



COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF TEACHERS
IN EASTERN AND WESTERN GERMANY.

A report on Activities of the "Social Character" Study
Group of the International Erich Fromm Society.

Petra Tauscher.

In 1986 a study group was set up by the International Erich Fromm Society with the aim of researching social character patterns. Up to date, no less than 20 weekend seminars have been held (two of them with Michael Maccoby participating). From 1990 on, some eighteen of the circle's members have been engaged in preparing and carrying out a modest comparative study. At a seminar held in Mexico City in October 1992, Petra Tauscher reports on latest developments within this project. Key passages of her report are reproduced here below so that members of the International Erich Fromm Society will be able to familiarize themselves with the objectives, structure, and execution of this project. The society intends to publish and otherwise document this study just as soon as the work of evaluation has been completed.

The unification of both German states with their differing lebenswelten -i.e. their differing economic and social structures core values, and social relationships, not to mention the differing labor organizations to which these inevitably gave rise- offered a unique opportunity to research the respective social character orientations of the two Germanies in their respective socio-economic situational dependencies and to conduct a comparative study aimed at verifying Frommian social character theory.

Particularly suited for such study, in the study



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group's opinion, were primary school teachers, i.e. those whose special social mandate is to pass on the core values and leading ideas thrown up by prevailing economic and social realities. Since the teachers' mandate is invariably enunciated and actualized in a different economic and social context, we can expect to find a variety of different types of social character implanted in teachers.

Painstaking attention to detail was needed before the rough drafts already been worked up in previous years were turned into questionnaires precisely tailored to the group of teachers under investigation. Further effort went into elaborating a supplementary theoretical edifice so that, in the analytic work, justice could be done to the social situations in Eastern and Western Germany in general and to the demands operating on teachers in Eastern and Western Germany in particular.

The main hypothesis to emerge from discussions to date is that the state capitalist system revolving around a planned economy leads in the main, to social relationships and core values of a kind typical of authoritarian and dictatorial systems. The typical features of an authoritarian social character pose more of an obstacle than a bonus for the market economy production mode. From the point of view of a production sector organized along market economy lines, a marketing social character



"functions" better if its distinguishing mark is precisely the refusal to permit any fixation on personality traits - indeed the insistence is that the marketing social character should be interchangeable, in line with market requirements.

We ha fixed as our objctive to conduct 15 interviews each with Eastern and Western German teachers (of both sexes). This objective was successfully accomplished. Interviewing was carried out between the fall of 1991 and the summer of 1992. Thanks to a meeting held in September expressly for this purpose all analytic work on the questionnaires has now been concluded.

Our specifications were that teachers should have logged up at least 5, but no more than 15, years of professional experience by the time of interview. Moreover, their socialization should have been exclusively gained in one or the other Germanies. Those coopted should also be at least 25, but no more than 45, years of age. Since only few men were to found among primary and lower secondary school teachers, we went to considerable lengths to monitor such as there were. Not only were we concerned to preserve a balance between numbers from both Germanies: equal weighting was also given to teachers from the big city, the small town, and even the smallest village; likewise to both northerners southernners. Since members engaged on this



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project themselves came from all corners of a united Germany, our choice of who was to be interviewed was frequently motivated by who, in the study group, was available locally to do the interviewing. Conducting an interview took an average of 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours. For reasons connected with the analytic methods adopted, it was decided against the use of a tape recorder. The interviewer's task therefore became to protocol the interviewee's answers in written form.

The depth psychological analytic work was undertaken in groups of at least five study group members. Since only few women were working on the project, it was felt that at least one woman should be present at each analytic session. It was also agreed that, at each analytic session, at least one person should be represented from the former East Germany. Then too, one person should be present who was familiar with psychoanalytic methods. Analytic sessions proved exhausting affairs, requiring the full concentration of all participants; they regularly lasted three to four hours.

The analytic method was based on the idea, and indeed the experience that the interviewees' various personality aspects or character traits, conscious and unconscious alike, can be and are mirrored, during the work of concentrating on the interview responses, in the members of



the evaluation group and in the very way the evaluation process unfolds. Particular weight was therefore given to the self-perceptions of the members of the evaluation group. Evaluation work within the group proceeded according to a uniform scheme, involving the following steps.

