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Ends at Odds: Conflicting Conceptions of Post-1989 German Culture

Introduction

Debates about the end of GDR culture and of post-WWII German literature proliferated during and after the events of 1989 and took on increased vehemence in the *Literaturstreit*, the literary quarrel sparked by Christa Wolf's narrative *Was bleibt*. Yet the terms employed were far from unified, much like the national construct Germany that provided the stage and most often the implicit or explicit object of conflict. One central question ignited particularly fierce controversies among artists and literary critics in 1989 and 1990: What culture was coming to an end together with the political system of the GDR? For some it was the totalitarian cultural politics repressing those creative forces in East Germany that wanted to transform their society into a more liberated and humane socialist formation, for others it was the socialist pipe dream itself together with its cultural sidekick *Gesinnungsästhetik*, the aesthetics of conviction perceived to have dominated German postwar literature. Yet another position was determined by the fear of eradication of a specific GDR culture and identity.

With varying emphases, the proponents of these positions saw art and politics as intimately linked within the histories of both Germanies. However, the consequences deduced from this were vastly disparate. Ulrich Greiner's frequently quoted statement about the debates that "he who determines what was also determines what will be" (cf. Huysen 1991, 125)¹ expresses the fact that all interventions have implications for cultural praxis past and future. One of the most hotly contested questions was the proper relationship between cultural and political spheres. The proposed answers were as manifold as the overwhelming number of contributors, so that any critique of the debates inevitably becomes highly selective.

Many intellectuals in both East and West Germany saw the termination of the SED's autocratic rule as a chance to embark on an East German cultural and political "third way" leading away from

both totalitarianism and capitalism. These authors proposed alternative possibilities in the shaping of GDR socialism and envisioned a close link between this process and the cultural sphere. Another grouping of participants in the debate did not share this utopian optimism, but nevertheless saw art as having political functions, if only localized and mediated ones.

In opposition to those who were continuing to advocate connections, mediated or direct, between art and the political sphere, other intellectuals proclaimed the end of the domination of East and West German literature by what they termed an aesthetics of moral and political conviction.² These authors, most prominently the critics Frank Schirrmacher, Ulrich Greiner, and Karl Heinz Bohrer, argued that the political and moral tasks assigned to literature led to aesthetic impoverishment in both German states, and, in the case of the GDR, even to an immoral interdependence of writers and rulers. They saw unification as a point at which the evaluation of literature could finally be grounded on purely formal, aesthetic criteria. However, as Eva Geulen has pointed out in her analysis of the topos of the "end of art" in the *Literaturstreit*,

the very effort to relieve literature of its social conscience after unification confirms, *post festum*, the underlying confidence in art's ability to mirror and even affect social conditions by virtue of its form (Geulen 176).

These efforts, then, betray their own political motivation to defuse the suspected (and suspect) critical potential of artistic form:

They cannot surrender the concept of form because they cannot afford to acknowledge that the effects of cultural praxis are neither predictable nor guaranteed. To acknowledge this would

¹ Translations of all other quotations from texts cited in German are mine.

² As so often in German discussions of cultural production, literature will stand here as a *pars pro toto* for art, since it occupied this privileged position in the debates.

mean to concede that cultural praxis—past and present—also cannot be controlled (180).

The problem that remains to be analyzed is to what extent and to what end proponents of the various positions in the debates wanted to control cultural praxis.

Many participants in the debates about the end of GDR culture and the aesthetics of conviction have noted that the old classificatory dichotomies of East vs. West, left vs. right, art-for-art's-sake vs. *littérature engagé* prove inadequate when analyzing the conflicts and ideological positions or ends involved. The aim of this paper, then, is to provide one possible reading of these conflicts with the help of concepts that do not depend on such dichotomies. It relies on the concepts of the “universal” and the “particular” as outlined in Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s theories regarding the relationship of these concepts within conflicting conceptions of political community. Since the debates analyzed here are inseparable from questions of politics, it proves useful to read them in light of these theories. Both Laclau and Mouffe critique the uncompromising appeals to either particularity or universality at the basis of traditional models of political community and citizenship. A brief discussion of their critiques and of the alternative model they propose, one in which the universal and the particular mutually inform one another, yields some concepts useful for interpreting the German cultural debates and their relationship to political aspects of unification.

