

Reflections on philosophy in the universities of the former German Democratic Republic

Ulrich Johannes Schneider
University of Leipzig
(Germany)

From 1990 on, the organizational structure of West-German institutions has been imposed upon those in the Eastern part of the expanded Federal Republic, and a society has disappeared that had been controlled by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and dominated by its ideology. Those who were identified as former leaders or ideologists are now often suspected of having perpetrated betrayals or failures—in particular the betrayal of human rights and a failure of critical thinking. At the very least these betrayals and failures confirm a righteous moral political view, which still seeks to explain the dissolution of the social system in the GDR as the result of the actions and collaborations of individuals.

The philosophers of the GDR are among those who are particularly affected by this point of view. They are ready victims for those looking for armchair culprits and who want to declare guilty verdicts even on fields of ideology. This is because those engaged in the propagation of Marxism-Leninism are thought to have been more involved in the directing of the social order than any other group of scholars and scientists. The philosophy lecturers at the universities and philosophy scholars at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin seem to have been incurably infected with the plague of party dogmatism, a dogmatism that in fact they could never openly contradict.

Critics looking for evidence of a resistance to the imposed decline in critical thinking based their evidence on the number of cases of dissidence, instances of censorship, and the prohibition to publish and teach. 'Cadre philosophers' is the term coined by the West-German GDR scholar, Norbert Kapferer, to refer to those who did not fall victim to such measures and ipso facto seemed to be on the side of the perpetrators.

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What does it prove to point out that there was a policy of political and ideological control, which is historically documented and in some cases exactly retraceable, and which sometimes even went so far as to exclude certain philosophers from the community of Marxists-Leninists? Does it prove that there were no opportunities for intellectual independence and individual opinions among the 'workers' and farmers' state', as Guntolf Herzberg, who worked temporarily at the 'Gauck-Behörde' (the administration dealing with the archives of the Stasi), suggests on the strength of his knowledge of the documents? Does it prove that scholarly work was impossible among philosophers, who also were almost without exception members of the SED, as Volker Gerhardt, a recently appointed professor of philosophy in Berlin, maintains on the basis of his work in evaluation commissions? Or does the use of force prove that both independence and the idea of scholarly work had to be repeated again and again, that some resistance against a system of one-sided interpretations of the world and humanity had to be suppressed again and again?

This is a difficult question and does not admit simple explanations—much too little is known about the political and intellectual positions of the persons involved and the conflicts they experienced. However, after some recent publications—particularly after the debate set off in the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* (the German journal for philosophy)—historical views have become defined sufficiently to evaluate the GDR philosophers from the point of view of philosophical history, after condemning them from moral and political viewpoints.

First of all, it has to be mentioned that the downfall of GDR philosophers was the consequence of the disruption of a functioning political machinery dedicated to the production of philosophy, which only the end of the GDR stopped. In the late eighties, opposition in the GDR established itself outside the universities, and philosophers were not the primary targets of criticism—though nominally and often in practice they had degenerated into interpreters of party wisdom rather than universal wisdom.

In truth, academic philosophy was politically rather insignificant in the GDR as everywhere else in the world. We overestimate the influence of university philosophers if we give them credit for stabilizing or destabilizing society. Even the opponents of the French Revolution of 1789 were wrong to incriminate Voltaire and Rousseau and not their readers. Economic

difficulties and other problems in everyday life always provide more motivation for political action than complicated philosophical systems. It was no different in 1989 than in 1789. With this in mind, I maintain that an approach to GDR philosophy should start out from the fact that it was an internally stable system that did not fail and thus cannot be explained by the analysis of a failure that did not exist.

What has happened since 1989? As I have said, GDR philosophy did not disappear because of self-criticism or self-dissolution but by institutional liquidation. After 1990 the process took two to three years. The result was the dismissal of about 300 philosophers employed at the Academy of Sciences and the universities. The Berlin Central Institute for Philosophy was closed altogether. Only a few logicians and one single professor of philosophy (Gerd Irrlitz in Berlin) received university positions corresponding to their previous posts. The non-professorial staff (employees and assistants) in Rostock, Greifswald, Frankfurt an der Oder, Magdeburg, Berlin, Cottbus, Erfurt, Jena, Halle, Chemnitz, and Dresden included a number of people whose contracts mostly expired by the end of 1996. This date marked the end of the WIP, the Scholar and Scientist Integration Program, which provided opportunities for former GDR employees to qualify for future occupation and/or employment.

The reasons for the mass dismissal lay in the Unification Treaty, which incriminated loyalty to the political system, but it also was caused by the wish of various State Ministers of Finance to economize on university positions as well as by occasional proof of collaboration with the secret police. The evaluation was done by commissions in which West German professors held the majority, and these took over the task of advising ministers in the individual federal states. Semi-official commissions, predominantly or exclusively composed of former GDR citizens, evaluated the GDR philosophers. The salvation of a few people was the result.

