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The Replacement of the Elite (2001)

For years, Gregor Gysi was the chairman of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and its best-known crowd pleaser. In the following excerpt, he criticizes the exclusion of former GDR elites from all areas of the economy, society, and politics. He also addresses the instruments and methods used to replace the GDR elite, especially the vetting processes of the so-called Gauck Agency and the closing of GDR institutions.

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When German unity was established, one of the many questions that had to be answered was what should become of the East German elite. In my mind, one of the biggest mistakes of the unification process was that a decision was made, for understandable but ultimately unjustifiable reasons, to replace the elites in the East German part of society; a step that has had grave consequences.

At the crux of it, the same problem underlies the extensive exclusion of East German elites, on the one hand, and the “phaseouts” in industry, agriculture, science, health care, culture, and sports, on the other hand. The Federal Republic of Germany was a self-contained system. It had everything that it needed and would have been able, without significant difficulties, to provide for the East German citizens who were added to it, even if all GDR enterprises had ceased to exist at the moment of accession. If one can survive without something, then it makes perfect sense to “phase it out.” What remains in spite of this remains not out of necessity but rather as a result of gracious concessions.

The Berlin CDU politician Klaus Landowsky explained to me in a conversation that there had been no real need for Berlin to keep the Charité [hospital], since the Virchow Clinic could have taken over its tasks.<sup>1</sup> “However,” he added, “we couldn’t just go and close the Charité, too.” This sounds as though law was tempered by mercy, and of course the employees of such institutions felt that. Thus, at times, the takeovers felt more humiliating than the closures, and the way in which such takeovers were carried out also served to discipline the workforce, which was reduced on a regular basis. Those who remained knew perfectly well that no one was absolutely

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<sup>1</sup> Charité was the main hospital in East Berlin and belonged to Humboldt University. The Virchow Clinic, on the other hand, was part of the Free University in West Berlin. The two merged in the mid-1990s – eds.

dependent on them, that they owed the continued existence of their jobs to a certain magnanimity.

In this respect, the GDR differed significantly from the other Eastern European states. There, the enterprises, the scientific, cultural, and athletics facilities had to be taken on essentially as they were; otherwise there wouldn't have been any. No such situation existed in the new federal states. The FRG had enough of everything. This is the flipside of the fact that the East Germans gained a relatively wealthy partner through accession, a partner who more or less cushioned all processes of social upheaval, and who was able to finance the building of infrastructure. The other Eastern European states had no such partner.

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The executive chairs usually went to members of the West German elite. This provoked a cultural rupture. The scientific assistant who had just rejoiced because his boss had been "phased out" suddenly had to come to terms with a new boss, who brought with him a very different world of experiences and a very different sense of superiority. If the previous boss had understood the assistant's background through shared experience, the new boss usually lacked any capacity for empathy. After all, he hadn't become boss by climbing the ranks within the institute but rather had been brought in from the outside. And since the two German states were two different countries, a kind of feeling of occupation and thus a sense of alienation had to arise.

And the process continued. After the bosses had been replaced, one turned to the other members of the elite. For example, if teachers had initially thought that only school principals would be affected, then they quickly discovered that they themselves were also in store for an examination with potentially negative consequences. A similar fate befell scientists, members of the state apparatus, of the future public sector, and so on. I know a teacher at a vocational school who noted, with full *Schadenfreude*, how the bosses all around him were losing their jobs. But I also saw his horror when he suddenly had to fill out questionnaires himself and when he got the sense that he was becoming a target, too. It was only at this point that he developed a critical attitude toward the replacement of the elites.

The instruments and methods that were employed to replace the elites in East German society were highly differentiated and varied. It was particularly easy with artists; they hardly received any more commissions. GDR writers who had just been celebrated in the feuilletons of Western papers for their behavior before and during the *Wende* were suddenly judged differently. Previously they had been treated as German writers; now they had metamorphosed back into GDR writers. The important thing about Christa Wolf was no longer how critically she had dealt with conditions in the GDR, but that there had also been a phase when she belonged to the Central Committee of the SED.

Investigations were legally mandated in the institutions. The Gauck Agency<sup>2</sup> was an important instrument in the replacement of the elites. Whether employees of scientific institutions or the public sector, whether union or party functionaries or teachers, they all had to submit to agency review. If it turned out that they had had contact with the MfS [Ministry for State Security] at some point in their lives, they could be fired, and generally were. In the few cases in which they were allowed to stay, they were permanently disciplined. If the Gauck Agency review produced nothing, then came the next phase of the political evaluation. The investigation now focused on whether the persons in question had been members of the SED and what functions they had exercised within that party. Thus, additional reasons for dismissal presented themselves. One person had belonged to a county [*Kreis*] organization of the SED; another had been a deputy in a county or district assembly or even in the former *Volkskammer*; in a pinch, it was enough to have been party secretary at a school or a university institution. If one failed to get anywhere with this, a function in the Combat Groups [*Kampfgruppen*]<sup>3</sup> of the GDR, or something else, was enough to determine that the person in question was no longer acceptable, politically speaking. With state prosecutors and judges it was easiest to find charges or verdicts that, according to the new political standards, precluded that person from remaining in his or her position.

At scientific institutions, there was one final possibility for dismissing someone in cases where no grounds for dismissal had been found during the political investigation. A committee, composed exclusively or predominantly of West German colleagues, carried out a professional review, which was often characterized by a high degree of arbitrariness and subjectivity. It was sufficient for the majority of its members to determine that the previous publications of the GDR scientist were of inadequate scientific quality. This meant that the person under review had not passed the professional evaluation and had to go.

An especially efficient instrument in the phasing out of East German elites was the closing of institutions. For example, since both East and West Berlin had an Academy of the Sciences, it was obvious which academy would stay. Most of the scientists who belonged to the GDR Academy of Sciences lost their jobs in this way or were temporarily placed somewhere else.

But even when establishments or institutions were not dissolved, the number of employees had to be substantially cut back on a regular basis for reasons of economy and efficiency. Thus nearly all researchers were dismissed from GDR enterprises when the companies, or at least their research and development departments, were shut down.

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<sup>2</sup> Commonly used term for the federal agency with the unwieldy name “Federal Commissioner for the Records of the Ministry for State Security of the Former German Democratic Republic.” The agency was named after its first head, Joachim Gauck – eds.

<sup>3</sup> GDR paramilitary organization founded after the workers’ uprising in June 1953 – eds.

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