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Adult educators, political models and moral leaders: Instructors of "Workers' and Peasants' Colleges"(ABF).

Biographical, institutional and professional processes in
 the 1950s of GDR¹

Abstract: The Workers' and Peasants' Colleges (Arbeiter- und Bauern-Fakultäten; ABF), existed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1946 to 1962. Their purpose was to enable workers and farmers to pass the *Abitur* exam, which granted access to higher education in Germany. However, it soon became clear that the advancement of workers and farmers was not an end in itself. Rather, the long-term intention of the ruling *Sozialistische Einheitspartei* (SED) was to create a conformist elite in its own image. Teaching at ABF could not only be described in terms of "transferring" or imparting the know-how of specific subject areas. Rather the ABF staff were supposed to act at the same time as political teachers and role models in moral behavior. In this paper we present different biographical and professional types of becoming an adult educator at the Workers' and Peasants' Colleges in the GDR.

Introduction

The Workers' and Peasants' Colleges (*Arbeiter- und Bauern-Fakultäten*; ABF) existed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1946 to 1962. Their predecessors were the *Vorstudienanstalten* (VSS), or preparatory colleges, founded in late 1945 to 1946. In other words, the ABF were adult education institutions. Their purpose was to enable workers and farmers to pass the *Abitur* exam which granted access to higher education in Germany. In all, some 35,000 people earned the right to attend University through the ABF (Lammel 1986). However, it soon became clear that the advancement of workers and farmers was not an end in itself. Rather, the long-term intention of the ruling *Sozialistische Einheitspartei* (SED) was to create a conformist elite in its own

¹ The findings presented in this paper are part of the research project "The Workers' and Peasants' College Greifswald. A biographical analysis of the institution" which is funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG).

image. The ABF faculties were soon labeled “Stalinist cadre mills” by their critics. This function is also evident in the fact that the ABF were associated with universities, not with adult education institutions. The SED explicitly aimed at gaining rapid influence in the universities, which were seen as fortresses of the bourgeoisie.

Thus the establishment of this institution can be seen on the one hand as an innovation with a democratic goal, namely equality of opportunity, that was unknown in the history of German education up to that time. On the other hand, however, because it was interwoven with the interests of the SED regime, this innovation was also used towards anti-democratic ends: one can easily demonstrate how it was instrumentalized for the Party's political purposes.

The focus of the present paper lies on the biographies of the teaching staff. Teaching at ABF could not only be described in terms of “transferring” or imparting the know-how of specific subject areas. Rather, the ABF staff were supposed to act at the same time as political teachers and role models in moral behavior. In our research project we reconstructed three different biographical and professional types of becoming an adult educator: first the “*Type of Dissociating from National Socialism*”, the “*Social Justice Type*” secondly and the third one we have called “*Career Type*”.

Before discussing this typology in detail, we are going to describe the development of the ABF (chapter 1).

In the next chapter (chapter 2) the special requirements for action are depicted with which the teaching staff were confronted in the ABF. The third chapter focuses on the three reconstructed biographical types that demonstrate which dispositions, traditions and ideological backgrounds formed the basis for teachers' actions. In conclusion, chapter 4 then expounds on the consequences of such backgrounds for the professional actions of the ABF teachers and for the actions of the educational institutions.

1. Phases in the Development of the “Workers’ and Peasants’ Colleges”

Over the period of time in which the institution of ABF existed, four phases of development can be identified in which this institution served different functions:

1st Phase: Aftermath of World War II and successful graduates (1945–1949)

The ABF served to continue educational careers interrupted by the

Second World War. The graduates successfully complete their University training. In this period, the primary function fulfilled by the ABF was to establish equality of opportunity. The political indoctrination intended by the SED politicians is achieved only partially since the institutions are still under construction, while the hosting University environment is still relatively strong and hermetic, and the decentralized political structure of the *Länder* has not yet been eradicated (cf. Miethe 2006). The students who arrived in the first few years after the preparatory colleges had been converted to ABFs were the types of students that best represented the SED's ambitions. These students were both highly motivated in their areas of study and politically active along the lines set down by the SED.² Their SED-aligned political activity was based in part on the conviction that the ABF corrected an old injustice inherited from the time before 1945,³ when workers and peasants had made up only about 6% of University students (Kaelble 1983). The students' support was also due, however, to feelings of gratitude, deliberately inculcated by the SED, for their admission to higher education.

