

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH AND FORMATION OF GENERATIONAL AWARENESS AFTER SOCIALISM

Radim Marada

REVOLUTIONS AND GENERATIONS

One thing common to modern revolutions is the hopes they all invest in generations to come. No matter what ideological direction a historical turn is to take, faith in future generations is a reliable indicator of a revolution. Such faith itself provides a regime change with its proper historical meaning; it makes using the word "revolution" possible and convincing. In other words, without hope in new generations, there can hardly be talk of revolution.

In its modern sense, revolution does not mean simply an exchange of rulers or the enactment of some institutional or legal amendments, however dramatic these may be. Revolution always entails an articulated hope and need for deep social and cultural transformation. Without such a drive to alter basic human conditions, we only have a reform or a *coup d'état*. A revolutionary change requires more than just new slogans and organizational shuffling. It requires new people, as the revolutionary rhetoric implies, who have been socialized in the new environment and who are therefore predisposed to face its challenges appropriately. According to Ralf Dahrendorf, in his reflections on the 1989 *revolutions* in East Central Europe, it takes days, months, and perhaps years for politicians, lawyers, and economists to change the basic institutional coordinates after a political revolution. Yet it takes decades for ordinary citizens, he continues, to carry out the ultimate revolutionary task of changing the character of human relations and of basic experience.

Among the advocates of the 1989 regime change in Czechoslovakia, there was a certain reluctance to use the word "revolution" to describe the old regime's breakdown. One reason for this was the memory of the

revolutionary rhetoric of Bolshevism. After Communists had seized political power in Czechoslovakia in February of 1948, the language of revolution served to legitimize state-organized violence and systematic persecutions from the outset. Avoiding such a brutal approach was a major legitimizing strategy of the 1989 historical turn.

However, physical violence need not be the only sign of a revolution, nor is it a necessary one. Even the Communists of 1948 did not rely solely on the revolutionary class struggle to legitimize their takeover. They also invested much hope in the coming generations as the true carriers of a new society – a society rid of its *bourgeois* heritage. Likewise, the public proponents of November 1989 invested much hope in the coming generations as the true carriers of a society rid, this time, of its Communist heritage. Plainly, these two historical events – dissimilar as they may be in other respects – fall under the same category with respect to the explicit expectations that were loaded on generationally renewed nations. The projected historical role of future generations rendered the 1989 regime change one of revolutionary aspirations.

Fifteen years later, the question is no longer whether there was a revolution in 1989. What is at issue for a sociologist today is the fate of the young revolutionary generation of 1989 and the ways in which the post-1989 youth fulfil the hopes that were invested in them when they were children. Is this the generation of new citizens envisioned in 1989, or must we look to their own children – or even grandchildren? (It is, after all, a basic sociological tenet that it takes at least two successive generations to fully inhabit a new environment, socially and culturally.) How do young people of today differ from their parents, who were socialized by and for the old regime? What is their place and experience in the post-Communist society? What are their hopes, perspectives, fears, and anxieties? Do they already represent the beginnings of a new society, one of re-cultivated values, attitudes, norms of behaviour, relationship to the past, and visions of the future? Do they represent a world for which the label “post-Communist” no longer applies? Or are they still just a transitional generation? Can post-Communist conditions produce a generation which is no longer post-Communist? Which generation will finally break the circle and bring post-Communism to its end?

These are broad and difficult questions indeed, and some of them are rather metaphysical. Yet they should be addressed. These questions deserve a critical sociological reflection, assuming we do not want to end up like those devoted Communists who waited in vain for their own truly new and pure generation – until their historical project finally collapsed. Simply sticking with the idea that subsequent generations will ultimately solve the revolutionary tasks can only lead, as it did after 1948, to an institutionalization of the ideology of youth and the frustration of endless waiting.

YOUTH AND GENERATION FORMATION

The following chapters pursue the subject of post-Communist youth from a particular perspective, albeit still in a rather general fashion. At the core of this perspective is the problem of generation formation in a post-revolutionary period. There are good reasons to frame the subject this way. All periods of profound historical change – wars, economic crises and booms, cultural shifts, religious upheavals, political revolutions and counter-revolutions – tend to instigate a heightened awareness, among those who live through them, of a shared historical fate. Such periods or events thus play a prominent role in the formation of what is called historical generations.¹ They provide powerful formative conditions for historical and political socialization as well as evident points of reference for an articulation of generational consciousness. An age cohort becomes a generation both prospectively and retrospectively: prospectively by cultivating a shared habitus in actual historical experience, retrospectively by relating itself to a common past. In other words, dramatic historical events and periods give rise to generations, and, in turn, an articulate generational consciousness provides these events and periods with a distinct historical status. Thus, *e.g.*, it is the members of the young generation of the 1960s who have been most active in the occasional glorification of that period. And it is the members of the aging war generation who continue to maintain the importance of the war experience. Generations need formative historical periods, both as sources of shared experience and as symbols to which they can relate and from which they can derive their specific generational identities. It is largely through generational consciousness that history acquires its periodical semblance.

But how can we speak about a “1960s generation” or a “war generation” at all, including some people and excluding others? Hadn’t some radical students of the 1960s already been born when the Second World War was being fought? And didn’t many of those whose lives had been strongly affected by the World War live through the 1960s as well? What sense does it make to talk about distinct generations in these and similar cases? At least a tentative response to these questions is necessary to justify our concern with generation formation in the context of the 1989 East European revolutions.

Firstly and obviously, “generation” is not a purely theoretical concept. Sociology makes it an analytical category only by way of double hermeneutics (Giddens 1976). It is social actors alone who first understand and present themselves and others as representatives of certain generations. Sociological reflection comes next. It does not create generations; it simply makes generational consciousness more reflective, relating it systematically

¹ As opposed to, *e.g.*, family generations.

to its experiential sources and identifying the forms of its manifestation. Sociology helps to understand a social actor as belonging to and acting out of a particular social context, much in the same way as it does when it talks about class, religious traditions, or gender. Social context de-individualizes specific inclinations, strategies, habits, and tastes by pointing out that these are representative of a particular age cohort. Theoretical reflection presents certain behaviours as signs of belonging to a particular generation, even though the behaviours may not be perceived as such by the actors themselves. It also generalizes its observations by looking for unseen common grounds and correlations in meaning² among disparate generation-related aspects of thinking and behaviour.

At the same time, however, a critical sociological approach will show that some ways of thinking and behaving, considered by certain people to be generation-related, may well be more general and characteristic of a wider community. One instance of this is the temptation to label some behavioural tendencies in the East European post-revolutionary politics and public sphere as "typically communist". The same "straightforward" approach has been readily branded as a sign of the arrogant communist mentality of the older generation, and at the same time has been characterized as a manifestation of the new-style directness of the younger generation. What comes off as arrogance with some appears as sincerity with others – simply as a result of generational associations. This polarized characterization, which has frequently occurred in the post-revolutionary politics and public discourse after 1989, demonstrates clearly that generations are more than just passive, super-structural reflections of some basic (or "material") experience. At some points, generation-based aspects of behaviour and thinking frequently remain unrecognized by the actors themselves. Here we would speak about a *generational unconscious*, to paraphrase Bourdieu's characterization of class (Bourdieu 1984). At other times, however, the social actors deliberately look for and explicitly identify signs of their or others' generational affiliation.