The Particular, the Universal, and Political Community

Chantal Mouffe argues that neither the liberal democratic nor the conservative communitarian model of political organization adequately describes current, culturally diverse industrial societies because each model is located at an extreme pole of the continuum between the particular and the universal. Mouffe’s project is to define an alternative more adequate to current social realities than either of these poles:

Our choice is not at all between an aggregate of individuals without common public concern and a premodern community organized around a single

substantive idea of the common good. How to envisage the modern democratic political community outside this dichotomy is the crucial question (Mouffe 75).

In its pure form, the liberal model relies completely on the particularity of each citizen’s interests and goals and allows only for an abstract, legal mediation between these interests based on a discourse of rights. Mouffe criticizes this once progressive idea as a no longer viable basis for community; likewise Ernesto Laclau argues “that an appeal to pure particularism is no solution to the problems we are facing in contemporary society” (Laclau 87). Communitarian thought, by contrast, postulates a substantive common good regarded as universally valid and binding for all members of the community.

Laclau sees such universalizing of a particular ideological position or agent as the crucial self-legitimizing move of both imperialism and communism. In the case of imperialism, European “civilization” was designated as that agent:

So European imperialist expansion had to be presented in terms of a universal civilizing function, of modernization, etc. As a result, the resistances of other cultures were presented not as struggles between particular identities and cultures, but as part of an all-embracing, epochal struggle between universality and particularisms . . . (Laclau 86).

Communism, for its part, legitimized itself as a universal idea and goal exclusively embodied and furthered by the Communist party:

The vanguard party as concrete particularity had to claim knowledge of the objective meaning of every event, and the viewpoint of the other particular social forces had to be dismissed as false consciousness. From this point on, the authoritarian turn was unavoidable (87).

It is plausible to link these broad historical analyses to the context of German unification, which in 1989/90 was routinely represented in metaphors that either condemned it as an imperialist take-over or celebrated it as the defeat of communism. Many

Germans saw the need for a kind of capitalist “civilizing” and “modernization” of the GDR, while there were real fears of losing a particular GDR identity. The struggle over the future of the GDR, however, was primarily between different universalisms.

As an alternative to both an isolating particularity and a hegemonic universal, Mouffe proposes a model of political community in which particular interests can be pursued while at the same time taking into account a universal common concern. This common concern should not consist of a substantive common goal, but of the democratic principles of freedom and equality, guiding conduct not as mere legal, defensive rules but as a positive identificatory project:

It implies seeing citizenship not as a legal status but as a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given. Since there will always be competing interpretations of the democratic principles of equality and liberty there will therefore be competing interpretations of democratic citizenship (Mouffe 75).

The interpretation that Mouffe espouses calls for the most literal application of these guiding principles and for a political identification as “radical democratic citizens” (80). She asserts that a “non-essentialist conception of the subject” (80) is the necessary condition for such a construction of one’s own identity by identification. Analogously, she rejects any essentializing definitions of political community, *res publica*, or *societas* that would obscure their constructed and negotiable character; instead, “it is crucial to see them not as empirical referents but as discursive surfaces” (80).

The concepts of community as discursive surface and of radical democratic citizenship as an active commitment to the radical realization of universal freedom and equality hold some important implications for cultural praxis within such a community. Although Mouffe does not address this sphere explicitly, she argues against “the idea of an abstract universalist definition of the public, opposed to a domain of the private seen as the realm of particularity and difference” (80). This argument implies a rejection of the attempt to restrict art to a

realm of pure, particular, private aesthetics. For Mouffe, the radical democratic approach

allows us to envision how a concern with equality and liberty should inform one’s actions in all areas of social life. No sphere is immune from those concerns, and relations of domination can be challenged everywhere (81).

