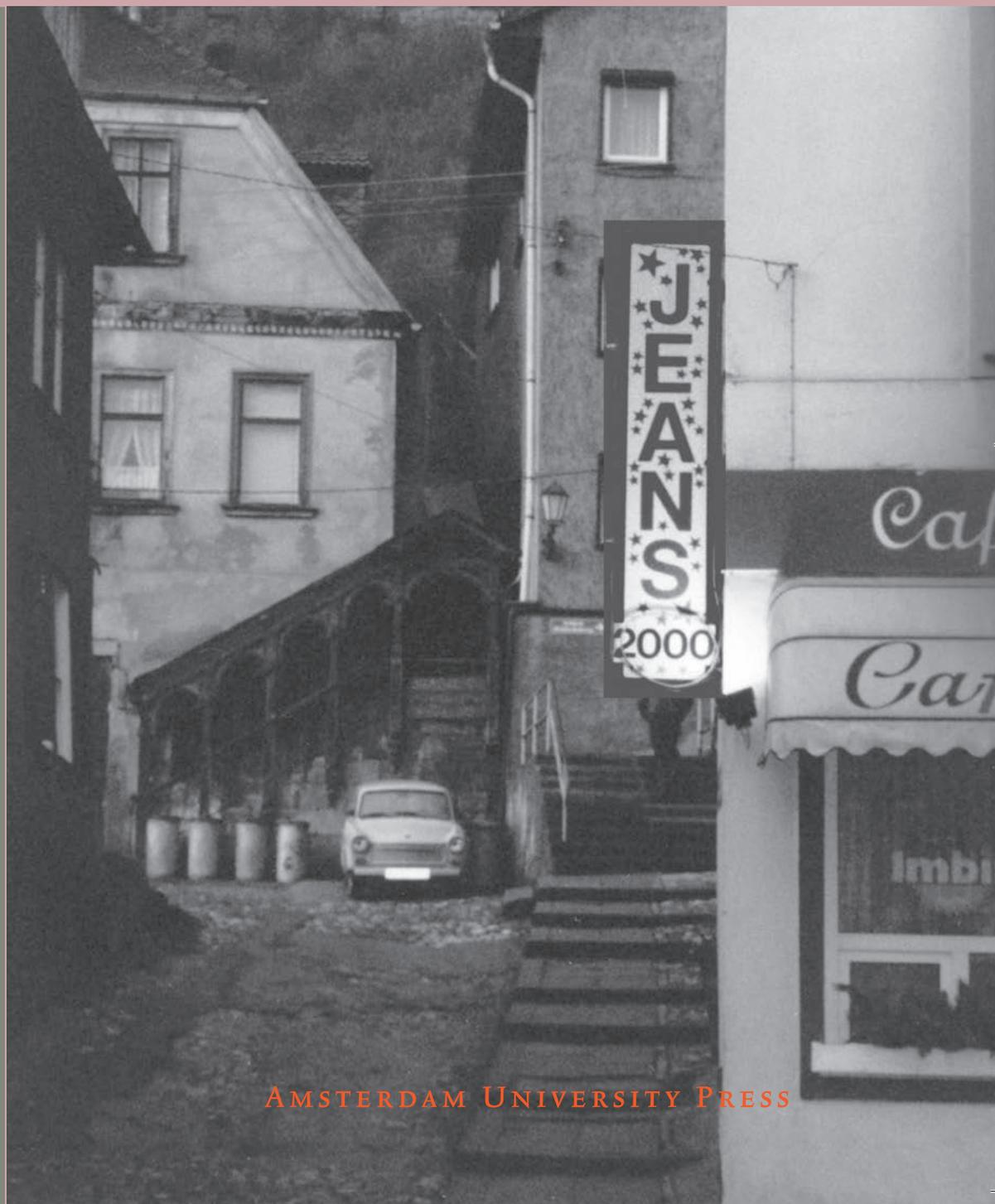


Material Fantasies

Expectations of the Western Consumer World
among East Germans **Milena Veenis**



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To Maurits and Rifka,
in memoriam Leonard van Es

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Milena Veenis

Amsterdam 2012

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Preface

In 1994, the former socialist part of Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), was probably one of the most fascinating places for an anthropologist to conduct research. Five years earlier, the Fall of the Berlin Wall had initiated the collapse of the socialist regime in Eastern Germany and the start of German reunification. Although heartily welcomed, this prompted the complete breakdown of East German society and the fast disintegration of all existing material, social, and conceptual standards. The ensuing turmoil could be seen, heard, and felt throughout the country. The general atmosphere was tense, and conversations on the most mundane topics could suddenly derail – ostensibly for no reason. Whereas anthropologists have generally come to accept that a society's social and cultural structures are not fixed but rather constructed, it was a shock to witness the panic and pain this confrontation caused in everyday life. People were frantically searching for new safeguards.

Since then much has changed – not just the material, social, and psychological make-up of the former socialist society, but also the way it is remembered. Initially, the painful breakdown of everything trusted and secure caused people to experience any criticism of their history as extraordinarily hurtful, but as time passed, people's memories on the GDR have grown more differentiated. In 1994, longing and nostalgia for the past, anger and denial with regard to criticizing it were common reactions to the complete reshuffling and widespread critique of former East Germans' existence. Barely twenty years later, these responses have made way for a more nuanced and critical perspective on the GDR. This shift is clearly illustrated in cinematic form by two films about the GDR that received wide acclaim also outside Germany: *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) and *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2007).¹ Although not denying or ignoring the dictatorial aspects of the GDR, the former film excels in its endearing, somewhat nostalgic depiction of the socialist past, whereas the latter conveys a far darker mood. *Goodbye Lenin's* main message is roughly: “life under socialism may have been cramped, and we may not have had much, but what we had was comfy and cozy,” while *The Lives of*

¹ Since both films have been made by West Germans, they do not represent East Germans' shifting valuations of their past. They are used here merely to illustrate, primarily for non-Germans, the two extremes of how the GDR is and has been recollected.

Others reveals the almost unperceivable corruption of human relationships under socialist dictatorship. From humoristic-nostalgic and tenderly ironic, to gloomy and (self)critical: the two films represent the sequence of collective memories of the GDR in a nutshell.

Based on historical ethnographic material, this book presents a theoretical analysis of a society adrift. It describes the situation I encountered in 1993 and 1994, but its scope is much wider than a historical record of that time. It provides an analysis of how people react when the prevailing social and cultural order can no longer provide stability or meaning to their lives, and the apparent normality of how life is supposed to be lived is exposed as artificial.

Focusing on people's reactions then, while glossing over the (public) recollections of the former socialist era circulating over the past two decades, my representation might seem to confirm the typical image of inhabitants of socialist countries as Western Europe's straggling '*other*.' Such an interpretation would disregard the real and more general theme of this work. Apart from the specific topics it addresses (consumption, its role in German history, the relationship between East and West Germany before and after 1989, and in the GDR between the people and the state), this book explores how people respond to being confronted with the make-believe of their society's main ideological underpinnings. It shows how they try to restore confidence in the symbolic order as a meaningful, discursive framework that will support social structure and allow for mutual recognition.

Writing this book would not have been possible without the generous support of a number of people and institutions. First of all, I am grateful to the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research who funded the research on which this work is based, and to the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) for funding the finalization of the manuscript.

My time in Rudolstadt was one of the most inspiring experiences of my life. It was overwhelming to be so closely involved with people whose lives had been thrown into such turmoil by their history. I am very grateful to many people there, especially Stefan Breternitz, Hartmut Franz, Petra Rottschalk, Katrin Stapf, Heiner and Iris Tschoepke, Mr and Mrs Weißensee, and the late Jo Winter, for their sincerity and friendship.

Beyond Rudolstadt, I would like to thank my colleagues in the international EUWOL (European Ways of Life in the American Century) network, for the hearty and pleasurable atmosphere in which we worked together. I am particularly indebted to Ruth Oldenziel and Johan Schot for their personal support and advice during difficult times. My very sincere thanks also go to those who gener-

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My deepest and heartfelt thanks, however, go to Leonard van Es, with whom I was fortunate to share many happy years. His love and support have had a profound and lasting influence on me and my life. I dedicate this book to his beloved memory, and to our children, Maurits and Rifka.

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Introduction

Das Desiderium, die einzig ehrliche Eigenschaft aller Menschen, ist unerforscht. Das Noch-Nicht-Bewußte, Noch-Nicht-Gewordene, obwohl es den Sinn aller Menschen und den Horizont alles Seins erfüllt, ist nicht einmal als Wort, geschweige als Begriff durchgedrungen [Desire, man's only truthful capacity, has not been investigated. The not-yet-conscious, not-yet-realized, though it is man's only purpose and the horizon of all being, has not yet permeated as word, let alone as concept] (Ernst Bloch, 1959).¹

Western Prosperity as Consolation

In the late summer and autumn of 1989, television news broadcasts all over the world were dominated for weeks by the same images. They showed large groups of East Germans crossing the Berlin Wall and the border to West Germany. The images have become iconic, representing the fall of communism and the democratic will of the people. As the pictures also showed East Germans' excitement at finally being able to enter West Germany's consumer paradise, the events are also carved in people's collective memory as iconic symbols of the worldwide triumph of capitalism and consumerism. To the dismay of critical reporters, many East Germans seemed to leave their country primarily to discover the unparalleled consumption potential on the other side of the Wall, and to a lesser extent because of the political liberties there.²

East Germans' expectations of the abundance of western consumer goods were obviously high. But what exactly had they expected to find on the other side of the Wall? What did they see when they looked at the western world? Why did they shed tears of joy when for the first time in their lives, they stepped inside West German shops? And why were they prepared to spend more than 10 percent of their average monthly wage for a pineapple and even more for a simple western portable radio? These questions aroused my curiosity and were the starting point for the investigations that formed the basis of this book. In this introduction I will unravel why these questions are still relevant today, arguing that this book's focus on consumption in East Germany not only sheds light on a decisive development

in recent European history (socialist Europe's breakdown and subsequent capitalist transformation), it offers a prism through which such wide-ranging topics as the role of consumption in the Cold War, the relationship between citizens and a dictatorial state, the role of fantasy in social life, and material culture as a suitable ingress to people's hidden, unspoken interests and experiences can be viewed.

My proposition that the seemingly trivial issue of East Germans' desires for the western consumer world sheds light on such a wide-ranging combination of topics is grounded in two considerations, which will briefly be referred to here, and elaborated in more detail in the following chapters.

The first consideration is historical: after the Second World War, the Cold War between the two superpowers was mainly being fought out on the territory of divided Germany, with the Federal Republic of Germany (henceforth FRG) representing the United States' claims, and the German Democratic Republic (henceforth GDR) representing the Soviet Union's claims to European hegemony. In this struggle, consumption was the main stake and weapon. The United States and the Soviet Union tried to outdo each other in terms of material culture, technology and consumption, and they primarily did so in their respective showcases: West and East Germany.

Next to its central role in global power politics, consumption was an extraordinarily significant issue for the inhabitants of Germany after the Second World War. Struggling for food and clearing the ruins was not just an absolute necessity in a country flattened by bombs, reconstructing the material world and striving to improve the material situation were also extremely effective ways to psychologically process other subjects. Because material well-being and consumption were so important for the inhabitants of both Germanys, the leadership of the two German states tried to gain their populations' support by holding out far-reaching materialist promises on the glorious future that was to be built up – under capitalist and socialist conditions, respectively. Both German states thus tried to establish legitimacy by tapping into their citizens' (partly unspoken) needs and aims, promising ultimate harmony and well-being in the wake of material resurrection and renewal.

The main argument unraveled in this book is that the far-fetched socialist and capitalist promises of consumption as the road to ultimate well-being, the partial realization and partial corruption thereof, the implicit social and psychological interests underlying the politicized promises in both countries, and the interweaving of state promises and citizens' needs formed the breeding ground for the development of materialist, cargo-cult-like fantasies in the GDR, in which the bright-



Figure 1 – Rudolstadt, 1994, main shopping street
Source: Picture by the author.

looking world of the west came to be seen as the place of “fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”³

In order to gain more insight into the expectations so many East Germans had cherished of the west’s consumer society, I spent part of 1993 and the whole of 1994 in Rudolstadt, an East German town of about twenty-five thousand inhabitants in Thuringia, where I spoke to people and witnessed the rapidly changing course of events. I saw the damage that had been caused by 45 years of communist rule and the resulting material deterioration and gloom. I also saw the disastrous way western money had been used to buy up and stash away all the GDR’s cracks and rust under a thick layer of plaster and paint.

People told me about their lives in the GDR, what it had been like to live in a socialist society, how they had imagined life to be on the other side of the Berlin Wall, and what they saw (and felt) when meeting residents of the other Germany. They talked about their earlier expectations and dreams, as far as they could still recollect them, now that they had long been eclipsed by capitalist reality. Their stories made it clear that many East Germans had bestowed almost magical powers on the material western world: as if life surrounded by such prosperity would simply be perfect, and as if all the shortcomings in their existence would vanish into thin air amid those things.

In the west everything was beautiful and wonderful. People seemed to have no worries, and only there was it possible to be really happy. Everything always looked better and more beautiful than here. It all looked so wonderful! We really thought it was paradise, a Schlaraffenland pur [The Land of Cockaigne in its purest form],

a middle-aged man sighed during an interview. His story is one chosen randomly from the numerous anecdotes and examples which might illustrate how many East Germans had been thinking that the affluence of the west could somehow make them blissfully happy. The far-reaching powers attributed to the world on the other side of the Wall were poignantly described in a speech delivered by East German author and psychologist Helga Schubert, about her childhood and life in the GDR.⁴

Born in 1941, Schubert had never known her father, who had been killed in the war. When the war was over, her grandfather was arrested by the Russians on suspicion of having been a member of the SS. By the time the accusation was proven unfounded, her grandfather had already died of his wounds. Schubert talked about the GDR, “*die gehaßte, aber vertraute Vergangenheit* [the hated, but familiar past],” and about the guilt she felt towards her son. After all, she was responsible for the fact that he had to grow up in that country. As if to make up for that, she told the audience, she had washed him as often as she could with West German soap. “Because even if he could not be a West German, I could at least make him smell like one.” She went on to describe the time after the *Wende*, talking about West Germans, “*die wirklichen Deutschen: die, die immer schon da waren* [the real Germans; those, who had always been there].” She talked about a day, long after 1990, when she realized, while sitting in the train, that she still thought it a shame to spend *DeutschMarken* (DM, former West German currency), “*das schöne Westgeld* [that beautiful western money],” on a cup of coffee.

Schubert’s story is short but revealing. It clearly shows that the mere scent of the material attributes of the west offered her a form of reconciliation or relief from the flaws in her own existence. Referring to the residents of the FRG as the people who had been able to develop and become real Germans, thanks to their hard currency and prosperous standard of living, and in contrast to their poorer East German neighbors, she suggests that the western material prosperity seemed able to somehow repair East Germans’ flawed self-image. Schubert’s story very poignantly sketches the outlines of the collective fantasy that I am attempting to unravel and understand in this study.

Considering the high expectations the material attributes in the west had aroused, it is hardly surprising that their arrival led to deep disappointment. The

things from the west looked so lovely, so everyone said, but now that they had them, life had not improved. Quite the contrary: everyone only wanted to have more and more, and in the new Germany everything just revolved around material possessions. In addition – so my interlocutors told me – the presence of all those consumer goods seemed to have had an extraordinarily negative effect on people and social life: the irresistible lure of consumer goods had made people selfish and egoistic, and because of their belongings, some imagined themselves to be more important and better than others. Nothing less than people's *humanity* seemed to disappear behind the pretty façade of these goods. Many suggested that, looking back, the socialist past had not been so bad after all, "*es war nicht alles schlecht damals* [not everything was bad back then]."

Such were the stories that circulated in the former GDR in the year 1994. Investigating the experiential context of these stories, this book tries to unearth why the expectations about western consumer goods had been so high. Why was western prosperity considered capable of repairing the defects in East Germans' existence, and how is it possible that the figments of imagination about the western world were shared by so many people? What role did the specific (political) context play in the development of East Germans' desires? And were people's relatively warm recollections of their past lives in the GDR the exclusive result of the disappointment the *Wende* had brought about? Or were they exposing something else – something about my western perspective on life in socialist societies that fell short and had to be revised?

The fact that material acquisition had become such a significant element in East Germans' collective self-image, as well as in their image of West Germans, is the direct result of two related historical developments that were briefly touched upon above: the pivotal role of consumption in the Cold War between the socialist east and the capitalist west, and the importance of consumption for the establishment of a new (self-)confidence amongst the citizens in both Germanys after 1945. This book shows that the combination of these factors played a decisive role in the development of a distinctively materialistic outlook on life, shared by many East (and West) Germans.

One of the reasons why the East German case is relevant for anthropological debate in general is that within this specific historical context, it highlights one of the classical themes of anthropological research, that is: the study of material culture and consumption. Because consumption is this book's central theme, I want to briefly discuss some of the most relevant theoretical contributions in this field of anthropological study of the last two decades.

Consumption, Identity, and Fantasy

Early anthropological theories on material culture were initially developed to understand human-object relations in non-western societies. Thus, the material goods surrounding the inhabitants of these societies were studied as a reflection of their world view, cosmology or social structure. Another social-scientific tradition of investigating human-object relations focused primarily on the inhabitants of western, capitalist societies: following Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, the materialist desires and the urge to accumulate possessions, so characteristic for modern, capitalist societies, have long been studied as a typical expression of the alienation to which the inhabitants of capitalist societies had collectively fallen victim. Assuming that if people were alienated from their productive capacities and the fruits of their labor, they would no longer be able to recognize the value of goods as products of human labor, the mere fact that the objects nevertheless appeared to have value (their price tag) would wrongly be regarded as inherent in the goods themselves. This is what Marx referred to as "the mystical character of commodities."⁵ When goods, valuable in themselves, tempt people to buy them, this is due to the suggestion that their possession would add value to the possessor's alienated existence (so Marxist thinking goes). Striving for possessions to express status was thus considered by the theorists of the Frankfurt School to be "an inadequate compensation for the denial of a more meaningful life ... tolerated in the absence of alternatives."⁶

These two perspectives on human-object relations have set the anthropological research agenda for an amazingly long time, and when anthropologists began to study material culture in western societies around 1970, their research was roughly conducted along one of the lines mentioned above. This meant that the place and significance of the goods with which the inhabitants of western consumer societies surrounded themselves were explained in a manner normally applied to non-western (so-called primitive) societies (as the reflection of underlying social, mental and/or moral patterns and structures within society).⁷ Or, when studying the fact that since the Second World War, consumption had become an important means of forming and expressing their identity for most inhabitants of the western world, this was not considered a topic for serious research. As an attendee at a conference organized by the University of Leiden remarked when she heard about my proposed research: "That is just about jeans and Coca Cola...those things don't have any *real* meaning, do they?," after which she went on to present her interpretation of batik patterns in relation to the social structure of Indonesian society.

Whereas the (neo)structuralist school tended to ignore the distinctive features of modern consumer societies, the (neo)Marxist school considered them to be merely the direct result of the alienating basis of capitalist societies, without making any attempt to connect to the everyday life and experiences of real-life people. This situation changed in 1987 with the publication of two books: anthropologist Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* and sociologist Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*.⁸

Although very different, these two books have in common that both authors attempt to deal with the subject of consumerism from a less biased perspective than was the case within the Marxist-inspired framework. Miller proposed an all-encompassing theory about the role of material culture and mass consumption in modern societies, while Campbell concentrated on the issue of why the inhabitants of contemporary (western) societies show such an infinite desire to continually have new possessions. Although both books were published more than twenty years ago, they have definitely reset the social-scientific research agenda on consumption and are therefore still the most frequently quoted works in theoretical discussions on consumption. For that reason, and because they have had a decisive influence on my thoughts on the subject, I present a brief outline of both works.

In his book, Miller endeavors to find a theoretically sound answer to the question of why consumption plays such a significant role in people's identity-formations nowadays. Unlike the (neo) structuralist theorists before him, Miller strives to conceptualize identity in a more dynamic way. Although he finds his inspiration in Marx's (Hegelian) perspective on self-realization as a continual process of objectification and alienation, he takes the Marxist premise that people are doomed to alienation when they are deprived of controlling their own labor to be anachronistic. People do not know any better than that labor is for sale – so Miller argues. And the same critique applies to Marxist ideas, which state that alienation clearly manifests itself in the relationship between people and goods. As mentioned above, when people no longer recognize goods as the product of human labor, they tend to see the value these goods appear to have as inherent in those goods. People then buy them to obtain that quality in order to neutralize their alienation. According to Miller, however, this line of reasoning is outdated. People simply know no other goods than those that flood the market throughout the world, and whose producers are completely anonymous. That is the context in which they live and build their lives. In Miller's view, alienation is an important factor of present-day existence, but it is not so much the result of the disturbed relationship between man and his productive capability as of modernity's freedom, making people fully responsible for their own existence.

The knowledge that the conditions and criteria by which we live our lives are “our own creation, rather than merely given by some external force, is a deeply unsettling one.” And although Miller certainly recognizes its positive sides, the negative side is that of a world which often presents itself as characterized by “alien abstraction.” This also applies to the goods that fill our shops. No longer made by ourselves or by someone we know and with whom we have personally been in contact, the objects we buy are strange to us. “[A]t the moment of purchase...the object is merely the property of capital or of the state from which we receive it.”⁹

In Miller’s view, however, this potentially alienating experience is merely a temporary phase. According to him, people convert alienating freedom into a self-affirming and self-construing act through consumption. Consumption is the arena where people appropriate the outside world of endless possibilities and, by way of the choices they thus make, contribute to their own process of self-development and realization.

The individual act of consumption, re-appropriating alien products and investing them with personal value is a deeply social phenomenon according to Miller, which “cannot be reduced to mere social distinction.” Apart from the fact that choosing products from the supermarket shelves is one of the concrete ways in which people substantiate their (family and social) relationships, there is also a more theoretical reason why Miller regards consumption as a deeply social phenomenon. This is due to the fact that people primarily come to know the world as an object world – it is by way of its material surroundings that they learn about their society’s “cognitive order, ideas of morality, ideal worlds and other abstractions and principles.”¹⁰ They understand femininity, for instance, by looking at its material manifestations. By subsequently appropriating aspects of the outside world (through buying, consuming), they (re)create not just their own, individual identity, they also work upon the world, thus changing it. When, for instance, someone buys a typically feminine item and rearranges it in a typically male way, this person slightly changes existing notions, manifestations, and meanings of femininity. Appropriation is thus a creative act, through which one constitutes oneself and re-creates the world, according to Miller.

There are two reasons why Miller’s book has earned such an iconic status in the social science literature regarding consumption. In the first place, he developed a theory in which he seriously engaged with the empirical fact that for many people, consumption is a way of establishing or expressing their identity. Furthermore, he sought to create a dynamic perspective on the relationship between commodities and people’s identity – a relationship that, before then, had always been considered in more or less essentialist terms.

Notwithstanding the theoretical importance of these insights, some critical notes must be made concerning his argumentation. Miller could not of course be expected to have anticipated the anthropological discussions on the concept of identity that have evolved over the past two decades, but it is remarkable that he does not confront his view on identity as a dynamic and continually changing phenomenon with the empirical observation that people usually refer to their identity (collective or individual) as if it were a solid, unchanging entity. Merely dismissing these statements as a wrongful attempt to freeze a never-ending developmental process is hardly satisfying. The intensity and frequency with which people tend to defend their identity, even trying to endow it with an aura of eternity, suggest that what Miller describes as alienation might be more than a temporary phase in a relatively smooth developmental process.

Just how traumatic the confrontation can be with the instability of identity as a construct was something I became very aware of during my stay in the former GDR. The collapse of all referents and ingredients of the earlier East German existence had produced an overall sense of desperation that was almost tangible. And although I fully agree with Miller that identity is a process, anthropological theories on this subject should take seriously and incorporate the empirical recognition that people often do their utmost best to deny its ever-changing character. Inspired by the anthropological discussions about the ways people try to make real their collective identities, I investigate the role of material objects and materiality in this process, more particularly the way in which the western material world had offered East Germans the concrete means to support their fantasies about a true identity and solid society.¹¹

Colin Campbell's book on *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* has been extremely inspiring and helpful in developing this argument. Although he does not work with the concept of fantasy, his book features a similar theme, namely the unbridgeable gap between the reality of everyday life and people's romantic desire to improve reality. The main premise in Campbell's work is that people's desire for consumer goods is not just about goods; it is a much more diffuse, relatively unfocused, romantic longing to improve, enrich, and change reality. According to Campbell, this Romantic ethic, which came to the fore in 18th- and 19th-century Romanticism, is actually an important byproduct of western enlightenment. Although most people may be inclined to think of Romanticism and enlightenment as opposite developments – the one driven by idealism and dreaminess, the other by rational deliberations and the drive towards ever more knowledge and clarity – both developments spring from the same root, according to Campbell. Both are the product of the same longing for betterment.¹²

It is this longing, this urge, this desire, that has remained an important driving force in our everyday lives – so Campbell's main argument goes.

Because reality is never as perfect as people's romantic imagination would like it to be, people desire to close the gap between the two. The "permanent desiring mode" that thus arises¹³ manifests itself in daydreams, in which people succumb to their desires: "improved versions of the reality they know...improved in imagination to the point of near-perfection."¹⁴ Compared to these daydreams, everyday life is a dissatisfying experience. The gap between the two results in "a general desire to experience in reality the more nearly perfect experiences already enjoyed in imagination."¹⁵ Seeking a way to experience the reality they have lived out in their daydreams, the desire then attaches itself to concrete objects that are in some way related to the daydream (but do not necessarily feature in it). When, for instance, I am daydreaming about a calm and quiet life in a cottage with a rose garden, a roseate bedspread may come to visualize this daydream. The bedspread becomes almost irresistible, so I purchase the desired object. However, as the desire that underpinned my purchase was many times greater and more diffuse than the satisfaction which the bedspread can possibly provide, its possession never lives up to my expectations. "[T]he gap between the real and the imagined can never actually be closed."¹⁶ This gap is consequently the source of new materialist desires, but the "consummation of desire" is always and inevitably a disillusioning experience.¹⁷

Campbell's hypothesis that the purchase of things is somehow related to the unachievable desire to bridge the gulf between imagination and reality is particularly relevant when trying to understand the situation in the former GDR. As Helga Schubert's anecdote about western soap suggests, for many in the GDR, western consumer goods somehow underpinned far-reaching fantasies of an existence in perfection. How these fantasies came about, what elements in East German history and everyday life were responsible for their development, and why exactly western consumer goods seemed able to close the gap between East German reality and its imagined perfection are questions covered in this book.

There is, however, one element of Campbell's analysis I do not agree with, and that is his premise that it is only a coincidence that people use material objects to bridge the gap between reality and imagination. Campbell states that "products are desired less because of their character as material objects than because consumers anticipate their possession will bring pleasurable experiences."¹⁸

I wonder whether there really is such a clear-cut distinction between the expected, enjoyable experiences of goods and their material nature. Schubert's story of how the fragrance of soap had seemed able to reconcile her own and her son's life for an instant is not unique. Many East Germans' anecdotes about western

goods center on the looks, smells, tastes and textures of things, suggesting that these sensory characteristics were at the heart of their allure. I have taken these stories as my starting point to investigate the possible link between the irresistible power of material objects and their materiality and sensory characteristics. Inspired by the works of social scientists who have shown that the senses play a far more important role in social life than was recognized until recently, I argue that it is the very materiality of objects that makes commodities so prominent in people's elusive search for a stable identity.

As will be discussed in the following chapters, another significant reason why material goods were so meaningful in East German identity fantasies is related to the distinctly materialistic politics of identification fostered by the East German state.¹⁹ Material objects and the striving for material betterment are frequently used to alleviate social tensions and traumas. In order to achieve hegemony, the GDR (just like the FRG) presented explicitly materialist promises, thus fostering the idea that material solutions were an apt way to deal with all sorts of problems.

By focusing on materiality, I hope to open another archive that will enable us to grasp the complexities and ambiguities of life in the socialist East and Central European states. Historians and sociologists are engaged in lively debates as to how the influence of the East German state on people's everyday lives ought to be conceptualized. Too often, however, they argue in terms of suppression, dictatorship and totalitarianism, terms that cast the inhabitants of these states in the role of either perpetrator or victim. My ethnography aims to show that East German reality was far more complex. To make that point, a brief presentation of the main outlines of this debate is required.

Life in Dictatorial Societies

Western (social scientific) thinking on the GDR has long been dominated by two opposing perspectives, both strongly politically and ideologically tinted. Put very briefly: one is generally positive and the other generally negative. During the last two decades, this bipolar stance has given rise to extensive debate and discussion, with the result that a third perspective has developed [which I approve of myself] that attempts to reconcile the two.

In the first perspective, endorsed not so much by scientists but primarily by left-wing, western politicians and intellectuals, the GDR was regarded as a well-intended (albeit partly failed) experiment.²⁰ With this view, the moral high-ground intentions of socialism were reiterated, with special attention to what historian

Konrad Jarausch has called “the legend of the good beginning” – the socialist state’s attempt to build up something new and noble from the debris of Nazism.²¹ In this line of interpretation, people primarily focused on the more positive attributes of the East German state: the punishment of national socialist war criminals, collective ownership of the modes and means of production, the attempts (partly successful) to create equal opportunities for all, and the emancipation of less fortunate and/or subordinate groups.

Apart from the obvious critiques on this approach’s contents and its selective reading of history, the positive reading of socialism also confronts one with a conceptual problem. An exclusive focus on socialism’s good intentions leaves one with the question of which factors were responsible for the ultimate failure of the German socialist experiment. When did things start to go wrong, and what factors were responsible for that? Was not the fact that they went wrong inherent in the state’s totalitarian claims?

This latter problem does not pertain to the more common perspective on the GDR, which highlights the negative aspects of life under a socialist dictatorship. Many people – laymen and academics alike – tend to regard the GDR as a completely illegitimate, dictatorially ruled state, based on violence and oppression, which can best be studied in terms of the state’s totalitarian and totalizing claims and aims. Analyses of this school tend to point to the restricted and undemocratic nature of socialist societies and to the authoritative and repressing characteristics of the socialist states in East and Central Europe. The societies created there were regarded as entirely politicized, with hardly any space for a normal private life, and their citizens, in as much as they were not collaborators, had to be considered as victims.

A major advantage of this approach was that it was centered around one of the most significant aspects of Eastern and Central European socialist societies: the unequal distribution of power and its consequences for the political culture and (in)flexibility of their economies. The focus on the repressive and authoritarian aspect of the socialist states also helped to explain their lengthy stability. In spite of these positive aspects, this so-called totalitarianism perspective is now generally dismissed for being too short-sighted and limited.

The principal objection to a nearly exclusive emphasis on the repressive aspect of socialist state power is that it ignores the conflicts, resistance, cultural contradictions, forms of protest and would-be collaboration that all existed within socialist societies. Furthermore, and along the same lines, if one only focuses on the totalitarian aspect of socialist states, it is difficult to understand the strange paradox of their lengthy stability and sudden collapse.²² A second objection to the

totalitarianism paradigm is the stereotypical representation of life in Eastern and Central European countries referred to above, unjustly suggesting that daily life in those countries was entirely tainted by the political aims of their regime. Such a perspective fails “to recognize the ordinariness of much of GDR life,”²³ while most inhabitants of these countries “were less concerned about the ‘big issues and aims’ of socialism, than they were about their own interests and needs.”²⁴

Several authors have insisted on a “more holistic approach to GDR history that identifies the fluid interconnections between the SED (the ruling Socialist Unity Party) and society.”²⁵ A leading compilation about the GDR, with the telling title *Dictatorship as Experience*, edited by historian Konrad Jarausch, states that serious investigations into life in the former socialist society can only be successful if they attempt to penetrate “beneath the surface of dictatorship.” For as Jarausch makes clear, the GDR was certainly not “a monolithic system of Communist dictatorship over a reluctant people,” nor “the most loyal satellite of Moscow,” nor “[an] egalitarian social experiment, aiming to break with the pernicious traditions of German history.” He advocates abandoning the two diametrically opposed perspectives in favor of seeking “their interdependence, probe their relationship, and untangle their connection.”²⁶

Jarausch suggests that the tension between the regime’s emancipating aims and its repressive tactics formed the core of the East German socialist project from the very beginning. Whilst the country’s national socialist past forced East German socialist rulers to break with the catastrophic first half of twentieth-century German history, the GDR at the same time and right from the start leaned on the Soviet Union in order to exist at all.²⁷ Consequently, East German society displayed a large number of partly opposing characteristics simultaneously. It was not just:

[A]n exciting experiment in social engineering to advance human equality, a living hell of unjust persecution of ideological or class opponents, or the latest version of that German staple, the *Obrigkeitsstaat* [authoritarian state] that challenged its citizens to invent creative ways around its arbitrary rules... From the perspective of experience, the GDR dictatorship looks like a set of confusing ambivalences and irreconcilable antinomies... A more subtle reconstruction of the East German past therefore ought to be multidimensional and oriented towards a theoretical understanding that stresses complexity.²⁸

Terms that best sum up the complex relationship between the East German state and society are “konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit,” “participatory dictatorship,” and “welfare dictatorship.” With the latter term, Jarausch attempts to do justice to

the emancipating aims and rhetoric of socialism and to the tyranny of Stalinism and, with it, to both the enforcing and the compelling nature of the socialist “utopia.”²⁹ An important advantage of the term is that it reflects the ambivalent experiences and memories that East Germans themselves have of the GDR; as a repressive and at the same time caring state.³⁰

Inspired by these debates, a large amount of research has recently been carried out in which one of the most fruitful questions pertained to the relationship between the state and the country’s inhabitants.³¹ According to the cliché image, East Germans scarcely played a role in the way socialism was established in their country – they supposedly were only able to act on orders from above. Recent investigations have shown, however, that the socialist transformation of East German society was a much more sluggish and less purposeful process than originally intended. It was not just “a process of dictating but also entailed a degree of negotiation, however implicit, informal and asymmetrical it may have been.” Although the most characteristic aspect of the society that eventually developed in the shadow of the Wall was undoubtedly the extent to which the socialist party (the SED) succeeded in penetrating the farthest private corners of East German society, it would be inadequate to regard everything within that light, “for society and everyday life in the GDR clearly amounted to more than dictatorial tutelage.”³²

The state and citizens in East Germany negotiated with each other in numerous domains. At the same time there were also areas which the state scarcely managed to penetrate. Good examples include the informal exchange networks between people, family life within the home, and communal life in the allotment gardens. Studying these phenomena as areas beyond the boundaries of dictatorship would wrongly suggest that there existed politics-dominated and politics-free areas of society, whereas the challenge is exactly to rethink the phenomenon of (political) power in this dictatorial society, and to study it in a more anthropological way. An inspiring example is the work of historian Corey Ross, who makes it clear that the authority of the East German regime was based on “a process of interaction and mutual dependence between rulers and ruled that can rest on informal structures and practices as well as formal ones. Seen in this light, political authority is a process of give and take.”³³

This book takes these insights as its starting point, demonstrating empirically that the GDR cannot be seen as a dictatorial state power ruling from above, exercising its authority over a suppressed population. It shows the mutual dependency between the East German state and its citizens, and it searches for the underlying reasons, and places where the two met. It thus stands in a long tradition of political anthropological research on power and domination. The French (Marxist-

inspired) anthropologist Maurice Godelier already showed ethnographically that domination does not so much depend on violence displayed by those in power but on a mental, idealist conformity between rulers and ruled.³⁴ He does not suggest that those suppressed approve of their suppression, but he unravels the shared mental and ideological domain – not implying that people share the same interpretations. “Consent means the sharing of the same representations, even with different interpretations of the same ideas, with opposed interpretations. But if you live within the same circle of ideas, you reproduce them even with an opposite attitude.”

Along similar lines, a great deal of research in the past decades has been carried out in (post-)colonial societies on the exact functioning of power and repression. The assumption prevailed for a long time that colonial domination had destroyed authentic cultures and communities; now researchers have gradually begun to shift their focus to investigate how domination exactly took place. What translation, cross-fertilization, and acquisition occurred between long-standing religious and ideological frameworks on the one hand, and those of the colonial powers on the other? Here too, the idea is that it is more fruitful to look beyond the obvious but barely explanatory terms suppression and resistance and focus instead on the connections between the colonial authorities and powerless locals. Even in situations of brutal repression there often exists what Achille Mbembe has called “an intimate tyranny” and “conviviality” between suppressors and suppressed; a situation that cannot be fully understood by only focusing on “search operations, surveillance or the politics of coercion.” Even when expressing critique and resistance, the citizens of authoritarian states often remain within the ideological framework of the powerful, which they thus at the same time maintain and help to reproduce.³⁵

Such insights force us to take a different perspective on power, as well as on the state. Since life in authoritarian-ruled societies is characterized by the omnipresent but therefore scarcely perceptible *interweaving* between state and society, it is worthwhile to look for the ways and places the state is seen – and thus temporarily made – as powerful: “in mythologies of power, as practical, often non-political routines or as violent impositions.”³⁶

In this book I examine the relationship between the East German state and society in the GDR. Was there indeed an unspoken agreement between state and citizens? And if so, what formed its basis: was it a case of partial legitimacy, conformity, fear, or consent? Or had the suppression been internalized to such an extent that it boiled down to what historian Alf Lüdtke has called “*mißmutige Loyalität*”

[sad loyalty]?³⁶ And given the particular focus of my study: what role did materialistic and consumption promises play in all of this?

In answering these questions, I will illustrate which aspects of socialist promises provided the main links between the state's official ideology and East German citizens' social and emotional lives. In particular, I want to focus on the role of material and consumption promises and themes, showing which social and emotional interests of East Germans were met by "the offensive connection" they had with their state.³⁸

By examining how it was possible that the people of East Germany, who seized the first opportunity they could to leave their country, nevertheless felt part of the state which had deprived them of that opportunity in hard-handed fashion for decades, this book provides insights concerning domination and compliance and how even authoritative powers succeed in bringing about deeply felt identifications amongst the population. This remains an amazing phenomenon, for although I fully appreciate the previously mentioned calls to study the GDR not only from the perspective that it was a dictatorship, I strongly disagree with those who state, in their attempt to avoid falling into the trap of totalitarianism theory that: "[T]he GDR was quite a normal country, despite its unusual international and domestic political setting...its citizens for the most part led normal lives, dominated as in most countries by family life and concerns about work and material welfare."³⁹

The fact that inhabitants of the GDR demonstrated the same type of economic and material preoccupations as elsewhere does not mean that life in the GDR was therefore more or less the same as in other countries. The situation in the GDR was exceptional. For although its inhabitants may have been leading their lives as normally as possible, working and striving for material prosperity, they were doing this in a dictatorially governed, mostly closed-off country, with an extraordinarily active state security service. In addition, they were aware that on the other side of the Wall, where their relatives lived, levels of material prosperity had been achieved that they could only dream of. It would be a shame to ignore these differences in an attempt (albeit justifiable) to show that the GDR cannot be equated with the politically ideological program run by its state powers. It would also be unjust to ignore the most fundamental aspect of this society, namely that East Germany's history must be seen first and foremost as a string of unfulfilled promises.

Analyzing empirically and at a local level why the material characteristics of an inaccessible society became so meaningful for so many East Germans, this book shows how consumption and consumer goods became the vehicles for collective fantasies on perfection. Although the use of the term fantasy is usually restricted to private and individual desires and wishes, my aim is to show its relevance for

the study of social life. I find myself inspired by a number of recent works in which philosophers and social scientists have shown how the main tenets of Jacques Lacan's legacy might be profitably applied to social scientific and historical theorizing.⁴⁰ Although there is a long-standing tradition of applying psychoanalytic theory to anthropology and history,⁴¹ the use of this body of theory in the social sciences has often been criticized. The main objection is predictable: it concerns the use of concepts and ideas that were developed for studying individual subjects to explain occurrences and dynamics in the social field. Clearly, these critics have a point. Studying the social as the sum total of many individuals – and assuming that because the members of a certain community or society have shared the same experiences, their emotional reactions are also comparable – is a line of reasoning that runs the risk of wrongfully generalizing individual experiences and reactions while failing to take into account the social aspect, in as much as this refers to the relationships *between* people. The work of political scientist Yannis Stavrakakis on the significance of Lacanian theory for the political sciences, however, has opened up a different line of thought that I deem highly profitable for an analysis of the sayings, silences and sentiments that I encountered in Rudolstadt. It allows me to ponder the parallels between Lacanian thinking on “the impossibility of identity” on the one hand,⁴² and recent anthropological insights on the intrinsic fallibility of the constructions anthropologists study as culture on the other.

During the past decades, anthropologists have time and again stressed that the identities, cultural categories, values, ideologies and classes which they study are not the result of laws of nature, geographical adjustments or unilinear historical development. They are manmade constructions, and they could have turned out to be very different. No matter how pertinent this insight may be, it raises an intriguing issue. As Michael Taussig argued more than twenty years ago: instead of focusing time and again on the constructed character of this or that category, anthropologists should ask themselves, how people manage to convince themselves that their constructions are real.⁴³ How can people come to believe that their categorizations are true, everlasting and beyond doubt? How do they come to believe that their ideas on what is proper and just are incontestable, natural or God-given, whereas those of others are weird, wrong and deserve to be banished? How is it possible that people recognize their identity as a more or less unchanging and almost natural given?

Lacan's work offers a fruitful starting point for exploring possible answers to these questions. His thoughts on the existential need for and simultaneous impossibility of constructing a solid identity show many parallels with the anthropological insights on the social and cultural necessity and ultimate fallibility of culture.⁴⁴

While people simply need to categorize, classify and draw boundaries in order to discriminate (between just and unjust, dirt and cleanliness, us and them), everyday life continually confronts them with the inadequacy of this undertaking. How, for instance, does one define “us” in multi-ethnic societies? How to account for female leaders when competitiveness is classified as a male characteristic? How to maintain that solidarity is one of our main characteristics when the fear of being denounced by one’s neighbors is omnipresent? Once people are confronted with the make-believe of what they simply used to refer to as us or their culture and society, they have a hard struggle to restore their confidence in the symbolic order as a meaningful discursive framework that can support the social structure and allow for mutual recognition.

The history of the GDR, with its dramatic succession of totalizing stories and their complete failures, perfectly demonstrates the relevance of these general theorems. During my stay in the former GDR, I was frequently confronted with people’s frustration with the many break-ups in their recent history. When I asked an old man for his opinion on the material abundance on Rudolstadt’s market square, he sighed while pointing to the cheerfully decorated Christmas stalls: “This is the third time that we have been betrayed” – referring to the sequence of ideologies that had been the framework of his life: National Socialism, Communism, and Capitalism.

Inspired by Stavrakakis’s use of Lacanian theory to rethink the domain of the social, this book aims to shed a different light on ideology’s capacity and fallibility in (re)constructing society as a meaningful, coherent entity, allowing for mutual recognition. As East German history makes painfully clear: those in power use their ideology’s beautiful promises (in socialist East Germany primarily involving equality and social harmony) to win people over and establish hegemony. If they succeed, the ideology formulated by them functions as society’s discursive basis. Their promises to recreate society and undo the causes of its previous failure come to constitute the referential symbolic framework through which society comes to see itself. In this way, ideology actually delves its own grave, for the more utopian its promises, the less likely they are to be realized. When reality does not live up to the ideological promises that “initially” gave society its coherence, people’s faith in their shared commonality as such is at stake. Colloquially phrased: If we are not what we were promised and thought to be, how can we be sure that we are an entity at all?

This is where fantasy comes into play. When reality threatens to undermine the discursive fundamentals supporting a certain group as a more or less cohesive entity, people have two escape routes at their disposal to restore and uphold faith

in their mutual coherence: creating a scapegoat (who is to blame for all that went wrong) or suggesting that the true “us” is to be reached, accomplished, found, and developed somewhere else. Both are fantasies that help to cloak ideology’s deficiencies. East Germany’s history clearly reveals that ideology needs fantasy to uphold its promises. By showing that ideology and fantasy are communicating vessels, it demonstrates why fantasies are certainly not to be dismissed by social scientists – they are pre-eminently social and collective.

East German fantasies revolved around the western consumer world. With its focus on consumption in East Germany, this book explicitly asks why commodities in particular played such a significant role in the processes of subject and fantasy formation. It furthermore investigates the role of the socialist state in the dialectics between consumption and these processes of identity and fantasy formation, exploring the relationship between ideology and fantasy. The spotlight on East Germans’ fantasies of western consumption uncovers more than just specifically East German issues and tensions. It is a historical ethnography on consumption, power and collective fantasies.

Apart from contributing to our understanding of the role of consumption in twentieth-century European history as an integrating and dividing factor in the relations between the socialist East and capitalist West, this book aims to shed light on consumer goods’ power of attraction in general. Explicitly focusing on the sensory ways in which East Germans came to know the western consumer world (as a world of different tastes, smells and tactile sensations), it unravels some of the mechanisms through which western models of consumption came to be recognized as an appropriate way to represent a nation’s idealized identity.

Analyzing the history of East Germans’ collective fantasies of western consumption as the cure to all social ills, this book also seeks to show the relevance of the notion of fantasy – both for the study of consumption, and more generally as an important theoretical concept for the social scientist and historian’s toolkit. Although the term fantasy is usually applied to private and individual desires and wishes, this book shows its relevance for the study of collective phenomena.

The main reason why fantasies need to be studied more by social scientists and historians is that this will enable us to probe beneath the public face and idealized self-representations people usually present. Whereas in everyday speech the term fantasy is often used as the opposite of reality, its most important theoretical characteristic is precisely its Janus-faced character. Of course, as they articulate people’s desires, fantasies offer an escape from everyday reality. Yet at the same time they also uphold everyday reality: by helping to gloss over reality’s flawed and unpleasant features, they offer an idealized version of reality that is worth striving

for. Fantasies are thus capable of seducing people with the suggestion that, under different circumstances, reality could actually be perfect.

Although perfection is inevitably bound to locally specific issues and themes, it generally refers to a situation in which dominant discourses and people's experiences coincide. Promising perfection, fantasy's power derives from its seeming ability to close the gap between people's real-life experiences on the one hand and the stories, discourses or ideologies they live by on the other. Studying them therefore not only opens a window on people's desires and dreams, but also on the distressing gaps and cracks in their symbolic order.⁴⁵ That is why these imperfections always glimmer through the dream world. In other words, you could say that fantasies depict an ideal, while trying to cover up something unpleasant, which they thereby implicitly reveal.

Considering the pivotal role that the concept of ideology plays in sociological theories, it is remarkable that fantasy's social and political role has been ignored for so long.⁴⁶ Where an ideology is used to establish political hegemony by promising mythical or imaginary resolutions to social tensions and contradictions, fantasy can be regarded as its principal comrade-in-arms.⁴⁷ For whenever reality turns out to be not as perfect as promised, fantasy is there. Presenting a scapegoat or pointing to the perfection somewhere else, fantasies help to cloak ideology's deficiencies. East Germany's history is a clear illustration of this general principle. It convincingly shows that ideology needs fantasy to uphold its promises, thereby demonstrating not only that ideology and fantasy are actually communicating vessels, but also that fantasies are pre-eminently social and collective.

Chapter 1

Fieldwork

Before presenting my analysis on the role of fantasy in the recent history of East Germany (GDR), I want to explain the relation between this book's argument and conclusion on the one hand, and the kind of material presented and used in it on the other. The reason to do so is that the book's main line of argument primarily derives from forms of knowledge that are essentially non-linguistic. Given the central role of fieldwork in anthropology, this is certainly not a revolutionary remark. But exactly because fieldwork, described as "deep hanging out" in order to generate "informed intuition,"¹ occupies such a central place in our academic identity, I find it striking how little attention is paid in mainstream anthropological texts and case studies to the question of where and how we find the sources that inform our intuition.

