

Blending Worlds

On Ethnic Identities in Late Modernity

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Can a person simultaneously identify him- or herself with two or more individual ethnic semantics? Can, in this sense, a person have several ethnic identities?

And how is this dealt with in theory, what kind of concepts do we have about such double lives and such hybrid identities? Why is ethnicity often defended as virtually the last bastion of unambiguity? Who is interested in this?

The article centers around these questions. The empirical argumentation is based primarily on the example of the Sorbs – a Slavic minority in Germany. The theoretical argumentation tries to open up the ethnological cultural studies for some of the considerations of the system theory and the modern constructivism. The article is a plea for the hybridity of cultures, ideas, politics, and for an ethnology which takes part in this construction.

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Confessions and Attributions

In an essay with the title “Bikulturalität und Selbstverständnis” (Biculturalism and Self-image), it is not without irony that the author Kito Lorenc writes about the ethnic classification of his work as well as the events in the German-Sorbian Theater in Bautzen: “As you know, the Sorbian actors do not only co-act in German plays, and their German colleagues do not – depending on their faculty of language – only occasionally appear in plays performed in the Sorbian language. One respects and tolerates one another also in his or her respective ability or partial inability. And all of them will appear together in the tragic grotesque play *Die wendische Schifffahrt* (The Wendish or Sorbian Ship’s Voyage), a piece commissioned by this theater, which (I may say so as its author) is not merely a play written by a Sorbian playwright that is ‘also produced in German’, but rather, it is an original Sorbian piece, although its Sorbian author originally wrote it in German and there was never a Sorbian version nor will there ever be one. Of course this piece is a part of Sorbian literature; however, at the same time,

it is also a part of German or German-language stage literature” (Lorenc 1995: 43).

So much for his confession. But how do the humanities deal with the classification of such texts or cultural events? As an initial approach to this question, I would like to cite an example taken from the largely autobiographical novel *Liebe und Müll* (Love and Waste) by Ivan Klima. The central figure, a writer who fell into disgrace following the events of 1968, earns his living as a street sweeper in Prague, and in his free time he occupies himself with the biography of Kafka. His train of thought: “Franz Kafka undoubtedly belongs to the most remarkable writers to have lived in Bohemia. He often cursed Prague and his parental home; however, he could not bring himself to tear himself away from either of them. Only upon superficial examination does the milieu of his fantastic stories have nothing to do with a real place. In reality, his hometown was more to him than just a backdrop for his tales. He was permeated by its multitude of voices and its melancholy, by its shadiness, its susceptibility. [...] Kafka spoke perfect, at best somewhat rigid Czech; he wrote in German. He, who was not a

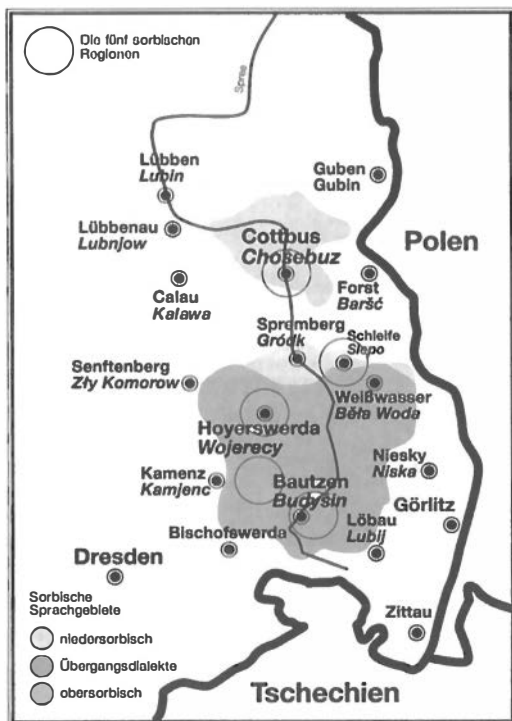


Fig. 1. The Sorbian area in eastern Germany.

German, but a Jew. Not a single Czech literary historian has ever summoned up the generosity, the courage or the tolerance to place him alongside Czech writers. The feeling of being excluded and of loneliness which runs through his prose was certainly a result of his predisposition, but also of his circumstances. He shared this with many of his peers" (Klíma 1991: 89–90).

In the following contribution, we shall not simply be occupied with the question of whether a cultural text or event can be credited to more than one national culture: to the Czech or the Jewish, to the Sorbian or the German. Rather, this contribution centers around the question: Can a person simultaneously identify him- or herself with two or more individual ethnic semantics? Can, in this sense, a person have several ethnic identities? I am going to base my empirical argumentation primarily on the example of the Sorbs – a Slavic minority in Germany.¹ In this respect, my contribution is linked to some of the findings of research on minorities and migration, as well as to concepts

and research on the Self and the Other. However, my theoretical approach here is concerned with the discourse surrounding pure and mixed identities, surrounding cultural homogeneity and difference in late modernity.

