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Teaching Revolution

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Abstract

Students of today, young people learning at universities or in schools nowadays, have not experienced or witnessed themselves the revolutions of 1989/1990 in Europe. In the best case they have been learning about those events from their parents and relatives, from the media and, last but not least, from school lessons. To what amount and with which content does school – be it in West Europe or a post-communist country - provide learners with opportunities to achieve knowledge about the revolutions? What do young people feel when they see and hear (again and again) films showing 70.000 citizens who demonstrate in front of tanks, photos of average people who climb up a wall or tear down a communist monument, reports about citizens who make sure that the secret service in their town has no opportunity to destroy their files and archives? Whenever political processes like the revolutions of 1989/1990 have had that impact on daily life of the younger generation, in East and West Europe, citizenship has to “explain” the facts and the reasons to young people.

Many students today, young people learning at universities or in schools, have not experienced or witnessed first hand the revolutions of 1989/1990 in Europe. In the best case they have been learning about those events from their parents and relatives, from the media and, last but not least, from school lessons. In the last case the learning outcome depends on various factors; the curriculum, the textbook, and the personality of the teacher are only a few ones among others.

To what extent and with which content does school provide learners with opportunities to achieve knowledge about the revolutions? What is the message? Is there any relevance for citizenship education?

Principal questions

If teaching citizenship or political education have to do with events of major importance, then the fall of the Berlin wall, the end of the communist system etc. are those events. Terms like the “end of history” or “victory of capitalism” exaggerate the facts, but tell us definitely that a new era, a new stage has started, not only in Europe, but in a global range. Insofar it is a must to teach students about these processes, to give them knowledge about the reasons, the facts, and the impacts of those revolutionary days.

Whenever political changes which have had that big impact on the daily life of the younger generation are to be identified, citizenship education is concerned, as one of its concepts is to “explain” to young people why things are like they are. Young people should know how the conditions of life have come about, be it in their own country, be it in neighbouring countries east of them.

Only the knowledge? Is it a cognitive matter only? What are the intentions and, maybe differently, the actual impacts on attitudes and values? What do young people feel when they see and hear (again and again)

- films showing 70.000 citizens who demonstrate in front of tanks;
- photos of ordinary people who climb up a wall or tear down a communist monument;
- reports about families who cry tears of joy when reaching “liberty” in the West; or,
- documentaries about citizens who make sure that the secret service in their town has no opportunity to destroy their files and archives?

With what emotions do they watch movies like “The Lives of Others” or “Good Bye, Lenin” which let them experience, to some extent, how the revolution has changed the political system?

It is to be assumed that beside the cognitive content there is another message; the message is saying something like: *Look, people act. It is the people who have the power. The masses are strong, but not violent. You can get rid of oppression. Democracy wins. ...*

These messages are crucial for citizenship education. They are comprehensive for those who have been involved in these processes and significant for those who did not witness revolution directly, in that they get to know more about it, through texts, photos, films etc. Young people, who acquire knowledge about a democratic process, also develop democratic skills and attitudes. Hence citizenship education should not hesitate to promote and distribute lessons that the revolutions of 1989/90 teach us!

This is a very strong claim which presupposes that the lesson is democratic, and that the lesson is to be transferred to contemporary societies with the same meaning. What, for instance, will be the message if people are discontent, disappointed about the outcome almost twenty years afterwards? Actually there is a shift of people who suffered from the transformation process as they lost their privileges or reputation:

- In GDR more than 1 % of the population served the Secret Service “Stasi” as informal, i.e. covered agents, another 0.5 % as employees.
- In East Germany, maybe an estimated 15 percent of the population can be identified as “losers of unification”, who would agree with items like “Today it’s worse than before the revolution” or at least “the communist system was not totally bad”.

Hence which lesson the history is teaching depends on the biography and social situation of the audience.