This ethics can be related to artistic praxis in two complementary ways. On the one hand, art is itself a sphere which should be based on free expression and the undogmatic acceptance of various poetics. On the other hand, the radical democratic conception of citizenship does allow for those kinds of production and reception of art which challenge dominant semiotic processes and discourses and which thus take part in the discursive shaping of the political community. Such a view is compatible with, indeed could profit from, the sharpening of the tools of aesthetic theory. However, it is incompatible with either limiting all art to political instrumentality or relegating it to the position of a disconnected particularity in the interest of pursuing a universal political agenda.

The Discourse of the Nation

The fall of the wall has not ushered in a Western McCarthyist conspiracy against the left and its leading figures. Those who oppose the idea of a “third way” and those who proclaim the end of literature’s domination by an aesthetics of conviction come from both East and West; their motives are not uniform but varied, their views are complex and sometimes even mutually exclusive. The writings of Karl Heinz Bohrer throughout 1990 are a good example of this complexity. Andreas Huyssen identifies Bohrer as the “*éminence grise* of the whole debate” (Huyssen 138) because of his influential theses on aesthetics and politics. Huyssen’s analysis of the fundamental contradiction in Bohrer’s writings is very perceptive. On the one hand, Bohrer legitimately demands literatures that are neither ideologically coerced nor coercive, as well as an aesthetic theory freed from teleological philosophies of history. On the other hand, Bohrer reintroduces a political function for art by assigning to it a role in the shaping of a new German national consciousness after unification (138-142).

Bohrer's political enlistment of art is indeed very subtle. In an essay on the desirability of unification, he defines "nation" as "the symbolic and reflexive constants of a collective historical and cultural ability to remember" (1990e, 81). He then ties this ability to remember to literature by commenting on a French writer's essay on Germany: "It is quite obvious—thus the impression of the French woman looking for Germany so late in the game—that those young men no longer know the names of great poets" (81). It is not clear whether the "great poets" is a quote from the French essay or his own addition, but here Bohrer successfully establishes the link between literature, memory, and national consciousness. The loss of national unity, he suggests, has severed that link:

The spiritual provincialization of the "FRG," whose characteristic symptom has been the moralization of literature and literary theory, is indirectly connected to the annihilation of national unity and the atomization of what remained into political regionalism (1990e, 83).

Here, Bohrer contradicts his own designation of art as a particularity irreconcilable with any universal program. He regards literature as an index for the division of the nation and the decline of national consciousness, thereby opening up the reverse possibility of a new post-unification literature once again participating in a strong national spirit.

From this vantage point Bohrer's undifferentiated polemic against the preservation of GDR culture becomes intelligible. He cannot acknowledge a wide spectrum of responses by German intellectuals to the events of 1989 because such diversity threatens the homogenous national consciousness he propagates, most explicitly in his *Merkur* essay series entitled "Provinzialismus." Therefore, he devalues all historical experience of GDR intellectuals and attributes to them a univocal intention:

I do not believe that the lost lives and careers of the GDR-intelligensia serve for more than painful and necessary psychological individual or group analysis. That will make the unified German atmosphere more stuffy. But their attempt, in cooperation with West German

sympathizing literati and intellectuals, to save as much as possible of the old utopia and the utopian habit individually and institutionally will not be able to close off again the new free spaces (1990c, 1015).

Bohrer denounces the supposed universalizing utopian ambitions of all intellectuals on the left while suggesting that his sole interest lies in preserving the particularity of "free spaces." These free spaces ostensibly serve as guarantors for literature liberated from the grip of ideology and directed towards a sharpened "imaginative potency" (1017). The realm of culture will remain autonomous from extraneous demands. Yet in the very last sentence of the same essay, Bohrer reestablishes the link between culture and politics:

The primary concern is not to condemn or salvage the former GDR culture existentially, but rather to limit possible devastating effects in a political and intellectual [*politisch-geistig*] manner without sentimentality (1018).

