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 The Constructive Moral

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 New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

One aspect of Communism neglected in Western studies is the subject of morals, better known in East Germany as "Socialist Morality". This all-pervading ethos is largely a Soviet import in the German Democratic Republic. But it assumes a German coloration of strictness and fanaticism in practical application by the party functionaries.

The distinguishing marks of Socialist Morality include severe puritanism, anti-intellectualism, so-called "constructive thinking", and the inability to take a joke.

You do not need to be very alert to detect these signs in the clothing (open-collared shirts - the necktie being a symbol of bourgeois elegance for most party members); on the dance floor (where "degenerate" Western music is banned), and in the literature and propaganda of the DDR (a vast sea of proletarian chastity).

However, in spite of its Soviet origin, Socialist Morality bears considerable resemblance to the "morality" of the Nazis. One need only recall Goebbels' campaign against impurity in the form of Western jazz, "decadent" literature, art, and architecture. Or the puritanical sanctification of the "German Mother" ("A German woman does not smoke!" was one of the bywords.)

The fact that both the Nazi and the Communist "morals" have been part and parcel of totalitarian regimes tends to obscure the peculiar German facet of the matter. Yet there is, I believe, an intangible electric tension between "morality" and "immorality" in German society and culture. Socialist Morality is only one of the poles.

A place in Leipzig where you could get a concentrated dose of morals is the political cabaret called the Pfeffermühle (peppermill). On Tuesday night, I drove along wet, dimly-lit streets to the Kabarett in the Elsterstrasse.

In the program of the Pfeffermühle, the new director, Hans Obermann, described his concept of the cabaret: "I am a journalist. It gives me pleasure to observe people, to record the observations, and to add a moral at the end. Cabaret, I am convinced... is a moral institution with immoral outlines. That is: We show up immorality so that it collapses of itself." He adds: "I am 'eastern', in case that means something to you. I share this tendency with the Frenchman, Louis Aragon, the Englishman, Allan Bush, and the American, Paul Robeson. While I am not as famous as these, I am just as sensible."

There wasn't much pepper in the Pfeffermühle performance, nor salt either. But there was plenty of nice mused morality. It came in the flabby puns about the Leipzig press, lazy teachers, and silly poets.

It came in the primitive direct assaults on West German institutions. It came in the skit about atomic bombs (the punchline had to be delivered optically - one of the seven performers lifted up a garrish picture of a mushroom cloud).

The audience, mostly young soldiers and old couples, laughed seldom, and then only at the non-political jokes.

It wasn't always like this at the Pfeffermühle.

In the autumn of 1956, the cabaret had a sharp tang. During the Hungarian Uprising, it put on a program entitled "Stir Yourself". One of its spiciest numbers was a sketch involving two soccer fans. The dialogue went: "How's Ulbricht doing as a leftwing?" -- "He's good when he gets the passes from Khrushchev." -- "Main thing is he shouldn't stall so long. He ought to play his own game." -- "Nobody tells him that." -- "Do you know why?" -- "I can imagine, but I won't say."

Communist Party functionaries got wind of this and snorted up to Walter Ulbricht. The secretary of the Socialist Unity Party immediately ordered a clean-up. So, at the 70th performance of "Stir Yourself", a tumult was staged. Communist toughs stormed the stage and threatened to beat up the performers. Then the Mayor of Leipzig appeared and declared that this demonstration of public "dissatisfaction" was reason enough to close the show.

The director, Conrad Reinhold, and his company, retired to work on a new program. Communist "culture authorities" insisted that the gifted 26-year-old satirize "refugees, factory 'slackers', and liberalistic intelligentsia," rather than party officials. Reinhold managed to create a new show, and the Pfeffermühle reopened in February, 1957 with a program called "Fun in a Minor Key".

But things were getting too hot for Reinhold. Someone denounced him for making anti-Communist remarks in a bar. He was fined and temporarily forbidden to work. So he fled to West Berlin in the summer of 1957. He is now working in Munich. Recently, Reinhold described the difference between East and West German satire this way: "The cabaret in the East is supposed to change society, but it can't say anything. In the West, the cabaret can say everything, but it can't change anything."

The other day a Communist commentary on the East Berlin cabaret, "The Thistle" reemphasized the moral tasks of satire. Writing in the official Party newspaper, Neues Deutschland, K. H. Hagen said: "The cabaret too, can become attorney for the ten commandments of Socialist Morality." The reference was to a set of "commandments" issued last summer by Walter Ulbricht. They define the good Socialist life.