Today, people probably have a more immediate sense of inter-generational distinctions than of class distinctions in their everyday relations, self-perceptions, and self-presentation. What the two sorts of social distinctions have in common, however, is that both social class and generation may, and often do, acquire political meaning and discursive representations. They become a socio-cultural basis for political mobilization and not merely reactive *products* of history and historical experience. As socially effective abstractions or social representations, they are powerful cultural

² Karl Mannheim, in the sociological classic of the theory of collective consciousness and the concept of generation, calls these correlations "morphological affinities" (Mannheim 1964a).

constructs, carrying specific meanings, and as such they may become effective *instruments* of power games. The above example reminds us that generational consciousness is often articulated in the service of a specific purpose. Generations, like social classes or nations, are formed in struggles that involve the strategic creation of meaning.

For a generation to emerge, the shared historical experience of a particular age cohort is needed. It is important to remember that formative historical periods or events affect different categories of people in different ways and with differing intensity. People filter a shared experience through their respective socio-economic classes, gender orientations, geographical locations, *etc.* Most importantly, in our context, events characteristically have a different socializing impact on different age cohorts.

A historical period or event is experienced by all members of a particular community, yet not all of them experience it as a formative experience – *i.e.*, as an experience that determines their generational identification. When we talk about the generation of the 1960s, the war generation, or the (post)revolutionary generation of the 1990s, we specifically mean those whom these events and periods brought to personal maturity, to adulthood. *A generation is formed when a formative historical experience coincides with a formative period of people's lives.*³

This dictum is the basic assumption of the following text, and, as has been indicated, it must be complemented by at least two other aspects of historical generation formation. First, generational self-consciousness arises when an age-cohort relates itself to an historical event or period and recognizes it as a symbolic point of self-reference. Second, for the sense of generational distinctiveness to remain strong, specific sorts of challenges must arise from time to time. Such challenges provoke reactions that reveal an affinity among those socialized through a particular shared historical experience: these reactions are different from those typical for other generations. In this sense, generations are functions of relating present behaviour to a past collective experience.

For the generation defined by the revolution of 1989, we do not know what these future challenges will be, although we could perhaps predict them. As sociologists are not in the business of making casual predictions, however, we will focus here upon some structural conditions of post-revolutionary generation formation. Even this is not an entirely easy task. It would be tempting to wait for a while and then enjoy describing the numerous instances of distinct generational behaviour and self-understanding that will have become apparent, as we like to do today with the 1960s generation in the West or the 1970s normalization generation in

³ An elaboration of this thesis can be found in numerous sociological accounts, including Mannheim (1964b) and Becker (2000).

the Czech Republic. It is definitely safer to analyze phenomena that seem to have completed their formation, phenomena whose historical meaning and significance have been settled and are taken for granted. Still, there are already some indications of a new generation forming within the post-revolutionary conditions, and although we do not know how strong the generational self-consciousness of the post-Communist cohort will be in the future, or what challenges it will face, we can at least attempt to trace some features of its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* former generations. The scope of this task far exceeds the scope of the following text; this is just part of a much broader investigation in the field.

FORMATION OF YOUTH IN POST-SOCIALIST CONDITIONS

In their provocative sociological account of contemporary youth, Claire Wallace and Sijka Kovatcheva (1998) describe, among other things, the changing conditions for the formation of the social category of youth in transition from Communist to post-Communist societies of Eastern Europe. Although they draw many of their examples specifically from Bulgaria, they include other countries of the region, and they present their own argument as applicable to Communist and post-Communist societies in general. The authors provide a complex and instructive picture of those changing conditions, discussing the topic in various contexts, such as education, work, family, youth subcultures, political values, and political participation.

As they approach a more general level of comparison between Communist and post-Communist conditions, however, they tend to focus primarily on the disappearance of the institutional basis of Communist-era socialist youth organizations and youth-oriented policies of the state. They then take Ulrich Beck's thesis of individualization under the late modern or post-modern conditions and apply it to the context of the regime changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The rupture in young people's experience has been made all the more dramatic (because politically accelerated) by the circumstances of regime change. For them, "the collapse of the official youth organizations is indicative of the disappearance of youth as a category for official intervention in the new post-Communist reality. At present there is mainly a vacuum which is being filled by commercial youth culture (no longer condemned) or economic activities. The highly ordered and controlled progression through age-status and transitions which the Communist Youth organizations supervised has been replaced by a diversity of different groups and in many places by nothing at all. [...] The mass modern concept of youth is replaced by privatized and fragmented alternatives" (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1998:76).

The authors do not endorse the Communist youth organizations and policies on any ideological ground. They repeatedly point out the disciplining and oppressive effects these programs had on the subjects for whom they were designed. The problem with statements such as the one quoted above is analytical, not political, in nature. Such assertions seem to imply that, with the disappearance of centralized or unifying political structures – organizations and policies – young people lose the opportunity to develop a sense of representing a distinct social category. It is as if the young people of today wander alone and aimlessly across a chaotic post-Communist and post-modern landscape, deprived of the solid indicators that once unerringly led their predecessors to a sense of belonging: the institutions that nurtured in them the sense of being no longer a child and not yet an adult. It is as if today's young people are destined to use some drug-like institutional substitutes in order to experience a semblance of what their predecessors enjoyed or rather suffered through in reality.

But youth as a social category is not formed within such official frameworks only. It is dubious, from a sociological point of view, to present diverse and fragmented subcultures or consumer cultures as mere substitutes, as things that fill a *void* left behind by the disappearance of *real* institutions in which youth were represented in a political or semi-political and rather uniform way. The new consumer styles and alternative cultures may not make young people any happier than the attempts – largely futile – of Communist functionaries to impose a rigid normative grid upon their lives. But certainly the former are no less real than the latter. They are equally real, at least, in the sense that they constitute a basis for the identity formation of young people as a distinct social category. To argue otherwise would amount to a kind of social substantialism which does not seem to correspond to the experience of today's young people in post-socialist conditions. They still take on and solidify their sense of being young, their sense of holding a distinct social and cultural status within society, in plenty of powerful contexts.

The growing number of alternative and often loosely institutionalized subcultures represents one example of these contexts. The eagerness with which many teenagers seek their own subcultural niche (often through a specific consumption style) testifies not only to the modern cultural understanding of youth as a period of experimentation but also to young people's urge to find new and different forms of self-representation. The "newness" of these subcultural styles may well be illusory, yet that matters little to those who identify with them. The important difference here, compared to young people's passive participation in socialist youth organizations, is that participation in these subcultures involves more intensive feelings and has the markings of an autonomous decision. Testing one's personal autonomy is one of the most important constitutive elements of youth.

It has been suggested by a number of authors that experimenting with new or unconventional lifestyles has, in the past few decades, ceased to be the prerogative of young people. This thesis points to the social decomposition of adulthood, rather than youth, in late modern societies.⁴ However, even in this view, the commonly shared notion of adulthood does not disappear altogether from a late modern culture. If we idealize youthfulness – to stay young, to look young, *etc.* – then that implies that we retain an image of adulthood if only to maintain the distinction between young and not young. We still have a working concept of what it is to be an adult, but it seems to be losing popularity as a behavioural option. Therefore, even if we accept as fact that experimentation with lifestyles has come to be considered less of a deviation for people in their forties and fifties, this does not amount to erasing the distinction between youth and adulthood from late modern cultural sensitivity. This development only blurs the biological definition of the social category of youth, making it more difficult to identify the cultural transition from youth to adulthood as a function of age. (See, *e.g.*, Melucci 1996:119)

This view of the matter is not in sharp contrast to the general argument made by Wallace and Kovatcheva, since they repeatedly speak about the dissolution of “youth as an *age* group”. However, I object to the idea that there is an institutional and cultural vacuum where formerly the unitary and state-sponsored organizations and policies effectively shaped youths’ identity and self-understanding. As I have said, older individuals’ parasitic consumption of the cultural insignia of youth – subcultures, fashion styles, language or slang, artistic taste, new sports, *etc.* – does not make these markers less socially real or effective. They are socially productive in three ways. First, they define the world of youth as culturally distinct from that of adults. Second, they provide a space, a means, and an idiom through which people can re-present themselves in everyday interactions as young or youthful. Third, people can identify with youth culture in relatively autonomous and individualized ways. Therefore, the argument made by Wallace and Kovatcheva should not be read as suggesting that the youth as a social category is disappearing altogether under what they call post-modern conditions, or in their specific post-Communist variation. What has changed are the conditions and means by which young adolescents leave the stage of childhood and take on the identity of teens.

