

The Director of the Central Institute for Research on Youth (Leipzig) on the Progressive Alienation of Young People in the GDR (1988)

Abstract

Walter Friedrich, Director of the Central Institute for Research on Youth (Leipzig), drafted a memorandum to Egon Krenz, the leader of the state youth organization, the Free German Youth [*Freie Deutsche Jugend* or FDJ]. Friedrich's memo details the growing alienation of East German youth from the state and calls for constructive countermeasures, such as granting more freedoms to East German citizens.

Source

Some Reflections on Mental and Cultural Processes in the GDR

1. Preliminary remarks

[...]

I think we are at the beginning of a period of cultural upheaval (perhaps a “mental-cultural transformation,” a “cultural revolution”) encompassing vast parts of the world. There are many indications that the Soviet Union, on the basis of the CPSU's perestroika course, will be a major, perhaps even a decisive factor in this global cultural reformation (new ways of thinking, an atmosphere of new beginnings, the assertion of humanist ideals, Russian cultural heritage, etc.).

In any case, we are living in a period of social change that is characterized by great intensity and profundity, especially in the area of cultural-intellectual life.

This, too, will lead us to a reconsideration of central social values and objectives, especially to a re-evaluation of our society as a “dynamic system.” We will have to judge our socialist society more strongly (and not merely in a theoretical-declarative sense) in its far-reaching structural change and development, in its objective requirements and constraints, in order to adapt to the changed reality. Only then can we assure the increased social effectiveness that is desperately needed in many areas—and our own survival.

2. Some background information on the underestimation of mental-cultural processes in our country

It is my impression that the extent and depth of the current changes in processes of thinking, feeling, and acting among the people, among the youth and the entire population, are not being taken seriously enough, are not being registered clearly enough in a political sense. Evidently, the great significance of this change in mentality, this change in basic personality traits (in character), is widely underestimated.

[...]

—We need a very realistic relationship to the reality of mental and cultural manifestations and ongoing processes.

I think that, at high levels of leadership in particular, we do not want to realize reality with all its

contradictions and new manifestations to the extent that we should.

Reports are still being whitewashed as they move “up the ladder” and information is passed on selectively.

[...]

5. On the change in mentality in the GDR

For a long time, we have already been dealing with processes of change in the consciousness and behavior of our youth. These are certainly also present in the adult population, perhaps even more distinctively, but we are not quite familiar with them.

On occasion, I have characterized these processes as changes in mentality, and I would like to interpret this expression.

[...]

I base my interpretation on the hypothesis that there is a syndrome around which the changes in mentality revolve: that is, a shift in people’s self-confidence toward a higher level of self-esteem, a stronger sense of self-determination and self-fulfillment. Such an epochal trend must necessarily lead to important changes in personality structure, in the framework of value orientation, and in behavioral patterns among the people.

I see the following components of the “self-confidence” syndrome (in a first-draft hypothesis; the matter needs further empirical verification):

—Development of the experience of self-esteem, of demands on oneself. [...]

—Development of self-determination. [...]

Sometimes this results in exaggerated anti-authoritarian behavior patterns. The consequences are as follows: conflict with authority figures of all types (parents, teachers, self-righteous functionaries, and media or media actors who lack credibility and offer slogans rather than realistic information); refusal to adulate politicians, artists, athletes (unfortunately also Katharina Witt!^[1]), and other people; general rejection of all forms of know-it-all behavior and the cult of personality.

In connection with this, young people have a critical attitude (which can go as far as rejection) toward formal institutions and organizations (school, FDJ), when the latter fail to take their demands into account (i.e., special interests, needs, ideas, suggestions).

Conversely, this explains the preference and affinity for informal groups, cliques, movements (church, environmental, all kinds of recreational groups). This also explains certain forms of deviant behavior, youth rioting, the rejection of police and other custodians of the law, authoritarian adults. And to some extent also, social dropouts, those wanting to emigrate, etc.

Another, totally different area should also be assigned to this category: The demand for freedom in choosing a partner, and surely also the phenomenon of cohabitation and the high divorce rates here. The greater demands by women, especially younger ones, for self-determination should also be regarded from this perspective—right up to feminist postulates. Also the entitlement to decide for oneself where to travel, what one would like to see. An examination of this phenomenon from this perspective is very promising. Unfortunately, it is not discussed in our country at all, not even among social scientists.

[...]

—Development of self-fulfillment. [...]

This is why young people, and others, are pressing to take on real social responsibility, to participate “voluntarily” in democratic processes, in major and, especially, minor ones. Only this is experienced as positive. Involvement in environmental groups, church groups, and other informal groups, rejection of the formal FDJ work should be mentioned here once again. If a young person’s departure from the FDJ were without consequence, then the youth today would certainly be leaving the organization en masse. In its organizational form, and to some extent in its subject matter and language, it corresponds too little to the changed mentality of today’s youth. They feel that they are subject to too much external control.