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I was still carrying on the vain search for Leipzig's teen-agers. After leaving the Pfeffermühle, I drove out the Ernst Thälmannstrasse to look for a tavern recommended to me in the suburb of Volkmarsdorf.

The taxi driver at the corner smiled pityingly when I asked him about the teen-age joint. "You must mean the Chinese Corner," he said. "The Volkspolizei closed that one down last month and threw out the jazz band. They call it the Deutsches Haus now and there's no more music. Just schnitzel." He advised me to try a nearby place called Papsers.

It was an old building, perhaps a former country tavern on the road to Torgau, since swallowed up in the city's expansion. There were antlers and deer heads mounted on the walls, stuffed ducks, and other hunting emblems. A jaded combo thrummed in the corner. Several couples were dancing diffidently. I pushed past the crowded tables towards the rear. A place was free next to three young men.

Over vodka (the only passable drink available) conversation began. I ordered another round while the blond next me told about himself: "I wanted to go to trade school and become an engineer or mechanic. They said 'join the Army first'. It is an indirect draft; you can't get anywhere unless you do your time with them. They couldn't get me in that outfit for anything. (He made a gesture with his index finger). A rotten life...I'd rather drive a truck. That's People's Democracy for you."

The older one interpolated: "You've got to join in a bit with them (the Communists). You have to go along just a little bit. Then they let you alone." He sighed. "Oh to be twenty again. And start all over again... We were born either twenty years too early or thirty years too late..."

He paused. "Reunification?" he said. "You and I won't live to see it. It will never come in our lifetimes."

As I got up to leave, the shrewd one looked up for an instant, very gravely. "Greet the homeland for us," he said. The three slumped back in their chairs, despondent. I think they had been having a good time until I joined them.

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Next morning I walked to an art store in the Klosterstrasse. It was an ancient store, full of books and prints; the floors creaked and there were narrow staircases leading up to lofts. The middle-aged clerk guided me to the back where she had a small gallery. She showed me an exhibit of watercolors by a young Dessau artist. They were bright and gay drawings from an excursion in Ethiopia.

Are there more art shops like this one, I wanted to know. Her smile was vinegary. "We are the last in Leipzig," she said. "There used to be dozens. People tell me we have the only private gallery left in the whole DDR. They come here from all over. In Berlin they only make collective exhibitions in the museums..."

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Later in the morning, Herr May of the Press Center said the conference with the Leipzig teachers (DB - 39) had been arranged. He would accompany me to the new Rathaus and attend the session.

Nine of us crowded into the small room on the top floor. In addition to May and myself there were: Herr Dittrich, the trade school teacher; Frau Förster of the grammar school; Herr Malditz of the high school; Herr Lehmann of the junior high school; Herr Gosse of the District Council; Herr Kretschmar, City School Councillor, and Herr Kropf of the high school. They all wore Communist Party buttons in their lapels.

The questions and answers went something like this:

Q--Why has the DDR introduced 'polytechnical education' before all the other Socialist countries?

A--(Herr Kropf) "Technology 's making giant steps forward. So we must adapt to it."

Q--Who conceived the idea of polytechnical education?

A--(Herr Malditz) "Well...in a sense, Karl Marx was the founder. No pedagogue developed the idea. The development of society dictated it. The aim is...to tie theory to practice. You should read Marx on 'general education and productive work'.

A--(Herr Dittrich) "We have been experimenting with the new system since 1952."

Q--How did you get started on it?

A--(Dittrich) "It was demanded on all sides. We decided to initiate it at the Fifth Congress of Teachers in 1955. At first things went slowly. Many hadn't the courage to make way for the victory of Socialism. It's not a real break with the past. Don't understand it that way. We are adding no new courses. It's just that now we take the pupils into the factories. The new system will eradicate dead knowledge."

Q--But in that case, aren't you yourselves burdened by 'dead knowledge'? After all, you were educated under the old system.

A--(Malditz) "We...see our lacks. That is why we teachers are going into the factories so that we can make up for what we missed. ...The practical aspect of education came too short before. What was done before was not false; it just wasn't enough. We have a complex, difficult thing to master."

A--(Kropf) "I have been a teacher for 13 years. My subject is chemistry. I can tell you that in my time we never had any practical application in my subject until polytechnical instruction came along. I have visited 20 factories in the last year and now I know how chemistry has practical aspects."

