of the original *Frauenkirche* was finished in 2005, while the square surrounding it is regaining its pre-war splendour through the erection of new facades. Socialist architecture on the other hand is being torn down at a rapid pace: in 2007 the former warehouse on the *Prager Strasse* had to make room for new architecture and the *Haus der Gastronomie* was demolished. After years of discussion, the disassembly of the *Palast der Republik* in Berlin was completed towards the end of 2008 to make way for the highly contested rebuilding of a copy of the castle that used to stand there from the 16th century to the end of WWII. Such urban restructuring evokes a lot of protest, in which nostalgia is mingled with local patriotism.

Struggles about the restructuring of local space are rarely won by locals. This can be attributed to the fact that the social milieus that constituted the engine of the civil protest slowly fragmented after unification. The common enemy having disappeared, people followed differentiated private or political interests (cf. Vester et al. 1995). As a result, their influence on public life is now mediated by different associations or organisations. The case of the district of Prenzlauerberg (East Berlin) provides a good example. Following the end of WWI, the dwellers of this district were poor workers, their houses badly heated. In order to help these people, the socially committed husband of Käthe Kollwitz, a medical doctor, decided to settle in the area. The couple was strongly committed to issues of pacifism and social equality. During the National Socialist period, Käthe Kollwitz expressed very critical positions, leading to her works being banned.

The square and the street named after Käthe Kollwitz served as a gathering point for activists and squatters towards the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s. It is therefore apparent that the area around the *Kollwitzplatz* is heavily loaded with memories from the GDR period. However, since reunification, the area has been undergoing a process of gentrification linked to the reconstruction works (Holm 2006). The new investors aim to attract young, wealthy families who have no emotional attachment to the place, and they are very successful in doing so. A flagrant example illustrating the absence of any effort to reconnect to the GDR past is a new housing complex costing about 30 million Euros. The Swiss architect who is in charge of the construction advertises the creation of a "Palais KolleBelle". The distortion of Kollwitz's name in order to give it a French touch is experienced as a harsh negation of local identity. The architect and the investors argue that they want to "bring some of Paris into Berlin". Local collective and individual protests (demonstrations and graffiti) have until now only met with police hostility, and the apartments were sold even before construction work started.

It seems that a weak local identity contributes to providing a breeding ground for the extreme right. Another area in the eastern part of Berlin, the "Weitlingkiez" in Lichtenberg, illustrates this very well. At the railway station of Lichtenberg, only a couple of minutes away from Alexanderplatz, passengers try to avoid each other's gaze. After arriving, travellers usually hurry outside into the streets. South of the station a lengthy street, the Weitlingstrasse, leads to shops and restaurants, many of which are Vietnamese and Turkish. While to the North huge prefabricated houses and the former State security buildings impress any visitor, the houses South of the railway station were all built before World War II and are no higher than five floors. Political power is in the hands of the left-wing party, which makes an effort to keep the socialist memory alive by naming streets and squares in the area after local socialist victims of the Nazi period. Since the 1990s, the area has been undergoing

massive restoration as part of a restructuring plan led by the public authorities: the houses, originally built for manual workers, are outdated and the area runs the risk of social degradation with its numerous empty and cheap houses. Overall, the population here can be characterised as socially disadvantaged: the unemployment rates are high. The population consists largely of native East Germans. There are no cultural attractions that would interest visitors from other parts of town. Once one of the commercially liveliest places in East Berlin, it is now presented in the media as a no-go area for foreigners (for example during the World cup of 2006). A Protestant pastor from West Berlin who is involved in rehabilitation programs for ex-offenders in the town guessed those offered "in that area are basically for skinheads". Not surprisingly, he himself had never been there. When the area is the object of mass media discourse, it is usually for one of two reasons: either when violent right-wing activities are involved or when it comes to issues linked to the former State Security apparatus, since some of the leading politicians of the area were members of the socialist unity party (SED). In recent years political authorities of the area have started to offer financial support for local initiatives to fight violence and racism and to favour cultural pluralism. However, locals on the other hand are clearly frustrated to see their area constantly reduced to the image of a right-wing "no-go" area. Their response is to downplay the extent of right-wing activities, while political authorities generously finance local programs to promote anti-racism.

In other cases, the presence of the extreme right has led to civil initiatives. In 1991, the small Saxony town of Hoyerswerda gained nationwide infamy due to racist assaults. The media interpreted the events as being a dark omen for the future of the East, defining the image of the city throughout the country. These racist assaults have served as an impetus for civil initiatives, either within contexts of local politics and cultural work, or in religious contexts in Hoyerswerda. The prominent presence of religious figures in the public sphere raises the question of religious developments in the former GDR, today renowned for being the most atheist region of Europe.

3.   RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

"East Germany is atheist as Bavaria is Catholic" *([in]Ostdeutschland ist atheistisch wie in Bayern katholisch*) said a Protestant pastor from *Heckertgebiet* in Chemnitz, a famous district of blocks of flats built during the socialist period, during a lecture on religion in October 2006. His statement fits another stereotype of Eastern Germany. Along with the Czech Republic, Eastern Germany is considered as a highly "de-Christianized" country (Müller 2008: 68) or even "the most secularized region in the world" (Schmidt & Wohlrab-Sahr 2003: 86). As Müller puts it "not

only do Czechs and East Germans not believe in God anymore; the majority, they would not call themselves a religious person." (2008: 68). According to Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr, East Germans tend to be born into 'nonmembership'" (2003: 91) Moreover, as it was during socialist times when practicing one's religion often led to discrimination in educational or career opportunities, nowadays "the decision for church membership [is] an act of nonconformity" (Schmidt & Wohlrab-Sahr 2003: 90).

