

Beiträge aus Forschung und Lehre

My Two Germanies John Milfull (Sydney)

Unfashionable as the word "assimilation" is these days, I am convinced that one can never really understand another society without making a determined effort to assimilate. Arthur Schnitzler even claimed that Jewish Austrians understood their hosts "better than they understood themselves", and with good reason: "This gift of understanding was forced to develop over a long period of time ... according to the laws of survival, if you like... in order to make one's way among strangers, or, as I said before, in enemy territory, to be armed against all dangers and tricks that await one, one must get to know one's enemies as well as possible, their virtues and their weaknesses...".

My situation as an Australian outsider who arrived in West Germany in 1962, speaking a variety of university German even more exotic than *Mauscheln*, was considerably less dramatic. Even on a bad day on the Munich trams, there was no real prospect of a pogrom, and my Berlin *Hausmeister* in 1969 was so relieved to find I was a white Australian that he almost dissolved in smiles. And if there were dangers and tricks that awaited me in this unfamiliar terrain, I was determined to overcome them, and not to return to Australia with all the prejudices, conscious and unconscious, I had brought with me. In time, I have come to realise that many of the pitfalls one encounters are in any case "foreigner-specific": each country reserves its most unlovely set of bureaucratic procedures for dealing with its "guests". And I know, of course, that there is a world of difference between spending a study leave, with all its sense of release and freedom, in a country of one's choice, and struggling to integrate and survive as a migrant who has often no choice at all.

Of course, there was a qualitative leap in the degree of "otherness" I experienced on my visits to the GDR, but the initial impression of a bleak and dilapidated nowhere was rapidly more than compensated by the warmth and genuine interest which I encountered, both with academic contacts and "ordinary people", an underlying humanity close beneath the missing veneer. I don't want to romanticise this: sympathetic visitors from the West who could speak some sort of German were rare enough, and helped to alleviate the sense of separation and isolation felt so deeply by most GDR citizens - separation not so much from their West German "brothers and sisters", but from the "real world", where things actually happened. I was not so convinced myself that they did in fact happen - the "period of stagnation" certainly had its Western equivalent - but this thirst for experience, even at second hand, was easy to understand.

At the end, I felt at home in both and neither of the German states, just as I came to feel both at home and not at home in Australia. In "assimilating", it was impossible

not to absorb and understand some of their attitudes towards one another, but always with the saving mixture of empathy and detachment my increasingly relativised "Australianness" brought with it. When I published my contribution on GDR literature and society in Viktor @mega~s' *History of German Literature* in 1984, the reactions from colleagues in the East and the West were oddly similar and rather envious: how much easier it was to write about such things "from outside". I even came to refer to the chapter self-deprecatingly as "GDR literature seen from the moon". But of course it wasn't. It was GDR literature seen by an empathetic outsider, who was also an empathetic outsider in the Federal Republic and, on a good day, in his own country. At the risk of offending the national feelings of the unreconstructed, I have to say that it the mean time I find this a highly desirable state of affairs, and I hope that with the development of multicultural societies and supranational states such multiple identities will become increasingly common, and not restricted to a privileged group. It seems to me the basis for a humane and dispassionate attempt to accommodate genuine difference and render it productive.

François Mauriac's witticism, "I love Germany so much I'm glad there are now two of them", defined not only the guilty secret at the root of allied policy towards a defeated Germany, but increasingly, internal German relations themselves. As a foreign visitor, you got "two Germanies for the price of one", and I have to admit that I sometimes miss the discreet charms of divorce and the competition for sympathy it produced. It was rather like being the common friend of an estranged couple, still connected by some strange kind of love-hate relationship, always wanting to talk about the other while keeping their distance, and above all, to justify, explain, and enlist sympathy for their separated condition. Willy Brandt was only stating the obvious in the formulation that the two German states could never be *Ausland* ("foreign territory") for one another; it has only really become fully apparent since 1989 to what extent each state was defined and constructed in terms of its "other", however caricatured or misunderstood, and the removal of this tension, at least on the formal political level, has left a substantial gap in cultural and political discourse. How can we (and they) manage without the "better Germans" (whichever they are/were)?

I think we have to begin from the insight that both German states and their populations defined themselves largely in terms of what they were not, rather than what they were, and that high on the list in each case was the other as image of all it was not. The shared nationality of the past was as unpleasant and uncomfortable a topic as conjugal sex for divorced couples, especially as everyone told them (with some justification) that they were no good at it, and never had been. To extend the metaphor further: remarriage was forced on the unwilling parents by a revolt of the children who had remained in the custody of *Spouse B*. They were no longer able to suppress their envy for the better living conditions of their siblings out of the loyalty such situations demand, but which seldom survives adolescence unscathed. It was not, I'm afraid, or rather relieved, an outburst of national feeling, a burning desire for Mum and Dad to get together again or even to bridge the gap with the Western siblings, but an outburst of pent-up frustration about sacrifices which no longer seemed worth it. Of the three catchwords of the French Revolution, *equality*, in a particularly pragmatic

