Scott Goodfellow looks at reactions to the abolition of Marxist- Leninist teaching in East Germany

Liberals rush in where Engels feared to tread

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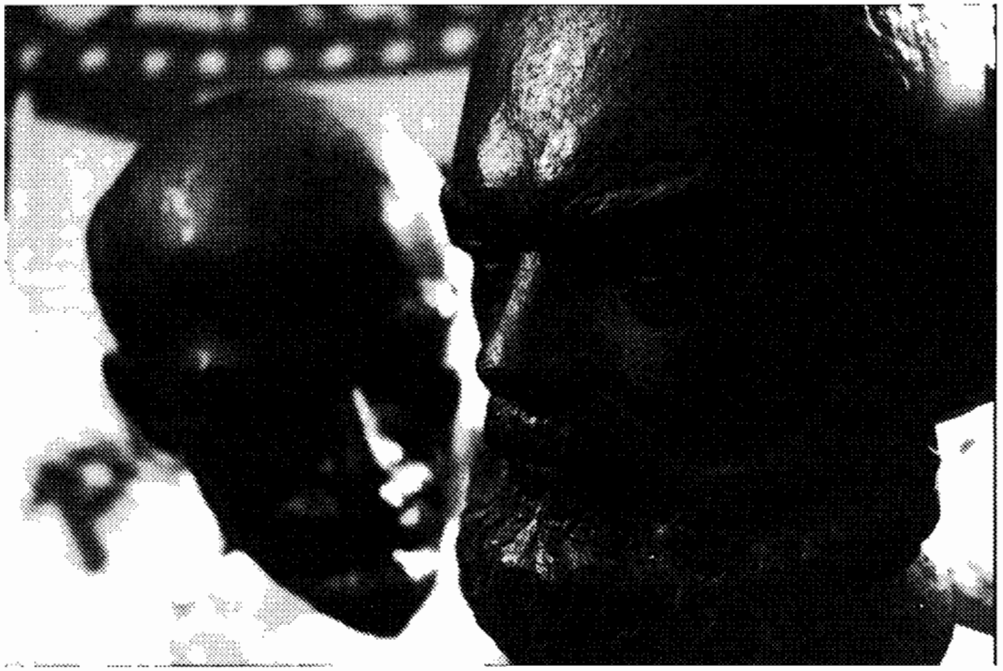
It is not uncommon, in most countries for PhD students to just give up. But Kristine Leithold, having completed her PhD thesis on Marxism and ethics, now has to cope with the opposite problem: her professors, department, in fact the whole establishment of academic "Marxismus Leninismus" (ML) in the German Democratic Republic having done just that – given up.

"The entire academic framework has vanished," she says. "Last year I was constantly criticized for being too unorthodox but now my attempts look rather modest." Kristine, in her late twenties and with a young child, hoped to get a lectureship but is now unsure if, how, by who and on what basis her doctorate will be awarded. At the moment she is unemployed.

The abolition of ML teaching in eastern Europe has been portrayed in the West as an academic liberation from a form of obscurantist neo-scholasticism. Like the classical syllogism or Occam's razor, arguments over the number of proletarians who can dance on the dialectic are no longer going to waste educational time. Reaction to news of mass redundancies (East Germany is disposing of 550 professors in one go) is one of universal approval.

But some now believe that enthusiasm at the complete disappearance of over 50 ML departments dotted round the GDR should be qualified. The academic study of Marxism has not been discredited *per se* and there are those who argue that the work of eastern European academics is being written off too quickly as nothing but the monolithic expression of state ideology. Certainly the end of the forced-feeding of undergraduates with a grim mix of Lenin and Honecker is unlamentable, but if nothing else, the German Democratic Republic has produced the monumental *Marx-Engels Werke*, the rock upon which modern Marx scholarship is founded.



Although Marxism-Leninism was compulsory, criticism was commonplace among East scholars

Kris Leithold paints a picture of a discipline which was strictly controlled from above and isolated from western scholarship, but which was by no means a monolith. "People are now saying that there was no critical GDR culture. But there was a fair amount from a humanist and ecological standpoint. ML departments were large because it was a compulsory subject, and among younger lecturers and research students there was a lot of fairly radical criticism."