A crucial question is whether the use historiography (the research and presentation of events in the past) is legitimate to teach lessons; should scholars “use” studies as a means to illustrate or support a “lesson”, to envelop a message? In the case of “Zeitgeschichte”, i.e. contemporary history, the events are in the past, but the actors are still alive. Matter-of-factly, those who have been involved in the processes do have influences on the public opinion; those who represent the old communist system can – due to the new liberty of opinion and press – publish their view; in many countries they retain political influence and power. In order to reject any theories of conspiracy, all files have to be published and opened for all researchers. The internal papers, discussed in the internal circle of the “Politbüro” in GDR, give evidence for the fact that in the late 1980s the economic crisis in East Germany was so advanced that it could hardly be coped with by further credit from the West.

Can we accept that historical studies are used in the educational and political contexts? If not, what is the purpose of research?

In this conflict it is to be emphasized that historiography and citizenship education are two different things: The historians are committed to the truth, the actors in *citizenship education want to use the historical facts in order to strengthen the democratic idea.*

It is not unethical to “use” the findings of historians as arguments. Citizenship education does not want to overwhelm its audience, but to give some arguments for a claim. One claim is that the revolutionary processes have been a transnational processes, as far as the causes, reasons and its conditions, and as far as the actors are concerned. As the processes cannot be explained sufficiently in terms of national states, they have to be called “revolutions in Europe” or yet “*European revolution(s)*”.

Under these auspices the mass movement, the system change, the transformation etc. can be illustrated by a national view, but must not be restricted to it. Of course there are important national aspects to these revolutions with respect to a change of system, replacement of the elites etc.; national self-determination with liberation from the Soviet-Union; to become unified (Germany); to regain national independence (e.g. Poland); or, gain independence (e.g. Slovenia); even in a new constellation (e.g. Czech Republic and Slovakia).

History

As far as curricula and text books are concerned, in most European states, the European Revolution is primarily the subject of history teachers. If there are school subjects like civil education or, like in

Germany, political education or social literacy, they are not focusing on that issue. In ethics, language and literature courses, the 1989/1990 events are rarely touched.

If, however, the European revolution of 1989/1990 is history, just a couple of historical events, the lessons might at least contribute to a better understanding of Europe of today, in particular the processes of integration and regional development after enlargement /accession to the EU.

The textbooks are mostly end with 1991 or 1992, summarizing the new structure of Europe, in particular the independence of the states which have been part of the Soviet-Union and Yugoslavia. Also in the German case (unification and full sovereignty) it looks like an “end of the history”, i.e. presenting Europe in a state which seems to be the intrinsic, historically logical sense of the previous 45 years. As the post war period has been overcome, everything seems to be “in order”.

Civil society

The political processes in the latter 1970s (e.g. Charta 77) and throughout the 1980s have not only been supported, but essentially driven and steered by citizens, movements, groups, clubs, committees and circles - by means of information and exchange, resistance, protest demonstrations, building up political publicity. The role of the church and trade unions has become crucial, as the citizens used them as a platform of political organization. All over Europe civil movements have developed, as people started to refer to Human Rights or Civil Rights in terms of the Helsinki declaration.

Individual action, even individualistic behavior, has challenged regimes at times, but only as part of a movement has it led to ‘fruitful crisis’. In the German case, the individuals who insisted on their freedom to leave GDR formed a movement, which although not in isolation, in part led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and, by the way, to the end of the GDR. In some states the masses executed just the pressure the new elites could rely upon when replacing the old ones. Hence citizenship education cannot renounce or refuse to refer to this model of historically single civil movements – be they so heterogeneous and different, in international comparison, as they are.

Civil society has not only been anticipated in terms of political means, but also objectives as well. Citizens fought for liberty of speech, opinions, religion; citizens fought for the liberty of travel and moving to other places, citizens fought for political pluralism, competition, free elections.

It is true that in many countries it has been a national movement; the citizens have had in mind the independency of their country, national sovereignty. The demonstrators showed national flags – in opposition to the communist symbols or emblems of the Soviet Empire. As civil society needs liberty, it was necessary to achieve self-determination and get rid of any empire and dictatorship. The success of civil movements in Latvia or Moldova, not less in Poland and Slovenia, was due to the fact that liberation has had its national aspect, too.

