The Barbarian East[1]

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Forget about the "new Berlin:" Even ten years after reunification, Berlin is still a "frontier city."

I.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has a sense for images. When he looks out of the window of his provisional office in the State Council Building, he recently said, he sees before him the "monstrous" and "ugly" Palace of the Republic. Motivated by concerns that a Chancellor in a Brioni suit might not be *en vogue* on Berlin's Schlossplatz, he called in an interview with the *Zeit* newspaper for Berlin's Royal Palace to be rebuilt "just because it looks nice."

Images, although not nice ones, were also the focus of a Harvard University congress on Berlin in February 1998. Right at the start of that gathering in Cambridge, Massachusetts, one of the event's organizers asked those charged with planning the new capital, "What is Berlin's place in Europe?" John Czaplicka, who asked that question, did not even wait for an answer. He was of the opinion that the often cited image of Berlin as a hub connecting East and West applied to Berlin only insofar as the formerly divided city had become a preferred place of refuge for eastern European migrants. "Berlin is a frontier city and shows it," said Czaplicka. "The only question is, how far Berlin is prepared to accept its reality as an immigrant city" (die tageszeitung, February 14, 1998).

What is Berlin's place in Europe? What does the "new Berlin" of Hackescher Markt and Schröder's sense of nice images have to do with the functional aesthetics of the Palace of the Republic and its former use? Does Berlin truly accept its reality as frontier city, as John Czaplicka demanded at the renowned University of Harvard?

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1 | Source: Rada, U. (2000) Der barbarische Osten. In Scharenberg, A. (ed.) *Berlin: Global City oder Konkursmasse? Eine Zwischenbilanz zehn Jahre nach dem Mauerfall.* Karl Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 129-133.

II.

"Berlin: open city" was the friendly-sounding title of an exhibition organized by the marketing company *Partner für Berlin* throughout the city environment in Berlin last year. The developments in the city, its growing together and its renewal were the visiting cards with which the "new Berlin" presented itself. However, anyone searching for an explanation of Berlin's openness in a volume of essays published at the same time was disappointed (cf. Architektenkammer Berlin 1999). The essays speak more about the "return to the capital" (Michael Mönninger) or the "new trade worlds" (Gerwin Zohlen). Berlin's panoramas, it seems, are open only to the West, or to the past. The future of the city, however, is in the wild, barbarian East.

Travellers to distant Kazakhstan or the even more easterly Vietnam report even now that those who are keen to come here have long been familiar with the car marts of Berlin's suburbs or the latest news from Rhinstraße in Marzahn. And so Berlin really does have a global image, only not the one aspired to after the fall of the wall. The "most westerly city in the East and the most easterly city in the West" failed to become the metropolis of hope but instead became the metropolis of the hopeful – a disputed space between "civil society" hunkered down in its island of prosperity and the "cheerful barbarism" of those determined to make a new start (Matthias Greffrath). Berlin has once again become a special border area, but this time on a European scale, and the border runs right through the middle of Schlossplatz – between the Palace of the Republic, which has become a symbol of the "ugliness of the East," and the State Council Building, the center of power of the "nice new center," provisionally, at least.

III.

"The second discovery of the East will begin when we have got rid of the image that we have had of it," writes the Eastern Europe expert Karl Schlögel. "It will begin when we start to remember faces which are new and to perceive a tone of expression which we have not been prepared to listen to before – or which we had forgotten" (Schlögel 1995). As a citizen of the former West Berlin, Schlögel, who now teaches Eastern European history at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder, has the honor of having made early reference to Berlin's geographical location. As early as May 1989, Schlögel wrote that the Senate in West Berlin had repeatedly referred to Berlin as a city at the center of Europe. "Now that people have realized that Berlin really is halfway between Bonn and Warsaw, they are astonished" (Schlögel 1991). The tone of expression, the new languages that can be heard on public transport in the city are still ignored today, however, despite the fact that the government has moved here

and the political center has shifted to the East. Berlin's *glitterati* may still dine in the fine restaurant Paris-Moskau, lodged between the government quarter and the Moabit prison, but as they leave the restaurant perched on the edge of urban civilization, they can't get away fast enough. The closer the East comes, the more they long for the West.

IV.

The West – that means more than fashion and glamour, communes and individual self-expression. The West also means having a sense of *la distinction* (Pierre Bourdieu). Ludovica Scarpa, formerly a committed campaigner against urban poverty, now sees these "distinctions" as the "right to be unequal," as a form of defence against the agenda of the Modern Age; Scarpa believes this so-called egalitarianism is a direct road to fascism (Berliner Zeitung, March 6, 1999). What this longing for the West expresses, however, is not only a desire to avoid the dark sides of fashion and glamour, culture and commerce. It is also a desire to blur the fine distinctions, going even so far as to express these differences in the city in a spatial way – a Berlin of "citadels" which is visibly distinguishable from the Berlin of the "ghettos."

