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Politics and the Development of Personality Reflections 10 Years after the end of the GDR

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In the countries of central and eastern Europe, the end of socialism and the construction of a political system which was built on a market economy went hand in hand with a change in values which went to the very roots of those societies. This change in values has had its effect not only on the large social interdependencies, but also on the relationships between individuals. It has become obvious that the process of change for the people was not as trouble-free as the politicians - particularly in that euphoric phase at the beginning of the process – had anticipated. Rather the process of change has manifested itself in an undermining of the people's sense of security, in depression, in hopelessness and helplessness, in a retreat to the familiar values and systems of values of the socialist era, or indeed, in the adoption of radical ideas and ideologies. In order to be able to assess the effects of this fundamental change in society on the development of children and young people, it makes sense first of all to analyze the following question:

How does personality develop?

In European cultures the family unit is the starting point in which a child starts to develop into a personality. Yet the term 'family unit' is a relative one. Does it consist of father, mother and children, or does it include relations such as the grandparents, the parents' brothers and sisters, and cousins? However varied the various perceptions of the family unit might be, one aspect seems to be common to all the European countries – the relationship of the child with its father and mother. It is the basis for the identification and the means of recognizing the child. For the state system, the father, mother, and the date and place of birth make a person identifiably unique. And at the same time this relationship gives the parents priority in making decisions that affect the upbringing of their child. They may, or must, bring it up according to their views. The development of the identity of a child, however, is not only the result of a greater or lesser degree of conscious upbringing by the parents, but also the adoption by the child of their way of life or their 'strategies for survival'.

A child can't choose its parents, or indeed their sense of values, their conduct or their social status. Its surroundings bring it into inevitable contact with those features, and require it to focus upon them. Thus the development of the identity

of the personality is not the sole result of the efforts of the members of the family and their 'strategies for survival', but also the activities of people and institutions in their surroundings.

The father and mother do not represent a united self-contained system of values and behavioral standards, but rather two separately identifiable personalities who, in one and the same situation may think, feel, or negotiate differently or even, on occasions, take opposite views. Thus the child's personality doesn't develop by adopting a unified parental model, but is rather the result of absorbing the interaction of two different role models – of equal status – who have carried out a detailed examination of the environment.

Our contemporary culture takes the view that men and women are equal personalities, and that they are independently able to shape their "own lives" (*vide* Beck 1998). Their association as parents does not mean that they are required to give up the peculiarities and independence of their personalities. Previously, one held the view that a unified parental view towards the child was necessary for a 'healthy' development of the child's personality. This view – which would incorporate the surrender of the parents' individuality - is now obsolete. It is precisely the difference between the parents that 'forces' the child to seek its own, new paths in the development of its personality. Thus the individuality of the father and mother is a necessary condition for the individuality, the unique characteristics of the child.

The 'survival strategies', or rather the 'survival programs' of the parents are the result of a successful study of the environment. One could also say that society, how we live and the times in which we live all become part of the individual. This is true even if the individual does not accept the society's system. How a child conducts himself with respect to his environment, and how he integrates with it, is carried out on the basis of a program that he has taken over from the original systems that his parents operated. These programs, however, only increase in significance when they have to be applied. Survival programs that are never called up or applied have no significance in the development of personal identity. The decisive role in the development of children's personalities is not, therefore, that they have 'picked up a lot' from their parents, but rather that they are able to, and are required to, apply what they have 'picked up'. Vice versa, one can say that an environment which has a large number of both pressures and stimuli has a development-building effect on a child's personality only if the child is able to examine that environment in the light of its 'own' possibilities which it inherited from its family.

The objective process of development of personality is reflected subjectively in the self-confidence of a person. What is self-confidence? Self-confidence is the knowledge that a person has of the individual behavioral strategies that he has at

his disposal that will allow him to cope with both current and future challenges in life. Self-confidence is one of the pillars of a democratic society, and rests on the "historical embodiment" of individual action. This historical embodiment arises not only out of one's own experience, but also out of the relationship to one's own personal roots. Without these roots, without the knowledge about one's own history, free, self-confident action in a free, democratic society is not possible. Knowledge about one's own history in no way cuts across the ability to take action and make decisions, rather it is the basis for trying something new in life and going one's own way.

Individuality in socialist and in democratic systems

The meaning of individuality in the two systems is fundamentally different: individuality, the freedom of the individual and his personal development are constituents of the declared foundations of a free democratic society. Both the state and society expect of the individual that he will bring his personal capabilities and his action to bear in the social community, and that he will thus be able to take his place in the life of society as a whole. A democratic society is founded on the individual activities of its members, in short: society is founded on individuality.