Beyond Unambiguity

If we evaluate current biographical material on the members of ethnic minorities, we will find an abundance of material on how individuals declare their affiliation with two or more separate ethnic semantics. The lyricist Róža Domašcyna recently commented on this in an interview in which she stated that she had grown up in Lausitz (Lusatia) with two languages, and explained how she composes her literary work in both Sorbian and German. "As a child, language was like a game to me," she says. "If you possess two languages, you remain curious."² In her essay "Warum das alles?" (Why all of this?), she also speaks of the discontinuity and the ambivalence of a life on the boundary: "I recall the reading assignments we had in school. Friedrich Schiller's *Glocke* (The Bell) and the *Sorbische Bekenntnis* (Sorbian Confession) by Jakub Bart-Ćišinski". But it was not so much Schiller and Ćišinski who left a lasting impression on her, says the writer, but rather "a lot of authentic banality": her own childhood, the dissonance in the deeply religious family, the mother in traditional dress and herself in a miniskirt, the mother who secretly learns the Sorbian alphabet out of her daughter's schoolbook³, the father's accounts of the war, of the "German war", in particular what he left out, his states of panic, the Sorbian language, which was often forbidden or at best only silently held in contempt, the LPG⁴, the borders, idiomatic expressions like "pol'sche Wirtschaft" (shambles), "wend'sche Hanka" (Wendish Hanka), "deutscher Michel" (the plain honest German), "die Iwans" (the Russkies), "Heimatlieder" (songs about the homeland) and what they conceal. And all of this is bundled up with the constant desire "to be different" (Domašcyna 1995).

But it is not only the writers and the intellectuals who tell of a "divided, double life" – to cite the title of a poem by Domašcyna. Research on

the ethnic sense of belonging of the “simple people” in the region supply an abundance of material on such an ambivalent life, e.g. the work by Ines Keller, *Sorbische und deutsch-sorbische Familien*⁵ (Sorbian and German-Sorbian Families), which is based on extensive field research. The investigations on cultural identity carried out at the Sorbian High School in Bautzen verify this: in interviews with students, events were portrayed which were described by those questioned as “conflicting”, “split personality”, or “I have somewhat mixed feelings about it” (“das ist’n bißchen gespalten bei mir”).⁶ And in a newspaper article under the spectacular title “Kamenzer Schulrätin führt ein Doppelleben” (Kamenz school inspector leads a double life), a situation is described which is not at all unusual for this region: “To a certain extent, the woman leads a double life. When she gets up in the morning, mumbles a sleepy ‘Dobre Ranje!’ to her husband, perhaps looks in on her mother, whom all her life she has only seen in traditional Sorbian dress, she is Lenka, Lenka Pjechowa. Everyone in Ralbicy, where she grew up as the oldest of ten children, knows her in this way. The people here only speak German when strangers ask for directions. Moments later, however, she climbs the steps leading to her office in Kamenz and slips, so to speak, into her second self. Her name is now Helene Pech, she is a senior civil servant responsible for 35 elementary schools in Upper Lusatia. Of course this includes the school in Ralbicy (Ralbitz) she once attended herself.”⁷

Lausitz is a region where the people do not solely draw from the German-Sorbian relation of tension. Today, it is a border region where three countries meet – Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland. In past centuries, parts of the region belonged to Saxony, then to Bohemia, Silesia, Poland, Brandenburg, Prussia. Typical for the region are also its many resettlers and refugees who came here from the east and southeast after the Second World War. Today, radio broadcasts in different Slavic languages can be clearly received in this region. Part of the banality of everyday life is to make a quick trip to Poland or the Czech Republic: to go shopping, fill up the car’s tank, or go out to eat. In addition to this there are school field

trips, weekend and extended vacations, cultural festivals, diverse encounters, as well as employment across the border. Characteristic for this is, e.g., the Sorbian High School, which is just celebrating the 50th anniversary of its founding: after the years of Nazi discrimination against the Sorbs in the Third Reich, the high school was first established in Czechia. But another part of the banality of every life are the typical inspections at construction sites in order to catch people from the east doing illicit work, or as has recently been the case, the tightened controls by border guards in order to catch illegal border crossers from non-EU countries. These individual examples clearly illustrate that the people in this region exist beyond unambiguity.