Other examples of a reconstituted cultural market of “youth identifications” might follow, with the same general conclusions as those

⁴ An increasing number of authors have coined this thesis and explore it in various contexts, from Christopher Lasch (1979) to Alberto Melucci (1996). A focused and consistent account of the process of disappearing adulthood as a cultural representation (*i.e.*, the weakening attractiveness of this representation for expressing one’s identity) in late modern societies is provided by James E. Coté in his *Arrested Adulthood* (2000).

drawn from the above case. The more civic-minded young people have had the opportunity to cultivate their own identities, their sense of being different from their older counterparts, in various *peer* projects organized by NGOs and schools. In these projects, involving of course only a small segment of the respective age-cohort, the young participants develop their own perspectives on, understanding of, and approaches to their own problems and issues. They are incited by the very arrangement of a peer group to do things in their own distinct way. Others may opt for going to some of the many new clubs and entertainment venues which cater specifically to youth and thus are expanding the market of cultural expressions for youth to identify with. Programs targeting youth have not disappeared from available TV channels. The difference is that they are now more diverse in style (particularly those oriented to music or culture in general), less openly ideological, and they often are made by young people themselves.

There are still magazines for young people, apparently in greater variety than before 1989. Their plurality is no longer the result of definite segmentation into precise age categories of supposed readers. Instead, the imperatives of the market economy, replacing to an extent the agenda of ideological and moral education, are driving publishers' efforts to provide youth with content that genuinely interests them, at least in the publisher's view. In this way, magazines play a role in the formation of youths' cultural habits, creating needs which the magazines can satisfy. They supply appealing material for young people to identify with, and they often do so in clear opposition to the older generations' cultural and moral tastes.

One of the clearest examples of this is the explicit sexual content of so many of the youth-oriented magazines that appeared in the 1990s. Before 1989, youth magazines were practically free of such content. Afterwards, many people (especially the parents of adolescents) started to feel that they were overloaded with it. Detailed descriptions of sexual practices, experiences, seduction strategies, *etc.* could be found in magazines advertised as being appropriate for fourteen-year-olds. This marketing strategy has various social and cultural effects. The emotional impoverishment of intimate relationships is perhaps the most frequent conclusion to be found within the moral and theoretical discourses. Yet such an effect is not necessarily the most important simply because it seems obvious. It is in such sexual forums as these that adolescents may suspect they have an anonymous ally within the "official" public sphere: an ally that is beyond parental and pedagogic influence, that in a sense normalizes their private transgressions and thus helps legitimize for the adolescents a space of youthful independence and irresponsibility. To put it in another way: the youth magazines help establish for youth a sexual discourse that carries an intrinsic feeling of differing from parental influence by redefining, among other things, the sense of

responsibility (towards oneself) and irresponsibility (*vis-à-vis* dominant adult culture).⁵

After all, there are a growing number of periodicals, outside the mainstream that are made not just for, but also *by*, young people. Many of them do not meet conventional standards of professionalism, but this may well contribute to their "youthful identity" and thus to their appeal. Publications on the Internet are an example of this.

THE AMBIVALENT STATUS OF YOUTH IN STATE SOCIALISM

The social and cultural conditions for the construction of youth as a distinct social category therefore do not disappear with the dissolution of the unified structure of youth organizations and the state policies and ideology oriented towards the Communist youth. A preoccupation with the official side of the youth organizations and policies would prevent us from seeing that, in the state socialist regimes, the sense of being young often formed precisely in opposition to official images and wishes. There was a strong, though rather implicit, understanding of youth as a period in which, on the one hand, one still enjoyed relative immunity from consequences for his or her political behaviour, yet, on the other hand, one was already expected to demonstrate his or her own political stance. Here, ultimately, this meant establishing one's relationship with the Communist regime: participating in May Day parades and other rituals, speaking correctly about the regime representatives, adopting a politically correct view of historical events, such as the view that the 1968 military invasion was "the 1968 brotherly international assistance".

The youth organizations are relevant to our discussion to the extent that they were among the institutional contexts where conflicting disciplinary practices were employed. It was in contexts such as this that the youth tended to polarize into two groups. On one side there stood those more mature individuals who adopted a "realistic" view of an imperfect world, acknowledged the limits for its improvement, and strategically adjusted their behaviour to optimize their own chances. On the other side were those immature individuals who still enjoyed provoking authorities and legitimized their political incorrectness partly by demonstrated naiveté and partly by moral purism.⁶ Their politically incorrect or irresponsible

⁵ Corsten (1999:260-266) writes further on the relation between discursive practices and generation formation.

⁶ In his early work, Richard Sennett (1970) used these terms to distinguish between an adolescent mentality and an adult mentality.

behaviour thus also had a strategic aspect, but it was strategic in a different sense. The latter attitude was “unrealistic” in that it was designed to *avoid personal consequences* altogether, claiming a consequence-free zone⁷ for expressing dissension with the regime. It is primarily in this sense that political irresponsibility and rebelliousness were associated with youthful experimentation. To appropriate Sennett’s argument, I would say that the claim for a consequence-free zone is “a logical use of the powers developed in adolescence to avoid pain” (Sennett 1970:35). Therefore, opting for dissent as a real life strategy – a very rare choice at any rate – should not be equated with prolonging youth, since severe personal consequences were a result of exercising such an option.

It was when young people entered real life, most often starting a family and a career, that they were confronted with the disconcerting choice between contradicting moral responsibilities: that of the moral purism and legitimate resistance associated with youth, and that of the smooth social integration and the secure family associated with adult life. However chastening the educational system may have been, there still was some space for “irresponsible” behaviour. It could still be excused as an expression of personal immaturity and youthful experimentation, and personal consequences were not so imminent. What Pierre Bourdieu says about the strategic construction of youth in general applies to the pre-1989 “socialist” youth, too: “The ‘young’ [...] allow themselves to be kept in the state of ‘youth’, that is, irresponsibility, enjoying the freedom of irresponsible behaviour in return for renouncing responsibility” (Bourdieu 1984:477-478).

However, youthful irresponsibility may lead to a new form of responsibility on those occasions when young people start to see themselves as citizens. “In situations of specific crisis,” Bourdieu continues, “when the order of succession is threatened, ‘young people’, refusing to remain consigned to ‘youth’, tend to consign the ‘old’ to ‘old age’. Wanting to take the responsibilities which define adults (in the sense of socially complete person), they must push the holders of responsibilities into that form of irresponsibility which defines old age, or rather retirement” (Bourdieu 1984: 478). The generational aspect of the tension that grew within Czechoslovak society in the late 1980s represents a case in point. If there were some traces of a generational revolt in the turmoil of the late 1980s, the revolt was not strictly political in nature. Frustrated and outspoken young people knew well that their parents by and large did not support the oppressive regime with any enthusiasm. They played the game in order to avoid difficulties

⁷ The metaphor of a “consequence-free zone” should confirm the widespread and analytically fruitful sociological strategy of dealing with the social category of youth via replanting the issue from a temporal to a spatial image.

with the regime, and they had developed a rich arsenal of rationalizations for such an attitude. Youthful irresponsibility predisposed young people to stop accepting excuses about family responsibility, in which they sensed quite clearly what sociologists would call "amoral familism". "The wisdom and prudence claimed by the elders then collapse into conservatism, archaism or, quite simply, senile irresponsibility" (Bourdieu 1984:478).

