

## **“UNDER OPEN SKIES”: REFLECTIONS ON GERMAN UNIFICATION**

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Today is October third, and Germany is celebrating the anniversary of its political reunification for the seventeenth time. I have been asked to speak today in honor of this momentous date. Many others have spoken in honor of this day, such as Jens Reich and Joachim Gauck, both of whom were active with me in the civic movement during the autumn of 1989. Jens Reich and I were both among the thirty founding members of the New Forum,<sup>1</sup> whose slogan “the time is ripe” became a decisive factor in the mass awakening that took place in the autumn of 1989. In a short time, more than 200,000 people signed up for this cause, and the New Forum became the largest mass movement in the GDR at that time.

Jens Reich and Joachim Gauck both discussed the basic issues, and I do not want to repeat them. We probably all judge the past years differently, as we have spent them in different places. Today I have been given the opportunity to voice some criticism. Celebration alone will not bring us further.

Perhaps I am only a ghost of the past for you, or, in today’s parlance, a witness to history. I’ve asked myself why I’ve been invited here today: I do not belong to a political party, I do not hold a political office, and I haven’t been active in German politics for years. For me, working at the grassroots level was always the most important; this is where I work today and where the bulk of my political experience continues to be. Today I would like to talk about this experience, both old and new. At the grassroots level, people are more hesitant, and perhaps because of this, they have a more realistic view of things than the elites do from their penthouses and corner offices.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the invitation to speak here today, as I have enjoyed my time in America. Here, for me, freedom has a more tangible feeling than in Germany since reunification.

I was born in Berlin in 1945 and grew up there. Life in a ruined and divided city dominated my upbringing: I saw the worker’s uprising on June 17, 1953, as an eight-year-old, and the building of the Wall in 1961 as a seventeen-year-old. I grew up in East Berlin, studied there, worked there, and lived there. When the Wall fell, I was forty-four years old. I have had more than enough time and opportunity to know what it’s like living in an authoritarian and repressive system.

The most important time of my life, however, will forever be the autumn of 1989. Almost two decades have passed since then. In two years, there will be many commemorations and celebrations. This calls for a look back. The political movements of the autumn of 1989 in East Germany have already been written about countless times and studied from numerous perspectives. Most interpretations fall in between two poles: Either they narrate the history from the vantage point of the political opposition in the GDR, because they view this as the beginning, or they narrate history from the perspective of the political order that was established at the end of that “amazing year.”

For me, it is a history that began on the streets under open skies, and that is its particular charm. I will never forget the enthusiasm that had taken hold, not only of the East Germans: The whole world seemed to be carried away by it. Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, West Germans, Americans, even Japanese, to name only a few, were all excited that the world had finally been shaken up. The unbelievable had happened: The blocks broke open, the Iron Curtain fell by the wayside, and people fell into each other’s arms.

The great caesura of 1989 has entirely changed the whole world order since then, and there is no end in sight to these changes. If we set aside for a moment the decades-long prehistory, then the actual political breakthrough to self-determination from below began in Germany, or, more precisely, in the former GDR. The upheavals in Prague, Warsaw, Budapest, Bucharest, Sofia, etc. ensued in quick succession, historically speaking. In Eastern Europe, these political movements and large demonstrations were limited to the capitals and a few other main cities. Not so in East Germany. In the autumn of 1989, from September to December, a constant, country-wide, almost simultaneous awakening took place in Germany, in which two million people actively participated—people in all of the large cities, in all of the mid-sized cities, in many small cities, and even in small villages. It was the largest democratic movement in German history so far, whose extent could perhaps be compared with the revolution of 1848, but this time the strength of organization and the degree of political morale reached even further than in 1848.

The autumn of 1989 in the GDR is essentially a history of the masses harnessing their long-suppressed democratic potential in reaction to state-ordered stagnation. For me, the decisive moment was not the collapse of the dried-up carcass that was the East German dictatorship in the autumn of 1989, but rather the virtual awakening of the masses that effected this collapse. The citizens’ central forms of action were: organizing independently of the regime; determining their own goals; mutually agreed non-violence; forming a pragmatic consensus; and basic social solidarity. The dynamic spread of the citizens’ search for a new type of

government is not recognized frequently enough. The events of that autumn happened “under open skies”—they played out on the street, the only place they could. During these six months, the demonstrating masses were able to achieve their political priorities. In contrast, “high politics” were forced to follow the masses, first and foremost on the terrain that the civic movement had already carved out. Only afterward could they go back to their traditional domain.