An informed solution to the problem was exacerbated by the lack of communication between professors of philosophy in the East and West before 1990. Only privileged GDR academics were allowed to participate in conferences held in the West and in the West there was little interest in philosophers from the GDR. In 1992, when one of the leading members of the former Central Institute for Philosophy at the Academy of Sciences of the GDR

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was asked what would remain of the GDR philosophy, he answered to the astonishment of many: the great critical editions. In fact these working editions of Aristotle and Leibniz, partly undertaken with East-West co-operation, are good illustrations of the minimal consensus on which mutual recognition was based even before 1990.

In other words: there was no specialized, disciplinary debate, and a discussion on the meaning of Marxism did not take place on an East-West level (exceptions prove the rule). This should not be astonishing, for this was (and is) also true of the intellectual relations among philosophers in the West, between France and Germany, England and Germany, France and England. It was (and is) usual to consider the thinkers from the other countries as biased, even prejudiced. Why should it have been different for the two German states? When philosophers in the GDR commented on the philosophical debates in West Germany they had no intention of participating in the discussion. The somewhat peaceful political coexistence of the two German states was, in the cultural and scholarly realms, based on ignorance and lack of interest, which was accompanied by an implicit feeling of superiority on both sides.

The lack of communication before 1990 had, of course, something to do with the political context. Philosophy professors on both sides of the Berlin Wall were connected to the state in which they lived—if to perceptibly varying degrees. In the East, most philosophers were members of the SED, and in the West, while there was no direct control of the philosophy professors' activities, they were civil servants. The dependence of philosophy professors on the government existed (and exists) simply because they have no control over personnel politics, as these are controlled by a minister who appoints professors. (It must be added that in the new federal states, personnel politics is more a matter of firing than hiring.)

For the ministries the establishing of the new always demanded that the old be expelled.

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GDR philosophers lost their jobs almost always for political reasons, which had been transformed into legal criteria in the unification treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Their scholarly and pedagogical qualifications were never properly evaluated. In Leipzig, there are three cases in which accomplished and internationally-known philosophy professors have lost their affiliations with their university as teachers and researchers.

So the work in the restructuring commission has resulted in deconstruction rather than construction, for political and financial constraints left little leeway. The process is finished. How we are to evaluate these liquidated structures remains an open question.

For many West-German observers, philosophy in the GDR can only be acknowledged as a theoretical variant of Marxism. This is a daring assumption. The fact is that in the GDR Marxism was a label attached to any philosophical activity. After the Higher Education Reform Act of 1968, all philosophical institutes were renamed Departments of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy. This of course demonstrates their orientations, but should not be confused with a theoretical construct that had any validity outside the GDR. A construct for GDR philosophy can only be reconstructed from an examination of publications and statements. Indeed, publications did not mirror one-to-one what was debated or considered controversial among intellectuals in the GDR.

In his examination of GDR philosophy, Kapferer was content to look at only printed publications and avoided unprinted and unregistered texts as well as nearly all dissertation and habilitation theses and periodicals with a circulation under one hundred copies and thus not officially subject to censorship. As a result, his reconstruction of cadre philosophy produces bizarre forms of theory biased by political considerations.

This approach is no longer adequate today, because more is known now about philosophy in the GDR. In his recently published book *From floating unfree to free fall*, Wolfgang Bialas (Potsdam) demonstrates how discourse was encoded so that authors could disguise criticism of socialism through a criticism of capitalism. Hans-Ulrich Wöhler (Dresden) and Klaus-Dieter Eichler (Leipzig) have illustrated in the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* that there was a broad scope for verbal exchange of ideas at meetings, conferences, and institute events. They have also described the philosophical subculture in Leipzig in the eighties, which had several circles and even published a journal—*Seminarum*.

These and other facts demonstrate that an understanding of philosophy in the GDR has to be reconstructed around a philosophical culture that existed around individual thinkers, unless one recognizes that this philosophical culture operated under special circumstances, the real conditions and reasons behind its development will remain unknown.

GDR philosophy was first and foremost an academic guild, sealed off from the rest of society just like the western guild. Within the ivory tower, however, the question of philosophy bridged the high-tension poles of individual doubts, classical texts, and political loyalty. Little is known so far about what type of tensions were involved.

Up to now the course of re-evaluating history has been confined to the level of scandals and meanness, and the persons involved have hardly had a chance for a hearing. An atmosphere of undifferentiated denunciation has made them reticent, as Camilla Warnke (formerly of the Academy of Sciences in Berlin) complained late last November to Guntolf Herzberg at a discussion of the club 'Berliner Debatte Initial'. Attempts to move beyond mere complaint have already been made by Dieter Wittich (formerly of Leipzig) in the journal *Hochschule ost*, as well as by Reinhard Mocek (formerly of Halle, currently at Bielefeld) in contribution to two relevant anthologies *East German philosophers's views from within* (1995) and *Disturbed reason?* (1996).

