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The Critical Difference: Meeting the Challenge of Multicultural Pedagogy[1]

A curious thing happened to the treatment of GDR culture in college-level language and culture textbooks after the fall of the Wall: it all but disappeared. Where once there was a chapter on the GDR in 200-, 300- and even beginning-level language textbooks, now there is none. We might argue that the disappearance of the GDR, at least from language textbooks, is justified: the GDR no longer exists. In fact, the chapter on the GDR in language and cultural textbooks has been replaced by more contemporary concerns, namely, the problems of unification. But is this curricular change a step in the right direction?

Certainly the inclusion of the current problems of unification in recent textbooks reflects the increasing interest of foreign language educators in bringing the insights of multicultural perspectives gained in this country into the foreign language classroom.[2] As June Noronha shows, the traditional focus of an international education is giving way to the highly charged socio-political venues so relevant to multicultural education: realms of "privilege, dominance, status difference and the *inter- and intragroup dynamics*" within national boundaries (Noronha 53). Such a pedagogical shift provides a more honest social picture of the target culture and expands the possibilities for reflection on and sensitivity to multicultural issues in the student's native society. In the words of Edmund Gordon and Maitrayee Bhattacharyya, such a shift has as a goal "the development of competence in critical analysis, critical interpretation and critical understanding" through engagement with civic issues and cultural differences (Gordon and Bhattacharyya 44). German language and culture textbooks represent these interests of multicultural pedagogy most frequently by including readings addressing women, the Turkish population of Germany, asylum-seekers, and Afro-Germans, and by adopting the "problems of unification" approach.

My thesis is this: deleting GDR studies from the curriculum and inserting the "problems of unification" approach does not serve the interests of a multicultural pedagogy. Without cultural and historical background about the GDR, a "problems of unification" pedagogy runs the risk of succumbing to the pitfalls of any multicultural curricular change based on "inclusion." It ultimately inhibits the very goals it sets out to achieve.[3]

In current textbooks, the citizens and culture of the former GDR are represented almost entirely through the lens of unification. Thus, the pedagogy of difference once animating textbooks that included a study of the GDR has

given way to one of "special problems," namely those of integration and assimilation into mainstream West German society and culture. This has lead to several errors of multicultural "inclusion" delineated by Betty Schmitz in her article, "Cultural Pluralism and Core Curricula."[4] First, because of the presumption of the rightness (and inevitability) of assimilation, mainstream West German society becomes the standard by which East Germans are judged. Thus, former GDR citizens are misrepresented as helpless victims in West German society, oppressed by their status as "Other," but without a cultural or historical identity that might counteract such representation. Second, the resulting representation of GDR culture is unidimensional. Culture clashes are reduced to an explication of clichés and prejudices. Third, the opportunity truly to explore difference and the unconscious assumptions of the dominant culture is lost. Clearly, the problems of unification are important. However, we must remain critically aware of the way in which unification actually invents the GDR by representing it exclusively through the interpretive framework of the victor's history.[5] There are clear pedagogical ramifications if the hermeneutic of unification is our students' only exposure to GDR culture and the people of the former GDR. To reach the goals of multicultural pedagogy, educators must strive for a nuanced portrayal and understanding of culture, that is, for perspectives beyond mainstream culture and society. While the former pedagogy of GDR culture had at least the potential to do that, the present "problems of unification" approach does not.

The study of East German culture exposes students to elements essential to a *multicultural pedagogy*, namely the challenge of incontrovertible differences. A successful multicultural pedagogy must demonstrate a distinction between critical and noncritical cultural differences. Noncritical differences are those that, in a sense, are non-threatening. The noncritical study of geography, architecture, holidays, eating habits, colloquial language, etc., of only West Germany can easily feed into a relativizing and trivializing of cultural difference. Such a pedagogy only weakly calls into question the naturalness of one's own culture and rarely inspires reflection on one's own social, political, or spiritual values. Likewise, the seeming similarity of West German and American culture means that a pedagogy addressing solely noncritical differences could actually fortify ethnocentrism. Students might be led to believe that all difference is noncritical and,

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therefore, "they may use a different hand to hold their fork, but otherwise, they are just like us." In contrast, a multicultural pedagogy that includes East German culture offers the study of "critical" differences that require our students seriously to contemplate the constructed nature of their own culture. Critical differences reveal challenging questions concerning morality and citizenship, privilege and democracy – all questions that a multicultural education should evoke.

