

Some East German Attitudes Toward Law and Political Authority

Willy Koch
University of Leipzig

Uwe Matthes
Gera, Germany

Richard Martin
Slippery Rock University

Richard Taylor
Kent State University

ABSTRACT: Nine University of Leipzig students provided usable responses with a Q sort which had been previously administered in the United States. Two factors were discovered: four subjects were Constitutionalists and three Individualists. Constitutionalists actively favored their new democratic system, but were willing to contemplate civil disobedience should democratic values be threatened. Individualists were skeptical of the political system and were committed to living their own personal lives. All nine subjects were law abiding. Comparisons are made with 87 American college students who had taken the same Q sort almost a decade previously.

Authors' addresses: *Koch*, Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Universität Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany; *Matthes*, Wachsenburgstraße 21, 0-6504 Gera, Germany; *Martin*, Department of Government and Public Affairs, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA 16057-9989; *Taylor*, Department of Political Science (Emeritus), Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242-0001.

I confess to be deeply convinced that the German people will never love political democracy. (Thomas Mann, 1922, p. xxxiv)

The politics of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was for most of its existence predictable; it may even be regarded as a fulfillment of Thomas Mann's prophesy. However, his pessimism has not been vindicated in this first Q study of East German attitudes toward political obligation. This project had its beginnings in a political conflict seminar directed by Professor Uwe Matthes at Karl Marx University (KMU), Leipzig, in the fall semester of 1990. Unfortunately, the closing of the Department of Political Sociology on December 14, 1990 precluded the completion of the study; however, a member of that seminar provided translation from English to German of a Q sample which had been previously used by Martin and Taylor (1978) with students in the United States.¹ This German Q sample was subsequently administered by Dr. Willy Koch to his seminar of 14 students in the spring of 1991. The Q sorts of 9 students were used; 5 others declined to permit the use of their responses.

Eight subjects were residents of Leipzig or nearby; one was a resident of Buttstädt in Thuringia. Their average age was 38 with a range from 26 to 56, which is much older than the normal student population age at the University. Their careers included primary and secondary school teaching, business, and government service including the police. We asked no prying questions; consequently, we do not know who was employed or unemployed, nor do we know the family status of any individual. We do know from their names who were

¹ A fuller picture of the series of U.S. experiments appears in Thomas, Martin, Taylor and Baas (1984), the results from which are used for some comparisons reported in the *Discussion* section below. Note is also made of an earlier study using Q technique to examine University of Cologne students' moral reasoning (Gielen, 1986).

men and who were women; however, two subjects did not even volunteer their names.

The political, economic and university environment during the time of the development of this study was stressful. What had been KMU had again become the University of Leipzig, and the faculty of the Department of Political Sociology had been largely changed. Citizens of Leipzig, as in the remainder of East Germany, were suffering from rapidly increasing unemployment. Moreover, since January 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor, Germans in this area had been subjected to two different forms of dictatorship that only ended with the first free elections of the GDR Volkskammer in March, 1990. During the autocratic periods, questionnaires were one instrument for exercising political control. Fears relating to the political past were not relieved by the October 3, 1990 unification, nor by the December 2 national elections for the Bundestag. Many Germans still have great difficulties coming to terms with their political past as well as the economic dislocations of the present. These insecurities may have influenced all our subjects.

The Q sample consisted of 60 statements. Subjects were instructed to model their opinions with respect to these statements by rank ordering them from -5 (most disagree) to +5 (most agree) in a forced distribution, the purpose of which was to assure that those statements to which the subjects reacted most strongly, either positively or negatively, counted the most in the subsequent factor analysis.² Two factors resulted using the SPSS procedure (Norusis, 1990, pp. 320-342), in which the number of factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were rotated according to varimax criteria. Factor A was designated *Constitutionalist* and was defined by four individ-

² On the methodology of this project, see Brown (1980). Copies of a brief theoretical explanation of Q methodology (Brown, 1976) was distributed to the seminar. The reason for the careful numbering of each Q statement in this paper is to facilitate the use of the German translation of the Q sort by those who find the German version necessary for their understanding. The German translation can be secured from Richard W. Taylor.

uals. Factor B was labeled *Individualist* and three subjects were loaded on this factor. About the two subjects not clearly defined by either factor more will be said later.

Attitude Segmentation About Political Obligation

Our study showed that our sample of University of Leipzig students had some remarkably similar attitudes towards public obedience to law, and that in some very interesting respects they diverged. For example, both the Constitutionalist factor A and the Individualist factor B recognized that justice is the result of competition of interests in a political process, that as long as individual rights are protected obedience is proper, that most laws make sense, and that those exceptional laws that tend to prevent public order may be disobeyed. Neither factor approved the idea that laws should be complied with simply because they are law; our Individualists rejected this idea strongly while our Constitutionlists did not react to statement 60 at all (scores below for factors A and B, respectively):

- | | | |
|-----|-----|--|
| + 5 | + 5 | (46) Justice is a compromise of competing interests. Obedience to these compromises when embodied in law is essential to a system of order which leaves the political community open to new compromises. |
| + 4 | + 4 | (28) As long as law protects people's rights, I see no reason why I should not obey it. |
| + 4 | + 3 | (18) I obey most laws because they make sense, such as traffic laws. The law provides reasonable guidelines for our mass society. |
| + 3 | + 3 | (47) Ordinarily I am law abiding. However, I would disobey individual laws that pervert the intentions of public order and are destructive of society. |
| 0 | - 4 | (60) I obey laws simply because they are laws. |

What most differentiated the Individualists from the Constitutionalists was their attitudes toward personal judgment. For example, Individualists govern their action according to their own standards rather than the law; compromises in details they regard as improper even when justified in terms of some more general good. Unlike the Constitutionalists, the Individualists would consider revenge if they suffered violence, or if loved ones were attacked.