If we are going to have segregation and urban flight, polarization and Americanization, then let's do it properly at least, with surveillance cameras, police presence and zero tolerance. Those who aim to arrive in the center of society want to have achieved that position before things start to get really uncomfortable. But what if things are already uncomfortable? What if there are not enough people to defend the citadels? What if even Potsdamer Platz is invaded by the bargain hunters? If one Charlottenburg neighborhood after another deteriorates into a "problem area" and Hackescher Markt appears strangely small and pompous when viewed from Fischerinsel? Didn't time already make the first judgements long ago? Since the last direct flight from Berlin to New York was cancelled years ago due to lack of demand in business class, the only remaining non-stop transcontinental flights connect the city directly with Pyongyang and Ulan Bator. Berlin's Ostbahnhof in Friedrichshain, like Lichtenberg station which is currently under reconstruction, has become an intersection of Eastern European Berlin. This is where the trains from Moskva, Tomsk, Kraków or Warszawa arrive. Berlin is simply a different kind of boomtown from New York City or swinging London. Another professor at the Viadrina University made it clear to Berliners recently once again. There can really be no talk of a service metropolis, writes the geographer Stefan Krätke in his latest book on Berlin. It is not the strategically important sectors, such as financial services, which dominate the German capital, but the "bad jobs." Thus, Berlin is more of a servants' metropolis than a service metropolis or, as Krätke writes, it is

the "capital of cleaners" (Krätke and Borst 2000). There are still enough politicians, however, who refuse to accept that Berlin is not a global city in waiting but rather a cleared out industrial center, a metropolis at best for new gold diggers and fortune hunters, more a saloon than a salon, a crazy mixture of Detroit and Lodz, a city bordering the East, indeed.

V.

What do the Große Stern in Tiergarten and the lay-bys on the roads to the east of the river Oder have in common? Both here and there, on either side of the border, Polish teenagers offer their services, washing windscreens for a few pennies, entering the lowest level of the service economy. Further up the ladder, industrial cleaners, many of them also from Poland, wipe the windows of the new office towers. At the same time, Polish housewives, working illegally of course, dust the books of those who spend their days in the newspaper offices or the corridors of power, dreaming of Berlin's future.

What Helmut Höge (1997) calls the "Berlin economy" is described by Karl Schlögel (1999) as the Eastern European "ant trade." And Berlin, the German capital, is one of the centers of this survival economy, just like Warsaw, Bucharest and Istanbul. "The spaces," says Schlögel, "develop along the fracture lines, ignoring the old line of division" (ibid.). He says places which were once far away have shifted into the local vicinity, and what used to be familiar has suddenly become difficult to access. It can be put another way, loosely quoting Scarpa, the unequal are insisting on their rights. The time of cosy comfort is really over.

When the majority of people are robbed of the opportunity to participate in the prosperity of society, warned the sociologist Hartmut Häußermann (1996) some time ago, that society is living on the verge of civil war. Karl Schlögel adds to this American experience of the crisis of the city a further example from Eastern Europe. "The whole of Eastern Europe has successfully completed a process which the West still faces: to engage with the dangers of an interim period, when an existing situation has become unviable, while a new situation has not yet become established; to live in a provisional state without feeling like it is the end of the world; not to dissolve into panic and hysteria when the normalities of a way of life cease to be normal" (Schlögel 1999).

VI.

What is normal and what is not? While intellectuals like Karl Schlögel, despite their efforts to "discover the East," while in fact actually hoping for a renaissance of the West there, and hankering after a "return of the cities," the "return

of the urban citizen," see a glimmer of hope in any accumulation of capital, even if it is in the hands of the mafia, others are more honest. For such people, the geographical location of Berlin as a frontier city is not an opportunity, but a threat. Consciously or unconsciously anticipating Samuel Huntington's theory of the *clash of civilizations*, some politicians – even among the Social Democrats and Greens – tried, after the fall of the wall, to bind visa-free travel between Poland and Berlin to the travellers' ability to prove they had hard currency. Leaping into the breach, that is the Eastern breach, is one way of dealing with Berlin's crisis; the other consists of erecting of new borders not only along the river Oder but also in Berlin – "invisible frontiers," as the Bremen-based political scientist, Lothar Probst (1995), describes them. What these two reactions have in common is the desire to deny the negative sides of Berlin's position as a frontier city. That, at least, has a long, a very long tradition. Even the Ancient Greeks excluded as "barbarians" those who said only "bar bar bar," that is, who had no mastery of the civilized language of their host country.[2] Little has changed in the Berlin of the 21st century. In the age of Parma ham and ciabatta, anyone who prefers solyanka, curry wurst or doner kebab can be nothing other than an attack on good taste. Seen this way, Berlin is nothing other than the "capital of the barbarians," and Hackescher Markt is no more than a little Gaulish village peopled by gourmet partisans.

What is normal and what is not? While Harvard intellectuals like John Czaplicka come up with sayings about Berlin like "survival not revival" (die tageszeitung, February 14, 1998) or critics of Huntington such as Jean-Christoph Rufin (1994) see in the tenet of the clash of cultures an attempt to build a new *limes*, the new barbarians have long since reached Berlin. They define themselves as "barbarians" such as in a youth club in Schöneberg, call themselves *Kanak Attak* such as in Kreuzberg, or play with the concept of the "barbarian from the East," like the Russian-Jewish columnist Wladimir Kaminer. This begs the question, why shouldn't they be part of the "new Berlin," too? Why shouldn't the German capital, a frontier city by definition, be allowed to be barbarian? What is the difference between someone like Peter Dussmann, with his bookshop chains in Eastern Europe, and a Polish cleaning lady looking for work here? And would it really be the downfall of the "Berlin Republic" if the reconstructed Berlin Royal Palace, so championed by the Chancellor, were eventually to house a common-or-garden DIY store?

Translated by David Shaw and Regina Webs

2 | Allow me to mention here the intention of Berlin's naturalization authorities to make the ability to understand a German newspaper article a prerequisite for citizenship.

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