The inability to recognize GDR citizens as a cultural minority constitutes the first impediment to a critical multicultural pedagogy. The reason they are not recognized as a cultural minority lies in the political history of the FRG. Constitutionally, the Federal Republic recognized the GDR as a separate political entity, but not as a separate cultural entity, that is, a nation. This disposition, of course, allowed East German citizens who managed to cross the border to be recognized immediately as *Bundesbürger*. After the fall of the Wall, the notion of a *Kulturnation* surfaced once again.[6] Behind it lay the belief that the common cultural history of Germans continues to unite them, regardless of their separate political and ideological histories. No doubt, the slogans of the *Wende* – "Wir sind ein Volk" – contributed to the mytn of common cultural heritage. In both cases, there is the presupposition of an objective history. Put another way, there is the assumption that Goethe is Goethe, no matter who reads him. However, the Goethe that West Germans read is not the Goethe that East Germans read, nor the Martin Luther or Thomas Münzer. The superstructure of cultural, historical and political understanding in the two countries was, in fact, fundamentally different.

Quite obviously, forty years of communism make GDR culture different from the culture of the FRG. Since the collapse of communist countries in Eastern Europe, the specter of communism continues to elicit the following widely-held associations: the Wall (or Iron Curtain) and the concomitant lack of personal freedom (freedom to speak, freedom to travel); poor economies with shortages of goods and services; a surveillance state, totalitarianism, and dictatorship. Every American student can reiterate these facets of communism. Yet, communist culture was anything but simple and monolithic. In fact, it was extremely complex and different from one country to the next.

The very "obviousness" of communism precludes precisely the investigation of difference for most Americans. We presume to know communism – this reverse reflection of democracy and freedom – in the same way that we presume to know our own culture and, therefore, we do not explore it. Its critical difference remains obscured. Yet, for a multicultural pedagogy, the "critical" cultural differences have the most to offer our students. It is the challenge of incontrovertible difference that animates critical reflection and denaturalizes one's own culture.

Since 1945, not even the fascist legacy in West Germany and Austria has carried as much political baggage in the United States as the legacy of the GDR. Even after the Cold War, anti-communism structures our social world to an extent that can justifiably be considered part of our political unconscious. This unconscious defines the limits of our culture; we only become aware of those limits when confronted with critical difference. In this country, anti-communism rests upon an intractable dualism of good and evil: American-style democracy versus dictatorial communism. Since evil cannot even be entertained as a choice or as a viable area of investigation, the possibility of learning from former communist societies is entirely ruled out. Bringing this unconscious prejudice of American ethnocentrism to light is precisely the benefit of studying the GDR ... with all of its warts and ideals.

When armed with historical and cultural background, students can begin to explore the invisible aspects of "real existing socialism." These are the *Wertgefühle* that underlie the visible and form a critical difference to American culture. For example, communist ideology provided the basis of a materialist understanding of history. One of the consequences of that historical understanding was sensitivity to the exploitation of labor and the development of a work ethic based on social interest as opposed to self-interest and profit-making. In an historical era in which the American worker mistrusts organized labor and has been convinced that individual interest is the key to survival in a shrinking job market, students might consider the successes and failures of such radically different approaches to labor as capitalism and socialism. Further, the constitution of the GDR guaranteed its citizens the basic human right to work, housing, and gender equality. While students indeed need an awareness of the problems that guaranteeing these rights created for the culture and the economy, they must also understand the cultural differences produced when these rights are constitutionally assumed.

On closer examination, students will find that fundamental aspects of a socialist world view continue to influence former GDR citizens in ways that are both apparent and measurable. For example, a sense of *Gemeinschaft* is frequently attributed to GDR culture. Eckard Schröter has documented the effect of such cultural expectations on management style in the East and West. East Germans differ from West Germans in preferring a superior who behaves "like a colleague and even cares for his work force," whereas West Germans prefer a more formalized relationship (Schröter 68). "The sense of responsibility for a 'workers' collective,' which also extends to off-duty hours, seems to be less developed ... among the higher echelons of Western administration" Schröter reports. However, the emphasis on materialist

values by East Germans (such as concern for unemployment and affordable food and housing) means that they are much more willing to accept "tighter limits on relevant political liberties" than their West German counterparts, whose interests lie more with post-materialist values such as social needs and personal fulfillment. (Schröter 63).

Property ownership comprises another area of distinct cultural difference. Peter Marcuse succinctly outlines the differences made in the GDR between personal and private property and ownership (Marcuse 80). The concept of private ownership in the GDR meant ownership for use and thus applied only to such things that could be individually used (appliances, cars, tools, houses); land and the means of production were not such commodities and belonged theoretically to the community.[7] This critical difference between capitalist and socialist notions of ownership now complicates numerous litigation problems involving property rights in Germany. Further, the distribution of housing was based on need, hence the well-known fact that there were no homeless in the GDR. While Western observers are quick to equate the ugliness of East German *Neubau*-apartment complexes with social failure, East Germans understood that *Plattenbau* meant cheap, quick, affordable housing for everyone. Thus, the *Wertgefühle* attached by East Germans to *Neubau* were not aesthetic, but ethical. Such GDR cultural visions, as constituted by a moral *a priori*, are typically invisible to us in the United States.