In a similar vein, research on migrants, refugees and other foreigners supplies information on how they fall back on different areas of cultural semantics and practices and in many respects – including an ethnic one – lead double lives. In her book *Der getötete Paß* (The Murdered Passport), Barbara Wolbert tells compact stories about people who come to the Federal Republic of Germany from Turkey to work here for ten or more years before returning to Turkey. Many of them move there and then back several times in their lives, and each return becomes a new experience. Some first generation migrants who receive retirement benefits in Germany live half the year here, the other half – there. Others, on the other hand, make more of an attempt to integrate themselves and to settle down – either here or there. However, all of these people live in a constant crossing of borders, in agreement with the allegedly unagreeable, and their lives prove “that with migrant labor, affiliations have developed which appear to make national statehood obsolete” (Wolbert 1995: 178).

Other empirical evidence for the liberal handling of different ethnic semantics in concrete, human, everyday life situations could also be drawn on. But the question is: How is this dealt with in theory? What kind of concepts do we have about such double lives and such mixed identities? When we attempt to study the theoretical treatment of these questions, we are confronted with a series of uncertainties, often

even ill-humor and resentment. Where does this come from? How did the idea of ethnicity originate? I would like to submit a brief outline.

Substantial research carried out in the last several years has conclusively verified how “the invention of the nation” and “the construction of history” have occurred in Europe in the last two to three centuries. Today, we already know something about how the European frontiers originated, how national and ethnical affiliations were produced, and which function culture had in these processes. It is known that the process of the development of nations, which was an important step in the direction of a modern society, took place inwardly – as the construction of a unit – and outwardly – as a distinction. Within this social, economic and political process, those parts of the culture that symbolized this process and were able to nurture it gained in significance. Those parts of the culture that tended to express the similarities beyond national boundaries or emphasized internal differences were irrelevant to this process, disruptive, which is why they were marginalized or denied – in the areas of both theory and politics. What was being sought after was that which could suggest homogeneity, unbroken continuity and individuality within the nation and *ethnos*, and that which allowed a distinction from the neighbors, that which established boundaries between one’s self and the others. In the era of the development of nation-states, the idea of a separate culture was taken on as something very special, uniform and constant. In this regard, a selective method was practiced and ethnic and cultural identities were determined according to the either/or model: either this side or that side of the border. The idea: a people, a nation, a culture gained plausibility. Human beings became German, Polish, French, and pure culture, indeed anything pure was favored.

To briefly summarize my standpoint: The claim to purity, homogeneity, obligation inwards (and thus the negation of all differences within the group) and the incomparability outwards (and thus the negation of all solidarity outwards) makes race, *ethnos*, national culture into “dangerous ideas” – to cite an important essay by Eric Wolf. And after two centuries of

devastating examples of National Socialism and racism in Europe, today it is not surprising that theory sometimes attempts to circumvent these concepts. However, if that is done, the danger arises that at the same time, ethnic identification as a part of socialization, as a part of an individual’s social ability to act is thereby circumvented. Because the scientific notion of ethnicity obliquely refers to (very soberly formulated) only the following: “That groups of people possess a common cultural ground, share historical and contemporary experience with each other, have ideas about a common ancestry, and based on this develop a certain consciousness regarding identity and solidarity, is a social fact which did not just become known in the present day. This ‘social fact’ appears to be a general and fundamental characteristic of human socialization, a universal category comparable to categories like the division of labor, inequality, culture, power or socialization, which can be found in all societies, albeit in relevantly different manifestations and with differing significance” (Heckmann 1992: 51–52).

So much for Heckmann’s general definition. The ethnic problem is particularly significant for ethnic minorities, subcultures, and for other divergent groups who have become marginalized into peripheral cultures in the process of the development of national cultures. In this case, the rejection of the notion of ethnicity can sometimes eventually serve to promote rather than expose certain potentially dangerous power structures. If we exclude ethnic semantics from our research, some processes of disrespect and discrimination can slip away from us, as well as something too of the human quest for acknowledgement and equality. How will we be able to understand that in the present day, someone can already be delighted that he or she is accepted as a human being just like the others in society? Like the Kamenz school inspector previously mentioned who leads a double life, who endeavors to intensify the contact between German and Sorbian youths. In the article we read: “The contacts already reach as far as Dresden,” she beams. “More and more German girls and boys are realizing: They are just like us, except that they speak one more language!”

