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The Unification Crisis (December 31, 1992)

Munich historian Christian Meier argues that the problems facing Germany should be subsumed under the heading “unification crisis,” since the term does justice to their true dimensions. He sees the crisis as being caused by the different identities of East and West Germans, the unequal distribution of the burdens of unification, and the expectations associated with it.

Nothing Separates People More than Unification The German Crisis: Why Both Sides are so Mistrustful

Germany is currently experiencing a crisis – the unification crisis. It is still too early to tell how serious it is. Although it is playing itself out chiefly among the Germans, it is occurring in the broader context of the long-term crisis of the former Eastern Bloc and of the global system as a whole, the crisis to which unification owes itself and which, at the same time, greatly exacerbates the difficulties surrounding it. The integration of German society is already being severely tested before it has made any appreciable headway.

Crisis originally meant decision or a situation calling for a decision. Applied to a system, it refers to a state of severe disturbance or existential challenge. A basic aspect of crisis is the possibility that defensive forces will develop. Crisis does not – at least not invariably – mean catastrophe.

I believe it is a mistake that the word “crisis” is not usually applied to the unification process. This mistake contributes to the matter being taken too lightly. Military campaigns generally run into great difficulties (or are even lost) when the situation is not analyzed correctly. Evidently, the same holds true for unification processes of this magnitude.

There is a long history behind the different positions of East and West Germany. More than forty years of drifting apart, first in separate zones and states, then in a united Germany. As a result, two contradictory collective identities evolved in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Thanks to its extraordinary successes, the FRG was able to move beyond numerous uncertainties and doubts to a sense of robust self-confidence. There was a feeling of agreement

with this society. The same cannot be said of the GDR: most of its citizens wanted neither the regime, nor the system, nor their own state. But they still had to come to terms with it; they, too, needed some kind of pride. They had to suffer the gradient of the great insecurity between the two German states and the manifestations thereof, which were quite unpleasant in part.

In the West, on the one hand, the old fear of Communists, the hatred of the SED regime (in sum: the anti-Communism that was virtually constitutive for the beginnings of the Federal Republic) was still alive. On the other hand, there was sympathy with the so-called brothers and sisters [on the other side]. Then that feeling began to be contaminated. The brothers and sisters were somehow suspected of also being perpetrators (or perpetrators and victims at the same time); at least one didn't know what to make of them. And if one pushed the issue, the situation became even more complicated, because for the most part they were unwilling to profess their opposition to the regime in such simple or at least such convincing terms – and to uncomprehending Westerners, on top of it. And so people were partially familiar, partially foreign to each other.

Finally, what characterized the mutual demarcation of the two systems, and also to some extent the mutual demarcation of the two societies, was that West Germans and East Germans also ascribed to each other the unpleasant aspects of their own nation. It is difficult to be a German, especially after World War II, and it follows – presumably with a fair degree of necessity – that in cases of a division such as Germany's each side points the finger at the other before the world. To be sure, the GDR was no challenge to the FRG, but German self-hatred could project a lot onto it. And the same holds true the other way around! Here, in addition, the FRG actually was a challenge to the GDR. The facts may be hard to untangle, but it is altogether undeniable that these projections are still exerting strong effects today, namely by acting as a breeding-ground for very negative feelings, including hatred.

Every "We" and "They" that people in East and West say about each other – "We" hardly ever refers to the Germans as a whole right now – confirms that there are two separate identities. This manifests itself in great mutual suspicion. And it finds expression in myriad attributions of qualities and characteristics: the people on the one side are stubborn if they do not understand something right away, or lazy if they are having a hard time with something; the people on the other side are arrogant if they casually demand something. It is precisely because the respective characteristics of East and West Germans are still being felt so strongly that generalizations are constantly being made. As is usually the case, these generalizations are not quite correct; uncertainties arise, as do variations in judgment. The West Germans do not at all comprehend how people can voluntarily be so different from them. The East Germans, for whom so much has been broken, are having a hard time negating themselves, on top of everything else. Of course, identity – especially in East Germany – is ruptured by many old and new enmities, but for large segments it still holds.

Much about the differences and their manifold consequences is unavoidable. The West pays – the East lives from the payments. The West is even paying a great deal – but for the East it is

by no means enough. The West retains all its comfortable institutions, and all it will accept – and with great reluctance – are certain delays in their further expansion. In the East, a large part of the world that made up people's lives – a world that was indeed inadequate on the whole but familiar and more or less functional – is being dismantled.

It is also unavoidable that in the West everyone is keeping his job, whereas the reality in the East is that 50 percent have become unemployed. What is not unavoidable is that all manner of well-earned supplementary pensions in the East are gradually being eliminated, while in the West all rights remain intact. Whether property matters had to be handled the way they were, whether so many East Germans had to be pushed into uncertainty about their future housing is very much up to debate, also whether it might actually have been better to continue some institutions, for example, the youth centers of the Free German Youth, for the time being, albeit under different leadership. It is surely not completely unavoidable that Western personnel replace Eastern personnel time and again in instances where the latter are compromised or appear incompetent – though unfortunately this is often also done where this is not the case.