In a socialist state it is different. Although the state knows and accepts that there are individuals with requirements and capabilities, it regimented the interests and the activities of the individuals under a collective interest. The socialist state doesn't recognize the differing individuality of people as a driving force for personal development, a concept which is generally ranked lower than the overall aim of the state control of the conditions of ownership.

While in democratic societies individuality and individual thought is encouraged, socialist societies lay great store on group thinking, solidarity and the retraction of individual demands. Individual performance is only acknowledged as valuable if it has been in the furtherance of pre-determined collective aims set by the state and society.

"Historic Uniformity" or the Uprooting of the Family

For the people in the erstwhile GDR, the political change was graver and more radical than was at first thought. In the West, too – and especially amongst politicians – there was a severe underestimation regarding the personal problems which the realignment brought about. If we examine the development of the personality of children and young people after the political change in the GDR, we can identify a number of complications and paradoxes, which particularly relate to the roles of the parents – one of the most important foundations of the children's development.

A serious problem for the people in the erstwhile GDR has been the loss of their personal material possessions as well as their social protection by the collective and the state, and the resulting necessity for them to fight as individuals to organize and be responsible for their own survival. In parallel with this the system of values that had been valid to the change date was almost entirely up-ended. What used to be good is bad today, and what used to be bad is now good. And the new system of values cannot be taken over as it is, because it is incapable of developing itself. Those survival programs that had been successful up to the change are now no longer acceptable to the changed environment. Any attempt to tie them to the values and behavioral requirements of the new order is seen both by the new society and the individuals themselves as a loss of their own identity and the importation of something foreign. And to want to take positive personal experiences from the socialist period with one into the new society is seen simply as an attempt to perpetuate the old order, and is resisted. Which completes the dilemma. In place of a situation where the people, their social surroundings and their personal history were reconciled, a feeling inevitably developed that the ground had been taken from under them. The effects on the children are unfortunate: the parents, who could have negotiated the foundations for their identity and individuality for them are no longer available as role models and supports. They now represent a world of experience, the values of which are no longer acceptable to the children. The dialectic of personal roots and familiar environment has been damaged and/or interrupted. The effects are passivity, loss of orientation and helplessness, as well as a tendency to being easily led by simple, populist ideas.

In the face of the effects on development – especially on children and young people – the West German politicians, as well as the entire German public, should fundamentally rethink their attitude to the series of values which had currency in the erstwhile GDR. They need to learn to differentiate between the individual values and their ideological status. Those values which individuals had constructed for themselves must likewise not be allowed to go under when measured against ideology. Only then will the prerequisites be established whereby one can examine the whole spectrum of problems which socialism left behind - both in families and in the minds of people in general.

One of these problems is a loss of historical records within the families of the erstwhile GDR – which I shall call "Historic Uniformity". In discussions and in analysis of families I have been able to establish that, in many families, and in the case of many individuals, the abilities and the knowledge to sort out the complexities of their native origins and their parental and maternal families has been lost. The reason for this lies in the fact that the family records were required to be matched to the official history of the GDR. A typical example is the movements of the last two generations – in the first case by virtue of the war, through fleeing, expulsion, resettlement, etc, and in the other case in GDR times

when enforced moves were made to satisfy decisions made via the socialist economic planning. In the family records I have studied these changes of location were indeed noted, but the earlier area of influence of the family can often be neither established geographically nor is any related cultural or social structure described.

Socialism so radically swept aside the established social structure, that people who have not consciously experienced it cannot imagine what happened. There was a downright taboo about handing down a record of the lifestyle of one's grandparents' generation, especially if these came from the so-called "landed gentry". Hence, in place of a specific warranted individual record in the family, the person joined the "Uniformity" which arose from the state ideology. Nonetheless, this process of "Historic Uniformity" was never, in the sense of socialism, successfully completed - as can be seen from the political changeover. Despite this, it has left its mark on the self-confidence of people that will considerably reduce their chances of active participation in a changed social lifestyle, e.g., in their work. A mark which could reach as far as the complete uprooting of young people in particular.

What can we do? Encouragement to work with young people

In many cases we shall be unable either to maintain the family in its traditional form, or reconstruct it. We can, however, help to ensure that the father and mother are viewed and experienced by their children as valuable people. We have to ensure that we are successful in supporting those for whom the demise of the state's ideological direction has left a gap in their personal orientation. In this an important role falls to the schools and kindergartens, in that they draw the parents into negotiations about complex historical backgrounds. Individual measures in helping the young people must be directed towards maintaining and strengthening the ability of the child or young person to identify with its father and mother.

The process of adjustment and reorientation requires both time and patience. All of society is encouraged to make the effort and to work together, to ensure that both children and young people have the opportunity to develop into self-confident individuals. Strength and support from their parents is thus an investment in the future which will be consistently repaid in future generations.

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Bibliography:Ulrich Beck et al.: Eigenes Leben, Munich, 1997.