Perhaps another model besides the either/or one can help us to get out of this dilemma. We could consider an either/and/or model. Research on ethnic minorities like the Sorbs, but also on migrants and other “foreigners”, provides us with powerful evidence to this means. Similar to most members of ethnic minorities, the Sorbs are fundamentally bilingual and they draw, as the situation requires, from the cultural reservoirs of the minority as well as the majority culture. They also have two names – as do the place name signs here. The Turkish immigrant workers who live in the Federal Republic of Germany also produce their own, new culture out of diverse elements of various cultures. And this cultural blend is not accidental, and it is not to be accredited to inadequate conformity to the host culture. Rather, it is a concrete response to new circumstances. It is the creative handling of the inconsistencies of one’s own life situation. These people have stridden through the grids of routine, inherent bonds and inherited affiliations and are staking out new spheres of action, experience and communication for themselves. They have pointedly left the unblemished world of purity and unambiguity – whatever that may be – and have irrevocably decided in favor of a hybrid and ambivalent world. I do not mean to deny the difficulties, the constraint, the suffering, and the destroyed existences which often accompany foreigners along the way, but these people overcome the barriers of an assigned existence, develop unknown capacities for action, write their own biography, create new worlds.

Perhaps when we refer to minorities like the Sorbs, but also to migrants and other stranded existences, we can more adequately speak of an either/and/or identity. I call that – blending worlds. Over the last few years, the conceptualizations of ambivalence (Bauman 1991), Creolization (Hannerz 1987) and hybrid cultures (Hall 1992) have opened the view to a new paradigm in this respect.

Ethnicity as Action

“We literally create the world in which we live by living it.” This sentence belongs to one of the intellectual fathers of modern constructivism –



Fig. 2. Double place names in Lausitz.

the Chilean biologist and neurocybernetician Humberto R. Maturana. In the disciplines of ethnology/cultural science, too, the view of ethnicity as a construction has recently gained more plausibility. Yet until this consideration has not been built into a coherent and systematic theory, it can easily be misunderstood. This is the case, e.g., if a misleading opposition is put forward: construction versus reality and/or construction versus effectivity. Such a perspective suggests that there is indeed somewhere and something “more real”, “truer”, or “more effective” than the ethnic construction just about to be deconstructed. Such a train of thought is theoretically unsound and politically dangerous. In particular when it is partially applied to minorities, migrants, and other border crossers. Etienne Balibar recently also expressly warned of this: “Every discussion about boundaries refers to the establishment of certain – national and other – identities. Now, it is well established that to differing degrees, there are active and passive, desired and accepted, individual and common identities or rather, identi-

fications. Their multitude and the fact that they can be explained as either construction or fiction deprive them of none of their effectivity" (Balibar 1997: 7).

Over the last 20 years, the discourse of modern, or also so-called "radical", constructivism has developed more and more into a dynamic, interdisciplinary complex of discussions. As Siegfried J. Schmidt, one of the primary motors of this development, formulated, it is more and more concerned with producing empirical evidence for the knowledge that "we never actually deal with reality itself, but rather always with the realities of our experience" (Schmidt 1994: 7). The new theoretical framework of the constructivists also implies a new evaluation of the social responsibility of science. The point is "that in particular, the subject dependency of our construction of reality can explain our successful actions in a socially accepted and seemingly objective physical world. Radical Constructivism supplies arguments for a sensible overcoming of European traditions of thought which have become intolerable. By taking leave of absolute notions of truth and reality, transforming objectivity into intersubjectivity, and binding all knowledge to human beings and their actions, it refers at the same time to our complete responsibility for the natural and social environment in which we live" (Schmidt 1994: 8).

As far as I can see, up to now there have been few attempts to apply the concepts of Radical Constructivism to the ethnic problem in a theoretically adequate manner. However, this seems to me to be worthwhile, as it could perhaps open up some of the muddled specialized discussions and help them achieve a disciplinary maturity, in particular in view of the new, politically explosive nature of the problems of ethnicity in Europe, and also in view of the current drawing up of new borders and the formation of new alliances. Without going over their argumentation, here I only want to selectively enlist a few of the considerations of the constructivists which are relevant for our problem.

In his essay "Konstruktivismus, Systemtheorie und Empirische Literaturwissenschaft" (Constructivism, System Theory, and Empiri-

cal Literary Studies), S.J. Schmidt summarizes a few basic ideas of the constructivist concept. His initial consideration is the consistent taking into account of the problem of observation: "In comparison, constructivists like myself concentrate on human agents as observers" (Schmidt 1994: 214). What is important here is the notion of empiricism: "At the same time [...] empiricism is demonstrated according to a constructivist understanding of processes and social criteria, and not of 'reality'; in other words, 'empirical research' is defined as a systematic (because it is led by theory) observation of the second order, the results of which can be socially stabilized, because and/or as far as there is an (implicit or explicit) consensus within the respective relevant groups of observers regarding the concepts and criteria of the act of observing, and as far as these results and their consequences agree with the socially accepted criteria of reality for objects and events in the observers' world of experience" (Schmidt 1994: 215).