Thus criticizing culture has far less to do with autonomous culture than with the politics of limiting certain effects. The context of Bohrer's other writings suggests that the effects he fears are those that could call into question a universal national consciousness or spirit. This spirit, for Bohrer, is the universal substantive common good around which the politics and culture of unified Germany should crystallize.

Ulrich Greiner, another contradictory supporter of a purely aesthetic poetics, denounces this very elevation of the common good of the "nation" for its "unclear and irrational" arguments. In one of his early interventions in the debates (1990a), he rejects the concept on the grounds that it "is not a descriptive, not an analytical term, but one which is charged with emotional and political intentions" (1990a). However, Greiner does acknowledge one concept of nation as legitimate ideal, the "cultural nation" (cf. 1990b) which the East German writer Günter de Bruyn, among others, advocates. For de Bruyn,

the concept is, so to speak, metapolitical. It denotes that the Germans belong together through culture and history, but it says nothing about borders, constitutional

principles, and sovereign rights (de Bruyn 65).

Yet the metapolitical status of the concept seems highly questionable. In another essay, de Bruyn rejects the idea of reforming socialism in the GDR. He warns that “to force every national impulse to the right could soon prove dangerous” (cf. Naumann 28-29). Whereas previously the cultural nation was described as independent of politics, this essay proposes the political concept of nation as the alternative to a socialist GDR. In the juxtaposition of the essays, this independence collapses and the cultural and the political concepts of nation come to complement one another after all.

Such correspondence makes it difficult to regard Greiner’s demand to abandon the “aesthetics of conviction” in literary production and reception as politically innocent. This demand is closely related to Bohrer’s theses on aesthetics. Greiner’s stance is thus implicated in Bohrer’s and de Bruyn’s paradoxical moves both to separate art from politics and simultaneously to enlist the cultural sphere for ideas of national renewal. The criticism of an aesthetics of conviction seems to mark a major shift in Greiner’s thinking about the relationship of cultural praxis and politics. Earlier in 1990 he had confronted intellectuals with an alternative: they could either be “accomplices” in the political and economical “annexation” of the GDR or “wrenches in the works of that which runs or departs” (1990a). His later definition and rejection of an aesthetics of conviction reveals a changed attitude towards politically involved art. Most importantly, such art is accused of a universalizing politico-moral intention:

In the aesthetics of conviction . . . work, person, and morality are inseparable. The text is the moral outline of the author’s self. And the author is identical with his moral intention. This morality appeals to humanity and universality (1990d, 216).

In the very attempt to convict the aesthetics of conviction of limiting and abusing art, this definition does precisely what it criticizes: by proclaiming the identity of the author’s self with a moral intention aiming for universality, it presupposes the possibility of determining the author’s identity and intention. Such a deterministic view betrays on the part of the critic that which he criticizes, namely the desire to

confine art. Further, this confinement to a particular aesthetic realm is implicated in a universal agenda.

It needs to be stressed again that this agenda is not a concerted conspiracy of fierce nationalists—Greiner’s rejection of nationalism is a case in point. Rather, the project profits from a discursive formation thematizing the end of ideological art. This discursive formation can be used to convict most of postwar German cultural production—and especially the proponents of alternatives to unification after 1989—on the charge of producing aesthetically impoverished art with universalizing intentions. If this is a legitimate, albeit generalizing, critique of aesthetics in the service of politics, accusing certain intellectuals of universalizing intentions also serves as a defense against potential threats to a universal national consciousness.