Both times that I did extensive fieldwork, I was struck by how little information interviews and conversations produced. This was especially clear in the former GDR. Already after a few weeks it struck me that the stories I listened to all sounded rather alike. Whomever I spoke to, whatever I asked, no matter how hard I tried to steer the conversation in another direction, change the topic, or did my best to tempt people to give a more personal account, it was to no avail. I listened, endlessly and to the point of irritation, to what I soon began to call the standard story: about the fact that nothing was available in this country, and what happened when there were finally children's clothes for sale, how everyone enlisted each other's help to get hold of the highly desirable jumpers; and how since 1989, now that everything was there, things had not improved, because nowadays everyone just thought about themselves; a real division had arisen between the people who had a lot and those who could not afford anything, and it had never been like that in the past, for in the GDR there had been more equality and community spirit than now, and so on and so forth.

Nothing but good things about the past, except for material provision. Capitalism was responsible for the total corruption of morality, social ties and economic security. The story was both simple and one-dimensional. Although I wondered frustratingly what I was doing wrong, it was remarkable that at the same

time ideas emerged, almost intuitively, on the reasons for this specific representation as well as on western prosperity's impact on the former East German existence. These ideas partly stem from conversations and the more or less concrete material I collected, but they mainly derive from much vaguer sources. Again, this may not be a ground-breaking observation, and there are plenty of specialized journals and volumes in which the methodological and phenomenological pitfalls of anthropological knowledge production are dealt with.² But apart from these specific sites, in general anthropological texts and case studies, language's inadequacy in conveying relevant anthropological information is hardly problematized or reflected upon, and neither is the question of which non-verbal sources the anthropologists' understanding is based on.

This is even more remarkable given that so many of the experiences we as anthropologists try to grasp and understand are noticeably difficult to put into words. Certainly when they are painful, embarrassing, shocking, or traumatic, or when they threaten to confront people with what in the previous chapter was referred to as "the distressing gaps and cracks in a society's symbolic order," it is no wonder that they are not easily expressed verbally.

This chapter seeks to elucidate that although such issues and experiences are not (easily and explicitly) talked about, this does not mean that they are impenetrable, or that it is impossible to gain an inkling of their importance, their place and meaning in other people's lives. As stated before, fieldwork derives its merit from the anthropologist somehow learning to read between the lines, to understand the unsaid in relation to the said, and to gain a feel for the pains and pitfalls of certain topics.³ Pinpointing how and where exactly this feeling comes about is not easy. But below, I will describe four more or less distinguishable sources that played a crucial role during my fieldwork in Rudolstadt. They are: my reflections on people's (often defensive and negative) reactions to my questioning presence, the conspicuous silence pertaining to specific topics, my personal experiences with the material culture I investigated, and the remarkable fact that sometimes a seemingly trivial utterance kept on haunting me – begging me, as it were, to crack its hidden significance.

Reactions to My Presence

Astonishingly little has been written about the resistance and negative reactions that anthropologists encounter during their research.⁴ We hardly ever read about unwilling respondents, about the anger and sometimes downright aggression

that anthropologists' questioning presence arouses, or about the insights gained from all this. Yet during both my field research experiences, people's defensive and negative reactions to my questions have had a significant impact on how I became acquainted with the particular society. My attempts to talk to the people of Rudolstadt about their longing for western goods, the changes in consumption that had taken place, or the ensuing deep disappointment often met with opposition, for example when I distributed questionnaires on consumption.

When they heard about the topic of the questionnaire, a surprisingly large number of people reacted disgruntled, and many refused to fill in the forms. One woman, a hairdresser to whom I had handed the questionnaire in her salon and who had initially been quite enthusiastic and obliging, gave me a friendly smile when I came to collect the papers a week later. "Oh here comes that woman with the nice name," she laughed, while cutting an older lady's hair. And she continued, still grinning broadly:

We were just talking about you. You have a lovely name, but what stupid questions you ask! I was just telling her – and she pointed to the client in the hairdresser's chair: 'If that's what you call a *Doktorarbeit!*? [dissertation]; it was only about what I had and what I bought. I wasn't going to fill in those papers, so I threw them out. I chucked them in the fire.

This final statement, of having thrown the papers in the fire, was repeated twice. Another woman initially took the papers from me when I came to her front door, but after a quick read, her face filled with anger, and she tore up the questionnaire in front of me, looking triumphantly as if to say: "Well, what are you going to do now?"

These were extreme reactions. More often people were simply defensive or in denial when I asked about the extraordinary meaning formerly attached to western goods. Once, when sitting in the cafe in the market square with the barkeeper, watching the shoppers leisurely picking out what they wanted from the fully laden vegetable, fruit and clothing stalls at the market, I asked out loud what the market scenery must have looked six years ago. The woman snapped at me: "Well, things have not changed that much you know!" Knowing that six years ago there had always been a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and that the supply of affordable clothing could never meet the demand, her reaction was remarkable. Another time, I was walking down the street with Karl, a youth worker who lived in Rudolstadt, on our way to a restaurant. It was winter, and it got dark early. Despite the twilight, the mountains of rubbish that piled up everywhere on the pavements were still clearly visible. They contained entire kitchens and all the other things you could think of, from

sofas to office chairs, televisions, fridges, and cots. I had seen this scene before. Every time, on the special days that large items of rubbish were to be collected, the pavements were piled high with a huge assortment of things, which I now knew to consist of old East German household goods (see figure 4.1 and 4.2, chapter 4). I got the impression that, with the arrival of the western consumer world, the residents of Rudolstadt collectively seized the opportunity to substitute as many of their possessions from former times as quickly as possible for new things. When I drew Karl's attention to the mountains of rubbish, saying that it seemed as if people were simply throwing away everything that reminded them of the GDR, he denied this vehemently and immediately changed the subject.

In the restaurant, I tried again to talk about the piles of rubbish. But again, Karl's response was a denial: it perhaps seemed as if people had thrown away their old stuff because they had bought new things, but there were other reasons why the piles on the sidewalks were so high. He explained that in the days of the GDR, everybody kept all their belongings – because you never knew when you might still need them. Besides, the average rent had increased so much since the *Wende* that every square meter of people's living or storage space had become expensive, and lofts were simply cleared out more thoroughly than in the past. What is more, in the old days, people used to have to pay for rubbish to be collected – or not, and anyway he was not the slightest bit interested in this subject! Old or new things? What did it matter! Since the *Wende*, much more significant socio-economic changes had occurred in the GDR and he would rather discuss those, instead of talking about objects. When I reminded him that in the autumn of 1989 his compatriots had apparently attached great importance to consumer goods, he denied it. According to him, the *Wende* was welcomed by most people in the GDR simply for idealistic reasons. It had nothing to do with prosperity or anything like that.

Apparently my questions about the expectations and changes in consumption touched a sensitive nerve.⁵ People seemed to be ashamed because they had attached so much value to things that in retrospect were apparently not worth it. In this book, I present material to illustrate and make plausible the reason why this subject was so sensitive: it touched upon a fantasy that had been shattered, confronting East Germans with its traumatic breeding grounds.

This interpretation is to a large extent based on experiences as described above, and on my reflections on them. Reflection on the subjective nature of field research has been an important development in the history of anthropology. I find it remarkable, however, that the emotional reactions which the anthropologist's presence evokes have been discussed so little as a source of anthropological knowledge and insight. In their writing, anthropologists hardly devote attention to the

extent to which they were informed by the emotional interaction between themselves and their interlocutors. Even in the theoretical literature on anthropological knowledge production, most attention is paid to the potential pitfalls and problems during verbal contact, resulting in texts in which much theoretical significance is ascribed to the literal conversations between the anthropologist and his informants, in order to provide insight into the intersubjective nature of anthropological knowledge.⁶

Noticeably absent in the school of anthropology which inspired this is attention to the intra-emotional aspects of contact. However, the anthropological knowledge process gains momentum thanks to the words people speak to each other, but also emotionally. The anthropologist's questioning presence evokes emotions in the people s/he attempts to engage with, and they affect the way people approach him/her – especially when s/he represents the former colonizing or western hegemonic powers. During my research in a German village in Argentina, I noticed that my questioning presence caused many people to react defensively and suspiciously: why had I chosen to do research precisely in that village? Why not in Argentina's one and only Dutch village?

In that situation the reactions were defensive and somewhat suspicious, but I can imagine numerous anthropologists must have noticed that the people they tried to talk with were trying to flatter them or demonstrating in other ways how they looked up to the world they came from, or the contrary: how they struggled with, hated and despised that world. The fact that this is barely mentioned in the anthropological literature is probably partly due to feelings of guilt, but I think it is also caused by another reason: the subject of emotions has long been taboo in anthropology.⁷ It is a blind spot, according to Charles Lindholm mainly because of

[The] vain disciplinary hope to be recognized as objective scientists of culture. To achieve this aim...the study of emotional life was left to clinical psychologists, who formulated pencil and paper tests that turned the analysis of personal emotional states into a matter of statistics.⁸

There is, however, a rich tradition in psychology (albeit clinical) to reflect on the informative nature of mutually emotional contact between people. Initially developed by Freud, the recognition of transference and countertransference's importance as informing processes is presently shared by all branches of clinical psychology. By explicitly paying attention not only to how the people being investigated react to his/her questioning presence, but also to the feelings they evoke in him/her, the anthropologist has an important source of information at his/her disposal.⁹ The suspicion I encountered among German emigrants in Argentina and

how I experienced constantly having to justify my research were extraordinarily relevant sources of information there.¹⁰ During my stay in the former GDR, another response pattern gradually became discernable when I realized that people's reactions during conversations regularly made me feel as if I had to almost belittle myself: pretend not to know things, and emphasize that I too was insecure. Apart from numerous little incidents that gradually formed a pattern, I also noticed this when once I went to a disco with a couple of friends and was attracting more attention than I found comfortable. For my own sake as well as for my companions, I adapted my dancing accordingly. All in all, the way I compelled myself to behave was reminiscent of the analysis given a long time ago by anthropologist George Foster, who described the central, unarticulated role of envy in some societies.¹¹ He made it clear how people unwittingly model their behavior and conceal anything that could cause the slightest provocation, for fear of arousing envy in others. Foster quotes extensively from the work of anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff. Those quotes read as a concise guide to what to do and how to act for visitors to the former GDR:

The best...measurement an individual can take...consists in not appearing enviable in the first place and in pretending to be poor, ill, and already in trouble. One should, therefore, never boast of one's health and property, never make an ostentatious display of one's belongings or qualities, never let it be known that one possesses some advantage over others.¹²

In retrospect, I now realize that I also adapted my behavior in the above-described way, but for a long time during my stay in Rudolstadt, I was hardly aware of it. And in as much as I was aware, I would not have easily dared to use my adjustment and examples of it as information. Fortunately, I received verbal confirmation of what I had merely experienced up until then. The episode occurred when I was out one evening with Stefan, a friend from Rudolstadt, and Mattijs, a Dutch friend who was visiting me. When we, the two Dutch people, expressed our enthusiasm about the town and East German society, Stefan laughed, saying that we would never get used to life here. We were "too big" for Rudolstadt. I did not ask him what exactly he meant by that. I was too busy taking the edge off his remark – "too big? what nonsense!" – but if I had asked, it is doubtful that his explanation would have made the remark any clearer. Despite its generality, it said it all.

I was fortunate that Stefan's remark put into words what I had only felt and for that reason found more difficult to use as information. The distinctly subjective insight and information his remark brought about – as a verbalization of innumerable other impressions – was highly relevant for it made manifest what other-

wise remained unsaid (paraphrasing): In the implicit comparison with others who come across as self-confident, we tend to feel small and insignificant. The inkling that this comparison and the feelings of inferiority it aroused had somehow played a role was highly relevant. It colored the general representation of the ex-GDR as a warm and harmonious society in a new way. How exactly the overall positive representation related to the vague insights described above, and what role material culture and consumption played in this, will become clear throughout this book.

Partly due to the important role linguistic anthropologists have played in the last decennia's critical reflections on anthropological knowledge production, much attention is paid to linguistic interaction and sources, suggesting (implicitly) that the emotional interaction between interviewer and interviewee is barely relevant. This book is informed in crucial ways by my experiences with and reflections on the emotional interaction between myself and my interlocutors, whereas the spoken word proved to be especially informative on account of the conspicuous gaps and silences.

As mentioned before, the general one-dimensional representations on life before and after 1989 had struck me. Albeit hindered by material shortages, life before then had generally been warm, harmonious and social, whereas the new era had brought glitter and outer shine, but this had come at an extremely high price – especially concerning mutual contact between people. Although this representation had triggered my curiosity and suspicion, I hardly received a concrete clue to show that this was a selection. I could of course have taken refuge in the opposing representation and simply confronted their story with the stereotypical western depiction of the GDR as a dictatorial society ruled by mutual distrust. This storyline has indeed informed the argument put forward in this book, but as I hope to make clear in the following chapters, this is not solely the result of my western perspective, but to an important extent due to the general and tell-tale silence pertaining to the dark sides of life in the GDR.

Material Culture and Tell-Tale One-Liners

The experiences in my contact with Rudolstadt's residents and the significant selections they appeared to make regarding their past and present life were not the only aspects that supported my intuition. As mentioned before, there were two other sources that proved to be highly illuminating: the material world, and the incidental remarks that somehow struck me, even though I often did not quite understand why. Since material culture played such a central role in my research,

it goes without saying that I was more focused on and paid more attention to the material surroundings than I would have done otherwise. I gathered a lot of information on the topic – listening to people's stories, going through relevant journals, collecting the advertisements in my mailbox, interviewing designers, shopkeepers, salespeople, etc. But in spite of all this, I remained an outsider, without a real clue as to the significance the western object world had had for so many people before 1989.

Again, it was my own experiences with material culture that eventually filled the gap, revealing in an almost physical way the effects the western material world could have had on East Germans before it was actually there. One example of such an experience was shortly before Christmas 1993 when in the course of one day, I happened to visit toilets in both the east and the west of the country.

In the morning I visited a former LPG [agricultural production cooperative] to interview some women who had temporary jobs there as part of an employment scheme. The women were growing cut flowers – chrysanthemums, roses and such like. Because their jobs were financed by the state and they were not dependent on the free market for their turnover, the atmosphere in the greenhouse was relatively peaceful and not too hectic, but the mood of the women was decidedly despondent. When I got to chatting to them, they told me how their lives had changed after 1989. Their stories were almost identical to those I had heard countless times during my stay in Rudolstadt; they were stories about loss.

The *Wende* had not been kind to any of the women. They were nearly all dismissed immediately. Being out of work for a long time meant that they had to scrimp and save to make ends meet. They felt useless, finished, lonely and left to their own devices until they were able to come work here. The majority of them had worked on a conveyor belt or operated machinery in large production companies during the time of the GDR, and from an early age they had belonged to a collective. The day-to-day tasks, the colleagues, and the social environment that went with that had always been a fundamental part of their lives, around which the rest of their daily chores were organized. And now? Once the two-year work provision scheme was finished, that would be the end. There was no hope of other work. As women, most of them a bit older and mothers, they might as well forget it.

The greenhouse where the flowers were grown was old and dilapidated, and nearly everything round about it was proverbially grim and grey, not helped by the chilly December weather. Mud, tractor tracks, trampled grass, a shaggy dog, and a scrapped Trabant dominated the scene. At some point, one of the women led me inside the building for the interview. Here, too, everything looked old and worn: large formica tables, a broken sink, bare walls, a cold stone floor, a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling and small, sagging metal stools. After the interview I went to the toilet. It was in a hallway that was as dark, dismal and

cold as the rest of the place. The tiles on the wall were faded and cracked, the hook to shut the door was hanging loose, and under the door was an open space so that you could see other people's feet. The toilet seat was cold, the water I washed my hands in was cold, and the towel was cold and clammy.

Besides being cold and dilapidated, I recognized the remains of an idealistic project in the place's rigid and sparse furnishings. By now, I knew enough about the history of East Germany's material culture to see how the design of this washroom represented a number of core values that had characterized the optimism with which East German designers had tried to recreate war-shattered eastern Germany. The no-frills, unadorned material things in this washroom represented some of the country's central socialist slogans (analyzed in more detail in chapter three), such as "let's produce more efficiently," "let's create a more honest world," and "we no longer need decorations that do not match our ideals." Dilapidated and cracked, the washroom exemplified the ultimate downfall of a once well-intentioned attempt to build up a future of mutual equality. The fine-sounding ideas and slogans were faded and worn. Driving back from my visit to the LPG, I felt numb.

After that interview, I left to return to the Netherlands to pick up some things. By late afternoon, I was driving through dusky villages in West Germany, brightened with Christmas street lights. A warm glow radiated from the shops and houses. It was a typical West European scene, full of traditional coziness and commercialized would-be romanticism, a scene that I would normally not have found attractive at all. On this occasion, however, its warmth radiated towards me. The shops appeared cozy and warm, everything looked equally inviting, and even from the front seat of my car, I could imagine the smell of Christmas baking.

In one of the villages I stopped for something to eat at a restaurant, and when I went to the ladies toilet, I remembered having gone to the toilet at the LPG that morning: the contrast could not have been greater. Here the shiny tiles were decorated with pale blue flowery prints, the mirror shone from a distance thanks to the flower-shaped lamp hanging above it, and the wash basin was huge and gleaming white. The place smelled of lilacs, and the solid toilet looked so expensive that for the first time I noticed that toilets could also have a brand name. This one was made by Villeroy & Boch.

The differences in outward appearance between both toilets had a strong effect on how I felt in each one. In the East German toilet I had felt numb, whereas here I felt nice and comfortable. That feeling was mainly aroused by the material differences between both places. Yet the interior design of the West German washroom was not what I would usually have found particularly attractive. In other circumstances, I would probably have viewed it with some contempt, as decidedly chintzy. The very reason I now felt so comfortable there was because I had just come from such utterly desolate surroundings – both materially and mentally. This did not mean, however, that my visit to the West German washroom made me feel grateful to be back at last in the prosperous west. The very opposite was true, for although at that mo-

ment I felt chilled by the material and mental gloom that was so omnipresent in the former GDR, it was precisely due to the huge disappointments and to the hopes and expectations which now and then glimmered through the gloom (and became so charged in the autumn of 1989) that my stay in Rudolstadt was such an exciting and moving experience. I really enjoyed being there, and I would never have exchanged my time there for a stay in the FRG. What my senses experienced in the West German material surroundings and the pleasant feeling that overcame me in that West German washroom went much further and had a much deeper impact than merely a desire for material prosperity as such. At that moment, I experienced the warmth and shiny finish of the West German toilet as a kind of consolation for the material and mental desolation of the GDR and the visible downfall of all the hopes and expectations which I had felt that morning in the East German LPG. As if the West German toilet made up for what had gone wrong in the former GDR.

Western prosperity as consolation. It is a wild idea, based on a highly personal event that informed me, without me being aware or being able to express at that time what it was actually saying. But the information was being stored, and when I later heard Helga Schubert's anecdote of how the magical bar of West German soap seemed to be able to reconcile her with her life in the GDR, that story resonated with my earlier experience. Schubert's story earns its prominent place in the opening chapter of this book thanks to the fact that it ties in so seamlessly with the previously described flash of insight, which in all its vagueness nevertheless struck me with its clarity.

Equally difficult to comprehend was the fact that some remarks stuck in my mind without me knowing why. I was struck by words whilst hardly anything was actually being said. This is nearly the opposite of a flash of insight: the words lingered in my head despite their apparent insignificance. Once, for example, I had a discussion with the chairman of one of Rudolstadt's allotment garden associations. He explained the role of the allotments in the GDR and talked about life then. His description was quite positive. At one point, when he recalled the differences between society then and as it had developed since the *Wende*, he mentioned in passing that formerly most people were not used to sticking their neck out – metaphorically speaking. That was, he explained, “because in the GDR, it was important that once you had secured a warm seat by the fire, you never left it. For if you went away, you never knew if someone else would come along and steal your place.”

The story stuck in my mind, initially probably just because the endearing image of a lovely, warm seat by the fire appealed to my imagination. Only much later did I realize that his remarks had possibly also struck me because although brief,

they completely contradicted the image of the GDR that had been portrayed to me until then. However neutrally the comment was made, what it conveyed was distrust. Fear and mistrust of others, fear of the conflict which could erupt – then you might be caught, and your place could be taken.¹³ Although this was almost the only account I recorded during my field research which evoked a different image of the GDR than the warm and mutually helpful society presented by the rest of my informants, the chairman's anecdote came to play a decisive role in my perception and representation of former East German society. As mentioned above, it had been clear to me from the outset that the society had not been just as warm, friendly, and egalitarian as described by my informants almost without exception. The chairman's remark gave me a hint of some of the unarticulated characteristics of the previous world.

This of course raises the questions of why and on what grounds I ventured to attach more importance to one man's remarks despite them being in such shrill and clear contrast to the picture nearly everyone else had painted? There are two reasons for this: in the first place, I did not trust the picture nearly everyone painted. But secondly, it was the nonchalant way the chairman made his remarks that gave them such pertinence.

Precisely because it was made so casually, the story struck me as being meaningful. If its moral about "the way of the world and people" would have been expressed more forcefully, I would probably have taken it as someone's personal opinion – "listen to what I have to say about this." Then I would not have given it any more thought. But because the chairman mentioned this life lesson almost in passing, it was obvious that he considered it to be common knowledge: we all know that you should: never take for granted what you have acquired; never trust everyone; better not stick out too much, as you never know if this could be used against you.

The story of the place by the fire, with its implicit message about fearing loss and mutual distrust, speaks for itself so succinctly that it is a clear example of what Michael Taussig has called "implicit social knowledge," referring to the life lessons "that move people without their knowing quite why or quite how."¹⁴ It is the kind of knowledge that, because it is passed down from generation to generation, is completely self-evident without having to give explicit details as to what experiences it actually refers to, to make it so meaningful.

Although such life lessons can sometimes be neutral or positive, or at other times negative and depressing, they always relate to knowledge that is so self-evident that everyone knows that this is just the way it is. Consequently, such knowledge is also typical in that it is not often articulated and therefore not easily found:

Implicit social knowledge is a reservoir of insights that are not contained in a society's canons; knowledge that is not embodied in the language of newspapers, books or academic journals; knowledge that you will not be able to find under any of the keywords in a library catalogue; knowledge that is not included in regular syllabuses of schools and universities. Knowledge that does the rounds of [a] society like a scent that finds its way into everything and everybody.¹⁵

Precisely because this knowledge is self-evident and preconscious, it is usually not articulated. One can assume, however, that if the knowledge provides unpleasant insights into *la condition humaine*, not articulating it is in the people's best interest: the interest of not having to confront and address negative insights about oneself and one's fellow human beings.

The story impressed me because it suggested that mutual distrust and fear of others were part of East Germans' implicit social knowledge. This also suggested why the material I collected and the conversations I had were so one-sided and gave such limited insight into the issues that interested me. A major part of the information remained unarticulated – because it was self-evident, because people were barely aware of it, but also because it was too negative, too black. And because as such, it could have a disastrous effect on the community spirit which had existed and still did exist in East German society. In this way, things remained implicit that were better kept implicit: the insight that, under certain circumstances, *homo homini lupus est* [man is a wolf to man].¹⁶ This does not mean to say that the positive image people described to me was incorrect or further from the truth than the story of distrust and fear of others. It means above all that people had an unarticulated interest in the choices they made, in the selection they presented.

This sheds a different light on the unity, fanaticism and general character of the rose-colored image people presented of the past: by emphasizing its mutual warmth, people were ensuring that any experiences of the opposite were kept in their place: guiding, but implicit and unarticulated. This also sheds a different light on the regularly recurring hostile, defensive, and suspicious reactions in my direction: due to my continual questioning, I threatened to make explicit what was implicit, forcing people to articulate what they preferred not to express or consciously acknowledge.

While the allotment chairman's passing remark had highlighted the fact that an embedded form of distrust was also part of the GDR's heritage, the way I unwittingly adapted my behavior during my stay made it clear to me that it was important to avoid envy. Slowly but surely, the impression evolved that the Standard

Story about the GDR being a warm society of mutual equality also functioned to cover up the distrust, envy and rivalry that had also existed, while the material culture of the west offered some sort of comfort or consolation. Although at first very tentatively, I thus began to recognize the relationship between what Dutch anthropologist Bonno Thoden van Velzen described in a recent interview as a society's "covered culture," and the "emotional undercurrents" hiding under it.¹⁷ I only gained insight into the relationship between the two domains by explicitly focusing on the emotional interaction between myself and others, the conspicuous silence pertaining to specific topics, my personal experiences with the material culture I investigated, and by taking some seemingly trivial utterances to be an entrance to the non-discursive, social knowledge that this society had in stock.

Generalization, Differentiation

Above, reference was made regularly to the unequivocalty of the stories of the past I heard in Rudolstadt, and I have given clues for the reasons why this Standard Story was generally shared. This book aims to offer insight into the social interests behind that story. This approach has one important disadvantage: it consolidates and reproduces the unequivocalty and uniformity that struck me during my research. I regularly refer to *the* East Germans, who were longing for something and, on account of that longing, were attempting to cover up certain characteristics of their society. This choice of words is reminiscent of the Culture and Personality School, which became popular in anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s and which is regarded with utter contempt and disdain in contemporary anthropology. Although most criticism of the work done within that subfield is to the point and important, it is essential not to forget that the practitioners of the culture and personality school were concerned with one of the main issues in anthropology, that is: the relationship between a common locality and history on the one hand, and the existence of certain dispositions, opinions and behavior on the other.

One of the main problems within this anthropological school was that the barely defined concept of culture almost seemed to have acquired powers of its own. It was thus not only essentialized and fixed, but also taken to be the determining factor of behavioral patterns (culture A makes its people behave in such and such way) instead of the starting point of analysis. Both the culture under consideration and the people practising and experiencing it were thereby frozen into unchangeable units. Culture, however, is not the driving force behind people's behavior; it is the visible and ever changing outcome thereof. It is not culture that

dictates how people act, think and value something. If striking patterns are discernible in people's acts, thoughts or values, we should rather aim to discover the causes, reasons and interests behind these patterns. That is what this book aims to do: to investigate the possible interests behind a relatively generally imparted self-image. In this regard, it stands in a long tradition of anthropological research.

After the culture and personality school's popularity in anthropology began to wane, the issue of the relationship between shared history and location, and obvious patterns in human behavioral dispositions, did not disappear from the anthropologists' agenda. For example, French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu developed the term *habitus* to capture not just the visible regularities in human behavior, taste and value dispositions, but also the power relations and interests behind them that are unwillingly expressed and perpetuated in these dispositions.¹⁸ In his often quoted work *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Anthony Cohen focused on the constructed nature of group ties and boundaries, and on the active role people play in creating and stimulating mutual similarities.¹⁹ And with the help of the term "chosen trauma," Vamik Volkan demonstrated that people even have an unarticulated interest in selecting certain traumatic experiences as a binding force.²⁰

The significance of such insights began to dawn on me during my research in Rudolstadt as I acknowledged the unmistakable and uniform nature of the stories I heard. Nothing would have been easier than to associate this Standard Story with the fact that the GDR had been a dictatorship, consequently binding or reducing East Germans to the post-totalitarian culture to which they supposedly belonged.²¹ Bearing in mind the above authors' work, I felt it would be more productive to find out which choices and interests lay behind such a black and white, generally held, and unquestionable representation.

I was amazed that the desire for the magical world of the west could get such a firm grip on so many East Germans, and that the disappointment with post-*Wende* changes was so widespread, so I wanted to delve deeper into the roots of these opposing feelings and experiences and discover what unarticulated interests they concealed. I have not attempted to differentiate them in terms of class, gender or generation. The main reason for not doing so is that the most remarkable ethnographic fact requiring further explanation was the rigid character of the generally shared stories about the past and present. By focusing on my East German interviewees' generalizations and contemplating their unspoken choices and interests, it gradually became clear what things were being left out. Subsequently, combining them with what was actually said led to a differentiated picture of East German history. It is, however, not differentiated in terms of class, gender, education or other social criteria, but along the lines of Jarausch, Ross and others, who called for a differentiated

analysis of East German history – focusing on its internal contradictions instead of opting for condemnation or *Verharmlosung* [belittling, playing down].

The argument in this book has thus been decidedly influenced by relatively minor incidents, the associations they called to mind, and other highly subjective experiences. On this basis, an idea was formed about the possible reason and cause of the west's irresistible power of attraction. I then collected the material to substantiate this idea, this interpretation. People could say, and rightly so, that what I present here is actually Whig history: tracing the past in order to understand its present outcome, without accounting for the fact that things could have turned out very differently.

History and anthropology have a great deal in common, which can make interdisciplinary cooperation both productive and innovative. But innovation also takes place if people do not shy away from the boundaries of their discipline and its *mores*. In as much as I have done this, the result lacks historical accuracy. My sweeping and (historically) undifferentiated pen-stroke is guided by the questions I was seeking to answer, but I am fully aware that this has narrowed my view and perspective. For that reason you could describe this book as a collage: from everything I experienced, heard and collected, I have made a deliberate selection, and I hope this has helped to make my perspective of East German history and society both insightful and comprehensible.

Befitting the image of a collage, my incorporation of statements by intellectuals illustrates a more general *Empfinden* [feeling]. Generally speaking, it is questionable to what extent the statements and writings of intellectuals can be used to express the sentiments of ordinary people. Students of the former GDR certainly face this question. For if one thing was clear when East Germans took to the streets in the autumn of 1989, it was that the intellectuals and the ordinary people held completely opposing views on which course to follow and the desired perspectives for the future. Whereas the former advocated change while maintaining the socialist state, the latter were mostly set on abandoning the GDR as quickly as possible and uniting with their rich, prosperous neighbor. These differences were expressed in the differing slogans both groups yelled: “*Wir sind das Volk* [we are the people],” aspiring to democratic change, chanted at the start of the *Wende*, after a while replaced by the sentence “*Wir sind ein Volk* [we are one people]” – a call for unification. Many of my East German acquaintances in what I shall describe for want of a better term as the alternative circuit told me that for them, this change-over was the turning point. Disappointed, they gave up.

At that time the wide gap became highly visible between what one could call the general East German *Volksempfinden* on the one hand, and the voice of East

German intellectuals on the other.²² The fact that I nevertheless refer to the texts of the writers Günther de Bruyn and Christa Wolf, psychiatrist Hans Joachim Maaz, psychotherapist Annette Simon and others in order to attribute their feelings and experiences to ordinary people is noteworthy. My decision is firstly based on the fact that the obvious differences between the politically ideological opinion and position of these two groups do not mean in my opinion that equally great differences existed in the way they experienced life in the GDR. Somewhat polemically, one could even claim that the abandonment of politics by the majority of intellectuals in 1989 when the people entered the stage was in fact the forerunner of the latter group's pending disappointment. One could also say that in 1989 the intellectuals were better able to fathom what happened and what consequences this would have, and to express this, than the people; they were used to doing this at the time of the GDR as well.

This is the second reason why I think the voice of East Germany's intellectuals can be generalized: particularly in the GDR, writers fulfilled a crucial role – like they do in all dictatorships and totalitarian societies. Precisely because in such societies many things are not allowed to be said, thought or even felt, writers and other intellectuals are not just the people's voice, but also their conscience and antenna. In a way that can barely be perceived by an outsider, they were revealing between the lines what was not allowed to be shown, expressing what was not allowed to be said, and often making it clear to the reader what many others probably would not and could not have dared to feel, see and experience. Romanian philosopher Andrei Plesu states clearly that in the dictatorial societies of East and Central Europe, literature had a much greater readership than one would probably expect: “[P]eople were used to standing in line as patiently for books as they did for food.”²³ Especially in dictatorships, it is the unique role of writers, poets and intellectuals to put into words what otherwise threatens to be swept under the totalitarian carpet.

Chapter 2

Germany 1945: A Country in Ruins

What would become of us all if we were to let the space in our memory
be unlocked to see what remains (Christa Wolf, 1990).¹

Material and Social Trauma

The Second World War ended in the spring of 1945. With larger and larger areas of Germany being occupied by the Allies, the German army surrendered unconditionally at the beginning of May. Initially, Thuringia was occupied by the Americans, but on June 30, 1945, the American occupying powers exchanged it for an area of Berlin which up till then had been under Russian control. From that moment on, Thuringia became part of the *Sovjetische Besatzungszone* [Soviet Occupied Zone, further SBZ], just like Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Officially, these five federal entities only formed a separate state on October 7, 1949, but they were administered as a separate entity from the beginning of July 1945. Power was executed by the *Sovjetische Militär Administration Deutschlands* [Soviet Military Administration of Germany, further SMAD], working together with members of the German Communist Party and the Social-Democratic Party Germany.

In many ways the end of the war did not bring closure for the inhabitants of the eastern part of Germany, for there was more continuity between the final years of the war and the years thereafter than the word peace suggests. According to German ethnologist Ina Merkel, “chaos, collapse and misery” reigned, and “the end of war acts did not bring an end to violence and destruction.”² The country’s ruinous economic situation deteriorated even further after the war, causing tensions, mistrust and animosity to flare up amongst the population. Even without the macro-political separation, Germany would have been a deeply divided country in 1945.³



Figure 2.1 – Berlin, 1945, clearing the ruins
Source: G. Gronefeld/Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.



Figure 2.2 – Berlin, 1945, refugees
Source: Getty Images.

The war begun by Germany had cost nearly fifty-six million lives, of which about six million on the German side. Bombs had flattened large parts of the country, and whatever faith still survived in the national socialist doctrine and national socialist world view was certainly shattered when all the details of Nazi war crimes were made public. Forty percent of the German population had lost everything. Some cities, like Dresden, were completely destroyed, and of the eighteen million dwellings in what would later be the GDR, about five million had been demolished. After the war, large parts of Germany were divided up between Czechoslovakia and Poland. By the autumn of 1945, twenty-five million Germans were fugitives or being driven from what had been their homes. The country was split into one part occupied by the Soviet Union and another part occupied by the Western allies. In the months after Germany's defeat, the area that would become the GDR housed 3.6 million refugees.

For most ordinary Germans, the end of the war meant further decline. The country's industry was nearly on its knees, and the supply of foodstuffs and raw materials from the occupied areas had come to an abrupt halt. The agricultural land was barren due to years of neglect. In the years after the war, starvation reigned, and people fought over a crust of bread.

In one family, consisting of a father, mother and three schoolchildren, a parcel arrived in the spring of 1947, the first CARE package from America. The father, utterly starving due to the freezing cold winter and permanent food shortages, secretly smuggled the package down to the cellar and ate the contents himself in a matter of days.⁴

Unlike the inhabitants of the later FRG, the people in what would subsequently become the GDR received no Marshall Aid. They had to come up with about fourteen billion dollars in reparations for the Soviet Union in the first eight years after the war.⁵ That amount was paid mostly in kind: the Soviet occupiers dismantled everything they could lay their hands on, which was consequently transported to the Soviet Union.⁶ Estimates show that 45 percent of East Germany's production capacity had been destroyed during the war and afterwards a further total of 3,147 East German companies were dismantled and shipped to the Soviet Union.⁷ Because huge sections of the East German railway network (sleepers, rails, etc.) disappeared to the Soviet Union as well, whatever production could still be achieved was further hampered by the impossibility to deliver materials and finished products.

In the first years after the war, one and a half times as many inhabitants of East Germany died as during the final years of the war.⁸ The ration cards for food,

sarcastically nicknamed “Friedhofkarte” [graveyard cards], were wholly inadequate. Half of Leipzig’s population, for instance, had so little food in 1946 that it was almost impossible to survive. And despite the fact that the city had to take in relatively few refugees, compared for instance to Rudolstadt, even there the atmosphere was dominated by people’s “Futterneid [envy of food]... People’s physical and mental strength deteriorated due to the chronic malnutrition: they were not just apathetic and lethargic at work...but the ‘mental depression’ spread to all parts of man’s existence.”⁹

Everyone was hungry, permanently hungry. “Wo es nach Essen roch, war die Mitte der Welt [Where you could smell food, that was the center of the world].” This was the time when life was ruled to such an extent by “der Traum vom Sattwerden [the dream of becoming satiated],” that a girl even killed her grandmother with an axe in order to steal her food and clothes. German historian Reiner Gries rigorously dismissed as fairytales the later memories, cherished by many, that this period had brought about a form of solidarity and a form of “unity in time of great need.”¹⁰

Germany was broken, and not just materially. The visible ruins were an adequate symbol of the country’s general situation. The organic *Volksgemeinschaft* [people’s community] which the Nazis had promised to forge for the people of Germany was shattered. When Swedish journalist Stig Dagerman travelled across Germany in 1946, he gave his impressions under headings such as: “Ruins,” “The forests of the hanging,” “Unwelcoming,” “The rivals,” “A lost generation.” His descriptions leave little to the imagination:

In the entrances to the cold, overcrowded houses, the local kids play war games with refugee children from the eastern zone or Sudetenland dressed in rags...If you show them a picture book, they immediately start talking about the best way to kill the people or animals in the book. Two little boys blasted out of their homes by bombs have not yet learned to speak, yet their pronunciation of the term “totschlagen [beat to death]” is disturbingly perfect.¹¹

The houses that had to accommodate the never-ending stream of fugitives were “infected...with the hate, jealousy and hunger of those living in too cramped conditions.”¹² This description seems to capture quite well the general situation in post-war Germany, where scarcity and famine inflected envy, while jealousy and hate reigned.

The situation in Thuringia was no different: its territory housed about two million *Umsiedler* [migrants], of whom 700,000 had to be taken in permanently –

and thus provided with some sort of shelter and food.¹³ The area in and around Rudolstadt probably had to cope with 30,000 new inhabitants. Several refugee camps were set up near the town. The camps were overcrowded: barracks built to take a maximum of 420 people sometimes housed more than a thousand children. Tuberculosis spread, epidemics broke out, and when people died or their misery drove them to commit suicide, the lack of coffins forced the survivors to press four or five corpses into each coffin. If the fugitives were offered shelter in people's homes, this also meant that people had to share the scarce food with them, which was a further cause for tension and anguish. "Wir haben ja nichts gehabt, man hat uns als Bettler angesehen, es gab viele Spannungen und Reibereien [We had nothing then, people saw us as beggars. There was a lot of tension and friction]," one of the former new inhabitants told me. The hunger in the Rudolstadt area was so great that of the 24,000 children living there in 1947, about 23,000 were suffering from malnutrition.¹⁴

Although the city had survived the war relatively unscathed from a material point of view, here too the damage was considerable: one church, five porcelain factories, and 103 dwellings had been entirely destroyed by the bombardments, and 62 houses partially. More than 300 families had become homeless, many had lost everything, and 117 people lost their lives during the bombing. Forty people were killed before and during the American occupation (on April 12 and 13, 1945). All in all, the war had caused the deaths of more than a thousand of Rudolstadt's inhabitants.¹⁵ That figure does not include the many hundreds of prisoners of war and convicts put in camps around the town during the war, an unknown number of whom did not survive. Also not included in these figures are the prisoners from the concentration camp Buchenwald located twenty-five miles away, who dropped dead or were executed in the streets of Rudolstadt during the infamous death march of April 1945. Their numbers "hat keine Statistik erfaßt [were not included in any statistics]."¹⁶

In general, the situation in Rudolstadt seems to have been similar to that in the rest of the country: the material damage was as bad as the famine. Consequently, and intensified by the reversal of power, the social climate was disastrous. "What at first sight may look like unity, is in fact covered with diagonal, vertical and horizontal cracks."¹⁷ The disastrous social climate deteriorated further in the eastern part of the country due to the communist takeover. The rigorous social, economic and political transformations that were implemented intensified the struggle for survival.

Although western historians have long regarded the post-war Soviet occupation of the eastern part of Germany as the start of the unavoidable Soviet annexation

tion, this representation appears to be wrong. During the first years after the war, the Soviet Union had no prepared plans for the part of Germany it occupied, and there was still plenty of scope for local policies. This had a devastating impact on the social climate in Eastern Germany, for a significant part of the politics decreed by the SMAD was carried out by local politicians (KPD and SPD members).¹⁸

That applied for example to the redistribution of modes of production, which began in October 1945 after SMAD order no.124, “*Über die Beschlagnahme und provisorische Übernahme einiger Eigentumskategorien in Deutschland* [on the seizure and provisional attribution of some ownership categories in Germany],” and no.126, “*Konfiszierung des Vermögens des NSDAP* [Confiscation of NSDAP capital],” were carried out. These orders announced the expropriation of former Nazis. From that moment on, everything that had belonged to the national socialist state or one of its associations was now owned by the new powers. The same applied to the possessions of certain categories (vaguely defined) of individual members of the NSDAP. Lengthy lists stated which objects in the Rudolstadt area should be expropriated as *Wehrmacht und Reichsvermögen* [military and state-owned properties]. The items included barracks, drill sites, command posts, schools, banks and buildings formerly belonging to one of the many mass organizations linked to the NSDAP. For all these objects, the new powers had to allocate a new use, and the same applied to the possessions of individual NSDAP members. In the minutes of a meeting held in Weimar on January 4, 1946, where further instructions were given to those responsible for the execution of the orders in the Weimar and Rudolstadt area, the expropriation was substantiated as follows:

Our most important task concerns the problem of feeding and clothing the German people and providing them with accommodation... Through order numbers 124 and 126, the Soviet Union is offering us the opportunity to settle the debts of the war criminals, stripping them of their economic role. Everything taken charge of, which will be expropriated later, is to be used for our reconstruction.¹⁹

No matter how reasonable and conceivable the argument may be, the expropriation resulted in further escalation of the existing tensions. And because certain sections of the population had been harshly excluded from the German *Volksgemeinschaft* [national community] by the Nazis in favor of the consenting majority, it is hardly surprising that the post-war reallocation of power with its accompanying reallocation of possessions was seized by many to settle old scores.

Rudolstadt’s *Landratsamt* [district administration] archives contain an extensive exchange of letters that demonstrate how the announced expropriation

caused huge internal strife at the local level. There are letters from people fiercely opposing the confiscation that is about to happen to them. There are letters from others justifying the planned confiscation from their fellow citizens by pointing out their political crimes. And there are letters from people trying to seize the confiscated goods of others by submitting a request for the possessions which were to be shared. Clearly, there is extensive correspondence on people's losing, acquiring and reallocating possessions.²⁰ "I was neither a war criminal nor an activist, have never had a role in the party, was not a member of the SS or the SA, and never worked for the security police or the Gestapo," wrote a man on September 5, 1946, to *Landespräsident* [district president] Prof. Dr. Paul, adding that he had not had any benefit from the war. According to his account, he was old, ill (*Gelenkrheumatismus, Schlagaderverkalkung* [rheumatism, arteriosclerosis]), and physically and mentally worn out. His son had been missing for a long time, a year ago he had lost his wife and had to evacuate his house, "and now – just because I was a member of the party long before 1933 – my possessions are being confiscated." It is too harsh, the man's letter concludes. His correspondence had another letter stapled to it from Rudolstadt's mayor, in which he dryly remarked that the author wore the golden party medal *Alter Kämpfer* [veteran] and had been a member of the NSDAP since 1929. The mayor also stated that he could not imagine that the man in question, who had joined the party so early on, was a member in name only – as he claimed in his letter. Then he would never have been given a gold party medal.²¹

There are many letters like these. Some of them helped people who were trying to keep their material possessions by making clear that they were not as bad as they seemed. There are messages from couples who fled to live in the British occupation zone when the Red Army arrived, and afterwards sent their children to claim the confiscated goods on behalf of their mother: she had not been a party member, so surely there was no reason to disown her just on account of her husband's party membership?

In other letters people attempt to describe that they were victims of the Nazis and for that reason claimed a right to a share of the confiscated Nazi possessions. A letter from the mayor for example recommends that a certain man be recognized as *Opfer des Faschismus* [victim of fascism]. The man in question had been jailed as a political prisoner from 1939 till 1945, and because he was interested in the shop owned by *SA-Sturmführer* [paramilitary rank of the NSDAP] B. in Königsee (a little village in the vicinity of Rudolstadt), he could make good use of the title.²²

People were not just trying to keep or get back their former possessions or acquire new ones, they also did not hesitate to betray each other in order to get

someone's things. One correspondent even told of couple X who had deliberately got divorced after the war so that the "divorcee," who was not a member of the NSDAP, had a chance of getting back the confiscated goods, while meanwhile secretly living together with her divorced husband in American-occupied Bavaria. There are accounts of people reporting each other to the new powers so that they themselves could take possession of the other's furniture or company. Petty crimes were revealed in order to discredit others: "These gentlemen had hidden the items so carefully in their private villa that they could only be found after a meticulous house search."²³ And they accused each other of betrayal. One woman accused her former daughter-in-law, who had been telling tales about her ex-husband (the correspondent's son) to the new powers in order to get revenge for the divorce while she herself, her former mother-in-law wrote, "was having it off with Russian soldiers" – which was the equivalent of a crime.²⁴

Although the Rudolstadt archives do not contain much on the period directly after the war, the little material there is conjures up a picture of a society ripped apart by mutual envy and strife. People fought fiercely with each other over the scarce possessions that were available. These struggles were at least partly the result of the reversal of power and the accompanying reallocation of possessions.²⁵ In retrospect, it is evident that the transition was used by both the state and individual citizens to get even with former opponents. The KPD's call to every "honest German" to help "trace Nazi leaders, Gestapo agents and SS villains who were in hiding," issued on June 11, 1945, may sound impartial, but it gave rise to a climate in which anonymous accusations and betrayal could become rampant.²⁶ Joachim Gauck, the East German church minister who was given the task of managing the Stasi archives after the *Wende* of 1989, remembers vividly that his father was suddenly gone:

In broad daylight, in the middle of the summer...my father was 'taken away'...an apparition that had developed in the Nazi era. I was eleven years old...My mother and my grandmother went to see Pieck, Grotewohl, and Ulbricht (East German politicians, mv), and they even went to the Russians in Berlin-Karlshorst, but they were always given the same information: 'We do not know this person.' My father was simply gone, he had become a nobody, without even a gravestone to remember him by. After two and a half years of complete uncertainty, we received the first sign of life from my father – a card, just like prisoners of war sent, telling us in tiny letters that he was alive and asking about the children.²⁷

According to the official accounts alone, 157,000 people were deported between 1945 and 1950, to end up in so-called *Speziallager* (special camps, including the concentration camp Buchenwald). As the calculation of the figures does not take bureaucratic errors and propaganda into account, the total number of deportees is probably considerably higher. Of the 157,000 officially accounted for, at least 44,000 died.²⁸ It goes without saying that this was a carefully kept secret at the time; officially, Buchenwald was no longer used after the Nazis were defeated.