The idea of observation of the second order emphasizes the difference between the description level and the object level. Social systems can thus be conceived according to action theory or – formulated another way – agent theory. Central to the constructivist concept is the so-called "text-agent-context syndrome". Here, the reciprocal constitutional context of communication, social agents, collective knowledge, and culture is moved into the foreground. Thus the question about the relations of power and influence within the framework of sociostructural orders can also be raised. It should perhaps be noted in brackets that constructivism has already become accepted in particular in the area of empirical literary studies, so that in the case of the "text-agent-context syndrome", the initial concern was with the literary text.

If we maintain this perspective, ethnicity could be conceived of as action. This would open up the possibility of shifting the focus of research from the question "What is ethnicity?" to the question "Who does what with ethnicity and why?". In this way, the use of ethnic semantics can be described as a response to a person's respective living conditions and life situations while doing justice to theory. A conception of

action could serve to clear up some aspects of our problem of blending worlds. It thus becomes possible to co-conceive the relation between cognition, communication, social system, institutions, and media from a theoretical perspective. The relation between the macro-level and the micro-level, e.g. between system level, life world and agents, can be meaningfully modelled in this way. What is decisive for me here is first and foremost to consistently trace the individual performance of the acting subject – the activity of the individual – and to move the agents into the center of the formation of theory. At the same time, this enables more effective investigation of the respective power relations and power struggles in society.

The Yeast of Society

In an essay on minorities, Iso Camartin, who lives in Switzerland and among other things has studied the Rhaetians, refers to minorities as “the yeast of society”. He writes: “The state of contentment into which minorities are capable of settling nevertheless remains one of the most effective gauges for measuring the political quality of life in a nation. As majority decisions will never guarantee freedom to those who are meant to be different, it is part of the political culture of a country that its elected holders of office, i.e. parliament and government, accept responsibility for implementing measures for the provision of such freedom” (Camartin 1987: 130–131).

As we all know, research is not exempt from this process of the formation of structures and opinions. However, before we devote more thought to minorities as the yeast of society, it would be important to understand how contemporary European society (for which I use the term late modernity) functions and how individuals create their world and their ethnic identity within this systematic framework of conditions. System theory – in particular Max Weber, Niklas Luhmann and Ulrich Beck – provides good reference aids for this purpose. With regard to their systematic framework of conditions, modern European societies are increasingly shaped as “formal-rational” and at the same time “subject-free” – to borrow Max

Weber’s terminology (Weber 1976/78). Viewed from the perspective of functional-rational system theory, society’s modernization process is presented as a process of social differentiation: as a transition of societies with hierarchical-stratificatory differentiation to societies with functional differentiation (Luhmann 1980/1989).

Contrary to feudal, pre-modern and early modern societies, within the context of functional differentiation individuals no longer belong to one – and only one – subsystem in society. Rather, they must be “assumed” to be “socially placeless”, i.e. individuals do not completely belong to one of the subsystems, and none of the subsystems can make a complete claim to any one individual. Here they are fundamentally “placeless and foreign”. Late modern society requires, so to speak, a person’s simultaneous affiliation with various subsystems. In this way, the functional systems of society are again clustered in the individual and “his world”: “Everything which appears separate from a system theoretical perspective becomes an integral part of the individual biography: family and gainful employment, education and occupation, administration and transport and communication, consumption, medicine, educational theory, etc. Partial system boundaries are valid for partial systems, but not for people in individual situations dependent on institutions. [...] partial system boundaries pass through individual situations” (Beck 1986: 218).

The act of clustering diverse subsystems is an individual’s personal achievement, and precisely this fact constitutes his or her individuality. If we think out this logic further, we are able to conceive of a mixed existence or – as I call it – blending worlds as a model for late modern society and for life today.

Because in late modernity, it is not just a matter of mixtures between individual subsystems: profession, family, politics, gender, confession, status, etc. It is also a matter of permeability within the individual subsystems: gender, generation, art, etc. Countless examples can be cited: opera greats like Luciano Pavarotti singing with pop and rock stars; fathers take a leave of absence from work to care for their

children, and mothers become the breadwinners of the family; young people know more about computers and new media than their parents, not to mention their grandparents; on the other hand, parents sometimes listen to music louder than their children do. Billions of people recently experienced it on television: For Lady Diana's funeral ceremony, the boundary between the funeral protocol appropriate for an aristocrat and a commoner was breached: "The Royal Family was now required to do the splits," commented a guest of the television station SAT 1 during the television broadcast on September 6, 1997.