The Politics of Poetics

The desire to enlist cultural production in the service of a universal politics seems to have been at work among only a few of those intellectuals who wanted to see the GDR transformed into a democratic socialist state. For those who fostered it, this desire was a function of the perceived need to oppose the capitalist West with a cohesive socialist alternative. Stefan Heym’s polemical essay “Ash Wednesday in the GDR” provides a striking example of one such negative utopia: “The *raison d’être* of the German Democratic Republic is socialism, no matter what form it may take; it is to offer an alternative to the robber-state with the innocuous name Federal Republic” (Heym 34). Despite Heym’s sharp criticism of the SED regime, socialism, “no matter what form,” remains the substantive common good of GDR citizens, and as Heym makes clear in an interview in the *ZEIT*, literature is assigned the function to spark thought in the readers and thus change them in a “social or socialist or so direction” (cf. Raddatz 13). Such a definition (in contrast to Heym’s own multifaceted artistic production) universalizes one of many possible roles for literature as the only legitimate one, based on the belief that the political effects of literature can be narrowly defined and steered in a specific ideological “direction.”

The author here retains control over the meanings the text generates. The meanings are predictable, and so, in logical reversal, is the author’s task. In an essay entitled “Braucht die Republik neue Autoren?“, Fritz Rudolf Fries predicted and rejected

the choice between ivory tower or bestsellerdom that unification would pose for writers from the GDR (cf. Naumann 56). Instead, communism should remain the basis of a common poetics:

The dream of communism, in other words of a world which provides justice for everyone, this dream is not at an end, just because some parties in some states have demonstrated once again the corruptibility of the human being. If the human being is still the problem, then it is also still our topic (56-57).

Fries lays the blame for the failure of a universalizing ideology on the inability of some particular instances and agents to rescue the ideology and so legitimize its privileging as the substantive common ground (or "topic") for GDR writers, obliquely grouped together in the collective possessive pronoun.

In contrast to this and similar attempts at preserving unity of purpose for the culture of the GDR, intellectuals promoted very differentiated and complex views of the interplay between art and politics. Around the end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990, Christa Wolf offered ambiguous positions on this interplay. In an interview on December 11, 1989, Wolf found art "too painful and also too uninteresting" vis-à-vis the current political upheavals engulfing all thoughts and emotions (139). Here her view seems to converge with those who see art as completely disjointed from politics.³ Yet further on in the interview she describes the unofficial culture of the GDR as having harbored "certain idealist values," now rejected by East Germans for material values, which at a later time might serve to counter "the unrestrained thinking in terms of efficiency and competition" (143). She thus conceptualizes a certain cultural sphere as a sphere of resistance, of opposition to both the reigning communist ideology in the former GDR and possibly to the capitalist ideology in the future East Germany.

In her acceptance speech for an honorary doctorate on January 31, 1990, Wolf clarifies her

³ Though perhaps her somewhat cryptic use of "painful" might point to the possible reemergence of the nexus between art, painful personal memories, and politics which Wolf explored in her text *Kindheitsmuster*.

view of the type of resistance literature under the SED regime was advocating:

For years the literature in conscious opposition had posed certain tasks for itself: to create or strengthen critical consciousness in its readers by naming contradictions which for a long time had been articulated nowhere else; to encourage readers to resist against lies, hypocrisy, and resignation; to keep alive our language and other traditions from German literature and history which were to be cut off; and, last but not least, to defend moral values which were to be sacrificed to the reigning ideology (158-159).

What emerges is a perhaps idealized but wholly defensive view of literature's political impact. Wolf conceptualizes art not as pursuing a universal telos, but as defending particularities against the SED's universal coercion. In contrast to the reductive definition of the "aesthetics of conviction," even moral values seem here to have a particular, strategic place in art in the face of their threatened extinction. Further on in the speech, Wolf indicates that art in the context of early 1990 has been relieved of its task of resistance:

But what about art meanwhile? The post it occupied for so long is vacant. This release from a perpetual excessive demand is a relief, but I also observe irritations . . . (161).

The separation of art from politics is perceived ambiguously, as relief and irritation. Christa Wolf was far from avidly defending the "aesthetics of conviction" for which she was so often cited as the prime example.