And it is all but absurd that among the inequalities between the Eastern and Western *Länder* there is only one single noteworthy exception, one aspect in which equality already prevails. This is the distribution of asylum-seekers relative to the size of the population – the decision behind it is surely one of the most idiotic of the entire unification process, as one certainly could have realized at the time it was made.

By now, the East Germans largely tend toward resignation; for the West Germans, the new *Länder* are primarily a disruption: financially, but also in terms of way of life, living conditions, and attitudes. And they believe that this disruption should be eliminated as quickly as possible.

One can easily understand that the two parts of the country have completely different expectations. The West Germans could have easily done without the East Germans: then why pay for them? Still, 150-180 billion Deutschmarks go to the other side every year. Taxes are rising, as are interest rates, various projects must be scaled back. This is indeed palpable – even if in moderation (and to varying degrees depending on income). And so people immediately say: We worked hard for our prosperity; they want it handed to them. And most recently there are even cases in which companies are closing their production facilities in the West and opening others in the East, because it is cheaper there. It is no surprise that discontent is arising. What's more: Why should the West Germans change themselves or their system in any way on account of the East Germans? After all, their system has proven itself, and the other one collapsed. Therefore, it goes without saying – right? – that the East Germans should adopt everything from the West Germans, including their parties (and party leaders), including democracy, down to every last detail.

A reverse perspective from the East: people are suffering all kinds of things they feel are unjust – loss of work, of housing, and more. There are the Western commissions that are assessing their suitability for office, the shifting of experienced men and women to apprentice status, the

dismissals (or non-rehirings) that were carried out in part under demeaning circumstances and in an unjust fashion for the benefit of junior Western employees. All manner of fraud was and is the order of the day, not to mention acts of tactlessness and lack of comprehension. Those who came over to the East voluntarily as civil servants and employees were mostly from the third and fourth tiers, most were even promoted to higher positions; the rest have to be paid large bonuses; as it is they receive higher salaries than their local colleagues, who are paid according to the Eastern wage scale. That the East German economy was so shattered is also difficult to comprehend, especially since a rudimentary GDR pride is affected here: after all, people had worked for this economy, directly or indirectly. Even if it was inadequate, it still was the life's work of most people in the country.

Evidently, all the improvements that have already been made – and they are indeed not small in number – do not easily penetrate the awareness of the majority. Some things are already taken for granted, others are cause for suffering. When something is already working it receives little notice; when something goes wrong, people like to talk about it so much that these cases seem to multiply through the telling. And then there is also a good deal of accusatory silence. The notion that one unjust, arbitrary regime was simply exchanged for another is already creeping in all too often (even though those who consider unification with the FRG right and good continue to form a clear majority).

Why are things like this? My assumption is this: first, because the downsides for many are quite considerable, while the hopes have been dulled (here, needless to say, various unkept promises by the West also play a role). Second, these downsides are perceived as inequality vis-à-vis the West Germans and are thus felt particularly strongly. Third, the processes that are currently taking place among the Germans are bringing the GDR's continuing identity strongly to the fore.

Herein lies the essential difference between East Germany and the other Eastern Bloc countries. While it must be admitted that East Germany is doing incomparably better economically, this doesn't really count, because now, even more than before, people are entirely fixated on West Germany, because people no longer want to suffer the inferiority. We are doing better because we don't have a big brother, a Czech recently said. He could be onto something. As the English specialist on German studies T. J. Reed put it: *Nothing, it seems, divides people like unification.*

[. . .]

There should be a discussion of what it means, and should mean, that a state of all Germans – together with many newly admitted to citizenship – is emerging once again, with the requisite openness towards others and as part of Europe.

There must be an agreement about the tasks that will confront the country and its citizens now and in the foreseeable future; how a new balance must be struck between rights and duties, and what the alternatives are if this is not possible or desirable.

People must be made aware – since unification is final, be it for practical reasons – that West Germans and East Germans have a great deal to do with each other, that they form not only one people but one national economy, and that they live in the most intimate political interconnectedness. Thus they must get to know each other, must dismantle many misconceptions, must continually reexamine many false qualities, and must develop a common language and common axioms. People will have to learn that the gaining of trust in the enlarged Germany presupposes above all that the superior part extends trust to the inferior part of the country, as a result of which trust will arise between both parts. The key to inner integration is far more likely to be found in the West than the East.

People should not console themselves by saying that the equalization of East and West will take decades, that it should be left to the passage of time. It need not be that way. And it must not be that way, since too much can happen during this time, since we cannot afford the current state of helplessness and defenselessness, in the context of which the various deficiencies are becoming symptoms of a crisis. The lack of integration also makes the creation of tolerance, of security for Jewish citizens, for example (not to mention foreigners), a task in East and West.

Bonn is not Weimar, people like to say. But Bonn is also not Berlin yet. And it is only the Berlin democracy, the all-German democracy, in which we can continue to live as a productive, free, Western nation. And this democracy must still be established. Within society.

Nothing would be more inappropriate than to overlook this fact or even throw in the towel. At the very least, democracies should have the possibility of embarking upon the unusual when they are already in a fix.

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