In this sense, the “autumn of 1989” lasted from the beginning of September 1989 until March 18, 1990—although by November of 1989 the cry, “We are the people” (*Wir sind das Volk*) was joined with the cry, “We are one people” (*Wir sind ein Volk*). The open border, the economic gap, the disintegrated power structures in the GDR, and people’s actual experiences with socialism nurtured many people’s desire for a quick German unification. Starting in January 1990, the growth of an independently organized East German society was stunted by the implementation of the West German political parties in the newly forming political landscape of East Germany. The new political movements were still forming when they were appropriated by the West German political parties. Throughout 1990, the democratic and social goals had to be increasingly reformulated to conform to the standards of the political language in the former Federal Republic. By losing their own language and, consequently, their own ways of changing society, East Germans also lost democratic self-confidence and their right to self-determination. These conditions, which we are still facing today, came about at the very beginning of the 1990s.

The main consequence of the way unification was conducted was that the rebuilding of East German society was not the work of the East Germans themselves. The parliamentary rules of the game, the political parties, the laws, the political, economic, and academic elites, and the major mass media—that is, virtually all of the elite institutions in society—were, by 1992 or 1993 at the latest, controlled by former West Germans or West German institutions.

Try to imagine, or even more importantly, try to understand, this: After decades of living in a dictatorship, the reluctant, cowering, hopeless, or hopeful, masses finally rise up together, conquer themselves and win back their own country, only to have their televisions, radios, and major newspapers no longer speak their language or recount their experiences twelve or twenty-four months later. Two million people demonstrate on the streets; they occupy government facilities such as ministry buildings, city halls, barracks, and Stasi offices. They open and search the archives. Factory bosses are deposed and new ones are appointed. The municipal—as well as the national—order is starting to be restructured through the so-called “Round Tables.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, three years later, not a

single factory, apartment, or agency exists where a former East German's status is recognized. Two out of seventeen million—in terms of the population of the United States, that would be a good thirty million politically active, demonstrating citizens. Can you understand how deep people's confusion and disillusionment was in the former East German (and for that matter, the West German) society?

After the elections on March 18, 1990, events took on a special dynamic, one that normal citizens could hardly follow. On May 18, 1990, the treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR was concluded. As we now know, it was essentially agreed upon by the elites of West Germany and the representatives of the former East German elites. In the treaty, the basic principles for the unification of the two states were established and the economic, currency, and social union were all agreed upon. On July 1, 1990, the Deutschmark became the official currency in the GDR, noticeably intensifying the economic problems in the East. The first factories were closed and the first wave of people lost their jobs. The events and headlines spiraled. Treaties, negotiations, and then more treaties followed.

Although many people had yearned for the day of reunification, many now realized that this day also spelled the end of the "fall of 1989" and its promise of social self-determination. A new, very demanding period began for people in East Germany. Most of all, people had to adjust to the new circumstances; whoever could not, or did not want to, was left out. Often people reacted by becoming disenchanted with politics and democracy, distancing themselves from society. For years, complaining and criticizing were the favorite activities in both East and West Germany, even if for different reasons.

Certainly, the flourishing landscapes promised by Chancellor Helmut Kohl do exist in the new federal states. Again and again, it is a pleasure to see the once-ailing cities. The GDR wanted to solve the problem of the decaying historical centers (for example, in Görlitz, Halberstadt, Leipzig, Halle, and many others) with a wrecking ball. Today they shine with new splendor. However, renovated inner cities, new streets, modern telephone lines, and sleek trains do not amount to a self-determined way of life.

I recently revisited a village in Mecklenburg that I had visited many years ago. Previously, the life of the residents was dominated by the collective farm.<sup>3</sup> Everyone worked on it. There were pig-breeding facilities, unending fields of rapeseed, a small *Konsum* grocery store,<sup>4</sup> a village pub, shabby houses, and no street lights. Everyone had chickens and their own, privately owned pig behind their houses. Today there are street lights and new sidewalks, and everyone has renovated their houses and built garages for their shiny new cars. However, there is no longer a

*Konsum* or a village pub. The collective farm is also long gone. The land has been bought by a Dutch farming company, which uses gigantic machines and a handful of people to produce just as much, if not more, than the collective farm once did. Almost everyone is unemployed and is a Hartz-IV recipient, the lowest tier of the German welfare system. Most people have spent the years since reunification in all sorts of job-creation programs. This often meant that they had a well-paid job, but such work seemed pointless because it had little to do with people's individual qualifications. Unwittingly, the psychology of work in the GDR was kept alive: in the GDR, too, one received money for a job that, to many, seemed pointless. One was kept busy, but one only rarely actually identified with one's work.