BECOMING YOUNG THROUGH PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND PLURALISM OF CHOICES

In focusing upon inter-generational conflict and its metamorphoses, we tend to focus on the political dimension of the process of social construction of the cultural category of youth. Therefore, I have not paid much attention to the other bookend of youth: childhood. So far, I have mainly dealt with the distinction between the world of youth and the adult world, although earlier I did mention the obvious fact that youth is a period of transition not only *before* adulthood, but also *after* childhood. Youth is a relational category in a similar sense to Bourdieu's understanding of social class: it is a product of the process of making distinctions in everyday life, experience, and self-understanding. The social and psychological separation from the "no longer" of childhood is just as important and indispensable to this process as keeping distance from the "not yet" of adulthood.

The point is that the newly predominant, although more loosely institutionalized, symbols of the world of youth seem to make the transition from childhood at least as definitive as did the formalized institutions of state-controlled youth organizations and policies. The transition at age fifteen from "young pioneers" to "socialist youth" was an externally regulated and *automatic* move in one's life-course, with little symbolic importance for the individual. It was prescribed by the institutional setting itself, and therefore imposed from outside. In contrast, the experiences of "going out" and "partying", reading magazines with sexual content, experimenting with one's sexuality, joining a peer project or a particular subculture, deciding one's own style of dress and artistic taste, all provide young people with a much stronger sense of *autonomy*. These experiences signify for them the transition from childhood to youth with much more intensity, even though they are less "political" in nature. After all, while the disinterest of contemporary youth in conventional politics may be from one viewpoint alarming and lamentable, it is, from our analytical perspective, a sign of intensified boundaries between the youth world and the adult world and therefore a sign of a stronger sense of distinction among those who identify themselves with the general cultural representation of youth.

Wallace and Kovatcheva are right when they point to the diversity of institutions representing the world of youth in post-Communist countries. Yet they stop short of considering this diversity conducive, rather than obstructive, to the young people's sense of belonging to a distinct social category. It is both the less strictly institutionalized character of the transition and the diversity of available youthful expressions that intensify the psychological process of coming to identify with youth. Such diversity does not weaken the sense of being young. Quite to the contrary, it validates the social and cultural distinctiveness of the world of youth.

A parallel can be drawn here to the image of religiosity. The sense of religiosity, of being religious, can only be abstractly imagined when religiosity is no longer tied to a particular church or denomination. That is, people can imagine religion without having a particular god or dogma in mind, or any god or dogma for that matter, only when they experience a diversity of religious beliefs and communities, all of them being "equally" religious, even if there are still disputes among them about their respective values. We can only think about people being religious or irreligious in general when we acknowledge and imagine that they can be religious in infinitely different ways. Similarly, the sense of being young, of inhabiting the world of youth, is psychologically strengthened when young people perceive a difference not only between their parents' world and their own but also among themselves, in the form of mutual differences, tensions, and conflicts. The world of youth is defined by internal conflicts as much as it is defined by distinctions between the worlds of childhood and adulthood.⁸

The diversity of competing styles of music, fashion, associations – in one word, subcultures – with which young people identify makes them relate to each other within the same general category of "youth". It is the relatively autonomous sphere of conflicts among youth subcultures that makes those involved feel a sense of commonality within this category. It does not matter that these frays are sometimes implicit, hidden; and sometimes explicit, overt. They are sometimes funny and sometimes violent, sometimes fought by proxy for young people by the media and culture industries, and frequently involve other conflicts at the same time, such as those related to class, gender, ethnicity, religiosity, power interests, *etc.* Whatever form their conflicts take, youth subcultures always assume a common stake that pertains to the world of youth and that simultaneously defines this world.

⁸ The same applies to the process of social construction of generational consciousness, since it is difficult, indeed impossible to imagine a generation as a friction free or homogeneous (in terms of political views, life styles, artistic tastes, religious attitudes, *etc.*) group. Mannheim (1964b) and Corsten (1999) have written on the role of internal conflicts in the process of social construction of generations.

It is difficult to identify one general or dominant stake, but assignations of what is "cool", fresh, incorrupt, authentic, truly moral, *etc.*, serve as examples.

There is a strong cognitive element involved in the social construction of youth as well. The capacity to discern subtle distinctions – between house music and techno music, a freestyle bike and a BMX bike, *etc.* – is an expert knowledge of sorts. Yet this is an expert knowledge that matters to contemporary youth, especially, and to those who want to keep track of what's going on – and thereby perhaps remain youthful regardless of chronological age. Such distinctions are tailored to young people, though not always embraced by all of them. When social importance begins to be attached to such distinctions by young people themselves, and they start to stake out their identities according to these allegiances, it is a defining moment within a youth culture. Conflicts among different subcultures thus amount to struggles over the definition of a common world: a world whose existence is presupposed and thus rendered a social reality. If it were not, there would be no point to the struggle.

In this context, a plurality of options and a sense of autonomy are structural prerequisites of the sense that one is no longer a child. They form part of a distinct experience of the need, necessity, and privilege of making one's own choices. In itself, however, such privilege does not suffice to define the condition of youth. There is one more aspect involved that distinguishes it from the adult world: the previously discussed notion of a consequence-free zone for making decisions. This is what makes youth an experimental period of life, and what ultimately defines the world of youth. It is a claim that adults can no longer make, and can be expressed as *the right to make mistakes*. However implicitly, this right is present beneath the fervour and determination with which young people tend to make their decisions. The point is astutely made by Alberto Melucci in his *Challenging Codes*. "Youth culture", says Melucci, "demands that what should be relevant and meaningful is the here and now, and it claims for itself the right to provisionality, to the reversibility of choices, to the plurality and polycentrism of individual lives and collective values. For this reason it inevitably enters into conflict with the requirements of a system centred around the need for predictability, reduction of uncertainty, and standardization" (Melucci 1996:122).

ACCELERATED GENERATION FORMATION: FROM PERSONALISM TO MERITOCRACY

Let us now return, by way of a conclusion, to the issue of generation formation in a post-socialist environment. For it is through these internal controversies, across different branches and levels of youth subcultures, that

young people, at certain critical points, start to sort themselves out along a generational line, and the precocious among them begin to pressure others to participate in the world of adults. Or these others, of their own accord, start to recognize that they have less and less personal stake in the world of the youth. The stakes at the centre of subcultural clashes are less compelling to them, and other priorities take their place. They may experience a state of alienation, and start to dissociate from the young generation. This is of course an ideal-typical depiction of the transitional process, which is difficult to pinpoint, not only from a theoretical point of view but also for the social actors themselves. It is hard to say when this transition is complete. Some people seem to get stuck in this phase: an endless struggle for personal maturity. Yet, what is important for the individual's self-understanding is that scattered signs of one's leaving the life stage of youth are nevertheless perceptible, as personal dilemmas, to those who undergo such transition, and sometimes dramatically. It is the personal experience of such transition that nurtures in individuals the sense of a generational divide, and at such biographical points individuals tend to reflect upon their generational affiliations.

One condensed example of the process of generational differentiation was occasioned by the Slovak TV2 channel on June 2, 2004, in a program called *Under the Lamp*. In this discussion program, young people were invited to reflect upon their experience of the post-revolutionary times. All involved in the discussion looked youthful, although their ages ranged from 20 to 40. During the extended discussion, a significant division emerged between the older participants and their younger counterparts. Yet, age *per se* was not the most important determinant of their stances. What mattered most was the way they experienced, in personal terms, the events of the 1989 regime change and the ensuing political developments. In a face-to-face confrontation, and in a setting stimulating generational self-reflection, the participants illustrated a general trend in generation formation in post-revolutionary times, a trend that can be observed far beyond discussions of that kind.