In the very beginning the civil movement in GDR has had only democratic ambitions (“We are the people”). Only in December 1989 the national aspect, the unification with West Germany (“We are one people”) started to become popular and influential. Most textbooks describe the East German revolution under the headline “German unification”, which is – regarding it from the end - correct, but not the whole truth.

It appears to be a general tendency to change the perception: The national states of today (which are dominated often enough by national and/or also post communist parties) present themselves as independent, sovereign states created and legitimated by the people during the 1989/1990 events. The liberal democracy, however, citizens had in mind and fought for, is getting neglected, as it would not be that comfortable for the new elites in any case, if the citizens insist on it.

The new elites have sometimes been related to the old elites, for instance as members of the communist party, yet no prominent ones. Former dissidents or expatriates did not necessarily come to power. GDR is a special case, as new elites have remarkably been recruited from West Germany. In East Germany of today, however, there are numerous members of the local or regional or national parliaments or governments who have been in a similar (though lower) function in the previous system.

Revolution

The democratic processes might differ in details due to the particular conditions in each country, but have led to the same results:

- the demission of political elites
- a pluralist political system, competition of political parties, liberty of opinion, press, association etc.
- market economy, privatization, and capitalism.

Taking these three aspects into consideration this change is not more and not less than a revolution.

In Germany a strange case of ignorance is to be stated. In daily communication, referring to the events of 1989/1990, people like to use the term “Wende” which means “turn” and goes back to the changes the secretary general of the communist party (officially: SED = Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) Krenz, after having replaced Honecker, had announced on 18th October 1989: changes within the system, not of the system!

“Nach der Wende” (after this turn) things appear to have changed softly and gradually – actually, however, East German politics, economy, society have changed profoundly!

There are still some textbooks which do not use the term “revolution”. Others use it without explanation or within quotation marks as if the authors are not convinced of it. There seems to be a sort of reluctance in public debates, political discussions, and mostly daily life to call the events of 1989 ‘revolution’. This reluctance might stem from a long tradition in Germany that views revolution as something suspicious, incorrect: It is not allowed to shake the authority of the state.

Frequently the unification, i.e. the access of the new five “Länder” to the Federal Republic, firstly concerning the currency and the economy, then the constitution and the state itself, is stressed, as if the unification is not the impact, but the source of the profound and radical changes.

Of course, it is easier to talk about a revolution in terms of its results than in terms of the process which is not necessarily a good one: violence, destruction, chaos, manipulation by obscure leaders (or leading parties) are associated with, not to mention revolutions which ended up with cruel dictatorship.

Only in some countries the “singing revolution” (Baltic States) or “velvet revolution” (Czech Republic and Slovakia) continue to have a positive semantic potential. In many other countries those times are remembered as a period of “transition” (Romania, Poland) only.

Hence, the facts of peaceful revolutions all over Europe, the fact of civil movements which have changed the continent, have to be stressed even more and again.

Europe

It was civil movements that changed Europe in a revolutionary way. Hence the European dimensions are threefold:

- a) A big part of Europe (East of Germany) has been the arena of fundamental political changes, the rest of it is being influenced indirectly; Finland, for instance, has had to cope with a severe economical crisis due to its close connection with the Soviet-Union. Concerning the impacts, the processes of 1989/1990 built a European revolution – and have created a New Europe (s.EU 27 etc.).
- b) The (progress of the) peaceful revolution in one state was an important incentive and encouragement for all others. The role of the media was crucial.
- c) The civil societies in communist countries had connections and communication among themselves - and with civil movements in West Europe as well.

There is much evidence for the first statement.

The statements b) and c), however, are not to be evidenced that easily. It seems to be consensus in German textbooks and public opinion that the so called “Wende” (turn) goes back to Gorbachov and the Hungarian government, as the “big brother” had recommended, even demanded reforms and the allied country in the south had opened the door for GDR-citizens to go West. And, to complete this sort of

historiography, it was Gorbatschow and Kohl who made sure that the unification and hence a true revolution could be transformed into a governmental agreement.

