An Education Researcher on the Reform Process at East German Universities (1999)

Abstract

In a detailed examination of two case studies, the University of Leipzig and Humboldt University in Berlin, East German education researcher Peer Pasternack describes the problems surrounding the reform process at East German universities after the transition [*Wende*].

Source

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4. Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, we identified an implementation conflict concerning the definition of the goals and modalities of reorganizing East German institutions of higher education. And at the end of this study, we identified an interpretation conflict concerning the evaluation of the process and the assessment of its results. The opposing interpretations of the process and its results can be summed up by the difference between two essential interpretive axes: on the one hand, the process was trumpeted as a "success story" (Jürgen Rüttgers); on the other, it was also labeled as an "academic disaster" (Edelbert Richter). Tied to this was our question of whether the interpretation conflict derived solely from the results of the process or whether it had already existed in the aforementioned implementation conflict.

Apart from evaluating the tangible results of the reorganization process – that is, the question of whether and to what extent it represented a *renewal* – the opinions of actors and observers diverged and still diverge significantly, especially regarding the political configuration of the reorganization process.

First of all, Habermas referred to the transformation of the East German system as having been initiated "from above." This also applied to the reorganization of the universities. The "hour of the executive," which aptly describes the transformation "from above," was also recognizable in the institutions of higher education in three stages.

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Academic freedom is "the freedom of the academic individual to pursue truth in research and teaching, wherever that may lead, without having to fear sanctions or job loss as the result of the violation of political, religious, or social conventions" (Goedegebuure et al. 1993, p. 17f.). This was not assured [during the transformation], since all personnel appointments were renegotiated, and, in preparation for that, integrity reviews, among other things, were conducted.

Substantive autonomy is "the ability of the institution of higher education as a whole to determine its own goals and programs (the 'what' of research and teaching)"; and *procedural autonomy* is "the ability of the institution of higher education to determine its own means of implementing its goals and programs (the 'how' of research and teaching)" (Ibid, p. 18). These forms of autonomy were significantly restricted: partly through the various evaluation processes and the subsequent decisions on university structures, and partly through the ongoing transitional character of the situation that resulted. In the evaluation processes, considerations about the compatibility of the East German higher education

system with the West German higher education system played a decisive role. When it came to making structural decisions, state executives took the lead; at the same time, they were clearly hindered by the limited budget funds. Procedural autonomy was ultimately so curtailed that a number of genuine tasks of [university] self-administration were carried out – not only by the ministries – but also by other substitute structures, such as state [*Land*] commissions of higher education, externally appointed founding deans and commissions, and the like (compare Teichler 1994; Mayntz 1994b).

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Meanwhile, at the level of higher education, it was characteristic that the time frame for social changes and the time frame for university reform were quickly decoupled. Universities maintained the illusory belief that a fresh start was possible for longer than GDR society in general. For the GDR, July 2 (Monetary Union) and October 3, 1990 (Accession) symbolized the relinquishing of sovereignty. For the universities, the equivalent to this – external intervention – the revocation of autonomy – came with the decision to close Leipzig University as of January 2, 1991, and to dismiss the dean of Berlin's Humboldt University in November 1991.

Independent of the respective dimension of the conflict and the inclination to protest at each university, political authorities in Berlin and Saxony mostly saw the processes of internal renewal as insufficient. They sought, however, to go above and beyond this in legitimizing their subsequent interventions:

"The extraordinarily critical assessment of the university situation by broad segments of the East German public was incomparably more significant for the coming decisions. This view was motivated, especially, by the not unjustified impression that there were influential forces at the universities that wanted to take advantage of this as a bulwark to oppose the democratic renewal in the eastern part of Germany." (H.J. Meyer 1997, p. 512)

This is what Hans Joachim Meyer, former GDR minister of education, and later Saxon minister of education and research, said in retrospect. Views of this sort led to external interventions, whereby administrators attempted to get matters under control. "Instead of being liberated from political co-option by the GDR regime," wrote sociologist Hansgünter Meyer, "the East German university system was eclipsed after the fact …." (1993, p. 73). "It was abandoned as an academic system and perceived as the bastion of an academic elite that was to be abolished."

But even this did not lead to a radical change in thinking, as can be seen in the assessments of foreign observers such as Dieter Simon, who said that the transfer of problems facing West German universities to the East "was compounded by East-specific deficits resulting from totalitarianism that expressed themselves in higher education primarily as authoritarian sentiments, an eagerness to be spoon-fed and a constant mindfulness of state orders, a lack of understanding of democratic procedures and a lack of respect for parliamentary institutions, a repugnance for self-fulfillment hedonism, and an irrational respect for the 'masses.'"

Government intervention in the restructuring of institutions of higher education was consistent from state to state when it came to the instruments it employed. Aside from closures, these included: new laws and regulations as well as authoritarian ad-hoc instructions; personnel review commissions in addition to existing internal university review commissions; labor law, including regulations included in the Unification Treaty that annulled portions of federal legislation on dismissal protection; and finally, university financing and related decisions about university structure.

This sort of reorganization of East German institutions of higher education was characterized by ambivalent compromises that tried to reconcile incompatible aims. This applied to the definition of the aims, the structures and instruments, and the execution of the process. It could be seen first and

foremost at the core of university reorganization: that is, in personnel reorganization, which encompassed both new personnel structures and personnel review.