sense, the desire for an equal share, came first; *liberty*, again in a fairly pragmatic sense, freedom of movement, second, but *fraternity* scarcely rated at all. On the West German side, which made no claim to a revolutionary heritage and in any case was not so much actor as reactor, this list was even further reduced, to a general sympathy for the desire for freedom, provided it didn't destabilise the West German *dolce vita* too much. The ungenerous suspicion voiced by that dangerous communist Oskar Lafontaine, that meeting the *Ossis'* desire for equality would end up far too expensive, was only briefly suppressed by Kohl's bland double negative, that the "blossoming landscapes" would *cost no-one nothing*. Like all double negatives, it contained its contrary: German unification has cost everyone something. If, on the one hand, it led directly to the collapse of the Soviet system and opened the way for the integration of East-Central Europe, it has also tied up for years the bulk of the resources West Germany might have devoted to the project. In retrospect, it is hard not to laugh at Thatcher's and Mitterand's paranoid fears that unification would make the Germans too strong - if the process of European integration has suffered, it is more because of their relative weakness.

It is a great deal easier to understand post-unification tensions if one accepts these starting points. The crucial question, of course, for an amateur counsellor is what both partners can bring to this unexpected and rather unequal re-marriage. I want to exploit my position as friend of the family quite shamelessly and attempt to define, from a mass of impressions over many years, the "achievements" of both GDR socialism and FRG (Rhenish) capitalism, and consider to what extent they can be preserved and blended in the years ahead.

Of course Mauriac was wrong: there were far more than two Germanies, and always have been so, except, perhaps, briefly in 1914 and during the heady years from 1933 till 43. Unsurprisingly, no one was keen to adopt either as a model for post-war Germany. There is little doubt that the two major pillars of West German success, the new Federal constitution and the concept of a "social market economy", were both adopted specifically as antidotes to an experience of unification and centralised state power no one wished to repeat, or even remember. But they proved an almost unmixed blessing. The formal recognition of the regional differences which had characterised most of German history defused and suppressed the national issue, and when it became clear that the way of acceptance back into the club of "civilised nations" lay through NATO and the EC, served as a firm foundation for the increasing transfer of "national sovereignty" to the new supra-national entities. In a major historical irony, the German deficit (late unification, lack of a clear and accepted metropolitan centre) suddenly came to be seen as a credit. This irony was repeated in 1990, when the expedient solution, disbanding the GDR and granting accession to the five resurrected East German *Länder*, simultaneously, and, I suspect, quite unintentionally, delivered the long-term therapy for the identity problem the absorption of the GDR was bound to create. It is already clear that the federal constitution has once again enabled the deflection of an awkward and scarcely resolvable issue onto a regional level where local heroes like Biedenkopf and Stolpe are able to recreate some form of identification.

Equally, anyone who has followed the development of Christian Democrat policy after the war, from the Bad Ahlen program, more socialistic than the SPD, to Erhard's final establishment of the social market economy as the other founding doctrine of the FRG, will be aware of the two poles between which this path was plotted. The first - the rejection of the centralised, dirigistic Nazi economy, based from the beginning, like Rathenau's WUMBA so much admired by Lenin, on the need for total mobilisation of resources in war; the second - the attempt to neutralise the attractions of socialism by stealing its thunder and "humanising" capitalism. Bismarck had shown the way with his "Prussian socialism", an interesting oxymoron if ever there was one.

It has to be said that it worked, provided, of course, one was German; the experience of migrant workers was less ecstatic. And, as if to refute the prognoses of prophets of doom like Karl Jaspers, the structures were finally filled by the new generation of democrats they were designed to encourage. There can be no real argument that the Federal Republic by 1989 had a strong claim to having created the highest degree of democracy and social consensus within the European Community.

What were the downsides? In many ways, they are linked to Jaspers's uncomfortable claim that West German democracy had no organic base in the population, it was achieved by default rather than design. How solid are the foundations on which the two pillars we have identified are built? Dieter Hasselbach argues convincingly that the almost total displacement of national pride onto economic success leaves the Germans unusually vulnerable to pits and troughs in the world economy; even a modest reduction in affluence threatens apocalypse, and there can be little doubt that Gerhard Schroeder is now finding out for himself to what extent the axioms of Rhenish capitalism are inscribed in the New German soul. If the German market economy is in need of a renovation, he will disturb the reality or myth of social consensus at his peril.

But in many ways, it is the other pillar that gives more cause for alarm. Since unification, there have been calls from within and without for the "normalisation" of Germany. Like Golda Meir's famous slogan, "the Jews are a people like any other", this seems to mean that the Germans should give up their abstinence from the better known boy's games of history; the first obligation of normality, it seems, is to join in a war. I have never been able to understand how any people, the Jews or the Germans, could set up normality as a goal; it is not a goal, but an excuse. If much of the abstinence that served West Germany so well, politically, socially and economically, was achieved by default, it needs to be reconstructed consciously, as a matter of post-national conviction.