The shift in cultural tastes was one of the points brought up during the discussion, as was the growing diversity of styles and subcultures. For the older participants, especially, this diversity contrasted with the situation before 1989, when there was a much higher degree of uniformity in both the official and the underground cultures. There were other more important differences, as well, between the generational cohorts.⁹ The discussion

⁹ One of the older participants perceptively labeled these generational cohorts as an "ORF generation" of yesterday vs. an "MTV generation" of today, referring in the first case to the Austrian state TV as the paradigmatic, because almost exclusive (and quite unsatisfactory from today's perspective) window to the world young people once sought.

specifically focused on the role of young people in the 1989 revolution and on their abilities and opportunities to take advantage of the political changes they had helped to initiate and realize. The differing responses to this question highlight the difference between the two age-cohorts in a way that is highly relevant for my present argument, because they articulate two distinct generational sensitivities after the regime change of 1989. Two age-cohorts present themselves to us as differing in their perceptions of history, in the kinds of frustrations they experience, and in their understanding of and relation to authorities. For convenience's sake, let us call the older age-cohort the revolutionary generation and the younger one the post-revolutionary generation.

Generally speaking, the revolutionary generation harbours a continuing obsession with the successes and, even more so, the failures of the revolutionary project. This generation is simply attached to the revolution of 1989 in a much more intimate way than the younger one; indeed, it is defined by it. It is only they, for example, who *can* legitimately use the popular catchphrase "stolen revolution" to express their own generational experience, although many of them refuse to adopt such a pessimistic view. For them, personal and professional opportunities are more directly tied to the revolution, and lost opportunities are tied to the revolution's failures. For the post-revolutionary generation, opportunities are already present or absent in the system they live in, and they tend to take the system as a given. In dealing with members of older generations, the revolutionary generation tend to pay more attention to personal history than the post-revolutionary generation, who are more sensitive to present behaviour and performance instead.

These prototypical generational attitudes reflect changes in the general social milieu within which the two age-cohorts were socialized. The formative experience of 1989 made the older generation's characteristic sensitivity past-oriented, and their experience of socialization caused them to adopt a more personal attitude towards the adult world. Those who were already in their early twenties by 1989 had experienced a historically specific period of transition into the world of adults compared to those growing up in the 1990s. It was a part of the formers' general experience – as a reaction to the disciplining pressures and the complementary claim for respect within the "consequence-free zone" of experimental political transgressions – that the world of adults was largely perceived through the personal criteria of moral integrity. The institutional rules could not provide such a "zone"; however, individuals holding respected positions (in schools, workplace, local administration, *etc.*) could.

This environment generally accentuated the personal qualities of the inhabitants of the adult world for the youth, which had an important impact on the character of inter-generational relations formed in their

mutual interaction. The revolutionary encounters of late 1989 at schools, universities, or places of work then represented a condensed and intensified expression of this divide. While young people's negative perception of the world of adults may have been present in somewhat implicit terms before 1989, the revolutionary upheaval caused it to be articulated in its full strength. On a general level, the adult world was perceived (not only by young people) as morally corrupt, paralyzed by past compromises and animosities, and therefore functionally ineffective in bringing about the expected and hoped for social change. In practical politics of the revolutionary time, young people in schools and places of work may not have played a decisive role in bringing the local Communist power down. All the same, they were incited by the supportive climate to take part, and when they did they often adopted a moral-personal view of adults. One of the major tasks of the time was to sort those in higher positions who could still be trusted from those who were too much compromised by their active support of the oppressive regime. This attitude towards the adults combined *moralization*, as the young people disassociated themselves from the morally corrupt generation of their parents, and *personification*, as this generation still had a direct experience with people's behaviour in pre-1989 institutions.

For the revolutionary generation, personified moral principles thus represented a platform on which it constituted its relationship towards the world of adults - *i.e.*, towards the older generations - in a stronger sense than for the post-revolutionary generation. They could hardly base their claims for positions in the world of work and politics on meritocratic principles, since neither their education nor their political experience qualified them for it. They may have not known exactly what to do, but they did know things had to be done differently. Therefore, it was they who should be trusted to pursue a new political course sincerely. Sincerity and trust were their rebuttal to criticisms from the other side that they were too inexperienced. With this argument they could legitimize their claims for positions in political institutions, as understood in a broad sense: not only positions in state administration and political parties but also in university senates and other boards, in NGOs, *etc.* I say they *could*, since of course not every young person did so (though many actually took such positions immediately after 1989). Such an argument, drawing on the general revolutionary hopes invested in young generations, served as a cultural opportunity structure for them. They were enabled to use it as a powerful legitimization of their active involvement in revolutionary changes and post-revolutionary developments.

As the previously mentioned TV discussion showed (and there are many other examples of such self-reflection of the revolutionary generation), what worked for the revolutionary generation as a legitimizing tool in

relation to the older, "normalized" generation has proven to be a handicap in their relations with the younger, post-revolutionary generation. The fact that young people growing up during the 1990s, especially the late 1990s, have enjoyed what is in many ways a better education – including English, computer training, classes less sullied by ideology, new subjects and approaches, travel opportunities, *etc.* – has been particularly stressed by the generation of their immediate predecessors from the late 1980s. The older generations of adults, when asked about the youngsters, generally prefer to focus on their moral impoverishment and other such judgments: "we were not like them". The revolutionary generation distinguishes itself from the post-revolutionary one by instead stressing the advantageous situation of their successors, emphasizing that they have been socialized in a society more open than they themselves could have imagined at that age. It is also through such competing perceptions of their different socialization experiences that the revolutionary and post-revolutionary age cohorts distinguish themselves from each other and form distinct generations.

In differing conditions of growing up, the prevailing sense of authority is different as well. The previously discussed stereotyping of adults by the revolutionary generation did not amount to categorical alienation from them, at least at the early stage of adolescence. It rather led to an increased sensitivity to the personal qualities of specific adults. In this atmosphere, the prevailing stance towards adults was to distinguish the good ones from the bad ones on moral grounds. This attitude, again, found its tangible expression immediately after the regime change in 1989. Contemporary youth seem different. They individualize less in judging about the adult world, which is indicative of their less moralistic, more competitive relationship with the world of adults in general. They dream not about replacing the morally degenerate but about overtaking the professionally less competent. They see an advantage in sticking to meritocratic principles and clear rules of the game rather than invoking moral principles and issues of personal trust in an unsettled environment.¹⁰

It may be said that I have focused only on one segment of the young population, the better educated one, and that I have neglected working class youth in my argument. This is true, and should be noted. Yet, if we

¹⁰ Petr Macek, a Czech psychologist, has observed a complementary shift in trends of identity formation, comparing adolescents of the early 1990s and adolescents of the late 1990s. He stresses that the later adolescent cohort is not less normatively oriented than the former one in how young people perceive themselves. The point is, however, that the norm is not set by parents or authorities but by a more general idea of justice. Contemporary adolescents do not want to be like someone else, they would prefer to be excellent according to general criteria. Macek concludes: "The self-representations [according to parents and according to authorities] were [even] more important for the post-totalitarian generation than they were for contemporary adolescents" (Macek 2002:9).

speaking about a generation in terms of the whole age-cohort, we can hardly avoid the question of who is culturally dominant within this age-cohort and thus in a position to define the generation in general, despite of the internal clashes or conflicts. On the one hand, we would find signs of similar generational distinctions among the working class youth as well, such as a somehow more creative adaptation to the uncertainties of the labour market (psychological coping with unemployment, willingness to travel for work abroad or change their qualification, etc.) by the 'younger youth' than by their older counterparts. Also, it has been generally observed in westernized societies for decades that the working class, while maintaining certain cultural tendencies of its own, tends nevertheless to adopt the strategies and perceptions articulated within the better educated classes. On the other hand, it would not be a great surprise if we realized that the sense of generational distinctions is after all less pronounced among the working class than among other strata of the same society. These remarks certainly are not intended to do away with the question of class differences within one age-cohort, but they at least partly justify the approach employed here.

