



"A decade before the Berlin Wall came down, the corrosion of the social welfare state started with the neoliberal turn"

Interview with **Wolfgang Engler**, by **Olaf Bruns**

Wolfgang Engler is a sociologist and publicist from Dresden who lives in Berlin. From 2005 to 2017 he was the rector of the Academy of Dramatic Arts "Ernst Busch" Berlin. His last book - together with Jana Hensel - "Wer wir sind. Die Erfahrung, ostdeutsch zu sein" ("Who we are. The experience of being East German"), tackles the many open questions of Germany 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The German sociologist Wolfgang Engler examines the question what happened to (Eastern) Germany in the past three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall from the inside. In his last book – together with the journalist and writer Jana Hensel – 'Wer wir sind. Die Erfahrung, ostdeutsch zu sein' ('Who we are. The experience of being East German'), recounts a particular sense of homelessness in the new, western world. But he also thinks that many of the problems that have arisen along the way can only be understood in the wider context of neoliberalism and deindustrialisation.

Progressive Post: *30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall – does the thought give you a solemn, or rather an anxious, feeling?*

Wolfgang Engler: Both. At the celebrations in November, we'll probably hear again about all the things that have been achieved. And you can't deny it: with regard to apartments, infrastructure, supply systems and also to a number of companies that are thriving, a lot has happened! But often, the problems that also exist are put aside. But perhaps something is changing now. The East is back in the headlines – linked to right-wing extremist demonstrations and acts of violence, but also on the electoral success of the New Right. This has led the East to be perceived as a threat on the one hand, but also: many people are now looking more closely at the background: why are these things

happening? Of course, I do not want to say that I'm grateful to these movements, but perhaps they were necessary to sharpen the general awareness of the problem!

PP: *For you, what are the salient features of Germany, 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall?*

WE: The ambivalence of the developments: The big subjects are the East-West migrations from 1989 to now, with all their disparities. Then again, there are places like Jena, Potsdam, Berlin and Dresden, and a number of other middle cities where the exodus has been successfully halted, where people come back, and which have developed quite well, economically and culturally. However, we still have many regions where the opposite is the case. Where the departures





| Like here in Wismar, many former GDR companies closed after the wall came down. From a total of 150 large companies (more than 5,000 employees), 145 were phased out in the early years after the reunification.'

continue and where the long-term effects of the economic ravage of the early years after the fall of the Wall are still palpable. Today, about 14 million live in the area that used to be the GDR. At the very end of the GDR there were about 17 million!

PP: *What were the reasons for society to unravel in this way?*

WE: Of course, the entire German unification process, starting from '89, was very much under pressure from the East Germans. Immediately after the fall of the Wall, the exodus from East to West started, there were slogans like 'if the D-Mark does not come to us, we go to the D-Mark', meaning: if the reunification doesn't happen fast, we'll go West. This had to be considered. But in reality, it has led to an overhasty reunification.

Just one example: in the East there were 150 large companies, with 5,000 or more employees. In the years after the unification,

145 of these were phased-out within a very short time. And that also means that the suppliers didn't have work anymore, that the social, cultural and medical infrastructure tied to these large companies in the East were suddenly no longer available. Life was deserted, within two to five years. Elsewhere – in the Ruhr area, in parts of the English Midlands, in the industrial belt in the US – these deindustrialisation processes took several decades to happen! And even today, the wounds do not heal so easily.

PP: *Is that the background of the radicalisation of part of the population in Eastern Germany?*

WE: I don't think it's an essentially East German or even a German problem. It becomes visible only when one takes a larger view and considers the changes in the early 1980s, a decade before the Wall came down, namely the corrosion of the social welfare state and the turn to neoliberal regimes. This

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Again, the words of Walter Benjamin apply, who said about the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s: these people help the masses to express themselves, but not to obtain their rights.

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In the 1980s, a decade before the Wall came down, the corrosion of the social welfare state started with the neoliberal turn. This has led people everywhere to miss the train and to feel left out. And these people are now looking for ways to politically address their anger and rage.

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has led people everywhere to miss the train and to feel left out. And these people are now looking for ways to politically address their anger and rage. For a long time, in Eastern Germany, their standard carrier was the Left Party. But in the summer of 2015, with the mass migration, people started feeling that the Left Party had become part of the establishment, that they back the policies of chancellor Angela Merkel. And then they thought: well, let's go for a radical turn! We now entrust our dissatisfaction to those who'll make you feel a bit uncomfortable. Maybe the political class will see us then. And that is exactly what happened!

And when you come to those areas where people feel excluded, they say, 'as long as we've stayed politically moderate, we've heard things like 'everything will be fine, it may take a little longer, there might just be dry spells...'. But now that we are entrusting our political process to the New Right, everyone is interested in us: the journalists come, the social researchers come... - well, it seems that we did everything right! And then it's hard to answer: no, that goes completely the wrong way!

PP: *Are these really essentially movements of people who feel excluded? Losers of the economic development, of globalisation?*

WE: No. If examine the supporters and support networks of the New Right, not only

in the East of Germany, it becomes clear that these are not just the so-called losers of globalisation, but that these networks reach deeply into the middle of the society. The precarious alone would neither bear the phenomenon nor would they allow it to be explained.

Research has shown that in Dresden many people who participate in the far-right demonstrations are well-educated, earning an average wage, or even slightly more, sometimes even academics. The middle of society is much more vulnerable than the West!

PP: *What causes this particular vulnerability of the middle of society, or the middle class, in the East?*

WE: There are many who have a good job, a good education and earn decent money, but, because of the different developments of the East, even now, after three decades, haven't even remotely been able to accumulate the same economic resources - savings, home ownership etc. - as comparable people in the West. And these people are extremely vulnerable when something unforeseen happens, when they lose their job or apartment. Normally, as middle class, people have an economic buffer, which allows them to envisage a new situation for a moment. Here in the East, people are much more unprotected towards change, because they can't





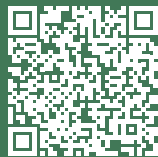
rely on those resources. And then an eviction from an apartment for the landlord's personal use is often already enough for someone to slip very quickly from the middle of society to the bottom.

And when this centre of society, the anchor of stability, comes under such massive pressure, when the people lose their homes or jobs in droves - then they

PP: *Is that the 'Great Offense' you write about in your recent book?*

WE: It's linked. By the 'Great Offense', I mean the irritating experience that millions of East Germans had in the period 1990-1992: on the one hand, through the 1989 reversal, they achieved, in political terms, pretty much everything they wanted: civil rights, individual freedoms, freedom of assembly, freedom of travel, etc. But at the precise moment when they had reached this goal, for millions of people suddenly the social and economic network fell apart. And this twofold experience, that they have achieved a gain in political self-determination, on the one hand, but a dramatic loss of economic self-determination on the other, destabilises society up until today.

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