During socialism, religious practices were to disappear from the public and forced into the private sphere, which caused the religious to become political. While writing about a strong Catholic tradition in Kella, a village in the Eichsfeld region in which inhabitants refused to join the Communist Party on religious grounds, Berdahl argues that "in Kella, religious practices expressed and affirmed regional identities as well as opposition to the socialist regime. Having one's child baptized, being married in the church, and sending a child to first communion instead of *Jugendweihe* were often overtly political acts." (1999b: 88). That religion gained political dimensions is also particularly clear in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, who had been severely persecuted in the GDR. These individual "political acts" performed in daily life against the oppressive system have helped to cultivate religious identity in the GDR, and have been a source of genuine pride after the *Wende*. At the same time, however, their significance has been either overlooked or ignored in the public discourse of the time.

Due to the Church-state opposition, in the 1980s churches became a shelter for different anti-state activists from different backgrounds. As Berdahl rightly observes, as such it "provided an arena for political opposition; it was not an agent of it" (Berdahl 1999b: 78). It nevertheless gave the churches a position of trust during socialism which they lost after reunification (Berdahl 1999b; Pollack 2000). The almost complete transfer of the West German legal model of church-state relationship to Eastern Germany gave established churches numerous privileges and advantages (e.g. religious education at school, church tax collected by the state) and restored religion as a public and political issue. Churches were not seen as "alternative institutions" and representative of the society anymore but as part of the victorious political system (Pollack 2000: 44).

The general religious revival that was expected after unification did not happen (Müller 2008). In the year of the establishment of the GDR state (1949), church membership was over 90%: 81% belonged to the Protestant and 11% to Catholic Church. After forty years of socialist rule, however, church membership rates decreased to approximately 30%: about 25% and about 4% belonged to the Protestant and Catholic Church respectively (Pollack 2000: 19). In comparison, in

West Germany there were about 96% and over 85% church members in 1950 and 1990 respectively (Pollack 2000: 19). The same happened –with a few exceptions- to minority religions whose members constituted 2% of the population in 1990 (Schmidt & Wohlrab-Sahr 2003).

Whereas the overall trend is clear, caution is in place. Surprisingly, despite the generally successful anti-religious policy of the communist state, religion survived in some regions, for instance, the Eichsfeld or the Oberlausitz region, often as a feature of regional, traditional or ethnic identity. The example of Hoyerswerda illustrates this very well. The city – founded in the 1950s- was an atheist project, meant to embody the ideal city of the socialist worker and to exist without any religion. However, Hoyerswerda is located in a region with a large Sorb population, a minority whose ethnic identity until today is partly rooted in religion (Catholic as well as Protestant). Since Hoyerswerda's founding, there has been a steady circulation of religiously active individuals, families and priests between the newly built city and the neighbouring Catholic parish with a strong Sorb presence. Furthermore, the workers for the new industrial complex came largely from a predominantly Catholic region (currently Polish territory). They organized themselves in "family circles" that in turn provided the basis for the foundation of new offshoots of the Catholic parish, and that co-defined local public life.

In effect, church members, like in certain other parts of Eastern Germany, formed a social milieu that was characterized by a high level of information, and an ability to articulate its demands, and they developed spaces where they could contribute to the shaping of public life. This put them at an advantage after the fall of socialism: the people who had been socialized in these milieus during socialist times are now important figures in Hoyerswerda, in politics, cultural work and social service organizations. The racist assaults in 1991 led them to found a Catholic children's home and a Christian-oriented grammar school, which is also attended by many children with an atheist background.

In Chemnitz on the other hand, religious communities meet four times a year in order to discuss the most important problems they are facing, for example the Jewish-Islam dialogue. This ecumenical coexistence of different religious communities is certainly a peculiar feature of Eastern Germany and dates from before the *Wende*. Ecumenical church services are held several times a year; there are also joint church services for Catholic and Protestant students who meet on a regular basis at meetings organized by Catholic (KSG) or Protestant Student Associations (ESG). Although young Christians constitute a relatively small group from a statistical point of view, they nonetheless participate more actively in church services and other initiatives than elder church members in Eastern

Germany and their peers in Western Germany (Pollack 2000; Schmidt & Wohlrab-Sahr 2003).

4.   CONCLUSION

It is necessary to go beyond stereotypes about Eastern Germany when trying to understand current developments. Whilst "shrinking cities" might have been a good catchphrase for advertising exhibitions or films, it does not adequately describe all urban developments in Eastern Germany. There is no doubt that unemployment rates are high in Eastern Germany, but there are important local differences both in the East and the West that blur the distinction. The same is true for right-wing extremism, which captures media attention whilst obfuscating the actual (political but also economic and cultural) struggles in which locals are involved on a daily basis. Although an overall trend towards an increasing secularisation is apparent, a lot of religious activity persists and is socially significant. The time-lapse of twenty years since unification as well as the differences between regions should warn the observer of Eastern Germany not to simply reify or *essentialise* the East in opposition to the West. The part of East German identity informed by the socialist past does not necessarily imply a desire to return to that past. The Karl Marx Monument that stands brooding among the blocks of flats will not observe Mayday parades anymore, but will remain important as local signifier, and - by attracting tourists - it acquires new meanings and fulfils a new role in contemporary Eastern Germany. In this sense, the past is not a foreign country, but has a future.

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