I have left my East Germans till last; they are used to it. In the debates of 1990, they were at a considerable disadvantage. There was a strong conviction, which reached well beyond the original movement for democratic reform, that the "achievements of socialism" or, more cautiously, the achievements of East Germans under socialism, should somehow be incorporated into a new constitution, to be hammered out at the Convention Article 146 of the Basic Law clearly foresaw. But when it came to the point, they were hard pressed to name or define these achievements. Most of the suggestions involved the incorporation of the best features of the GDR social security

system, but when it became clear that the West German dealers who held the bank and most of the cards were unwilling to include even a symbolic recognition of the right to work, just as the maintenance of employment rapidly disappeared from the *Treuhand's* priorities, the campaign collapsed. And it is hard to see how it could have succeeded, for all the devastation wrought by the application of shock therapy to the East German economy and its industrial sector. The people had voted unambiguously for the market economy, and Kohl left no doubt that he had no intention of throwing "good money at a bad system".

In retrospect, it has become increasingly clear that the "achievements of socialism", such as they were, could not be carried over into a united Germany in any formal way, because they were largely intangible and grew out of an East German sense of "anti-identity" which depended on both the regime and its hostile brother, the FRG, for existence. East Germans had every reason to be proud that they had "almost made socialism work" (against all the odds, some would say), but they were unlikely to receive any credit from those who had no vested interest whatever in making it work. Nor did the West appear much interested that, contrary to the popular Slavic myth, the SED had succeeded, on the whole, in avoiding the worst excesses of Stalinism.

The Soviet Empire was anything but a monolith, for all the realities of neo-colonial rule from Moscow. One of the more fascinating, and perhaps even useful, research projects of the future will be the study of the different forms in which "imported Stalinism" was domesticated and rendered more or less liveable. At the ends of the scale are probably Poland and the GDR; Poland, in which the attempt had to be more or less abandoned, given the massive and often anarchic resistance of the population to any form of organisation, and the GDR, in which it advanced furthest. Surprisingly, perhaps, anti-Sovietism played a much less significant role in the GDR than elsewhere, not only because of the policy of non-fraternisation adopted after the disasters of 1945/46. In the other Eastern European States, it went hand in hand with a deep bitterness over the loss of an independence only recently won and never really enjoyed, which often took an intensely nationalistic form. In the GDR, its anti-Fascist credentials were the regime's trump card. Whatever their authenticity and despite their later manifest degradation into empty ritual, they lay at the centre of socialism's undeniable appeal to the post-war generation, reinforced by the presence of an brilliant group of anti-Fascist intellectuals returning from emigration in the West to a daily and increasingly bitter struggle with the reality of Stalinism. Opposition to "socialism as it existed in [the] reality" of the GDR expressed itself, in the tradition of the Western emigrants, not in a national form, but as a critical affirmation of socialism against its deformations, with the unspoken subtext that perhaps precisely in Germany anti-Fascists might finally construct a humane society, freed from the stains of both totalitarian heritages. The GDR never produced a dissident culture on the Polish or Czech model; even its best known bad boy, Wolf Biermann, was never tired of affirming his loyalty both to the state he had chosen and to a revolutionary romanticism so far beyond the bounds of the practical as to offer no possible programme for change. The vast majority of GDR artists and intellectuals retained a

critical solidarity with socialism which contrasted oddly with the survival of earlier traditions of intellectual messianism and separatism to their East.

The broader culture which emerged from this constellation presented an image of warmth and humanity projected within, but not against, the often harsh realities of everyday life, which demonstrably had an enormous appeal to large sections of the population. I am convinced that it lay at the root of the personal relationships which for most survivors are the real object of nostalgia - *Ostalgia* if you will - and at the heart of the first GDR reform movement, before it was swamped by the dash for the D-Mark. I suspect that the final answer to that other most teasing question of unification, why the SED leadership finally let it be and abdicated, was that they too were products enough of this culture not to try and suppress what seemed, to many of them as well, the final, and unexpected, outbreak of democratic socialism - without nationalism, without violence and without hierarchy. That it vanished so rapidly, almost without trace, remains the saddest outcome of unification, but also its major challenge. The real achievement of GDR socialism only emerged in its downfall, an image unclear, but extraordinarily persuasive, of a society based on "friendliness", as Brecht would have said. I do not think it needs to be lost for ever; it could well be the real contribution the Ossis can make to the New Germany, if they overcome bitterness and decide, in their turn, to fill the empty spaces of a society badly in need of new common values and directions. The creative if hostile tensions of the Cold War years need to be transformed into a positive dialogue within a New Germany that recognises and cultivates difference, not only between Germans, and turns it into a source of innovation and creativity. My *Two Germanies* do not need to become one in the old sense, to fit some kind of pre- EU directive on the size, shape and content of regulation nations; they need to weave their own diversity into the broad fabric of *European* diversity, to complement and enrich each other.