The *Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv* [main state archives] has some of the correspondence between the local rulers at that time and citizens who tried to get information about members of their family who had suddenly disappeared. Many of those taken away without formal charges or stated reasons were former Nazis. Sometimes the neighbours were able to report that the person concerned had been taken away by Soviet soldiers. But it frequently happened that those left behind did not have the faintest clue as to what had happened to their husband, father or son, because nobody dared to speak out, for fear of being the next to disappear. Family members often did not receive word about the deported person's whereabouts till much later, and often they did not hear anything at all.²⁹ Many people never returned. Only after the *Wende* of 1989 was it officially announced what many already knew, suspected or feared, namely that in the first post-war years, not only Nazis were deported, but also people who were completely innocent – including many social democrats who supported a different party line than the SED.³⁰ Investigations into this part of East German history had only just started when historian Hermann Weber remarked that many of the internees were “randomly chosen persons.”³¹

The letters I studied clearly showed that many of those who disappeared had been betrayed to the new powers by their fellow citizens. The reason for their internment often seems to have had nothing to do with the Nazi past. There is, for example, a letter from a woman whose 72-year-old husband was taken away although he had never been a member of the NSDAP. On the contrary, the Nazis had even punished him for his criticism of national socialist politics:

In 1933 my husband exchanged harsh words with the formal leader of the local (party) branch because he was against the council's decisions. He was punished by being transferred to Munich in Westphalia; at the age of sixty, and within five days he had to leave his *Heimat*. After that he was no longer promoted. Because he was not a party member, although he was a high-ranking civil servant, we had to fight an ongoing struggle to survive...My husband was not a political person, he lived a philosophically

academic life [sic]...he was a great handyman and he enjoyed hunting. We had a peaceful life together, and inwardly he was a very honest, good, and strong...person. We had a happy marriage, my husband was everything to me. Without him my life is shattered.³²

The letter revealed that the man had possessed shotguns, which he had buried when the Americans were approaching Rudolstadt at the end of March. When the Russians found them, they had him deported for that reason. His wife never received a reply to her letter. Another man was deported in 1949, because as a SPD member he had refused to join the SED. He spent seven years in various Russian prisons. His wife suspected that he had been betrayed by others.³³ In a volume about the history of Rudolstadt published in 1992, historian Peter Langhof describes that the internments were carried out completely randomly and mostly initiated by accusations. In this way, he concluded, “many thousands of SPD, LDP, CDU, yes even KPD followers, as well as many non-party citizens were rendered politically harmless and often physically destroyed.”³⁴

In the first years after the war, the slightest provocation was enough to be reported as an enemy of the new regime. In this way, old scores were settled. The atmosphere of suspicion and climate of fear must have been terrible.³⁵ Daily life was dominated by distrust, jealousy and the insight that one man’s death was the other man’s bread. The well-known photographs of the ruins in Berlin and Dresden are a painfully appropriate illustration of the general situation in Eastern Germany. Besides the personal and material losses people had to endure during the war, a long famine ensued after 1945. Partly due to this and strengthened by the reversal of power, the social climate was one of strife and fear of mutual denunciation and betrayal. “The fault line which ran through German society...was of enormous significance, not just at Zero Hour, but in the months and years to come.”³⁶

In Search of a Hold

The question is how the population in the eastern part of Germany reacted to the traumatic experience, when all the remains of solidarity, mutual trust and cohesion had disintegrated, making way for a raw form of distrust and betrayal. How could people believe that things would ever return to normal? Where were they going to look for something new to hold onto and restore faith in the future?

These questions are extensively dealt with in the literature on the western part of Germany, illustrating that most people’s reaction was a combination of “pre-

serving silence and industriously devoting themselves to the *Wirtschaftswunder* [economic miracle].”³⁷ Below I will further describe and analyze this combination, which has been portrayed in detail for the western part of the country. There is, however, reason to generalize the western response. East German author Christa Wolf, writing about the eastern part of the country, made clear that: “nowhere was there such infinite silence as in German families.” And historian Mary Fulbrook also concludes that in those days, the only thing that united the German population was silence; there was a “community of silence” in both parts of the country. American anthropologist John Borneman draws the same conclusion. He points out that most West Germans’ secondary response to the traumatic situation they were confronted with (that is: industriously trying to rebuild the material remains of their society as quickly as possible) also applied to the eastern part of the country.³⁸

Even in 1945, eyewitnesses were amazed when they saw how Germans reacted to their completely devastated lives. The country was in ruins, but that was hardly discussed. People seemed to want nothing else than to rebuild their material world and move on.

[P]eople here are running back and forth between the ruins, like ants on a destroyed hill...excited with a mad fervor...The devastation does not depress them, but acts as an intense motivation to work...People show...me certain residential blocks, pointing out: that was a bombardment, there too...And that is all. No more announcements are made...People are getting on with the work.³⁹

The urge to rebuild their material existence played a major role in the restoration of the country, which took off so quickly that it is generally referred to as a miracle: the *Wirtschaftswunder*. The book *The Interpellation* describes that miracle, of which its author (Christian Geissler), is extremely critical, like most contemporary commentators.

He describes a country bathing in “flashing neon lights,” where vivid colors and billboards “lit with a thousand watts” brighten up the streets. Its residents look up, expecting to see sailing boats and sports cars fall from the sky. They are not in the mood for reflection but merely “live for the day...and the world smiles optimistically at them” because “no one can be bothered with people’s problems.” Set in the optimistic period when the *Wirtschaftswunder* began to yield its fruits, the author’s conclusions are definitely gloomy. According to him, the cheerfulness, optimism and energy as well as the material prosperity which started to re-emerge in West Germany were merely a desperate attempt not to sink into “the void.” For

him post-war West Germany's fascination with material possessions was simply an endeavor to forget about the war and "stand firm even in this void."⁴⁰

Geissler was not the only one to make a connection between Germans' productiveness and preoccupation with material things on the one hand, and the trauma of the Second World War on the other. Many reporters agreed that the *Wirtschaftswunder* was not just enabled by the American Marshall Aid, but especially by the urge to remove the pain of the past. The necessity to rebuild the country seemed to form a kind of screen, behind which people hid experiences that were so painful that confronting them had to be avoided at all cost.

Regarding what exactly was to be swept aside, Geissler refers to the Void being hidden from view by the country's blinding material recovery. Other reporters are more specific, but they all describe the unbearable burden of the past in moral terms; they speak of guilt, shame, pain and despondency, all linked to the post-war West German obsession with material progress. West Germany's fast recuperation, from a land in rack and ruin to one of the most prosperous countries in the world, has even been interpreted as an avoidance tactic to distract people's attention from the unforgivable crimes committed in Germany's name. In their famous and often quoted account of the situation in post-war West Germany, the Mitscherlichs also posited a direct relationship between the country's fast economic recovery on the one hand and Germans' untenable shame and guilt about the Second World War and Auschwitz on the other. Or as one of Geissler's characters scorns his countrymen: "[T]hey build houses...[but] as long as nothing is right yet, neither in the cellar, nor in the loft, the lovely spaces full of flowers in between are no more than ammunition rooms...Whenever the past is simply reduced to ashes, the present glows so hot that you rush to the future as if it were a cool place in the shadows."⁴¹

The disapproving, moral undertone appears to be based on the premise that the German population was (or should be) suffering terribly from the burden of the past. Reporters were amazed at the (apparent) lack of feelings of pain, guilt, and shame, and at the energy displayed in their place. "It will be much easier for them to rebuild their cities than to induce them to perceive what they have experienced or let them understand how it came about."⁴² Such accusations stem from the assumption that the German people should have been able – directly after the war – to confront their own involvement and responsibility for the disastrous recent past. The German nation's obsession with reviving their existence and the fanaticism displayed in restoring their country after 1945 were thought to have been inspired by an attempt to deny or repress the collective feelings of guilt about Auschwitz. The material reconstruction which gave people something to hold on

to would be absolutely vital in order to ward off a deep moral crisis brought about by oblivious feelings of guilt.

Although the argument sounds convincing and is indisputably true in individual cases, I do not find it a satisfactory explanation for the reactions displayed so generally by German people after 1945. I find it too moralistic and therefore unbelievable. It seems implausible that, after finding out what atrocities had been committed in their name, people would suddenly be overwhelmed by feelings of guilt towards those for whom they had previously harbored scarcely any feelings of solidarity or involvement. That moral standard simply seems too high. According to me, Germans' post-war reticence and their fanatic removal of the material ruins should be explained in a less altruistic manner. Furthermore, I also find it unsatisfactory to interpret the collective reaction to social trauma as the sum of many individual responses, in this case pertaining to guilt. Whenever there is communal silence, it seems sociologically more relevant to trace which communal interests were being served instead of interpreting the silence in terms of individual psychology.

In this context it is telling that silence, dedication and throwing one's self fanatically into rebuilding the future are well known reactions to internal societal crises. Not only the perpetrators but also the victims of terror are reported to present such reactions. Dutch sociologist Jolande Withuis, for instance, showed that many children in Israel have also grown up in silence, "with the knowledge of a secret." There, too, the most frequent reaction to the trauma of war was an enormous drive to rebuild the future by working very hard.⁴³ And Japanese women affected by radiation from the atom bomb during the Second World War presented a comparable reaction. They, too, initially kept their mouths shut about their suffering, only breaking the silence to argue the case for their experiences more than twenty years later.⁴⁴

Such reactions are not only linked to the uncommunicativeness of the experiences endured, but also to the social climate that then characterizes a society. When war, famine or other large-scale disasters strike a people who have lived together for a long time without animosity, they are confronted with the fact that the community which up until then they had assumed as self-evident was actually founded on a rather shaky basis. When the violence, hunger or hardship has been caused by one's neighbours, distrust comes to dominate society. One of the hardest problems facing people at such times is to find experiences or other connecting factors which, despite the social tensions defining communal life at that moment, are able to restore the suggestion of community.⁴⁵ One way to veil the borderlines in a community which is split between perpetrators and victims is, for example,

the collective choice of victimization.⁴⁶ By stressing a joint role (even fictitious), one can rebuild a collective relationship with the past, thus restoring at least the illusion of community.

The most striking reactions the inhabitants of Germany displayed after 1945 (silence, dedication and striving for material reconstruction) should also be seen in relation to the country's social climate at that time. Hardly any feelings of community existed in Germany after 1945. Social life was dominated by deep and widespread mutual distrust, and fear was all around.⁴⁷ In this context, silence and material reconstruction had two important social functions.

Apart from the fact that clearing the ruins in a country flattened by bombs and overrun by refugees was an absolute necessity, reconstructing the material world is also an extremely effective way to psychologically process other things. When the outside world that people unquestionably felt part of suddenly manifests itself as fundamentally untrustworthy and threatening, they find solace in distancing themselves, focusing on the material reconstruction of their personal lives.⁴⁸ Rebuilding a house is a good way to exclude mutual distrust, also because the house will provide a safe haven from which people can start, slowly but surely, to explore the outside world again. Furthermore, building houses and streets is also a concrete and symbolic form of working for the community and its future. While clearing up the debris and building a new neighborhood, people literally structure the foundations of the future community. The ruins and suspicions from the past are removed, to be replaced by new houses – as a symbol of new trust in living and building a future together. Building up the collapsed world brick by brick with one's own bare hands is therefore an excellent way to (re)gain control of one's life. And later on, the building process, as a shared experience, will appear to have functioned as a foundation for future community experiences and spirit.

It is known that this strategy worked well in the western part of the country; the restoration of houses, factories and roads, the gradual removal of ruins and debris actually succeeded in establishing new faith in society and the future. West Germans' loyalty towards the new nation developed thanks to the stable material basis the *Bundesrepublik* would soon become. The economic growth and improved standard of living created not only consumers, but also loyal West Germans.⁴⁹

Obviously the West German *Wirtschaftswunder* did not just appear out of the blue. Apart from the West German fervor, it was to a considerable extent the result of the Marshall Aid offered by the United States. The Treaty of Versailles had taught the Allies not to leave defeated Germany to its fate for the second time – after 1918 this had laid the foundation for the kind of resentment in which Hitler's national socialism thrived so well. The Allies were determined not to make that

mistake again. Another, equally important reason for America's post-war generosity towards West Germany was that it directly served an American goal. The country to be restored was an ideal place to market American products and services, and once developed as a prosperous capitalist society, it could be a significant trading partner for the United States.⁵⁰ International capitalist collaboration and the global spread of America's model of consumer citizenship were the explicit aims of America's post-war aid to defeated Germany.

The famous West German *Wirtschaftswunder* thus came about because it best served the three major parties' interests: it enabled the population to disguise the Void; if successful, it would help legitimize the new state; and it would provide the western allies with another loyal partner (politically and economically) in the short and long term.

Little is known about the situation in the eastern part of the country. How did those in power deal with people's needs and wants? Did a form of collaboration exist between occupiers, state and residents? To what extent was the new East German state able to adapt to people's desires to keep quiet about the recent past and mutual suspicion, and instead put all their efforts into rebuilding their existence? In what way did the East German state accommodate the traumatic experience of what Geissler described as the Void?

Analyses of East Germany's history are usually quite critical: the repressive state is generally described as having had no consideration whatsoever for the needs of its population. And the overriding representation is that the country's material reconstruction lagged behind developments in West Germany right from the very start. Although it is certainly true that the new socialist powers did not enjoy the full support of the people, I think it is worthwhile looking further than the obvious divergences between what the state was offering and the people's needs and wants. The socialist ideology, which the new state used to justify itself, did in some ways accommodate the silent, materialist way the German people were attempting to delete their recent past.

The next chapter delves deeper into the similarities between state ideology and the needs of the people. Although insufficient to justify the new state in the eyes of its residents, these similarities did play an important role in accomplishing the East German state's hegemony. By promising the people a socialist utopia which would be accomplished in an explicitly materialist way, the East German state was nourishing a materialist politics of identity. This would indirectly provide a breeding ground for the collective fantasies of material wealth as a source of redemption that reached their dramatic peak in the autumn of 1989.

Chapter 3

The GDR: Future Promises

When the Americans left Thuringia to be replaced by Russian troops in the spring of 1945, most of the region's residents feared the situation would deteriorate further. As the national socialist regime had always portrayed the Soviet Union as the empire of evil, most East Germans had strong anti-Russian feelings. The population's general attitude towards the various occupational forces was aptly summed up by a female resident of Berlin, who stated: "When we saw Russians coming, we would run down the basement steps. If we saw Americans, we would run up the steps to meet them."¹ East Germans' worst fears about the Russian occupiers were painfully confirmed with the massive violation of East German women by members of the Red Army, and with the brutal ways the Soviet occupying power claimed its war reparations. This all resulted in widespread anti-Soviet attitudes and strong opposition to Soviet "early socialization policies."² The new East German leaders who wanted to win the population round to the socialist project were thus setting themselves an almost impossible task.

In spite of the general hostility, people seemed to gradually come to terms with their country's socialist project. This was mainly thanks to the appeal of what can be termed the GDR's ideological fundament: its presumed antifascist nature. Claiming this label as an apt description of the new state's *raison-d'être* was accomplished by thoroughly rewriting recent history. As will be suggested in this chapter, the new, socialist-proof version of the recent past perfectly accommodated widespread popular yearnings – to quietly build a new life (materially and socially) in order to cover up the lack of mutual trust and restore faith in the future. Despite East Germans' widespread reluctance to conform to the Russian occupation, the state's promises for the future and popular strivings eventually established a form of alliance between the new socialist state and the East German population after 1945.

The Past Rewritten

When the Soviet Union occupied the eastern part of Germany, it had no well-designed plans for its future. This began to change amidst mounting antagonism between the western allied powers and the Soviet Union, and when it gradually became clear that the western part of Germany was going to be integrated in the capitalist bloc. In 1949 the GDR was founded as a separate German state under direct Soviet control. This new state was not supported by popular feelings of belonging or national identity, and its leaders faced the task of ruling a country with practically no national legitimacy. In order to grant socialist Germany a certain rationale of existence, it was necessary to claim that the new state was different – different from its predecessor, and different from the western part of the country. These differences were professed to have been caused by the GDR's distinct anti-fascist nature. "The GDR claimed the historical honorary title of a 'new Germany,' whose politically and social-economically founded antifascism meant a rigorous and definitive break with all traditions that had resulted in 1933."³

The first claim to substantiate this title was by arguing that Germany's fascist history was the unique result of the capitalist system – which had been abolished in the GDR. Secondly, the collapse of the national socialist regime was ascribed exclusively to the incessant battle with East German communists and other anti-fascists – who were the new leaders of the GDR. Last of all, it was claimed that the necessary denazification after 1945 had only been carried out successfully in the eastern part of Germany. Denazification of the western part was said to be a mere farce (for how could it be otherwise – so it was claimed in the GDR – given the historical continuity in the west of Germany, where the capitalist mode of production had remained unaltered). These three reasons were used to justify the assertion that the socialist state had to be established in order to preserve all the valuable elements of the German heritage.

It is important to stress that the GDR's socialist leaders indeed forced considerable changes in the existing political, economic and social structures of East German society, by radically altering the social relations and mode of production – as briefly sketched in the previous chapter. Also, the majority of the politicians who cooperated with the Soviet occupying powers, and who were later to join the first government of the GDR, had indeed risked their lives in the struggle against fascism. Last but not least, the new East German leadership had achieved a radical transformation in the existing balance of power. Most members of the commercial and intellectual bourgeoisie were bereft of their positions, and many teachers, professors, and judges, as well as the majority of administrative executives, were

dismissed and replaced with people from a lower class background. “In order to realize its political and ideological program, the SED replaced the entire elite, an unprecedented upheaval in modern German history. This process of restructuring destroyed traditionally developed milieus, basically changed the social climate, and mobilized society to a considerable extent.”⁴ The restructuring of society had a major additional advantage for the new leaders: it assured them of a large group of loyal adherents and advocates of the socialist ideology.⁵

Given that the East German leadership had indeed accomplished real changes, they were blown out of all proportion by the East German regime. The result was a completely unrealistic representation of the recent past and the near future. No matter what sources one consults, whether East German history books, song-books, autobiographies of famous East Germans, educational literature for young people, or advertising placards: they all show the same razor-sharp line drawn between pre-1945 national socialist and post-1945 socialist society. Before socialism, life was allegedly infected by the continuous capitalist struggle of “all against all.” This struggle was said to have disappeared in the new socialist society, to be replaced by friendly cooperation, “collective commitment,” and feelings of mutual solidarity. The last period of the war was thoroughly rewritten – it was reported to have been characterized by “heroism, resistance, and victory.” The East German population was described as an innocent people, living in an innocent country, in which unfortunately two brutal categories had lived and reigned: the *Junker* [derogatory reference to the aristocracy] and the *Monopolkapitaliste* [monopoly capitalists]. These groups were responsible for all the disasters that had taken place, and they were exclusively described within the well-known Marxist, socio-economic framework of analysis. Although national socialism had claimed to be a variety of socialism, East German historians explained it had to be regarded as the last horrific convulsion of the capitalist system. As East German historiography drew attention to the anti-Semitic and racist characteristics of national socialist politics, this was within the framework of an overarching critique of capitalism.⁶

East German historiography on the post-war period is equally clear and one-dimensional. Denazification of the Soviet-occupied part of Germany was said to have been pursued in a strict, just, and successful way. Almost all Nazis had presumably been punished, and their possessions were said to have been redistributed or sequestered, nationalized and subsequently used for the common good. Official historiography claimed that the majority of the East German population swiftly understood that they had been abused by national socialism and its capitalist leaders. Contrary to the situation in the western part of Germany, the GDR was said to have been liberated of fascism in 1945 once and for all, allowing the records to be

closed. As part of their education, generations of Rudolstadt's schoolchildren visited the former concentration camp Buchenwald (twenty-five miles to the north) in order to learn about the socialist liberators who successfully put an end to the catastrophic "profit seeking of German *Monopolbourgeoisie* [monopoly bourgeoisie], its bestial exploitation, and repression in concentration camp Buchenwald" and the "horrific history of German imperialism."⁷

Although, as I mentioned before, a significant part of the East German government indeed consisted of members of the resistance who had risked their lives combating Nazi Germany, present-day historians generally agree that "the image of a pristine antifascist government cleansed of all ex-Nazis was more antifascist mythology than East German reality."⁸ Denazification of the eastern part of Germany was neither more thorough nor more successful than in the western zones, and the Soviets appear to have known this all too well: "[T]he Soviets publicly claimed satisfaction with their success, while privately they too admitted failure."⁹ The officially sanctioned representation of East Germany's recent past was "as fictitious as it was self-serving for the SED."¹⁰ Because admitting it would have completely undermined the legitimacy of the GDR as a separate German state, antifascism was and remained the core of the socialist state, which helped to "morally lift up" the GDR.¹¹ Reference was constantly made to the "identity-confirming ideological fundament of the East German state" in order to legitimize the state's continued existence, its balance of power, and political decisions. Apart from its legitimizing role, the GDR's antifascism was also used to morally bind people to the regime, by commanding loyalty with the brave antifascist *Widerstandskämpfer* [resistance fighters].¹²

Life in socialist society was apparently characterized by the common ownership of all, which would bring about equality, mutual harmony and solidarity. This would bring forth "the gift of a new people," claiming to differ from their fascist-capitalist predecessors thanks to their genuine identification with collective goals. Because they knew their individual interests corresponded entirely with the collective ones, there would be no more "petty bourgeois and individualist ambitions. Envy and hate would rot away, and people would be freed from the existential loneliness on earth."¹³ The East German population would be released from the social-destructive tendencies and experiences that had always plagued their existence. Instead, they would become part of the "socialist community of people" where "man was the only goal and standard." This would allow for the "free development of one in the service of all."¹⁴

All in all, the socialist state thus promised its citizens nothing less than a complete form of harmony and unity – both for individuals and between people. This

was to be realized in the near future, because the main condition for its development had already been fulfilled in the eastern part of Germany, where capitalist relation of production had been partly terminated, and large-scale nationalization of agriculture and industry had been implemented by the end of 1945.

In a country that was in desperate need of optimism and faith in the future, and where recent history was being written around heroes, villains and victims, true recollections of events were not welcome – but repression was.¹⁵ The betrayal, pain, hatred, and envy that I described in the previous chapter remained unspoken. There was no room for people's memories unless they were in line with the officially propagated and sanctioned history. Open-minded investigation of the past was even more difficult when the country became one of the Soviet Union's major partners in the Cold War. Openly posing questions about national socialism's appeal remained practically impossible, unless they were approached in the obligatory, well-known standard of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. Until the mid-1970s there was only one way to write about the Nazi period: from the perspective of those who had already recognized the reprehensible character and aims of fascism during the war. When in 1976 the first novel appeared in which the author, Christa Wolf, openly admitted that she – as so many of her peers – had been under the spell of national socialist promises, the book was fiercely criticized. Wolf was blamed for not being able to subordinate her own experiences to the progressive forces and developments in her country.¹⁶

East German history's rigorous rewriting must have resulted in broadly shared experiences of alienation, as has been aptly worded by German cultural historian Frank Trommler: "Whatever the experience, it cannot even claim an appropriate understanding of the events of which it has been part."¹⁷ But apart from being estranging, it was probably also reassuring not to be able to think and talk about the past in other than the mythical way described above – with heroes, villains and victims. Because the officially approved perspective on the past was not only important for the establishment and legitimacy of East German socialist politics but was also used "to instill a sense of political commitment which was to be beyond valid questioning," there was simply no room for objection. All possible means were used to steer East Germans' emotions in support of the imposed politics of the time. A false dichotomy was created: if you are against fascism, then you are for the GDR; if you are critical of the GDR, then you are essentially a fascist.¹⁸

As a result, it appears to have always been difficult for East Germans to hear (let alone voice) criticism of the GDR – because of the presumed antifascist nature of the state. Fulbrook calls this the "psychological coercion" the inhabitants of the GDR fell victim to.¹⁹ A 68-year-old judge, whom I regularly visited during my

stay in Rudolstadt and who was usually quite critical about the former socialist state, once sighed: "In spite of everything, the GDR's original goals and assumptions were very good and worthwhile." Any critique of the GDR was implicitly a critique of antifascism, and as such highly suspicious. The use of morally loaded ideological claims was the main way "to capture the public political imagination by tapping into its wells of moral conscience" – a frequently used tactic by moralizing states.²⁰ For the new East German state, antifascism functioned as a fetish. The signs, vocabulary and narratives it produced were not meant to be mere symbols; they were officially invested with a surplus of meanings which were not negotiable and which one was officially forbidden to depart from or challenge.²¹

Although the "legend of the good beginning," which was so important for the new state's legitimacy, was forced upon the East German population, Mary Fulbrook has concluded that "the myth of innocence of the workers and peasants...appears to have gone down relatively well with the vast mass of the East German population."²² This is not as surprising as it may seem, because it must have been quite an attractive myth for many people. First of all, it promised to realize a fully harmonious society, without social tensions.²³ Secondly, the GDR's proclaimed antifascist nature offered the population a perfect escape route to avoid personal confrontations, responsibility and involvement with the rise of national socialism, the war and the ensuing void. By presenting these issues as the sole result of capitalism's evils (successfully dismantled in the GDR), the East German state presented its population a story of collective innocence for the recent past's disasters. Personal misgivings and internal differences were erased in light of the bright future of mutual solidarity and security awaiting the East German people.

The myth of the new beginning has had a deep impact on the development of the future GDR. By presenting 1945 as an overall watershed, East German society was built on a collective denial of past experiences. It was also built on an undisclosed gap in which experiences of mutual distrust, betrayal and the failure of solidarity were hidden, covered up with beautiful promises of mutual solidarity. Both the state and the population had a firm interest in concealing this gap, brushing socially disruptive experiences under the carpet, while emphasizing the better future on the horizon. The combination of a state-sanctioned, collective amnesia and a rigorous reinterpretation of real memories has been very effective "for achieving a constrained loyalty" to the state.²⁴ In spite of general skepticism amongst East Germans with regard to the socialist cause, an unsaid, partly unwitting consensus developed between people's desires, motives and endeavors on the one hand, and the claimed antifascist, socialist state ideology on the other. The image of 1945 as a firm dividing line functioned as the nation's ideological core, helping to create a

semblance of national unity and command internal loyalty. “Our loyalty towards the GDR contained irrational, almost mythical dimensions. All those flat, worn out stories have in one way or another had a deep, subconscious impact on all of us. It was certainly no coincidence that the Wall was called an ‘antifascist protection wall.’”²⁵

The antifascist, socialist doctrine functioned as a mask, which both the population and the government were keen to wear. One result of the widespread, state-sanctioned “*Schlussstrich*” [draw a line under] mentality was that “the most important issues on the country’s past, like national-socialism’s broad popular base, were ignored along with questions about the population’s involvement in the regime’s politics of persecution and destruction.”²⁶

Comparable reactions of silently and industriously sweeping away the past as soon as possible were displayed in the western part of Germany, but these patterns changed over time. Especially after the violent riots in the late 1960s, the darkest period in German history became an undeniable part of West Germany’s self-representation – a development which was unthinkable in the GDR.

The establishment of democracy in the west also meant that, in sharp contrast to the dictatorship in the east, the decisions of the early years were not final. East Germans were able to freeze political memory...In West Germany, political freedom and open debate fostered criticism of the shortcomings of the Adenauer era and a growing knowledge about the Nazi era.²⁷

In the GDR, the ruinous experiences remained suppressed and hidden, on which the bright future was to be built. The question of how this has influenced East German society’s social texture will be answered in the coming chapters. There, I will also show what collective stockpiles were developed for the containment of experiences and memories that did not fit in with the past’s officially sanctioned representations. At an individual level, people created different stockpiles. My 70-year-old neighbor in Rudolstadt appeared to be revealing her memories in the songs she sang every time she was drunk, allowing her to return to her lost *Heimat*.

She lived next to me in an old apartment on Rudolstadt’s market square. Just like me, she had to go down to the courtyard every day in autumn and winter in order to gather coal and kindling for the fire. But whereas my apartment had hot running water, a shower, and a private toilet, she had to heat water on the stove and put it in a tub before she could wash herself, and her toilet was in the communal corridor. She was lonely. Apart from her son, who reluctantly visited her every three or four weeks, she seemed to have no social contacts

at all. Sometimes we had a little chat when we met in the corridor, but she always seemed a bit absentminded. She originally came from Silesia, a part of Germany that was assigned to Poland after the war. She probably left her home town in the spring of 1945 in a hurry. I don't know whether her son was already born by then. Like the millions of others who were driven from their homesteads at that time, she probably walked all the way to Thuringia (400 miles). When she arrived in Rudolstadt, people probably frowned disapprovingly at her because she needed the food and shelter that were in such short supply. I don't know for sure whether she ever really managed to feel at home. My impression was that she did not. There was a small landscape painting on the wall of our communal hallway. The scenery resembled the area around Rudolstadt, but I always imagined it to be her native Silesia.

During the time I lived next to her, she came home really drunk several times a week, stumbling noisily to the door of our hallway. Sometimes she didn't even make it that far, and I would find her downstairs, lying in her urine. She had fallen down and was too drunk to get up. Once I heard her fall – it was a hard thump. I went down and saw her lying in a pool of blood, her legs in a strange position under her body. An ambulance took her to hospital where she stayed for some weeks. When she returned, she had lost some weight, but it wasn't long before she began drinking again. And yet again, she came home drunk a few times a week, hardly able to reach the door of her apartment or get the key in the lock. Once she was inside, the evenings always elapsed in the same way. The walls were so thin that I could hear her singing, sometimes till deep at night. One time I was able to work out some of the words and then I realized it was always the same theme: *Heimat, Heimat*, it sounded melancholically.

Every town has its alcoholics, but it struck me that my aged neighbor returned to her native country every night, having left it fifty years earlier. Her history contained many elements that had been written out of official East German historiography. The story of her life was taboo: socialists do not recognize homesickness for the area where you were born, certainly not when there were sound political reasons to allocate it to a befriended, bordering nation.

A New Future: Material Well-Being

Concentrating on the socialist leaders' general promises allowed me to sketch the wonderful perspective that was presented to the war-beaten East German population after 1945. A complete break with the past would automatically bring about a community of new people, living together in great harmony and solidarity. Or as the first line of the East German anthem went: "*Auferstanden aus Ruinen und der*

Zukunft zugewandt [Risen from ruins and facing the future].” This prospect must have been extremely attractive. However, as I showed in the previous chapter, the German population was searching for a new symbolic order, not only by silencing past social fissures, but also by materially rebuilding society. The question is to what extent the socialist state accommodated this search.

In theory, the answer to this question is very simple: according to Marxist theory, a radical change in the material basis of East German society would bring about the desired socialist utopia. Transforming society’s material basis would lead to a fundamental transformation in people’s attitude towards work, re-establishing it as the central, constitutive element of their existence: “Work is joy, volunteering and responsibility; it is courage, diligence, heroism, success, specialty, and plan. The worker recognizes his productive activities as the purpose of his life and his patriotic duty.”²⁸ The destruction of capitalist “non-culture” would liberate people, allowing them to invest all their energy, hope and faith in “securing the uttermost welfare and the free development of *all* members of society.”²⁹

Although the obvious question of course is to what extent these general axioms were achieved, it is important to recognize that by allowing material circumstances to bring ultimate fulfillment for all in mutual harmony, the socialist leaders endowed the material domain with capacities far beyond economic recovery and material resurrection. In this respect, their promises came close to the general hopes and ambitions of the East German population, leading to a further merging of people’s needs and wants on the one hand, and the main promises of the socialist state on the other.

During the first decade after the Second World War, the East German regime was internally divided on the issue of consumption. The central importance of meeting the needs of the consumer in order to establish state legitimacy was not generally recognized.³⁰ Until the end of the 1940s, the material situation in the GDR was extremely bad; hunger and scarcity dominated daily life. East Germans’ attitude towards the new political course in their country fluctuated along the lines of material improvement. With East and West Germans keeping a close watch on the developments in both parts of the country and comparing the advances in each country’s consumption, it goes without saying that when the material situation in the western part seemed to recover more rapidly, this had a devastating impact on the credibility of the GDR’s socialist project.³¹

In 1946 and 1947 the population of Saxony (a province in East Germany) was relatively favorably disposed towards the political decisions of the new leaders. However, when material circumstances deteriorated, partly due to the long and harsh winters of 1947 and 1948, popular support eroded immediately, reaching

rock bottom in mid-1948 once people learned that ration cards had been abolished in West Germany. The impact was tremendous. From that moment on, the West German population was able to pay with real money when they went to shops that actually had something worth buying. Therefore, in West Germany, the end of rationing “symbolized the end of the war years and times of deprivation. It was the beginning of the long-expected return to ‘normality,’ security and welfare.”³² For the East German population, the abolition of rationing in the west was equally important, albeit in a negative way. Many then concluded that “life is simply better in the west.”³³

The symbolic and political significance of full shops was insufficiently recognized by all East German politicians. Many still considered the politics of consumption subordinate to the recovery of heavy industry. They would soon find out that improvement in the sphere of consumption was fundamentally important for legitimatizing their political course.

From the early 1950s onwards, increasing numbers of East Germans left their hearth and home to build up a new life in the western part of the country. The figures are telling: in 1950 almost 77,000 people left the territory of the GDR, in 1953 the number of exiles amounted to over 317,000.³⁴ Most East German party leaders viewed these developments suspiciously but seemed confident that they would be able to turn the economic tide at short notice and bring an end to the country’s material and consumption problems. This confidence was based on two assumptions. Firstly, they believed that the collectivization of agriculture would produce “a surplus in foodstuffs and [increase] the overall availability of goods.”³⁵ Secondly, they assumed that the socialist mode of production would eventually far outrank the capitalist mode of production. At the second party congress in 1952, party leader Walter Ulbricht announced the acceleration in socialism’s development: “As a result of the double enslavement by American and West German monopoly capitalism, the living standards of the West German population will continue to fall, whereas in the GDR and the democratic sector of Berlin, material and cultural conditions for the workers will improve according to plan.”³⁶

In spite of these promising words, consumer developments in the GDR were sluggish in comparison with the west, and the resulting dissatisfaction played a fundamental role in the only revolt worth mentioning that occurred in the GDR, which took place on June 17, 1953.

The immediate cause of the revolt was the ongoing increase in production demands, which was not compensated by an improvement in consumption potential or a reduction in prices. By the beginning of June, workers took to the streets to voice their dissent. When the party leadership did not respond satisfactorily, dem-

onstrations were announced for the next day, under the motto “butter instead of canons.”³⁷ On June 17, the entire country was hit by strikes and demonstrations, and the uprising was a fact. It was harshly crushed by the local Soviet forces, but the message to the party leaders was clear: state legitimacy depended very much on how well the material situation improved. “The lessons about the power of consumer opinion in sowing concord or dissent had been drummed into the minds of the new elite in East Germany with the uprising of June 17, 1953.”³⁸ In an attempt to improve the food shortages and lack of consumer goods, the SED gave the remaining private industries more freedom. The result was an immediate improvement,³⁹ and the numbers of emigrants are telling: whereas in 1953 over 317,000 people left the GDR, this number dropped to 114,000 in 1954, again illustrating the importance of material improvement for the establishment of state legitimacy.

The socialist German state struggled with the problem that its existence was not supported by time-honored national sentiments. The socialist leadership was therefore unable to foster a state with the “powerful force of national emotions.”⁴⁰ When the government finally understood to what extent the state’s legitimacy depended on satisfying consumer demand, it “seriously strove to improve the population’s standard of living, in order to be ensured of its loyalty.”⁴¹ Although comparable issues haunted the new West German state, its restructuring soon appeared to be an all-out success, finally resulting in the famous Economic Miracle.

The collective attempt to banish the traumas of the Second World War by covering them up with beautiful examples of prosperity was one of the critical stakes in West Germany’s 1968-generation’s revolt. Since then, Germany’s war traumas have been laid bare and never disappeared from the public stage in the FRG again. But by that time, the new German democracy’s legitimacy was beyond doubt, thanks to its marvelous economic achievements.

Such developments were impossible in the GDR. Until the state ceased to exist, silence reigned regarding the socially unsettling experiences of the past. In chapter six I will show that in time, the silence related not just to matters of the past, it was generally impossible to publicly name or discuss socially disruptive issues. They were covered up with the beautiful story about mutual equality and solidarity in the wake of transforming the socialist state’s material basis. This story was not just relevant for the new state and its leadership, it also had a great emotional and social impact on the East German population. Collectively aiming for a new and materially improved life diverted their attention from traumatic experiences. In this way, state and citizens came to a kind of agreement in which consumption and material developments had far-reaching powers.

This agreement has had a deep and long-lasting effect on the GDR.⁴² The post-war habit of silently denying social disasters and the state-ordered taboo on breaking the silence continued to exist in East German society. Not only did it nourish the belief in an ideal society without social fissures or tensions, it also met East Germans' widespread hopes and expectations that material improvement was the most appropriate solution to social problems. "The communist system was built on unambiguous promises of material progress. The [inhabitants]...were perpetually on the threshold of the promised land. Socialism...aroused the desire to consume by its promises of material improvement."⁴³

When I refer to the pact between state and citizenry in the GDR, I highlight how the state's ideology became enmeshed with the needs of the traumatized population not only to build a materially safe future, but also to deny and remove experiences that were at odds with the newly-to-be-formed communal ties. Key elements of this ideology would form the basis for the new symbolic order in the eastern part of Germany. The socialist state's promises that seamlessly matched the lessons of life which were as important as they were taboo became the silenced core of a secret collusion between state and citizenry.

Chapter 4

Material Realizations

What we are thus arguing is not simply that ideology permeates the alleged extra-ideological strata of everyday life, but that this materialization of ideology in the external materiality renders visible inherent antagonisms that the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge (Slavoj Žižek, 1996).¹

Sometimes posing a question is the same as answering it. At first glance, this certainly applies to the question of how well the East German state succeeded in delivering its materialist promises. We all know what transpired. We have seen the images of grimy streets, long queues in front of shops, and people so happy to finally get their hands on a few oranges. We have heard them grumbling about the country's material and consumer situation. It was primarily these complaints that drove so many people to the streets in the autumn of 1989. And one year later, these complaints motivated them yet again when it came to deciding their country's future. By voting for German unity, most people were opting for well-equipped shops and the ability to buy fresh fruit all year around. They wanted to end the continual shortages and lack of materials.

Since the East German state was apparently not able to provide acceptable material conditions, it seems obvious to assume that the pact between government and populace did not hold out. Although hard to believe, the contrary was true. This chapter will show that the GDR's difficult material situation actually functioned as one of the main pillars sustaining the alliance between state and citizenry.

Severe, Rational, and Centrally Planned

In the autumn of 1992, when I was in search of an appropriate fieldwork location, I made a short trip to the former GDR during which I visited various towns and cities. Apart from the appointments I had made in advance, my first impressions of the country were mainly visual. Wherever I came, I curiously viewed the streets, the public spaces, the tall apartment blocks in the suburbs, the interiors of the



Figure 4.1 and 4.2 – Rudolstadt, 1994, pile of rubbish
Source: Pictures by the author.

libraries and town halls, the decoration in the few shops not yet renovated, and the little East German neon signs that were still there. I happened to visit Weimar on the day when the municipal rubbish collectors picked up large items, thus allowing me a glimpse of the remnants of people's interiors that were now piled up on the side of the street. The overall scene left an impression similar to the ones I had encountered in the waiting rooms of public buildings. The colors were rather dreary. Most objects were rectangular, hardly adorned or plain, and rather drab. As far as the objects were decorated, these decorations did not seem to match the overall rectangular shapes of the objects. When I returned home, my general impression was that the GDR had had a rather severe material culture. When I later bought a catalogue with pictures of former East German consumer goods, this impression was confirmed.²

Almost a year later, when I had settled in Rudolstadt, the same severity struck me once more. The interiors of public buildings, shops and apartments, and the piles of rubbish on this town's side streets all showed the same combination of frugality, severity, and scanty ornamentation that did not match the overall lines and forms.



Figure 4.3 – Rudolstadt, 1993, fish-shop
Source: Picture by the author.



Figure 4.4 – Rudolstadt, 1994, pile of rubbish
Source: Picture by the author.



Figure 4.5 – Eisenhüttenstadt, Leninallee, lamp and electric appliances shop, undated, 1970s
Source: Collection HO advertisement, Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt.

To me, a western outsider, the overall image came across as rather inconsistent and poor. Fortunately, a number of East Germans' statements clarified that this impression was not solely down to (western) prejudices or my position as outsider. "East German objects represent the world at that time: it was a small world, a sad world," remarked Stefan (a thirty-year-old student) when he saw something that reminded him of the old days while we were walking through the city of Jena. A similar connection was also suggested by Rudolstadt's museum director. "Former East German society can be seen through its objects," he said, showing me his little collection of East German consumer goods: a bar of soap, a packet of coffee, a bottle of hair tonic, and other everyday items, which he had hastily bought during 1989's hectic autumn. Foreseeing that the GDR's material world would soon disappear, he had found it important to store some of its everyday items. He did not know what to do with them, but future generations of historians might want to further investigate the relationship between objects of the period.

I later regretted neglecting to ask his opinion on that relationship. On the basis of what I had seen until then, I had come to associate the former GDR with severity and puritan rigidity. When I began to search for literature on home furnishings and design, it soon became clear that my associations were not purely coincidental. The East German material world appeared indeed to have been designed on the basis of ideas and convictions that could definitely be called severe.

Corresponding with the classical Marxist axiom that the material basis of society determines the social relations and mentality of a people, much thought was given to finding the right forms for East Germans' daily lives. It was considered important for their further development to surround them with the right, socialist-proof material world. This was not only relevant for the public sphere (urban development and architecture), but also for people's private lives, as highlighted by the editors of the popular house and interior design magazine, *Kultur im Heim*:

If people's living space was only the passive copy of their subjective qualities, ideas and tastes, we would not have to look at it from a social perspective; it would merely be a private affair. But because people's living space plays such an important role in both the further development of human essence and the expression of socialist relationships, and because it has such a fundamental function within social psychology, its forms and shapes deserve to be dealt with in public. They are 'res publica.'³

According to the East German socialist doctrine, people's material surroundings were not only the actual product of economic relations and human labor, they also played a significant role in encouraging the further development of people and

society. This dialectic between subject and object was not considered to be a neutral or value-free fact; its resulting development was seen as progressive, leading to mankind's further enlightenment. "Our living space is much more than just a shield, a skin, or our life's visual scenery – it is part of our essence, which develops with us and through which we find and achieve ourselves."⁴

In order for people to find the right material environment, they had to learn how to align their tastes and desires with what was needed to further develop society at large. Personal taste and society's needs could only be matched once people had learned to recognize communal interests as their own. This could be accomplished by constantly instructing them to give up their acquired habits, primary impulses and individual desires, and question how they related to the needs of society at large. The main instrument to achieve this was the power of reason. "Empirical observation is not enough to understand reality in such a way that you grasp the total direction of historical movement and development in order to achieve the whole truth. For this, a high level of thinking is needed which can never be accomplished without a scientifically based world view."⁵

Although Marxist dialectics assumed that East Germans' tastes would almost automatically develop along the lines sketched above – because "the enlightened human subject" would inevitably tend to favor "objects which are parallel to his essence" – this appears not always to have been the case.⁶ In order to help East German citizen-consumers find "forms of expression that are *lebensbejahend* [life-confirming], honest and true," social scientists, philosophers, and designers studied the relationship between socialism, aesthetics, and taste.⁷ Their insights were popularized and disseminated by *Kultur im Heim's* editors to reach and counsel the East German public. For more than thirty years, the editors explained to East Germans which forms and living room interiors were acceptable and which were not.⁸

Going through entire volumes of the magazine shows that certain mistakes in taste were almost ineradicable. This particularly pertained to the preference for so-called old antique-looking objects and for things so abundantly adorned with frills, obtrusive splendor and fineries that they could be described as kitsch. Up until 1989, both phenomena were regularly subjected to critical scrutiny by *Kultur im Heim's* editors. Time and again they tried to inform their readers that the "desire for decorations" and by-gone styles were expressions of a "deformed aesthetic consciousness," which would have a far-reaching "inhibiting" effect on people individually and on society at large.⁹

According to the editors, it was "tasteless, absurd, and kitschy to produce a salt-shaker in the form of an animal or mushroom." What is more: it was "inappropri-

ate, and thus superfluous” to even decorate salt-shakers. Comparable statements reappeared quite regularly in a column to educate readers, called “the school of taste.” This column featured the right form and answered questions about a specific object. When, for instance, various stoves were illustrated, the reader was first asked to make a choice and then turn some pages further to read whether he had chosen the correct object or not, and why this was so. The preference for stove number seven, for instance, was right because “the structure and proportions of stove number seven are good.” If one opted for stove number eight, they explained that “this stove’s form is unacceptable.” Preferring a fake, old-looking object was wrong because this choice was usually not based on a true understanding of the object. If people’s preference for old-looking objects was based on real knowledge (of the era when the object was made and used), it was acceptable. In such cases, the person’s preference was well informed, because he knew that “old objects express the heritage of craftsmanship and older generations’ taste, incorporating the mentality and way of life at that time.” The owner of the old-looking object was considered to have “a clear attitude towards yesterday’s objects,” enabling him to “ascribe the object its proper place, which is where it optimally serves its goal.” If such knowledge and insight did not exist, the attractiveness of old-looking objects was merely based on “immature understandings.” As it was obvious that most East Germans’ preferences were not based on true historical knowledge, the editors of the journal never tired of explaining why this was wrong. Sometimes this was done rather ironically: “Many people state that old is old and therefore beautiful. Some even respectably call that ‘antique.’ But please, be consistent and turn off the lights, put two long twigs in your mouth and use them as a torch while you do the housekeeping.”¹⁰

The editors of course fully understood that no one really wanted to return to these so-called cosy forms of illumination, because they were the silent witnesses of the miserable and exploited lives most people then lived. There was thus no objective reason, they went on to explain, to emotionally associate old-looking objects with positive notions – such as warmth or romanticism. People had to learn that their uninformed eye betrayed them when tempted to buy objects that were really “unnatural, meaningless, superfluous, unpractical, and overloaded” and “sugary, false, unreal, plagiaristic, badly faked, functionless, counterfeit.”¹¹

Similar reproaches also applied to objects that were not appropriate for East German circumstances at that time: objects whose production was extremely expensive for instance (because they were too big or unwieldy to use), or objects that were adorned in order to be adorned, that attracted attention in order to attract attention, that were different in order to be different, new in order to be new, or

derived their assumed beauty merely from the fact that they were supposed to be fashionable. Such taste preferences, according to the editors of the magazine, were dangerous because they made clear that too much importance was attached to material objects. In 1982 the magazine featured an article inviting readers to take a closer look inside a typical bourgeois home. The description of the interior includes a number of classical Marxist ideas:

Bald regt es sich die kurzen Wände entlang von allerlei verrenkten, miszfarbig gebeizten, heidenmässig mit Kupfer beschlagenen Kasten und Kästchen, die wildbaumelnde Herde der Beleuchtungskörper rückt lärmend ein, das 'Künstgewerbe' überflutet alle wehrlosen Standflächen. Schlangenlinien und Lilienwindungen wimmeln auf Tischdecken und Buchrücken; und drinnen, mitten in all dem schneidendfalschen Getön der ärgerlichsten Willkür, waltet die...Hausfrau [Soon the walls will be crammed with all kinds of cabinets and caskets in mismatched color stains and with dreadful copper fittings, the wildly dangling flock of lights overhanging blatantly, and the arts and crafts flooding the helpless floor space. Squiggly lines and scrolling lilies will abound on tablecloths and book spines; and within, in the midst of all the incisively false tone of highly irritating self-righteousness, reigns...the housewife]¹²

This popularized version of Marxist ideas on the fetishist relationship between people and objects in bourgeois, capitalist societies showed East German readers that their preference for fashionable, so-called chic things actually conveyed a form of alienation that characterized life in capitalist societies. In these societies, so the argument went, the urge to obtain ever more possessions went hand in hand with growing rivalry, and there was no room for sincere relationships between people. "The constitutive moment of bourgeois enjoyment...is exclusiveness, the exclusion of others," according to the East German philosopher Lothar Kühne in his book on aesthetics.¹³ It was up to East German designers and intellectuals to clarify these processes and explain to East German consumers that this was what would happen if they tried to surround themselves with objects that were dishonest and insincere, from an enlightened design point of view.

East German rhetoric on design and material culture was dominated by rigid and absolute terms, by phrases about the essence of things, true and insincere desires, and an honest taste. Reason was the only relevant yardstick, and East Germans had to relate rationally towards their material surroundings. Any other orientation, like emotions, senses, or fantasy, should be subjected to logical scrutiny. Even aesthetics and taste had to be based on a well-balanced rational analysis.

People's existing and former preferences were deemed irrelevant, except as starting points for further clarification and enlightenment.

In order to show how these abstract considerations were achieved in practice and what concrete objects they generated, it is necessary to first explain how the GDR's production process was organized.

Production in East Germany aimed to optimally develop socialist society. As explained by the East German Minister of Culture in 1958: "True progress is what allows for or coerces further development."¹⁴ Because general interests were best served when all available means, knowledge and capacities were used optimally, all East German production was centrally planned and mutually aligned: "East German economics is socialist, planned economics."¹⁵ The production of consumer goods was centrally planned by the national planning commission and based on regional reports. After planning, the commission delegated different tasks (research, design, production, and sales) to the various production units and companies. Whenever problems occurred, the national planning commission assigned a study group to examine the situation and find a solution.