Much theoretical thought has been devoted to all of these mixtures, some of which appears to have already gained acceptance today. But this is not the case for ethnic questions. In this regard, we come across diverse reservations. This is particularly prominent in the German discourse. Why is it so difficult to imagine that someone can cluster two or three ethnic identifications in his or her world? Why is the idea that a person has either one ethnic affiliation or none at all so predominant? Why is ethnicity defended as virtually the last bastion of unambiguity? Who is interested in this?

The research carried out in Lusatia is instructive for answering these questions. We can observe how unambiguity, purity, and authenticity are conceived of with regard to "that which is Sorbian": "Where for centuries the Church and national traditions have entered into a symbiosis, that is where ethnicity is intact," e.g. the Catholic parish priest Miræin Salowski assures us when asked about "that which is Sorbian", without taking the least notice of the significant numbers of Protestant, non-denominational or loosely denominational Sorbs. "It is obvious that even today, the Christian faith determines the lives of the Catholic Sorbs. Faith and a national consciousness are very pronounced here, and they complement one another. It is not lastly because thousands of people here attend church services held in the Sorbian language every Sunday and holiday that the faith and the language are kept alive. Sorbian feasts and celebrations, the social bond with the village community, the parish and the family provide support and security. Christian-

ity strengthens and fosters the culture of the Sorbs, just as one cannot imagine European culture without the Christian faith. A culture cannot be established with disregard for or desperate rejection of that which one understands as *cultus* – worship and respect" (Salowski 1993: 144).

Such ideas are often held by the clergy, but also by "simple people". I have already attempted above to show that today, such conceptions, which in a way propagate a uniform and static, i.e., substantial ethnic identity which is binding for everyone and always retrieveable – a kind of anti-modernity – can mean two things. On the one hand: a past imagined as having been secure is intended to provide security in uncertain times. It can only be hinted at here: high unemployment in the region (at 20.6%, the administrative district of Bautzen has the highest unemployment rate in Saxony, and in September 1997, Saxony had an unemployment rate of 17.5% – twice as high as in any of the old states)⁸, a dramatic shortage of apprenticeship positions, a high rate of migration, breakdown of the customary forms of life and social network after the collapse of socialism, loss of social status, devaluation of individual biographies, unknown social, ecological, and other uncertainties. The problem with such conceptions is that as long as support and confidence are sought in the past, the opportunities for consciously and actively tackling the problems of the present are more likely to be wasted than taken advantage of. On the other hand, however, such concepts are part of current power struggles: they are about achieving and securing privileges, they are about resources and spheres of influence, and they are about how the new elite of interpreters and spokespersons of society will constitute and assert themselves. These are real struggles about power and distribution which – after the collapse of socialism and upon the reorganization of society – are being fought with both a claim to "authentic" Sorbian culture and to the right to define what it is and is "allowed to be" Sorbian (Tschernokoshewa 1995).

The notion of an authentic Sorbian culture, however, does not only originate internally, from within the ranks of the minority itself. It



Fig. 3. “Folklorization” of Sorbian everyday life: Village festival in Schwarzkollm.

is often the expectations and attributions from the outside that produce this “authenticity”. And this is not only done in a historical sense: with the construction of a “pure” German national culture, the Sorbian culture was also constructed. As we know, this is the fundamental principle of construct for ethnic minorities in Europe. Today as well, minorities are to be thought of only in relation to the majority. For the purpose of distinction, minorities like the Sorbs are presently often forced into a “pre-modern”, folkloristic, often rustical corner by the majority – if the latter, so to speak, makes sole claim to progress and modernity. And this distinction is also often thought of in a hierarchical way, thus going hand-in-hand with the placement of ethnic minorities in the lower stratum of society. Even in the year 1997, we can read the following in the *Berliner Zeitung*: “‘Yesterday is here’ – this is the title of an exhibition of 50 photographs by Michael Herrmann in the foyer of the Axel Springer Verlag

in Kochstraße 50. From 1992 to 1996, the photographer from Berlin traced the development in Lusatia and the life of the Sorbs.” The title of the report is: “Pictures of everyday life in Lusatia” – “The Sorbs are presently responsible for upholding established traditions” – is a quotation taken from a lengthy article which appeared in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* in 1996. “The Sorbs are most Sorbian when they sing and pray in Sorbian” – is a statement from a television feature by the MDR with the title “The Sorbs – a life against time”.⁹

The folklorization of minorities like the Sorbs is part of a comprehensive national power construct. It is a product, and it more or less openly accompanies the idea of a homogenous national culture, which is historically passé and has been for a long time. And this is where I see an essential reason why blending worlds – living a life beyond ethnic unambiguity – is sorely accepted by many. I would like to cite Nora Räthzel in this regard: “That is perhaps a further reason



Fig. 4. "Folklorization" of everyday life: Sorbian children celebrating the so called "Vogelhochzeit".

why ethnic minorities are discriminated against and marginalized. They could prove that the perspective of one's life lies in the irreverent crossing of all boundaries, in self-determined action. A perspective that deprives the border guards of all 'cultures' of the basis for their existence" (Räthzel 1996: 62).