There is still another important feature of the post-1989 generation formation to be found when we focus upon the better educated youth. The exponentially growing rate of university attendance in the past fifteen years has had a significant impact on how young people position themselves along generational lines. On the one side, the sense of superiority has weakened for students and fresh graduates. There are simply too many of them already, and so what may be a source of pride for their parents, relatives and older neighbours, often is not so for them, especially the more they sense that a better education will not automatically lead to a job, much less a better one. On the other hand, they feel increasingly more competent when comparing themselves to the older generation settled in the labour market. While for the older revolutionary generation moral integrity is a component of professional competence, for the younger, post-revolutionary generation professional competence is a component of morality.

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“The Taste Remains”: Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany

Jonathan Bach

Ten years after German reunification, a relic from the past appeared in an industrial corner of what was once East Berlin: an original “Intershop.” Part of a chain of state retail establishments set up by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for hard currency sales, the Intershop had formerly served as a type of duty-free store for Western time travelers on their rare visits to the world of the East. In socialist days, these stores stocked scarce consumer and luxury items such as chocolate, electronics, and perfume. For all but the privileged few, these shops were a constant reminder of not only the material failings of the GDR economy, but also the incongruity of the socialist ideal with the state’s own hard currency-seeking activities.

Today’s Intershop is a distorted commentary on the events of the last ten years: old GDR products are offered that, in some cases, are now almost equally as scarce as the Western goods once were. The rebirth of the Intershop can be traced to a 1999 exhibition, conceived by two western Germans, on everyday life in the socialist East. The decision to house the exhibit in an old Intershop worked in accordance with the show’s emphasis on design, as the structure was essentially a kind of transportable barracks, easily assembled or stored and easily recognizable to easterners and westerners alike.¹ The exhibit sought to capture the

1. This particular Intershop possessed historical significance as part of the store once located at the famed Friedrichstrasse border station; it was incongruously reassembled nearly ten years after unification in a parking lot amidst stolid warehouses in an industrial quarter of former East Berlin.

material culture of a rapidly vanishing era through commercial products and quotidian accoutrements. Inspired perhaps by these historical and aesthetic sensibilities, visitors consistently attempted to purchase the items on display. To accommodate a demand for items that, at that time, could only be found in flea markets or wholesale warehouses, the curators-turned-owners split the Intershop into a historical exhibit and a version of its original role as a retail shop. From senior citizens seeking familiar products to young, western collectors of kitsch, visitors came to peruse the shelves for GDR brands and memorabilia.²

The new Intershop arrived on a wave of *Ostalgia*, by now a household word for the perceived nostalgia for the East (*Ost*) that presents itself in the form of theme parties, newly revived products, and a general flowering of things eastern. If, shortly after unification, East Germans famously abhorred anything made in the East (even milk and eggs) in favor of items from the West, ten years later the situation is substantially reversed. *Ostprodukte* (East products)—everyday items from the GDR that are still or once again available—have been making a comeback. These goods consist especially of foodstuffs (e.g., chocolate, beer, mustard) and household products such as the beloved dishwashing detergent Spee. Some of these items are available in GDR specialty shops, others in ordinary grocery stores displaying the sign “we sell East products,” and most can be found on the Internet.

In conversations with Germans the newfound popularity of former GDR products usually appears as that ephemera of a questionable nostalgia evoked by the very term *Ostalgia*. The term embraces a spectrum of colloquial usage that is both pejorative and playful. When referring to the habits of easterners, *Ostalgia* confirms a widespread western image of East Germans as deluded ingrates longing pathetically (if understandably) for the socialist past. Yet when the subject is the knowingly ironic westerner (or the “sophisticated” easterner) enjoying the

The new location (Ehrenbergstrasse 3–7) itself bespeaks the clashing aesthetics of the old and new East Berlin, for the once forbidding warehouses and factories of the district have been renovated into chic office space, leaving the old Intershop forlorn and shrunken amidst postmodern facades and new construction.

2. The curators originally sought to make fun of the *West* by calling the shop *Kaufhaus des Ostens* (KaDeO, or Department Store of the East) as a conscious satire of the famous *Kaufhaus des Westens* (KaDeWe, or Department Store of the West) in West Berlin. A letter from KaDeWe’s lawyer convinced the curators to change the name, and a similar legal problem enjoined their second choice, *Kaufhalle des Ostens* (Shopping Hall of the East). So it was back to the GDR and Intershop. The official name, Intershop 2000, is presumably in deference to the large electronics chain store that uses the name Intershop.

retro aura of GDR era design, Ostalgia appears as a (p)ostmodern artifact valued precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past. Thus I see Ostalgia as simultaneously two forms of nostalgia, forms that are similar to the distinctions Marilyn Ivy (1995) discerns in relation to nostalgia in Japan: a “modernist” nostalgia (see Jameson 1991: 19) in former East Germany and a “nostalgia of style” primarily (but not exclusively) in the West.

“The Taste Remains”

The production and consumption of *Ostprodukte* function as the main symbolic locations for the crystallization of these two types of nostalgia. In the case of modernist nostalgia, the consumption of *Ostprodukte* appears as a form of production itself—a reappropriation of symbols that establishes “ownership” of symbolic capital or what Michel de Certeau (1984: xiii) calls a “manipulation by users who are not its makers.” In the nostalgia of style, *Ostprodukte* constitute floating signifiers of the “neokitsch” that undermine consumption as an oppositional practice by at once turning the consumer *into* the market and the goods into markers of personal ironic expression.

Modernist Nostalgia

Nostalgia is colloquially a form of longing for the past, but its modernist variant is less a longing for an unredeemable past as such than a longing for the fantasies and desires that were once possible in that past. In this way, modernist nostalgia is a longing for a *mode* of longing that is no longer possible. In the GDR, the socialist projection of a harmonious future, in which the people’s hard work would produce a utopian state, became fused with images of the West garnered largely through the western television shows so avidly watched by East Germans, in which a similarly fictional world exuded the appearance of living in accord with one’s material surroundings. This fusion created a desire split temporally (into the future) and spatially (onto the West). In an insightful article Milena Veenis (1999: 86) carefully shows how

the beautiful material [East Germans] saw [in the West], with its harmonious aesthetic compositions and its tangible, soft and sensuous characteristics, somehow seemed to be the concrete realization and the ultimate fulfillment of all the beautiful-sounding but never-realized (socialist) promises about the Golden Future, in which we would all have a fully developed Self, while living in complete harmony with each other.

Thus GDR longing was premised on an unattainable object of desire, the “fully developed Self” promised by both socialism *and* western materialism. The long-

ing for a socialist utopia was therefore perversely connected to a fetishism of western material culture. The sudden possibility of unification in 1989 and 1990 held the incredible promise of instantiating these temporal and spatial fantasies. The inability of unification to act as the *Aufhebung* (sublimation) of the socialist-trained and capitalist-propelled desire for harmony resulted in a form of postunification nostalgia in the East that has as its object not the GDR itself, but the longing associated with the GDR. What had been a frozen aspiration for an indefinitely deferred future shifted to nostalgia for that aspiration.