Occasionally this would surface in publications. In 1988, as ideological arteries were hardening in the central committee of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), Berlin's Humboldt University published *Epoch of Change*, a collection of essays which explicitly questioned Leninism. Despite the "unavailability" of some Soviet journals and the trumpeting of "socialism with GDR colours", the Gorbachov revolution brought changes in unofficial thinking.

Changes in society wrought by the information and technological revolutions – undreamt of in the philosophy of the tractor and the happy worker – led to an officially sanctioned interdisciplinary project into what was grandly titled the "bio-psycho-social essence of humanity". This brought together everyone from philosophers to biologists and resulted in the publication in 1987 of *Arguments for Responsibility*. In the rigidly demarcated academic world of the GDR this was unique.

Particularly interesting was the inclusion in the project of Robert Weimann, professor of English literature at Humboldt, who, through the surreptitious introduction of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking into the study of Shakespeare, helped to transform the annual Weimar Shakespeare festival into a forum for new theoretical approaches. With philosophy and ML departments respectively defined as philosophy past and future, it was from less rigidly policed subjects that new ideas filtered through.

Kris Leithold's own work, dealing with questions of individuation and personal responsibility, brought her into contact with areas of study and disciplines that were treated with suspicion by the authorities. Dialectical materialism, the Stalinized Marxism exported from the Soviet Union, lays claim to a unified theory of personal and social development. The disciplines of psychology and sociology, born of a different intellectual tradition, threaten that claim.

"It was impossible to use western thinkers unless one included an explicit *ausenlandersetzung* – a critical justification," she says. "And after 1985 it was no longer possible to travel to Leningrad and search in the Soviet libraries for a good source for your ideas – that became suspicious after Gorbachov. In order to justify my work I had to go back to the wave of socialist humanism in the 1960s that began with Khruschev and ended with the invasion of Czechoslovakia."

Dr Siegfried Bunger, a professor of modern history at Humboldt University, remembers 1968 very well. "I was involved in the political battles at Prague University at the time," he says. "Afterwards I was refused a lectureship for my 'anti-Leninist position'." Like Kris Leithold, he would not describe himself as a dissident, but testifies to a continued tradition of high academic standards in GDR universities. "People in the West treat us as a solid, homogenous bloc. It has never been the case. The new Christian Democrat education minister Professor Meyer has stated that he is thankful of the liberal and tolerant education he received at Humboldt."

Humboldt, the most prestigious of GDR universities, has a long tradition of critical independence: after all Karl Marx himself studied there in the 1830s. Now it faces an uncertain future in a united Germany. Just across the city is West Berlin's Free University, which has a similar number of staff – but with 60,000 students to Humboldt's 15,000 or so. Whereas seminars in the East may have 30 or so students, those in the West have hundreds. No one knows what form reorganization will take or when it will come, but, says Dr Bunger, change is inevitable.

It was not only Marxism-Leninism that embodied the old régime. Humboldt's huge economics faculty, training managers for the fast disappearing command economy, is hopelessly obsolete.

"You can distort history, but you cannot just invent it. They invented a perfectly planned economy that did not exist," he says grimly.

Conversely, the faculties of sociology, law, and political science are already expanding.

In his own subject, Siegfried Bunger points out that he and some other historians have been informing their students of events such as the Hitler–Stalin pact of 1939 (officially denied by the Soviet Union until last year) for many years.

But, he says, "in a way we were all official historians. It was intellectually crippling. Although, as a lecturer in English history I had more space. Those who have spent a lifetime telling students of how the historic mission of the German working class was fulfilled in the GDR have more of a problem."

Both Bunger and Leithold are united in believing that change was long overdue, and that many of their colleagues are irredeemably sunk in ignorant dogma.

But both would describe themselves as Marxists and both were members of the SED. Kris Leithold is now a city councillor for the SED's reformed successor, the Party of Democratic Socialism. So perhaps it is one of those interesting dialectical contradictions that both of them, although concerned about jobs and funding, are more hopeful now for the future of academic Marxism in the GDR than they were under socialism.