Different Yet Similar at the Same Time

W.-D. Bukow and R. Llaryora – in my opinion two of the most profound researchers in the field of minorities in German-speaking areas – have summarized the inappropriate localization of ethnicity as follows: "In comparison with many traditional societies, in the Federal Republic, as in other advanced industrial societies in Europe, ethnicity plays a rather curious role. As a rule, ethnic components are perceived, picked out as a central theme, and questioned solely from a very special point of view. They are almost exclusively sought and found in recently immigrated minorities – this being the same for all of these groups – and are then incorporated in a 'minority-centered' way. This is first of all true for the daily discourse on the street and in

the media, but then also for the political arena, and finally even frequently for the scientific discussion itself" (Bukow/Llaryora 1988: 159).

This ethnization observed by Bukow and Llaryora in the conceptualization of newly immigrated minorities can also be observed with regard to "resident" minorities like the Sorbs. I do not mean to minimize the differences between these minorities regarding citizenship and other factors; however, structurally we are dealing with the same phenomenon. And in practice, strategies and points of view are already being rehearsed with a nation's "own foreigners" which are then also applied to the "foreign foreigners": folklorization, othering, social relegation. The reverse way is also possible.

At this stage I want to point out a paradox which for me is one of the most serious of late modernity. It concerns the question of the inherent or acquired identity of people who are blending worlds. As outlined above, these people are living that pluralization of forms of life symptomatic for modern life – *per definitionem*, so to speak. They have escaped all forces of subsumptive situating – blood, soil, unambigu-



Fig. 5. Everyday life beyond “Folklorization”. Photo: Jürgen Matschie.

ity – and have chosen “being different” over security, and “a place elsewhere” over roots. Their biographies show that they have left the illusion of an inherent ethnicity behind them, and are visibly creating ethnicity as an acquired world. The paradoxical thing is that it is precisely these people whom the citizens and institutions of their host country, or the members of the majority, do not position based on their biographies – i.e. on what they have acquired, what they have lived – but rather, they position them exclusively according to attributed, allegedly inherent characteristics. These heralds of a differentiated modernity are often gauged according to the standards and ways of thinking of early or pre-modernity. This is a very “narrow”, even “feudal” perspective which, however, is unfortunately not rarely held and which for me is a conception geared towards the stabilization of social inequalities. This is precisely what happens with immigrants and with other foreigners when they are ethnicized, as is often the case with immigrant workers from Turkey. This is also what happens with minorities when they are folklorized, which is often the case with the Sorbs: they are often thought

of “only as Sorbs”, e.g. as an ethnic group preferably recognizable by their traditional dress. People coming from Turkey to Germany do not become “Turkish” until they have arrived here (as they are now viewed as “German” in Turkey), and they remain “Turkish” for years after leaving Turkey, even in the second or third generation. Today, there are 7.3 million people living in the Federal Republic without a German passport; more than half of these have lived in Germany for more than ten years; 1.3 million of them were born here (Münz/Seifert 1997). These “fellow citizens from foreign parts” (to quote the title of an article by Bukow/Llaryora) have been denied fundamental rights of just this modern life: civil rights (the right to vote – to vote in federal elections, to be voted into political office, at the same time to be taken account of by candidates for political office), an unrestricted right to employment (they require work permits), the right to travel (restrictive visa ordinances), etc. After 15 years of residency, German citizenship can be taken into consideration; however, the other passport must be relinquished in this case. Thus migrants are again placed before the either/or dilemma, pre-

cisely that dilemma which they wanted to escape from by blending worlds. Originally, for the migrant – as for the Sorbs, indeed, for all of us – it was a matter of the right to be different and still belong. And each time that happens, modern society robs itself of a perspective which has model character.