To show why this central organization best served general interests, reference was made to capitalism's inefficient, extravagant legacy – an example of which was the production of light switches.¹⁶ In 1945, the region that was to become the GDR counted no fewer than seventeen different companies producing 1300 different light switches. Innumerable people throughout the country were thus involved with the same tasks, regarding the production of the same type of product. As this was considered an enormous waste of energy, manpower and financial means, the situation had to be changed as soon as possible. After careful examination, the amount of light switches was set at 178, which were no longer to be produced by seventeen, but only by two companies.

Mutual alignment not only took place at the national level, but also internationally. The socialist bloc countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Aid cooperated in production and trading. Their cooperation was largely based on forms of exchange in which money played a subordinate role. "It was almost medieval; we simply exchanged commodities," an East German philosopher explained ironically. These international agreements caused a great deal of problems. Frequently, the GDR did not receive the agreed amount of commodities, or they were not delivered in time, or their quality was worse than expected. When, for instance, Hungary did not deliver the ordered number of batteries in time, there was no other option but to wait, because Hungary produced batteries and the GDR did not. At a national level, such problems were the order of the day. In spite of such

shortcomings, the system of central (national and international) planning was not open to discussion.

An additional advantage of the plan system for the national economy was that product design could also be monitored centrally. Because, as sketched above, it was considered important for the inhabitants of the socialist state to be surrounded by the right forms, it was convenient to develop a national style that was in keeping with material culture's educative and progressive function. Professional designers were asked to take the lead in clearing the existing product-landscape and searching for a new, truly socialist form. In this way, they played an important role in restructuring East German material culture and adjusting it to the new state's demands.

The main task given to East German designers was to reduce the variety of forms and end the "form-wilderness" of objects.¹⁷ Starting in the late 1950s, the orders were for an all-encompassing "assortment clearance."¹⁸ This meant designers had to critically study all sorts of items, from coffeepots and washing-up bowls to socks, in order to select the most appropriately designed objects, which were then chosen for further production. The selection criteria were the same as discussed above: there was no room for bourgeois taste preferences or objects that expressed people's "desire for prestige" or "petty bourgeois ambitions."¹⁹ Showing off or making others envious was inappropriate and did not conform to socialist society's egalitarian ideals.²⁰ Objects considered as kitschy were also deemed inappropriate for production. If an object was designed in such a way that its function was hidden behind an irrelevant decoration, the object was considered dishonest, because it renounced its primary aim – to serve a specific goal. Usually, such objects also renounced their origin because their appearance suggested another area of production than the one in which they were actually made. Comparable critique applied to richly decorated objects, whose adornments disguised their industrial origins. People who preferred to be surrounded by such things were actually trying to escape from the present time.

These points of departure underpinned East German designers' search for forms that expressed contemporary, industrial means of production, and that were in keeping with the innermost functions and aims of the products concerned. All this was to be done as economically as possible, because all available means had to be used in a sensible and responsible way.

Thrift thus became the leading principle. It was regarded as an important virtue – not just for purely economic reasons (the amount of money, raw materials, and manpower used during production), but also from a more qualitative perspective. Too much adornment diverted attention from an object's function.



Figure 4.6 – East German living room, late 1960s

Source: Collection “Kultur im Heim,” Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt.

Uneconomically designed objects in general tended to overwhelm and belittle their users.²¹ In time, a material culture of frugality developed in the GDR. Both for economic reasons and inspired by an idealistic search for honest forms in line with present-day reality, designers tried to find forms and objects that were little more than their function’s packaging. Because an object’s appearance had to be subordinate to the people who used it, the ideal form resembled a wrapping or cover. Then the object could show what it was meant for: for closing, sealing and covering (technical) functions.²² This perspective gave rise to an economically inspired aesthetics.

The result was a rigidly functionalist design, in which objects with straight lines and angles were preferred to rounded or curved forms. Producing rectangular objects was easier and more efficient (with little loss of material) and they were easier to transport and store. It is therefore no wonder that kits became important “symbols of progress” in the GDR, since they “rationalize[d] production and show[ed] the world to be manufacturable.”²³ The ultimate aim was to develop a “rational engagement with furniture parts” that would “turn all elements into a uniform system.”²⁴



Figure 4.7 – East German living room, undated, late 1960s

Source: Collection “Kultur im Heim,” Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt.

In time, objects came to be merely recognized as parts of a larger whole, and the highest praise was reserved for objects that were perfectly able to “adjust – to an ensemble, an assortment, a collection, a kit, a room.” Because it would not work to combine a straight bed with a curved cabinet, more and more object forms were adjusted to suit each other. The possibility to stack objects became a form quality in its own right, and ever more designers opted for straight, clear lines and forms, and for a neutral and plain color: grey.²⁵

The fact that more and more objects tended to look alike was not deemed a disadvantage, because the key search was for “design qualities that were not determined by originality, but by objectivity.” The idea was to develop forms “of which even the smallest detail was rationally determined,” with a mutual alignment of all outer characteristics. Such forms were the result of scientific thinking. In them, “science and rationality found their formal expression...even though they were mediated by the designer’s subjectivity.”²⁶

While doing all they could for the continual adjustment, merging and exchangeability of separate elements and parts, East German designers were ordered to investigate how “built-in furniture” could further save space. And by the end of the 1960s, the “link between furniture and architecture” was being investigated in order to discover how separate parts of housing accommodation could be turned into “different elements of a uniform system.” Sometimes the entire interior of

a flat, the furniture and its lay-out were aligned. In such cases it was crucial to execute the “formal coherence” of all parts, down to the tiniest details. “Separate products were to show their family resemblance very clearly, details of form were to recur, colors were to be adapted to each another, standardized parts were to be used, and the whole thing should be subject to a modular system.”²⁷

Rational, functional, enlightened, in accordance with present-day reality, no deceit, no insincere seduction, mutual alignment, and as economical as possible: those were East German design’s main tenets to optimally serve society’s further development. The overall image is overwhelmingly consistent, with everything being subordinate to reason. If a form was right, one could learn to appreciate it. Because modernist designers’ vision seamlessly embraced the government’s cost-cutting aims, the two parties naturally found each other in an outspokenly frugal material culture.

Because, as mentioned before, all decisions in the East German planned economy were taken or confirmed centrally, the overview presented above certainly suggests that the state ultimately even decided how people were allowed to furnish their apartments. However, one of the main reasons why East German history is so fascinating to study is that, in spite of its rigid ideology and seemingly rigid economic structure, it was characterized throughout by internal contradictions. Nothing was what it seemed, and this certainly applied to the material world, which in a number of ways came to look slightly different than what is sketched above.

The main reason why everyday reality did not match the previously mentioned ideal lies in the fact that the designers’ role in the production process, which although definitely greater than in market economies, was frequently frustrated by two different factors.²⁸ First, there were the ineradicable, bourgeois taste preferences of the people with whom they collaborated during production, and second they had to deal with the rigid, international economic circumstances. Thus, many designers’ propositions frequently crashed before they were even taken into production. By describing and analyzing this process in the following section, I give a concrete illustration of what East Germany’s “constitutive contradictoriness” refers to in the domain of material culture.

“Far Too Modern for Our People,” and Economic Gaps

East German designers often had a hard task, for they were actually battling two fronts at the same time. While attempting to adjust East Germans’ taste preferences

to present-day circumstances and challenges, they were constantly hindered at the production site. When a particular design was ready for production, it regularly happened that the factory suddenly decided that other interests had to prevail, or a party-member with a good position at the factory suddenly decided to change the design according to his own liking. This happened quite frequently, sometimes because he did not like the product or did not know anything about design. One designer told me about an older female party-member who held a high position at the factory where one of his products was to be made. When the designer showed her cloth samples, she crankily remarked: "Oh no! We don't want those materials! No, this is far too modern for our people! That one is too daring, and that one is too colorful. No. This is what we will do." She then simply swept his plans off the table. Another designer explained in more detail that designs were often discarded or changed because East German policymakers, party-members and people with a high position in industry usually had a totally different taste than professional designers:

The former category was often from a poor, working class background, where there was only enough money for the bare necessities. For a long time those people had looked up to a somewhat flashy form of comfort, which for them was the ultimate ideal. The interiors they had seen at the mayor and the notary's house – that was what they wanted: a shiny cabinet with glass doors, enabling one to see the beautiful glass-ware and the fancy dishes inside, a beautifully adorned candelabra on top, and a copious sofa next to it, with beautiful and richly decorated upholstery. That was their petty bourgeois image of an ideal home and how things were done by people in a certain position. That was the image of prosperity they would strive for if they obtained such a position themselves and what they wanted to spend their money on. So those were the kinds of objects that had to be made. When confronted with something that was too modern, too simple, and too plain – for instance a white tea service without golden edging or enrichments – they told us: "That is not what our people want." And maybe that was correct, but they themselves did not want it in the first place. The petty bourgeois ideal always remained intact in our country, and whenever some high-ranking party member had something to say, he could change the plans to suit his own wishes.²⁹

This story shows that at the local level, those who were responsible for the state's frugal policy only subscribed to the economic aspects of its thrifty ideology on material culture and design. The match between the economic necessity of thrift



Figure 4.8 – Multiple room wall system ‘Frankfurt,’ undated, early 1970s
 Source: Collection “Kultur im Heim,” Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR,
 Eisenhüttenstadt. Photo by Michael Weimer.



Figure 4.9 – East German living room interior with wall system ‘Carat,’ 1972
 Source: Collection “Kultur im Heim,” Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR,
 Eisenhüttenstadt.

and most designers' frugal ideas, which was pledged at the national level, was locally frustrated by party bosses and others in power who clung to their old taste preferences, even though they were not sensible or socialistically sound. If even loyal party members' tastes were not susceptible to rational consideration, we might safely conclude that East German material reality was less open for change and enlightenment than the lucid socialist ideals would suggest.

This was exactly my experience on visiting the former GDR for the first time, when I was struck by the odd combination of strict lines and mismatched ornamentation. The furniture on Weimar's streets showed a striking compromise between designers' functionalist-inspired and economically reasonable ideas on the one hand, and falling behind, petty bourgeois taste preferences of party-bosses and most consumers on the other – a compromise between modern lines and a cozy-looking decor.

A comparable compromise manifested itself in the way chipboard was used. The product as such perfectly suited the socialist state's ideals: it exemplified the optimal use of raw materials, was visibly industrially produced and thus perfectly present-day. Remarkably, most chipboard objects and furniture that were produced and used in the GDR were covered with plastic foil with a wood design, thus disguising the manufactured product, making it look like natural wood. Just like the party-bosses, who adjusted modern objects to old-fashioned taste preferences, the chipboard embellishments also proved that the sound socialist ideas on design were not as widely appreciated as well-meaning idealists hoped.

Most designers knew that their ideas for functional products were relatively unpopular. "Many people didn't like objects that clearly showed their function. They wanted to have richly embellished things, with for instance a flowery edging and elegant finish," a middle-aged female designer told me. Her remark was substantiated by many East German consumers. "In our country, everything always looked the same: straightforward and unadorned. We didn't like that. We preferred objects with a little adornment here, and a little trimming there," people explained to me. But trimmings and adornments were not in line with socialist policy, and designers stuck to a rational, more or less ageless ideal, where form follows function.

At the academy, students even learned to design *contrary to* the somewhat softer, rounded, fashionable (and western-looking) forms that so many East German consumers desired, as Karin, a 35-year-old designer, explained:

These forms were regarded as a genuflection for naive consumers, whereas consumers needed to be educated. And that was what we were for. It was

not our task to make what people wanted or liked. Because what they liked and wanted was no design. It had nothing to do with design at all – that was what we learned.

But frequently she too had to accept that once her well-considered designs were being produced, they would be embellished with colorful, flowery motives.

The material objects that came to dominate the East German product world were the result of an interesting combination of factors and forces: the modernist ideas of relatively highly educated designers who were supported by national policies (if only for economic reasons), but constantly frustrated by the unenlightened taste preferences of consumers, some of whom had the power and capacity to actually obstruct designers' work.

The third force that had a major influence on the East German material landscape was money. When discussing material culture's everyday form and socialist ideals with a highly educated, prominent party member, he snarled curtly: "Ideology?? Socialist personality?? Come on! It was all a matter of money! Our objects were ugly because we couldn't afford anything else. Besides, there was no need to please the eye; people bought everything anyway." All the beautiful, educative ideas on design discussed above were swept aside as completely irrelevant. The GDR's material appearance and decor had primarily been determined by the country's poor economic situation. His remark further clarified what I had seen on the side streets of Weimar and Rudolstadt: an impossible compromise between modern-enlightened and traditional-bourgeois, that was further compromised by the GDR's permanent lack of money and raw materials.

The impact of East Germany's economic developments on its material culture can hardly be overstated – especially with regard to the period from the end of the 1970s. "In fact," a retired doctor explained to me, "East German economics were characterized by gaps. There was a constant succession of gaps and shortages, and in fact this was pre-programmed in the socialist economic system." To illustrate his point, he referred to the area he knew best: the pharmaceutical industry.

Today we have about eighty thousand different medicines. Some of them chemically work the same, curing the same symptoms. This variety was considered undesirable in the GDR. Therefore, the amount of medication was limited to about two thousand types: there was one medication for each symptom. This could have worked well, but the problems were insurmountable when one of the ingredients was not available. Then the whole plan went haywire, and certain medicines were simply not available. This



Figure 4.10 – Ökonometer
Source: Dokumentationszentrum
Alltagskultur der DDR.

was almost perpetually the case: then there were no medicines for headaches, and then there was nothing for rheumatics or corns, etc.

In spite of the country's continual shortages and planning deficiencies, official policy never openly revealed or discussed the less than rosy economic situation. Time and time again, people were confronted with announcements applauding the latest positive developments in the field of production and public welfare.

In 1978, for instance, a picture of the so-called Ecometer was displayed on every street corner (see figure 4.10). Its message read: "Out of every working hour, every mark [the GDR's currency, mv], and every gram of raw material, we obtain more useful products." In light of the ongoing shortages that plagued East German planning and production at the time, the message comes across as an outright lie. But as I mentioned before, nothing was what it seemed in the GDR, and that also applied to this message. For it was indeed true that East Germany managed to produce ever more with ever fewer materials. An employee of a furniture manufacturer told me laughingly how this came about: "You want to know how we managed to make more pasta out of less wheat? We simply enlarged the holes in our macaroni!" It was a joke, but when she explained how the furniture industry managed to continuously raise its production levels, the reality was no laughing matter.

There were plenty of ways to increase production. If, for instance, we used more expensive materials, we didn't have to produce as many items. Another trick was to send the products back and forth. For example, we bought chair components from company X, assembled them at our company, then sent them – still as separate components – to a firm to upholster them, after which the items were returned to us, and we produced the chair that was then sent to yet another company which packaged the products. By continually sending objects back and forth, their price went up and so did our turnover. Once we had bad luck: the Russians delivered the materials we had ordered at a lower price than expected. This made our production cheaper than planned, reducing our turnover. The party summoned us to explain what had happened, and we were reprimanded. Nowadays this is inconceivable – we would be delighted to obtain cheap materials! From a market-economic perspective, it is a clear example of things being turned upside down.

The story not only exemplifies some of the planned economy's main failures. It also shows how much effort people put into upholding the beautiful-sounding promises despite the stubborn and disappointing reality confronting them.

"In fact it was impossible," a woman explained, "to make plans, let alone achieve them." She had been responsible for making and checking the economic plans for Rudolstadt region's thirty bookshops, but she pointed out how impossible it was to know in advance how many books would be sold in each shop in the following year. One could not make solid plans, but it was a public secret that the plans were creatively adjusted afterwards.

Sometimes this happened in public. Then, reference was made to the objective reasons (i.e. caused somewhere else) for why the plan was not accomplished. For instance, an archive record of an *Exquisit* shop's plan states: "Because there are objective reasons for insufficient fulfillment of the plan, trading figures for February have dropped statistically by one-and-a-half million."³⁰ Usually, however, the plans were adjusted less discernably – by creative accounting. In Rudolstadt's Allotment Association's plans for the year 1975, one column mentions that the small stock figures had not improved since last year, whereas another column mentions a 10 percent rise.³¹ When I asked her to explain, the archives assistant said this was probably correct: she assumed that the gardeners had acquired fewer animals, but slaughtered more than in the previous year.

These examples show, each in their own way, that people did their utmost best to uphold the positive tone so characteristic of the GDR's public sphere. Apart



tassenwasser
tijen-shove
lotion après rasage



Handcreme
Handcream
Crème pour mains



Lotion

Figure 4.11a and b – East German drugstore products

Source: Georg C. Bertsch, Ernst Hedler, and Matthias Dietz. SED. Schönes Einheits Design. Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1990.

from creative accounting, understatements and other forms of beautification were frequently used to flatter developments. If it was impossible to leave out a negative development, people often enveloped it in beautiful-sounding phrases. A confidential archive document from 1963 about trading and supplies in Rudolstadt mentions the following: “The women of our area are still very much engaged in all the issues pertaining to the maintenance of peace and the problems of the Moscow Agreement, but also in matters of supply.”³² The document is telling: twenty-six positive words, followed by an almost negligible six-worded remark. The same applies to the following message on the state of affairs concerning food supplies, which dates from the year 1983 and has a positive ring:

The available amount of potatoes guarantees the population a stable supply in the nearby future. Problems exist in the preservation of quality, due to increasing *Schwarzfleckigkeit* [black spot]. In the vegetables category we are able to provide sufficient lettuce, rhubarb, onions, white cabbage and sauerkraut. There are also enough apples.³³

The positive tone of the message is so dominant, that it takes a second read to realize that the population of Rudolstadt had to be satisfied, in the middle of June, with a rather limited choice of vegetables, while the potatoes had black spots.



Figure 4.12 – Packing of a Heli-Radio receiver. Regular corrugated cardboard was used in combination with a tag showing the company's brand label. Heli-Radio, a private company until 1972, was famous for the professionally designed corporate design of the mid-1960s as well as for their functionalist radio designs. Undated, probably 1970s or 1980s. Source: Packaging collection, Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt. Photo: Andreas Ludwig.

Besides quality, the appearance of most consumer goods also suffered from the poor economic circumstances, the director of Gera's Museum of Applied Arts explained, while showing me the museum's East German packaging and consumer goods collection. Going past the material remains of the old days, he repeatedly drew my attention to the poor and loveless appearance of the products. "And then always this serial production," he sighed, pointing to the drugstore products.

The color of the label was the only way to tell whether you were holding a bottle of pills for headaches, diarrhea, or stomach-ache, or if it was a bottle of shampoo, nail polish remover, or hair lotion. But even the colors were difficult to distinguish. They were all of the same dull hue. In this country, yellow was never really yellow and blue was never really blue. There was simply no money to obtain good, richly pigmented coloring.

Since East German packaging was usually of a rather coarse, thick paper that bore some resemblance to cardboard and typically had a very loose structure, the coloured ink was almost entirely absorbed into the paper's pores. Most packaging was therefore reminiscent of today's vaguely colored, eco-friendly toilet paper. It often had a simple white sticker with "light bulb, 40 Watts" written on it. The general image was extremely disconsolate. The director showed me a packet of biscuits, and judging by its appearance, it could have contained anything – from elastic bands to rat poison – except biscuits.³⁴



Figure 4.13 – Chairs in a waiting room in Rudolstadt, 1994

Source: Picture by the author.

The GDR had insufficient financial resources to produce vibrantly colored paint, good paper, or a variety of packaging.³⁵ Sometimes the overall shortages were such that extreme measures were necessary. An inhabitant of a hamlet near Rudolstadt told me that one day, when the Soviet Union was unable to deliver the agreed amount of maize, the whole country was ordered to plant maize. Even the garden of the small local school did not grow anything but maize that year.

In order to rid itself of international dependency, East German industry was continually encouraged to “cut back and intensify the use of indigenous resources” and “*abgestimmte Veredlungskonzepte* [coordinated refinement concepts].”³⁶ No matter how beautiful the words, in practice it meant that the holes in the macaroni were bigger, or that chair-leg producers used so little metal that chairs could easily sag under the slightest weight or movement (see figure 4.13).

The quality of East German products became worse and worse, the country was simply *runtergerubelt* [Russicism, literally: rouble down], and ever more people began complaining: about the bottles of beer – which people used to turn upside down to check whether they contained flakes, as beer was made from surrogates instead of real malt and hops; about the clothes made of surrogate cotton, which caused excessive perspiration when worn; about the chocolate produced with almost no cacao; about the butter that contained too much water; about the

chewing gum that fell apart when you chewed it and later became so hard that it almost broke your teeth; about the jeans-surrogate which the GDR eventually managed to develop, but which did not even look like the original; about the furniture made from pressed paper, which miraculously did not fall apart spontaneously; about the water taps made of plastic, and the cars made of paper; about the sandals that were made of pressed paper instead of leather, with plastic soles instead of rubber.³⁷

As these examples show, East German products were to a certain extent fake: fake chocolate, fake cotton, fake rubber, beer, butter, cars and wooden furniture. Dissatisfaction was growing. People not only complained about the quality, but also about products' appearance, their availability, variety and price. In one of Rudolstadt's *Exquisit* shops, female customers were unsatisfied with the garments on display: they were not enticed by "trousers made of polyester-silk with bright glittery effects." They did not want to spend half their wages on stuffy winter jackets, for they wanted "elegant, cotton, fur-trimmed coats."³⁸ But they were not available.

Billboards along East German highways never stopped showing that: *Chemie gibt Brot, Wohlstand und Schönheit* [the chemical industry will provide bread, welfare and beauty]. This motto, which once expressed a promising future optimism, in the end was merely cynical, unable to conceal the fact that there was not enough money for cotton, metal, hops and malt. But none of this could really be said out loud.³⁹ If there was no butter, newspapers published articles explaining in detail that butter was actually not very healthy and that margarine was preferable.

In the GDR, the reality was always embellished. The media outdid each other with their jubilant declarations: "Year after year the planning goals for the production of consumer goods are fulfilled and improved" or "the rate of agrarian production has grown during the year 1986 and is five times higher than in the period 1981-1985."⁴⁰ Shops aimed to "cream off more money [in the next year] and in the years thereafter," and economic diagrams always showed a rising trend.⁴¹ Whenever Honecker or another important politician travelled through the country, the houses along his route were painted afresh and the field in front of the factory he was going to visit was sprayed with green paint.⁴²

In the course of East Germany's entire history, the optimistic and cheerful messages remained the same: it won't take long, we're doing our best, and it is getting better. East German public life was dominated by positive words, whereas everybody could see with their own eyes how dreadful the economic situation actually was. Because every level of East German bureaucracy messed around with facts and figures, trying to enhance reality on paper, Mary Fulbrook concludes that

Honecker and his colleagues lived in a “hall of mirrors, where the messages that were reflected from the center came back from the provinces in a slightly moderated form.”⁴³

I always wondered what it would have been like to live amidst beautiful promises and the harsh reality of beer with flakes and chocolate without cacao. I have given a few examples of the complaints and dissatisfaction this caused. It would not have been difficult to extend the list and fill many pages. One would therefore expect East Germans to have increasingly turned away from the state, de-identifying with it and its false promises. One would expect the pact between state and citizens, which was based on high hopes and far-reaching promises in the wake of material improvement, to be crushed by the disappointing East German material conditions. To a certain extent, that was indeed the case. It is no coincidence that when German historian Lutz Niethammer was doing an oral history project in the GDR in 1988, he was particularly struck by the omnipresent critiques on the country’s material situation.⁴⁴ And of course, these critiques played a central role in East Germans’ mounting desires vis-à-vis the western consumer world.

At the same time, however, it soon became clear to me that the material and economic hardships people suffered also generated behavior and forms of social contact that characterized East German life in a positive way. It may be hard to believe, but the pact between state and citizens seems to have partly survived – in spite of the frustrations about unfulfilled promises – because the promises were not fulfilled.

Queuing and Mutual Equality

Material shortages were a recurrent theme in my conversations with East Germans. Many people told me that in the old days, experience simply taught them that it was not wise to go shopping with specific items in mind. After all, you could never be sure which goods would be available or not. Sometimes there was no washing powder, sometimes no milk. After the *Wende*, Matthias Biskupek, a writer from Rudolstadt, described the GDR as the country inhabited by *Beuteldeutschen* [shopping-bag Germans].⁴⁵ Due to the permanent shortages, East Germans always had a shopping bag with them. One never knew in advance what would happen – one might even run into something that one just happened to need...

People were therefore always preoccupied with being able to buy certain things. This is not to say that they were constantly buying things. They were constantly trying to make deals that would allow them to buy or obtain things in the future.

For an outsider like me, it was fascinating to hear their stories. Not just because they opened up a world I did not know, but also for more theoretical reasons. The constant shortages made the East German economy function according to a completely different set of values than I knew. Whereas the value of money declined, social contacts were invaluable. But the deplorable material situation also triggered forms of behavior that had profound effects on East German social life.

I overheard innumerable stories about the different methods people used in order to acquire all their bare necessities. People were constantly exchanging and arranging necessary purchases. At work, women frequently circulated notes so that they could all write down what they needed from the supermarket, the grocery store and the butcher. Then they allocated the tasks, and one went to queue here, the other there. “As soon as we heard that they had a specific kind of meat somewhere, everyone left work in order to get a place in the queue. But even then, you often came home empty-handed, because the saleswoman had put it aside for her acquaintances,” a middle-aged civil servant recalled. Because shopping in the socialist bloc was so unpredictable, the Polish psychologist Zbigniew Czwartosz has compared socialist consumers with hunters:

The Poles go shopping like hunters go hunting. Just like hunters, they do not know precisely ‘what’ they will manage to track down. They do get a clear hint when to start the action. And that is the sight of a queue. We react to the queue like a fisherman to a jerk on his bait. We get a thrill of emotion and enter the stage of our everyday life theatre.⁴⁶

As soon as there was a queue somewhere, people joined it – even if they did not know what they were queuing for. All they knew was that at the end of the queue something was for sale, and it hardly mattered what that was: rare goods were always useful. So instead of asking what was for sale and whether one needed it, the automatic reaction when seeing a queue was simply to think “buy it.” Czwartosz’s five-year-old son once came home very disappointed, saying that he had not been able to buy parsley, because there was no queue anywhere. “The lack of a queue met a gap in his knowledge about shopping.”⁴⁷

Czwartosz’s article illustrates that people’s desires were to a great extent determined by the (un)availability of goods. This conclusion corresponded with the stories I heard. One of my acquaintances in Rudolstadt told me the following story:

Whenever the supermarkets put signs on a certain product to indicate that individual customers were only entitled to buy a limited amount, it was obvious that this product was in short supply. Just for fun, we then

placed the sign somewhere else – on a product that was widely available. Within no time that product was sold out, whereas the product that was really in short supply was not sold at all!!

Another woman told me: “Because we were always running after goods, the GDR was frequently referred to as the running-club.” Often people started to stock Christmas presents around September already, for if you started in December, you would certainly not find everything you needed in time. The same applied to the ingredients for baking Christmas cakes – almonds, for instance, or raisins, or coconut. Such foodstuffs were always scarce, and whenever they were available, they were sold out within a few hours, “because people do their utmost best to meet their year-round needs.”⁴⁸ Hoarding was common practice in the GDR. People did not buy what they needed but what they were allowed to (sales of so-called deficiency goods were limited).⁴⁹

An older woman from a village close to Rudolstadt once told me about the day her daughter wanted to buy a winter coat. Her husband and daughter went into town together to find a coat. She had told them not to worry about money: the most important thing was that they buy a good, warm coat. When they came home later that afternoon, they appeared not to have a coat, but a bathing suit. They had not seen any winter coats at all, but as soon as they saw the bathing suits, there was no doubt in their minds at all, and they instantly decided to buy one. After all, you never knew whether bathing suits would be available next summer.

The father in this story knew that his daughter actually needed a bathing suit, but often people simply bought an item just because it was hard to get – even if they knew they were not going to need it themselves. Such haphazardly bought items did not necessarily end up in the attic. Frequently, something turned out to be useful in an unexpected way, for instance when you ran into an acquaintance who appeared to be in need of that specific item and who was happy to exchange it for something you yourself needed.

Due to the continual shortage of a wide range of goods, the customer was never king in the GDR, but treated as beggar. The opposite applied to people who worked in a shop or restaurant. They were extremely powerful. “I never had such a large circle of friends as *zu DDR-Zeiten* [the days of the GDR], when I worked in a shop selling household goods,” a young man told me. Everybody came up to him asking: “Do you happen to have a so-and-so, can you arrange this or that for me?” A similar story came from a woman who worked in a restaurant. She explained that she was regularly exchanging restaurant seats for goods. On special occasions she and her colleagues reserved tables for special guests – the women working



Figure 4.14 a and b – Houses in (the vicinity of) Rudolstadt, 1994
 Source: Pictures by the author.

in the children’s wear shop, for instance, who could have a seat in exchange for babies’ nappies.

As these stories show, it paid to have a job in a shop or other access to scarce goods and services. Many people grew strawberries or asparagus in their garden as exchange-capital. Such luxury goods were always scarce, and being unnecessary, they were unaffordable and therefore very suitable exchange objects. “Goods are the real currency in this country. Those with something to give have the potential to obtain.”⁵⁰ Certain goods such as spare parts for cars and building materials were always hard to get. They were invaluable: once you obtained such goods, everything else was accessible. One way to obtain them was by maintaining an extensive exchange network. The significance of such networks was highlighted in a story told by Mr. Linke, a middle-aged man who used to work as a taxi-driver. He managed to build his own house which, considering the permanent shortages of building materials, had certainly not been easy. He bought only a small amount of the required materials in shops – the rest he had managed to acquire through all kinds of unofficial arrangements. It had taken him only eight years to build the house, which was a relatively short period. He could only achieve this, he explained, because he had done nothing else but work and build, and because he knew a lot of

people (through his work) who were able to get him what he needed. He sometimes refused to drive people unless they brought him a bag of sand, stones or mortar. He explained that this was the reason why so many houses in the GDR looked as if they were made from different scraps of materials. “Everything was so scarce, that you were happy to get at least something; the question of whether it fitted in with the rest was completely irrelevant. The result usually looked rather hotchpotch: different sizes of kitchen tiles, and general mismatching in almost every domain.”

The permanent shortages and waiting-lists also led to widescale bribery and corruption.⁵¹ The man who owned the only furniture shop in Rudolstadt that was still successful after the *Wende* told me that he believed the reason for his success was that he was the only one who had always traded fairly. That is: he had always divided up the available furniture in an honest way. Even when high-ranking party-members came to the shop and asked if he could arrange a certain couch or side table, he treated them in exactly the same way as he treated others: they could put their name on a list, and then they had to wait. In most shops, things went differently. A woman told me about her attempts to acquire a new television set. She was on the waiting list, and one day a saleswoman told her that a delivery of new televisions was expected the next morning. Because she really wanted one, she arranged for some of her family to spend the night on the pavement in front of the store. In the end, she was able to buy a television, but even so, she had seriously reckoned with the possibility of coming away empty-handed. Certain goods were so scarce and so desired, she explained, that they were usually sold under the counter. As soon as they arrived, the salespeople put them under the proverbial counter in order to sell them to the person with whom they had made an agreement (usually a person who happened to have something the saleswoman needed). When the specific customer arrived to buy the so-called *Bückwaren* [articles sold under the counter], the saleswoman bent down to get the objects from under the counter and sold them. Referring to these practices, many shopkeepers said that their job actually did not involve selling goods, but redistributing them.

The same situation applied to services. Sometimes, people even traded places on a waiting list – for example when buying a car. The continual shortages led to the habit of moonlighting, and East Germans developed other creative tactics. Under the motto “private above adversity,” people frequently stole materials from their workplace in order to trade them amongst each other. These practices were generally known – business crime was even recorded in the plan.⁵² A form of bribery was even used by the state from time to time – for instance, when the political situation was tense, or when something special was about to occur (elections).

Such situations were designated as *versorgungspolitischen Schwerpunkte* [supply-political main points].⁵³ In order to secure a calm and reasonably satisfied mood amongst the population, scarce goods were made available in order to buy popular support. A few extra truckloads of oranges were enough to obtain a satisfactory result or, as was stated in a report on the local political situation in the year 1983: “Further progress was attained [through] politically influencing the availability of extra consumer goods for popular supply.”⁵⁴

East Germany’s widescale corruption undoubtedly had far-reaching negative economic consequences, but from a social point of view, the consequences were markedly positive. As sketched above, social life in the GDR was upheld by large-scale exchange networks which kept people informed of each other’s wishes, needs, frustrations and searches. Theatre tickets were exchanged for stockings, baby clothes were bartered for a bathroom-mat, and if you knew someone who kept rabbits or worked at a butcher’s shop, you would certainly be tucking into rabbit or goose at Christmas. Money played a subordinate role in these networks. Whereas national economics were plagued by continual financial shortages, the majority of the East German population had enough money at its disposal. Their main problem was the inability to spend it on things they really wanted.

Traditional economic thinking has long seen barter as the forerunner or breeding ground for financial deals. The East German situation actually showed the opposite: here, barter functioned as a way to solve the problems originating in the financial economy.⁵⁵ The stories I recorded in Rudolstadt show that barter should certainly not be seen as a non-monetary form of trade. Even *if* people negotiated the goods and amounts to be exchanged, there were no external, objective criteria to calculate the value of exchanged goods. Value was determined solely by both parties’ interests in the other’s possession. And when goods and desires happened to match, an exchange was made. There was no financial gain, and the entire process was set in motion by people trying to satisfy their own desires, helping each other along the way. The social element was a welcome side-effect, independently adding value to the interaction. Because the implicit rule that you get something from me and I get something from you is a far more social affair than an exchange organized according to externally recognized values (money), barter is a form of exchange “which creates social relations in its own mode.”⁵⁶

The anecdotes about barter and exchange I encountered in Rudolstadt clearly illustrate Mauss’s widely accepted idea that the exchange of goods encourages mutual solidarity. A wide web of social relationships was woven throughout the town, linking everyone to countless others through countless strands. Through the pro-

cess of bartering and exchanging goods, people were in touch with and linked up with others.

The other major consequence of permanent shortages, that is to say queuing, had a similar effect. Standing in line together, waiting for scarce goods, led to a certain commonality amongst the queuing people. Existing social-economic differentiations faded temporarily – everyone had to queue up for oranges, the doctor just as much as the worker and the party-member just as much as the critical teenager.

While standing and grumbling together, people experienced something communal that surpassed the mutual differences prevailing elsewhere. Although people with a rich network of acquaintances or a higher social position probably spent less time queuing than others, they also had to stand and wait until they were served, or to see what was for sale. If they wanted to obtain scarce goods, they were also dependent on factors beyond their power. Thus, queuing also had a certain leveling, democratizing effect and: “[A]rticulated (in grumbling) were often interests that transcended the individual...in being annoyed they were one.”⁵⁷ The fact that people knew each other’s needs and wants also helped to create a certain intimacy or community feeling, which was the direct result of the GDR’s continual scarcities and economic misery.

Interestingly, solidarity amongst the East German population, which the socialist state had promised, was indeed a result of the material situation – not because it had improved, but because it failed to improve. Anthropologist Chris Hann draws a comparable conclusion about Polish farmers before the upheaval of 1989-1990. The highly praised mutual solidarity, which the Polish state made a great ideological song and dance about, was primarily experienced when people were queuing together in front of a shop: “[A] true spirit of solidarity developed during the hours (sometimes days) they spent waiting at the shop for the delivery truck to arrive.”⁵⁸

More generally, one could even conclude that, in as much as solidarity and feelings of commonality did characterize East German daily life, they were to a certain extent the result of the state’s inability to fulfill its material and consumer promises. People suffered the same shortages, almost everyone (except the small circle at the head of the socialist unity party) had to stand in the same queues, and scarcity compelled people to develop a much larger social network than they otherwise would have had. All those very practical, everyday forms of sharing and social contact generated a feeling of commonality, solidarity and mutual equality that people dearly missed after the *Wende*.

Life in the GDR was dominated by a huge discrepancy between the state’s claims and everyday reality. Nothing was what it was said to be. Newspapers

merely presented beautiful promises that hardly anyone gave credence to. The retired judge mentioned before, who had remained a loyal party-member, recalled a party conference in the mid-1980s. While socialist praises were again being sung in the most beautiful words, he shoved a note to one of his party colleagues stating: "Sure, things are great in this country! That's why the shops are always empty, and there is nothing for sale." Looking back, he compared the GDR with the fairytale of the emperor's new clothes: "Everyone had to be jubilant about things no one could see."

Although ultimately no one believed that the beautiful-sounding words would ever become reality, people still cooperated in reproducing them – perhaps not wholeheartedly, but grumbling and complaining, secretly sending notes to each other, but still... at all bureaucratic levels people beautified reality. Everyone helped to uphold a reality no one believed in.

It is reminiscent of the situation in Syria, evocatively described and analyzed by political scientist Lisa Wedeen. She describes a country where the inhabitants collectively act as if they believe in the language of power. The insincerity is so evident that the question arises of why politics are based "on the external and easily falsified trappings of loyalty, rather than on people's internal beliefs."⁵⁹ Wedeen's comments are highly relevant when trying to understand why the pact between East German citizens and the state remained intact in spite of material promises not being fulfilled.

According to Wedeen, people participating in actions they do not believe in contribute to a mentality of powerlessness, thus implicitly proving and helping to realize the power of the state.⁶⁰ Participating and acting as if reality was as beautiful as described on paper shows that "the regime can make most people obey most of the time."⁶¹ This binds people. It incriminates them, making them "aware of their willingness to comply."⁶² In doing so, they become enmeshed with and part of the state apparatus.

Wedeen's conclusions aptly capture what I have tried to show empirically in this chapter: that it was impossible to draw a line between the East German state and its citizens. Everyone helped to enhance the printed version of reality. Party bosses and ordinary people – everyone complained about unadorned tea services and empty shops. And as Mary Fulbrook showed: the beautiful-sounding promises were sent from the center to the rest of the country, after which almost equally beautiful messages were sent back from the regions to the administrative center. It was almost impossible to think of a position "strictly outside or inside the state."⁶³ East Germans were not only subordinate to the power and language of the socialist state, in myriad ways they also reproduced them themselves; by writing that plans

had been achieved again, and that the women in the Rudolstadt area were primarily occupied with “issues pertaining to the maintenance of peace.”⁶⁴

Instead of studying East German society as one in which everything was determined and orchestrated by the centre, it is more beneficial to focus on the constant “interaction and mutual dependence between rulers and ruled.”⁶⁵ The next chapter will deal with this interaction and mutual dependence. There I will show that it was specifically the East German state’s omnipresence which eventually privatized the state: “[P]recisely because [the state] had lost its limits, in a certain sense [it] became increasingly *vergesellschaftet* [indistinguishable from society].”⁶⁶ This certainly plays a role in explaining why during my fieldwork so many East Germans kept on defining themselves as *East German*.

Chapter 5

The East German Dictatorship

The classification of political ideas into only two categories, *dominance* and *resistance*, gives analytic life to a mythical reduction of the complexity and multifacetedness of human thought. There can be many more than two sides, many more than two postures, many more than two ideas of 'reality' (Sally Falk-Moore, 1993).¹

One of the most interesting themes which emerged from my conversations with people was the way the power of the state featured in their past. On the one hand, people wholeheartedly admitted that the state had exerted a far-reaching influence on their existence. In their stories, the state was generally portrayed as a distant entity, responsible for everything that had gone wrong in the GDR: "Them at the top, they were always thinking up such strange things..." At the same time, the influence of the state was perceived in a highly relative way, with phrases such as: "It wasn't that bad, we didn't take it seriously." Furthermore, as will be shown in this chapter, it was precisely thanks to the bond between state and citizenry that the majority of the people I met had not seen the state as a threat, but on the contrary as a force that had actually played a rather positive role in daily life. It was partly due to the state's omnipresence that the general atmosphere in the GDR had been so warm and friendly.

Initially, I found this inconceivable. Why did people's stories about the past sound so mild, sometimes even entirely positive, and nearly always defensive – as for instance in the frequently heard sentence "es war nicht alles schlecht damals [it wasn't all that bad]." Two of the most frequently mentioned positive aspects people recalled were the warmth and mutual equality that had supposedly characterized their former lives. Yet another comment that many people repeated about their past was: "We were all in the same boat then." Spoken in a somewhat defensive manner, like an excuse, the same boat apparently represented the security brought about by mutual equality.²

Although I did occasionally hear critical comments about the past, they were negligible compared to the amount of protective and positive accounts. The main criticism was limited to material consumption. The major problems and limita-

tions that I as westerner was used to associating with living in a dictatorship appeared to have been relatively insignificant for most East Germans, as they were only mentioned by a relatively small number of people. I could not understand this. In my eyes, the GDR had been above all a state where deprived liberty, oppression, and restriction were the order of the day. And the neutral and positive way in which East Germans identified their former existence was a mystery to me.

Naturally, I could appreciate that it must be hard for East Germans to be constantly confronted with westerners' negative, one-sided perspective of their past. And I also appreciated that my attempts to understand their history were greatly hindered by the fierce conflict concerning East Germany's past that had been raging between East and West Germans since the *Wende* in 1989. The people I met were accustomed to westerners being nothing but judgmental about the past. As they assumed beforehand that my questions would be based on western disapproval, I saw their positive comments about bygone days primarily as a reaction to this negativity. However, time and time again people tried to explain to me that this was not the only issue, and that I did not understand anything about life in the GDR if I was not able to appreciate that there were positive sides to their lives, also as a result of the dictatorship. It was stalemate: whilst I could not help approaching East Germany's past in a rather negative way, my informants tried to convince me that it was not so bad. "That's just the way it was," was the third most often repeated sentence, emphasizing that what westerners saw as horrific was merely a way of life for East Germans.

Thus, these three sentences used by East Germans to ward off criticism from westerners show that there were positive sides to life in East Germany which have never been understood by the west.

1. "Es war nicht alles schlecht damals [It wasn't all bad in the past]."

I wondered, in silence: "Wasn't it? Tell me one thing that can withstand critical scrutiny!"

2. "Damals saßen wir allen im gleichen Boot [We were all in the same boat then]."

I wondered, in silence: "That's what I mean: imagine finding consolation because everyone is equally badly off!"

3. "Es war nun mal so [That's just the way it was]."

I wondered, in silence: "Right! Precisely the fact that nobody could change anything was what made it so awful!"

For me as a westerner, the significance of the above-mentioned statements was shaped entirely by the all-devouring perspective of the GDR as dictatorship. But time and time again people tried to persuade me that I could not maintain this

perspective if I wanted to understand how East Germans had experienced their past.

Finally, people managed to convince me that their attitude towards the past was more than just a reaction to the huge changes that had taken place in their lives since 1989, or to the west's condemnation. They made it clear that there were also intrinsic reasons why they felt sad when thinking about bygone days. I came to realize that in order to understand why so many East Germans, despite everything, had such a strong sense of belonging to the GDR and described its warmth in such nostalgic terms, a radical change in perspective was necessary. I would have to learn to differentiate my views on the relationship between the East German powers and the country's inhabitants. In this chapter I describe my struggle to understand their perception of their past, including the conflict going on in the media and among intellectuals and historians (especially German ones).

Theorizing Dictatorship

Historians and intellectuals have long been debating how East Germany's past should be viewed and to what extent the notion of dictatorship was helpful to understand it. For a long time experts in various disciplines have viewed and analyzed socialist societies in Central and Eastern Europe – especially the Soviet Union – as being totalitarian dictatorships. They applied the term totalitarian in an attempt to explain that the powers in such societies were indeed total and capable of penetrating all of their citizens' existence.

In the 1960s, the totalitarian concept passed into disuse mainly due to a number of academic and social developments. First of all, academic thinking on political systems changed. Whereas formerly much emphasis had been placed on the role and actions of individuals or relatively small groups of powerful people as decisive historical and/or social actors, now attention was more focused on the political and social structures in which these actors were operating. Second, people were becoming more aware that there was also criticism and opposition in what up until then had been called totalitarian societies. Claims of power, for example in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, may have been total and totalitarian but that did not automatically mean they had been realized or were as successful as planned. As a result of these insights and doubts, the totalitarian concept lost its analytic value.

At the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, however, the concept of totalitarianism began to raise its head again, thanks to the influence of dissident

East European thinkers. But the way this concept was being applied by them was considerably different. First of all, western thinkers generally viewed the concept as being clearly anti-socialist, whereas Central and East European dissidents like Václav Havel leaned more to the political left, and their criticism was not directed at the socialist structure of society as such, but more to the fact that socialist principles and values had been discredited by those in power in the so-called socialist states. Second, they applied the concept of totalitarianism to demonstrate the difference between European socialist dictatorships on the one hand and normal dictatorships on the other.

Unlike in traditional dictatorships (for example in Central and South America), they felt that the socialist claims and characteristics of the Central and East European dictatorships benefitted from a long ideational tradition which gave these systems “a sense of durability and permanence that dictatorships often lack.”³ At the same time, the South American dictatorships could only exist due to the explicit and omnipresent threat of physical violence. It goes without saying that there were also instances of violence and threats in Central and Eastern Europe, but life on the street was not affected as much as in South American military dictatorships. The basis of the relationship between rulers and ruled in socialist dictatorships was therefore totally different. Fear of violence was not really the main reason why people obeyed. It was more a case of conformity, which according to some could only be explained as an expression of successful totalitarianism.

As an example, Havel pointed to the masses of flags flying during socialist celebrations. Although this clearly demonstrated a kind of consensus between rulers and ruled, it raised the question of how far this consensus went and how it should be interpreted. According to Havel, the flag was a sort of talisman. The person who decides to hang it does so, says Havel, “because he thinks that by doing so, he will appear loyal to those around him, to officials, and, ultimately, to the police.” In this context, hanging out a flag should be seen as a form of camouflage as “it helps him [to] slip quietly into the background of daily life.”⁴

In Havel’s opinion, power was maintained in Central and East European socialist societies not so much by the use of weapons, but “through each citizen feeling the ‘existential pressure’ to conform.” This led to a type of conformity which, although motivated by pressure, achieved “a tacit agreement between citizen and regime.”⁵ According to some (though not Havel), this ‘agreement’ in fact boiled down to a form of brainwashing by the regime: “The most totalitarian system is the one where the penetration of the regime into the soul of the individual is complete.”⁶

Since 1989, several East German academics and intellectuals have analyzed East Germans' former existence in a similar fashion. One of the most outspoken voices in these debates is the East German psychiatrist Hans-Joachim Maaz. In many of his books, he has tried to clarify what an extraordinarily deep and destructive influence the dictatorship had on everyday life in East Germany. In his work *Der Gefühlsstau*, he claims that: "Finally everyone in the GDR was infected by a virus which caused a pathological destruction of society."⁷ Similar comments can be found on nearly every page. Because, according to Maaz, repression infiltrated every aspect of East German (social) life, the GDR should be regarded as a totalitarian dictatorship.⁸ From a socio-historical perspective, similar conclusions were drawn by historians Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle.⁹ They also concluded that from the outset, the GDR has been an entirely illegal society based on violence and repression, which could only continue to exist due to the presence of Russian bayonets.

Their statements confirmed the predominant western view of Central and East European dictatorships. After 1989 that view was significantly reinforced once it became evident how much the socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe had depended on the operations of their secret services. For this reason many western observers tend to reduce the entire existence in socialist countries to the dictatorial aims of those in power. Due to the regime's totalitarian claims, people assumed that life in such societies was primarily colored by the political aims of their leaders.

Comparable conclusions were reached by the enquiry commission set up by the German government to investigate how the East German dictatorship operated. According to this commission, East Germany had been a dictatorship based on violence and injustice.¹⁰ In June 1994 the inhabitants of Rudolstadt were informed through one of their local newspapers that from the outset the GDR had been a totalitarian dictatorship, "in which the powers of the ruling party, that is to say: its leaders, infiltrated and...controlled every aspect of life," thus sentencing the inhabitants of the country to "life-long imprisonment."¹¹ During my stay in Rudolstadt, these statements caused great anger. People were almost unanimous in their opinion that the way former East Germany was represented was generally far too prejudiced and absolutely incomplete.

