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The New Germany (July 9, 2009)

Literary critic and journalist Ijoma Mangold reflects on the positive aspects of unification and emphasizes how much Germany has changed. He argues that the East has much to offer, makes reference to new alliances between East and West, and notes that Germany has become more culturally diverse.

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### **Be Proud of Your Prejudices**

*The richness of united Germany lay in the differences between West and East. Something new has long since emerged from them.*

When Socialism collapsed and the GDR became capitalist, it was equality – of all things – that was proclaimed the measure of reunification. The postulate was: equal living standards in East and West! Since then, politicians – in an annual act of self-flagellation – have presented figures and statistics that prove that a disgraceful gap between West and East persists. And lest one be caught on the wrong – the materialistic – foot, these numbers are immediately followed by the lament that, two decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the two parts of the country still haven't come together in terms of psychology and mentality. The wall in the mind, one always hears in a reproachful tone, simply hasn't been overcome.

And in fact it's true: even now, in the year 2009, one can travel to a foreign land without ever having to cross the border of the German state. But it's time to stop seeing this as a problem or a shortcoming and to view it instead as an incomparable gain. The unequal and the foreign, which collided after unification, are what give this historically unprecedented fusion of societies its real richness. Where else could the relativity of one's own cultural imprinting be illustrated through comparison with others who share the same native language?

Of course, there is a good psychological reason why the official political discourse was so intent on equality and ashamed of inequality. The difference between East and West was an asymmetrical one from the get-go. The one side had to stay after school, had to return to "start," and had to submit to the value system of the other side, which, in turn, could comfortably feel like the winner of history, without experiencing the pressure of having to question its own way of life.

[ . . . ]

These asymmetries still exist today, but isn't it possible that they have actually shifted in favor of the East? Or at least in favor of a completely new constellation, which can no longer be so seamlessly reduced to FRG and GDR?

The *Wessi* braggart and the *Ossi* whiner were by no means fictions devoid of reality. But the ascription of these roles was exceedingly short-lived, for the triumph of the *Wessi* braggart didn't last long. All together too self-satisfied and lazy, he was soon considered the sick man of Europe: incapable of change, status-maintaining, and inflexible; he finally had to be goaded into action by forceful threats of reform, not least from an East German chancellor. Meanwhile, the supposed *Ossi* whiner was unable to escape the pressure of transformation, and thus became – at least as the ideal type – a quick-change artist who combined two very different sets of experiences and values in his biography – a true model of flexibility. The East German as avant garde – that's what the sociologist Wolfgang Engler called it, not that far off the mark.

Of course, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern still have higher unemployment rates, and many East German regions are ageing and desolate. (Although these regions also have a tradition of structural weakness.) Still, Germany's mental geography looks very different by now. What really matters for cultural self-respect, for example, is city pride, and in this regard East German cities have long since passed their West German counterparts. From Weimar to Greifswald, from Erfurt to Schwerin, from Dresden to Potsdam: Germany's most beautiful cities are in the East.

Thus, the GDR, which was always too cash-strapped for West Germany's modernization mania, looks, in retrospect, like a salutary mummification. It preserved what western modernity, in its modernizing zeal, would not tolerate. And then the GDR fortunately fell just in time for the old architectural stock to be revived by the financial transfers of *Aufbau Ost* [the economic reconstruction of the East]. Ever since, the history-conscious, pan-German patriot prefers to travel to Stralsund rather than Pforzheim, to Görlitz rather than Stuttgart. Which is why the talk of the "new *Länder*" seems almost grotesque: compared to North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony is a model of venerable old age.

In actuality, completely new coalitions are being formed, which cut across the old opposition of East-West. These new alliances, as far as one can tell, have something to do with the aforementioned museum-like character of the GDR, namely in a very fundamental sense. Germany has gained historical depth through reunification. The remnants of the GDR often create the impression of a trip backward in time, to Germany before 1933. An anachronism is at work here, one to which the present – with its fondness for the past – is very receptive.

[ . . . ]

In short: in certain respects the new Germany is connecting happily with cultural traditions that have remained much more vibrant in the GDR than in the West.

“Generation Berlin” has long since begun spending its weekends on the trails of the old GDR bohemianism in the dachas of Brandenburg – when Botho Strauß built himself a house in the Uckermark way back in the early nineties, he, too, became part of the conservative avant garde.

Of course, this is an ambivalent movement: looking at Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, one could speak – to put it pointedly – of a re-feudalization that carries elements of a colonial land occupation. Between Müritz and Oder there are once again outdoor concerts in spruced-up manor parks, with invitation cards featuring Fontane quotes. . . Ingo Schulze, in his novel *Neue Leben* [*New Lives*], encapsulated this trend very caustically in the form of a highly dubious comic-opera aristocrat [who was] cast as “Reconstruction Helper East” in Altenburg in the year 1990. The character, like John the Baptist, spends the whole time promising the expectant Altenburgers the arrival of the hereditary prince.

But the most sensitive social seismograph is always the choice of school. Here, too, we see interesting social-chemical reactions, in which foreign elements enter into surprisingly new compounds: in Berlin, when there are no more spots with the Jesuits, the career-bourgeoisie of the West send their children to Pankow to the former eastern cadre school – just as long as there is discipline and an ethos of achievement (in return for which one tolerates the little ones being subjected to very unique history lessons . . .).

The remarkable debate about the renovation of Richard Paulick’s *Staatsoper unter den Linden* [State Opera on “Under the Linden”] in Berlin in 2008 was another clear sign of new alliances, because for the first time the PDS and the CDU were fighting under one banner in the name of Socialist classicism – which was by no means entirely comfortable for either side.

Are all of these examples merely cultural superstructure? Perhaps. But one should not underestimate its potency. For in many respects the Germany of 2009 differs more from North to South than East to West. How fortunate the land that was so powerfully shaken up!

Source: Ijoma Mangold, “Seid stolz auf eure Vorurteile” [“Be Proud of Your Prejudices”], *Die Zeit*, no. 29, July 9, 2009, p. 49.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap