

Twenty-First New Hampshire Symposium

Held June 21-28, 1995, at the idyllic World Fellowship Center near Conway, the Twenty-First New Hampshire Symposium tackled “the identity dispute in the new German states five years after unification.” Despite an almost comic overrepresentation of Berliners at the conference, the participants answered the conference’s interrogatory title — “Who’s We?” — from a remarkable variety of points of view in over thirty paper presentations, literary readings, and film screenings and in lively discussions between the sixty participants. By the end of the week, it became clear that East Germans today more than ever constitute a culturally, politically, and economically heterogeneous population that nonetheless shares a common, though divergently interpreted, history and identity.

Wolfgang Bialas set the tone for the conference with his thought-provoking opening paper on the “socio-schizophrenia of a divided existence.” He argued that East Germans might believe they share a common identity, usually that of the victim, but that they in fact embrace a variety of self-contained and often stereotypical discourses that nonetheless mutually feed on one another (e.g. virulent anti-communists vs. unreconstructed Stalinists). In something of a key-note address, Lothar Probst indicted German intellectuals for their dichotomous thinking and in the process suggested why Germans have been slow to recognize the multiplicity and complexity of their identities.

A central question addressed in many of the papers was the extent to which the transformation process has shaped or even erased GDR-specific identities. Analyzing demographic trends that preceded 1989, Harald Michel refuted the widely-held belief that the hardships of transition have provoked a psychological crisis that has expressed itself in a dramatic decline in birth and marriage rates. Laurence McFalls reported on interviews with “ordinary” East Germans showing them to claim to be simultaneously well-integrated in their new socio-economic and political order but eager to hold onto past values associated with socialism. Similarly, Thomas Koch’s study of new entrepreneurs found them to be ambivalent about their role as capitalists (“I’m not doing it to become rich . . .”). Although the adaptive success of some individuals and some GDR products (particularly food and cigarettes) might be a source of eastern pride and identity,

economist Jörg Roesler reminded the symposium that with only 5% of privatized GDR enterprises in eastern hands and production integrated into West German and international processes, economic performance could no longer be a source of identity, while Renate Stauch and Ursula Schubert underscored the ravages to identity-formation of the growing social and economic exclusion of East German women and children.

Still, a number of papers pointed to the resurgence of eastern identity and pride. Whether in their consumption of print-media (Rolf Geserick) or in the reception of advertising themes (Heiko Partscheveld), East Germans retain their specificities, though of course within the context of western media control. Rainer Gries presented the symposium’s most humorous but perhaps most subtle paper, in which he offered a brilliant interpretive analysis of the revived Club Cola’s successful advertising campaign. Using film clips from forty years of GDR history, Club Cola’s campaign could appeal to easterners’ selective but now self-confident memories, offering an illusion of a common GDR identity to consumers who pick and choose different elements from their pasts.

While Gries’s paper had the quality of fine textual analysis, literary scholars were notably absent from this year’s symposium. The afternoon devoted to “literary and cultural identity” included only one literary paper, Wolfgang Ertl’s analysis of the recent poetry of Reiner Kunze and of Heinz Czechowski, while Dietrich Löffler reported on the persistence of East German reading habits and Olaf Georg Klein offered more of a sociological than literary analysis of generational differences between eastern authors. It may be that writers and literary scholars have not yet discovered the language to express the new diversity of the East German experience, yet it seems that literature might be the best instrument for understanding that experience.

The twenty-second New Hampshire Symposium planned for next June under the theme “bridges and barriers to communication in the new Länder” ought to provide the occasion for more literary scholars to add their reflections to the stimulating discussions and debates. Also, more North Americans from all disciplines should take advantage of the unique opportunities for dialogue with a large number of *East* German scholars in

particular that the Conway conference offers. As a first-time participant this year, I was greatly impressed not only with the quality of the papers presented but especially with the relaxed atmosphere at the World Fellowship Center, which allows for intellectual debate without the aggressivity and acrimony that unfortunately too often characterize meetings of Germanists, particularly those including representatives from East and West.

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