Anyone with insight into East German society's structure would not find the conclusions reached by the commission and by Maaz farfetched. The socialist state's influence and control penetrated so deeply into the private lives of GDR citizens that the concept of totalitarianism springs to mind almost automatically – a short introduction will be presented below.

One of the most significant pillars which upheld the socialist promises in the GDR was its social security system. Every East German had a right to education, accommodation, a job, and child care. That sounds wonderful, but apart from the fact that in the long run it was unaffordable, one of the main effects of this extensive social provision was that it enabled far-reaching forms of ideological influence and indoctrination. Nowhere was this more evident than in education. People who worked in education told me that schools focused especially on developing skills and values which were classed as socialist, for example being able to subordinate oneself to the greater good, the *Kollektiv* [the collective].¹² Independent (not to mention critical) thinking was not encouraged, creativity was soon labeled disruptive, and the curriculum (with the exception of applying Marxist-Leninist theories) was geared to learning factual knowledge. Obedience was considered a major character trait, and the same applied to the ability to adhere to rules and regulations. According to some intellectuals, education had a disastrous effect on the attitude and mentality of many East German inhabitants.¹³

It was generally known that teachers kept a close eye on which children (and thereby also which parents) were loyal to the socialist party. Teaching staff ensured that pupils did not vent any criticism of the GDR. Children were admonished in public if they wore western clothes or carried their school stuff in western plastic bags. One young woman who worked at the museum in Rudolstadt recalled that a teacher once snapped at her: “You’re surely not advertising *für westliche Ausbeuter-Konzerne?* [for western companies that abuse people].” And a well-known trick to find out which families watched West German television programs was to ask the children if the clock on the television showed the hours in dots or in lines – allowing the teacher to find out which families could be accused of being more or less critical of the state.¹⁴ Social engagement was also one of the factors which determined who could and who could not go to university. Obviously a scholar’s intellectual capabilities had to be sufficient, but if an excellent student wanted to become a doctor, his parents’ loyalty to the state was very much taken into account. Another factor which played a decisive role was social background. If the parents belonged to the so-called *Intelligenz* [intelligentsia], he had less chance than if his parents were workers or farmers.

Besides this indoctrination by the schools themselves, the socialist youth organizations – respectively the *Jung Pioniere* [Young Pioneers, for the youngest], the *Pioniere* [Pioneers, six and older], and the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* [Free German Youth, 14 and older] – played a significant role in East German school-life. If secondary school children did not join the FDJ, not only were they confronted by rep-

representatives of the organization itself but also by their teachers.¹⁵ It was one of the most apparent signs of subversion and indicative of parents' loyalty to the state.¹⁶

As the FDJ was also responsible for young people's cultural and leisure activities, part of how East Germans spent their free time was indirectly controlled by the state. Obviously, the FDJ focused a great deal of attention on "gesellschaftspolitische Arbeit [socio-political work]," consisting of military exercises and political debates.¹⁷ But the ideological indoctrination began even earlier, as children were made aware of the lessons of international class conflict in young children's organizations. A relevant article from 1959 found in the SBZ archives described a group of youngsters playing a game of *Verteidigung der Republik* [defending the republic] one early Sunday morning.¹⁸ The youngsters were divided into various *Kampfgruppen* [battalions]; there were *Gruppenkommandeuren* [group commanders] and in order "to teach the children to be socialist people...they wear red paper armbands on their left arms."¹⁹

All work and leisure organizations functioned the same way. Every inhabitant of the GDR was expected to join the *Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaftsbund* [Society for German-Soviet Friendship] and one of the numerous socialist organizations in order to engage in public life. Even though people could choose which organization they wanted to join, in reality it made no difference: everything had been aligned to the party, and party members were present everywhere to enforce adherence to the party line and deal with social themes. Church membership was certainly not encouraged, and if parents wished to have their child baptized, that was seen by the government as a sign of their suspect loyalty to the state. The exact implications varied, but the choice would not be beneficial for that particular family's career prospects.

When tracing how and to what extent the state tried to govern its citizens' lives, the measure which had the deepest and most direct effect was of course the Wall. The exact rules regarding traffic across the border between East and West Germany changed many times over the years, but right up to the end it was only possible to visit West German relatives for so-called urgent family matters. A request for such a visit could be denied without an explanation, which happened very often. After all, a visit to the FRG was a privilege, not a right. An elderly man recalled that he was the only member of his family not allowed to attend his older sister's 50th birthday in West Germany. Unlike many others who never found out why their request was denied, he was told. Because he worked in the telex department of a large company and had to store details of employees' wages, he had access to secret knowledge which he could have passed to the class enemy. An older woman, who had submitted a request to attend her aunt's funeral, said that they had snarled

at her: “The most important thing in life is certainly not the aunt or uncle in the west. Most important is that peace is maintained” – hereby referring to the official reason for erecting the Wall, namely as *Schützwand des Friedens* [wall for defending peace]. The only people who were allowed to visit West Germany once a year were East German pensioners. The reason for this leniency was that they no longer represented any economic value for the GDR. Should they decide not to return to the *Heimstatt des Friedens und Geborgenheit* [secure and peaceful homeland], this would not constitute a loss for the country’s production or finances.

Most of the other measures and rules which illustrate the dictatorial nature of the GDR are known: telephone conversations between East and West Germans were tapped, visits from West German relatives and friends were watched closely, letters and parcels from the west were opened and searched. Strict security measures were in force at the border zone, including visibly armed policemen. Someone who wanted to visit people living in the border zone had to submit a request long beforehand. If those who lived in the villages and towns around the border wanted to receive visitors, they had to request this several weeks in advance. Everyone walking around in the border area could be stopped by the police and detained, frisked, and even shot for no official reason. For the same reasons it was impossible for most East Germans to have a holiday on the east coast: being part of the border area, the coast could not be freely visited by everyone. Any holiday there had to be requested well in advance, and usually the hotels and holiday homes were entirely reserved for members of the SED and other organizations that formed the National Front. A holiday on the Baltic Sea was one of the most enjoyable ways to be rewarded for political loyalty in the GDR.

Although East Germans were scarcely able to leave their country, West Germans were allowed to visit the GDR. The principal reason for not restricting the number of visitors was an economic one. Because they were obliged to change 25 West German marks for East German marks at an exchange rate of one to one every day, West Germans were bringing in hard cash.

It is well-known that westerners visiting the GDR were not allowed to bring certain categories of magazines (opinion and pulp) and books (critical or so-called decadent ones). As the criteria governing what was and what was not allowed to be imported were never published anywhere, and moreover seemed to alter regularly over time, it was always a tense situation waiting to see what could or could not be taken over the border. One such incident was experienced by the owner of a flower shop in Rudolstadt. While working at a florist in the former GDR, she wanted to take home a large yucca (indoor plant) from West Germany. That was forbidden. She had to leave it at the border, because:

The official explanation was that there might have been bacteria in the soil. But I knew that was not what it was about. In my opinion, the real reason was that we did not have plants like that. And so that plant was not only a symbol of the west, more importantly it epitomized an enjoyment of life that our state could not and would not give us. Seeing such a plant would cause dissension.

Although she was probably right, it is of course ironic that nearly all East Germans could see what life was like in West Germany every day by watching television in their own living room. Understandably, this transfer of information was a thorn in the face of the GDR government, particularly because the programs on the West German channels were generally considered much more appealing than those on East German television. This led to a large-scale action in 1961, whereby the members of the aforementioned FDJ climbed onto East Germans' roofs in order to turn round all the TV aerials that were facing west.²⁰

There are many more examples which could demonstrate how strongly the state affected and determined the daily lives of people living in the GDR. What went on at school also went on at work, at university, and in the army. Even at home people could not escape interference from the government. Every district and block of flats had its own *Hausgemeinschaft* [housing association], which not only ensured that flats were kept clean and homely but was also meant to stimulate the correct ideological climate in the direct vicinity of people's homes. Even the allotment gardens, where people liked to withdraw – mainly so they did not need to be involved in anything and could finally get some peace and quiet – were made part of the state's politically ideological framework. The annual reports of Rudolstadt's Allotment Association were bulging with ideological wording and political lip service. This association apparently concerned itself with "the peace policies of offensive socialist states," for the sake of "the oncoming military-strategic balance, despite the confrontational political stance of NATO," and with "the German history regarding war and suffering."²¹

The state's influence penetrated every aspect of East Germans' existence, and their entire lives were coated with a thick political and ideological wash. All the social and cultural activities people undertook were embedded in a politically ideological framework, and people's behavior in the various social organizations and arenas was closely scrutinized. Every inhabitant of the GDR also had a personal file. This contained people's class background, as well as what and where they had studied, what results they had achieved, which organizations they had joined,

what role they had played as member, where they worked, their profile at work, how they related to the *Kollektiv* of which they were a part, and so forth.

Based on the above, it is clear that the inhabitants of the GDR were monitored and indoctrinated in numerous ways. This occurred both publicly, under the mantle of specific laws, rules and regulations, as well as under implicit, less obviously apparent pressure, which made people comply with rules and regulations that had not been laid down anywhere. All in all, East Germans' existence appears to have been so swamped with state orders, interference and regulations that the totalitarian concept seems very apt.

It is therefore remarkable, as mentioned earlier, that the majority of the people I met tried to convince me that their earlier lives were for the most part removed from the regime's political claims and intentions, and that even they should be taken with a pinch of salt. As Mrs. Pätzold, the retired owner of one of the few clothes shops that remained in private ownership at the time of the GDR, explained to me:

Superficially, of course, everything here was dictated by the state, but at the same time, many more things were possible. If you had the right contacts, stood your ground, kept on grumbling a bit, or simply refused, taking care of course not to overstep the law or do anything that was strictly forbidden, there were plenty of opportunities. And so many things happened differently or were more flexible than officially stated. Formally, there was the official line which was the same for everyone, and under, alongside, and in between that, there was a bit of fixing here and a bit of rustling there. Everyone knew it, and everyone did it.

German historian Martin Sabrow also concluded that most of the GDR's inhabitants did not really experience their country as a dictatorship.²² Along with him, other historians have denounced the conclusions of the enquiry commission, that the GDR was a totalitarian dictatorship based on violence and injustice, as being very biased and superficial. According to them, it is important to develop a more balanced perspective of East Germany's history.

American historian James McAdams was fiercely critical of the enquiry commission's conclusions: in his opinion they reminded him more of "contending campaign platforms than thoughtful enquiries into the East German past."²³ British historian Mary Fulbrook came to a similar conclusion after reading a great number of historical studies on the GDR, which according to her are unjustly "deeply immersed in an accusatory undertone."²⁴ She warns in powerful terms against criminalizing East Germany's society and history. Renowned German ethnologist Ina Merkel has also noted that historical accounts of the GDR are extremely

cliché, mostly written from a judgmental western perspective, in which “[d]ie Schlüsselworte Stasi, Totalitarismus und Kommandowirtschaft ein Bermuda-Dreieck [formen], in dem die Vergangenheit der ehemaligen DDR-Bürger/innen zu verschwinden droht [the key concepts of Stasi, totalitarianism and controlled economy form a Bermuda Triangle, threatening to erase East German citizens’ past].”²⁵ American anthropologist John Borneman concluded that “totalitarianism never existed in the GDR. To confuse the theory of totalitarianism with everyday life is to mistake ideal type for an empirical reality.”²⁶ And British historian Mark Allinson states that East Germany’s existence cannot be identified with its political context. Despite the Wall and the fact that people were not allowed to leave the country, he concludes: “The GDR was quite a normal country, despite its unusual international and domestic political setting...its citizens for the most part led normal lives, dominated as in most countries by family life and concerns about work and material welfare.”²⁷

The previous scholars warn against identifying the East German political context with the lives that had developed there, and they advocate that historical perspectives on the GDR should include the accounts of those involved, and take them seriously. Although in theory I firmly agree with them, in practice it proved more difficult than I thought to use the very experiences of those concerned as a starting point. This was affected by more than just my inability and/or unwillingness to relativize the previously described dictatorial structure and characteristics. Another influential factor was the mounting tension since the *Wende* over East Germany’s past, which had sparked heated debates, especially between East and West Germans. As a result, many East Germans were pretty well convinced that their perspective of their past would never be understood and therefore adopted a hardened, defensive attitude towards inquisitive outsiders.

Local Conversations on Dictatorship

Many people reacted defensively to my attempts to talk to them about their past, but by far the most extreme reaction to my curiosity was displayed by Thomas, who ran the bar near my lodgings. From the very first time I visited that bar, he had been on his guard. After a while he seemed to thaw a bit, but one day when I started asking one of the regulars about the GDR, he burst into a tirade, leaving no doubt about what he thought of me. He did not trust me at all. I was an actor. I tricked people and ridiculed them behind their backs. All that inquiring of mine was just not right, and the only reason I asked questions was to degrade people. I

was much cleverer than I would have them believe with all those questions. It goes without saying that this exchange did not go unnoticed. A number of regulars joined in the debate and said that they were just as suspicious of me.

That day I actually managed to calm things down and continued to visit the bar. Sometime later, while chatting to a West German one evening, I laughed out loud: “You Germans, it’s unbelievable,” and that sparked things off. Although afterwards I could not remember in which order the accusations were hurled at me, I do remember Thomas’s face when he confronted me. It was contorted with fury, and he almost spat at me: he had always known that I was deceiving the whole caboodle. He knew all along: I was far smarter than I acted. “I knew right from the start that you were not to be trusted. I told you already that you’re a thoroughly bad person. You act as if you’re superior, with your nose in the air!” Totally flabbergasted at this unexpected attack, I told him he was crazy, and he laughed as if he had finally caught me in the act: “Oh yeah, so I’m crazy? I’m just small, right!? This small? Well, I don’t have to listen to you. You’re leaving here in two months, and we’ll never see you again. I don’t need anything from you, and you don’t need anything from me, so I can tell you what I think of you: *deine Augen lügen* [your eyes are lying]!” I left the bar and never went back, which was apparently his intention. My continual questioning made me unreliable in his eyes, and his reaction revealed why this was the case: my questions about the past made him feel small.

In the first instance, such reactions may seem to confirm Maaz’s ideas about the impact of forty years of dictatorship on his countrymen’s “collective psyche.” In my view, however, Thomas’s anger did not so much relate to an East German legacy as to the argument that had been going on in Germany since 1989. During the time I was doing my research, one could not open a newspaper or magazine without reading something negative about the former GDR. One could not switch on the television without seeing a program in which aspects of former East Germany were being raked up and condemned: from Stasi scandals to horrifying reports on East German nursery schools. East Germans’ entire past was being reduced to a pitiful tale of repression, adjustment and petty bourgeoisie. Similarly, sociological studies had shown that people laughed less in the GDR than in the FRG, drank more than their counterparts in the FRG, and despite all their boasting about mutual helpfulness, the average East German had fewer friends than the average West German or Dutch. Even the Protestant Church, always assumed to be a stronghold of resistance, was proved to have been deeply involved with the Stasi and the state of East Germany. In the same condemnatory tone, the local newspaper portrayed the country as *Trümmerfeld DDR* [scene of devastation GDR].²⁸

In the conflict surrounding East Germany's past, many West Germans equated life in the former GDR with its wrongful state form, they "felt that the lives of East Germans were a failure because their state was a failure."²⁹ The defensive attitude towards me was first of all a completely understandable reaction to the general condemnation. Secondly, many people were probably also reluctant to respond to my questions because they concerned matters of material consumption. One of the reasons why my research was so sensitive was the fact that the material aspects of East Germans' existence featured so strongly in westerners' utterly negative image of East Germany's past.

The first time I realized what a direct effect the subject of my research had on the reactions I triggered was when I asked a woman in Berlin for directions. After she had pointed out where to go, I asked her about the building (a tall, rectangular concrete building with yellowish-brown plate-glass windows) on the other side of the street. She replied that it was the *Palast der Republik* [Palace of the Republic]. I had read about people and materials being brought from all over the GDR to Berlin in order to build that palace and so I tried to find out from her if all that effort to erect an imposing structure in the eastern section of the city was perhaps to show western visitors something like "we can produce something good too, you know." However, when I put it to her tentatively: "Was that meant to be a show-piece?," she burst out:

No! This was a real Palace for the People! With huge halls and everyone could always go in. It was truly built by and for the people. And it was all open to the public, except of course during important conferences. Throughout the building there were restaurants where you could get cheap meals (a scarcely veiled reproach of the era since the Wende, when although restaurants were set up everywhere, they were unaffordable), a coffee bar and ice-cream parlor, and vast halls that held thousands of people: it was all there. But now it has to go, *nur weil man etwas gegen DDR-Bauen hat* [just because people have something against GDR buildings].

According to her, the city council had initially tried to have the building demolished, referring to its traces of asbestos, but that excuse did not work after it appeared that the same was true for a considerable number of buildings in the western section of the city (one building on the west side was even eight times more contaminated than this one!). So then they had to think up another way to get rid of the building. Now the latest plan was to pull down the front and just leave the interior intact. She was furious about it. Her GDR was being demolished under false pretenses, and only because it was the GDR!

In the previous chapter I showed that the GDR's material environment was certainly not neutral: it was explicitly meant to express socialist ideals. Whereas the close relationship between these ideals and the forms it induced did not really work out the way it was planned then, the association between socialism and its material culture has been firmly established since the *Wende*. What is more: the GDR's material remains have played a major role in the conflict over East Germany's past. This was not only suggested by the angry outburst from the woman giving me directions, but on arrival at my destination something happened that further confirmed the impression that my focus on material culture was one of the main reasons for people's reluctance.

I was on my way to meet the director of a museum with a collection of items of the GDR heritage. The museum turned out to be hidden in one of Berlin's courtyards. Inside, the large space was filled with piles of furniture, objects, boxes and cabinets which I immediately recognized as the old East German style. The director shook my hand and asked the exact reason for my visit. I told him about my research on the changed significance of western consumer goods in the former GDR. As if stung by a horsefly, his panic reaction was: "Oh no, not another of those studies showing how functionalism didn't work, is it? Just like all the criticism we got in the Fifties?"

Before we could go any further, his retort had already doubly discredited me and the subject of my research: my potentially critical conclusions did not just contain the wrong criticism, but they were moreover completely irrelevant. I hardly dared to open my mouth any more. He asked if I knew who he was: former Editor-in-Chief of the design magazine *Form und Zweck*. He explained that I could read all about the old (by now completely out-of-date) discussions in this magazine. Anyway, he did not have much time, but he would show me the permanent collection of East German objects.

We walked into the room where the objects were exhibited. The first cabinets displayed items from just after the war: enamel pans, *igelit* (artificial leather) shoes. Then there were some beautiful objects, obviously inspired by the famous Bauhaus style, which by this time I had learned were hardly ever for sale in the GDR. After that were a few displays of impressive machinery and technical gadgets. And next was a cabinet with everyday objects such as plastic ice-cream bowls, egg-cups shaped like chickens, etc. It was obvious that my guide would have preferred to usher me past all this, but as that was not possible, he remarked in a rather cynical, half-bored tone: "Yes, well, of course these are the things westerners always find very interesting. They think this is typical of the GDR! They assume that this was the only type of thing we were capable of manufacturing!" With unmistak-

able disdain, he moved on to the next cabinet full of lovely objects that were never available in the GDR.

His words were crystal clear and achieved the desired effect. I did not ask about anything else in the cabinet and let him guide me to the next exhibit. At the end of the tour when I enquired about the records he kept, he was rather vague. The archives had not yet been properly filed, he was not always here, and besides he was not being paid because the town council did not recognize the museum or the archives. One thing was for sure, he would never lend out a GDR object again. He had done that once with a Fifties poster which in his opinion exemplified the collective German-German image and design of the period. However, the poster was used at an exhibition to illustrate that even in the early days, the notion of a rigidly controlled state-aesthetics had been brewing in East Germany. I should perhaps have asked him again to see the archives, but I did not bother. It was obvious that we would never be able to have a normal conversation on this or any other subject.

The failed interview with the director really irritated me – not just because it was definitely discouraging to be continually confronted with such unwilling and defensive reactions, but also because I had hoped to find interesting information in his archive about material goods at the time of the GDR and how the public perceived them. However, while on my way back from Berlin to Rudolstadt, I began to understand his unwillingness a bit better. When my travel companion, a West German architect, saw the picture of the egg-cups which the director had not wanted to discuss with me, his reaction said it all: “Great,” he laughed, “real GDR!” In one stroke, his words highlighted why the director was unwilling to discuss East Germany’s past with western outsiders: in the eyes of many westerners, the material legacy of the GDR was not only ugly, but also inferior, stripped, and grey. As such, it was above all the visible symbol of the widespread misery in that country’s past and therefore deserving of westerners’ sneering condemnation.

Another significant illustration of this perspective is the way Michael Moeller, West German psychiatrist, described his journey by train through the former GDR sometime after the *Wende*. Both the images he sketched and the associations they evoked in him were probably less personal than they might seem at first glance:

I had boarded the by western standards rather ramshackle and gloomy train from Leipzig to Halle. Initially, it felt exciting sitting in the train, entering unknown territory, but after travelling through the dark evening for three-quarters of an hour, I noticed the houses, and my heart sank. What I saw before me was a forlorn world. I was unwittingly witnessing what I already knew: everything has fallen into decay; no-one has looked

after the houses or the fields... At the same time I realized what a long time it had been: all these forty, fifty years of un-lived life! What all had been neglected, repressed and given no lease of life? This question had a deep effect on me, possibly because I was a child during the war.³⁰

It is surprising how the noticeable decay – from a shabby train in a barren landscape – gradually began to color his entire perspective until what he saw was a totally neglected country where little had been able to grow. The countryside's appearance evoked associations with a greater, all-embracing stagnation. Many West Germans experienced the same when they visited the former GDR for the first time: "Just like in the Forties and Fifties!" they often called it.³¹ And it was obvious they were not just referring to the cobbled streets and crumbling houses. This remark summed up their association with the country's social, cultural and mental stagnation – left behind, undeveloped, conservative, ridiculous and less. Dutch historian Willem Melching uses a poignant example to illustrate his conclusion that in the eyes of West Germans, the lives of East Germans had failed because their state had failed: "This feeling was eloquently described by the East German writer Sparschuh, whose novel... tells of a westerner ('Wessi') drawing the following conclusions: 'You didn't have a life there!... The elections weren't real elections, the streets weren't streets. Even the cars weren't cars.'³²

In the eyes of westerners, a direct line can be traced from the outward appearance of the GDR, via the reprehensible political system, to the deplorable (and failed) existence said to have been developed there. Due to these dominant associations, East Germans' existence threatens to be recorded as a pitiful tale of dismal, dilapidated houses and plastic egg-cups.

The main reason why people reacted so defensively to my querying their material surroundings now and in the past was that to East Germans' ears, such questions were by definition neither innocent nor inquiring but indicative of a general condemnation of their past. It confirmed their suspicions of feelings of satisfaction on the part of West Germans; satisfaction that East Germans' existence was finally exposed in the crumbling remains after 1989. If a westerner asked about East German egg-cups, state palaces or heaps of furniture on pavements, an East German would interpret this question as: Can't you see that your lives are a mess? You think so too, don't you? Don't deny it, because as soon as you can, you will put your past on the pavement as well. We always knew it; the GDR was ugly, broke and rotten. And you are just as small and pitiable as your past. "You were psychologically pressed together, just like far too narrow beds."³³

This is the image that East Germans defended *en masse*: some by keeping quiet, most by stressing again and again that their past should be viewed in a different light: more differentiated, less general and judgmental, and with more understanding and frankness. “The past was not all that bad!” was the saying or – in a somewhat jaded tone: “It is all much more differentiated.” The weariness and frustration were not so much due to the negative attitude towards aspects of East Germany’s former material consumption (for this criticism was mostly underlined by East Germans), but more to the implied criticism of the past in general.

For many East Germans, although they complained a great deal about the material conditions of East German life, these conditions had also brought about the well-known warmth and community spirit which were a feature of East German society. “In the old days you felt closer to people,” said Heinz, a somewhat alternative young man. And he gave me an example of what he meant. “Hardly anybody had a car, and if for example we went to a concert and there were no trains going back, we just spent the night at each other’s houses. Now we all go home in our own cars, but we miss the togetherness.” Another youth, Heiko, told a similar story: “In the past we didn’t have much, and there wasn’t much to do. So you had to make the best of it. Everyone did that, but at least you had each other, and you were happy to be together. Partly born out of necessity, there was more of a community spirit between people.” Every time, when listening to their stories of how they made a virtue out of necessity, I tended to hear just the necessity, whereas they tried to bring across the virtues. The same happened when Claudia, a student at Rudolstadt’s secondary school, tried to explain why especially the past’s hardships sometimes had such positive results:

All those Wessis say that everything about the past was bad, but that’s not right. In the old days, people were closer to each other. For instance in the classroom. If the teacher happened to make a critical comment about Honecker, we were highly impressed: ‘For him to say that! He must really trust us to tell us that!’ That created a bond, and I am certain that no one ever revealed any of that. But now? Now everyone only thinks about themselves.

Here again my cynicism tended to prevail (because how could she be so sure no one had ever reported some of this conversation), but the anecdote is significant. It demonstrates that Claudia was not denying or disguising the dictatorial circumstances, nor did she deny or tone down the influence of the state. On the contrary: it was in fact the dictatorial circumstances and omnipresence of the state – the two aspects which underpinned the west’s disapproval of dictatorial society – which in

her account attributed to the community spirit and warmth. There was a feeling of community because we couldn't say much. There was warmth because we couldn't do much.

Although I kept getting the impression from listening to these stories that life under a dictatorial form of government was uncommunicative, a number of aspects seemed to be responsible for the fact that the East German dictatorship was experienced so differently from what outsiders imagined.³⁴ Anticipating the description and analysis I will present below: they had learned to tolerate the power of the state in a fundamentally different way than outsiders could envisage.

Irony, a Caring State, and the *Nische*

Many people I spoke to reminded me that East Germany reality, as enforced on paper, was not something I should take too seriously. At the time of the GDR there were of course rules and regulations for everything. People knew them and had to abide by them. That is to say: for show. But in between all that, a great deal was possible. "And it was like a game, learning how to live with the rules and the bans," as Sigrid (a high-ranking local government official in the cultural department) and Jörg (youth worker), explained:

Naturally, the game was a serious one, and sometimes it was played so hard that it was no longer funny, but in fact everyone knew that there was a game going on between the state and the people. 'We are not allowed to say this, but we will say it anyway, and although we know you understand exactly what we are saying, you pretend it is not true, and we act as if we believe that.'

The party, for instance, dictated what was deemed correct socialist literature and what was not, and it was able to actually impose and maintain these rules by censorship. However, many people explained to me that this actually resulted in writers doing their utmost best to slightly disguise things which did not conform. As a side-effect of censorship, people learned how to write and read between the lines. Consequently, literature was one of the mainstays in many East Germans' daily lives. And as soon as a certain author's latest book was published, it was sold out in no time. Everyone wanted to read it so that they could discuss it together: What has he been saying now, did you see that 'they' have not even noticed his implicit criticism of... Although a negative fact in itself, the Romanian philosopher and literary critic Andrei Plesu showed that "the existence of censorship led to the

elaboration of ingenious subtexts, allusions, and camouflage, techniques practiced with great virtuosity by writers and assimilated promptly by the mass of readers.”³⁵ The same was true in the GDR, where many people considered it a sport to find out what had actually been said. Thanks to the close relationship between certain writers and their readership, the role of literature in East Germans’ public lives was comparable to the significance of religion or psychotherapy elsewhere.³⁶ And the same applied to the theatre.

People needed to camouflage what they were saying, yet they at the same time wanted to call things by their name, and this gave rise to a huge number of jokes in the GDR. Sigrid remembered:

It was a different language: jokes were being told all the time, so that people could at least explain things to each other. Obviously, this language had been prompted by necessity because officially so much could not be said, but meanwhile it was really good. When the *Wende* came about, the entire culture of telling jokes disappeared at once, and there is nothing left. Now and again someone tells a joke, but somehow it doesn’t work. Because nowadays you can say whatever you want, nothing has to be disguised. And what is funny about saying that Kohl is an *Arschloch* [a rotter]?³⁷

East Germans’ habit of making jokes about the political and ideological environment in which they were forced to live is aptly described by the term used by a German journalist: “conspiratorial irony.”³⁸ This term conjures up Dutch sociologist Wim Wertheim’s work on forms of resistance amongst repressed groups, in which he frequently used the term counterpoints.³⁹ American anthropologist James Scott provided the following examples of counterpoints: “Such deviant values may take the form of myths, jokes, songs, linguistic usage, or religion.”⁴⁰

Apart from explaining the critically ironic role of jokes, Sigrid’s comments also showed that there was a huge difference in the GDR between reality as it appeared on the surface and the ironic, somewhat long-suffering way people dealt with it. People were used to not taking seriously the authorized reality that was decreed and outlined by politics. They read between the lines and laughed about it together, thereby endorsing that it was extremely questionable whether the state “that never stop[p]ed talking” was ever really heard.⁴¹ In domestic circles people of course laughed more freely and heartily about the state than in public, but in the public arena, irony had a place as well. There, people laughed – albeit carefully and sneakily – at the exhilarating, positive phrases which dominated public life. It is a well-known way to ridicule the almighty powers of the state, by “separating words

or phrases from their conventional meanings and using them in quite another sense.”⁴² People do conform, but through their ironic stance, they nevertheless maintain “a kind of inner autonomy, holding off the ceremonial order by the very act of upholding it.”⁴³

Although prompted by necessity, such “quasi konspirativen Kommunikationsformen [mock, conspiring forms of communication]” first of all lightened people’s lives because the oppression and loss of freedom forced on them by the state was softened a little bit.⁴⁴ Second, these forms of irony also united people in their semi-conspiring attitude towards the mighty state which was able to exert such an extreme influence on their daily lives. By ridiculing the coercive conditions they had to live in, East Germans were mentally toning down part of the social and material limitations inflicted on them. Moreover, the fact that ‘everyone’ laughed and made jokes about the same things created a kind of mutual understanding, unity and equality among people.

Looking back on things in this light, I began to understand that while I only took certain phenomena to be characteristic of the state’s coercive force, Claudia and so many others were actually trying to convey the opposite: it was precisely the dictatorial circumstances that had created a form of mutual belonging.

Earlier I showed that even the allotments in the GDR were wrapped up in political phrases. The people who were so pleased to have a garden assured me that they were very ordinary gardens where you went on your day off, mostly in order not to be involved with anything. In the beginning there was some resistance from the government against these petty bourgeoisie tendencies, as the director of the Allotment Association explained. And naturally the state was against people retreating from public life in that way. But when it finally became clear that there was nothing they could do, the allotments were tolerated, and in exchange the association paid lip service to the state. Thus, the director weaved the well-known hollow phrases into his speeches. “But,” he told me, “meanwhile we withdrew to our gardens, where we produced the honey and fruit which the state had no other means of producing and which we could sell for a great deal of money (to state trade organizations, mv). But the plots had nothing whatsoever to do with politics: it was simply enjoyable and relaxing, and the party knew that.”⁴⁵ When I re-read the minutes of the allotment association’s meetings, a completely different type of interaction between citizen and state emerged than the coercive, dictatorial relationship I had initially recognized.

For instance I read one report in which – after the obligatory political and ideological statements – a request was made to obtain more beehives. It was recorded that things could not continue as they were. More and more honey was being

produced and inevitably from time to time beehives got broken. Besides, some hives were too old. These discarded hives were not being replaced, even though it was well known that the production of honey was of such importance to the population.

Reading this report, I came to realize that the omnipresence of the state had not only been coercive and threatening, but also very quotidian and even caring: the problems involved in acquiring new beehives (in my view, relatively minor details in the private life of a beekeeper) were brought to the attention of the district councilors by the chairman of the allotment association. Because beekeeping was encapsulated in the political-ideological framework of the state, like everything else in the GDR, it had become a matter of social relevance and was imperative for the population's provisioning. It was therefore also the responsibility of the state to provide the material prerequisites. As the state tried to invade every aspect of people's existence, its power was not just a component of their daily lives, but caring for people's daily needs had also become a necessary task. Citizens put up with the invading powers, and the arising contact worked both ways. This meant that the powers were partly responsible for resolving people's everyday problems, such as the material prerequisites to continue with their hobbies.

The omnipotence of the state, which at first I only saw as threatening, suddenly seemed mundane in a touching kind of way. A similar impression struck me on re-reading someone's personal file. Beforehand, I had really only considered the phenomenon of an official file in relation to the omnipotence of the East German state, but reading it a second time made it look more like a school report from a concerned teacher than dictatorial power reflected in writing.

Coll.[eague, mv] L. always does his best to further qualify himself in order to be in complete control of the tasks for which he is responsible. He carries out his duties conscientiously...his appearance is always positive... Despite coll. L.'s positive qualities as supervisor and his good achievements, there is room for improvement. He must demonstrate more and greater effort in adjusting to future tasks, and seek possibilities and improvements as well as put forward suggestions as to how additional tasks can best be incorporated in the organization. He should not be satisfied with the current state of his department... Coll. L. has been promised support in this area from the social representatives.⁴⁶

The text gave new meaning to the term father state, for precisely thanks to its authoritative power, it acquired something intimate.⁴⁷

In the GDR, the (language of the) state's power was everywhere. It permeated existence in every feasible way, and daily life was imbued with its ideological flavouring. If I asked people about it, they said that they were used to looking and reading past the language in order to find the tangible and necessary information. "We didn't read the paper," Claudia said, "only the weather forecasts and news that was directly relevant to Rudolstadt. That's what everyone did."⁴⁸ Because everyone glossed over the same words in the knowledge that everyone had to live by and with these words, a community of people existed who knew that the deceiving, though originally well intended language formed the structure of their existence: no one could escape, everyone simply had to live with it.

"In those days we were all in the same boat." People used this sentence to convey the fact that everyone being in the same situation led to a feeling of security, calm and a certain warmth. For a long time I found this a particularly sad expression, for it told me that people had found consolation in a bad situation because it was experienced by all. It took a while before I realized that their words signified something totally different.⁴⁹ Above all, they expressed a feeling that had nothing to do with the values dominating my (western) frame of reference. The expression refers to the experience that what we tend to call misery is simply a fact, and no matter what you think about it, it is a mutually experienced fate.⁵⁰

The phrase about the same boat was meant to show that, irrespective of the value one attributed to it, the omnipotent language of power was a decisive factor in East Germans' existence. The state's rhetoric was "the great enframer of [their] lives."⁵¹ Affecting everyone to the same extent, the daily recurring language soaked in ideology was one of the main binding factors in East Germans' lives. A comparable conclusion is drawn by American political scientist Lisa Wedeen with regard to the symbolic language of power in Syria:

Every Syrian...is fluent in this symbolic language, if only because all are subjected to a constant barrage of its rhetorical iterations. To be Syrian means, in part, to be able to operate, either rebelliously...or obediently... within the universe of the official rhetoric. This generalized familiarity with the regime's language and iconography operates to integrate Syrians, because every citizen in every location of the political landscape, from those who admire Asad's political savvy, to those who despise him, have been required to share in this experience of Asad's rule.⁵²

In analyzing the relationship between the inhabitants and authoritarian states in Africa, Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe used a similar expression when describing that both inhabited "the same living space."⁵³ He refers to

the same involuntary form of unity as expressed by my interviewees – one that is brought about by people inhabiting the same material (the land) and ideational (the language of power) structure. When talking about the same boat, people were not so much alluding to the fact that they could not leave the country, but to the simple fact that everyone had to make the best of it within the same, clearly circumscribed space.⁵⁴ That was the fundament of what some have called East Germans' "symbiosis born of necessity."⁵⁵

The relatively positive way East Germans looked back on their past appeared to be closely bound with the fact that the dictatorial state manifested itself more ambiguously in their daily lives than I would have thought possible. Remarkably, it was precisely the totalitarian characteristics of the power of the state which were partly responsible for the neutral-positive way they were depicted retrospectively. Through a complex, layered, bureaucratic system, the state asserted its powers over every aspect of life, and although this meant that there was scarcely a place to be found which the state could not access, it presented itself in rather trivial ways. The state was, for example, the neighbor who continued to cajole you to be more committed. Or it was the person who compiled the beekeepers' annual report – incorporating a number of obligatory sentences that made people chuckle together. Precisely due to the fact that the power of the state had penetrated society so deeply, its omnipotence, seen to be extremely threatening from the outside, was largely neutralized. Its very omnipresence was the reason why people were able to negotiate with the state in so many situations, it looked after them, and they so often laughed about it together – albeit sneakily.

What struck me most about peoples' stories were the innocent, amusing and caring features. Although the more threatening and liberty-depriving characteristics of the East German powers were not named as such, they were of course implicitly present in the stories I referred to. The story told by Claudia, the school pupil, about the 'dissident' comments of her teacher is the most obvious example. The reason Claudia and her classmates had a bond of trust with their teacher was because he said something critical even though this was not allowed. This 'not allowed' only featured implicitly in the stories East Germans told me about their former society. In the following chapter I will go into more detail about what in my opinion has been omitted and why. For the remainder of this chapter, I will concentrate on the mechanisms that ensured the state's liberty-depriving characteristics remained invisible – to a certain extent.

The story Reiner (director of one of Rudolstadt's main cultural institution) told me about his personal life in the GDR offers a good start: He had become a party member out of idealism, because he was critically involved with the society he

happened to live in. He hoped that if many more people would dedicate themselves to it, East German reality could perhaps be brought more in line with socialist ideals in the future. Finally, however, so little was left of his initial enthusiasm and dedication that he ended up just trying – as he put it – “to survive as a kind of jester.” Yet he remained a party member. Partly because he was rather lazy – as he himself described it – but also because he always cherished the hope that someday things here would change for the better...And that hope was also fed, he recalled.

There always were these enthusing remarks, like ‘*Mensch, wir brauchen dich! Wir brauchen Leute so wie dich, die einfach mit ein kritisches Selbstverständnis an die Sachen ‘ran gehen* [Hey folks, come on, we need you! We need people like you who critically help things to progress].’ And of course, the ideal of a classless society, as it was so cleverly put, with equal rights for all...well, who would not identify with that?!

Still, he did not become politically active again until after the *Wende*. At the time of the GDR, he merely sat out his party membership. Fortunately, he went on to tell me, he was surrounded by a group of people at work who mostly shared the same attitudes, and who got on well together. For him, his work was really a sort of *Nische*; an island to which he and his colleagues could withdraw together: “there we shut ourselves off from the outside world, which we tried to keep out as much as possible. Many people had their own *Nische*, their own island to which they withdrew: there was always a group within which people felt as one.” Within the *Nischen*, there was no room for party attire, for that was where real life took place.

His story illustrates three elements which are typical of the complex relationship between the citizens and the power of the state in the GDR, two of which have already been discussed. First of all, Reiner’s story shows that his relationship towards the power of the state was quite ambiguous. His attitude contained elements of idealism, disappointment, irony, and opportunism in equal measures. Ultimately, he saw himself as a jester – a term which not only sounds opportunistic but also mocking, so typical of the attitude many East Germans adopted towards the state. Second, his story also demonstrates how the power of the state was intertwined with his personal life in an entirely imperceptible way. Although he suffered from political pressure in his daily life, it was in the form of an acquaintance reproaching him for his lack of political commitment, encouraging him to show his face more often. In Reiner’s retrospective view, the state’s pressure was hardly experienced as threatening or oppressive. This much we know.

What is new in Reiner’s story is the separation between public and private, between the public arena and the *Nische* to which people retreated together. Besides

personalizing the state and ironically distancing themselves from it, this was the third way East Germans managed to avoid the dictatorial pressure confronting them.

Separating the public domain from private life was characteristic for life in the GDR. It was prompted by the need for honesty. For however nice it was to sneak a laugh together at the lies which dominated the public domain, the cleft between fine words and visible reality was such a characterizing feature of everyday life in the GDR that people felt urged to deal with it in a less ritualized manner. Because true openness in these matters was not possible in public, people confined the expression of personal opinions to their private circles. East Germans' existence was thus split; there was the public domain, where the lies governed that everyone laughed about together, and there was the private domain, where real life prevailed.

The *Nische* was a prominent feature of East Germans' existence.⁵⁶ For not only the factory worker, the taxi-driver, and the critical artist, but also the party secretary, the head of the communal *Handel und Versorgung* [trade and maintenance] department, and the judge wanted to withdraw with like-minded people at the weekend, after work or even at work. Even loyal party members wanted to remove their public face when in private, so that – in their own *Nische* – they could be really honest. Some people's *Nische* might have been a group of colleagues, for another it was a group of friends.

From an early age on, people thus learned to present themselves differently in different situations. On the one side there was the private sphere where people generally trusted each other, and where in principle everything could be said.⁵⁷ Then there was the public sphere, characterized by a massive gap between fine words and everyday reality, managed by people one usually knew, and joined by everyone who was able and willing to (re)produce the half-truths which were subsequently ridiculed by everyone in public, but not too loudly.

Obviously, people knew that a third domain existed alongside this, populated by "them up there." It was not known what exactly went on there, and nobody wanted to have anything to do with it. That was the place where the fine words originated (and yes, other things as well, but it was better to keep this in brackets), and it was better to stay as far away from there as possible. Some people were affected – like for instance Karl D., whom I met while he was working in the council's youth welfare and culture department.

I really wanted to study, but that was not possible because I was not a party member. Then I considered joining the party, but decided against this. Later, when it became more and more obvious to me how much was

wrong in the GDR, I did become a member. I thought: if that is where the power is, and I feel that things should change, then that is where I ought to be. That is why I became a member. After a while, however, I loathed it more and more. It began to dawn on me that the power did not lie with the party at all, but with a little, unknown, higher-ranked group, who in fact had the whole of society in their pocket. That sickened me, and so I left. The official statement was that I had been thrown out of the party, because obviously no one left the party of their own accord. That was just not possible. Shortly afterwards, a rumor circulated at work that one of our colleagues had been spying for the west. As time went by, it was made known that I was the one. Then I was really afraid. I even considered leaving the country.

A rumor, no more than that. But the underlying threat alone was enough to make Karl consider leaving the country. According to him, it was a little handful of high-ranked people who had real power – threatening power. Most people had nothing to do with them, so they could simply carry on as if that handful did not exist and as if the state was mainly an encouraging neighbor. At the local level, power had such an everyday, accessible, and sometimes even caring face that it was not difficult to join in. In the ensuing solidarity, people laughed together, they read between the lines, and if they felt the need for real frankness, they withdrew into the *Nische*. In this way most people managed to banish the real power beyond the margins of existence (and consciousness). This led to “people feeling perfectly free and autonomous in their own little world and treating the domain of power as somewhere beyond the private sphere.”⁵⁸

Thus, although the omnipresent state might give the impression of keeping people small, most people did not experience it that way. The society that had evolved in the GDR was primarily remembered as one of warmth and solidarity. When people could not avoid recognizing another type of power than the friendly lady next door, this was demystified and banished to a faraway domain inhabited by the unknown category of them up there.

The warmth and trust that existed in the *Nischen* and the community spirit were typical features of life in the GDR, and they are what people claim to miss since the *Wende*.⁵⁹ The more or less secretive nature of these privation communities, the slightly subversive grumbling and laughing together and helping one another gave them something extra. People were united because they shared so much: they lived in the same area within the Wall, they lived with the same language of power and developed a commonly shared ironic attitude. If East Germans

tried to explain positive feelings about their former existence, the western criticism was devastating. In West German eyes, the GDR was barely a footnote in German history and even a criminal footnote at that,⁶⁰ so who would want to be identified with such a footnote?

Many westerners' experience of the GDR's outward appearance and material deterioration seems to have been the staunchest – because visible – reason for the country's negative image in general. Although this explains the unenthusiastic reactions to my questions on the subject, it is remarkable that East Germans' only outspoken criticism of their past was the material situation in their country (as will be discussed in chapter seven). This was a sore topic that I was not allowed to ask or talk about. Somewhat overstated, one could therefore say that I was not allowed to say what they also felt. This illustrates that when talking to me about their past, they were making a selection.

In this chapter, I have concentrated on the positive aspects of the relationship between the East German state and the population, in which irony played a significant role. As the theoretical literature on jokes in relation to the social order illustrates, however, jokes can always be interpreted in two contrasting ways. They can indeed be seen as a form of moral resistance or criticism against the existing social order. But one can also allege that such a strict ritualized form does not pose any threat whatsoever. As an “institutionalized and harmless form of symbolic protest,” the jester was allowed to joke about the royal court. Rather than being a threat towards the existing social order, his jokes merely consolidated it.⁶¹

Resisting or accepting the existing social order? However imprecise this may sound, in my opinion it was both. I will return to this subject in the conclusion. The simple fact, though, that hardly any criticism was accepted about their past and that so many East Germans presented it in such unequivocally neutral and positive tones clearly indicates that the complexity of East Germany's past was not only glossed over by western scholars, but also by East Germans themselves.

Chapter 6

Silenced Pasts

Every one of us...who has passed the last forty years (or part of them) between Elbe and Oder notices, when he turns around to oversee his path of life, sites or whole regions where he or his surroundings were a puppet in the hands of powers that only showed themselves in disguise, so that – even if he did not suffer psychologically – he is still groping in the dark as to their exact workings (Günther de Bruyn, 1993).¹

The stories East Germans told me about their former *Nische*-existence were all equally rosy. All the aspects that dominate westerners' representations of East German life were ostensibly absent. Painful subjects, such as the threat and fear of the Stasi, mutual distrust, and people's collaboration with the regime, were almost never mentioned. Even when I finally came to understand my informants' positive representation of their past, I still found it amazing that they appeared to succeed so well in cleansing their stories and recollections of negative experiences. The subject Stasi, for instance, was never mentioned. Except when talking to someone who had been kept under close surveillance by the secret service, this dark side of East Germany's past was only referred to in the form of a few standard remarks, some rumors and an incidental joke.

Only once did I hear an anecdote that gave me a solid clue to my assumption that people's one-sided positive view of the past was part of a selection process, hiding other elements from view. The anecdote came from Helmut – a middle-aged man who was active in local politics when I met him.

Long before 1989, Helmut and his wife Lotte were part of a circle of friends who were very close. They shared the same interests, frequently spent time together, and usually visited each other at weekends. They were so close that they even reprimanded each other's children when they did something wrong. Suddenly, however, the group fell apart – almost from one day to another. This happened when some of them applied for an exit visa. From that moment on, they seemed to feel superior to the others. They befriended other people who wanted to leave the country as well – people with whom they would normally never have mixed socially – and they began to avoid their old circle of friends.

This happened more often, Helmut explained. Many friendships broke up when people decided to leave the country. Somehow, they then felt superior. Leaving the GDR?! Then one really was someone!

The anecdote evokes many questions. How is it possible that such close friendships fell apart so suddenly and rigorously when a number of people decided to leave the country? Why did they want to leave? Why did they not discuss their doubts with the others? And why was one “really someone” after deciding to turn one’s back on the GDR?

Apart from these questions, the anecdote also suggests that the East German *Nische* was not only a safe bulwark of warmth, mutual confidence and geniality which allowed people to really be themselves when amongst each other. It suggests that the stories about the former *Nischen* were also the result of selective memory, and that the *Nischen* might not only have been the stronghold of mutual trust and confidentiality they were alleged to be later.

Much was not allowed in the GDR, much was forbidden by the state. Apart from that, East Germans themselves also chose to remain silent about certain subjects. The question is whether this silence was merely the result of the selective memory process taking effect afterwards, or were my respondents aware that they were concealing the more painful elements of their past for their own sakes, as the famous East German writer Günther de Bruyn suggests in this chapter’s motto? De Bruyn describes how he and his fellow countrymen were puppets in the hands of powers that only manifested themselves in disguise, so that even afterwards, people were still in the dark about their exact functioning and effect. I feel there is a relationship between the disguised powers of the state on the one hand and the collective silence about the past’s painful subjects on the other – a relationship that could be summarized as conformity.

