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## Article abstract

Following the reunification of 1989, in Germany joy soon gave way to disenchantment among post-socialist academics. A suddenly much more competitive environment proved a rude awakening for many who formerly had held positions with almost complete job security. Instead there has been an overwhelming tendency to replace these academics with colleagues from the West. This is a brief assessment of the situation eight years after the wall came down, based on personal observation and an eclectic choice of documentation.

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# AFTER THE WALL CAME DOWN

## Academics in Post-Socialist East Germany

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Chairing the joint paper session of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and the Canadian Association of Slavists, “Recent Ethnology in Central and Eastern Europe” (St. John’s, June 1997) raised my curiosity to similarly research the situation in former East Germany. This subject holds some personal interest as I was born in East Germany, but grew up in the West. Moreover, during annual visits to Germany in the early nineties I had experienced some of the exuberance of East meeting West when the Berlin Wall came down, which in subsequent years was quickly tempered by disenchantment — for the “Wessis” [West Germans], who had to foot the bill for bringing the new provinces up to their own standard of living and working, as well as for the “Ossis” [former East Germans] who felt they were being patronized, dominated and made to feel inferior.

While I was well aware that much of the initial goodwill had evaporated by 1997, I did not anticipate the extent of havoc reunification appears to have wrought among former East German academics. Compared to other areas of Central and Eastern Europe discussed in this journal, the situation in Germany is different for we are dealing with a country that was divided for over 40 years, each part following very different paths of development. After 1945, the discipline of folklore in East Germany (GDR), like other states of central and eastern Europe, came under the influence of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the history of the working class became the major focus of research. By contrast, leading West German folklorists like Hermann Bausinger and his school of *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft* [Empirical Cultural Science] at the University of Tübingen moved towards the social sciences by emphasizing everyday life and problems of the contemporary world (see Dow and Lixfeld 1986).

When reunification came suddenly in late 1989 it held promises for the former East Germans that proved unrealistic in the short run. Among other aspects they had taken for granted in the past, for example, they lost almost complete job security that was not tied to performance. Instead they had to adapt to a competitive, capitalist environment which for many proved a rude awakening. Meanwhile West Germans were quick to profit from the inexperience and naïvety of their reunited compatriots. Inevitably during the last few years problems have surfaced on both sides. On the academic level, however, these are rarely admitted, as I found out to my frustration when beginning my research. Of the people contacted, each response by letter, fax, e-mail referred me to yet another person, none of whom felt compelled, confident or inclined to comment on the current situation. This initial difficulty indicated a real problem, of course, and made me all the more eager to continue the research.

Finally a breakthrough in the lack of communication occurred during a visit to Germany in early 1998. *Die Zeit*, a prominent highbrow weekly newspaper, featured a satire by a former East German academic, out of work for over a year, who was then being urged by his *Arbeitsamt* [employment office] to start retraining for a career in business, adding insult to injury. The caustic tone of this article nevertheless reveals deep despair. This academic, well in his forties, with twenty years of dedicated teaching, research and writing in his field of ancient history, and with a clean conscience (i.e., not a *Stasi* informer) realizes that in spite of excellent references and numerous job applications, he will never get another position comparable to what he held in former East Germany — and that most likely he would not face such a difficult situation now had he grown up in West Germany and made his career there (Witte 1998).

This article led to a discussion with journalist Klaus Betz, an old friend, who made the drastic claim that by early 1998 just about all East German academics had been replaced by professors from the West. Not only are these new professors generally considered second or even third rate, i.e., they are deemed expendable by West German universities; they often refuse to live in former East Germany, preferring to become long distance commuters and returning to the West as often as possible. They do not tend to establish any close ties in their new environment. Consequently the universities in the East have become less attractive to students than those in the West of Germany.

These observations by a respected journalist were generally confirmed in a roundtable discussion on the subject of *Deutsch-deutsche Kommunikationserfahrungen im arbeitsweltlichen Alltag* [German-German communication experiences in the everyday working environment] (Barz and Fix 1996). Though the discussants were mainly linguists who had either moved from East to West or vice versa, it may be assumed that ethnologists and folklorists are experiencing much the same problems. For example, Dagmar Barth, a linguist specializing in English, now works at the university of Paderborn (West), but also participates in a project of the Martin-Luther Universität of Halle-Wittenberg (East). As a student in Leipzig (East) shortly after reunification, she felt that the new professors from the West were rarely good ones, at least not any better than the former professors. When applying for jobs, however, she realized that she was trying to adapt to the dominant majority of “Wessis” to the point of hiding her East German background by speaking the official “high German” [*Hochdeutsch*]. She is keenly aware of the clichés that have evolved, that the Saxon dialect is now part of comic figures appearing in television shows, and that “Ossis” have become the butt of ethnic jokes. Meanwhile it is still rare for “Ossi” academics to participate in conferences in the West or vice versa (Barth 1996).

