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**Reconstruction or a new Beginning – German Unification from a
Micro-Perspective**

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More than 10 years ago I took part in a TAM Council meeting. While preparing for today's lecture I looked at some notes from the meeting and some photographs I had taken during my visit. One of it showed a statue in a wonderful park in front of university buildings.

As a devoted reader of the „New York Review of Books“ it caught my interest. I had read some articles on the fierce controversies about Confederate Monuments on Southern university campuses. I took this picture more than 10 years ago. It shows a Confederate soldier in heroic posture: „Silent Sam“, as it was called. The statue was torn down only in 2018. (And is now hidden at a secret place)

The interesting thing with this statue – in my point of view - is that it was erected in 1913, nearly 50 years after the end of the Civil War by an organization called „United Daughters of the Confederacy“, whose's purpose included the memorization of Confederate soldiers and financial support for the erection of monuments - for men who fought a lost cause!

This is quite unusual, because monuments in public spaces normally celebrate the victorious cause and their heroes: kings, generals or politicians.

During public uprisings or revolutions these monuments are one of the first targets of collective wrath and fury. They are turned down by the revolutionary masses or by the mob. (One of the most emblematic scenes in recent history is the destruction of the huge statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad after the US troops entered the city in 2003).

I remember a statue of Lenin which stood in front of Humboldt University. It was torn down by angry students during the revolutionary events late 1989, early 1990.

Today you will find no statues of Stalin (except in his homeland Georgia), of Hitler, or Saddam Hussein any more.

These symbolic acts of revenge against the former repressors may be a liberating factor in a revolutionary situation, but that doesn't mean that their legacies are dead for good. The ghosts of the past are still haunting people's minds.

In his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx used a poetic image to describe the lasting influence of inherited beliefs in a society:

"The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never

yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battlecries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.“¹

Historical events, long passed, are still present: The American Civil War, the „Great War“ (as the British and the French call the first World War), World War II and the Holocaust, the Millions of death cause by Stalinism and Maoism, the legacies of cruel dictators in Spain or Greece, „Apartheid“ in South Africa are still prevalent aggrieving future generations. They have deep roots in the perception and self-perception of peoples and political cultures.

The way, individuals, social groups and a society as a whole are coping with the past is even more complicated when a political system, a state and/or a social order has been defeated, either by War, Civil War, or by a revolution and former enemies or opponents are dictating the rules of the game.

You may ask me, what am I doing here? I've been asked to talk about Germany.

In order to give you an idea of the fundamental challenges a defeated political and social community and its citizens are confronted with, I'd like to look into history and draw an analogy between the situation in the American South during Reconstruction and former communist countries, and especially the former GDR after 1989.

¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 11, London, Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 103-4.

Before doing that I have to make four methodological remarks:

1. What I'm going to do, in a strict sense, is not a comparison. I will highlight some analogies which may help to understand the longlasting and sometimes still visible legacies of a political and social order, decades or even more than a century after it was overturned by another power.
2. „Reconstruction“ means to re-built, re-shape, re-generate something to a former status or form.

In the Case of East Germany it's more complicated than that:

„*reconstruction*“ meant to re-establish (or re-construct) a market economy and a bourgeois society. In the political realm, the political and institutional system could not simply be „re-constructed“, (By the way the same held to the Federal Republic in 1949.)

German history in the first half of the XX. Century, and 40 years of communist rule didn't provide for a blueprint for „re-construction“. The old communist regime and the political system of the GDR, in 1989, was toppled by a public revolt and surrendered (happily in a peaceful manner).

3. This is why many social scientists are using the term „*transformation*“. For me, it is too simplistic a term. Building a new economic, political and social order after the breakdown of the old regime is more complicated than „transforming“ electric energy from 110 to 12 volt.
4. I would prefer the term „*transition*“ also used by political scientist like Philippe Schmitter or Juan Linz, to name only two of them. Transition

means a temporary phenomenon, a drastic change of political, economic and social circumstances, not the typical piece meal type of politics. It is a process, where the starting point is known, the breakdown of the *ancien regime*, but the time and the end of this process is open. In the German case, regime change was an „*aborted transition*“. As it happened, there could not be a (at least partly) autonomous development because the GDR citizens in their vast majority wanted to join the FRG immediately and unconditionally.

Theoretically there were two solutions available:

1. *Either* a „post-revolutionary“ solution, building a new society and political order in it's own right. In the German case, in a divided country, that would have meant to postpone unification of the two German states *ad infinitum*.

2. *Or*, desolve the GDR as a state and join the FRG. The West German constitution, the Basic Law [Grundgesetz] of 1949 provided for such an accession. Article 23 stated: „For the time being this Basic Law shall apply in the territory of the Laender... (and there the 11 West German states were enumerated)... In other Parts of Germany it shall be put into force on their accession.“

In contrary to the former Confederate States, the GDR could not be „re-admitted“ because the Federal Republic considered itself as the only legitimate German state

5. . After the Civil War a highly controversial discussion dealt with the question, whether the Confederate States should re-join the Union.