The job-creation schemes of today sometimes seem just as absurd as the prescribed jobs in the GDR. In a forest near the village in Mecklenburg, a nature trail for students was created. Almost every tree and shrub was outfitted with a sign indicating what type of tree it is: oak, beech, birch, and so on. Something like this might make sense near Berlin, but in this area, the youth is long gone, having long since moved west, where the jobs are. And the old farmers already know all the trees.

Since reunification, the residents of this village have not gone hungry; indeed, they have been able to renovate their houses and buy fancy cars. But haven't they actually just fallen by the wayside? One gets this impression, at any rate, when observing how they ride around on their little lawn mowers frantically looking for a single blade of grass to cut. In truth, they are looking for a meaningful task, but they cannot find one. It's not worth it anymore to keep a few chickens around: Eggs cost less at the *Aldi* supermarket in the neighboring small town than food for the chickens would. That's the reason there are no longer chickens in this village.

I've told you this story to show that, after almost two decades, many people still have not arrived in reunified Germany. In the fall of 1989 these people, too, dreamed of self-determination and shaping their own future. Such feelings have gone stale. Was that all there is to it? Is there anything left in store for us? The right-wing NPD achieved one of its best election results in this region.

No one wants to turn back the clock, but no one seems able to cope with the present. Many people once again feel as if everything is out of their hands. They are looking for a foothold, for security, but it is no better than it used to be. Moreover, people have the feeling that they have even less influence than they did before. In the whole Eastern bloc, loafing on the job, for example, was one of the most beloved forms of rebellion, a way to express one's dissatisfaction with the whole system, especially the conditions of the work environment. While loudly proclaiming a truth could still shake the entire system in the Eastern bloc—I remind

you of Vaclav Havel's "attempt to live in truth"—now such statements just get drowned out in the cacophony of special interests.

The West Germans are also unsure, and they too have fears about the future. The transformation of the welfare state is in full swing. What will happen if I become unemployed or sick, when I get old, or if my child does not find an apprenticeship or student scholarship? These questions affect everyday life. This is something new because for decades both German states provided a social safety net, albeit to different degrees. It is frightening to think that since the healthcare reform, which went into effect this year, 50,000 healthcare workers had to be downsized, meaning that there are now 700 million fewer Euros in the healthcare system than before. When the "bottom line" and quarterly figures become all-important, the social climate becomes rather icy. Since German reunification, the extreme right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) has increased its local and regional foothold, especially in East Germany.

On the path that Germany has embarked on since reunification, East Germans are disadvantaged by their late entry into "West German" life. The key differences between East and West Germans do not lie in economic factors and personal savings, but in the different mentalities, psychologies, and personal experiences. To integrate East Germans into West Germany, more than one generation will be necessary. German unity could have been achieved—probably more quickly and with less money—by leaving more creative space for developing economic, social, agrarian, environmental, health, and education policies. Now the new federal states are an albatross around the necks of the former West German states. More and more people are leaving eastern Germany, and the resulting depopulation exacerbates many of the problems there, like the maintenance of infrastructure, which becomes prohibitively expensive.

Of course, there are also many people that have profited in the past few years: Some have made a lot of money. They believe that they "have arrived." But money affects social relationships. Old friendships suffer as a result. While some people are buying their fifth new car and going to the Bahamas for vacation, penniless Hartz-IV welfare recipients have to deal with a massive bureaucratic system to receive their social entitlements. This probably is not that interesting for you, since America learned long ago to live with problems like these. People here are more flexible when it comes to overcoming these problems. However, from afar it looks like they are becoming more and more difficult to overcome. In this respect, one can only applaud the Germans for having "arrived" in the world at large. Unfortunately, the Germans themselves often do not fully appreciate this; otherwise they would follow and assess the

current transformations of the welfare state and the rule of law in a much more constructive and critical manner.

People who were persecuted or discriminated against in the GDR wanted justice after reunification. They were now living in a country characterized by the rule of law. But this did not mean that they got justice. Justice and the rule of law are two very different things. This became especially clear when members of the old GDR *Nomenklatura* and unofficial Stasi collaborators became government ministers, or political party leaders. The half-hearted treatment of GDR injustices and the many court decisions connected to the GDR are, however, a separate topic. I mention them only because they contributed to the negative post-unification atmosphere and created mistrust toward the rule of law. More and more people feel alienated from the German justice system. Common sense, new technologies (the Internet, for example), and people's experiences increasingly contradict German court decisions, just as was the case in the GDR.