- 5 +4 (42) Quite frankly, I don't live my life or govern my activities with a mind to the law. My actions are governed only by my own standards.
- +3 -4 (56) I feel a serious obligation to the law. Obedience is necessary. It is often true, as Montaigne suggests, "that a man is forced to do wrong in detail if he wants to do right in the gross."
- 5 +3 (20) An assault by someone, including a public official, upon me or a member of my family would lead me to consider revenge. Governments don't make life less nasty or brutish.

In contrast, the Constitutionalists govern their behavior according to law; they reject the standard of private inclination, and obey laws because they benefit public order.

- +5 0 (3) I believe that most of the laws are made with the interest of the people in mind. Consequently, I believe laws should be obeyed.
- 4 -1 (5) I disobey laws that prevent me from doing what I wish.
- +3 -1 (52) I obey laws so that I can enjoy the benefits of a well ordered society.

Curiously, the Constitutionalists are more favorable to the idea of civil disobedience than the Individualists.

- +4 +2 (8) There are occasions when civil disobedience is proper, but never revolution in violent forms.

Indeed this position is given some support in Article 20 (4) of the Federal Republic of Germany Basic Law which recognizes the right of resistance: Opposition to tyranny is a constitutional right. On the other hand, the lack of enthusiasm of the Individualists for this kind of action may well stem from their lack of interest in the laws; this is suggested by the reaction of this factor to statement 42 (*supra*), and because of the greater distrust by these respondents of politics in general.

A passing comment regarding the two individuals who did not fit clearly on one or the other factor is required. One of these individuals loaded on both factors and is therefore "mixed" (but not mixed up). This individual was pragmatically self-regarding and also strongly attached to the laws. The other individual was simply dependent on government authority. While the first could be quite politically active, the second did not show attitudes that would support political action. Neither of these individuals looks like a candidate for participation in a peaceful revolution nor, indeed, in any knowing disobedience.

Discussion

Nine Q sorts do not provide a sound foundation for major generalizations about the political attitudes of all East Germans, or even students at the University of Leipzig in the spring of 1991. However, these results permit some comparisons with the earlier study published by Thomas et al. (1984), and a reconsideration of Thomas Mann's pessimism.

The Thomas study of American students involved the recruiting of 84 students in political science from four separate colleges located in Alaska, Iowa, Ohio and Pennsylvania. They were given the English version of the Q sort under similar conditions of instruction, and three factors were identified which were described, respectively, as Deferential, Egocentric and Principled.

The German Constitutionalist and Individualists proved not to fit into any of these three American factors. Only the person who loaded positively on both Constitutionalist and

Individualist factors was really similar to the Deferentials in the American study. These Americans were described as "good citizens" in that they were meticulously obedient but willing to utilize the political system to their own advantage; they look very much like this one German.

The situation is considerably different when the other factors of the American study are compared with the German. Curiously, it is the Principled which has some affinity with the German Constitutionalist factor. Both of these factors require a conformity to principle, but the principles differ. For the German, the principle is the maintenance of a democratic constitutional order, while the American is more clearly inner directed; the latter marches to a different drummer, while the German is concerned about the political community. For these different reasons, both are willing to entertain civil disobedience. The German is clearly more optimistic about his political system than is the American.

The American Egocentric has apparently more similarities to the German Individualist than differences. Neither group views law as ennobling or enabling, but both are willing to entertain political action within the system to support their own interests. However, neither really governs life with a mind to law, but the German is clearly more compliant to public authority than the American, and, curiously, is also more individualistic. Differences in German and American political culture as well as of circumstances certainly account for much of the variation of response patterns.

These comparisons encourage us to make an additional comment. Should the Constitutionalist and Individualist factors prove also to predominate in the larger Germany society, this should provide substantial support for democracy. Individuals in both categories are inoculated against blind obedience, and mostly they insist on making up their minds about how they should live. Both these groups feel they are competent to make their own judgments, and this is reflected in their rejection of the following statement.

-4 -4 (57) I don't know what to do about social problems, so I just obey the laws made by those who know better.

In reference to the German "Peaceful Revolution" in 1989, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker declared that "1989 would remain memorable as an example of the non-violent struggle for democracy and private judgement. This is its unpredicted and astonishing gift to humanity.... Its meaning should be better understood in coming generations" (cited in Lange & Matthes, 1990, p. 1750). Our Constitutionalsists and Individualists both contribute more to von Weizäcker's hope than Mann's despair.

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