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Weariness with Politics (October 2, 2006)

For the author of this article, the chief problem of the new German division is not the division between East and West, but the differences between regions within the new *Länder*. West Germany, argues Munich journalist Heribert Prantl, was lucky that democracy and the “economic miracle” occurred simultaneously. In parts of the former GDR, he notes, the opposite was true, and an underclass emerged that was receptive to radical right-wing ideas.

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### **The New German Division**

*When the division of Germany ended 16 years ago, it began anew. The new division does not run between East and West but rather between East and East.*

The region that acceded became a divided land. Today, there are two “Easts” in Germany: the “Upswing East” and the “Decline East.” The asymmetry in the East surpasses every kind of asymmetry known in the old Federal Republic.

The East is blooming and the East is withering. It is blooming here and there, and it is withering on a large scale. It is blooming in Silicon Saxony, in Jena and Leipzig; it is withering in Anklam and in the Uckermark.

### **Sad Reality**

The state assistance policy has written off the weak regions; the principle that the weakest need the most support no longer holds.

The federal minister in charge speaks of “beacons” that must be promoted to make them shine even more brightly. They are illuminating a sad reality, the German irredeemable.

The West has shoveled trillions of Euro into the East. In return, the East is giving the West the best that it has: its young people. With the money that flows into the East every year, one could allocate 550 Euro per month to every East German. But the money is not being received in a way that would keep the young people.

## **Dismantling the East**

The well-educated and motivated young people are going to the West, young women in even greater numbers than young men; the old and the unemployed are staying behind. This has enormously negative repercussions on the social structure; the life of civil society is withering.

When hope is gone, hopelessness is what's left. In large areas, the reconstruction of the East has become the dismantling of the East: apartment blocks are torn down, schools are closed. Of course those things also happen in the West, but not on such an extensive scale.

It takes a lot of optimism to conceive of this dismantling as an opportunity and to regard the concepts behind it as an expression of the East German avant-garde, as East German politicians occasionally do. The Uckermark is as large as the Saarland but less densely populated than Burkina Faso.

When the nearest doctor is sixty kilometers away and real unemployment is at fifty percent, one would rather not be part of this avant-garde. In many rural areas in the East the intelligent, young generation is missing; the young people who have stayed form the base of the NPD in many places.

Back then, in 1989, when everything began, the young also set out for the West, leaving the GDR via Hungary in droves. Suddenly, parents didn't care anymore; they risked everything and took to the streets.

Thus, the German revolution came into being. Over the past sixteen years, this revolutionary potential has been ground down by the machinery of the market economy.

People live in a stupor of resignation (things are significantly different only in areas considered "beacons") – and a sense of defeatism about and contempt for democracy grows. Thus the mistrust of "politics" thrives.

This results not from defective political genes, but from the real and presumed experiences of many in the East. The West Germans had the good fortune in the 1950s and 1960s of being allowed to become acquainted with democracy in parallel with the "economic miracle"; they experienced democracy as a form of government under which their life situation improved.

## **Gushing about the GDR**

Thirty years later, many East Germans are experiencing the exact opposite; for them, the introduction of democracy was accompanied by growing joblessness and social degradation. Today, there is no shortage of East Germans who believe that what the former GDR rulers told

them about the nature of capitalism was not all that wrong. They fly to Mallorca, gush about the coziness of the old GDR, and get pretty unpleasant when the subject of foreigners comes up.

Generation Hartz IV: there is a new underclass, and this is much clearer in the East than in the West. This underclass no longer sees any opportunities for advancement, has lost its relationship to the future, and can no longer be reached by what is referred to as political discourse.

They are “socially handicapped,” as Reinhard Höppner, the one-time minister president of Saxony-Anhalt and current president of the Protestant Church Congress, put it. This new underclass forms the milieu of those who sympathize with right-wing extremism, because the members of this class agree with right-wing extremists’ rejection of the democratic system.

The people of this new underclass need help managing their lives; they need jobs that pull them out of their armchairs and away from the TV and that free them from the dull rhythms of resignation.

### **The Bad Habit of Backing Off**

Democracy needs self-confidence. Recently, however, the bad habit of backing off has established itself: municipal administrations in the East are making deals with the right-wing extremists, mayors babble about a “Demokrat<sup>1</sup>” that is supposedly needed.

The bad habit of backing off also includes the destruction of the cultural infrastructure, something that is currently under way, above all in Thuringia: cultural budgets are being cut in half, theaters are being closed. But no country can endure such a dismantling, the dismantling of culture and democracy – not even when a few beacons are standing by.

Source: Heribert Prantl, “Die neue deutsche Teilung” [“The New German Division”], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 2, 2006.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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<sup>1</sup> The word “Demokrat<sup>1</sup>” is a combination of “Demokratie” [democracy] and “Diktatur” [dictatorship] – trans.