I agree with De Bruyn as I believe that many East Germans were unaware of the extent to which their existence was entangled with the dictatorial context they lived in, primarily because this entanglement had assumed unrecognizable forms. In my opinion, the clearest sign of East Germans’ adjustment to the pressures of the state was the existence of the *Nische* – the social institution that was primarily accredited with anti-state connotations in daily life. In this chapter I will show that the *Nische*, celebrated as a buffer of mutual trust beyond state influence, was also the result of conformity with the state, in which social tensions were encapsulated and made indiscernible.

Helmut’s anecdote of the collapsing *Nische* was one of the very few stories I heard which proved that life in the GDR had not only been cozy and warm. This chapter is therefore mainly based on archival material and secondary sources.²

By focusing on the themes that were generally absent from East Germans' recollections, I will show that the warm and pleasant characteristics of East German society also functioned as a screen behind which the less attractive aspects of the "intimate tyranny" and the "tacit agreement" between rulers and ruled remained hidden. Together with the previous one, this chapter aims to show the influence of the dictatorial regime on East German society. Although the themes of material goods and consumption may seem to disappear in the background in the following pages, it will become clear that they were important instruments in enforcing adaptation and conformity to the socialist state.

Different Perspectives and Jokes about the Stasi

As I observed earlier, most media present a completely different perspective on East German history than the safe, warm and confidence-inspiring existence sketched in the previous chapter. The theme that dominates western media accounts of the former GDR is the atmosphere of fear and mistrust that was due to the omnipresence of the secret service – the Stasi. While I was doing fieldwork, new Stasi scandals were uncovered quite regularly. Famous East German politicians appeared to have worked for the service, spouses turned out to have spied on each other for years, and circles of close friends suddenly found out that one of them had been a Stasi informant. Even the past of the country's most famous and respected writer, Christa Wolf, appeared not to have been completely clean. Such disclosures often resulted in public mud-slinging, in which victims and perpetrators disputed each other's assertions. The public at large could delight in the rude accusations and insinuations spelled out in the popular media.

In most cases the people spied-upon had held a critical stance towards the former socialist state. They were members of an oppositional group, a religious community or discussion group, or were active environmentalists, pacifists, critical intellectuals, journalists or artists. These potential critics of the state were seen as a threat, and so the Stasi kept a sharp eye on them. Ordinary people had less reason to suspect they were being watched. This is not to say, however, that the Stasi did not influence ordinary East Germans' lives. According to the main custodian of the Stasi archives, the former East German clergyman Joachim Gauck, the opposite was true.

In his work, Gauck repeatedly made it clear that the secret service's presence deeply influenced the social, mental and psychological climate in the GDR: "The mentality of East German citizens was deeply influenced by a permanent feeling

of threat.”³ He is not alone in this. Many prominent German intellectuals are also convinced that the Stasi dominated all of East Germans’ existence. Some claim that East German society was characterized by a regime of fear which imprisoned everyone – irrespective of whether one was actually watched by the Stasi or not.⁴ The threatening presence of the secret service would have been like a hovering shadow, darkening all of East Germany. Maaz, for example, has frequently described the GDR as a society in which it was almost impossible not to become completely estranged from oneself. According to him, the presence of the secret service stirred people’s latent feelings of fear, and from an early age on, they collectively learned to only show their socially acceptable façades, behind which fear and insecurity remained hidden.⁵ De Bruyn’s final verdict is equally negative when he describes East Germany as a society where people “had been kept restrained, locked up, and repressed for decades. Because of their repression they were completely entangled in guilt.”⁶ According to him, the climate in the post-*Wende* GDR is characterized by “a moral crisis or its repression...which is unable to issue a solid fundament for emotional wellbeing.”⁷

In light of these conclusions, it is even more remarkable that my discussion partners in Rudolstadt generally responded rather half-heartedly when the subject Stasi came up. Many were of the opinion that it was of course terrible, but that the subject was completely blown up in the western media. The representation of the GDR as a completely degenerated society, permeated by the secret service and the resulting threat, distrust and fear, was seen as a gross exaggeration. The elderly judge referred to before, whom I visited regularly, told me that of course he had always known that they existed, but even if they did watch him, he had no problem with that as he had nothing to hide.

He expressed an opinion of the Stasi that many East Germans shared: of course it was bad, but it was not that awful. A fair summary of the widespread attitude would probably be something like: “We knew that they existed, and we suspected that their employees were everywhere, but it didn’t really bother us.” The only place ordinary East Germans felt a little wary about the Stasi was when they entered an *Intershop*. It was generally known that “they” were there to see who visited the shops and to take notes on what people bought, how much money they spent, how often they came, etc. Since no-one really knew what the secret service was going to do with the information they gathered, people generally felt a little uneasy when entering those shops. But apart from that, it was not so bad. The Stasi really did not have so much influence on East German life as is now suggested – so they claimed. Even Werner, a middle-aged intellectual who worked for the local administration in the cultural field and who was generally quite willing to share his thoughts on

all kinds of topics with me, was a little reluctant when I asked him his opinion on the discussions taking place. It was so complicated, he answered evasively, that he advised me not to pursue the subject further – making it clear that he was not prepared to discuss it with me.

Jokes were sometimes made on the subject. For instance, when I was standing in a bar, talking to Axel, and the bartender shoved a scrap of paper in my direction – ‘a secret note,’ written by someone else and signed with the designation *IM Freund*.⁸ Much later I heard that the person who wrote the note had been watched by the Stasi quite intensively and for a very long time. This also applied to the local politician who worked for Rudolstadt’s social democrat fraction and who, during a theatre performance by two famous East German cabaret artists, suddenly appeared on stage, dressed as a Stasi-collaborator with a big black hat, dark sunglasses and a long leather coat. The artists welcomed him, saying, “Ah, here is our regular guest. Please, sit down,” and offered him a chair in a corner of the stage. He sat there for the rest of the performance, making notes, listening to what was being said, and looking round very furtively. Sometimes the performers warned him that they were about to tell a joke which he had already heard at one of their earlier shows, so he could go to the toilet for the next ten minutes or so.

His actions reminded me of myself in my role as anthropologist. I was therefore not surprised to be frequently introduced to people as follows: “Here is someone who wants to know everything about us, but who is not from the Stasi.”

To the point and amusing. It was not so amusing when I once wanted to ask Michaëla – a close friend whom I met quite regularly – whether I could interview her father (a designer). I tentatively tried to ask: “Do you know whether your father...” But she interrupted me: “Was with the Stasi? No, I don’t know and I don’t want to know either. I am not interested.” For an uninteresting theme, it seemed to be one that rather preoccupied her, but Michaëla stuck to it: she was not interested.

According to Joachim Gauck, such reactions, and particularly the glossing-over attitude towards the Stasi that was widespread in the former GDR, are the most serious consequences of the GDR’s “really solid dictatorship.”⁹ During a lecture he gave at the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam in 1998, he explained that many East Germans “suffered seriously from the dictatorship’s heritage.” This was not surprising, he explained, when one realized how omnipresent the secret service had been. Over 90,000 people had officially worked for the Ministry, then there were at least 170,000 IMs, and the Ministry for the State Security Service had left more than fifty miles of archive records.¹⁰ Gauck explained that more than twice as many people had been involved in the East German state security service than under Hitler (in all of Germany). One out of every sixty East Germans had col-

laborated with the Stasi. Below I will give a brief description of the activities they undertook and the kind of methods they used.

The Stasi's main task, apart from controlling East German post and telephone communications, was to gather detailed information on often assumed opposition groups and individuals. In some cases this could take rather extreme forms. The Stasi archives contain records that show how the secret service did its utmost to upset and sometimes even destroy individuals' lives. Spreading rumors was one of the most common techniques to disrupt people's existence and to discredit them and their work, even in the close circle of their intimate relations.

How this was done was explained to me by Georg. When I met him he was about 55 years old and lived in a hamlet near Rudolstadt. He told me that he had always suspected, and from a certain moment knew, that he was being watched by the Stasi. Nevertheless, he was shocked when going through his records after the *Wende*. He had never imagined that they would go so far to bring him down. Looking back, suddenly all the bad luck and misfortune he had suffered fell into place: everything that had gone wrong or not worked out the way he had planned, the promotions that did not happen, the research applications that were turned down, the friendships that suddenly broke up, the relationships that ended. Not until he read the Stasi reports did he realize that everything had been planned by them. They had systematically tried to destroy his life and had succeeded quite well.

Maybe he should have known and could have prevented some things by being more careful, he considered afterwards. But he did not want to be preoccupied with wondering whom he could trust and whom not all the time. He did not want to live like that, he explained.

I have always considered that because my heart and conscience were clear, they should act as they pleased. But then to find out that one of the few people whom I really thought I could trust, had been an IM and had for years passed on information about me...These notes were often quite meaningless, like my pig's weight at slaughter, and that I had bought this and that amount of coal for next winter...But that was not the issue.

The issue was that among the few people he really trusted, there had been one who had passed on information about him. The issue was that they had been able to come that close.

According to an employee of the main Stasi archives in Berlin whom I interviewed, the official aim of such activities was "to organize personal and professional failure up to the point of suicide." In the Department of Operational Psychology

at Potsdam's College of Law (the so-called Stasi University), people were not only taught how to instruct and lead IMs, how to hold on to them and even make them dependent on them, they also learned numerous tactics to combat hostile and opposition groups and individuals, for instance by:

Systematically discrediting people's public reputation, standing and prestige on the basis of the intermingling of true, controllable and discrediting statements with untrue, plausible, irrefutable and equally discrediting ones; systematic organization of professional and social failures in order to undermine individuals' self-confidence.¹¹

It is a short quotation. The list of suggestions on how to destroy people's lives is much longer. The Stasi archive employee told me that the archives also contained statistics with all Stasi-orchestrated suicide attempts per year. When the attempt succeeded and people actually committed suicide, it was booked as a success. From the early 1960s, the MfS (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, Ministry of State Security) had been making plans for the establishment of concentration camps. Although they were never built, the Stasi kept records of all extremely suspect individuals who had to be interned within 24 hours, as soon as the situation threatened to become politically explosive.¹²

These are some of the most extreme examples of the notorious East German security service's methods. Even putting them aside and only focusing on the Stasi's more common activities, Joachim Gauck asserts that they have had a deep and lasting influence on what in his lecture he called, "East German attitudes and conditions of life."

The Stasi's general activities and their impact have been well portrayed by Christa Wolf. In a short novel, *Was Bleibt* [What remains], she describes problematically how the Stasi entered her life and knocked it off balance. She describes the little clicks during telephone conversations and the kind of codes she developed in order to speak a secret language. The paranoia that gradually took hold of her, the fear and the feeling of being taken over by others and estranged from herself are sketched in poignant and succinct terms.

Apart from the general mood, I was particularly struck by a passage in which Wolf describes how and why she first began to wonder whether a particular acquaintance was gathering information on her. The first time the thought entered her mind was when the man in question took her to a bar. While they were sitting there, he made an unpleasant remark, after which she asked him: "Have I ever done you an injustice?" Wolf then describes how the dam the man had built around himself suddenly broke. Although he did not say it explicitly, she detected

a confession in his words. Amidst his outpouring, he also remarked that he found her arrogant: she thought she could get everything out of life without paying for it, without selling her soul. In order to break the tension, Wolf commented: “Come on, we are not living in the Middle Ages anymore.” Then he exploded:

Not in the Middle Ages? Oh yes, Madam, we are living in the Middle Ages. Apart from some external things, not much has changed. And nothing will change, if people want to use their knowledge in order to rise above the ignorant masses – then they have to sell their souls, as always. And if I really wanted to know what this meant: it meant bloodshed, even if it was not your own blood. Not always your own blood... Now I remember what I had instantly understood at the time: they have got to him. And I remember that my pride – in this he was probably right, he was a gifted psychologist – compelled me to quietly ask him: ‘well, why don’t you quit?’ And how he then turned deathly pale, opened his eyes wide, put his face so close to mine that I could smell the beer on his breath, and then in a clear and stone-sober voice, he uttered three words: ‘I-am-afraid.’ Immediately after that he pretended to be drunk again, I stood up, tapped my knuckles on the table, and left. After that I did not see Jürgen M. for years. I have forgotten the scene that he will never forget, and now, he no longer has to know about me. He is in the house with the many telephones, where he happily collects all the material on me that no one else can obtain, every morning thanking providence that has brought him to a place where he can satisfy his passionate lust, while at the same time be of use to society.¹³

The first question this passage raised in my mind related to Wolf’s remarks about the person who is watching her (the so-called perpetrator). She describes that performing these activities enables him to “satisfy his passionate lust.” The second intriguing element is his reproach to her (the so-called victim) that she is arrogant because she wants to “rise above the masses” and “get everything out of life without paying for it.” Also overwhelming and fascinating is Wolf’s observation that not only she is afraid, but also the one spying on her. It made me wonder how this related to so many East Germans’ remarks that they had never been afraid of the Stasi at all.¹⁴

In his lecture, Gauck asserted that it is almost impossible for outsiders to imagine how deep an impact the above-mentioned collective experiences have had on the people of the GDR. According to him, East Germans had in fact always lived in fear: fear was the basis of their existence. Three successive genera-

tions had first and foremost learned: “Bow your head, feel the fear, adapt, and you will be alright.” As a result of this repression and the concomitant ideological indoctrination, people not only gave up their own conscience and individuality, but according to Gauck, referring to Hannah Arendt, it also generated a collective “loss of reality.”

Gauck did not elaborate on this conclusion during his lecture, but elsewhere he has made it clear that according to him, the omnipresence of the Stasi completely estranged East Germans from themselves.¹⁵ The main reason why the secret service could have such a profound influence on their existence was because no-one ever knew who they were.

Amongst our colleagues, we knew who the party clerk and the union representative were. We knew them. We knew how to behave towards them, we knew what their assignment was, and what sort of threat they posed. But with regard to the Stasi...one never knew. In every big company, big apartment-complex, and even at a big party, one might be talking to someone from the Stasi without knowing it and without knowing what kind of information he was interested in. People generally wanted to be open towards each other, but because we never really knew who they were, it was impossible to relate to them. That was the really threatening thing about them.

It is an interesting and plausible argument which, although contrary to the one I presented in the previous chapter, follows a similar line of reasoning. In both cases the normality of a power's disciplinary techniques is assumed to give order and meaning to people's lives.¹⁶ Following on from my informants' comments, the previous chapter showed that the language of power was the all-influencing framework of East Germans' existence (an influence which my informants valued rather positively). Gauck put forward a similar argument regarding the threatening aspects of power. In his view, it was precisely the secret service's omnipresence which had a structuring – albeit largely unconscious – effect on the way people perceived and experienced the reality they lived in.

The argument sounds plausible and might offer an explanation as to why so many East Germans contended that fear hardly played a role in their lives. If correct, it would also shed new light on the narrative of mutual warmth, commitment and security that assumingly characterized so many East Germans' lives. Perhaps even the nostalgically remembered *Nische* would look very different if seen from Gauck's perspective. In order to get a better understanding of the Stasi's influence

on ordinary East Germans' lives, I submitted a request to investigate the Stasi archives on Rudolstadt.

The Stasi's Methods and the Taboo on More

Based on the previous arguments, I had quite a strong inkling of what kind of information I would probably find in the Stasi archives. When I first saw the contents of the records on Rudolstadt that had been saved, I almost started to laugh: they were more like boys' adventure books or the script of an old-fashioned, East German James Bond film than the legacy of one of the world's most threatening secret services. I was struck by the Cold War slogans, the suffocating anxiety, and the constant warnings: People, take care, the class enemy is everywhere!! Although it was now and then amusing to go through the documents, they also presented a number of relevant issues (albeit at times only indirectly) for grasping the East German state's means of maintaining power.

One of the things I came across was a pamphlet on East German leisure activities that was sent to all local Stasi departments in 1984. The pamphlet drew attention to a dilemma: although it was praiseworthy that holiday traffic between the socialist countries had risen, creating better opportunities to get to know each other's socialist ways of life, it was also important to realize the potentially dangerous consequences.¹⁷ More and more people were opting to spend some of their holidays at camping sites abroad, but it was generally known that western secret services used the camping sites in Czechoslovakia to win over East Germans to their side, or influence them ideologically, making them dissatisfied with the East German state, party and politics. This was particularly threatening during the summer holidays, when people were in the mood to relax and be more open towards others. In such situations, even the most politically correct people were at risk. By distributing printed matter, through personal conversations and "by exhibiting certain aspects of the western way of life as subtle advertising for their lifestyle and system," the GDR's opponents tried to win over East German citizens to "realize hostile activities."¹⁸ Particularly by way of "direct contacts," Czech camping sites offered the GDR's opponents "[f]avorable opportunities for a differentiated influencing of our citizens... It is relatively easy to determine someone's profession, work station, political attitude, family relationships, but also specific features, like for instance reticence, thoughtlessness, boasting, et cetera."¹⁹

In all its banality, the memo is significant: it shows that the Stasi preferred people not to leave the country at all, but if they did leave, to remain observant at

all times and in all circumstances. Noteworthy as well is the reference to “certain features” that could apply to some of East Germany’s holidaymakers abroad who thus could be abused by foreign secret services. As I will show further on in this chapter, the East German secret service was very well aware of the importance of certain features when it came to the extraction of relevant information. Reticence was therefore strongly preferred over openness and light-heartedness as far as East German citizens were concerned. Open-minded East Germans with good communication skills might too easily be persuaded to divert from the socialist track.

The memo consists of eighteen pages. The terminology that is used, the kind of problems it addresses, and the undiluted Cold War language are all characteristic of the entire Stasi legacy. A similar tone and contents could be found in the notes that were used to determine whether or not someone qualified to be admitted as member of the so-called *Reisekader* [travel executives]. When someone applied for permission to travel to capitalist countries for his work, it was necessary to find out whether he was in fact “the right and reliable executive to maintain the necessary contact with executives from the *nicht sozialistische Wirtschaftsgebiet* [non-socialist economic area].”²⁰ In order to meet this requirement accurately, several IMs were selected, with partly the same assignments so that they could check each other’s reliability and meticulousness.²¹ They had a list of guidelines that served as a basis for the report they were to write, in which a wide-ranging series of issues had to be addressed. Relevant information was to be gathered, for instance, on the amount of mail someone received, what time he would get up and come home, his political and professional development, attitude towards the party and the state, and what kind of activities he undertook at his workplace.

The resulting reports mentioned all the so-called weak spots of the people concerned. When one of Rudolstadt’s residents wanted to visit a scientific conference in Rumania, it was reported that his uncle and aunt lived in the FRG, that his wife did not vote in 1967 (the report was written in December 1986), and in addition, that he appeared to have contact with West Germans. With regard to another man (X) who was to represent his company at Leipzig’s international fair, it was to be investigated whether the important position of trade-department manager was “sufficiently covered by comrade X” because although he was friendly, he was also “very self-aware” and had an “exaggerated degree of assertiveness.”²²

Once people were admitted to the highly desirable *Reisekader* and allowed to visit the class-enemy, they were carefully watched during their trips abroad. The notes and impressions below are written by a colleague of the person concerned, for whom the trip to France was his first introduction to a capitalist country. I cite

this report quite extensively because some of the details provide a good overview of the Stasi's concerns and points of interest.

He was very impressed by everything that the capitalist country was able to outwardly present. Thank God he also witnessed a scene that showed capitalism's other side, i.e. when a woman...was sheltering on a hot air vent, probably because she was homeless...He owns a weekend cottage...I presume his financial position is very good...He is basically rather quiet, but he is also a sociable person and he is probably easier to interrogate than other people. This possibly also leads him to easily trust others...For obvious reasons he was very insecure during the entire journey...He has not made any personal contact with others during the trip. I have been able to conclude that he talks quite a lot. This is not automatically a negative evaluation, but he could be briefer – also in negotiations.²³

The memo clearly illustrates the Stasi's concerns for East German citizens' ability and ideological perseverance in resisting the seductions of western prosperity. Furthermore, it is evident that the Stasi had a strong interest in people's character and way of life and in their material and economic conditions.

In view of this interest, it is hardly surprising that the secret service indeed had an unofficial employee at every *Intershop* – as East Germans appeared to have rightly surmised – who passed on information about the people visiting the shops, mentioning who accompanied them, what they looked at, what they bought, who paid for the purchases, and how much money was spent. The notes which the secret service received from the IM working at the *Intershop* in Rudolstadt's main hotel on the market square excelled in both their detail and apparent meaninglessness: "A female person, whom I do not know by name at this moment, purchases for about 100 DM a week. She is about 40 years old and 5½ feet tall. She usually has her child with her."²⁴

In spite of the apparent irrelevance of such statements, it is clear that the Stasi's routines are comparable to those of an anthropologist in the field. During their respective education, both professional categories learn to take notes of every possible piece of information, because even ostensibly meaningless details may later turn out to be valuable and telling.

The Stasi's task was to gather as much information as possible. When working on someone who was potentially dangerous or suspect, they should overlook nothing, and even the tiniest, petty details of someone's personal particulars (his hobbies, relations, material situation and consumer preferences) were noted. Even when things appeared to be completely irrelevant at first glance, they might prove

to be significant (sometimes much later) for blackmail, bribery and extortion (if necessary, even of the secret service employees). The reason the Stasi was interested even in the minute details of people's lives was because they might be useful in order to "have influence over the candidates." This is why the archives contain so many memos pertaining to suspect, extortable and otherwise striking or deviating behavior. Everything that might potentially be useful to put pressure on someone was carefully documented. Relevant traits were, for instance, too lively an interest in western goods, too strong a craving for luxury, or, as the clergyman in a small village in the Rudolstadt area discovered after reading his files, someone's inappropriate eating behavior; this man appeared to have burped and slurped.²⁵

The Stasi recorded people's habits, allowing the party leadership to keep an eye on the population's thoughts and moods. But the recorded information was also used to steer the population's behavior – through blackmail and other forms of pressure. The records therefore offer an insight into the behavior, way of life, etiquette, and attitude that were desired from above.

Even the most nonsensical records therefor contain information that might be interesting and relevant for social scientists. I previously referred to memos pertaining to an individual's presumed character traits and way of life. It is remarkable that the Stasi's observations were primarily focused on the extent to which people were ostentatious, sensitive to luxury and riches, desirous to have or appear more than others, wanted or dared to attract attention, were different or wanted to be different than others. The clergyman had strange eating habits, someone else was attracted to gold necklaces, another was very open, or self-assured, or markedly impressed by wealth. One man was noticed for being extremely ambitious.

Going through the files, a certain profile becomes evident, based precisely on these kinds of small, hardly noticeable details, which after a while reveal a rather puritan frame of reference. For instance, it was always recorded if someone was sociable, conspicuous, different, eager to make friends, talking loudly and frequently, uncivilized or voluptuous, gaudy, susceptible to comfort, self-assured, etc. Although it was also noted whether people were modest or quiet, subordinate, insecure or correct, the way such valuations were documented demonstrates that the secret service assessed the latter category as safe, in contrast to those who behaved in a more conspicuous manner. It seems that people who attracted attention – even if they were not suspected of oppositional or GDR-critical activities and attitudes – also risked attracting the Stasi's attention.

Interesting in this respect is that the same category of people who attracted attention also risked being regarded as Stasi collaborators by their fellow countrymen. The clergyman whose uncivilized eating behavior was mentioned tried to

put into words what the secret service's presence had brought about in his country in a poem – the Song of Distrust – of which especially the last line (the only line where the author used capitals) is significant:

die war dies jahr schon zwei mal im westen
 she already visited the west twice this year
 das geht sicher nicht mit rechten dingen zu
 she is obviously not righteous
 und ihr bild hängt in der straße unsrer besten
 her image hangs in our leaders' streets
 damit ist bewiesen die gehört dazu
 which proves: she is a part, she belongs
 ach mißtraut euch freunde ach mißtraut euch nicht
 oh, mistrust my friends, do not mistrust each other

die verbrecher sind nicht wir in diesem land
 we inhabitants of this country are not the criminals here
 kneift die augen zu doch schaut euch ins gesicht
 turn a blind eye, but look each other in the face
 denn *nicht jeder BESTE ist ein denunziant*
 because *not every BEST ONE is a squealer*

The last two lines of the next two verses are consecutively: “because not every NEW ONE,” and “because not every DIFFERENT ONE is a squealer.”²⁶ With these lines Winter suggests that everyone who appeared to be better, new, or different risked being regarded with suspicion because he could be a Stasi collaborator. During my fieldwork, this conclusion was confirmed one time in a very strange way. The immediate cause was a question I had asked Helga, who worked at the little bar below my apartment, about a certain Gerhard Richter and his restaurant.

Until 1993, Gerhard and his wife Bärbel had owned a restaurant in a little village near Rudolstadt. The restaurant had a good reputation, and on Sundays many residents of Rudolstadt used to go for a walk to the little village to eat and drink something at the restaurant and then walk back. When I first came to Rudolstadt, I stayed at the Richters for two weeks. After that, I continued to visit them regularly. For me, they somehow represented the many unpretentious, hard-working East Germans I met. Their daughter was married to a butcher, and their son was a dedicated socialist who deeply regretted the GDR's downfall. Every Sunday the

whole family met for lunch at Gerhard and Bärbel's place. She always prepared a fine piece of meat with Thuringian dumplings.

Both of them liked to talk about the old days, and because they had worked in the catering industry, I found their stories very interesting: it was fascinating to hear how they constantly had to fix and wangle to obtain an extra barrel of beer or a little more meat than they were allotted.

At one point after having visited them, I realized that there was one specific detail of Gerhard's stories which I did not understand. He had told me that in the old days when a group booked a table at his restaurant, he had always been obliged to report that beforehand to the *Rat des Kreises* [district council] and afterwards write a report about it. I could not understand the reason for this obligation and was curious what such a report should be about, so when I came home, I decided to ask Helga, the lady who worked in the pub near my apartment. During the GDR, Helga had also worked in the catering industry, so she might be able to clarify Gerhard's story.

Helga did not understand what I was talking about: write a report about groups before and after their visit? She had never heard about it and turned to talk to her friend Astrid, who had previously worked for the *Rat des Kreises*. While discussing the matter, both women suddenly exchanged a meaningful look: of course, now they understood! This could mean only one thing: Gerhard had been with the Stasi! When I said that I could not believe that, the women sniggered. How could I know!? It was generally known that in the old days Gerhard had always managed to offer something extra with his dishes: there were always tomatoes and cucumber with his pork chops, and had he not been able to build an extension on his house?! Wasn't that telling enough: he apparently had acquaintances... Yes, they were certain: he had been with the Stasi!

Gerhard had been with the Stasi because of the extra services he had offered. As ridiculous as the conclusion may seem, it is slightly reminiscent of the Stasi report about the danger of going to a barbecue on a Czech camping site. The association made by the two women is striking. It is a telling illustration of clergyman Winter's words and the impression I gained while going through the Stasi files: in the GDR it had been imperative not to attract attention. One should certainly not try to be different, seem different or stand out. That attitude had worked in Gerhard's favor when he still had a restaurant and made the effort to organize extra vegetables with his dishes. This had attracted people. But afterwards, when he said something strange or incomprehensible, people still nailed him to the Stasi pillory because of his vegetables.

Although this was almost the only time that I was informed (without having to ask) about the way the Stasi's presence had influenced daily life in the GDR, the anecdote confirmed that it had been important not to act conspicuously but to just adjust oneself. People who acted conspicuously seemed to have risked becoming ensnared in the Stasi webs: either because they were being watched by the secret service or because others considered them to be part of it. This impression is indirectly confirmed by Joachim Gauck's conclusions on what he considered the most difficult question regarding the Stasi phenomenon: "Who were the perpetrators?" – more on this issue below.²⁷

Contrary to what one would expect, only a small minority of those who worked as IMs for the Stasi did so because they considered it their civic duty to help the secret service.²⁸ The majority of those who appear as IM in the Stasi files decided to cooperate after having been approached and put under pressure by the secret service. In most cases, the decisive factor was that not cooperating could have harmful consequences for someone's future career. A story I recorded in Rudolstadt is a clear illustration of this. Reiner, a young man who came to work as press spokesman at the town hall after the *Wende*, told me that, long ago, a good friend of his confided that he had once been approached by the Stasi to supply information about Reiner. The friend had promised to do so, and he also told Reiner why: he was a photographer and wanted to achieve something in life. He wanted to leave the GDR, to be allowed to go abroad and cover major stories, which would only be possible if he was cooperative.

It is a well-known, very profane and imaginable argument, where someone's personal responsibility and part of his conscience are set aside for fear of social decline or desire for social advancement. A similar motive was highlighted by Christa Wolf in the passage referred to earlier. When Wolf lets her IM speak, he accuses her of being arrogant because she wants to stand out from the masses. She, in turn, suspects him of being driven by a "passionate lust," later on described as his desire to "outdo" her. According to her interpretation, he wanted to prove to her that he was "the real master, the true king."²⁹ Wolf furthermore describes that she was somehow susceptible to this challenge and took up the gauntlet. She entered the struggle for power and noticed that she somehow enjoyed the fact that she was apparently so worthy that they wanted to know all about her.

As will be clear by now, the vanity she discovers in herself is to a certain extent comparable to what she suspects in Jürgen M. He wanted to win by outdoing her. Not only was she vain enough to (also) like that, she even entered the power struggle in order to prove that it was impossible to beat her. Both seem to have

been driven by a comparable motive or desire, which could be described as standing out above the crowd.

Apart from the categories described so far, Gauck points out that a small group also existed that was driven by idealism to collaborate with the Stasi. Interestingly, they were mainly people with a rather critical stance towards the GDR who concluded that change was only possible from the inside. For outsiders this sounds unbelievable. I might not have believed it myself, had I not discovered that I happened to know someone to whom this applied. It came as a shock to find out that Werner's wife Paula (Werner being the middle-aged intellectual who refused to talk to me about the Stasi) had worked as an IM. I knew Paula as an intelligent woman who had been socially active in a critical way – both then and after the *Wende*. In an anonymous letter, she revealed some of her motivations to become an IM.³⁰ In the letter she explains that she decided to cooperate with the Stasi because in that way she hoped to contribute to “the reform of socialism” by exerting pressure on the Stasi through her *Führungsoffizier* [officer in charge].³¹ She continues that only afterwards did she come to realize how grossly she had overestimated herself. The designation *Selbstüberschätzung* [overestimation of oneself] is telling and relevant in order to better understand the mechanisms of the Stasi.

Paula is critical about misjudging herself. No matter how individual and personal this desire may have been, there is a certain connection between Paula's *Selbstüberschätzung* and Wolf's description of herself and her IM as people who both wanted to stand out from the crowd. As also remarked by Gauck, undertaking espionage activities for the MfS often made people feel meaningful and important.³² Or, according to Maaz: in order to be a good IM, people had to have “a clear desire to throw their weight around, and be regarded as important and significant.”³³ Although phrased in individual terms, it refers not to an individual, psychological characterization but to a deeply social phenomenon: the only way one achieves standing is in the eyes of the outside world.

Wanting (to have, to be, to mean, to achieve) more than others was difficult in the GDR. It did not fit in with socialist equality principles, and a pliant, docile population was imperative for a well-functioning East German dictatorship. People were made “to choose” not to attract too much attention. “From an early age, it was instilled into East German citizens that they must...never stand out in any way that might attract attention.”³⁴ If people were unwilling or unable to do so, they entered a domain controlled by the Stasi. When someone claimed the right to be different, they risked being watched by people (in their capacity as IM) who were selected because they themselves also wanted more (career opportunities) than was otherwise possible in the normal way. The example given by Wolf about

her spying acquaintance showed that people also became IM because they secretly enjoyed scoring off their countrymen.

I certainly do not mean that people were driven by pleasure to become an IM – on the contrary. As Wolf pointed out, both she (the victim) and her IM (the perpetrator) were afraid. This is confirmed by Gauck. He gives poignant examples: of people who were imprisoned after trying to flee the country, and who then were set up against their spouses; of boys who were caught drinking alcohol during military service and were told that this was the definite end of their future career, only to hear a couple of days later that something might be done for them, if only... they were willing to convincingly show their loyalty to the state.

Fear of being blackmailed, fear of extortion, fear that a secret might be revealed, fear that one's spouse would be confronted with compromising pictures... After the *Wende*, Stasi officers often claimed that if they had wanted, they would have been able to “win everyone over to cooperate.”³⁵ This may be somewhat exaggerated, but almost any inhabitant of the GDR could be extorted – if only because so much was forbidden. One could therefore say that those who were not involved in the Stasi in any way simply had the good fortune that they, their life or their acquaintances were not threatening, striking or different enough to have been approached by the service: “Many may not have become spies for the Stasi because they were useless for ‘the firm.’”³⁶

Partly due to the threats of the security service, forms of behavior were exacted in the GDR that I referred to above as puritan; public displays of modesty and moderation were its most striking characteristics. Those who demanded the right to publicly attract attention or be different entered a climate of fear that Wolf has portrayed so poignantly. Wolf was afraid, always afraid.³⁷ But when one was able to adjust, there was no reason for that.

This explains why my informants collectively stated that fear was not really an ingredient in their former lives. By adjusting to what they thought was expected of them, most people avoided a direct confrontation with the (potentially threatening) dictatorial powers and were thus able to uphold the notion that their lives were unfolding quite normally, unhindered by repressive factors. Because not attracting attention was probably not a tall order for most people, they could think that they were merely living their lives, without acknowledging to what extent these latter were enmeshed with the regime and the state.

Although it is probably true that most people never experienced any real fear, I do think that a regime of fear existed in the GDR. Because a deeply ingrained attitude prevented the majority of East Germans from having reasons to be afraid, fear was actually the mental framework within which they arranged their lives.

East German psychologist Annette Simon describes this very well, when explaining how it was possible that, whereas she was never afraid while the GDR still existed, after the *Wende* she began to recognize and feel the fear which she apparently had been able to elude before.³⁸ And Mary Fulbrook also concluded that “The climate of fear was the outer parameter of existence...it did not have to be a feature of everyday life.”³⁹

The conclusion that life in the GDR was characterized by the urge not to attract attention because it could result in Stasi monitoring demands another reading of East Germans’ sniggering laughter and the *Nische*. The simple fact that the secretive, universal laughter could not be expressed publicly reveals to what extent most people adjusted to the demands of the state. Something similar applies to people’s withdrawal in their *Nische*, where they were said to be true to themselves. The mere fact, however, that this so-called true self could only be manifested indoors and not in public is a clear indication of the extent to which East Germans’ existence was colored by dictatorial rule.

Both East Germans’ *Nische* and their sniggering (albeit incomparably different phenomena) speak of secrecy and surreptitiousness. The same applies to East Germans’ main adjustment mechanism: not to attract attention. All three mechanisms imply a careful attitude to life.

In the former chapter I described my personal struggle to understand the invariably repeated *es war nun mal so*, expressing the existential fact of living with a lie. Because this fact applied equally to all, it functioned as a unifying element, indirectly forming the basis for feelings of warmth and solidarity. Regarded more negatively, the phrase *es war nun mal so* also expresses a dull resignation, a “*mentalité* of popular powerlessness...of people who have internalized their own surveillance.”⁴⁰ The warmth East Germans said to have shared was the warmth of people who had learned from childhood to accept that they had no other choice but to adjust, and to make the most of it within the confines set by the state. This does not mean that everything people made of it was pitiful, but the confines within which they were able to act were set by the state.

Several authors, including Vaclav Havel, have shown that in dictatorial societies, adjustment is not only achieved by the state but also by social processes within society itself. When people openly refuse to accept that the confines of their existence are set by the state, their fellow countrymen tend to expel them from the community, treating “any non-involvement as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society.”⁴¹

Inspired by Marx and Gramsci, social scientists still struggle to understand how it is that subordinated people to a certain extent come to support their own sub-

ordination. This question is central in French anthropologist Maurice Godelier's work. In his famous ethnography on Baruya women's subordination by men, *The Making of Great Men*, Godelier states: "Men's greatest strength lies not in the exercise of violence but in women's consent to their domination; and this consent can only exist if both sexes share the same conceptions, which here legitimize male domination."⁴² Godelier's thesis is that shared ideological convictions or a shared ideological domain between oppressors and subordinates help to legitimize existing relations of inequality. The same may have been true in the former GDR. There as well, suppression was not only enforced by the state, it was also the result of people's widespread adjustment, partly inspired by the acceptance that they had no other choice.

But they did have another choice. Although it was difficult, it was possible not to adjust. The consequences were such that it may rightfully be called "a Faustian choice...the choice confronting each individual is really no choice at all and that is why the system is able to keep itself in being."⁴³ Apart from adjustment, it was possible to apply for an exit visa, as Helmut and Lotte's friends did. By deciding to leave, people were demonstrating not only that they wanted to get more out of life than was possible and allowed within the borders set by the state, but also that there were other acceptable options. This revealed that the mutual involvement was to a certain extent the result of adjustment and fear.

Those who decided to leave thus not only confronted those staying behind with their willingness to comply, their failing integrity and their sluggishness, but also with the fact that their friendship was partly the result of external conditions.⁴⁴ By bringing into the open that the mutual involvement and warmth were partly the result of the unspoken necessity to make the best of it, their decision implicitly also showed that if conditions had been different, they could have made more of their lives than up till then they had done together. This ruined the friendship. The warmth resulting from a jointly shared fate seems to have implicated a ban on mutual differentiation as well. The fact that this ban was broken when part of the group decided to leave suggests that mutual differentiation, competition, and jealousy were smothered in and through the *Nisches'* warmth.

Egalitarianism, Crab Antics, and Adjustment

The anthropologist George Foster has written extensively on what he calls "the image of limited good" that often thrives in peasant societies. The implicit assumption in these societies is that there is only a limited amount available of all the

good things in life. With one person's gain automatically being seen as another person's loss, the result is an inherently unstable social structure, permanently threatened by the undermining impact of jealousy. According to Foster, it is no coincidence that this "cognitive orientation" often goes hand in hand with a strong egalitarian ideology; striving for equality is one of the mechanisms to reduce jealousy. Referring to the sociologist Helmut Schoeck, Foster suggests that egalitarian ideologies would be the answer to the universally human, extremely threatening experience of envy: "The utopian desire for an egalitarian society cannot...have sprung from any other motive than that of an inability to come to terms with one's own envy, and/or with the supposed envy of one's less well-off fellow men."⁴⁵

As Foster shows, egalitarian ideals hardly work. In practice, they turn envy into "the dominant device used to enforce egalitarianism, so that the cure is at least as bad as the illness."⁴⁶ Envy being refurbished as egalitarianism means that whenever someone stands out, others are ideologically allowed to punish him for breaching the norm.

In the anthropological literature, this kind of penalizing behavior is referred to as "egalitarian conspiracies" and "leveling coalitions." These are cultural mechanisms which help to hold back real and potential social climbers. Such practices have been made famous by anthropologist Peter Wilson's analyses of what he termed "crab antics," the term referring to the behavior he observed in Caribbean communities with a strong egalitarian ideology. Whenever people in these communities succeeded in acquiring more than others, this caused the rest of the community to react like crabs do when put in a barrel: "[A]s one of them nears the top, the one below pulls him down." Although all tried to climb out of the barrel, the lonely climbers who managed to resist the egalitarian ideology and reach the top were stopped by others and punished for climbing. Such behavior is not based on rational considerations, but on collective jealousy and envy.⁴⁷

Foster gives a brilliant analysis of how a public egalitarian ideology can be both the breeding ground and the hiding place for individual feelings of jealousy. When equality is an explicit and highly emphasized ideological norm, it sharpens people's discernment of inequality. Achieving more than others is regarded as not proper, and individual feelings of jealousy get a free rein – not only because they are legitimate but because, according to the dominant ideology, jealousy is nothing to be ashamed of. It is the deviating behavior of the one who achieved more that is shameful.

As shown in chapter four, behavioral standards and morals were enforced in the GDR according to the main motto of socialist ideology, mutual equality. This legitimized feelings of envy and jealousy by institutionalizing them. If someone

was seen to have achieved more than others, his behavior was penalized – not because people were jealous, but because he did something that ideologically speaking was not right. The anecdote of Helmut's former *Nische* suggests that these standards penetrated deep into the private domain. Breaking out of the mutual warmth meant the end of it.

Initially accepted to ward off painful collective experiences and legitimized by the official state ideology, in time the taboo on mutual differentiation came to function as a social defense mechanism. The fact that East German society was primarily experienced as warm and hardly as repressive was partly due to a social climate (legitimized by the socialist doctrine) in which public signs of differentiation and competition were not acceptable.

In spite of the socialist regime's claim that it had accomplished a definite break with regard to the national-socialist policy after 1945, there seems to have been remarkable continuity. Continuity not only prevailed in the field Joachim Gauck referred to during his lecture, when he stressed that in the eastern part of Germany, three generations had primarily learned to bow their heads, feel the fear, and adjust to the state's demands. In the course of my research, I was confronted with another manifestation of continuity: the continuity of silence. Silence not only reigned with regard to the painful characteristics of the GDR's past; post-World War II experiences also appeared to be still shrouded in persistent silence – a climate so aptly captured in Christa Wolf's words, "there is no silence as deep...as in German families."⁴⁸ When I tried to talk about this period during my fieldwork, I noticed Wolf's conclusion still applied to the year 1994. Those who had not been committed socialists between 1933 and 1945 (or had become so out of true conviction right after 1945) still covered up that part of their past with an impenetrable silence.

Dr. Hartmann, for instance, with a PhD in history and one of Rudolstadt's most renowned citizens, appeared unwilling to talk about it. The reason for visiting him was that I needed information on the Second World War in Rudolstadt: how many people had been killed, had there been any bombardments, had people been driven out, etc. He received me very enthusiastically: he was so pleased to finally meet someone from the Netherlands! Did I know about the many alliances between the Dutch royal family and Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt's monarchs? The last of them had been guests of honor at Queen Wilhelmina's wedding, but relations between the two royal houses dated from way back and had always been very hearty. One of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt's monarchs had been married to a direct heir of the House of Orange Nassau. He himself had known the last monarch personally because one of his family members had been secretary at the court then. He had

prepared a copy of an article for me which he had recently written describing in detail the relations between the two royal houses.

It was as if I was attending a formal lecture, and no matter how hard I tried to point out that my main interest was in recent history, he did not stop talking about the monarchs. I tried to change the subject by asking him about the local *Heimathefte* – a chronicle on Rudolstadt's history. This turned out to be another of his hobbyhorses: "Well, yes," he replied, and began to explain that he had initiated the series at the time, just like it had been his initiative to chart new walking-tours in the area around Rudolstadt. He had always had a keen interest in nature, and he was especially fascinated by Rudolstadt and its surroundings. It was so beautiful around here, so pure and rural. He really loved this country.

Beautiful country, rich history, old monarchy...When I interrupted him again to ask whether he could tell me something about the period following Germany's defeat in May 1945, he replied that he would rather not talk about it. It was too painful, too close. "I don't want to sow new hatred. It is over, it's history." After insisting quite strongly, he told me that he had served as a member of the *Wehrmacht*. When he heard about Germany's capitulation, he was in Russia, north of Stalingrad. He walked all the way back to Rudolstadt, mainly at night. He slept during the daytime. I asked him how things were when he came back here. "Then I fully dedicated myself to rebuilding Rudolstadt," he replied, adding that there had been some good communists as well – people one could work with. Again I had to insist: how were things in the summer of 1945, with the takeover of power, when the Americans left and the Russians came? What happened, and how did Rudolstadt's population react? He smiled a little:

The Russians came to my door. They were looking for me. I was an officer, so I had to go with them. Then I went into hiding in the woods, together with my wife. We lived secret lives, we were always on the alert. It took years before the coast was clear and we could return to our normal lives. We were not the only ones. This is many people's story. But don't you write it down. It is too painful.

And he continued to tell me about his efforts to rebuild Rudolstadt and initiate the *Heimatheften*.

His defense was clear: a beautiful country, but he did not want to talk about the recent past. That was history, and over. At the same time it was too close and too fresh. The differences and tensions, the internal betrayal, and the accompanying hatred that had risen to the surface so brusquely during and after the war had been suppressed, buried under the state's principal banner of anti-fascism.⁴⁹

Gerd was also used to living in silence. Although no one ever talked about it, he always thought that everybody knew about his father. His paternal grandfather had been a confirmed believer in communism since the beginning of the 1930s. After he was captured by the Nazis in 1941, he spent many years in concentration camp Buchenwald. At this time his son (Gerd's father) decided to join the *Waffen SS*. According to Gerd, it had been a family decision in an attempt to clear the communist (grand)father's name, but it somehow sounded like a story which the family had concocted later in order to accept it. However, after the war, both father and son returned home: the first from Buchenwald, the second from the *Waffen SS*. The former was appointed mayor of a town near Rudolstadt, the latter (the mayor's son and Gerd's father) had to hide. He went underground on a farm in the neighborhood for over a year. Then he gradually began to take part in normal life. By that time, Gerd's mother recently told him, he had started to drink. He had not been able to reconcile himself with the GDR's existence. But in a family of confirmed socialist believers and being the son of the first communist mayor of a middle-sized town, it was impossible for him to air his opinions. Gerd did not elaborate on what must have been a family drama but confided in me that he secretly admired his father for his guts not to go with the wind and change his views, when everything he had believed in was suddenly forbidden and taboo. He had not been a *Wendehals* [turncoat] when that was required after 1945. He could not and would not, thus committing himself to a life of silence.

This was also the case with the designer Katrin's father-in-law. He too had remained silent, and only of late, since he retired, had he begun to talk about his time in the *Hitler Jugend*, which was the greatest experience in his life. In the past he had never spoken about it. He had always been a quiet person who kept to himself. Only now did his family realize that the reason for his reticence was mainly that he had never dared to share his experiences. If he had, he would have run the risk of being completely excluded or even worse: being taken prisoner – as happened to many captured after 1945 by the Soviet occupying powers, and who often did not return.

Many of them never spoke about their experiences or about their thoughts on the past. They withdrew within themselves and remained silent. One of their life stories compiled by a clergyman in Rudolstadt describes how a man returning after seven years in captivity at Buchenwald never talked about it: "All the suffering had caused him to lose the power of speech."⁵⁰

These people kept their mouths shut about various pastime topics and events and for various reasons. For all of them, remaining silent was in some way due to the fact that their memories ran counter to the promise of mutual solidarity which formed the kernel of the new, post-1945 symbolic order. Their experiences and

memories, although unspoken, often lingered on in the form of fear of further persecution, sometimes with disastrous consequences for “relationships between members of their family and neighbors.”⁵¹ For many of them it was only possible to speak about their former experiences after 1989, “but the suspicion towards others, also towards close relatives, the disappointment, the bitterness about their fellow men and the distrust...never left many of them.”⁵²

As described in chapters two and three, the promises of the new state seamlessly linked into a lesson in life (about distrust and fear of others), which was at the same time completely taboo. That lesson became the concealed core of the new symbolic order in the GDR and of the relationship between state and citizens. The solidarity and bond which developed in East German society were partly fed by the taboo on comprehending and exploring experiences of mutual distrust, jealousy and betrayal. And in time, the mutual equality and warmth in the *Nischen* were also the positive and therefore visible and demonstrable modification of feelings of jealousy and envy, for those who succeeded in being just a little less equal. In the *Nischen* it was warm – until they opened. The ideology of mutual equality’s wide appeal does not so much show that East Germans had completely internalized the ideology of equality collectively. One of the reasons for its wide acceptance was that it served to legitimize the type of crab antics people adopted among themselves to ensure that nobody thought they could get away with publicly positioning themselves above the community. You had to be very sure of what you were doing before you left your cosy fire, for there was no turning back.

Not sticking out in the crowd and the mutual warmth and solidarity in private circles were the two sides of one ideological coin. Through its administration and bureaucracy, mutual equality had become the GDR’s master code, which although initially nurtured by the taboo, eventually became so institutionalized and widely accepted that it grew to be the symbol of the GDR – not just officially but also perceived as such by its people. It became the fundamental characteristic of “their former consciousness.”⁵³ The egalitarian grip which East Germans had on each other under a cloak of mutual warmth created its own contradiction. The passionate denial of inequality, mutual competitiveness and strife, because they did not fit in with the fine-sounding ideology, actually disguised the antics and endeavors that formed the Stasi’s breeding ground. The so-called politically ideological break after 1945 concealed the continuity that silently and subversively lingered on.