2nd Phase: Euphoria and disillusionment (1951–1956)

This phase is characterized by increasing enrollment.⁴ In order to attain this high enrollment, publicity campaigns in industry and agriculture were aimed at persuading young workers and peasants to study. Since the SED closely monitored whether the enrollment in each ABF met the prescribed quotas, the publicity campaigns resulted in many people being admitted to study without adequate prior education and without sufficient motivation for such an educational career. The successes of the 2nd phase are only partly quantifiable. A large number of students did not pass the *Abitur* exam, or failed in their later University studies.⁵

Whereas in the first phase of the ABF a high proportion of students were members of the SED, party membership among students in this phase drops below ten percent. From this point

2 „Vertrauliche Kollegiumsvorlage 2/8/54 zur politischen Lage an den ABF und über Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung der politischen und erzieherischen Arbeit“, 1954, (Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 3/I. Schicht, 149, n.p.).

3 Cf. interviews with ABF-graduates.

4 Cf. Statistische Jahrbücher der DDR.

5 „Rede des Genossen Loch auf der erweiterten Direktorensitzung“, 22.-23. September 1955 (Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 3/I. Schicht/568, n.p.).

onwards we can observe that workers and peasants in particular increasingly keep their distance from the SED. This tendency is strengthened by the completed transformation of the SED into a Stalinist cadre organization (cf. Kluttig 1997) and by the fact that workers and peasants, who enjoyed preferential access to education in the 1950s due to their social background, were less motivated to demonstrate conformity by joining the SED than children of "other" social backgrounds (Miethe 2006, Kowalczyk 2003; Kleßmann 2000). Political training and technical training at ABF are given equal importance. The proposal of the Ministry to close the ABF was rejected by the Central Committee of the SED because they still needed these institutions for political reasons (Miethe 2006).

3rd Phase: Political instrumentalization and party discipline (1957–1958)

This phase is characterized by substantial political indoctrination and discipline ensuing from the "revisionism debate." Accusations of "revisionism" played a regular part in the Party's internal purges in the GDR of the 1950s. The institution of the ABF, which the SED had intended to serve as a political model, was especially embroiled in the Party's internal power struggles during these years. To avoid any accusation of revisionism, the faculty in this period tried to adhere to the party line as closely as possible. Thus the term "Stalinist cadre mill" is best applicable in this phase in which political indoctrination clearly took precedence over academic learning.

4th Phase: Development of the specialized *Abitur* exam and dissolution of the ABF (1959 to 1962/63)

After the end of the "revisionism debate" political instrumentalization recedes into the background. Since the institution's achievements are both academically and politically below the expectations of SED politicians, the full *Abitur* is abandoned. ABF studies are increasingly oriented towards a technical *Abitur*, then, in 1962 the ABFs are dissolved.

2. Demands on and Recruitment of ABF teachers

The teachers employed by the VSS/ABF were to display not only competence in their subject areas but also the adherence to such political views as were expected by the SED.

It proved difficult throughout the four phases of the VSS/ABF's existence to recruit teaching staff that in all respects met the

requirement of subject competence as well as that of the political expectations.

The attempts at recruitment immediately following the Second World War suffered predominantly from the denazification taking place among teaching staff in higher education institutions that had led to many teachers of pre-war times being made redundant. As a result teaching staff for higher education were in short supply.

