

Heiner Müller on the Sell-Out of the GDR (July 30, 1990)

Abstract

In an interview with the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, East German author Heiner Müller articulates the unease felt by many intellectuals on account of the rapid pace of unification. He predicts that introducing the Deutschmark will have problematic consequences, and he sadly reflects on the discrediting of the socialist dream of a better future.

Source

“Now it’s all just Unity Pabulum”

Dramatist Heiner Müller on Intellectuals and the Decline of the GDR

SPIEGEL: “What’s going on here is not unification but subjugation.” That’s a Heiner Müller sound bite from mid-July on German unity. Subjugation requires coercion. Are GDR citizens really being pressured into unification?

MÜLLER: Not at all. They wanted this unity and probably still do. It’s just that they imagined it differently. What’s happening now is economic subjugation.

SPIEGEL: How did GDR citizen Heiner Müller envision unification?

MÜLLER: It makes no sense to whine about some dream that was never fulfilled.

SPIEGEL: But you can describe it.

MÜLLER: That’s not so easy. I have always been regarded as a person who is directly interested in politics. But that’s nonsense. I am interested in writing and some other things, and politics is material, just like everything else.

[...]

SPIEGEL: Mr. Müller, you have always considered yourself a GDR writer, although you were only able to develop your talents in the West. What is the complex relationship between you and this state that is coming to an end?

MÜLLER: It’s real work for me to reflect on that now. I was raised in one dictatorship and grew into the next dictatorship, which started out as an anti-dictatorship with which I could identify. Very roughly speaking, I could also identify with Stalin. Stalin was the one who killed Hitler. After that, things became problematic. I was raised in this first dictatorship in a rather schizophrenic situation: Outside was “Heil Hitler!” and at home everything was okay. This tension emerged in a different way in the next dictatorship. That’s what is strange about it; I learned how to deal with it. I think it gave me a lot of experience as a writer and a lot of very contradictory material. Precisely this black foil of dictatorship and this broken or ambivalent relationship to the state was a *movens*, a motivation, for me to write.

I never doubted that this GDR existed only in dependence on the Soviet Union and that the population here lived under the status of a colonized people.

SPIEGEL: And for certain historical reasons you considered that appropriate?

MÜLLER: You can't really say that, because I'm a writer, not a politician. I could work with it. Art has nothing to do with morality.

SPIEGEL: No, but there is also the person Heiner Müller.

MÜLLER: Only to a certain extent. The longer you write, the more the person is consumed. One point with regard to myself was this: What was useful for writing, totally void of morality and politics, was that we were also living in a Third World situation. Socialism in the GDR in its Stalinist form meant nothing more than the colonization of one's own population. You can still see that today in the subway immediately. GDR citizens have a concealed glance. You can identify them right away as the people with the concealed glance. Even the children. It is the glance of the colonized.

SPIEGEL: Do you mean the situation of oppression helped you, it clarified things?

MÜLLER: There was greater experiential pressure than I could have had in Hamburg.

SPIEGEL: There is another clause to the Müller quotation we cited at the beginning of this interview. "We want to resist" the subjugation. How do you expect to resist in a situation in which German unity is long since a *fait accompli*?

MÜLLER: Let me give you an example. At the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Peter Ludwig – the great GDR patron – just had an argument with his museum directors, who decided: this GDR art emerged in an unjust system, it was painted in un-freedom [*Unfreiheit*]. Therefore, it belongs in the basement and is not allowed to be displayed. That trend exists here, too. Just a few days ago, I heard: GDR art will no longer be shown in GDR museums; it belongs in the basement.

SPIEGEL: So you mean resistance to getting plowed under?

MÜLLER: To the simple equation of culture or art or literature with the system in which it was created.

SPIEGEL: In your view, was there such a thing as a GDR culture?

MÜLLER: I don't know. In literature there were certainly things that were relatively specific to what emerged in the GDR. But it was still written in German, and in the end there was a criterion for whether it was good German or not. In this respect there were never two literatures. Of course, both sides had trivial literature. The one here was state-run and the one there was commercial; that was the difference.

SPIEGEL: What do you view as GDR achievements worthy of preservation? And how should they be saved?

MÜLLER: If I only knew! For example, I was away for five days; I was in France or somewhere. There's a bookstore in my building. In these five days the book display had changed beyond recognition. There were only DuMont travel guides and cookbooks on the shelves. It doesn't have to be GDR books, but a lot of our publishers have published a lot of high-quality international works. None of that is possible anymore if they were printed in the GDR.

SPIEGEL: Because your people don't want to buy it anymore?

MÜLLER: Of course. Sure. My resistance is to the quick assimilation.

SPIEGEL: Isn't the resistance also a bit of a defiant reaction by an offended intellectual? [...]

MÜLLER: [...] I'm not offended.

SPIEGEL: But a lot of your artistic colleagues are, because the revolution ran right past them.