When trying to imagine life in a dictatorship, one of the words that springs to mind is adjustment. Ever since the GDR ceased to exist, people have pointed their accusing fingers at the East German population, blaming them because by adapting to the situation, they were partly responsible for the Stasi terror in their coun-

try. In a society such as East Germany it was extremely difficult not to conform: “Trying to live outside the regime’s influence takes tremendous effort, particularly when everyone else is going along with the authorities.”⁵⁴ The stakes are high: one not only relinquishes professional and career opportunities, but social isolation also threatens; not belonging to the group, your fate is to be an outsider – see Havel.

The majority of East Germans chose to adjust, at least on the surface; laughing half-heartedly at the demands that were made on them. Laughing was a way of showing that their adjustment was not whole-hearted and that they were just pretending. Besides laughing, people also pointed to the *Nische* as a kind of proof that they had not forfeited their entire identity for the ideology. The state had no influence on the *Nischen*, they argued; there you could lead an entirely autonomous existence beyond the ideology. This population representation was just part of the truth.

The very fact that the *Nischen* existed is an indication of the state’s power. The fact that people simply presented a politically unthreatening image of themselves in public, while only able to show their less adapted face in private circles, demonstrates how far the power of the state went. “[P]ower resides not only in orchestrated displays of obedience, but also in the silence about domestic politics that characterizes daily life.”⁵⁵

Moreover, the warmth and mutual involvement, supposedly symbols of the *Nische*, were also the visible and spoken manifestations of the taboo on mutual differentiation and competition implied by the egalitarian ideology. As such, both the conspiring laughter in public as well as the *Nische* were not so much acts of resistance against state and ideology, as cultural forms in which the interweaving of private life with the state and its ideology became visible. Both were clear examples of the furtive connection between subordinates and oppressors which Mbembe has described for Cameroon. Although the laughter and the *Nische* were presented as a type of distant and implicit criticism, we have to tread carefully when interpreting “the expressions, symbols, and acts we intuitively may register as resistance.”⁵⁶ Precisely the necessity to back away from the state reveals its power.⁵⁷

Chapter 7

Western Promise

Life in the west, which we longed for so desperately, would that have any shortcomings and weak points?...[F]or many of us, everything that went on beyond the invincible Wall was inflated into an extraordinary exaggeration, an excellent breeding ground for parasocial fantasy and projection (Hans-Joachim Maaz, 1991).¹

It appeared from the stories in the previous chapter that East Germans had learned to be selective about which negative aspects of their lives they preferred to keep to themselves. The only thing that was more or less in the open were people's complaints about the previous material situation. The power of attraction of the western world mainly derived from its material conditions. In East Germans' eyes, the plentiful West German consumer world was so special that people visited the *Intershops* despite the fact that this was precisely the place where they knew they were being closely watched by the Stasi. In the GDR, western goods were regarded as little relics, the value of which could not be measured by any objective standard – they were a western fetish. Why did western goods have such value in the GDR? What did they appear to promise?

According to Dutch anthropologist Patricia Spyer, the “extraordinary power” that is often attributed to certain categories of material objects, specifically in socially unstable situations, is linked to the promise that material objects seem to evoke – a promise that proves to be irresistible especially in uncertain times: “[The] promise of fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”² Thus, completely out of context, these words may come across as too vague and general an indication, but in my opinion they capture the essence of what the West German consumer world previously seemed to promise in so many East Germans' eyes.

On the subject of his friends rising above him, Helmut remarked that “one only really became someone in the GDR when leaving the country.” This statement suggests that apparently only *beyond* the borders of the GDR was it possible to really make something of life. Thus, the ultimate realization of East Germans' existence was to be found beyond the borders of their own country. In many East Germans' experience, the fulfillment of their desires was found in the material wealth of the

west. They imagined that in the western world that looked so fine, so soft and so bright, and smelled so good, they would – slightly paraphrasing Helmut's words – “finally become what we could not be in our own country.” This image was both related to and enforced by the materiality of objects.

Irresistible Prosperity

When I asked East Germans about their past views of the western world, their stories never ended. The wonderful world of the west!! The golden west!! Everything that came from there was special. If you received a present from the west, you felt as happy as a king because the possession of western objects had a certain status attached.³ Heiko, the young man who was a sales assistant in an ironmonger's both during my stay in Rudolstadt as well as at the time of the GDR, said that in the past, people were happy to have the smallest things from the FRG. Whether it was a pen or a packet of chewing gum, a bar of soap or chocolate, everything was equally desirable. Contact with West German friends and family was indeed extremely important for East Germans, and one of the reasons why West German visitors were always welcomed with open arms in the GDR was that they often brought all kinds of gifts – varying from spices and tins of preserves to do-it-yourself materials and entire furnishings.

Mr Linke, the middle-aged man who used to be a taxi driver and had built his own house, told me that he had fitted out his entire bathroom with equipment from the FRG. Every time his West German family came to visit, they brought something with them, one time it was a load of tiles, another time gold-colored taps or a beautifully decorated mirror. Such luxury goods were not available in the GDR. Also bathtubs were always scarce, and he proudly boasted how his West German relatives even managed to bring him a bath. As he was afraid of jealous looks from the neighbors, they secretly smuggled it into the house while everyone else was at work. Once it was finally in place, he was really pleased as he did not know of anyone who had a real West German bathroom!

Another way in which many East Germans were able to acquire the highly coveted western goods was through the Christmas parcels sent to them every year by their West German family or friends. These parcels featured significantly in many East Germans' recollections. “Now that was something,” was their regular heartfelt comment. And how miserable people were if they did not have any family in West Germany and never received a parcel! In fact, they just did not really fit in, for Christmas was all about a parcel from West Germany, it was as simple as that.⁴

Neither the parcels nor their contents were ever taken for granted or considered as normal, on the contrary: “Those parcels were little relics,” a middle-aged woman who worked for Rudolstadt’s parish explained.

If for example you received some soap, it was out of the question to use it to wash yourself. Only exceptionally and at the very last moment (getting on towards next Christmas when yet another new parcel was expected, *mv*), but in the first instance it was kept in between the clothes in the cupboard for a long time, on a different shelf each week, to give off the lovely scent. That was something, that scent...you could enjoy it for hours and lose yourself in dreams about it. And then the chocolate and the coffee!! It was all a miracle. It came from another world, a wonderful world – one which was beyond reach.

Many people told similar stories. Western goods were so special in the GDR that even West German plastic bags had a high exchange value, and empty West German beer cans were displayed in many an East German living room cabinet.⁵ The *Intershops* where western goods were sold also exerted an almost irresistible allure on many East Germans. With their sparse western money they often went there to buy what for westerners were everyday consumer goods – such as chewing gum and chocolate or bars of ordinary household soap.⁶

East Germans’ desire for western things was certainly partly prompted by the status attached to possessing them, but their power of attraction went way beyond this rather clear-cut social determinant. An East German student recalled, for example, how he and his countrymen almost lost their sense of reality when they saw westerners:

When we saw them, with their expensive clothes and posh cars, we almost forgot that they too went to the toilet and had to eat to survive. They seemed to be a different, better, and more perfect kind of people. And that image, that notion, was linked to certain outward appearances. Up till the Wende, we believed that the people on the other side of the Wall were better, because they looked better.

In order to get closer to that ideal image, East Germans were even prepared to put up with Stasi glares when buying western goods in *Intershops*. Such shops, according to Mr Linke, were extremely alluring: “They were fitted out attractively with more attention to the lay-out. And although you paid much more than the goods were worth, you could tell if someone bought their clothes there. It was truly *gehobenes Einkaufen* [upper class buying].”

This was also the case, although to a lesser extent, with the *Exquisit* shops where East Germans could buy luxury goods made in West and East Germany. The desire for such goods came at a heavy price, as shown for example in an anecdote from November 1967 – when an East German woman returned to the *Exquisit* shop in Leipzig, complaining at the top of her voice that the stitching on the West German shoes she had bought two days earlier for 150 East German Marks had already burst. When the shopkeeper contacted the supplier, the shoes appeared to have been purchased from the FRG by the East German state for the mere sum of eight (West German) Marks “im Interzonenhandel” [via inter-zone trading].⁷ For that low price, the supplier explained, “könne man ja wohl keine Qualität liefern” [one cannot deliver quality].⁸

The situation really becomes ridiculous once one realizes that it was not possible to be entirely sure if the shoes in question were actually West German. It is highly probable that the so-called West German shoes, which had provided the state of East Germany with a profit of 142 (East German) Marks, were originally manufactured in the GDR.⁹ As the GDR was always looking for ways to obtain hard cash, and wages in the GDR were much lower than in West European countries, the GDR manufactured many products for West German and other western companies. It was rarely stated on the product that it was manufactured in the GDR. The lady who ran a furniture manufacturing company both at the time of the GDR and after the *Wende* said that the furniture produced in the GDR for the west was transported unlabeled to the FRG. The place of origin was not displayed because the West Germans who placed the order did not want the West German buyers to know that they were East German products.

Thus, it could transpire, Heiko explained to me, that people were buying “western” chocolate in the *Intershop* with their frugal West German DMs, while in reality this was the very same chocolate sold in the *Exquisit* shops in an East German wrapper. This meant that some of the chocolate made in the GDR was wrapped in East German packaging to be sold as an East German luxury product in the *Exquisit* shops, while the rest was exported to the FRG to be packaged there, in order to be sold as a West German product. This latter category could then be imported back again to the GDR, where it was sold for many times the West German price as *Westprodukt* in the *Intershops*.

It is hard to imagine a more extreme example of producers being alienated from their manufactured goods. Most interesting, nonetheless, is that even the knowledge that some of the “western” products were manufactured in their own country did not diminish the irresistible power of attraction that “western products” presented. According to Heiko, people were willing to part with their limited

DMs for things that had become so attractive thanks to the charisma of the west. His statement touches on one of the most fascinating issues concerning the study of consumption: how is it possible that people allow themselves to be so deceived and/or tempted?¹⁰

When asked how the irresistible allurements of the western material world came about, people often replied quite vaguely, searching for words: "Well, yes, they just had all the things that we didn't have." And when I probed further, trying to fill in the general description of "all" (whether things from there were so much finer or better, or if the significance of "all" was perhaps related to the fact that so little was available in East German shops?), such suggestions were mostly greeted with a kind of mumbling, such as, "Yes, no, it had nothing to do with that. Here you could often get lots of things as well, but...there they just had everything we didn't." The confused vagueness of their reactions left no doubt that although the West German material world's power of attraction was related to genuine concepts such as beautiful and ugly and full and empty shops, it all went much deeper than such descriptions suggested.

The irresistible power of attraction the western material world wielded over so many East Germans was linked to a number of factors, some more specific than others. I shall discuss them below, beginning with the most specific: appearance, then move on to less discernible ones.

The main way that East Germans' perception of the west evolved was through West German television. From the numerous statements I recorded on this subject, it was apparent that East Germans collectively regarded the highly attractive image they saw on West German television as a realistic reflection of the way things went on in reality. "Virtual reality was seen as everyday reality," according to historian Hermann Glaser.¹¹ And a middle-aged woman in Rudolstadt worded it as follows:

We really believed what they said on West German television. We thought that the western washing powder could really remove the stains. Not long after the Wende, when we were able to buy all these things here too, I went shopping with my son, and he was very keen for me to buy a certain washing-up liquid which he had seen advertised. It was a well-known and expensive brand, so I thought it would be good and wanted to try it anyway. At home he put water in the washing-up bowl, then added the liquid and the plates. Then he stared at the water, waiting for a miracle. When he took out one of the plates, what a disappointment: it was not shiny and clean like they had said in the advertisement. It was still dirty.

One reason why the critical approach towards the West German consumer world, as broadcasted by the East German media every day, could not succeed was because East German media were notoriously untrustworthy. No one believed anything of their statements and broadcasts. A social worker from Rudolstadt explained: "In our country, the gulf between word and reality was becoming wider all the time. Everyone noticed it. You only had to open the newspapers and read the rose-tinted stories that were reported there, and then look out of the window to see how dismal reality was." This factor certainly played a role in many East Germans' belief that what they saw on West German television and in West German magazines was the truth. The question remains, however, what exactly did they see in the western programs and magazines?

While handing out and collecting surveys, I was able to examine many different East German homes within a short space of time. I was struck by the sharp material contrast between the dwellings that had been renovated since the *Wende* and those that had changed very little or had nothing done to them. The non-refurbished houses had typically straight lines, dull colors and excessive amounts of chipboard pasted to look like wood, whereas the newly furnished apartments looked very different. I was particularly struck by three specific aspects of their appearance.

To begin with, by 1994, all over Rudolstadt you could buy objects which were predominantly advertised as having natural, nostalgically authentic features. Wooden furniture and objects were very popular. Cabinets were recommended as *echt Eiche rustikal* [genuine rustic oak], bedrooms as *natürlich und gut* [natural and good], and advertising leaflets and shop displays were decorated with numerous elements referring to nature: autumn leaves and flowers, but also cats, birds and other animals, sometimes in the form of sculptures or pictures. This tendency towards natural elements often took on a nostalgic form, which was evident for example in the many reproduction antiques, which had been opposed so fanatically at the time of the GDR: from flowery teasetts to ornamental furniture and from the well-known *Hummel* figurines to the promotional description *original Alt-Bürger Blau-Weisz* [old farmer's blue and white] on dinner services.¹² Publicity brochures often showed sentimental black and white images. If the combination of natural and ostensibly nostalgic elements did not suggest enough authenticity, the impression that this was a significantly enticing item was strengthened by allusions to exotic countries. Shops advertised *originale Nepal-Teppiche* [original Nepalese carpets], while exotic attributes such as palm trees and wild animals were used extensively in shop window displays and in the promotional designs.



Figure 7.1 a and b – Advertising brochures, as found in the author’s mailbox during her stay in Rudolstadt, 1993-1994
 Source: Publishing agency unknown.

Second, the western material world – certainly in comparison to East German design and objects – appeared to be extremely polished. Many items were ostentatiously decorated and embellished. While I was staying in Rudolstadt, (quasi-) crystal vases and glasswork were immeasurably popular, and the same applied to otherwise shiny objects, whether they were silver or gold-colored. Formerly, many floors were covered with various types of dull-colored floor covering, but since the *Wende*, deep-pile carpets were all the rage. And in contrast to East German chairs which were usually covered with fabric in muted shades, the settees and armchairs

purchased more recently almost glowed with their shiny material which seemed to have been made with luminous elements.

The third thing that struck me in Rudolstadt was how much effort people made in order to conceal precisely the function of objects, compared to the old days when functionality was what was propagated. This was not only evident in furniture with ornate edging, decorative panels or curled and twisted ornaments, but also in the wooden conversions for central heating, built-in kitchens, ceilings decorated with fake wooden tiles, an L-shaped wall unit to conceal the corner of a room, concealing wires by building cupboards around them and decorating the sides by bringing the thick-piled carpet up a bit higher, then finishing off the wall with a wooden skirting board.

During the GDR's more than forty years of existence, the East German public was instructed by the designers and editorial teams of magazines such as *Kultur im Heim* and *Form und Zweck* above all to adopt a reasonable and rational attitude towards their material environment. Under the motto that one had to learn to accept the current reality (industrial production methods, short supply of raw materials, and limited state budget), people were encouraged to no longer disguise things by adding so-called romantic flowers or frills, which evoked false associations with a past that had never existed. The preference for such designs was merely an escape, which unleashed a kind of false consciousness – according to the strict socialist instructors. However, attempts to influence East German consumers to be more rational in their preferred taste always met with opposition. Conventional lampshades were given a flowery edge, and chipboard was provided with a surface that looked like wood. Apparently, many East German consumers always continued to desire the non-functional but perfectly polished, natural-looking objects which were for sale on every market stall and on every street corner at low prices in the west, and which they saw on television every day.

When investigating the power of attraction that emanated from the western world, it was striking that, apart from the visible differences I could discern myself, many people answered my questions by referring to the strong sensory stimulus these had provoked. Western things were recalled for having had such a lovely smell, and for shining and sparkling so beautifully, and feeling so different. Furthermore, the colors were so much more vibrant and beautiful, and as far as food was concerned, it usually tasted so much more intense and nicer than in Eastern Germany. Annette Simon gave a concise description of her first visit to the west (which took place in 1980) as follows: "Today I know that the inner motto of my trip was 'don't be seduced!' I was particularly impressed by the west-

ern world's sensory-aesthetic characteristics: those smells, and colors, the many different foodstuffs.”¹³

The most frequently mentioned alluring characteristic of the western world was its smell. When Heiko told me about the smell of the Christmas parcels which his family received every year, even six years later it seemed to send him off into a day-dream: “Just the smell of it...that was indescribable. I shall never forget it. You can ask anyone and they will all confirm it. The smell of the soap, the washing powder and that coffee...The clothes that were wrapped in the parcels smelled of that strange mixture of scents for months.”

East German writer Thomas Rosenlöcher has described how as a young boy he was walking around the station in Berlin and almost against his will was compelled to follow a “secret neon smell” that seemed to be wafting from an *Intershop*. Although there was absolutely no point in him entering the shop at that moment because he had no *Westgeld*, which made the goods on display there unattainable to him, time and time again he was drawn inside “by the aromas.” In Rosenlöcher’s opinion, it was not just thanks to their aroma but also to their radiance and shine that the East German population was collectively enthralled every December by the West German Christmas parcels. He describes how the entire kitchen changed when a parcel arrived and was then set on the kitchen table to be opened, as a “little glacier of prosperity.” At that moment, it was as if the room was bathing in the imaginary light that even seemed “to come from the pudding mix.” Although the parcel was wrapped up again after a quick look and only properly opened on Christmas Eve, the smell lingered in the kitchen for days afterwards and was so strong that every passerby asked, “Have you received a parcel?”¹⁴

Besides having a different smell, western goods also looked totally different than East German ones, as all the stories confirmed. Among other things, the color appeared to be an important aspect of the allure. A middle-aged man explained to me: “The stuff from the FRG was far more colorful than ours. We just had plain old green, but in the FRG there was also lime green and grass green and spring-bud green. And it was like that with all the colors.” It also struck me that whenever East Germans tried to describe western goods’ power of attraction, they often referred to West German things having such a remarkably shiny appearance. That shine was so typical for the west that many referred to it shortly and sweetly as “the golden west.” In a similar vein, Rosenlöcher describes the *Intershop* at the previously mentioned Berlin station as a “shiny grotto” in which he was especially struck by the “splendor of progress” which radiated a “spiritual” and “exalted brilliance.”¹⁵

Some mentioned the brilliance and shine of western objects in one and the same breath, thereby referring to the incomparably different tactile perception

they left behind compared to East German products. For example, when I asked an older woman who had waxed lyrically to me over the shine and smell of western things how she would have explained the difference between things from the GDR and from the FRG to me if I had been blind, she responded: "I would have let you feel how soft the West German material was and have you experience how differently those things felt." With that she made a gesture as if stroking a round thing. To make her point, she told me about her neighbor who had just bought a new couch with matching side table. The couch in particular was so beautiful, so "colorful and smooth." She made it clear to me that it was vastly different to the rough fabric in the GRD. When I asked Heiko what it was about West German goods that appealed to the senses so much, he replied:

The smells held a promise that there was more to life than here – that it was more than mere functionality and purposefulness. Look, our washing powder did clean. It was functional and was fit for the purpose. But the washing powder from the west, the soap from the west...that was completely different, something unique. That soap, its lovely smell...That soap enticed you to use it, to enjoy it: that was an experience-soap. Whereas our soap... Well, perhaps it did not really stink – the washing powder for that matter did stink – but then it was not intended that you enjoy the experience. Our soap was meant to clean things and that was that. And that is how it was with everything. Our salt was just salt and that is what it said on the label. It was a plain white packaging with 'salt' on it: *stincknormal* [bloody normal]. And in fact the same applied to everything. Compared to cabinets from the west, our cabinets were downright straight. Western cabinets had a little ridge here and a little edge there and there again a bit of decoration. And take our clothes, they did not tempt you at all to put them on. The jeans for example: at some point the stone-washed trousers were in fashion. But the GDR did not have that material. Finally, Schalck Golodkowski succeeded in importing that material, and at last those jeans were also made in the GDR.¹⁶ The government knew very well that the people could only be satisfied with consumer goods, and so it was constantly doing its best to purchase what was required. But it never succeeded. There was always too little, and it was never right. The same with the jeans: they did indeed come, but the style was just not quite right. We wanted them with a label here, and a stitching of a certain color there. But what did we get? Those straight up and down trousers. They were of course jeans, and the

denim material was right, but without the trimmings and decoration we wanted.

And that is how it happened with everything. It was all too functional, too unappealing, and looking at it gave you little sense of experiencing anything. But appearances count too, don't they? And therein lay the secret of western things. The power of attraction of western things lay in the fact that they had a completely different charisma than ours. Our things were functional, and if you looked at them it was obvious that they were meant to function, and to be useful, but that you should not expect anything else from them.

I am in all honesty compelled to admit that I was the one who had introduced the concept of functionality into my conversation with Heiko. But once I had mentioned that word, he exclaimed: that was it! That is what it was all about, I had taken the word right out of his mouth. East German things were functional, no more than that, while western things were, as he called them, "things to experience."

With his reply, Heiko demonstrated that the visual impressions of functionality (as nothing-more-than-usefulness) versus non-functionality (as pleasure-providing-experience) through the smells and other sensory perceptions amounted to an all-embracing physical experience, which in the western case was felt as unmistakably enticing and in the eastern case was not. The extraordinary powers of "western" goods that featured in the stories people told me were explicitly related to their physical characteristics, showing that this was one of the factors responsible for western goods being recognized as incarnating the ultimate realization of how East Germans' lives should have been.

The fact that East Germans' fantasies of "fulfillment and ultimate arrival" were being evoked and fed by western goods connects to the significant role material(ist) issues have played in East German history.¹⁷ From the outset, the desire for material redemption figured centrally in the pact between the state and its inhabitants, as described in chapter three. Both sides assigned an important stabilizing role (socially and mentally) to the material sphere, as being able to bring salvation. One thing that became clear while recording the stories in Rudolstadt was that materialist developments had indeed become pivotal for East German subjectivation and identification processes. More than any other external criteria of value, collective images of "who we are" and "what we want to be" were often directly related to and expressed in terms of the value and significance of goods.

East Germans' Identification with the West

The fact that material living conditions in the GDR did not develop as favorably as promised nor as favorably as on the other side of the Wall had a profound effect on many an East German's confidence and feeling of self-worth. This for instance was voiced as: "We were not worth anything because our money was not worth anything," or "we were worth nothing because nothing was achieved or built up here."¹⁸ Many people criticized domestic consumption, and even the critique on the impossibility to go abroad was usually expressed in economic or material terms: "We worked hard, but we couldn't even leave the country! Our money, our coins, our nationality was worth nothing abroad." Or: "The worst thing about the GDR was that we were not worth being given permission to go abroad." One of the few times that someone spontaneously put forward a more general complaint about life in the GDR, "wir sind immer so gehalten daß wir gebückt und geduckt durch das Leben gingen" [we have always been required to go through life stooping and crouching], even this statement was prompted by a comment on the material conditions: "Wir haben ja nichts gehat, man hat uns als Bettler angesehen [we didn't have a thing, we were looked down upon as beggars]."

Many East Germans experienced their country's material shortcomings almost as a personal failure. They sometimes admitted to being ashamed of their living conditions. A woman told me that she was always ashamed whenever she had West German visitors: what on earth do you offer people who came from a country where you could get everything? And a good friend of mine, Diana, explained how exceedingly insecure she always felt when going into an *Intershop*, just because it represented such an un-East German world.

I always felt like a beginner in there. And many people seemed to feel that way. You saw them getting themselves all pumped up before they went inside. Although they then appeared to be very confident, anyone could see they were just putting on a front. Everyone was unsure. There were so many things you did not know, everything looked different, and besides, the stuff was laid out so that you could not reach it yourself or even hold it in your hands; you could only look at it. It was all so unknown that you really felt very small when you were there. In order to reassure myself a bit, I used to think about the sales-lady being just an ordinary East German woman as well.

Diana's explanation showed that the excess of western material goods evoked feelings of inferiority. Similar feelings were recollected vaguely now and then in peo-

ple's stories of their encounters with West Germans who visited the GDR. These stories featured swaggering West Germans behaving as if they were God in the GDR, and East Germans on holiday in foreign socialist countries being treated as second-class Germans because their money was only worth a fraction of the DM. There were countless stories about objects, and anecdotes in which people reduced themselves to objects, and considered themselves in relation to one another through and as objects.

Many East Germans seem to have been permanently comparing their own material existence with the western side of the border and constantly felt themselves to be the less successful, less endowed, poorer, little twin brother.¹⁹ "Existing in the shadow of West German society continued to shape the lives of GDR Germans."²⁰ In contrast, the GDR seems to have played a less significant role for West Germans forming their identity, but it was beyond dispute that West Germans also compared themselves with their East German neighbors, and that the respective material attainments of both countries also played a major role in that comparison. In the eyes of many westerners, the disintegrating and drab material state that was the scene of East Germans' existence was an apt symbol for the backward general development of life in the GDR – as shown in chapter six.

The assertion that the material differences between the two countries gave rise to feelings of pride and shame, respectively, and of looking down at or up to one another is wonderfully illustrated in the numerous anecdotes recorded by the West German author Hanns Werner Schwarze in his volume *Die DDR ist keine Zone mehr* [the GDR is no longer a zone]. This is all the more remarkable since the theme of the book has nothing to do with material or consumer developments as such but covers the situation in the GDR in general. The volume contains an interview recorded with a West German who was just back from a holiday on the Black Sea (the interview dates from October 1967). Asked if he had had any contact with people "from the zone," he replied that this had scarcely happened. "I only got chatting with one because he was admiring my car: BMW 1800, latest model." After he had named the price, the contact between the two was over immediately. The East German had become angry and swore that he was just as proud of his Wartburg, even more so because he had had to wait four years to get it and, in converted currency, had paid more for it than the West German had for his BMW! Elsewhere in the book an East German explains why he would never want to live in the Federal Republic. He is fed up that every time when West German relations pay him a visit, he has "to make a good impression...dish up enough food to make the table sag, and say that he is doing well and is definitely not to be pitied."²¹

How profoundly the respective national material achievements could arouse feelings of inferiority and superiority in individual East and West Germans was demonstrated in the letters presented below, which were prominently displayed at an exhibition on Christmas culture in East and West Germany, held in December 1992 in Berlin. The letter on the left was written by a West German woman to her East German sister-in-law, the one on the right by an East German niece to her West German aunt. For the sake of clarity: the two letters and letter writers have no connection with each other.

<p>Würzburg, 10.12.1987</p> <p>Dear Sister-in-law,</p> <p>Have a Merry Christmas at your home in Leipzig!</p> <p>Many thanks for the invitation. You always make such an effort. Unfortunately, we have to keep an eye on our house, we are flying to Sanfangi [?] on December 20. We would have liked to join you, are the Wuppertalers coming?</p> <p>Give everyone our regards.</p> <p>How are you all doing? Has Hans got the new Wartburg [East German car, mv] yet, surely the ten years must have passed by now?</p> <p>We have so much to do, and I have not yet got round to sending you a parcel. I have already been using the writing paper that you sent me.</p> <p>Merry Christmas, we are thinking of you,</p> <p>Your Hannelore and Kurt</p>	<p>Luckenwalde, 26.12.85</p> <p>Dear Aunt Henny!</p> <p>Thank you very much for the lovely Christmas parcel. It arrived on the 23rd. We were really worried. It was falling apart a bit as if it had been round half the globe.</p> <p>Mama says that it did not have all the things that you usually always send. No 'Tosca,' but that does not matter. Mama still has some left from last year. It does not go off and still smells the same. Yesterday we had goose, and for dessert, chocolate pudding made from your packet, it is not as lumpy as ours.</p> <p>In the evening we went to the Schneiders, they had Apfeln which their grandma had sent them. I liked it. Mama prefers dry wine and papa cognac.</p> <p>Your dearest Romy</p> <p>P.s. Hope you got our Dresden stollen and the candles you wanted so much.</p>
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Both letters are almost exclusively about matters of consumption, and it is noticeable how condescendingly one side of the border thanks for the invitation (for which the addressee obviously had neither the time nor the inclination – such an effort! Unfortunately, we have to go to our house in Spain), while on the other side, the pleas for more gifts are scarcely disguised.

The strong identification with the respective material conditions on both sides of the inter-German border was linked with the central role of materialist themes and promises in both countries' post-war history.²² As chapters three and four showed, after 1945 both sections of the country sought to recover by focusing on material reconstruction. Both parts of the country worked equally hard to remove the damage of war and build up a new society and a new confidence in the

future, but the conditions in the FRG were more favorable than in the GRD. The Americans dished out chocolate, coffee and cigarettes, whereas the Russians dismantled the East German railway lines and other industrial attainments. From the outset the GDR excelled in fine (materialistic) promises which came to nothing, while the material reconstruction and associated mental and social pay-off in the west of the country were much more successful.²³ On that subject, Borneman's conclusion is significant: "The major difference between East and West Berliners... lies in the fact that the *Wirtschaftswunder* is translated into prosperity by West Berliners, whereas the *Aufbau* [reconstruction] is translated into hard work by East Berliners."²⁴

From the moment the *Wirtschaftswunder* began to bear its fruits, the inhabitants of West Germany managed to disguise increasingly well what I previously, and inspired by Geissler referred to as the Void under a relatively shiny, polished, material presentation of who we are. "Consumers. We are a nation of consumers. Ties and conformism, shirts and non-conformism – everything has its consumers, the only important thing is that it – shirt or conformism – presents itself as branded article."²⁵ Generally speaking, West German post-war consumerism is described rather critically, as in the included quote from Böll, because it supposedly expressed the collective denial or suppression of the burden of the Second World War.

After the Second World War, material aspirations unmistakably helped the inhabitants of both Germanys to aim their sights at the future and away from the past. More openness towards and collective involvement with the past came later, forced by the revolt of the illustrious *68er Generation* [generation of 1968]. From then on, the collective guilt became an integral part of West Germany's official self-image, and even up to the present time, hardly a public debate can take place in the FRG without some reference or other to Germany's blame for the Holocaust.²⁶

The steadily increasing material prosperity in post-war FRG formed the basis for a newly developed mutual trust and, with it, a form of mutual/national solidarity. Post-war developments in the eastern part of Germany were less unambiguously positive. Although material prosperity had improved, it was still less compared to the west. During my research in Rudolstadt, a woman with whom I was discussing the newly acquired prosperity explained to me: "Oh you know, I lived through the war and then forty years of the GDR. I will always be an Ossi." Asked what that meant, she replied: "That is someone who always grabs if he sees something and always stocks too many supplies." In her experience there was one continuous line from 1945 to 1989; the continuity of shortage and always wanting more.

In the previous chapters I have tried to illustrate that the East German state powers did not fulfill either the material or social promises underpinning the pact with the population that gradually came into being after 1945. Certainly from the time of the *Wirtschaftswunder* years, East Germans' eyes were continually focused on the west in order to compare the FRG's developments with those in their own country. This comparison suggested that everything East Germans desired for, and everything their state promised to realize, was accomplished on the other side of the border. That is why the East Germans' interpretation of growing West German prosperity was much more far-reaching.

The all-encompassing significance attached to material possessions, consumption and excess in collective identity formation processes in both parts of the country since 1945, and the role of the lost war in this, are illustrated by a brief anecdote dating from 1958. In it, a little East German boy appears on the scene, and when a Mercedes parks right in front of him in the eastern part of Berlin, he asks his mother: "Mama, are those Germans, too?" The mother replies: "Yes, Günter, they are German, but I think they didn't lose the war like we did...at least that's what it looks like."²⁷

After the *Wende*, English-Dutch author Ian Buruma conducted interviews on German unification with a number of leading West German intellectuals. One unnamed "famous West German writer" commented on his new compatriots: "I don't like those people in the east. I feel that I know them. I don't want to have anything to do with them." When Buruma put these words to a "literary critic" from the former FRG, the reaction was as follows:

I understand him completely...In fact, it is a miracle how quickly the Germans in the Federal Republic have become so civilized. Now we really belong to the West. We have internalized democracy. But the Germans in the former GDR, they are still locked in a pre-modern age. Those are the ugly Germans.

Thereafter, Buruma concluded that:

[West Germans] antipathy towards the ugly Osis in their badly fitting suits, their stone-washed jeans and plastic shoes...[was] more than just snobbery. The unspoken message was that the Wessis themselves had only narrowly escaped remaining crypto-Nazi, goose-stepping Germans, and because of that had become different, perhaps modern Europeans.²⁸

The statements show that the identification of the two German nations with their respective material standards of living had also given rise to mutual processes of

projective identification. West Germans looked down on the “ugly” East Germans with their shabby, old-fashioned appearance because in them they identified a defeated, historically removed part of themselves – their “contemporary ancestors.” “There is an Ossi hidden in every Wessi – at least a little left over.” And vice versa, East Germans seemed to look up to West Germans with their radiant appearance, because in them they recognized the better developed part of themselves. “In comparing their life course with those of West German peers, for whom material prosperity was a constant...they developed a sense of themselves as weaker and poorer, ‘lacking’ something ineffable.”²⁹

The inhabitants of the two German states have often been compared to twins, and in this context Borneman remarked that in the eyes of East Germans, West Germans were “the desired other.”³⁰ I believe, however, it would be better to replace the description “the desired other” with “desired self.” When looking at West Germans, East Germans were seeing who they themselves could have been if history had taken a different course. In this regard, it is telling that in the GDR, East Germans who did not possess any *DeutschMarken* were called *Aso* (abbreviation from *Asozialen*, anti-socials). Apparently, people who had no *Westgeld* did not belong; they were anti-socials, who had dropped out of society. A similar description was applied to the area around Dresden – the only area of the GDR where West German television reception was impossible. This was called the *Tal der Ahnungslosen* [valley of the clueless]; no access to the west was obviously seen as having “no idea what was going on in the world.” The constant comparison of the world within the Wall with the world outside it made East Germans consider existence in their own country to be not only relatively worthless, but above all a weak extract of the so-called real existence taking place in the west. When Helmut spoke about the *Nische* breaking into pieces, he put it slightly differently: according to him, you could only “really become someone” if you left the country.

The confusingly vague responses to the question of what was so special about the west also left no doubt that its power of attraction might be linked to demonstrable characteristics, but was primarily stronger and more all-encompassing than could be determined by any specific criterion. The West German material world “[represented] the real one,” and the main reason for that world being so irresistible was that the people there had everything they did not have on the east side of the border.³¹ The material world beyond the Wall represented what East Germans lacked. It was not just about what East Germans wanted to have but could never really get, it was also about who they wanted to be but could never become. Significantly relevant in this context is the difference between the ways West and East Germans outlined their life stories. While the stories told by West Germans

born between 1910 and 1955 focused on the themes of economic and material success (such as leisure time, consumer goods, and prosperity), East Germans of the same generation characterized their existence in terms of “lack.”³² This lack was not an isolated experience: it was related to life in the west. In the GDR people missed what had been developed in the FRG. The same applied to the west’s power of attraction: the images of western excess were so alluring because they were close by, geographically and emotionally, while at the same time unattainably far away. Thus they formed the perfect basis for collective fantasies about “fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”³³ The prosperous western world with its beautiful appearance, its enticing smells, and its wonderful glow seemed to be the ultimate materialization of the socialist message of salvation – in which a materially improved existence was the basis for social harmony and mutual solidarity.

The Material as Fulfillment

The images that residents of the GDR could see every day via West German television presented a world that was the opposite of their own to a certain extent. Whereas they were constantly asked to accept functionality, rationality and honesty as their guiding principles (our accommodation is just a bit small, get on with it! we are now in the 20th century, so just accept that!), life in the west seemed to embody a sort of timeless harmony, where problems and tensions scarcely existed.³⁴ That the West German picture was intuitively interpreted as being outspokenly harmonious is in my view primarily related to the sensory ways East Germans were informed about the material world of the west. What people saw was strengthened by other sensorial impressions: the smell, taste and tactile attributes of the western world were so strong that its visual attributes, and the associations they elicited, were confirmed through the other senses. What people thought to see in that world (non-functionality and a shiny, polished but still natural authenticity) was experienced in an all-encompassing physical way. Thus, what they saw and the temptation this aroused were more difficult to resist rationally than if it had only been an outward appearance.

The second reason East Germans imagined they saw all-encompassing harmonious fulfillment on the other side of the Wall was due to certain external features of western material culture. According to Katrin (the designer from Chemnitz with whom I regularly discussed East German images of the west), the outward appearance of the west seemed so natural, nostalgic, and authentic. “All those dried floral arrangements and flowery settees,” Katrin explained and she continued:

All those forms of ‘naturalness’ – they express a desire; a desire to go back in time; not back to a particular age or to a particular period. It is the desire to return to a kind of primitive feeling. We want to go back to the time when there was no separation within us, back to the time when we were still one, undivided. We miss that feeling of unity and look for it in nature. Nature is real and honest.

Katrin tried to put into words the chord that was struck by the previously described pictures, displays and objects. According to her, such images evoked an almost intuitive, common human desire for an ideal world which could be, as she described it: “One and undivided.” According to her, that was what East Germans were seeking and thought they had found in the prosperous west (and their collective identification with it). That was why they desperately longed for and identified with it. I think Katrin’s interpretation is extremely relevant. It refers to the desire for an existence without gaps and cracks, an existence without chasms between the self and its lived experiences on the one hand, and the demands and needs of the social and symbolic order on the other. Generally impossible to achieve everlastingly, East German history painfully illustrates the on-going dialectics between the promises dominating the social order, their fallibility, resulting in collective experiences previously described as the Void or “lack” (East Germans), and the increasingly pressing desire for “fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”³⁵

The GDR came into existence in an era when material shortage affected every aspect of life. Also as a result of the poignant material conditions suffered by the people living in the area that was to become the GDR, they were painfully confronted with what Geissler called the Void – a situation in which social cohesion was painfully absent and where even the last remnants of society were shattered. In chapters three and four, I described how people succeeded in jointly writing off a reality which had manifested itself so intrusively.

Finding a new foundation in the socialist promise of harmony was partly enabled by what one could call its “materialistic packaging.” Even if there was no solution to the social problems, the aspiration of material improvement which was offered as the concrete starting point for future social well-being seemed to be worth the effort. And people did their best: restoring the collapsed houses, they hoped to restore mutual harmony and warmth. This hope was based on experiences which people were not allowed to discuss – they were taboo. These negative experiences had been turned into positive promises, for the future restructuring of society. The negative life lessons were reported to be *beseitigt* [put aside] through the denazification and implanting of socialism in the GDR.

The residents of the society thus formed were mutually connected in the shared, secret knowledge of a traumatic, forbidden reality. This gap was the core around which society evolved – as shown in the previous chapters. Right from the start, the East German state attempted to ensure that the gap between word and reality did not become visible – by never acknowledging, for instance, that denazification had been unsuccessful, and later that suspicion and Stasi existed where solidarity was preached. The warmth that did exist also served to cover up socially disruptive forces and experiences, such as envy and rivalry between people.

The “lack” East Germans struggled with was not only of a material but also of a social nature. Competitiveness, jealousy and distrust between people were hidden from sight, they were taboo. The aims of material improvement as the basis of paradise to be created on earth were never fulfilled. But precisely because these material aims were potentially attainable (in contrast with the problems of a social nature which remained the hidden core of East German society), the desire for improved material conditions always remained the articulated and collectively shared façade which disguised other types of unspoken problems.³⁶

In the years before the *Wende*, criticism on the material situation in the GDR was so widespread and general that when West German historian Lutz Niethammer and his colleagues Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling were allowed to carry out an oral history project in the GDR in 1988, they were shocked. The inhabitants of the GDR seemed to have completely reduced their existence to a materially economic concern. According to Niethammer, the complaints about material consumption were used to express another type of dissatisfaction regarding matters which were not named as such: “Criticism of provisions dominated nearly every interview, just as much so with party loyalists... The all too obvious reduction of people’s entire existence to a direct material concern had become a lingua franca in the GDR, into which all feelings had to be translated.” According to Niethammer, the reason why all possible feelings of dissatisfaction were translated into material complaints was due to a “deep-seated consensus with the material economic values of the system.” The criticism of consumption functioned as an “officially legitimate valve” because this was “the only area in which the unfulfilled perspectives of the people and the party leaders corresponded.”³⁷

These conclusions fully correspond to what I have sketched so far. The obvious identification with the close-by-yet-so-unattainable West German prosperity was so widespread because in the GDR, material prosperity used to be related to more far-reaching promises of salvation. The image of the glorious west gave way to a fantasy that if East Germans would have those things, they would be released from the “lack” prevailing in their society. “If we had that, everything would be perfect,”

is how East German fantasies about the west could be summed up. Just how far-reaching people's perceptions of life in western prosperity could be was illustrated in Mr. Linke's recollections. When talking about the house he himself had built, he regularly referred to the west. If he had lived on the other side of the Wall, he said, not only could he have built a real "dream house," but thanks to the material wealth there, it would have definitely been possible for him to achieve everything he was never able to do in the GDR. It was in this conversation that he uttered the words I already quoted in the introduction: "In the west everything was beautiful and wonderful. People seemed to have no worries, and only there was it possible to be really happy. Everything always looked better and more beautiful than here. It all looked so wonderful! We really thought it was paradise, a *Schlaraffenland pur* [The Land of Cockaigne in its purest form]." While the unfavorable material situation was the only problem in East German society that was allowed to be discussed, the fictitious solution to all (unnamed) problems could be equally found in material areas. Paraphrasing: "If only we were as rich and prosperous as on the other side of the Wall, then..." followed by a completely harmonious description of who we really could have been, from which all the existing – though not mentioned – shortcomings, problems, and frustrations were deleted. A social worker from Rudolstadt put it into words as follows:

In our country, the schizophrenia between word and reality was continuously increasing, and the western material world played an important role in that. We really believed that people in the west stood closer to their ideals; that ideal and reality were in harmony than in our country, and that people were happier there because there was no schizophrenia. That is what we thought because of everything we saw on the television. And western visitors confirmed that image. They looked like the people in the advertisements, they laughed like in the advertisements, and they even smelled like in the advertisements. The image that was spread by television advertising was confirmed by them in real life. And on that basis, we really believed that the residents of the west and their ideals were one. Consumer goods played a significant role in that fusion: Their reality was ideal because they had those things. And if we only had these things too, it would be like that here, too, and that would put a stop to the schizophrenia. Then the gap between ideal and reality would be closed here as well.

Their representation of the west helped East Germans to conceal that their society was more characterized by mutual tension and envy than they tried to feel in their *Nischen*. The fact that people collectively desired the west, just as they also laughed

together by poking fun at the lies which dominated the public arena in the GDR, seemed to confirm the mutual solidarity and community.

All the destabilizing elements of East German existence were removed as far as possible. And if that was not possible, people scapegoated the state – for “die da oben, die machen doch immer so ein Schwachsinn! [those at the top, they always make such a mess of it],” and the fantasy about whom they would have been if... was every bit as beautiful as the western world appeared on television: shiny, radiant, sweet-smelling, soft and harmonious. When the Wall fell, this fantasy was realized, and “the horror of the Real it conceal[ed]” threatened to be exposed.³⁸

Chapter 8

Shattered Illusions

Where we think we have caught hold of the Grail, we have only grasped a *thing*, and what is left in our hands is only a cooking pot (Georges Bataille, 1988 [1967]).¹

In late 1989, the unimaginable happened: GDR residents could freely enter West Germany, and one year later, the two Germanys were united. In that year, the country was in a state of jubilation. The euphoria was immense, especially in the GDR. Yet these joyous feelings quickly disappeared, and five years later they had given way to a general mood of dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration and despair. Many felt like the man in the street, cheated by the western world. Many missed the GDR, sighing nostalgically: “Then the world was still friendly, warm and convenient.” Interestingly, this mood was apparent in every social circle and layer of society. Even people who had prospered since the *Wende* often declared their frustration and disappointment. All in all, I hardly met anyone who was entirely satisfied with the changes that had taken place. The question is how this mood change should be interpreted?

There appeared to be various reasons for the widespread discontent. In the first place, many East Germans were disappointed by what the economic upheaval had engendered. In a market economy, only the fittest survive according to East German common opinion. This was seen as one of the causes not only of the high unemployment in the GDR, but of the painful fact that, in order to better themselves, people cheated on each other. The second reason why the capitalist world met with such strong disapproval in the former GDR was that since the *Wende*, social differentiation between people had increased considerably. This was said to have largely put an end to people’s involvement with each other. The third reason was that the relationship between East and West Germans did not work out as people had expected. On the contrary, because West Germans supposedly looked down on East Germans and their past society, East Germans collectively felt as if they had become second-class citizens in their own country. The changes in the consumer market that had occurred since the *Wende* were cited as a cause, a result or an illustration of the three different sources of discontent.

Before going into these issues more deeply, let me first outline the dramatic events that took place in the GDR from the moment that some of the East German population took to the streets in the autumn of 1989.

The *Wende*

In the summer of 1989, when East German holidaymakers in Czechoslovakia managed to secure entry to the west through the West German embassy in Prague, the call for change was beginning to sound in the GDR and would be declared more openly. Various letters to the editors of newspapers were published in which people – first cautiously and later ever more blatantly – demanded change: more openness, democracy and freedom. “*Wir sind das Volk* [we are the people]” was heard everywhere. “The people” no longer accepted not having a voice and being dictated to. They demanded changes to the existing East German power structure.

It was a rather specific section of the people that spoke out. The people who took to the streets and called for changes were generally those who had also previously been more critically involved in society: intellectuals, people active in the protestant church, party members, writers, artists, and journalists. The vast majority of East Germans were only remotely interested in politics that autumn.²

Just like in all the towns and cities up and down the country, meetings were organized in Rudolstadt from the middle of October 1989 – in churches, theatres, youth clubs and schools. There, too, the first initiatives were taken by the local intelligentsia. On October 16, some actors from the local theatre organized a meeting, and three days later a service to pray for peace was held in the Protestant church, after which the congregation walked to the Catholic church at the other end of the city center. In that first demonstration an estimated total of 2000 people took part. Although demonstrations had been held in other towns for over a month, various participants of that first demonstration in Rudolstadt remembered how scared they were when they went into the streets. They still vividly remembered the previous summer’s “Chinese solution” when the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing had ended in a bloody massacre. Considering how unthinkable it had always been in the GDR to voice a dissident opinion out loud in the streets, this felt extremely scary. Moreover, during the first demonstrations, police was everywhere, and photographs were taken of the demonstrators. Despite the fear, the numbers of people taking part in the demonstrations quickly increased. Once it became clear that the powers of state were not going to intervene with force, the

fear gradually made way for a feeling that people were witnessing a remarkably special moment in time.

From the end of October, national events started to take off at a rapid pace. On November 4, the biggest demonstration in the GDR's history took place in East Berlin; it was estimated that one million people took part. On November 7, a mass demonstration was held in Dresden, where for the first time people publicly called for the government to step down. That same day the government resigned, and on November 8, eleven members of the Politburo did the same.