—Another component/symptom of the “changed self-confidence” syndrome is the strong desire/need for life-realization. This is to be interpreted simply as another aspect of self-realization. A better term for this should probably be found.

With this, I am referring to the growing aspiration/tendency toward joie de vivre, an enjoyment of life, and more “living it up.”

[...]

—Performance motivation is also altered in a characteristic way as a result of this mentality change. Ego-peripheral motives (that is, value orientations aimed at society or at abstract values) recede further; they lose force and ego-centered motives increasingly emerge.

[...]

—There is still an identification with major, universal-humanist values, such as peace, humanity, solidarity, wanting to help others (helpfulness), equality, democracy, social security.

[...]

But more specific socialist values and goals are presently losing their attraction. The identification potential is diminishing, for example, with socialism as a superior social model, elements of class consciousness, communist convictions and ideals, recognition of Marxism-Leninism as a life philosophy, the concept of the enemy, defense preparedness, etc.

This was referred to extensively in our reports and many examples were given.

Criticism is expressed toward institutions (party, FDJ), groups, and especially individual persons (politicians, commentators, journalists, functionaries, comrades, leaders, adults) whenever they do not act according to expectations or norms: if their actions are authoritarian and unfair, if they act privileged, if they preach water and drink wine, violate socialist norms, or act as superiors.

I am convinced that it is very important to connect the multitude of superficial phenomena mentioned here, and others not (yet) mentioned, to the syndrome of “changed” self-confidence. Although this is not a universal key to understanding it, it does make it basically accessible. This access opens up significant information, options, opportunities, and prospects in the areas of politics, leadership, education, and propaganda.

We need to remain aware of this problem and carry out in-depth empirical research.

[...]

6. Some remarks on the causes of a change in mentality

The change in mentality that is presently taking place in the GDR is extraordinarily complicated and determined by many factors. I am not in a position to offer a satisfactory explanation of the complex of causes (there is no literature that goes beyond an abstract discussion).

Therefore, I can refer only to some layers of causes/determination structures that I regard as essential.

It is definitely necessary to distinguish between global and GDR-specific determinants.

The change in mentality in the GDR is determined by general factors as well as by numerous factors specific to the GDR; these are structurally interwoven. Neither the general factors nor those specific to the GDR should be overlooked.

The change in mentality has unmistakable GDR characteristics. It cannot simply be identified as the “postmaterialist shift in values” in Western capitalist countries, even if it includes some of these traits, though partially in different structural contexts.

[...]

In closing, it should be emphasized: We need a new attitude toward independent, toward creative (and this also implies non-conformist) thinking.

We cannot immunize society and politics so strongly against independent thinking. Here, I am pleading not for a lack of boundaries, but rather for an extension of the boundaries of tolerance.

Inhumane thinking that is dangerous to people and hostile to progress (for example, fascist) is not allowed and must be fought. I am, however, in favor of the creative discussion of various political theses, hypotheses that accord with the search for better and better pathways for socialist society—under the constantly changing conditions that determine the existence of our society.

We should regard our socialist society as still being “on the way,” in constant development, in a state of incompleteness, and thus in its necessary state of transformation and optimization. We should no longer relativize the status quo of our society. This is necessary for many reasons, one of which is the grave change in mentality felt among our population, particularly among our youth.

The population’s identification with our goals and values, with the policies of our party, can only be increased if we manage to establish significant new ways of communicating (information, openness, democratic cooperation) with people. Otherwise, in the next one to three years, the people will continue to distance themselves from us—and on a threatening scale at that. If—in our leadership, education, training, and definitely in our politics—we fail to recognize and consider that today’s GDR citizens (not only the young ones!) have a totally different mentality, a totally different consciousness than ten or twenty years ago, then our speeches, appeals, political information in the media can in no way achieve the expected effect. The people don’t even take the slightest notice of these things; they immunize themselves against them more and more (have many counter-arguments and everyday observations handy), and increasingly respond from a position of confrontation, disappointment, opposition—or give up.

NOTES

[1] Two-time Olympic gold medalist (1984 and 1988) in figure skating from the GDR—trans.

Source: Walter Friedrich, "Einige Reflexionen über geistig-kulturelle Prozesse in der DDR" (November 21, 1988), SAPMO-BArch, SED, ZK, IV 2/2039/246; reprinted in Gerd Rüdiger Stephan, ed., *Vorwärts immer, rückwärts nimmer. Interne Dokumente zum Zerfall der SED und der DDR*. Berlin, 1994, pp. 39–53.

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