It was, as far as the Soviet-Union is concerned, a type of top-down-revolution which means that the reforms initiated by the general secretary of the communist party were not demanded, were not accepted yet by the masses. Civil society, beside intellectuals and artists, was not developed well in Russia, also because the church was far from being critical or offering space for critical groups. In Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova however, civil society has started to work, to some degree under the auspices of a national movement. Liberation has had a double meaning: independence and pluralistic democracy.

The communist parties in GDR, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, less in Bulgaria and Romania, did not have the choice any more to respond to societal demands or not. The liberal ideas of Hungarian government, for instance, were referring to lots of groups and a public opinion which had no excuse or justification to arrest or keep back East German families who wanted to emigrate to West Germany.

In order to understand the influence of civil movements in one country on the processes in other ones, it might suffice to consider the chronology. Prior to the most important Monday demonstrations, e.g. about 70,000 citizens in the streets of Leipzig (Lipsia) 9th of October 1989, fundamental changes have started already elsewhere, as the two items show:

- In Poland, 24th of August, after almost free elections in June, the first non-communist government (T. Mazowiecki) came into power
- In Hungary, since 1987 new parties had been founded, January 1989 the Communist Party (USAP) had given up its monopole, accepted a pluralistic party system.

Actually there is a lack of research about the international, i.e. intersocietal or civic connections in Europe, between East and West. Beside private relationships (for instance relatives from East Germany or Czech Republic and West Germany who spent their holidays together at lake Balaton, Hungary) three examples of transnational civil movements can be mentioned:

- The intensive contacts between (protestant or catholic) Christians in Central Europe
- The increasing number of Human Rights committees or Helsinki groups in communist countries which received support by corresponding groups in West Europe
- The increasing number of official contacts between sister cities or youth organizations, also trade-unions, which gave opportunities to learn to know each other not only to people close to the system

Textbooks

The European revolution of 1989/1990 does not play any role in the textbooks and curricula for the subject which is called “political literacy”, “politics” or “social literacy” in German states.

It is, however, subject of history, as the secondary school or the first level of “Gymnasium”, in each case 10th form (16 years old student) , and the Gymnasium 12th or 13th grade conclude with contemporary history. Students and teachers, however, are reporting that at the end of the school year there was no time left for it.

It might be the case that part of the teachers are not that unhappy about this lack of time, as they have grown up and been educated in the GDR, teaching already “during GDR times” (another term which is in use and apt to cover the fact that the school system has had to support the building of a socialist society). On the other hand a couple of teachers of history or “social literacy” do teach these subjects nowadays, but had not studied it. Nevertheless there are also teachers who have been part of the civic movement in the late 1980s and able/willing to tell the students their story. Concerning the biographies and attitudes of contemporary teachers there are no empirical data available.

In West German schools the European revolution is not topical, either. It has been proved for curricula and textbooks in Germany and might be proved for other countries, too: the national perspective is dominant (Schröder 2004, Arnswald 2004).

There are not so many textbooks like Cornelsen 2006, which does mention Human Rights movement in East Europe and even offers the students documents mostly from the 1970s about the CSCE in Helsinki, Charta 1977, Solidarnocs, Sacharow, Solschenizyn, Havel, Bukowskij, and the National People's Front of Lithuania, particularly also about the persecution of opposite intellectuals like Orlov, Pljuschtsch and Demszky (Cornelsen, 2006: 411-415). We look, however, in vain for any information, be it text or photo, about the revolution in Czechoslovakia or Romania. In this textbook, which is one of the best, there are no details about the revolution in neighbouring countries at all!

In general, the textbooks refer to resistance and opposition in the GDR and mentioning the movements of citizens particularly within the churches. The importance of civil society is not stressed very much, in the textbooks for the 16 years old student even less (Arnswald, 2004).

Citizenship education

Citizenship education is a learning opportunity prepared by whomever, be it schools or youth associations or local initiatives or global movements, in which

- people can express that they want to have the control over their lives,
- people can start to act and experience that they can achieve the results they want.