A--(Kretschmar) "What we want to do is get rid of the old type of teacher. I know two who are brilliant. They can even play violin. But they can't even replace a wornout electric plug. That's an example. (He beamed) See what I mean?"

A--(Malditz) "There's a difference between a student who has 'seen' a lathe machine and one who can actually use it."

Q--But will you apply polytechnical methods to a subject like German?

A--(Frau Förster) "Yes. Yes. Absolutely. We will have essay themes on technical subjects, certain literature where the history of the worker is emphasized... We don't want to be one-sided." (!)

Q--What actually takes place under the new system?

A--(Kretschmar) "Well, once a week the pupils from seventh to twelfth grade spend three hours 'in the production'. They start with basic skills. That is, the seventh graders work on farms; the eighth graders work on construction projects; the ninth graders in light industry, and the tenth graders in heavy industry. After that they will specialize in order to get accreditation as skilled workers.

Q--What about connecting other subjects to polytechnical methods?

A--(Malditz) "In foreign languages of course we will study technical terms. Now with Latin, it would be impossible. That would be out as a dead language."

A--(Lehmann; waving excitedly) "Just a minute! Comrade Malditz. Think about agriculture! That's where Latin comes in. All those Latin terms in botany and chemistry too!"

A--(Malditz, blushing) "Yes...that's true. That must be changed. We must emphasize more practical application in Latin."

A--(Lehmann) "That's right. That's right."

Q--What about teacher training? Surely you can't rely on merely a few visits to factories.

A--(Kretschmar) "Our future teachers will have to learn a trade and absolve an examination in that trade before they can teach."

Q--Are there any other countries in the Socialist Camp doing this?

A--(Gosse) "Russia has some of its children in factories too. But they haven't gone into it as thoroughly as we have. (Shortly after this conversation, Nikita Khrushchev announced the new polytechnical method would be introduced in Russia). The DDR is the farthest along. But we are still in the experimental stage."

Q--None of you has mentioned the ideological aspect of it. I'm rather surprised. I thought there was some doctrinal goal in the plan. (At this point the teachers all started speaking at once. They were stirred up.)

A--(Malditz) "But that is the whole point..."

A--(Kretschmar) "...to educate our youngsters in the Socialist worker's morality..."

A--(Malditz) "...that's the core of the matter, to teach them

- A--(Dittrich) "Comrade Malditz, you don't say enough when you say worker discipline. (He paused for a deep breath) "All of the creative powers must be developed. They must be joined to produce class-conscious workers. Luckily, we can force this development."
- A--(Lehmann) "In the past, we isolated our children from the day to day struggle. They had the idea that Socialism was a straight road and all they had to do was walk along it. Now we are giving them the chance to get out and see reality. To be comrades in the battle. Sure, they'll see lazy workers here and there in the factories. But they'll also see the progressive ones."
- A--(Kretschmar) "They must learn to see reality early. Before this, the fight was spared them. Now they are in it! (His eyes glistened) Mister, are you a father? No? Well let me tell you, speaking as a father, I am pleased as anything that my 14-year-old daughter goes into the factory once a week now. I tell her, 'Now you see how hard it is to earn a mark!'"
- A--(Dittrich) "That goes for me too. I, as a father of two children... Both of them progressively educated ('progressive' is synonymous with Communist in this context) Free German Youth and everything...My boy was never hungry. In contrast to me! He and the girl go up to a FDJ camp on the Baltic Coast in the summer. I ask them, 'Do you know who pays for that?' They didn't know. Well, now they know that the workers pay for it. That's a good thing. Now they see. Besides, polytechnical instruction keeps them off the streets."
- Q--Has there been any opposition to polytechnical education?
- A--(Gosse) "Our class enemies are against it. RIAS (the American radio station in West Berlin) is hotly against it. That only shows that we are on the right track. Hah. Child labor, that's what RIAS called it. Can you imagine?"
- Q--What about the teachers? We read in the West that many of them have fled the DDR. Especially since polytechnical education was initiated.
- A--(Malditz) "You could count them on your fingers. Only a couple out of the 800 teachers we have here. They were the ones we wanted most to go. The best stayed."
- A--(Kretschmar) "Understand, it doesn't please us that they scrambled. There may be some things we don't quite see through."
- Q--But why do you make all this fuss about it? After all, the way you describe it, polytechnical instruction is just an appendage to the regular curriculum. You are just emphasizing the practical aspect of education a little more than before. But lots of school systems are doing that today.
- A--(Dittrich) "Herr Binder, you do not see deeply enough. There is an entirely new quality in our system. We hope to raise the level of education this way. Our production (system) is different than the capitalist one. With our 'improver method' (an incentive award scheme), our worker brigades...It is different."