MÜLLER: Where to? I was rather skeptical from the outset. As soon as I hear the word “Volk,” I get leery. It isn’t my “Volk,” my people. I understood very well, especially in the fall of last year, why Brecht always insisted on saying “population” instead of “people.” A slogan like “We are one population,” of course, does not work. It doesn’t have any spark at all.

SPIEGEL: There was also the slogan: “We are a stupid people.”

MÜLLER: Yeah, I liked that. Even better was: “I am Volker.”^[1] One banner read: “Wir sind das Volk” [“We are the people”], and next to it someone wrote, “I am Volker.” We will need the guy who wrote that. We have to strengthen those forces.

But back to the revolution. I don’t think we should look at it so emotionally, so heroically. What really happened there was that a government went bankrupt. Well, the credit chains break at the weakest link, just like other chains.

SPIEGEL: But maybe we shouldn’t look at it all that unemotionally either. A real fortress has been razed. It cannot just be ridiculed with an “I am Volker.”

MÜLLER: It might sound a bit distant, but this *Wende*, this turning point, or this so-called turning point, came at least five years too late. In other words, the substance of GDR society had already been hollowed out. It was nothing but a zombie. The opening of the border on November 9, 1989, came too early. It was an occupational accident. No one was prepared for it. Now it’s all just unity pabulum. And the problem is that the people all got caught up in this revolutionary delirium, which was not a beer delirium at first. And now everything is going so fast that they’re quickly being torn apart into interest groups. My dream would have been to have left time for this unification and to approach it gradually. I am rather certain that the tempo of this unification is being determined by the CDU’s interest in reelection.

SPIEGEL: But also by the people’s interest in getting Deutschmarks as quickly as possible.

MÜLLER: Yes. They didn’t know what they were getting with it. They did not reckon with getting far fewer Deutschmarks in comparison with the people in the Federal Republic.

SPIEGEL: Dreams of paradise in times of revolution are always like that.

MÜLLER: And now these illusions are breaking down. Now the lethargy is taking over.

SPIEGEL: Do you think that a new GDR consciousness will emerge, a nostalgia?

MÜLLER: No, not in the next five years. What will emerge are pogroms, outbreaks of violence, aggression on the streets and everywhere. That will increase.

SPIEGEL: You said that this turning point, the *Wende*, came five years too late. Do I sense a bit of self-criticism in that? If anyone could have precipitated it five years ago, it would have been the intellectuals.

MÜLLER: No, that is not at all the case.

SPIEGEL: Why not?

MÜLLER: I already said what I thought five or ten years ago – here and, of course, also in the West. But I played the role of the clown, the fool.

SPIEGEL: Okay, so no self-criticism, but criticism of your colleagues?

MÜLLER: Maybe also of myself. But it makes no sense to play the Winkelried.^[2] There were always discussions on literature, that a writer has to be a communist first and a writer second. I would say: I am a writer first and a hero second.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Müller, are you a communist?

MÜLLER: I never claimed to be a communist because I find it inappropriate to say that.

[...]

SPIEGEL: And you still could live with communism?

MÜLLER: Yes. I was interested in the tragedy of this socialism. Now it looks like a farce. That is the last phase. But it was a tragedy.

SPIEGEL: Isn't it an aesthetically questionable standpoint to say you love tragedies even if they are carried out on the backs of other people?

MÜLLER: Aesthetically questionable? What does the *Spiegel* live from? It is not only a problem of art and politics.

[...]

SPIEGEL: If intellectuals, if writers were so despised by the Communist Party since the time of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, then why did they throw themselves so masochistically at its heirs?

MÜLLER: Of course an artist needs to have a conception of a world that is different from the given or existing one. Otherwise I think it's impossible to make art. And so there was this final religion of the twentieth century, the communist utopia. It is no coincidence: There are not many great writers or artists who actively promoted Nazism. But incredible numbers of them in all the countries of the world campaigned for this communist utopia.

SPIEGEL: But now that is past, since socialism is over with. [...]

MÜLLER: [...] but it isn't over with. The attempt to refute Marx is over. Marx said this simple sentence: the attempt to build socialism or a socialist structure on the basis of an economy of scarcity will end in the same old shit. That's what we're experiencing now.

SPIEGEL: Do you think socialism has a future?

MÜLLER: Yes.

SPIEGEL: And where is it?

MÜLLER: It lies in the simple fact that capitalism does not have a solution for the problems of the world.

[...]

NOTES

^[1] Volker is a German men's name – trans.

^[2] Arnold von Winkelried is a legendary hero of Swiss history, who is said to have saved the victory of the Old Swiss Confederacy by throwing himself onto the pikes of the Habsburg soldiers, taking them down with his body so that the confederates could attack through the opening – trans.

Source: “Jetzt ist da eine Einheitssoße” [In East Berlin. The conversation was led by editors Hellmuth Karasek, Matthias Matusske, and Ulrich Schwarz]. *Der Spiegel*, July 30, 1990, pp. 136–41.

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