Abraham Lincoln's position was crystal clear: They were not constitutionally allowed to secede, they were legally still part of the Union and could not „re-join“ but they had to meet certain standards to re-gain their right of political participation. German statehood until the end of World War II was provisional. The Federal Republic considered itself as the only legitimate German state. But it were the 4 War-Allies (US, UK, France, USSR), not the Germans, who had the last say when it came to decisions about the future of Germany. (2+4 Treaty).

The question, however, is, could one draw parallels and analogies between „*re-admittance*“ and „*reconstruction*“ in the American South and the „*admittance*“ or „*accession*“ of the GDR to the Federal Republic?

YES & NO

	The American South	(Post-Communism) ex-GDR
Political Institutions	<p><i>(re)admittance</i> to the Union after accepting the rules and legal fundamentals</p> <p>first and foremost 13th amendment – emancipation of former Slaves</p> <p>(dispute whether 14th amendment, granting citizen's rights to freedmen has also be adhered to)</p> <p>- the Southern states had to ratify it in order to regain representation in Congress</p>	<p><i>The GDR regime was not conquered by external forces but by a political revolution and regime change from within in the first place</i></p> <p><i>accession</i> of the former GDR (Art, 23 BasicLaw „other parts of Germany could join...)</p> <p>- i.e. a political system <i>dissolved</i> itself and voluntarily became part of another, the FRG</p> <p>- its constitution,</p> <p>- legal system</p> <p>- political institutions</p>
Political Economy	<p>Economic and social basis of a former slaveholder economy replaced by an economy based on „sharecropping“ and free labor</p>	<p>Old state-owned and state-planned economy without private ownership of the mode of production was abolished within month and</p>

		<p>replaced by by a capitalist market economy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capital stock of the GDR was far outdated and not competitive under the new circumstances - Total collapse of the former markets for GDR products in the East - millions of people laid off - specific qualifications devalued
Social system	<p>The old „Planter Aristocracy“ lost its economic basis new social (and ethnic) groups emerged</p>	<p>Social and personal relations were basically determined by the workplace (factory, public administration, educational, or cultural institutions etc.)</p>
Elite Change	<p>„Northerners“ came as businessmen, as missionaries, teachers, politicians in derogatory terms denounced as „carpetbaggers“, perceived as exploiting the local populace</p>	<p>Replacement of the old Elites,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - only partly by those, who opposed the old system and triggered the public uprising and the revolution of 1989 - civil rights activists were always a minority the „masses“ had totally different visions and political goals: they wanted to join the FRG unconditionally and as quick as possible - the mode of accession opened the gates for Western elites, businessmen and adventurers often disguised as „benevolent“ investors), who took the opportunity of their lives - there were others, serious people who wanted to join a historic period of „transition“ and „democratization“

		<p>Often, but not always, both groups were denounced as „Wessis“ or „Besserwessis“ (those pretending to know better).. The equivalent of „Carpetbaggers“</p> <p>- leading positions in public service, regional government, the CEOs of the privatized industries, Universities and institutions of higher education went to Westerners</p>
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In contrary to former dictatorships like, let's say Spain, in both, the American and the German case, it was not only „regime-change“ with all it's intended and unintended consequences, but a fundamental change of the economic and social conditions in which people lived. Their personal life was more than often turned upside down!

In the case of East Germany, personal and social relations were strongly correlated with the workplace, social and cultural institutions provided by the factory, agrarian co-operative, public institution, school or university people worked at.

Most of these institutions collapsed (like big industrial plants or co-operatives in the countryside), or were wound down and restructured. More than one fifth of the working population lost their job within month after accession to the western economic system. Even those, who didn't

lose their job in the first place found themselves in a situation, where their skills and qualifications were devalued.

To give you an idea of the every-day problems of transition in a particular institutional setting, I'd like to refer to some personal experiences at Humboldt-University (formerly the university of the GDR-capital) as a newly appointed Political Science professor who came from the West-Berlin Free University, only 15 kilometers away. I held a new chair on German Politics - not „West German“ politics.

1. When I came to Humboldt, in my first semester in summer 1992, I offered a lecture-series on the history and current problems of the political system of the Federal Republic. I was confronted with students who believed, I were the western equivalent of their former teachers of Marxism-Leninism, presenting the official ideology of the new regime.

(As it happened that I was a specialist on Communist systems and the GDR, which meant that could make a rough assessment how my new East German students were ticking. Nevertheless I was surprised about the resistance I was faced with).

What I taught was my own, independent view on political and social problems, based on empirical research and, to the best of my knowledge, earnest consideration of different opinions and views among social scientists. Even today, I'm not sure whether I could convince my students in the first place. It took some time before we managed to trust each other.