Despite the fact that these education functionaries spent most of the time parroting the party line, this was still a very illuminating discussion to me. It showed that the scheme had been imposed prematurely on these lower-level bureaucrats. They hadn't been able to adjust to it as yet, and they hadn't memorized all the official dogma.

We pumped hands all around and I left. Herr May stayed behind, presumably to lecture the functionaries on slips of the tongue.

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That afternoon, I drove to the Congress Hall to see a special fashion show. Everything about it was 'Western' except the audience. There was a smooth quintet on the stage and a jovial master of ceremonies armed with adjectives. Cute models paraded up and down the ramp in stylish furs and taffetas that nobody could afford. There were sack dresses; Empire line, trapeze, and tulip modes. Some were straight from Paris.

But the audience was straight East German. Old women in short-skirted blue suits, stringy-haired Hausfrauen in shapeless cotton dresses, in long old organdy drapes, beflowered horrors, and kimona-cloth frights.

What they enviously watched mincing before them on the ramp was available only to that group of higher Communist functionaries that one Leipziger called "the Upper Ten Thousand."

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I ordered a quick dinner at Simmers' HO Restaurant in the Ritterstrasse. It was an intimate place with low ceilings and ebony fixtures. The dark-haired waitress would have been pretty except for her crooked teeth. After bringing the soup she said: "You're from the West, aren't you?"

"I was over in Düsseldorf to visit my sister," she said in her whistling Saxon accent. "I went in the stores there and asked the prices again and again. I just couldn't believe they were so low. I took 100 marks with me (a third of her month's salary) and got 18 West (marks) for it. Couldn't do anything with that. All the beautiful things. I thought about staying, but then I got homesick." She asked me to send her women's magazines from the West. "I can't afford the things, but I like to look at them," she said.

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Around the corner, the FDJ Clubhouse advertised another evening program for Leipzig's youth. "Secret Transmitter XY is Silent" promised to be an interesting lecture. It was to be given by a member of the State Security Service.

However, the lecture was called off at the last minute, because, "The Ministry for State Security has had so much to do during the Fair." Instead, I and a score of youngsters gathered in the hall to view a propaganda film called "They All Knew Each Other."

It was a counter intelligence story about a big capitalist whose automobile plant was taken over by the People. To revenge himself, he bribed two employees to sabotage a test model. One test driver was killed in the ensuing crash. But the calm-voiced intelligence men drew the net on the villain during the next two reels and caught him just as he was about to flee to the West.

The film was fairly well made. It would have qualified as ordinary late evening television fare in the United States. The youngsters seemed to be entertained. But it appeared doubtful that they got the "message".

* * *

Next morning, I found myself facing a possible real-life encounter with the State Security Service.

I had packed the car and driven halfway across the city when I remembered that I had to give an accounting for my financial transactions at the border. I stopped and looked in my wallet. Five hundred West Marks were missing (\$125).

A dilemma - the only place it could have disappeared was in the apartment. But the hosts had seemed such decent people. If I reported the loss to the People's Police, they would be investigated. Their non-Communist sympathies surely would make them more "Suspect".

On the other hand, if I failed to show the proper amount of currency and stamped receipts at the border, I might risk personal trouble. After some deliberation, I forged the entries on my currency certificate (see DB - 38). It worked. The control point guard glanced cursorily at wallet and ticket, then waved me on into Berlin.

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Thinking back on Leipzig, it is important to keep in mind that what I saw was only a small facet of East German life - a decorated facet at that.

It was easy enough to see elements like the intense politicizing of all aspects of society, the campaign for the youth, the emphasis on hard labor, the "wartime" atmosphere. But only occasionally did I see flashes of the sullen despair, the ponderous pressures, the anxieties which the Communist regime has created in these people.

Yet one thing was clear to me - the East Germans have become a people quite different from the West Germans. The fact that they have been able to adapt themselves as refugees to Western ways very rapidly (DB - 20) does not diminish this fact. As a bulk of some 17,000,000, they are different. This will become more obvious if and when the two Germanies are reunited (or confederated) someday in the future.

In conclusion, there is a German saying that "Prussia starved itself to greatness." From a brief look at East Germany, its tightly planned economy, and its suppressed, hard-driven population, we may have to say the same of the German Democratic Republic one of these years. Like it or not.

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