Nostalgia for the loss of longing is part of a more general sense of loss experienced by the citizens of the former GDR, a loss that Gisela Brinker-Gabler (1997: 265) describes as a dis/re/location from Germany to Germany, "a rupture of the collective East German subject and the individual subject—which is also a rupture of language—and a replacement in a reunited Germany with new conditions of experience." The GDR was a leader among Eastern bloc nations in technology and industry. Even during the revolutions of 1989 and 1990 the GDR seemed to be the winner, literally "becoming western" overnight while its socialist neighbors could only dream of such transmogrification at the end of a long path.³ But once incorporated into the West, citizens of the former GDR were faced with a clear subordinate status. The high rate of unemployment, lower wages, and social anomie that pervaded the East soon after unification were at first viewed as transitional effects but quickly became stubborn markers of eastern Germany's relative position. East Germans, as a representative article in a respected western German journal put it, "have learned to live with the fact that they are second-class citizens, and will remain so for the foreseeable future" (Pollack and Pickel 1998: 23).⁴ This is an astonishing admission of the failed promise of unification to bring the East up to the level of the West. In this context, it is hardly surprising that eastern Germans would not be content with the "fact" of their second-class station. Articulating an East German identity, however, is a precarious task, since the East firmly occupies the discursive space of

3. East Germany became an instant member of the European Union through its accession to West Germany. But more than ten years after the end of socialism, the other former Eastern bloc countries have yet to join the EU despite ongoing negotiations.

4. It is usually the East that is blamed for not assimilating quickly enough for a variety of reasons, including the GDR's persistent ties to an authoritarian past overcome by the West and the area's lingering trauma from forty years of socialist socialization. The Western understanding of what is "wrong" with the East stems from a Western double fiction during the Cold War, a fiction, as John Borneman (1998: 109) describes it, "of the East as a spatially distinct and antithetical Other outside the territorial West, and of the East as a lost part of the West, rightfully belonging inside the West and needed for completion of the self."

inferiority and, practically speaking, western Germans dominate the economic, cultural, and political landscape of the East.

"The Taste Remains"

The East Chooses

It is here that *Ostprodukte* can help to take the psychological edge off of the western advantage in unification. Daphne Berdahl (1999: 140) notes that while the eastern German seeks "oneness" with the western German, the westerner has no need of such unity and is, in fact, empowered to deny it. *Ostprodukte* work precisely to reverse this: by refusing the self-evidently superior western goods for the "good old" East German products, it is the easterner who is seeking to use the market symbolically against the West.

This reversal is apparent in common advertising slogans found throughout the former East:⁵

Kathi baked goods: *Der Osten hat gewählt* (The East has chosen)

Club Cola: *Club Cola: unsere Cola* (Club Cola, our Cola)

Hurra, ich lebe noch (Hurrah, I'm still alive)

Von einigen belächelt, ist sie doch nicht tot zu kriegen: Club Cola—die Cola aus Berlin (Belittled by some, it can't be killed: Club Cola—the Cola from Berlin)

Super Illu (newspaper): *Eine von uns* (One of us)

Rondo Coffee: *Natürlich war nicht alles schlecht, was wir früher gemacht haben* (Naturally not all things we made before were bad)

Juwel cigarettes: *Ich rauche Juwel, weil ich den Westen schon getestet hab'.*

Eine für uns. (I smoke Juwel because I already tested the West. One for us.)

Karo cigarettes: *Anschlag auf den Einheitsgeschmack* (Attack on uniformity of taste)

f6 cigarettes: *Der Geschmack Bleibt!* (The taste remains!)

This discursive terrain is immediately recognizable to Germans, East and West. These slogans carry a sharp sense of double entendre that plays to the bittersweet encounter with the once-golden West and that can be said to fall into three main

5. On these and other slogans see Lay 1997 and Roth and Rudolf 1997. All of these goods and dozens more can now be purchased on-line from a variety of eastern German ventures. The earliest of these companies, www.ossiversand.de, specialized in *Ostpakete* or gift packages of eastern goods to be sent (presumably) to easterners now living in the west. It is a highly ironic reversal on the *Westpakete* (West packages) that western relatives used to send to their eastern brethren for holidays and special occasions.

tropes of critical significance. The first, exemplified by Kathi and Juwel, implies that things were better in the East and that the West failed to live up to expectations: The baked goods advertisement "The East has chosen" evokes the scorn that easterners heap on western bread rolls, whose hard crust contains a light interior that they find airy and "empty" in comparison to the hearty rolls of the East. Juwel is far less subtle with its slogan "I already tested the West." This is wordplay with a double target, countering at one level the popular cigarette brand "West" with its infamous and ubiquitous advertising slogan "Test the West" and at another level providing a sarcastic rejoinder to the thinly veiled unification subtext of becoming western by buying western goods. The second trope, represented by Karo and F6, deepens the disillusionment and turns bitter. Karo's "attack on the uniformity of taste" is a harsh pun, since in German "uniformity of taste" also means "the taste of unity." F6's slogan "the taste remains" can be read as a terse answer to Christa Wolf's controversial book about the demise of the GDR, entitled *What Remains* (1995). Finally there is the sense of victimhood and survival in slogans such as Club Cola's "Hurrah, I'm still alive," with its eerie echoes of a post-1945 slogan, *Hurra, wir leben noch* (Hurrah, we're still alive).

The *Echt* and the *Ersatz*

These products not only re-create a romanticized East Germany; they additionally hark back to a time when the relation of the *echt* (the real) to the *ersatz* (the substitute) seemed coherent. The "real" used to be considered characteristic of western products: real coffee instead of chicory, real orange juice instead of orange flavor, and so on. In this context, even empty soft drink cans famously assumed fetishized roles (after all, Coca Cola is "the real thing"). The authentic product, linked to the authentic self, was located in the West. Its relics consistently seeped into East German consciousness through advertisements on western television, gifts from western relatives, and various accounts of visits "over there" by the fortunate few.

This view of authentic products is closely connected to East Germans' experience with commodity fetishism. In spite of official proclamations of victory over commodity fetishism, if anything the socialist system worked to constantly deprive and stimulate consumer desire in an ongoing cycle. This cycle had its roots in the relationship between the first and second economies, or, more specifically, between the official circuits of exchange and those of the black market. The second economy was not merely parasitic on the first but co-constitutive: without the black market, the official economy would have completely collapsed.

The unofficial, if not outright illegal, economy helped to contain the dynamics of stimulation and deprivation caused by the inability of central planning to deliver the promised goods. Yet it also dispersed the market into all aspects of life. Valuable deals, connections, and opportunities could present themselves everywhere and at a moment's notice (as in the often told anecdote about standing in a line without bothering to ask what it was for, since if there was a line the items at its origin must be scarce and therefore good), thus creating pent-up consumer desire.⁶

The transformation of eastern goods from *ersatz* to *echt* occurred in the aftermath of the apotheosis of this consumer desire: unification. "Socialism had trained them to desire," observes John Borneman (1991: 81), "capitalism stepped in to let them buy." The sense of unreality and fantasy brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall was heightened by the conflated longing, described above by Veenis, for a socialist utopia with a western face. The first months of unification inaugurated a consumer frenzy in the true sense of the word, in German literally a consumer high (*Konsumrausch*).⁷ Intoxicated East Germans used the medium of exchange to immerse themselves in the West.