2. different understanding of the social role of professors in academia and in society as a whole.

Most of the East German professors were dismissed, especially in „ideological vulnerable“ disciplines like Philosophie, Law, or Social Sciences. The self-perception of those who had a chance to stay, differed from their Western colleagues: they saw themselves as public intellectuals, who aimed to influence the political discourse (as they had tried, with little success, in the GDR) not as a social scientist in the *Weberian* sense. My Western colleagues and myself stood in the tradition of Max Weber. We tried to differentiate between our personal convictions (sometimes also preoccupations, idiosyncracies, prejudgements and prejudices) and our scientific findings *sine ira et studio*.

3. different understanding of the role of universities.

Should our university primarily be an Institution for professional training of academically skilled (whitecollar) workers for all sectors of society *or* a realm for science- and knowledge driven education in the Humboldtian tradition based on the unity of teaching and research.

4. Universities in Germany, although state financed, enjoy a high degree of independence from the state. The state only provides for the legal, institutional and framework and funding from the state budget, but is not allowed to intervene into teaching and research. Freedom of teaching and research is guaranteed by the constitution (Art. 5).

„Art and science, research and teaching shall be free...)

This was, obviously, not the case in the GDR.

Let me leave it with these few examples from my personal experience and make some more general remarks as to the legacies of the old system..

There is one important aspect of the political, economic, social and cultural trajectories in post-communist societies: the „ghosts of the past“, Karl Marx referred to.

The collapse of Communism has produced some serious side effects: it inevitably meant that familiar experience could not be preserved and that alien norms and values had to be adopted. Overnight entirely new legal norms, procedures and modes of behaviour prevailed. As a result, life experience, behavioural codes, social norms and qualifications were invalidated *en masse* and replaced by new ones which could not be learned overnight in crasch-course fashion.

An entire society had to return to school, so to speak, in order to learn what their compatriots in the West had known for a long time.

The vast majority of former citizens of the GDR had to answer the question, how to make their living after they lost their jobs. They had to find a new one or became dependent on social welfare funds. Hundreds of thousands commuted to the West on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. East Germans had to learn how to deal with new institutions, how to develop new patterns of behavior in a totally different social setting. And, last but not least, how to make use of their newly gained political rights. This proved to be a long lasting mental processes, which is - as the

West German experience after World War II demonstrates - taking generations. (*Almond/Verba 1960s*)

Besides the hard fact of adopting to a market economy, new laws and institutions one factor was of decisive importance - and I will, very briefly, delve into this – the political and social culture of a commonwealth and body politic in change.

Although the majority of East Germans wanted the end of the old system (as was evident not least in the results of the first free and fair elections in March 1990), they now faced obvious difficulties in relinquishing it for good. This can scarcely be cause for surprise since the people in the old GDR were transposed unprepared into a new social reality which they knew only from hearsay (or TV) but which had always been held up as an ideal.

Citizens of the former GDR only gradually realised that they had pledged themselves to the radical transformation of their entire lives. Like many dictatorships before, the authoritarian welfare state of Erich Honecker protected the population from the vicissitudes of world economic developments by means of demarcation (*Abgrenzung*) and the ruthless exploitation of natural and human resources. The price paid in terms of the near total destruction of the industrial infrastructure, the destruction of any industrial future for the country and the exploitation of

the natural world came to light only after the fall of the Communist Party SED.

Nowadays there is still a widespread feeling among the people in Eastern Germany that the dependency of the past has been replaced by another. This is not unusual in the context of transitions from dictatorship to democracy. However, in the case of the coexistence of the German people in one united polity, this feeling does assume a problematic dimension: the new order is inherited from the West; it has not been developed by the people of the East. Their only autonomous decision was to overthrow the old regime and to join the Federal Republic!

Even thirty years after unification representatives of the western part of the country are rarely versed in the circumstances and sensibilities of the former GDR and its people. They all too frequently conceal their own ignorance under arrogance and sanctimoniousness.

A new social character was indeed required in the new German *Länder* which is fundamentally different to that in the old GDR.

Only few of the social and political experiences of GDR citizens could be shared by people in West Germany. In 1990, at breakneck speed, two social orders with antagonistic political, economic and social systems but a common history and culture were put together. Only now are people beginning to realise that in both parts of Germany highly diverse and fundamentally different social characteristics had developed from 1949 to 1989, which could not simply be merged by laws and political institutions.

One could say polemically that the events of 1989 have brought Germany state unity and social division. Before 9 November 1989 the majority of the German people were convinced that only politics, politicians and the Cold War (i.e. US and SU) were preventing them from living in a common polity. There was great reluctance to admit that more than forty years of division had produced social and cultural separation. Now it seems as if the two German societies are still apart. Not „different but equal“, but „united and nevertheless apart).

Overcoming this divide will last a generation or even more. The "German question" is not yet solved for good.

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