Each of these ideas provides the opportunity for students to understand basic premises of the socialist worldview while also reflecting critically on their own cultural assumptions. For example, analysis of the constitutional guarantee of gender equality in the GDR would allow students to explore the ways in which a state can and cannot affect equality.[8] They would have to ask, "Is economic equality the sole necessity for political equality?" Considering the constitutional guarantee of work and housing would force students to reflect seriously on how our society continues to accept homelessness and unemployment as necessary by-products of a free-market economy. They would explore censorship that issues from the state, as well as the self-censorship dictated by a market economy.

The study of the GDR also provides a unique opportunity to examine socialist and communist ideas that have shaped an entire century and have shaped Western Europe as well. American students are painfully ignorant of the tradition of democratic socialism in Europe; they are unaware that every Western European country has had at one time a democratically-elected socialist party, or that communist parties have been democratically elected in countries like Italy, Greece, and France and continue to be elected to power in several eastern European countries.

Ironically, the critical difference of East German culture can reveal the invisible culture of West Germany as well. By comparing, for example, the SED with the SPD, students will discover how the SPD, the historical source of democracy in Germany, was able to transform capitalism in a way that makes captialism in West German fundamentally different from that in the United States.[9]

Powerful political discourses resist an undogmatic assessment of GDR culture. For example, attempts to reexamine GDR culture are frequently dismissed as mere "nostalgia." However, the fact that 60 percent of young East Germans claimed having "positive memories of the GDR, such as the feeling of 'being at home' and the feeling of social stability" in a 1991 survey does have social and political ramifications.[10] Lacking a nuanced understanding of GDR culture and especially socialist theory and history, it will be impossible for our students to understand why former GDR citizens voted for the PDS in the last election and why a vast number of PDS voters were young people who cast their vote for the first time. A critical multicultural pedagogy must prepare students for the political possibilities of the future.

Paramount in the unveiling of critical difference would be the opportunity to break down ethnocentric barriers that are defined by an inability to see difference 1) immanently, and 2) as potential choice. An immanent understanding of difference – that is, an empathetic and critical knowledge of history and culture – will help students meet the challenge of multicultural education "to identify one's own culture and to appreciate the worth of other people's culture" and ultimately, "to create systems that support a multitude of cultural styles" (Katz 8). Students must realize that there are social, political, and spiritual choices available to them. The future resides in their ability to meet the challenges of a culturally diverse society by helping to create ways of living together in peace. The expansion of choices is at the foundation of critical thought and multicultural pedagogy. The current emphasis on unification as the lens through which difference is examined in the German curriculum does not go far enough in providing our students with the tools for this multicultural understanding and may, in fact, inhibit it.

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Notes

[1] This is a revised version of an essay which first appeared under the title "East German Culture and the Challenge of Multicultural Pedagogy," *Selecta: Journal of the Pacific Northwest Council on Foreign Languages* 16 (1995): 24-28. Since the readership of *Selecta* is by and large distinct from that of the *GDR Bulletin*, it is offered here as well.

[2] See, for example, Ingeborg Henderson, "Multikulturalismus als Unterrichtsgegenstand," *Unterrichtspraxis* 2 (1994): 29-33.

[3] While this essay focuses on GDR culture in the multicultural curriculum, clearly much of my argument would hold true as well for the many cultures thrown together under the rubric of "minorities" in German studies curricula. A curriculum which focuses on the "problems" of minority groups in Germany is in danger of succumbing to the same pitfalls.

[4] Schmitz enumerates several problems of the "inclusion" model that lead to misrepresentation of the target culture. Among the ones she cites are: privileging one group over another such that "paradigms chosen to organize a course define a priori other cultures only through Western eyes;" introducing other groups for comparison such that the target culture is recognized as "absence or negation of mainstream culture;" focusing on "special problems," which, from the perspective of mainstream culture, represent members of the target culture as victims; focusing on only one aspect such that the target culture appears unidimimensional.

[5] Chartier makes us aware of the way in which subsequent historical events (the French Revolution) shape the reception of that which precedes them (Enlightenment). Unification is similarly inventing the GDR through the lens of the victor's history. See Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. L. G. Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[6] See "So viele Länder, Ströme, Sitten. Gedanken über die deutsche Kulturnation," in Günter de Bruyn, *Jubelgeschreie, Trauergesänge. Deutsche Befindlichkeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991).

[7] See Daniela Dahn, *Wir bleiben hier oder Wem gehört der Osten* (Reinbek: Hamburg, 1994).

[8] See for example Myra Marx Feree, "The Rise and Fall of Mommy Politics: Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany," *Feminist Studies* 19 (1993): 89-115.

[9] One example that immediately comes to mind is the West German "dual system of interest representation" in business guaranteed by the Labor-Management Relations Act.

[10] Woods (8) cites a survey by Michael Brie, "Nostalgie: Die Sehnsucht nach der 'ANDEREN ddr,'" *Presseinformation Deutsche Shell Aktiengesellschaft*, 1992.

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