In addition, inferior benefits and unfavourable working conditions led to a high rate of fluctuation among teaching staff in the Soviet Occupied Zone/GDR (SBZ/DDR) (cf. Geißler 1992; Hohmann 1997, 2000). Due to the required high level of subject-specific know-how, the VSS/ABF had only limited options to fall back on recent graduates of teacher programmes "*Neulehrer*" training). Furthermore it took several years before the successors in teaching, who would have obtained the proper certificates for teaching in higher education, had undergone their training so that it was only in the mid- or late-1950s that the need for teaching staff could be satisfied by recruiting from this client group.

Whilst at first teachers were recruited who had obtained their teacher qualifications before 1945 (type "old guard" – born 1880-1895 – and type "old school" – born 1895-1915), later on – as of 1951 – recruitment concentrated on people who had undergone their training in education institutions of the Soviet Occupied Zone / GDR (SBZ/DDR). These essentially fall into two groups of people:

Firstly, there is the group of the so-called "post-war teachers" whose educations were delayed by the Second World War. The people of this group, born between 1916 and 1926, were either of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois family background or alternatively of proletarian family background. These "post-war teachers" had in common that they were obliged to obtain further qualifications throughout their working life because they had often not yet achieved the required qualification in the beginning of their teaching practice at ABF: a certificate to teach at higher education institutions. However, as of the late 1950s this group of people most likely dominated the ABF not only in political and administrative, but also in technical respects.

Secondly, increasingly younger teachers were recruited who were born approximately between 1927 and 1930 and who had passed a post-secondary qualification after 1945 under the East German system. Some were ABF graduates themselves. This group we have called the "self-recruited teachers". Their percentage in the teaching staff increased continually up to the dissolution of the ABF

in 1962 when this group made up two-thirds of all teachers.

The group of "self-recruited teachers" in the 1950s was clearly greater in number than the group of "post-war teachers". However, they hardly called experience on the job their own so that they often had to take orientation from the "post-war teachers" who also took up all management positions at the ABF. Seen from this perspective, the group of "post-war teachers" therefore may well be seen as the core group of the teaching profession with regard to the theoretical approach developed by Anselm Strauss, that of the "professions in process". This process-oriented approach dissociates itself from those approaches which define profession as homogeneous. Strauss and his colleagues emphasize instead segmentation processes taking place that lead to the formation of collegiate circles or to exclusion and inclusion processes⁶:

"There is a great diversity in the tasks performed in the name of the profession. Different definitions may be found between segments of the profession concerning what kinds of work the professional should be doing, how work should be organized, and which tasks have precedence" (Strauss/Bucher 1991: 249).

Due to this special institutional, political and organisational structure of the ABF, the teachers could be described as adult educators. This profession demands special biographical requirements from its members as is the case with other professions in the field of people-oriented services (cf. Alheit 1995; Egger 1995; Effinger 1993; Giesecke 1995, 1999; Hermann 1990):

"In such social and educational fields there are no 'fixed professional models' which offer traditional professional skills for orientation - in difference to the so-called classical professions. Rather, the socialization process taking place at work at the same time depicts a field of action that the member of the profession has to acquire in his or her own biographic process." (Schiebel 2003: 352)

This is even the more valid the less formalized and regulated an institution or organization presents itself. Those acting within the organizational context – whether it is members of the profession or students or novices – are thereby encouraged or even forced to fill the gaps in official options for interpretation by biographic contents (cf. Schütze 1999; Fabel/Tiefel 2004).

6 "We shall develop the idea of professions as loose amalgamations of segments pursuing different objectives in different manner and more or less delicately held together under a common name at a particular period in history" (Strauss/Bucher 1991: 246)

However, the ABF teachers were bound to a certain institutional and political framework that influenced their daily work at the education institutions. The teachers not only had to fulfil their "private demands" of perhaps organizing their household – be it purchasing food or taking care of their children (in post-war times the child care facilities were scarce) in parallel with their teaching duties. They moreover also had to handle manifold and time-consuming additional tasks on the job, be it supervising and controlling the self-study process of the students in the student residences, acting as head of a department or organizing subject-related excursions.