These and other publications suggest that there is now a certain willingness to accept that there was an everyday procedure of teaching and research and at the same time a common philosophical tight-rope walk that had to be traversed between questioning students and party secretaries. During the Berlin discussion men-

tioned before, philosophy historian Ursula Goldenbaum (formerly of Berlin, currently at Potsdam) suggested that the study of Aristotelianism in the seventeenth century might be used as a model for the historical examination of GDR philosophy. That is, while there seems to have been a uniform similarity in the schools, this in fact cloaks a veritable mare's nest of ideological and theoretical debates and controversies.

The Aristotelians of the seventeenth century are dead, but the German Marxists–Leninists of the twentieth century are living among us. With their help, the walls of text that stand as the ruins of GDR philosophy in libraries could be deconstructed. These walls conceal philosophizing that goes beyond the written materials and a critical thinking beyond institutional scholarship. It is necessary to investigate the environment in which the philosophers had to work to evaluate the philosophemes and arguments that evolved under the circumstances of the GDR. The countries of the former Eastern Bloc did indeed have varied philosophical cultures, and party pressure was exerted differently in each. Even if the GDR philosophers now floating freely in the Federal Republic of Germany may not all have been of the same calibre as some Russian or Hungarian thinkers, there is no need to brand them as inferior or of no interest.

The total disappearance of GDR philosophy constitutes the case of a philosophical culture becoming obsolete before our very eyes. Some people think that nothing else disappeared together with the Marxists–Leninists but their theories—i.e. Marxism in its Leninist interpretation. Such a view implies that a philosopher is merely the propagator of a theory. This assumption is wrong. It violates the Western tradition of philosophy as a whole, and it misses the point in this particular case, since after 1990 only a few former GDR philosophers did call themselves Marxists. Without in the least ignoring cowardice and opportunism, this self-description reveals something about the reality of studying and teaching philosophy in the GDR—namely that it also took place in the shadow of ideology. Many philosophers were officially obliged to Marxism–Leninism and may have been only indirectly devoted to it.

Just like police-artist sketches, images of enemies are representations distorted by hatred or fear and dominated by rigidity and immovability. Using historical insights to produce such

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images and denounce the past does not broaden knowledge. Anyone who wants to learn about the reality or efficiency of philosophy in the GDR needs to know not only the position of philosophy in a politically divided world, but also the way it functioned both inside and on the margins of dogma.

In a book by Rainer Land and Ralf Possekkel, *Types of political discourse of intellectuals from the GDR*, published in 1994, the authors state that, in contrast to West Germany, in the GDR 'the connection among those who participated in discourse did not take place by virtue of a-priori rules, but by recognition of a-priori discourse contents beyond the range of discussion'. If one looks back in history to the concrete position the philosophers were in then, we must look for intellectual agility also behind or within many proclamatory acts.

It is necessary to differentiate GDR philosophy historically, not least for reasons that relate to our understanding of contemporary philosophy. When Socrates, having been sentenced to death, sent his friends away with the command to 'live following . . . the path marked out by our present and past discussions' (*Phaedo*, 115^b) he did not have a theory or even a mission in mind, as Jesus did centuries later. His order, 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28: 19), marks the beginning of a sect and later a church.

Philosophers have never made it that far, not even as Marxists–Leninists. In other words: Philosophy does not involve proclaiming, but rather explaining, criticizing, and problematizing something. It is a methodological requirement to acknowledge that retrospectively also for the GDR; it is furthermore a challenge to our concept of philosophy.

Traditionally this concept articulates the claims of philosophy, expressed in such classical formulations as Hegel's *dictum* that philosophy amounts to 'seizing one's time in thoughts', or Wittgenstein's thesis that it is 'clarification of our thoughts'. Philosophers and philosophy

lovers tend to deduce the impact of philosophy from axioms or predefined goals of thinking and do not bother to analyse the actual work of philosophers, although they do fulfil describable functions, as university professors, scholars, and interpreters of the Western tradition.

Philosophy in the old and new Federal Republic is first and foremost university philosophy. The fact that it is hardly ever connected with the everyday practice of teaching demonstrates a 'will to theory' that considers even dialogues with students in seminars primarily as exercises in dedicating oneself exclusively to the texts handed down by tradition. The attention of learners and teachers is diverted from the questions of life 'out there in the real world' to questions of the canonized philosophical positions.

This gap between functioning philosophical scholarship within the university and social relevance of philosophical thought hardly seems to feed back into today's philosophical concerns. There is only one way to come to terms with the walls of (scholarly) text—by regarding the conditions of thinking and formulating them as a warning to one's own conscience, and not as an open truth about the conditions of the action of thinking itself. When one observes how vehemently philosophers disclaim their historic role as lying outside academic work, it appears that they are ashamed of being teachers. I am inclined to assume that from the perspective of West-German university philosophy, people do not want to or cannot understand East-German university philosophy, because the abolished system bears too close a resemblance to their own situation.

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The first item in this list, by Ulrich Johannes Schneider, which caused the debate, appears in French in *Revue d'Allemagne d'aujourd'hui* (July/August 1997) and in English in *Social review* (July 1997)

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