Klaus Heller, another discussant at the roundtable, is one of twenty-two linguists who were transferred from the *Zentralinstitut für Sprachwissenschaft der Akademie der Wissenschaften* at Dresden (East) to join forty-four West German colleagues at the *Institut für deutsche Sprache* at Mannheim. In this case conflict was largely avoided because the academic competence of the “Ossis” was never questioned. Nevertheless, each day he is faced with the dilemma: to adapt or not, i.e., to pretend that one has always done it just like the “Wessi” colleagues, or to openly admit “we used to do it differently.” The pressure of this decision obviously weighs much more heavily on those who have lost their familiar social background, who know that from now on everything is and will be different. As an example, Heller mentions that among former East German academics not a single line of text was passed on without being evaluated, corrected and approved by colleagues, by a supervisor, and in extreme cases by a hierarchy of functionaries. Photocopiers were registered and guarded like automatic weapons. Individual responsibility was thus kept low, which to many may have felt rather comfortable, and the close working relationship that was common in the East often included socializing together. By contrast, Heller noted a tendency among Western academics towards

individualism with the negative extreme of keeping a distance between colleagues. He further mentions differences even in such gestures as shaking hands, which was far more common among "Ossis" than "Wessis" (Heller 1996). Incidentally, Klaus Heller regularly commutes from Mannheim (West) to Dresden (East), where he left behind his family, home and huge collection of books (private communication).

Yet another participant in the roundtable discussion, Werner Holly, moved from West to East to teach Germanic languages at the Technische Universität Chemnitz-Zwickau. He likened the current situation between academics of East and West to a "mine field." Very distinct communicative systems are based on different attitudes, on categories of "East" and "West" that exist in peoples' heads. "Ossis" must make a huge effort to adapt; they are experiencing a break in continuity, including their own dialect which is regarded as strange by the dominant majority. Language thus represents an immediate handicap and becomes a source of discrimination because within the reunited Germany, "East" now equals "losers." By contrast "Wessis," who in turn rarely consider adopting anything from former East Germans, tend to appear arrogant (Holly 1996).

For specific information on the current state of folkloristics in former East Germany I am grateful to Dr. Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow, Gesellschaft für Ethnographie, Berlin. In a letter (December 27, 1997) she explained that before 1990 *Volkskunde* [Folkloristics] was taught in combination with History as part of *Ethnographie* [Ethnography] at Humboldt University, Berlin (East). At other universities, e.g. Jena, linguistics was taught without explicit folklore orientation. Yet more universities taught Anthropology [*Völkerkunde*], specializing in specific regions, e.g. Leipzig focused on Africa, Rostock on Latin America. Since reunification, attempts to establish new folklore institutes have all but failed. An exception is the University of Jena, where a new Folklore Chair was expected to be established by summer 1998.

Up until 1992, folklorist Professor Ute Mohrmann headed the Ethnography/Folklore Institute at Humboldt University. She then briefly worked at the Folklore Institutes of Marburg and Kiel (both in the West). When I first approached her with a request for information on post-socialist developments, she agreed to cooperate. Soon afterwards, however, she regretted that she would have to renege on her promise. Because she had just lost the position of lecturer at the university of Jena, which she had taken up with some hope, she felt personally too affected to be able to provide a

balanced picture of the situation. Her unfortunate experience, however, may be considered symptomatic and follows much the same pattern of what other academics from former East Germany have suffered.

Meanwhile malaise is also evident in contributions to *Berliner Blätter — Ethnographische und Ethnologische Beiträge* (13/14, June 1997), a special edition that was meant to emphasize the development of departmental perspectives in East and West since 1989. Two of the invited participants did not bother to contribute at all, explaining that they did not feel they could currently say anything of substance (Blask and Scholze 1997). Among the contributors, Wolfgang Jacobeit, a former leading folklorist of Eastern Germany who retired in 1986, expressed disappointment that his efforts in the East to integrate Folkloristics into the discipline of History as “Everyday History,” true to the emphasis in the East on socialist research of working class history, were barely acknowledged after 1989 — despite first reassurances to the contrary.

He feels that the differences in scholarly approaches between East and West tend to be exaggerated, that folklorists in the East were well aware of basic concepts developed in the West and knew how to apply them (Jacobeit 1997). Wolfgang Kaschuba of Humboldt University, Berlin, also pleads for keeping a foothold in History while acknowledging that German folklorists now emphasize phenomena of contemporary culture (Kaschuba 1997).

Meanwhile the discipline of German *Volkskunde* overall appears to be undergoing a crisis of legitimation. After the major shift in direction of the 1960s and 1970s, dominated by Hermann Bausinger (now retired), who helped to move the discipline towards becoming an applied cultural science (Bausinger 1986), it is time for another attempt at self-definition to present an image to the outside world that all can agree upon. Accordingly the 1996 conference of *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde* at Basel focused on the need for a new orientation (Köck 1997). Moreover, out of necessity, faced with shrinking universities, such small and formerly quite separate departments as *Völkerkunde* and *Volkskunde* may have to move closer together (Kramer 1997).

This brief survey of the current situation of folklorists/ethnologists in former East Germany, as part of the larger academic community, must remain superficial given the constraints of distance and difficulty in obtaining information. Nevertheless, it clearly appears that the *Wende* [change] in Germany from 1989 on has been very disruptive for academics from the East, seeing well established careers put on ice and past accomplishments all but ignored.

East Germans have had to adapt to the dominant West Germans who are acting much like colonizers. At the same time German *Volkskunde* is in a phase of transition. Identities must always be newly created; perhaps there is yet room for integration of East and West in the domain of German *Volkskunde* that can ultimately draw on the strengths and real achievements of both sides.

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