Furthermore, the ABF instructors were expected to fulfil a political role model function which is why they were urged to get involved in political activities, for example in mass organizations, in the military and in the Party. Finally the participation in work or harvesting aid activities was obligatory for the teaching staff of the ABF institution.

Given this background the question arises to what extent the teaching staff of the Workers' and Peasants' Colleges (*Arbeiter- und Bauern-Fakultäten*, ABF) could on the one hand draw upon their biographical resources. On the other hand the question is, how far an institutional moulding of biographies (cf. Becker/Geer/Hughes/ Strauss 1961) could be reconstructed.

3. Biographical study

The main research question in our project is to what extent biographies and institutional processes are reciprocally structured and to what extent an interrelated fusion process of biography and institution can be reconstructed. The empirical basis of the study consists of both written life histories of teaching staff (historic reconstruction of biographies, persons who could not be interviewed) and 30 narrative biographical interviews with ABF instructors. These interviews have been evaluated both sociologically by means of hermeneutic case reconstructions, and historically as eyewitness testimony. The hermeneutic case reconstructions based on the narrative biographical interviews were completed with respect to the research question of the relationship between biographies and institution. The goal of this sociological reconstruction is to discover the generative structure. To quote Fischer-Rosenthal (2000: 119):

"The generative structures of the lived and experienced life history and of the self-presentation in the life-story interview, as well as their interdependence are understood as principles that organise emergent events in the individual's life in order to enable him or her to achieve a consistent orientation".

After case reconstructions, types of generative structure are formulated: three empirical types could be found, representing three different types of becoming a professional adult educator at ABF, too.

	„Type of Dissociating from National Socialism“ (I)	„Social Justice Type“ (II)	„Career Type“ (III)
constitutive element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ability to adopt the political requirements of the institution contemporary historic experience of national socialism (NS) and socialization-specific disposition towards accepting responsibility for NS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ability to adopt the social requirements of the taking responsibility for creating social justice by transferring cultural capital and educational-biographic support in order to contribute to equal opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no adoption of political or social requirements of the institution implementation of a occupational outline or occupational course at the ABF, ABF is insofar an exchangeable institution
Identification with ABF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> high degree of identification with ABF, since the institution serves as a forum for restitution of a subjective (metaphysical or moral) guilt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> varied range of aspects for identification with the ABF as part of the education strategy experiment of the Soviet Occupied Zone/GDR which has the function as a symbol of social justice for them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> career strategic, pragmatic treatment of ABF; hence only low-level identification with the institution
supporting factors of identification with ABF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GDR ideology (offer of anti-fascism and of fascism definition) delimitation to the West and to the real political situation in the FRG of the 1950s (process of denazification) educational duty (apart from transferring technical know-how) of the ABF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ability to adopt the family-own biographic experience of advancement experience of support and encouragement in own educational history interrelating with political (and pedagogical) family tradition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the pragmatic "functioning" in the institution is sufficient and accepted by the institution ABF is of importance as a "career-advancing stepping stone" due to its closeness to University and its relatively high social standing (compared to high schools)

Type I: "Type of Dissociating from National Socialism"

ABF instructors belonging to this type are part of the "building-up generation" in the GDR (described in the literature by various

authors, for example Lindner 1997; Wierling 1993 and Niethammer/von Plato/Wierling 1991). They received their first political socialization in the National-Socialistic Youth organisations. The constitutive elements of this type are on one hand (family-)biographical experiences in the NS. On the other hand, they have the biographical disposition to assume responsibility (regarding the "guilt" of their parents) because of their socialization. It does not mean that this type only comprises those cases whose parents were deeply involved in National Socialism. There are other cases belonging to other types whose parents or who themselves were much more involved in the political system of NS; however, they don't reflect about their past involvement. This type in contrast shows a special kind of feeling guilty that Karl Jaspers (1946) defined in his philosophical approach as "metaphysical guiltiness". This caused a sense of responsibility. So the ABF instructors belonging to the type of "Dissociating from National-Socialism" are putting their lives and professional work at ABF in a thematic horizon that is supposed to compensate for NS-times (or to make good those times) and to help prevent a repetition of that dark era.

