

Dismissed East German Faculty Members Make up a “Second Academic Culture” (May 15, 2004)

Abstract

According to a study by the Institute for Higher Education Research (HoF) in Halle, East German academics and researchers were the “losers of the *Wende* [i.e. transformation].” After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the study concluded, members of this group were relegated to a “second academic culture.” In the following piece, journalist Jürgen Amendt describes the findings of this study as well as the efforts of Thomas Flierl (PDS), Berlin Senator for Science, Research, and Culture, to improve the situation of East German academics and create greater East-West equality in the filling of leadership positions in academia.

Source

The Losers of the “Transformation”

The Failed Integration of East Berlin’s Academics

German unification was accompanied by a radical replacement of elites at the universities in the Eastern part of the republic. At Humboldt University in Berlin, for example, 75% of all professors and 70% of all research assistants were dismissed. Many academics were fired despite the fact that they had proven professional qualifications – this was the conclusion reached by the authors of the study “East Berlin Academia in Unified Berlin: An Analysis of the Consequences of the Transformation,” which was carried out by the Institute for Higher Education Research (HoF) in Halle.

The basic assumption that scholars in the humanities and social sciences were politically suspect had a particularly disadvantageous effect. Natural scientists were generally assumed to possess the necessary professional qualifications, but when it came to social scientists, political distrust appears to have outweighed all other considerations. For that reason alone, the study indicated, proof of scholarly potential played no role whatsoever for this group in the reorganization of personnel that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. Social scientists thus comprised only a minority of the participants in the Researcher Integration Program [*Wissenschaftler-Integrations-Programm* or WIP], which aimed to help integrate East German researchers into the academic community of united Germany.

“Second Academic Culture”

The past fifteen years have witnessed the development, especially in the social sciences and humanities, of a kind of “second academic culture” made up mostly by dismissed East German academics. At the moment, there are about twenty associations that fit this description in Berlin. Many operate without any solid funding source. Thomas Flierl (PDS), Senator for Science, Research, and Culture, would like to integrate this “second academic culture” into the established research scene. The largest problem group is the so-called middle generation, that is, scholars who were between thirty and forty-five in 1990. Among other recommendations, the Institute for Higher Education Research (HoF) proposed that the Senate create a job pool for this group.

In presenting the study, the senator for science and research [i.e. Flierl] emphasized that its recommendations would serve as “a litmus test for the coalition agreement,” which demands that the life achievements of GDR citizens be recognized. The future of the Leibniz Society will play a key role

here. As the legal successor to the society of scholars of the GDR Academy of Sciences, the Leibniz Society is still struggling for political recognition. In 1992, it lost its funding and its office space, which had been provided by the Berlin Senate. Since then, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy has functioned as an official institution for scholars. [More recently,] the SPD-PDS Senate made several attempts to grant at least symbolic recognition to the Leibniz Society (which is now composed of scholars from East and West), but these attempts have all failed up to this point. Now the society's scientific achievements are supposed to be recognized through "financial support" and thus put on an equal footing with "the achievements of other university and non-university social science institutes." Annual support to the society in the amount of roughly 30,000 Euro is being discussed.

Flierl envisions another solution for scholars who were "removed" from their careers after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification, but who are now too old to return to academia. He stressed: "We have to make up for the injustice that occurred, at least symbolically." He proposed an "official farewell after the fact" for dismissed GDR professors, "preferably in the Red Town Hall." He said that it is still necessary, of course, to consider the extent to which dismissed academics were involved in the Stasi system. However, he said that he does not want to act as "the academic police." An event of this sort would have to serve primarily to honor notable scholarly achievements.

The job pool proposed by the higher education researchers cannot be implemented, he said, "for budgetary reasons alone." And surely there would also be political obstacles to overcome: "Here, it is always necessary to take the smallest steps possible." The higher education researchers from Saxony-Anhalt see things similarly. Some of the people who were responsible for closing the GDR academies in the early 1990s now regret the "personal injustice." For example, University of Konstanz philosopher Jürgen Mittelstrass was quoted as saying that "the resource that is intellect was treated with negligence."

Institutes in the Shadows

The HoF proposes base financing for a portion of the "second academic culture" – for scientific institutions that are organized as associations, such as the Berlin Institute for Social Scientific Studies (BISS). The aim is to put them on an equal footing with other organizations in this sector. Many of these researchers have an excellent knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe, for example. Additionally, consideration should also be given to amending the Berlin Higher Education Act in a way that would permit in-house appointments for professors at Berlin universities. This would make it possible for university instructors who were hired as research assistants in the early 1990s to receive professorships.

For Thomas Flierl, however, this is not simply a matter of reintegrating dismissed East German researchers. He sees ongoing inequality between East and West when it comes to leadership positions in academia. "There are still very few East Germans on the candidate lists for professorships that I receive." Among other things, he attributes this to the considerable role played by social and cultural background in the filling of leadership positions. "East Germans lack the relevant social networks and the necessary habitus."

The study describes this problem in greater detail. In a chapter added after the fact, HoF researchers recapitulated the consequences of the comprehensive reorganization of the East German academic community over the past fourteen years. [...] The chapter described East-West inequality in the awarding of leadership positions as the "most serious basic long-term problem." A disproportionately large number of East Germans occupy lower-paid positions. For instance, they hold an above-average proportion of C3 professorships, but a relatively low number of C4 professorships. In German academia as a whole, only 7.3 percent of elite positions are held by East Germans, although East Germans make up roughly 20 percent of the total population of Germany.

According to the authors, this phenomenon cannot be explained by the exaggerated populist theory that the West simply occupied the East and pushed out the qualified East German personnel. Instead, they basically see two reasons why East Germans are so poorly represented in leadership positions at universities and academic institutions. Firstly, a “change of elites” was desired politically. After 1989, there were very few people in leadership positions who had not discredited themselves politically. Secondly, in filling academic positions it was not possible to demand “a direct correlation between the university’s geographical location and the birthplace/hometown of the job holder.” Even though not every Western import satisfied all the expectations, one still had to concede that “in particular the professional deficits of the East German job holders were more pronounced.”

The study and Flierl’s conclusions met with mixed reviews in the political sphere. The proposal to repopulate the decimated mid-level academic ranks at East Berlin’s institutions of higher education was the only point that met with unanimous agreement. The president of the Leibniz Society, philosophy professor Herbert Hörz, remains skeptical about whether this reintegration will succeed. In an interview with the newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, he stressed that many younger academics have been forced to work outside of their fields during the past years, and that this will make reintegration difficult.

[...]

Source: Jürgen Amendt, “Verlierer der ‘Wende.’ Die missglückte Integration der Ost-Berliner Wissenschaft”, *Neues Deutschland*, May 15, 2004.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Dismissed East German Faculty Members Make up a “Second Academic Culture” (May 15, 2004), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-4275>> [May 18, 2024].