

The Berlin Wall as metaphor and diagnosis

2009-11-09 15:22:00

By



Twenty years ago today the Berlin Wall fell (both materially and metaphorically) and state socialism in Eastern Europe entered its final period of collapse. However, as the ample anthropological literature on the area shows us (and as Slavoj Žižek discusses in an [op-ed piece](#) in today's New York Times) two decades of postsocialism have had far from unequivocal results.

A more thorough discussion of the anthropological literature on postsocialism—as it relates to issues of medicine, health and science will have to wait, but at the moment I'd like to highlight a couple of interesting articles which examine the Berlin Wall specifically as a construct in psychological discourse. In "[The Berlin Wall on the Therapist's Couch](#)" and "[Constructions of the Berlin Wall: How Material Culture Is Used in Psychological Theory](#)," sociologist of science [Christine Leuenberger](#) has written about the psychological sciences in Germany have used the Wall as a means of understanding the basis of individual distress and as a metaphor for social malaise. Here's the abstract from the latter article:

This article examines how, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the German psychological sciences used the Berlin Wall

to interpret and make sense of the psychological make-up of the German people. It focuses on how the wall has been invoked by psychiatrists, applied psychologists, and psychotherapists in their writings at three historical moments: (1) after its initial construction in 1961, (2) immediately after its fall in 1989, and (3) 10 years after its demise. After the wall was erected, it became an interpretive resource to think about a divided society, and to make visible, decipherable, and classifiable, the inner life of a people. Shortly after its fall, it continued to serve as a basis for categorizing human suffering. Ten years later the wall had been rhetorically transformed into a “mental wall” offering a compelling metaphor for modern Germany’s apparent psychological and cultural divide. The three case studies exemplify how the psychological sciences use material objects, such as the Berlin Wall, as interpretive resources to reflect on psychological issues, make sense of societal transformations, and create and solve social problems,” ([Leuenberger 2006](#)).

The first of these case studies is particularly interesting. It concerns:

“...the book *Die Berliner Mauerkrankheit* (The Berlin wall disease) written by a prominent East German psychiatrist, Dietfried Müller-Hegemann (1973), shortly after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 (but not published until after his emigration to the West). Müller-Hegemann drew on his collection of patient histories to highlight the deleterious social and psychological consequences of a society encircled by the wall. He investigated what Berliners had already started to talk about—whether the newly built wall was causing a novel psychological disease: “the wall disorder,”([Leuenberger 2006](#): 22).

In 1990, a book by Hans Joachim Maaz, an East German cultural critic and psychotherapist examined the Wall’s fall in broad cultural terms, drawing upon psychoanalytic language—a mode of analysis which itself signified a shift away from the orthodox therapeutic theories of the East (which framed psychoanalysis as bourgeois and capitalist):

“In his book *Der Gefühlsstau* (Emotional Blockage), Maaz (1990) described that fateful night in November 1989 as a psychological revolution: “The wall’s fall was the emotional climax of the unloading, the cathartic breaking-through . . . of the unconscious. The emotional blockage unclogged, the repressed came to the surface, and the parts that had been split apart, united” (p. 152). East Germans’ “emotional blockage” had built up over years of a

“walled in and restricted existence” marked by “authoritarian” structures in schools, homes and professions (Maaz 1990:15). He argued that “the wall provided the outer framework” for East Germany’s “repressive and authoritarian” (p. 15) political, medical, and educational institutions and practices,” ([Leuenberger 2006](#): 27).

Finally, the 1990s saw the rise of the notion of “die Mauer in den Köpfen” (the wall in the heads) — as a frequently cited construct through which journalists, psychologists and cultural critics conceptualized (and Leuenberger suggests, reified) persistent differences between East and West.

Interestingly, Leuenberger has followed up this work with a [new project](#) on the barrier constructed by Israel along the border with the West Bank.

The references:

Christine Leuenberger. “[Constructions of the Berlin Wall: How Material Culture Is Used in Psychological Theory.](#)” *Social Problems*, February 2006, 53(1): 18–37.

Christine Leuenberger. “[The Berlin Wall on the Therapist’s Couch.](#)” *Human Studies*, April 2000, 23(2): 99-121.

And a couple of additional key anthropological texts on post-socialist East Germany:

John Borneman. [Belonging in the two Berlins: Kin, state, nation.](#) Cambridge University Press: 1992.

Daphne Berdahl. [Where the world ended: re-unification and identity in the German borderland.](#) University of California Press: 1999.

[Image source: Wikipedia/Senate of Berlin](#)

AMA citation

. The Berlin Wall as metaphor and diagnosis. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed June 13, 2012.

APA citation

. (). *The Berlin Wall as metaphor and diagnosis*. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation

. . The Berlin Wall as metaphor and diagnosis. Somatosphere. (accessed June 13, 2012).

Harvard citation

, *The Berlin Wall as metaphor and diagnosis*, Somatosphere. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <>

MLA citation

. "The Berlin Wall as metaphor and diagnosis." . Somatosphere. Accessed 13 Jun. 2012.<>