The anti-fascistic frame of mind as well as the delimitation against Western Germany are a characteristic of the political culture in the GDR in general and are nothing specific to the ABF institution. However, this institution is especially apt to prevent a repetition of fascism since it sets as its target the dissolution of social injustice and therefore at the same time supports a "fascism prophylaxis" that follows the fascism definition of GDR.

Teachers of this type emphasize the community, the commonalities and the sense of belonging in the context of the ABF. In this institutional context a generational unit arose, linked by both the suffering from common life historic experiences (World War II; National Socialism) and also the willing to engage in for a better future in GDR. This social process includes both groups of the ABF, instructors and graduates. It is helpful to know that there was no separation in every-day life at ABF between working life and leisure time.

The ABF was not only an educational institution that taught the subject-specific know-how necessary for the *Abitur*-qualification. Rather, the teaching staff were also obliged to educate especially in social and political respects. This educational impetus had at the same time political connotations and served to build a "better Germany". This is the assumption under which the members of the

"Type of Dissociating from National Socialism" work actively to convince the students of the anti-fascist ideals and to urge the students to get involved in favour of an anti-fascist state. The teachers of this type may therefore be labelled as "political role models".

ABF instructors of this type fulfil the important function of legitimizing the ABF politically. They carry forth the decisive ideological and political postulate of the institution and act as facilitators of it to the successive generations. Furthermore, they represent the anti-fascist postulate of the ABF also in public.

Type II: „Social Justice Type“

For the "Social Justice Type" it is constitutive that its members look upon their professional biographic actions within the ABF as an "act of social justice". The contribution to social justice that they try to make as teaching staff at the ABF consists of transferring their acquired cultural capital – in Bourdieus sense (1983) – on to successive generations and to students who have not been able to participate in the cultural capital due to their specific family backgrounds. Their actions are therefore embedded in the horizon of creating equal opportunities or dissolving social injustice with respect to acquiring an education.

Although this egalitarian understanding of social justice (cf. Becker/Hauser 2004; Cohens 1989; Rawls 1971) cannot be put at the same level as the education strategy that the SED publicly propagated, but it is rhetorically interrelated to it. With hindsight on the documentation it becomes clear that the SED most of all aimed at "breaking the educational monopoly of the ruling class" (Alt 1978). This power-centred motive within the educational policies of the SED (cf. Lenhard/Stock 1997) that served to secure the Party's power quite consciously ignored the inequality of certain groups that were not seen as worthy of support. The teaching staff of this "Social Justice Type" in contrast did not refer in their actions to this power-political aspect but rather to the creation of justice that was emphasized in the societal discourse of the time.

On the one hand this type assembles teachers who were able to participate in education due to their (petty-) bourgeoisie family origins even before 1945 and who had acquired cultural and social capital due to the milieu from which they originated. This group of ABF instructors came from families where the parents had mostly achieved an advancement into the petty-bourgeoisie during the

empire or in the Weimar Republic. In these families the acquiring of education on the part of the children was seen as highly relevant making the high school attendance of instructors during their childhood and youth an unquestioned part of their daily life. On the other hand this type also assembles ABF instructors who obtained access to University education only through the educational institutions of the Soviet Occupied Zone / GDR and who therefore themselves profited from the relevant political instruments of support of the SED-education policy.

The range of identification with the ABF varies amongst the members of this type according to the degree in which the ideological premises of the societal order in the GDR is shared or the values acquired during the socialization process are traditionalized further. Those who manage to interweave their family traditions with the new policies for society show a high degree of identification with the ABF. They share the wish to take responsibility for transferring this cultural capital and the educational support they themselves experienced in order to contribute to the creation of equal opportunities.

The members of the "Social Justice Type" contribute essentially to the success of the educational policies and the social and educational targets of the ABF. They hold up the social postulate of the institution. At the same time they not only traditionalize and transfer educational contents but also cultural values that contribute decisively to the moulding of the personality and character of their students.