Civil society is the space beyond family/friends, market economy and state – it is the space where citizens organize themselves. As citizens. As we do not accept racist or fundamentalist movements or violence and intolerance, civil society is committed to civic values, to democracy, equal opportunities and respect.

The European revolutions are models of citizenship as far as these values are concerned, in particular because they are examples of people who are becoming actors and succeeding generally – it is the main problem that this success is called “history” now.

Though the societal changes in Europe are sustainable, not reversible at all, it is not this impact, but the mistakes and problems which came alongside, which are sometimes dominating the public perception. People, for instance, accuse the new politicians to be as corrupt as the former ones, but do not estimate the fact that this criticism can be published now; public opinion is the best way to get rid of those persons, political competition a good way to avoid “connections”.

The revolutions then cannot become wrong because of economical or social problems of today. Maybe it is wrong that civil society, i.e. the citizens did retire and handed over too many issues to the state or the capital, and people returned too much to private life.

Citizenship education can and should use the historical revolutions in order to set up a tradition which should not be hidden under national ideology but highlighting the fact that “once upon a time” there were democratic movements, peacefully acting citizens, who succeeded to get rid of dictatorship and oppression. The European revolution did not “take place” just like that, but it was a smaller or bigger number of courageous citizens who “made it”!

Whenever citizenship education wants to encourage (young) people to act and cooperate, to become “authors of their own life”, the civil movements which led to the revolutions of 1989/1990 can be used as a good model.

Nostalgia

Let us assume that contemporary history and its teaching in school are focusing on revolution and thus on civil society. Young people, we can take for granted, enjoy their life in modern, liberal and capitalist societies of today. There is, however, still the question how much they associate these two aspects with each other.

According to recent research (Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder, 2008) the danger comes from a side which was not under consideration that much: The image of the former society is not that bad. If people “know” about the GDR that it was a system with some mistakes, but deem in general GDR to be a system with many advantages, revolution “against it” becomes an odd category: What was the objective the democratic movement fought for?

An odd question is going to be asked: Which political system was better? For almost one fifth of the interviewed students in East Germany it was the former GDR, for only 57% it was the West. Moreover, not more than about fifty percent of the East German interviewees (16-17 years old) are clear enough to identify the GDR as a dictatorship (Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder, 2008: 331). Further, about one third of the East German students do not concede that the GDR faced an economical crisis which was one of the reasons why it perished. Also, it is, in view of the normal non-conformism of young people, somehow surprising to see that about 30 % of the East German students would appreciate having leisure time organized "like in the GDR", though they should know that these activities were obligatory and politically loaded (Deutz-Schroeder, and Schroeder, 2008: 323).

Though the students do not know the facts and the context, e.g. the low standard of housing, the poor pensions (high rate of poverty among elderly people), the political pressure in the school etc., they estimate the social security or educational system to be better than the Western one (Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder, 2008). It seems that the less the students know the better they judge the GDR!

Lessons

The European Revolution should be centered in civics, civic education, social and political education (what ever the official name of the subject is)

- as case studies of violent free resistance, networking, grass root democracy, etc (analysis)
- as case studies and exercises of civil courage (training)

Under both aspects, the transnational communication should be highlighted more than it has been

- as a subject of transnational research: What was the relationship between Solidarnosc/catholic church in Poland and civil rights movement in Germany?
- as a tradition to be continued: What can be initiated by civil society in both countries, for instance by youth groups, to cooperate?

Of course democratic movements have been movements for democracy. Revolution is not an objective as such, but a means to achieve democracy, to abolish dictatorship or occupation, in a particular political situation. Movements come to an end when they have been successful. It is a big success to create democratic institutions, a plural system of competing political parties, free press and public control etc. Nobody wants the permanent revolution. But there was a big impetus, a high potential of self-organization. It must not be lost or discouraged.

What people have learnt at least is that they must not allow the state to colonialize their life, to watch and control them, and be it under the auspices of anti-terror policies.

Schools have the task to teach revolution. Teaching revolution is a lesson in democracy, in fair and peaceful action. Teaching revolution is an opportunity that Citizenship education should never miss.

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