After several minutes of preliminary silence, two group members read aloud questions and answers in turn from the interview to be assessed. The first evaluative step was to collect the reactions each member of the group was able to observe within himself. The second step involved attempting to achieve a global perception of the interviewee while the interview was being read for instance, what particularly struck the one or the other member, or what general observations suggested themselves. Then, in a third step, there followed individual evaluation of the answers to the questionnaire (which, all in all, provided for some 57 different positions). A fourth step involved attempting, on the basis of the questions asked concerning the socio-economic situation of the interviewee's childhood and present, to isolate the causal factors that had gone into shaping his character. In yet a further step, the productive (or, alternatively, non-productive) components of the postulated character traits were assessed, in order then, in a sixth and final step, to reach a judgement on the interviewee's characterological



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orientation and the ingredients that had gone into its making.

Protocols of some 30 individual teachers have been compiled. Their computer-assisted registration permits both comparative and in-depth analysis of the individual questions. The analytic work proper still lies ahead of us. Nonetheless, it is possible to offer some provisional assessments.

Clearly the hierarchical incorporation of teachers into the official school systems of both German states was and is quite considerable, a situation which has led, in both cases alike, to authoritarian structures which can successfully reproduce themselves. We did however find clearcut evidence of authoritarian character structures among the Eastern German teachers. By contrast, Western German teachers we found to exhibit, for the most part, marketing and narcissistic structures –doubtless the result of the influence of the market-orientated "affluent society".

At the same time, a development has taken place in Western Germany which, in tendency at least, opens up rather more room for maneuver. By 1968 at the latest, with the emergence of the leftist students' movement, new educational concepts arose which, in effect, promoted a freer and more democratic climate in the classrooms, a



closer orientation to the needs of children, a greater commitment to creativity. Under the motto of "anti-authoritarian" education new models were explored and tested, especially in the urban centers. Parallel to this a development occurred, in the course of which social conflict became more and more pronounced and traditional family structures progressively broke down. The upshot, particularly in the big cities, was that teachers found themselves not only teaching their usual academic subjects, but also functioning more and more as "social workers" and counselors for both parents and children.

Analysis of the socio-economic origin of teachers' parental households mostly turned up great similarities between both systems. We find an "idealized world" constructed around traditional family structures, but closely allied with a fixation on material prosperity. Fatty bourgeois structures frequently were in evidence. In the parental household of teachers the father was normally the breadwinner, with the mother devoting herself to childraising, at least for a period of time. Hard work had usually been a necessity.

These structures had played an express role in both Germanies during the fifties, i.e. at the time of post-war reconstruction. For all the differences, what stands out is the great similarity of family structures across the



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divide. These structures have remained more or less intact to date in the former East Germany; but what we find in the West Germany of the sixties, seventies and eighties is a deepreaching influence that has stemmed from the "economic miracle" of those years. Teachers from West Germany therefore show a development away from authoritarian towards marketing character types.

We also observed that clearcut differences are not only apparent between teachers from both Germanies; an equally great divide exists between teachers from urban areas, on the one hand, and those with rural and small town backgrounds, on the other. A Berlin teacher, for exmple, differs characterologically from a teacher from a small Bavarian town no less than a Eastern from a Western German teacher. Cutting right across both Germanies is the greater prevalence of authoritarian structures in small towns or on the land. Characteristic of those in the big city is their greater exposure to market influences.

What did strike us particularly was that teachers from Eastern Germany seemed to have settled into highly regimented, even rigid habits –and that in even comparatively young years, i.e. before even reaching the age of thirty; furthermore, our impression was that they could easily so continue right up to their retirement. As a result, they seemed older than their years. By contrast,



the Western German teachers, especially those from the cities, seemed to have held onto some flexibility even beyond their fortieth year of life. They seemed to have retained some capacity for restructuring their lives. Partnerships and private lives were also run on less rigid lines; and children, if there were any, tended to arrive much later than in the case of Eastern German teachers. Their readiness to try out openended teaching methods was also more pronounced.