From a structural-functional perspective, the compromise nature of personnel reorganization stemmed from two circumstances resulting from political, not least voter, decisions: the political system change in Eastern Germany had to be carried out at a speed that can usually only be achieved through a violent revolution. At the same time, however, it could not fall back on an arsenal of violent revolutionary instruments. In short: an evolutionary change had to be implemented at revolutionary speed.

This led to the compromises between incompatibles, which were also characteristic of the ambivalence of the changes: the nature of system change as a fundamental process could lead, on the one hand, to revolutionary demands such as the radical replacement of the elite. This was countered, on the other hand, by the precept of legal action, that is, the demand that all elements of the process be conducted according to law. Both positions, in turn, sought normative protection in the doctrine of democracy.

The personnel commissions were developed and installed as the primary instrument – in terms of range, depth, duration, and impact – for *personnel renewal* in the East German higher education system. […] The positivist core of the processes carried out by the personnel commissions consisted of assessments of individual life histories for the purpose of determining a person's eligibility (or non-eligibility) for civil service in the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany. This matter was functionally translated into the criterion of feasibility. The responsible ministers of education and research used the insights acquired by the commissions to determine the feasibility or unfeasibility of each individual.

When focusing on actors in the reorganization of the higher education system, it should be noted up front that no one fundamentally disputed the need to restructure the system. "At least no one spoke out publicly for maintaining the status quo of the years 1989-90. In that regard, the nascent camps had a common point of departure." (Neidhardt 1994, p. 34)

This procedure was to be considered restorative, also contrary to the external perception of some efforts within the university. Although the reorganization process was not disputed, in principle, within the universities, opinions on how thorough the process needed to be varied, of course: to be precise, they depended on each individual's degree of social involvement. The zeal for reform exhibited by the "old cadre with experience in management and politics," for example, had to be "dampened by the fact that more than a few of them would have had to dismiss themselves if they [really] took the notion of self-renewal seriously." (Ibid, p. 38)

Furthermore, none of the participating actors denied that this reorganization had to be a *democratic reform* process. Once again, in all analytical coldness: even those in the GDR who, in the interest of maintaining state-socialist control, proceeded to tout democratic decision-making and power controls as dispensable, even they were by no means being hypocritical when they emphasized the appropriateness of democratic processes. After all, it was difficult to deny that the basic conditions had changed.

But even more, no word was emphasized more within the debate on the East German university restructuring process than "democracy." By the same token, the accusation that certain plans and intentions and things that were done (or not done) were undemocratic in nature was part of the standard polemical repertoire employed by all sides in the ensuing discourse.

In order to answer the question of whether the democratic demands that were formulated were in fact implemented in the real process of making and carrying out decisions, one thing needs to be considered: what was actually thought of as "democratic" in the *democratic reform*?

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Now that we have presented the material, we can formulate the key rules for the reform debate:

(I) The reference to *democracy* was ritualized. Anyone who avoided this ritual had to expect excommunication from discussion circles. The word *democracy* fulfilled the function of a rhetorical bracket in the debate on renewal. Attempts were thus made to preserve the compatibility of the fundamental legitimacy of the reorganization of East German higher education. This legitimacy was based on the constitutional ties on which the overarching process of university reorganization – that is, German reunification – depended. *Democracy* was thus the constant regulatory factor in the reform debate: it enabled actors who were otherwise extremely different to talk and act together.

(II_1) While "democracy" retained its validity as a rhetorical constant to the very end, *grassroots democracy* only functioned as a point of orientation in the communicative field in the first, romantic phase of the reform process.

(II_2) In the second phase – structural reorganization – the debate was essentially shaped by reducing complexity through the process of *dichotomization*. From then on, the discourse used binary coding: "close to the system/foreign to the system," "burdened/unburdened," "unfeasible/feasible." The agents of complexity reduction argued in a Jacobin fashion.

(III) Although the constant regulatory factor of "democracy" continued to ensure the capacity for communication, also in the second phase, an oppositional thread of the debate established itself at the same time – in clear demarcation to dichotomization. This thread framed the debate in a strictly *legal positivistic* manner against the dominant *Jacobin* thread. Both threads were based on specific underlying interests.

(IV_1) Among those who took up the *Jacobin* thread, people who had been disadvantaged by the GDR system initially showed an interest in filing criminal charges against the representatives of the previous regime. The prerequisite for this was the delegitimation of the *ancien régime.* The disadvantaged met with incumbent political functionaries to discuss this matter. Their legitimation efforts aimed to increase their political power through universities that were compatible with the system and which would not become a "bulwark against democratic renewal in the eastern part of Germany." (H.J. Meyer 1997, p. 512)

(IV_2) In contrast, the *legal-positivistic discourse* represented two interests that can be conveyed only in part, interests whose supporters can be clearly distinguished: on the one hand, there was the position of the old academic elite. It viewed a legal positivistic argument as the only remaining fallback position from which it was possible to react sensibly to the attack from the political sphere. On the other hand, some actors who were not individually affected by this attack also responded in a markedly legal-positivistic way. But these people felt challenged for different reasons than the old GDR elite: they viewed the dissolution of traditional legal standards as nullifying the balance of powers, which they felt threatened the institutional prerequisites of the existing political system.

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Source: Peer Pasternack, *"Demokratische Erneuerung". Eine universitätsgeschichtliche Untersuchung des ostdeutschen Hochschulumbaus 1989-1995*. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1999, pp. 366-78.

Translation: Allison Brown

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