After the collapse of the socialist system, all of those people in the former Eastern bloc have, in a sense, become migrants. They are blending their lives with two worlds. They are blending their lives in time. Today, we can observe how “the East” is being ethnicized, folkloricized, alienated and socially relegated from the outside.¹⁰ This is also happening as a reaction to the imminent integration of Europe and in view of the drawing up of new borders between the “EU area” and the “non-EU area”. This is the great, new construction in Europe, and our discipline should be more watchful and expose the exuberant ideologization being practiced here as a symptom of current forces of power and distribution. I am thinking here of, e.g., press reports like the following one: “Saxony wants electronic border controls” – so the title of an article in the *Sächsische Zeitung* announcing this novelty. The article continues: “In future, electronic surveillance equipment shall secure some sections of Saxony’s border to Poland and the Czech Republic.”¹¹

In my opinion, old and new minorities, strangers of all kinds, people blending worlds provide a good opportunity for theory to give some thought to the idea that difference does not mean the opposite of similarity, but rather that in today’s world, that which is similar resides in that which is different. The Similar finds expression, concretization, and action in Difference. For me, this insight is of fundamental significance. It equips theory with a new set of conceptual tools. At the same time, it undermines the foundation of current power relations, namely the idea that nations or ethnicities are homogenous and cannot be compared. If we maintain this view we can not only find powerful theoretical arguments against xenophobia, but we can also find arguments for the creation and support of new alliances. In order to tread this path, it would be important to first bring together the concepts underlying minor-

ity research and majority research. Then it will become clear that blending worlds does not only affect minorities or migrants, but all people: We are all blending worlds.

In closing, I would like to formulate a provocation and direct it to our discipline. The street sweeper in Prague in Klíma’s novel further motivates me to do this, because in ethnic terms, he creates his own world similar to Kafka. My consideration is as follows: At the latest, with the advent of modern constructivism we have recognized that any scientific achievement is a construct, and that science cannot exist otherwise. We should then perhaps somewhat more courageously and openly stand by our own scientific constructs. In his novel *The Satanic Verses*, and later in his defense of the novel and the Impure, Salman Rushdie provides us with an example of how this could be done: “The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and that, is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world and I have tried to embrace it. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-co-joining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves” (Rushdie 1991: 394).

Translation: Rebecca van Dyck

Notes

1. The Sorbs are a Slavic minority in Germany. They live in the easternmost part of Germany, in Lausitz, near the Czech and Polish borders. A distinction is made between Upper Sorbs and Lower Sorbs, whereby the Upper Sorbian language (in and around Bautzen) is similar to Czechian, and the Lower Sorbian language (in and around Cottbus) is similar to Polish. Recent statistics indicate that there are approx. 60,000 Sorbs, although this number can fluctuate upwards or downwards depending on how “being Sorbian” is defined. At the end of the 19th century there were over 150,000 people actively speaking Sorbian. History books state that the ances-

- tors of the Sorbs came from the original homeland of the Slavs north of the Carpathian Mountains, and that in about the year 600, they settled a vast area between the Elbe/Saale and Oder/Neisse rivers. Several centuries later, the area was ravaged by campaigns of conquest by the Great Franconian Empire under Charlemagne and his successors. The Sorbian tribes were firmly placed under German rule in the 10th and 11th centuries. Since then, Sorbs and Germans have coexisted in Lausitz.
- See E. Tschernokoschewa (ed.) *So langsam wird's Zeit. Kulturelle Perspektiven der Sorben in Deutschland*, Bonn, 1994, for information on the cultural situation of the Sorbs today.
2. See Anne Goebel, "Das Spiel mit den zwei Sprachen", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich, 29 July 1997.
 3. The Sorbian language, like all Sorbian institutions, was banned under National Socialism.
 4. LPG – Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgemeinschaft (Agricultural Production Community): Organizational form of agriculture during Socialism.
 5. See Ines Keller, *Sorbische und deutsch-sorbische Familien. Aspekte ihrer Entwicklung in generativem Vergleich*, Humboldt University, Berlin (PhD manuscript), 1997.
 6. See Dirk Hüper, *Kulturelle Identität sorbischer Jugendlicher: Hemmnisse und Chancen auf dem Weg in eine multikulturelle Gesellschaft*, Free University of Berlin, Berlin (dissertation manuscript), 1995.
 7. See "Kamenzer Schulrätin führt ein Doppelleben", *Chemnitzer Zeitung* 27 July 1997.
 8. See *Sächsische Zeitung* 10 September 1997, pp. 1, 9, 21.
 9. See "Bilder über den Alltag in der Lausitz", *Berliner Zeitung*, 15 January 1997.
 10. "Auferstehung in der Lausitz. Bautzen, eine Stadt, die um ihr Image kämpft", *Frankfurter Rundschau*.
Refer to Peter Niedermüller for more on nationalism "from within".
 11. See *Sächsische Zeitung*, 5 September 1997, p. 1.
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