As an ex-GDR citizen, I am perhaps particularly vigilant when I see my freedom of speech being restricted. Manfred Stolpe has contributed to this considerably. In the GDR, he was *Konsistorialpräsident* of the Protestant Church and worked for the Stasi as an "unofficial collaborator"; in reunified Germany, he was a minister in the SPD government. In 2005, Mr. Stolpe won a case stipulating that "ambiguous statements"—and what statements aren't in some way ambiguous?—could be legally prohibited, if a possible meaning was disagreeable to the person to whom the statement referred. This means that anyone who disapproves of a publicly expressed opinion about him or herself can block it. Luckily, this is unthinkable here in America! This new legal precedent has been applied to a wide range of cases. It can distort the way history is written. This is particularly disastrous because people in eastern Germany have just learned how to speak out and question things; now they will have to learn all over again how to say what is "right." This is self-censorship before a public discourse can even begin. Internet archives have to be checked for statements that might be legally questionable in order to avoid paying high legal costs. This applies to university archives, newspaper archives, and many others. History is being rewritten on the Internet. Today, a whole new branch of the economy has been created: writing legal warning letters. The court costs are dangerously high and can threaten people's livelihood. Whoever cannot pay has to serve a jail sentence. Once again, people are sitting in jail just for expressing their opinion.

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The title of my lecture today, "Unter freiem Himmel" [Under Open Skies], does not just refer to the "open skies" of the fall of 1989, but also

to the sky in New York, which has always seemed especially clear, vast, and active to me. The first time I flew to New York, I felt very insecure. What awaited me there? Would it actually be the heartless, selfish, exploitative society where every man fends for himself, as America was depicted in the GDR? Many West Germans—not just leftists—saw America the same way, even though they had never been there themselves. The East Germans could not go, but many West Germans did not want to. The first time I flew to New York, in 1992, the wondrous sky filtered through the canyoned streets down to me. It was November. In Germany, I had received many death threats after the Wall fell, and it would be impossible to argue that they had not affected me. I even decided to buy a life insurance policy. In New York, though, I wasn't afraid. I met the most wonderful people in the oddest situations. Thousands of new impressions and questions: What is the value of freedom without a social safety net? How does democracy function without thousands of laws and bureaucratic rules? How does such a diverse society function, one where the people have hardly anything more in common than a flag and McDonalds? I was fascinated by these questions. Most of all, though, I was impressed by the way people of different nationalities and religions could live together. To be sure, there are more than enough problems here, but I have always been impressed that people managed to live peacefully with each other despite everything, and there seem to be self-imposed ways to adjust to problems in critical moments. Whether one can count on this in the future is another question entirely.

Since 1996 I have lived and worked in the Balkans. I worked in Bosnia in the office of the High Representative until 1999. This official represents the international community and the United Nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina—the people of Bosnia do not elect the “High Representative.” He holds wide-ranging authoritarian powers allowing him to dismiss democratically elected ministers, judges, and mayors; issue laws; and create new civil offices and agencies. Unfortunately, these powers were not used often enough to remove irresponsible politicians. The office is in charge of implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement. I worked in the department dealing with humanitarian issues. Later, I organized various projects in Bosnia and Croatia, most recently a project providing cisterns for a village near Mostar.

Life in a war-torn and hate-filled country is hard, and it changes the way you see the world. I was a dedicated pacifist prior to coming to Bosnia, but quickly realized that only the presence of foreign soldiers maintains the peace. Many locals still say today that when all of the soldiers leave, they will go, too. It is clear to me now that the world never should have stood by watching the war for those first four years. We are paying the price for that now. No country in the Balkans is as tattered and

ungovernable as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The war ended twelve years ago, and there should finally be light at the end of the tunnel. Politicians and diplomats claim to see it, but the common people are still in the dark.

As long as the past determines the present and the future, no actual development will occur in Bosnia. War criminals still move freely about; just look at Karadzic and Mladic. But I am mainly thinking of the old hatreds that still plague many people here. Many people have been traumatized by the war and their experiences. The old political and social system continues to dominate. People have still not learned to function in the new political system; they have only learned to conform. This is why they are unable to meet the present challenges and exert constructive pressure on their politicians.

Outside of the family, there is no basic social solidarity. There is no will to come together independently of the government and the established political order; there is hardly any local non-governmental aid; there are no effective alternatives to the daily chaos of the state; there is no courage to make the real issues known; and society seems to lack even a basic identity as a whole. Just as it was in the GDR, the only place politics can be discussed is at the kitchen table, where people lament the duplicitous and corrupt politicians, the bad policies, the lousy present, and the lack of prospects.

