The Sociological Perspective and the Berlin Wall

The twentieth anniversary celebration of the building of the Berlin Wall was about to begin on that August, 1981 morning when my two West German friends and I met Andreas, an East German resident, at "Checkpoint Charlie," one of the official crossing points to communist East Germany. We were carrying a few items that Andreas had said he would like to have, but were difficult to find: a favorite brand of toothpaste, a particular record album - and a kitchen sink. Andreas didn't have a sink in his two-room flat and, he had told us, the prospects of getting one in that poverty-stricken dictatorship were slim. We had found one in our apartment basement, discarded, and in good condition. The border officials were perplexed seeing this cardboard wrapped contraption, but on that day they arbitrarily decided to let it, and us, pass.

We talked about daily life over lunch on the outdoor balcony of the Palace Hotel in Karl Marx Plaza. Andreas told us of the persistent despair that he felt knowing that people elsewhere were free. "Here you must be careful at all times with what you do. You could be stopped and questioned." During our afternoon stroll, Andreas pointed out the secret police that were observing us, and later, we were asked to show our identification papers. "Most people have retreated to their family life or their hobbies," said Andreas. "If they spend any time outdoors, they are likely to be bothered by the police asking to see their papers. So they stay indoors."

We passed by a travel agency as the window advertisement was being changed. A colorful poster announcing a seasonal special to Sweden was positioned. "But of course we can't travel," said Andreas. "You need permission, and they won't let you go if they think you won't come back.

We climbed the stairs of Andreas' dreary fifty-year old apartment house passing the shared toilet room off the first landing. His flat had no shower either, but at least it gained a kitchen sink. In his modest surroundings we talked of our travels. Andreas couldn't hide his envy at how we could decide to go to New Delhi one day, or just take a spontaneous trip to San Francisco. He couldn't understand why we could go where we wanted and he couldn't.

As the day neared its end we realized that we needed to leave before our permission to visit would expire. Andreas pleaded with us to stay just a little while longer, but we had to go. We boarded the train for a three-minute ride to the West and stole a last look at that tyrannical place and its victim, a sad and envious young man who, by accident of birth and territorial circumstances, could only wave goodbye. It would be another eight years before Andreas would gain his freedom with the final destruction of the infamous Berlin Wall.

All of us struggled on that day with the bizarre truth that we could not easily make sense of the world around us. I could not understand how totalitarianism could be so oppressive and enduring. After all, in America, we have the freedom to travel, to associate, and to speak our minds without consulting with officials. It was hard for me to seriously believe that we could be randomly stopped or even arrested as we strolled through the city. At the same time Andreas could scarcely comprehend the fact that we could hop aboard the subway and cross the border to freedom while he could not. Neither could he imagine the global mobility that I seemed to possess and what exactly he would do if he suddenly had it.

Our dilemma at that point was an example of a universal occurrence and the very practical essence of sociological inquiry: the attempt to make sense of the world around us.
We want to examine what we know and what others know about our social situation. What are the dominant cultural ideas that are affecting us now, and as our social situation changes from moment to moment? Both Andreas and I knew we were in a communist police state where ideas about how a society should operate were entirely different from what Americans believe. I was highly dependent upon Andreas’ judgments and interpretations about what we could or could not do. Yet even Andreas could not be entirely sure of what might happen next in such an intolerant and domineering culture.

We want to know who we are and who others are and what will be the probable consequences of any social interaction. We want to know how social life is organized and how those social arrangements can affect us. I was dubious when Andreas said that the secret police were following us. It was only after they confronted us and demanded our papers that I was convinced. I became instantly aware that I was subject to detention by powerful officials at any time. It was obvious that ordinary people were not very important. Who could people trust?

We want to know where we are and whom we are with. We want to know how the social ecology of a place can influence our behavior. Initially, I had difficulty “seeing” East Berlin as different from any other city, but eventually I began to notice my surroundings and the messages that were being sent. The travel agency, for example, was an illusion for the most part, since only a select group of people would ever be able to use it. There were few people in the streets and they seemed to move and act cautiously. At one corner, a multitude of bullet holes in the wall served as a reminder that violence was never far away.

We silently returned to the west carrying mixed emotions. We felt sadness for Andreas and his situation, but also relief since we were returning to a safe and more predictable place. Although our visit was short, we left with a lifetime of memories about the culture, the social structure and the ecology of that ill-fated country.