Type III: „Career Type“

It is significant for the members of the "Career Type" that their actions are strategically and pragmatically oriented towards the aim of a professional career. The political or social postulate of the institution is peripheral to this group. This type to a large extent comprises scientists – in our research sample – who make clear with their choice of subjects that societal and political questions are not the focus of their interests. The institution ABF is merely an exchangeable framework for professional biographical actions. Therefore there is only minor identification with the ABF.

Amongst this type are on the one hand those who have developed their own motivation for a professional career during the period of socialization (family, role models among teachers, experiences at school) and who have constituted their occupational

outline autonomously.⁷ This type comprises those people who already possess a career and education motivation and who most often also already possess the relevant cultural capital. Based on the closeness of the ABF to University, the ABF often served this group as a stepping stone for a University career. On the other hand also that teaching staff are part of the career type at ABF whose occupational course is produced heteronomously since it is developed only due to the specific support structure of the Soviet Occupied Zone /GDR. Their family origins are in family milieus – coming from a farming or proletarian social background – where educational advancement or motivation for the children were relevant either not at all or only in exceptional cases. This ABF teachers managed to replace the lack of cultural capital by political capital (in the sense of Bourdieu 1991). Their family origins served them therefore as political capital. This means these teachers did not anticipate their educational career. Rather it was produced externally.

The ABF finds pragmatic use for these instructors. It offers an exchangeable framework to implement their occupational outline or occupational course where they acting quite pragmatically. Although for this group the ABF in general represents a pragmatic work relationship where one fulfils one's tasks, there are nevertheless instances of identification – however small – of this group with the institution. Thus, even for the “Career Type” a touch of identification with the ABF is created which, however, is not founded either on the political nor the social postulate of the institution, but rather is founded on relationships with colleagues and common experiences in the daily work routine. Since the ABF advances their professional career, this also adds a small factor for identification with the ABF.

This form of functioning pragmatically is supported by the fact that the outside adjustment to the requirements of the institution was sufficient and accepted within the institution in order to be able to work smoothly within this context. The teachers who are members of the “Career Type” group feature the ability to function pragmatically and willingly adopt the institutional circumstances. They embody the organisational dimension of the institution. Since they are quite willing to take on political functions and tasks in the institutional context and since they do not represent any challenging societal ideologies or goals, their pragmatic orientation is accepted within the institution.

7 The fact that biographies are influenced both by the dimension of an autonomous constitution and a heteronomous production has been developed in the biographic theoretical approach of Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal (1991, 1995).

Conclusion

The teaching staff at the ABF were confronted with institutional and political postulates that concerned not only their professional actions or influenced their time management. Rather these conditions furthermore demanded biographical adjustments. Especially in times of political crises (for example the events in 1953 – workers protests, Stalin's death, expropriation of hotel proprietors on the Baltic Sea, better known under the name of “*Aktion Rose*” – or the events in the context of the “revisionism debate” in 1956/57) the pressure was at times strong enough to lead to migration to West Germany even among those ABF teachers who were supposed to fulfil a political role model function (the ABF Greifswald registered 16 cases of “illegal emigration”, see Lippmann/Schiebel 2006).

On the other hand the results of the biographical study clarify the fact that the ABF, although being a rather strongly formalized institution, employed more than one single type of teacher. The three reconstructed types – “*Type of Dissociating from National Socialism*”, “*Social Justice Type*”, “*Career Type*” – shows that even at the ABF, as well as in other fields of adult education, it was possible and even necessary to give the professional framework for actions a specific, biographical sense. In other words, the foci and horizon of sense relevant to the three types and expounded by them in which the actions of the teachers at the ABF were embedded are based biographically. Therefore the ABF proves to have been able to adopt various degrees of identification as well as various traditions.

In the end, the professional actions of the teachers at the ABF may be seen as an undissolvable interplay of biographical meanings and values with an institutional framework.

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