What can be done? Who can partner with the international community in such war-torn countries? How can the international community have an influence on politicians who have completely different intentions, intentions that do not necessarily even include the well-being of their constituents? Or do we have to wait for a stronger civil society to be built, one that can solve its own problems? When will that happen? Are people even capable of building one without support? It is particularly important to find answers to these questions when we stop to think about the many war zones that are also waiting for help. Afghanistan and Iraq are obviously only two of many.

Vast amounts of money and huge amounts of humanitarian aid flow into the Balkans, especially to Bosnia. This aid often does not reach its destination, but rather disappears into black markets. There are only three and a half million people in Bosnia and Herzegovina; nevertheless, the international community still has not succeeded in providing them with a good prospect for their future or in solving their problems. Bosnia still lacks a unified police force and a constitution, yet these institutions are the conditions for Bosnia's "return to Europe." Ethnic and religious conflicts allow the politicians to manipulate people and determine day-to-day politics. Unemployment averages 50 percent; a third of the young people want to leave the country because they do not see a future for themselves in such a demoralized place. Agriculture is unorganized.

Very few workers are socially insured. Most people work illegally or clandestinely, are self-sufficient, and live from hand to mouth. Altogether these conditions provide a good breeding ground for terrorism. Many of the mujahedeen, who fought on the side of the Bosnian Muslims in the war, still live in the country. Four hundred of them have been classified as potentially violent. In the meantime, they have started families and have Bosnian passports; they are not going anywhere. For years, local politicians and the international community avoided the issue, since they did not want to create additional problems. Progress in Bosnia has become dependent on the will of donor countries to keep providing aid money.

My experience after German reunification and in Bosnia tells me that democracy fails when we export our notions of democracy and the rule of law without sufficiently taking into account other countries' histories, traditions and mentalities. We need to put ourselves under the magnifying glass and be ready to change ourselves, too. "This is supposed to be democracy?" I have often heard this question voiced in eastern Germany, Poland, Hungary, and in Bosnia. Sometimes it sounds sarcastic, sometimes mournful, but always as if these people have nothing to do with this democracy. It was just exported or donated to them. And the one who is exporting it—the West—believes that it is thus ensuring its own safety and protecting itself from harmful changes. But this is naïve: the more people and cultures are affected by change, the more we need alternative concepts of democratization.

People need time to find themselves and their own way; otherwise, they feel as though they lack the freedom and the ability to determine their own lives. The solution is definitely not to take away the responsibility and initiative of the very people who are expected to take their destiny into their own hands. Western values and ideas cannot simply be implemented, as has happened in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and frankly in the whole Eastern bloc after 1989. The result can only be half-hearted and imperfect. Societies must be built from the bottom up. To do this, we need to develop new concepts, which will actually involve the local population, helping them form an environment in which democracy can grow. The sky is the limit.

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It seems especially fitting in this city to end by commemorating my friend and colleague Gerd Wagner. He worked here in Washington at the Germany Embassy. In 1997, he went to Bosnia as one of the two deputies of then-High Representative Carlos Westendorp. Wagner lost his life in a helicopter crash in September of that year. Five of the twelve that died in

that accident were Americans. This was not just a tragedy for his family and our office, but for Bosnia as well. Gerd loved and defended Western ideals. He also loved and knew the people of the former Yugoslavia. He spoke fluent Serbo-Croatian. Hardly anyone could connect with everyday people as quickly as he. He listened to them, he was trusted. At the same time, he was open to non-bureaucratic and quick solutions. I am convinced that Bosnia would be a different place today had he been able to work there longer. The world needs people who take their time and plan ahead and consider the consequences that their decisions have for the future.

## Notes

\* [www.baerbelbohley.de](http://www.baerbelbohley.de)

<sup>1</sup> [www.baerbelbohley.de/neuesforum/aufruf.htm](http://www.baerbelbohley.de/neuesforum/aufruf.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Round tables were established in 1989 as new informal committees during the peaceful revolution in the GDR to work through the national emergency and to identify legislative and executive tasks. They did this even though they lacked a legitimate mandate, as they were not democratically elected.

<sup>3</sup> The collective farm (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft*, or *LPG*) refers to the partially forced merger between farmers and other means of production such as other occupations related to communal agrarian production in the GDR.

<sup>4</sup> *Konsumladen* was GDR slang for a grocery store in the consumer collective (*Konsumgenossenschaft*), the biggest chain in the GDR.