Unification, of course, did not herald a hybrid Golden Future where fully developed selves lived in harmony. Quite the opposite. The advent of unscrupulous salespersons, scams, and the planned obsolescence of glitzy products quickly dispelled the illusion of material satisfaction as a stage toward a harmonious state of being. Accordingly, most easterners discarded the briefly (albeit intensely) held notion that western goods were ipso facto *echter* than eastern goods. By the end of 1991, nearly three-quarters of East Germans polled already expressed a preference for eastern products (Lay 1997). This set the stage for the ultimate reversal: GDR goods came in many instances to seem *more* authentic than their contemporary counterparts. The products from the old GDR context became associated with a form of symbolic capital once reserved for the seemingly superior products of the West insofar as they were thought to express an authentic, unalienated relation of self to product.

6. On the role of the second, "black" economy as essential to the functioning of the first, "legitimate" economy, see Verdery 1996. On the constant stimulation of consumer desire and its postsocialist effects, see also Borneman 1991, 1998, as well as Berdahl 1999, chap. 4.

7. The German word *rausch* means intoxication; hence consumer frenzy is literally consumer intoxication. This *rausch* is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's (1997: 56) remarks on Paris of the Second Empire, where commodity-saturated customers displayed the intoxicated charm of drug addicts. As with addicts, "commodities derive the same effect from the crowd that surges around and intoxicates them. The concentration of customers which makes the market, which in turns makes the commodity into a commodity, enhances its attractiveness to the average buyer."

Nostalgia as Style

This sudden switch in the perception of western goods from real to fake is partially a result of eastern Germans behaving too much like the ideal consumer. They fell for advertisements and felt at once betrayed and wiser as they came to understand that guile is part of advertising. But of course the whole idea of packaging is motivated by the supposition of consumer gullibility. In the West consumers hover between giving into the seduction of commercials and an awareness that the inside of the package never looks like the picture on the cover. East Germans, however, had to undergo a certain learning process in order to acquire the necessary "cultural fluency," as Berdahl (1999: 137) felicitously phrases it, in their practices of consumption.

Yet cultural fluency in consumption is accompanied by its own institutionalization. As intoxication of unification wore off, marketing firms moved in to track the changing tastes. The definition of tastes is a form of drawing the borders of identity (Bourdieu 1984), but it is also the foundation for creating a niche market. The ultimate irony is that many of the eastern products now regarded as more authentic are owned entirely by western firms. Advertising slogans like the ones discussed earlier are, as Conrad Lay notes, a marketer's dream come true: personal biographies are inseparable from product histories. The western firms adopt a successful strategy of keeping the original brand name, bringing the quality up to western standards and only slightly modernizing the appearance (Lay 1997: 5). The former East German cigarette brand f6 provides a perfect example of the symbiotic relationship between demand for eastern products and western marketing. Phillip Morris, who owns f6, offers the following explanation from their public relations department:

The f6 stands for what's good and trusted from days past and helps with the self-conscious articulation of East German identity. The f6 does not stand for a misunderstood conservatism, rather, this cigarette represents a part of East German cultural history that has come to stand for a significant portion of identity building for the citizens in the new federal lands. . . . Although quality and production have been decisively improved, the f6 remains exactly the same as it always was: powerful, strong, and incomparably aromatic in taste. (Lay 1997: 5)

The western marketing of an East German identity is an exemplar of the other form of nostalgia at work here, that which Ivy (1995: 56) calls a nostalgia of style, the packaging of "nostalgia products" with "no explicit appeal to return, no acute sense of loss, and no reference to embodied memory [to mar] the glib evo-

cation of vanished commodity forms." Similar to the process that Ivy observes in the case of Japan, Germany also wants to overcome and retain its own past, to keep it "on the verge of vanishing, stable yet endangered (and thus open for commodifiable desire)" (65). This resurrection of the past-as-camp appeals at once to eastern Germans too young to actually experience East Germany and to westerners looking to consumption as "a privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 299) in a new age of anxiety governed by the floating signifier of globalization.

It is therefore not surprising to find westerners among the purchasers of eastern goods, some of whom consider themselves *Wossis*, a hybrid term created from *Wessi* (westerner) and *Ossi* (easterner). Like the designation *Ossi*, *Wossi* is originally negatively coded, as it was used by *Ossis* to pejoratively characterize other *Ossis* who ostentatiously adopted the characteristics of the West. Now it has been partially appropriated, mostly by young westerners who have moved to the East (usually the hip east Berlin districts) in a positive if knowingly ironic sense. They decorate their apartments with what is now eastern kitsch and profess a predilection for eastern design that, according to one *Wossi*, is "totally avant-gardish. . . . Today it is almost modern again" (Schmundt 1996: 125). Hilmar Schmundt (1996: 129) calls these *Wossis Wostalgikers*—the westernized version of *Ostalgia*—noting that:

The "Wostalgikers" do not melt East and West Germany into one pot, rather they play the East against the West to achieve an Americanized, simulated hyperreality, a type of GDR-Disneyland. The Wostalgikers interpret pawned eastern objects in light of a postmodern horizon of experience, creating an "Eastmodern" concept of home [*Heimat*].⁸ In the simulated environment of this (p)ost-modern home, it is design that determines being [*das Design bestimmt das Sein*].

The way in which *Wostalgikers* consume *Ostprodukte* is notable because it admits of an alternative process of differentiation mediated by something outside of the German-German binary: the hyperreality of Americanized ironic taste. For *Wossis* and the other consumers of East German products, the specificity of the past detaches itself from the material signifiers to create a "free-floating past" (Ivy 1995: 56) that can be reassembled and redeployed, like the Intershop barracks, in the search for commodifiable hipness.

8. "Eastmodern" in German is a pun on the words "postmodern" and the word "east" (*ost*). Drop the "p" from the word "postmodern" in German and it results in a neologism: "eastmodern."

What Remains

After ten years, the landscape of unification exhibits a dual nostalgia tied to the East's humbling encounter with "modernization" and the West's disorienting experience of "postmodernization," understood here in Jean and John Comaroffs' (2000) sense of capitalist consumer culture at the millennium. The modernist nostalgia of the East is a straightforward longing, not for a past per se but for the fantasies of that past. It is in this context that consumption as production represents a strategy for easterners to not be speechless in a discursive field of cultural production that is dominated by the West. This form of reappropriation is itself a legacy of the role of consumption during the GDR, where marketing could play on the borderline of political acceptability. The ownership of symbols compensated in some way for the lack of concrete ownership in a society without property. The consumption practices of *Ostprodukte* are thus directly linked to what Iris Häuser (1996) calls "counter-identities" (*Gegenidentitäten*) that emerged as a central part of East German political and social culture in the decade before the GDR's collapse. Such counter-identities have been reoriented rather than transcended by unification.

A contrary process is at work in the nostalgia of style, a primarily western phenomenon in which longing works not to maintain a past that hovers between confirmation and disappearance, but to actively empty signifiers, to make commodities float more freely. Consumption still functions as a signifying practice, but it alters the relationship of longing to belonging such that the market becomes an allegorical space for the construction of an "expressive individualism" (Lash and Urry 1994). In this way, consumption of *Ostprodukte* functions as a link between nostalgia for capitalism, ironically embodied here by a sense of loss for the former GDR's longing for the intangible material world across the border, and the capitalist nostalgia of today's unified Germany organized around an aesthetics of kitsch.⁹ As direct memories of the GDR fade, the taste that remains may not be the bitter aftertaste of longing lost, but a highly aestheticized and decontextualized sense of camp.

9. Arjun Appadurai (1996: 85) presents consumption as the link between nostalgia for capitalism and capitalist nostalgia. He emphasizes the aesthetics of ephemerality in modern marketing to make this link, which is not identical with kitsch, though kitsch may be used to create an ephemeral fashion.

Jonathan Bach is a postdoctoral research scholar at the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy at Columbia University. He is the author of *Between Sovereignty and Integration: German Foreign Policy and National Identity after 1989* (1999).

"The Taste Remains"

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