Other intellectuals demanded sharper departures from the idea of democratic socialism and art's instrumentalization within this idea. Uwe Kolbe, in an "open letter," rejected efforts such as Heym's and Fries' as a "revived politics of the popular front" and as a sign for the "narrow-mindedness of . . . the intelligensia-turned-social-class" (cf. Naumann 87). Instead of a universalizing politics, Kolbe demands "a state that can sustain dissent. It should feed on the collision of opinions, philosophies, views" (89).

Although the explicit theme here is the political future of the GDR, cultural praxis is implicated in the address. Kolbe admonishes intellectuals, including artists, that they “cannot enlighten from above” (90). This calls for a revision of the conceptualization of art, and Kolbe hints at one possible role art might play by asking: “Don’t we above all have questions ourselves?” (90). This question captures a central theme of many responses by artists to the events of 1989: the right and duty to foster ambiguity. After all, the demand for clarity had been imposed on East German writers and artists for many years, and on both sides of the intra-German border. In the GDR, the SED at first demanded an art that was clearly “Socialist” and later one that at least was not obviously subversive; in the Federal Republic, the more amorphous “public” somewhat paradoxically demanded an art that could clearly be read as hidden criticism of the totalitarian structures in the GDR. So a dominant concern in many interventions is claiming the right to ambiguity, the right not to know all the answers and to question simplifying answers.⁴

Such ambiguity finds its correspondence in the constitutive characteristic of literary texts. As East German writer and filmmaker Helga Schütz reminds us, “language is polyvalent, and just this polyvalence makes for the allure of writing” (cf. Dodds, 145). Thus, literature could become one of the sites where the social contradictions and ambiguities of the unification process, which have been denied and covered up by political institutions and discourses, are expressed and worked through. The task of transforming literature into a part of the discursive surface that is society is delegated to the readers. Art is relieved of the task of stirring readers to political action and transforming society; instead, it serves as a location of the discursive process of forming a community through identifications. The particular reader becomes responsible for the forms these identifications take.

Was bleibt?

In the wake of the fall of 1989 many interpretations emerged as to what was ending

⁴ Recognition and acceptance of ambiguity were also demanded for biographies and histories on the more immediately political level, especially where relationships with the Stasi were concerned.

politically as well as culturally in the newly unified Germany. These interpretations necessarily entailed prognoses or demands for the future forms of political community and cultural praxis. There were those who demanded the complete separation of the political sphere from art as well as those who equated art with political functions; both “camps” contributed to discursive formations that projected political communities around the universal common good in the form of democratic socialism or of national consciousness.⁵ Opinions within these groupings diverged a great deal, however, and often individual authors who shared views on one aspect would sharply disagree with each other on another. Moreover, statements made by the same author in different contexts were often mutually contradictory. Therefore, in view of the complex situation, the following criticism levelled by Lothar Baier at Greiner, Schirmacher, and Bohrer should be directed toward all those who proclaimed a Western McCarthyist campaign or an Eastern popular front in defense of privileges and coercive utopias:

Those who concern themselves with once again establishing hostile camps just after the end of German separation may not mean well for a future society. Such a society can only arise from a multiplicity of individual altercations and convergences, not from the addition of collectives (Baier 1990).

This critique stresses the need for the balance and mutual informing of the particular and the universal. For the relationship between the political community as a discursive surface and art, such mutual informing must be thought as a highly mediated and complex process. Aesthetic theory might be able to contribute to such thought without being coopted for an ideological telos. At the same time, however, it is problematic to demand that art be a “discourse outside of power,” as Klaus-Michael Bogdal (603) sees Bohrer, Schirmacher, and Greiner to be doing. If the “connection between power and writing” (603) cannot be controlled, it should not be denied or

⁵ Few contributors to the debates appealed to absolute particularity as social basis. One, the poet Günter Kunert, rejected the idea of democratic socialism as yet another attempt to forge a community in the age of the isolated subject (cf. Naumann 1990, 97-102).

neglected either. Art's unpredictable polyvalence makes it a suitable medium for questioning modes of representation and discursive practices, for complex mediations of complex social situations, and for examining the principles around which a community is formed.

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