During the following day's press conference on November 9, while Günter Schabowski, a member of the reduced Politburo, was giving an account of the recent events, an unimaginable thing happened. A piece of paper was shoved into Schabowski's hands, which he read out in front of the cameras. People watching the event on television later said that it seemed as if Schabowski did not know what he was reading, but his words meant that with immediate effect, the residents of the GDR were free to leave the country. The announcement was so unimaginable that initially it almost did not sink in. People could not believe their ears, it could not be true. The East German Reverend Weber, who later published his diary describing those astonishing days, explained the consequences of the televised broadcast of Schabowski's press conference as follows:

No-one seems to understand the significance of the announcement – Schabowski just as little as all those who saw him on live television. Slowly, a sort of shock situation emerges, and people begin to realize the huge significance. Does this really mean...? These hopes are immediately banished again. Impossible, a joke, one of the numerous fake decisions that people know so well: first your hopes are raised, only to be dashed by the subsequent interpretation. Or could it be possible? Indeed: the late news confirmed what people had not dared to hope. Thousands of East Berliners started to cross the border to West Berlin.³

On November 9, 1989, the border between both German states was opened. News spread very rapidly throughout the country, and within a couple of hours, the whole of East Germany was aware that the country was no longer hermetically closed to the outside world. The East German customs officers' initial reaction was reluctance, but it soon became clear to them as well that they would have to let the flocking mass of countrymen through the border without hindering them in any way. For the first time, no mirrors had to be held under the cars, no visas had to be checked, and no contents of cars and bags had to be subjected to a thorough search in case someone was being smuggled over the border. Everyone who wanted to

could freely pass the border between East and West Germany, to be received on the other side by the equally enthusiast masses of West Germans.

What happened within the hours, days, and weeks thereafter dominated the news. All over the world the television showed the same images: blocked East German roads, mile-long rows of Trabants [East German car] trying to reach the frontier, indistinct masses of people at the border, and East and West Germans sobbing as they fell into each other's arms on the western side. The promise that every East German would receive an amount of one hundred DM *Begrüßungsgeld* [welcoming money] on the west side was an additional incentive for most East Germans to go and see the world on the other side with their own eyes. Everyone went. In the first ten days after November 9, an estimated eight million East Germans crossed the border to West Germany.

Afterwards, most people still remembered vividly what they then felt. Many said they just could not control their tears when visiting West Germany for the first time. Especially its material aspects made a deep impression. What prosperity! It was all there! Everywhere, there were things for sale! Everything looked equally beautiful: the people, the streets, the houses, the cars, the shops, all of it! The attraction of the West German to the consumer side was also evident in the essays on the *Wende*, written by secondary school pupils in Rudolstadt.⁴ A 13-year-old girl described this attraction as follows:

Five years ago, how much we looked forward to our first trip to West Germany!! In those days we still had our old Wartburg [East German car, mv], and my grandfather drove us to West Germany. At the moment when the East German roads became West German, my grandfather said to my father, 'You can tell that we are in the west.' We drove on and collected the hundred DM that had been set aside for everyone, and then we went to the first shop we saw. My grandmother got out of the car, went into the shop, and at that moment she cried tears of joy. Then my mother asked my brother what he would really like...I could of course pick out something as well and I chose my first radio. That day, everything changed.

Another 13-year-old girl wrote: "My parents and I went by car to West Germany to do our Christmas shopping. We could not believe what we saw there. It was like being in heaven."

The trains were bulging, people took their old grandmothers and grandfathers along to collect the hundred DM to which they were entitled. One woman even told how she had seen a mother leave her pram behind at a station in East

Germany: she was determined to get to the FRG with her baby in order to collect two hundred DM, but could not get the pram into the jam-packed train.

Social scientists also noticed that above all, encountering western consumption was of significant importance to most East Germans. "In the days and weeks after the opening, East Germans gorged themselves on the symbolic goods of West German nation-ness...They flocked to the shopping centers and stores in a consumptive orgy."⁵ When sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, originally from Poland, asked East Germans if their discontent also had anything to do with the quality of education, for example, he was made to understand that he had simply just not grasped it. This had nothing to do with education or the quality of welfare. It was about "the gratifying feeling of self-assertion, expressed in the act of consumer choice."⁶

In light of what I have described in the previous chapters, it is hardly surprising that so many East Germans experienced these events as their entry to "the promised land."⁷ When Christa Wolf tried to put into words what stirred her and her countrymen in that euphoric autumn of 1989, she described those days as a "Traum-Zeit [dream time]". East Germans were "einige Wochen lang...wirklich die, die sie sein könnten [for a few weeks, East Germans were truly who they could have been]."⁸ Although Wolf is extremely vague about what in her view was the main reason for this collective feeling of sudden self-realization, I read her description as a confirmation of my thesis: that East Germans, when they were at last given access to the wonderful world of the west, which up until then they had only been able to enter in their dreams, collectively felt that their dreams had come true and that reality was finally living up to them.⁹ Before going into more depth on this subject, I first want to describe further the developments that took place in and after the autumn of 1989, focusing specifically on economic and material changes.

After the opening up of the border on November 9, 1989, a rapid sequence of developments ensued in the GDR. On November 17, Hans Modrow, the new head of the East German government, put forward the idea of forming a *Vertragsgemeinschaft* [contractual community] with the FRG. The Ministry of State Security (the Stasi) was disbanded, citizens' movement *Neues Forum* was admitted, the leading role of the SED was scrapped from the constitution, and refugees of the republic were granted amnesty. Articles appeared in the East German newspaper on the Stasi's methods, and on East German television images were broadcast in which the lifestyle of the highest-ranking party officials in the village of Wandlitz was revealed. Especially the luxurious (by East German standards), western interiors, mostly purchased in *Intershops*, gave rise to mass rage: "[A]ll those years when they preached water, they were drinking wine!" was how an

older man expressed the people's anger. Scandals about corruption, abuse of power and illegal trade were revealed right up to the party's top ranks. On December 1, 1989, the East German singer Wolf Bierman, who had been *ausgebürgert* [expatriated] in 1976, performed again in the GDR.

Meanwhile, demonstrations were still being held all over the country, with more and more people joining in. On November 27, the director of Rudolstadt's museum, who had attended a number of demonstrations in Rudolstadt, Leipzig, and Dresden, wrote in his diary: "Stimmung kippt, massive Förderung nach Einheit Deutschland [Mood has shifted. Massive support for German unity]." Around that time, other reporters also noticed a change, which according to many was most clearly expressed by the different slogan the demonstrators were chanting. Whereas the earlier demonstrations upheld "*Wir sind das Volk* [We are the people]" (a slogan in which the democratic, politically idealistic aims of the first demonstrators resounded), this gradually made way for a slightly different slogan, which clearly voiced the striving for concrete political-economic and material changes: "*Wir sind ein Volk* [We are one people]." The switch in slogan was significant: the demonstrations, begun in an attempt to reform the GDR, were aimed more and more at the unification of the two German states.¹⁰

The call for unification was gaining ground everywhere. In December 1989 already, the East German *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU, Christian Democratic Union) acknowledged the market economy and announced it would strive for national unity. As the opening up of the GDR had set in motion a mass migration from east to west, the most important sectors of the East German economy were gradually becoming paralyzed, and the country was in danger of breaking up in chaos.¹¹ This was one of the reasons that general elections were announced in the GDR for March 18, 1990.

In the meantime, however, there was also a surge in the opposite direction, albeit smaller and more limited in form. It mainly consisted of West German traders, who were very keen on serving the eager-to-spend East German public. Goods and market stalls were loaded up in the FRG and unloaded on the East German side of the border. In many East German towns, provisional market halls and tents sprang up to enable the East German population to purchase the desirable *Westwaren* as quickly and easily as possible. For the first time in history, the East German shops remained empty. Now that West German goods were available, nobody wanted to spend their money on East German stuff any longer. Even East German meat and vegetables could not compete against West German varieties. And while up until 1989, people had had to wait for years for the desirable Trabant, these same cars were now being given away for a pittance, sometimes even for nothing.



Figure 8.1 – Rudolstadt 1989/90, Trabant – instant sale
Source: Picture by one of the author's interlocutors.

A West German furniture salesman who had opened a business in Rudolstadt right after the Wall fell, selling remnants bought up in the FRG, explained that it did not matter what he brought, it all sold anyway, “the people wanted everything, as long as it came from the west.” When traders from Bayreuth, a relatively nearby West German town, brought their wares to the market in Rudolstadt, everything sold like hot cakes, despite the fact that a pineapple cost 24.95 DM and a bar of chocolate 7.50 DM. With wages many times lower than in the FRG (even at the fictitious exchange rate of 1:1), these prices were indeed “überteuert [exorbitant],” but as the residents of Rudolstadt asked a local journalist: “Wann habe ich einmal die Möglichkeit, das Alles einzukaufen [when will I be able to buy all this?].”¹²

Having a share of the west's prosperity became the main focus in the run-up to the elections. Chancellor Kohl's CDU presented itself as the party that had enabled West Germany's good fortune. At the first of Kohl's rallies, whilst giving the green light for the election campaign, he promised to achieve the same material prosperity in the GDR (*blühende Landschaften*, blossoming landscapes) that existed in the FRG. According to Kohl, that prosperity would only come about if the voters ensured that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was kept out of the government.¹³

On March 18, 1990, something happened that most of the reporters had anticipated: the CDU won the elections in the GDR with an overwhelming major-

ity. “Die Noch-DDR hat die schnelle D-Mark gewählt [the still existing GDR has voted for the fast DM]” was how the newspaper article described the CDU’s landslide victory.¹⁴ Economic and materialistic considerations had won over the more idealist, political aims with which the first demonstrators had taken to the streets in the autumn of 1989. East Germany’s inhabitants had voted for unification with the FRG as soon as possible, for the DM, and for the promised material prosperity of Kohl’s *blühende Landschaften*. Their voice was explicitly meant to oppose every attempt to develop an adapted socialism as suggested by the supporters of *Neues Forum*. After the elections, the previously mentioned director wrote in his diary: “Das Volk will seine Vergangenheit zu Grabe tragen...Auf dem Markt wird Erdinger Weißbier ausgeschenkt. Die Vorhut der neuen Zeit ist da: die Händler [the people want to bury their past...At the market West German beer is being served. The vanguard of the new era has arrived: the traders].”

From that moment on, East Germany’s transformation happened very quickly – especially in the material sense. More and more East German goods lay untouched on the shop shelves. When it was announced that the *Währungsunion* [financial union] would take place on July 1, 1990, whereby East German coins would disappear and payment in both countries would be in DM, people stopped buying anything from the GDR. Almost immediately after the elections it was made known that the previously desirable automobile, the “Trabant P 601 in der Ausführung Limousine und Universal [Trabant P 601, type limousine and universal]” could be purchased “ohne Vorbestellung [without pre-ordering].”¹⁵ “[U]nter dem Motto Ansehen – Kaufen – Mitnehmen” [Under the motto ‘see – buy – take away’], a completely unknown phenomenon in the GDR, the car was freely available.¹⁶ Dramatic price cuts were made everywhere. Shoes which used to cost 190 *Ostmark* were suddenly available for 29.60 *Ostmark*, and things people used to have to queue for could now be had for almost nothing. East German shop spaces were bought up by West German chains, existing purchase agreements with East German producers were cancelled, and even sheet music produced in the GDR was seen as *ramschi* (junk), “als ob Chopin für den Westen anders komponiert hätte [as if Chopin composed differently for the west].”¹⁷ While there had been only one newspaper in the GDR, now there were suddenly numerous papers and magazines for sale, full of advertisements offering things for sale that would have been completely unthinkable in the old days: pieces of land and other investment opportunities, for example, but also sexual favors and services.

What was happening in the sphere of consumption found its official confirmation on July 1, 1990. From that day on, only one coin was used throughout the entire country. With that, the reunification of the two Germanys had practi-



Figure 8.2 – Rudolstadt, July 1, 1989: Währungsunion [monetary union], queue in front of Rudolstadt's bank

Source: Picture by one of the author's interlocutors.

cally become a fact. In the days that followed, East German banks were inundated. Long queues formed in front of them as everyone came to exchange their money. Bank assistants worked overtime to deal with the huge stream of people. They worked on in the evenings to exchange the hated *Aluchips* [derogatory name for East German marks made of aluminum] as quickly as possible for the equivalent in the desired DM. Everyone wanted to know what their money was worth, how much “schönes Geld [beautiful money]” they had precisely, as a bank worker at the *Sparkasse* (one of Germany's largest banks) explained. Although people could obviously have calculated that themselves, the bank worker emphasized that people simply wanted to see it with their own eyes.

For East Germans, the DM was their entrance ticket to the western world – to “heaven on earth,” as the 13-year-old girl had described in her essay. Moreover, many also considered it an opportunity to clean up the life they had led up until then. Many couples who had married a long time ago took their new money to the west in order to buy each other another wedding ring. Only two styles of wedding ring had existed in the GDR, and practically everyone had worn the same one.

With the arrival of the DM, the East German material landscape changed at lightning speed. Shops were fitted out and decorated differently, old East German shops were obliged to shut down, and new shops were opening their doors ev-

ery day. According to the director of Rudolstadt's *Industrie und Handelskammer* [Chamber of Commerce], at first for shops household electrical goods and jeans, were immensely popular, and the same applied to garages, taxi companies and driving schools. Businesses were set up that had never existed before in the GDR, such as video stores, game halls, insurance companies, estate agents, sex shops, and computer shops. Alongside all these new retail opportunities, the street scene was also enlivened with brightly colored western advertising. "Once again the magician waved his magic wand, and up sprung new signs above the new shops. At last, long cherished desires could be fulfilled. And what next? Now, said the magician to the people, everything will be quick and easy."¹⁸

And quick it certainly was. Walking round Rudolstadt in 1994, I found it hard to imagine that scarcely five years ago, people had had to stand and queue for bananas and oranges, while no-one knew what a kiwi was. And where most western visitors had struggled in 1988 to spend the obligatory 25 exchanged marks a day, by 1994 Rudolstadt had everything for sale that a spoilt westerner could desire: from gold-rimmed long-drink glasses to fresh basil, and from thrillers by John le Carré to the latest model of widescreen television. Queues were nowhere to be seen, on market days the public sauntered leisurely over the market square, and a supermarket had been set up just outside the town center, with nearly 6000 square meter of floor space offering more than 85,000 items. In a material sense, Rudolstadt had become identical to any other West German provincial town. The residents dressed according to the same fashion trends as their West German contemporaries, and about a hundred advertising brochures landed in their letterboxes every month. Here, too, the post office workers had to work overtime when mail-order companies issued their new catalogues, in order to unpack and dispatch all the catalogues as quickly as possible. The kiosk sold 19 different magazines on finance and the stock exchange, and posters hanging in bank offices said: "Ansprüche sind wie Kinder: Sie wachsen [Demands are like children: they grow]," or "Papa sagt, hier wächst unser Geld schneller als ich [Papa says that here our money grows faster than I do]." And a totally different type of poster hung in the post office: an address you could apply to if you were suffering from compulsive buying.

The former socialist society's material landscape had been completely transformed, and everything the East German population could scarcely have dared to imagine had actually happened in an extremely short space of time. As we know, this did not go hand in hand with the joy and contentment everyone had expected.

East Germans' Dissatisfaction

The vast majority of Rudolstadt's residents were quite negative about the emergence of the western consumer culture. In fact, the mood was unmistakably gloomy, which in many ways had to do with the changes that had occurred in consumption. Although hardly anyone seemed to really want to return to the GDR, feelings of nostalgia were widespread, and many people reacted as if they had been stung by a wasp when asked questions about the transformation in the country's consumer culture. Paraphrasing what so many people felt then: "Yes, now we have everything, but our lives have certainly not improved. Nowadays, it is only about money. Before, there was nothing, but now we cannot afford anything. Because of capitalism, there is nothing left of the life we had, and the former solidarity between people is gone."

This was roughly the message circulating throughout the GDR in 1994. After a while I even stopped writing down comments like these. They were expressed so often that I began to simply list them under the heading "standard story" in my diary. The most surprising aspect was that nearly everyone I spoke to seemed to confirm the above statements more or less. During the fifteen months I lived in Rudolstadt, I met only a few people who were really positive about the country's transformation. Strangely enough, not all of them had gained the most in financial or economic terms from the country's *Wende*. The dissatisfaction extended to all layers of society, and even those who were better off than before, either in an absolute or relative sense, were often unsatisfied with the transformation.

Although the complaints were certainly not just directed at the country's material transformation, everything did seem to hinge around this. Paraphrasing, the crux of the problems could be described as follows:

In exchange for material wealth, we had to give up everything that used to bind us. Whereas mutual solidarity was once the core value, nowadays there is only one God, and that is Mammon. Our former existence embodied a great deal of mutual warmth and involvement, but nowadays everyone cheats the other in order to better himself, and that is all down to capitalism, the new money and the goods. Our former lives have been stripped of all of their positive attributes.

Three female workers at the municipal *Diakonie* [social ministry] said that since the *Wende*, they had become distinctly more suspicious and mistrusting. "And that is a good thing too," one of them remarked bitterly, "for whoever is trusting, is stupid. Everyone just walks over you. If you are gullible and kind, people just

exploit you.” In this day and age, they complained, everything revolved around money and goods. This crept into the work situation as well, even if someone’s line of work did not give rise to such behavior at all – for example, if she was a social worker. Partly due to their growing differences, people’s contact with each other had contracted considerably since the *Wende*. People no longer trusted each other, they did not greet each other in the street, and friendships were broken because a sudden feeling of rivalry had arisen.¹⁹ Additionally, life had become so hectic that people did not have time for each other. All three women knew of marriages in their neighborhood which had suffered from the changes. Even the atmosphere in family circles was often spoilt due to the underlying rivalry and distrust engulfing everything. One of the women described how the onset of capitalism had drastically changed the feelings between members of her own family.²⁰

In the past we always came together for big celebrations. That does not happen as often now. It has become too expensive, and we no longer have time for each other. We also trust each other less. Whenever we meet up, everyone is always checking: what has he got, what has she got, how did he get it, she must be doing well, how is that possible, how much is he earning, how is she spending her money, etc. This ruins the atmosphere, and because of that we are no longer so open and trusting with each other. In the past, if one family member had a birthday, the whole family was invited to dinner: we made *Klöße* with meat and possibly lettuce if we could get it, and then pudding with coffee afterwards and home-baked *Kuchen*.²¹ But now when it is someone’s birthday, it is only celebrated if it is a child, and then we invite each other round in the evening, only to come and grill sausages on the barbecue. It has become too much of an effort; we no longer have or take the time, and we do not feel like doing it any more. It has all become so depressing... The one has lost his job, the other cannot find a nursery.

In the past we used to look forward to someone coming to visit us, but now? We react very differently to each other. An intimate conversation is a thing of the past. That just does not happen anymore. We do not want to be saddled with each other’s problems, and we do not let people get close to us anymore. Everything has changed completely. You do not know who is honest and who is not, whether it is a lie or not. One is even a bigger cheat than the other, and then there is the mutual envy in the family. We had just bought a new car, and my brother remarked: “A new car? The other one was still running ok?” But it is none of his business how I spend my money, what I do with it! His daughter is always dolled up like a princess, but I do not ask him how he can afford all that!

When asked why they no longer wanted people to get close to them, she replied:

We all used to be a bit more equal in the old days. Now I surely would not think of letting my family see my bank statements! And nowadays you have to present yourself, you have to know how to sell yourself – they taught us that at a retraining course. In the past, that would not have played a role at all, people only looked at who you genuinely were. Appearance? Presentation? But now you have to present yourself as well as possible. You have to please those above you, *anschleimen und arschkriechen* [sucking up and ass-licking]. It is all just blah blah blah these days. Where I first worked, many people had to be laid off after the *Wende*, but I was kept on. I trusted that all would go well and did not get involved with anything. But my colleagues went to the boss and said to him: “We have young children, work is very important for us.” Then I was given the sack, and the others could stay. That was a breaking point for me. Since then, I no longer trust anyone anymore.

Everyone hides in his own little shell, and we all only live for ourselves. The Stasi might not be around anymore, but now it is the employers who put you under pressure. In the past, when we were all in the same boat, we all had the same problems. And even if you had different problems, they were political or to do with the Stasi. But today it has changed. People assume that if you have a problem, you are responsible for it. People have become more egoistic. The main thing is: I am alright. That is why you have to stand up for yourself. Soon I am going to see my aunt in the west and I now know already what she will say: “New car?? How is that possible???”

No, nobody needs to know as much about me as they did in the past. It does not serve any purpose. I was brought up with the idea that you had to love your neighbor like yourself, but tell me honestly: can I love those who play me a mean trick? You have to learn to deal with it. I always used to deal with things spontaneously. Now I just sit and listen. I do not say too much, and contemplate quietly. I no longer trust anyone. Everywhere you go you are deceived anyway: by the authorities, at the *Treuhand* [Trust agency].²²

The fact that I was dismissed due to the actions of my colleagues, I have not got over that yet. That has changed my life. Someone’s face alone does not tell you. With everyone you must ask yourself: can I trust them or not? And everything is connected to the pressure to achieve, to be more than your neighbor, and to have more than your neighbor: he already has that but I do not yet have it, she looks better than me, and so on and so forth. Struggle, envy, jealousy, wanting more than at first, wanting more than others, joining in the fight for status, that is what it is all about these days.

Her long story contains all the themes that cropped up in nearly every conversation I had with people: about how money ruled the world, that the atmosphere between people was not what it used to be, that pressure to achieve, jealousy, mutual rivalry and distrust had come to dominate the once so egalitarian and jovial society. Since the *Wende*, people withdrew to their own four walls – even more

so than in the East German *Nische* society, and that was due to capitalism and its accompanying lifestyle, in which everything revolved around money and material possessions. From the moment the country became western, nothing remained of what used to be East German existence: all the warmth and friendship had made way for egoism. This resonated everywhere, and the newspapers regularly published cynical jokes, making fun of the central role of egoism in current society.

The fact that East Germans had little faith in society and the future after the *Wende* is also demonstrated demographically. In the period between 1989 and 1992, the number of marriages that took place in East Germany dropped by 62 percent – a “marriage shock” which has almost no parallel in history. Even between 1942 and 1946, the number of marriages in Berlin only dropped by 30 percent. East German death rates for 1992 were not yet available when political economist Nicholas Eberstadt carried out his research, but on the basis of the 1991 figures, it was clear that death rates had increased in all age categories since the *Wende*, and “many of these increases were dramatic.” According to Eberstadt, the most significant illustration of the shock phase the GDR was going through three years after 1989 was the fall in the number of births in the former East Germany: in 1992 this had dropped by 55 percent compared to three years earlier. “Industrialized societies... have scarcely ever registered such radical declines in fertility – not even during the chaos and destruction attendant upon defeat in total war... Eastern Germany’s adults appear to have come as close to a temporary suspension of child-bearing as any large population in the human experience.”²³

Similar trends were also visible in Rudolstadt. Whereas 877 children were born in *Kreis* Rudolstadt in 1988, that number had dropped to 287 in 1993. The annual number of marriages showed a similar slump: in 1988 there were 578, in 1993 only 177.²⁴ In addition, I heard about a surprisingly high number of suicides. Some even knew of several people who had decided to end their lives. One of the women from the *Diakonie* reported that since the *Wende*, at least three people in her village had committed suicide. One of them, a man, threw himself under the train after having been dismissed. Another was a 21-year-old woman who had had a child almost exactly a year ago.²⁵ These are the most extreme stories I recorded, but I met many people who admitted that they too no longer had any faith in the future. “In ten years? I hope I am still alive then,” a 35-year-old woman joked bitterly when she spoke of how much her life had changed recently. Just like many others, she admitted to missing the GDR. Then she knew what she was living for, she still had a job, a purpose, a structure, something to do. But now? She was going mad sitting at home, not being able to do anything because everything she could think of would cost money.

I listened to lots of stories like these – dismal, bitter tales from people who said they had completely lost their desire for and grip on life since the *Wende*. Even in the little café under my apartment which was frequented mostly by Wessis, Wossis (East Germans who wanted to be seen as successful Wessis) and other *Möchtegerns*²⁶ [wannabe’s] working in Rudolstadt, many people complained about the destructive *Werdegang* [development] of the once so harmonious society. Sometime before articles about *Ostalgie* started to appear in the German media, a GDR night was organized in this café.²⁷

That night the café was decorated with East German attributes: East German consumer goods (packets of beans and other preserves) were placed in between bottles of alcohol, old maps of East Germany adorned the walls, and there were lots of GDR memorabilia on the bar. Many visitors had put on part of their old FDJ uniforms, and some greeted each other with the FDJ’s usual slogan, “Wir sind bereit [we are ready].” Others had pinned on GDR badges such as “für ausgezeichnete Leistungen [for excellent achievements].” Remarkably, however, the music played was not from the GDR era. Only the most popular current hits sounded through the bar, one of which was the East German band Der Prinzen’s song “Alles nur geklaut [everything’s just stolen],” undoubtedly the most popular song at that time. During my stay in Rudolstadt, I heard the song everywhere: in shops, cafés, the gym, and also in people’s homes. The chorus went like this:

es ist alles nur geklaut, heho heho
 [everything’s just stolen, heho, heho]
 es ist alles ja nicht mein, heho heho
 [nothing here belongs to me, heho, heho]
 es ist alles nur gestolen, nur gelogen, nur geklaut
 [everything’s just stolen, lied about, and taken]
 entschuldigung, das hab’ ich mich erlaubt, heho, heho
 [apologies, I allowed myself to do it]
 das hab’ ich mich erlaubt
 [I let myself do it]

I could not help hearing the lyrics as an ironically cutting criticism of the central role of money in the current society.

Here too, nothing but criticism. The pressing question is why so many people were utterly negative about the new era. As mentioned before, my interlocutors gave various reasons for the depression they had collectively fallen prey to. The first was complaints concerning the economy and the economic structure of so-

ciety, second the social differentiation which the introduction of capitalism had led to, and lastly the humiliating feeling of being treated as second-class citizens. Running through everything was the dissatisfaction with the changed morals as a result of the *Wende* from socialism to capitalism.

Three Reasons for East German Despondency

Fraud, privatization and unemployment

When trying to distribute questionnaires, I noticed that a great number of houses in Rudolstadt had stickers on their front doors outlining and commenting briefly on East Germans' collective experience of the country's economic *Wende*. The stickers were meant to keep traders and sales representatives at bay. The texts differed, but one of the most common was: "We are insured for everything. We do not want to be converted to join a sect, we already have a vacuum cleaner. We also possess an encyclopedia. We do not want to change our newspaper or our weekly. Please do not disturb us! Thanks!"

The stickers were a reaction to one of East Germans' first experiences of the down side of the capitalist economy. Immediately after the country was opened up, it was overrun with West German traders and representatives, and the stickers summarized succinctly a number of collective experiences which had enraged those in the former GDR. Everywhere people had come banging on doors, trying to sell goods and services, thereby taking blatant advantage of East German naivety regarding the workings of the market economy. Playing to the feelings of desire and insecurity about the future, they sold expensive insurance deals for things people did not have to insure, or even could not insure against. People were persuaded to book trips to areas which on closer investigation appeared not to exist, or they had to pay absurdly high prices for products of poor quality.

In the early days after the *Wende*, the former GDR was a goldmine for speculators. Because land and real estate had been almost worthless in the former socialist economy, West German speculators anticipated an opportunity. Even before the *Währungsunion* [financial unity], West German estate agents headed off *en masse* to the GDR, searching for the best pieces of land and objects that looked interesting. "Wie im Goldrausch, seien sie allen durch die DDR gestieft [they all charged round the GDR, as if they had gold fever]," explained an assistant at one of the construction companies that were quick to seize their chance to earn "eine schnelle Mark [a quick mark]."²⁸ The transformation of value that came with the introduction of the capitalist market economy was so unimaginable for nearly all

East Germans that they were an easy prey to the slick young men of capitalism. In Rudolstadt numerous stories circulated about people who had closed seemingly lucrative deals during the *Wende*, which later proved to be cases of downright fraud.

Alongside the feeling that unfamiliarity with the rules of the capitalist economy was being abused, the economic changes that had occurred in East German society since 1989 also enraged everyone because of the way the East German economy was privatized. Since the *Wende*, there was scarcely anything left of East German industry. Although everyone could see how outdated and *herunter gewirtschaftet* [economically hollowed out] most of the East German production companies were, the general expectation had nonetheless been that many of them would be restored once West German production companies would set themselves up in the former GDR. That did not happen. East German companies were too poorly maintained, and their production methods were far below international standards (especially in ecological aspects). And because wages and other production costs in neighboring countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic were much lower than in Germany, the West German companies that were considering setting up additional branches mostly preferred other countries to the former GDR. Thus, the *Treuhand* was forced to sell off very cheaply a large number of companies and factories that had been relatively productive before.

This was also the fate of the huge chemical concern in Rudolstadt, which until 1989 had employed 7000 people. In 1993, the company was sold to two Iranians for the symbolic amount of one DM. The new owners, having received a vast sum of money from the state of Thuringia intended for the renovation and conservation of the factory, dismissed 6300 of the employees. Shortly afterwards they disappeared – taking with them the renovation subsidies. Since then, Thuringia has tried many different ways to keep the factory going, but in 1994, the remaining 700 employees were uncertain about their jobs. Just like the majority of East German production companies, the factory had belonged to the international top in East and Central Europe at the time of the GDR. Many of Rudolstadt's residents simply did not understand why the company and its products were suddenly dumped without a trace after the *Wende*. Many suspected that the downfall of East German industry was a case of evil intent; West German producers were said to have much to gain by destroying all the competition. For them, the GDR would only be worthwhile as a distribution market, and they would have tried to prevent anything really flourishing here.²⁹

The former employees of the chemical factory formed a substantial part of Rudolstadt's unemployed. In 1994, the percentage of jobless officially fluctuated around 20 percent, but the statistics only included those people who were entitled

to unemployment benefit. Many women whose husbands worked, 55-plussers who came under a different entitlement category, and the great numbers of people who thanks to *Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen* [job creation measures] were helped in finding temporary work were not included in these figures, which brought the actual percentage of unemployed to nearly double that amount.³⁰ This means that at least 35-40 percent of Rudolstadt's residents who wanted and were able to work were unemployed. This was undeniably one of the significant reasons why the GDR's economic transformation enraged so many people.

A large portion of the unemployed (both in Rudolstadt as well as in the rest of the country) consisted of women, who were accustomed to working and to derive – unlike in the old FRG – a significant part of their identity from their work. Most of them suffered considerably from the feeling that they were no longer needed and did not belong anywhere. “We have no experience with this,” the head of Rudolstadt's *Wohnungsamt* explained. Whereas in the old days, people's existence was mainly structured around work, now that this had ended, many felt that everything simply ceased to exist. All that was left was the emptiness and the feeling “ich werde nicht mehr gebraucht [I am useless, nobody needs me].” Precisely because unemployment had not existed in the GDR, East Germans did not know how to cope with this phenomenon. The many unemployed women had no idea at all of how they could adapt to life without having a job, nor had they seen any role models. I met many women who spent their days drearily on the couch, waiting till their husbands came home in the evening and not knowing what to do with the rest of their lives.

Besides the bitter consequences of the economic privatization and the frequent fraud of which they been made victims, there was a third reason why many East Germans were dissatisfied with the economic unification of the GDR with the FRG. This was because East Germans who did have a job earned only 70 percent of those in an equivalent job in the west. As rents and the costs of living were by this time at a similar level as in the former FRG, this meant that working residents of the GDR had much less to spend than those in the old federal republic.

These reasons illustrate why many East Germans criticized the economic transformation of their country. Apart from that, dissatisfaction and disappointment was also related to the fact that after 1989, the whole GDR's economic structure had to be converted, reorganized, renovated, privatized, and reimbursed in a terrific hurry. This caused a rapid increase in the social differentiation of society.

Increased Social Differentiation

By the year 1994 it was evident throughout Rudolstadt that not everyone had benefited equally from the country's transformation. Especially in the town center, huge



Figure 8.3 – Rudolstadt, 1994, the city as seen from the Heidecksburg (castle on Rudolstadt's hill)
Source: Picture by the author.

differences were visible between the buildings and streets that had been renovated, and those that had not. Whereas some shops were identical to the shiny, garishly colored shopping paradises that overshadow the shopping streets in the west, others had not changed visibly in forty years. If you looked down from the castle that towers above Rudolstadt to the town below, you see a similar picture unfolding. Buildings that had obviously not been touched for forty years stood next to those that had recently been given a complete make-over. Similar contrasts between old and new, neglected and renovated were visible everywhere: at parking places and on motorways, where next to the shiny, brightly colored Mercedes and four-wheel drives, a great many old Trabants were still chugging along. Comparable differences could be seen in the interiors of houses and public areas. In chapter seven, I described the visible differences between the decoration and interior design of the houses that had undergone an entirely new refurbishment and those which showed no sign of having being changed in the past forty years. Whenever I visited people at their place of work, the same picture was evident; there was often a great contrast between the rooms where the managers worked and those that could be accessed by everyone or where subordinates worked. The differences in outward appearance were so obvious that people going to work everyday became aware of



Figure 8.4a and b – Rudolstadt, 1994, houses
Source: Pictures by the author.

a divided society, one half of which scarcely seemed to matter, while the other half appeared to be fully in control.

While the *nouveaux riches* ostentatiously honked the horns of their flashy cars as they drove round Rudolstadt's market square and had new kitchens measured, sometimes costing over 100,000 DM, the less fortunate went on shopping trips to Poland. A travel agency in Rudolstadt organized these one-day trips to the town of Görlitz, just over the border, where the day-trippers could take advantage of



Figure 8.5 – Saalfeld (neighboring city, 6 miles away from Rudolstadt), 1994
Source: Picture by the author.

the cheap lace blouses, plush animals, “crystal” glasses, bright flowery “porcelain” dinner services, “real leather” jackets for 10 DM, and jeans recommended as “real Live’s Strauss [sic]: there is nothing more American.”

One time I went along. After the woman I sat next to in the bus had walked round the market all day, she flopped down, exhausted from shopping. She could not stop talking about how successful her day had been. At least four times she told me about the crystal glasses at 8 DM a piece, for which she would have to pay at least 30 DM in Rudolstadt. She had bought as many as she could carry and had already signed up for the next day-trip. She wanted to have more of that glassware and was going to buy some as presents for all her relatives. In the old days, the luxury of crystal glasses was unattainable for ideological reasons; nowadays, such glasses were for sale on every street corner. But whereas her neighbors were able to buy them in Germany, she had to travel abroad to get them. For only there, at a Polish market, was she able to indulge in a shopping spree and feel completely happy.

The increased social differentiation of society was a significant cause of East Germans’ frustration. The pain it inflicted was aggravated by two factors; the growing differences had wide-ranging effects on the social contacts between people, and secondly because East Germans were made to understand in all sorts

of ways that they should accept these developments – as that is what it takes to be successful in the free capitalist market. Ideologically, the growing differences seemed to be entirely accepted. Both factors deepened the pain caused by the social differentiation as such.

The escalating social rivalry had chilled and hardened the general atmosphere in society. Due to the greater differences, it often happened that people who used to be good friends suddenly after the *Wende* did not see enough in each other to warrant keeping in touch. It occurred just as often that people who beforehand associated with each other in a normal and sometimes even genuinely friendly manner did not want to know one another after the *Wende* because they suddenly felt superior.

And so, in numerous different ways, East Germans learned by bitter experience how important it was in a capitalist society to convince others of your own merits. You had to always keep up as good an appearance as possible to prove your capacities to others. This was what Claudia – the secondary school pupil referred to before – explained bitterly once when we were talking about West Germans: “Die? Die können *spielen* glücklich zu sein [Them? They can *act* like they are happy!],” she sighed, and she explained what she meant by that:

Every time West German musicians come to play for my parents’ orchestra (her parents were professional musicians, mv), they manage to present themselves so well that the entire orchestra is impressed beforehand already. ‘Wow! This is going to be something special.’ When they subsequently start playing, it is not until much later that my parents and their colleagues realize that those West German musicians actually play only as well as they themselves and are not impressively better at all.

As East Germans were generally unfamiliar with the principle of showing off, they themselves were often the victim of people who were better at these tricks. The East German owner of a *Bureau für Imageberatung* [image consultancy], established in Berlin in 1994, told a Dutch journalist that East Germans were not good at seeing through simple (outward) trickery. According to him, this was because it had been especially important at the time of the GDR for people to adapt and gear themselves to the collective to which they belonged.³¹ Consequently, he explained, East Germans had in fact continually been taught how *not* to stick their neck out. They still struggled with this, he explained, for in the old days it was ideologically reprehensible to stand out too much from others. People were therefore basically ashamed to do so now. And because East Germans were not accustomed to pierc-

ing through the fancy words and polished exteriors, they had become an easy prey for all kinds of deception since the *Wende*.³²

Apart from that, many people also struggled with the growing differentiation of society because they had different ways of fulfilling the freedom to shape their own lives as they saw fit. The previously mentioned *Diakonie* workers described how many friendships had suffered under the increasing possibilities: suddenly one did this, the other did something very different, and consequently it was obvious that people had less in common and were less like each other than they had previously thought. One of the women remarked dismally: “Diese sogenannte Freiheit hat viele Ketten gesprungen [this so-called freedom has broken many ties].” And the head of the *Wohnungsamt* [housing department] explained that even people who had previously complained about the high degree of uniformity dominating life in the GDR now saw that this very aspect of East German existence had something nice and egalitarian about it. As everyone’s lives had been organized in the same way, people felt and expressed themselves as more equal than was the case nowadays:

We all lived in the same block of flats, which we left in the morning to go to work, where it was known what would happen in the course of the day. The child went to the nursery, later to the *Krippe* [crib] and later on to school. In each case he was taken care of ten hours a day and when you came home in the evening you also knew he had watched *Notruf* [TV program] and then could go to bed. At work everyone got a hot meal. That cost seventy pfennig a week. The food was inedible, and everyone complained, but the doctor ate the same horrible food in the canteen for the same amount as everyone else, and then, because it was so horrible, he like everyone else went to the kiosk on the other side of the street to get a piece of *Kuchen*. Had he wanted a tomato salad, that was impossible, just like it was impossible for all of us. Even if he had paid shall we say fifty Ostmark, he still, just like everyone else, would not have got a tomato salad. Today, however, this same doctor can have his assistant bring him a different salad every day if he fancies it. And it is totally unthinkable that he would eat it together with her. What is more: he will keep her at a great distance. He employs her, but the difference in salary between the two has become so large; and regarding these differences, he has even fooled her that he has got himself seriously into debt in order to set up the practice, so that although he had to take her on, he can only offer her a low salary. So he does not want her to know that these days he has a real carpet in his

living room and not the same carpet from the Konsum [shop] we all had before. In the past we all bought the same stuff because there was nothing else. This made it more equal. The wages were different, but much less different than now. And because there was nothing, everyone was able to buy the same with his money. It is true there was not much, but what there was, was for everyone.

From this lengthy anecdote it is clear that in the old days differences did exist, but because they came less to the fore, there was less reason for jealousy than is the case nowadays. In this way people could deceive themselves and others that such feelings had not or hardly ever existed in the GDR. Whereas now? In the words of one of the *Diakonie* workers, “jealousy seeps through society like corrosive acid.”

This is a meaningful statement, which in the first place clarifies that more than just political freedom was repressed in the GDR. Under the motto of mutual equality, socio-economic differences were ideologically toned down and covered up. Moreover, in a practical sense they were indeed not so apparent because the lack of consumer goods ensured that what little there was had been shared relatively honestly, leaving people collectively longing for the west. Second, the statement is also meaningful because it reveals that the pain caused by increasing differentiation was very much linked to the fact that nowadays this was ideologically legitimized instead of condemned.³³ Under the motto that everyone is responsible for their own existence and that differences are just part of life, in present-day society no-one needs to be ashamed of driving around in an expensive car and feeling too good to drink a beer with their unemployed neighbor. According to the same ideology, no-one but yourself was responsible if you decided to insure yourself for worthless things, book a holiday to a place that didn't exist, or got persuaded to buy a basic vacuum cleaner for nearly 1000 DM.

Former East German author Monica Maron (who left the GDR long before the *Wende*) provides a striking analysis of the pain caused by increasing social economic differentiation in the former socialist society. In her view, the disappearance of socialism in the GDR primarily meant that the ideological constraint on mutual *inequality* had disappeared, which in the old days had to a certain extent supported “the losers” by giving them at least some ideological credit. Maron states bitterly that after the *Wende*:

[East Germans primarily] miss their familiar equality. When they all had less rather than more, or in any case had the same, they apparently also felt equal. One of the most frequently posed questions in this country was:

you surely think you are better? But no-one was better... In matters of taste and culture, the assertion that we were living in the dictatorship of the proletariat was certainly not a lie. And then suddenly this was over, just like that; that is what hurts the most.³⁴

I agree with Maron. The main reason why the increasing differentiation was so hard to bear was because the growing opportunities and freedom of movement had made visible and expressible what formerly had remained hidden – under an ideological taboo, under shortages in material consumption, and under the associated collective (and therefore mutually binding) desires for a prosperous world.

A New Existence and Second-Class Citizens

Besides the complaints discussed above, many East Germans were very frustrated because they felt like second-class citizens in their own country. This feeling was presumably to a large extent the result of the arrogant way they were treated by West Germans.

Since the *Wende*, all of East German life has changed. Not only the political, economic, and judicial structure of society has changed, but also its material, infrastructural characteristics. A psychologist working at the *Diakonie* in Rudolstadt recalled that during the *Wende*, she realized at an early stage how all-embracing the transformation awaiting her and her compatriots would be. Because she feared she would lose her grip on life, she forced herself to investigate what exactly would change and what the legal consequences would be, at least in a small area relating to her work with young people. When talking about it five years later, she remembered well how much time and effort this had cost her during that period:

I was determined to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the developments. I wanted to understand what was going to happen, and how the new society that was about to appear would function. I wanted to understand what I was up against. I spent many nights engrossed in employment law and juvenile law, but I am probably the only person who did this so intensively then. Most people let themselves be entirely overpowered by what was happening.

Many people explained that their dissatisfaction with the *Wende* was indeed not only linked to the terrific speed with which the changes had taken place, but also to the fact that the entire East German existence was reshaped in a tested West German model. Nothing that had existed in the GDR appeared to be worth keeping. To illustrate this point, people referred to the long-winded discussions that

had raged in 1993 and 1994 over the question of whether one of the former East German traffic signs, the so-called *grüne Pfeil* [green arrow], could be retained in the east of Germany and possibly even adopted throughout Germany. Most people felt that the lengthy political commotion was out of proportion to the speed with which all of the former GDR had been rigorously crushed. The fast and painstaking way their existence had been shoved to one side gave people the feeling that they themselves were considered worthless.

One area where this feeling was actually confirmed was in the way job vacancies arising in the former GDR were filled after reunification. From the moment the socialist society ceased to exist, a large number of jobs had to be reallocated, for example in areas such as justice and law and order. In addition, everyone in the civil service was checked for Stasi involvement, and most people whose involvement was proven were dismissed. Together with the large number of jobs created by the introduction of the market economy, a large number of positions became vacant. During the reallocation process, East Germans often noticed that people from the old FRG were systematically given preference over East Germans. This was partly inevitable, such as with former East German public prosecutors, judges, and the majority of the police force. But the fact that the new directors of the museum and theatre in Rudolstadt were also from the west met with less approval. The same applied to the many West German civil servants added to Rudolstadt's administration. In general, the predominant feeling was that East Germany was being governed by West Germans who were not good enough to achieve their ambitions in their own country, but seized the opportunity in "the east." In addition, East Germans were paid only 70 percent of the salary of an equivalent job in the west, whereas for their activities in the east, West Germans received an extra supplement, commonly described in scathing tones as *Busch-* [bush] or *Dschungelzulage* [jungle supplement].³⁵

A further development which contributed to making East Germans feel like second-class citizens in their own country concerned one of the most controversial conditions of the German unification treaty: the right to property reimbursement. According to this clause, all real estate illegally appropriated by the East German state after 1949 had to be given back to the original owners.³⁶ This measure caused a massive transfer of property in the eastern part of Germany, and everywhere East German residents' houses and land were handed over to people who for decades had considered themselves West Germans. In some communities, 80 percent of the houses and land were reclaimed.³⁷ When I lived in Rudolstadt, the closing date for applications to claim reimbursement of property had expired. A total of 3500 applications were submitted, of which 32 percent had been settled by the

middle of 1994. According to the head of Rudolstadt's branch of the *Amt für offene Vermögensfragen* [office that dealt with reimbursement claims], three-quarters of the requests were settled. A salient detail, however, is that the 3500 claims related to 10,000 real estate items. The average reimbursement claim was for three buildings. This means that those who had left the GDR at the time were generally the ones who already owned a great deal. And it was precisely those people who benefitted from this measure.

Many East Germans experienced the manner in which the right to property reimbursement was claimed as a painful and concrete example of West Germany taking over the GDR financially and materially. It was by and large West Germans who benefitted the most while East Germans lost out, and this general feeling was roughly expressed in an article in *Neues Deutschland* (the former East German party newspaper): "Alle Eigentümer sind gleich, die westdeutschen gleicher³⁸ [all owners are equal, but the West Germans are more equal]."

By 1994 not much was left of the happiness and mutual reconciliation which had prevailed between East and West Germans during the *Wende*. "The Wall is gone, but the wall in our heads has become even bigger," was one of the comments typifying the mutual relations. Germany was in danger of becoming a country of *Ossis* and *Wessis*. East Germans thought that West Germans acted as if they had the world in their pockets. According to East Germans, this arrogant attitude was primarily prompted by West Germans' perspective on the world, which was supposedly based on money and status. Because East Germans generally had little of either, West Germans did not acknowledge them. It frequently happened that West Germans reminded East Germans that they did not amount to much, were unworldly, were behind the times, and still had a great deal to learn. Also for this reason, most West Germans (once again: in the eyes of East Germans), in retrospect, regretted the unification of the two Germanys.

It was true that the German media regularly published articles implying that West Germans would actually have preferred to let the Wall stand. This was usually motivated by the exorbitant costs involved in restoring and modernizing the GDR. Because so much money was spent on bringing the former GDR to a comparable level as the western part of the country, West Germans frequently reacted disgruntled at the increased prosperity in the former GDR. A middle-aged woman told me, for instance, that when she and her husband had been on holiday to Spain with her sister from the west, and the rest of the group in the coach heard that they were from the GDR, they were showered with questions: "Wie könnt ihr das denn leisten [how can you afford this]?" Even when she tried to put a stop to the questions by saying – wrongly – that her sister had paid for the trip, again new

discussions began: “You did not contribute anything to our pension pot, yet now you are getting our good money!” At one point the East German woman asked one of the West German women if she herself had worked. It turned out the woman was receiving a pension because her husband had worked. Even after all this time, it could still infuriate my East German interlocutor: “Time and time again we still have to belittle ourselves and show gratitude because we too have that lovely money! As if we have not worked the past fifty years!”

The sluggish relations between West and East Germans were the topic of many jokes published in the local newspapers and in joke books. Here is one about West Germans’ changed attitude towards German unification:

An *Ossi* and a *Wessi* meet each other.

The *Ossi* says to the *Wessi*: “We are one nation!”

The *Wessi* replies: “So are we!”³⁹

West Germans’ anger regarding the high costs of the unification and the supposedly fast enrichment of East Germany were the theme of many cartoons, as were the unworldly traits East Germans thought West Germans assigned to them.

As figure 8.6 suggests, many East Germans experienced West Germans as neo-colonialists, who not only thought that their money could buy the whole of the GDR including its inhabitants, but also that they could do anything they liked. Some thought the way West Germans acted in the former GDR was like “Herrenmenschen in einer Kolonie [lords in a colony],”⁴⁰ which made many East Germans feel like “Heimatvertriebene [displaced persons in their own country].”⁴¹ That even children were aware of the feelings of humiliation so strongly present in the former GDR was apparent from the following excerpt from an essay that a 14-year-old boy wrote entitled, “Deutschland. Ein Land von Osis und Wessis? [Germany. A country of Osis and Wessis?]:”

Ich finde es schlimm so die Osis hinzustellen als wären sie dumm, sie wüsten nichts, haben noch nie was von Hifi und Video gehört. Es stimmt ja das wir noch einiges dazu lernen müßten, aber so dumm waren wir nun wirklich nicht. [I think it is bad that East Germans are looked upon as being stupid, or do not know anything, and have never heard of hi-fi and stereo. It is true, we still had to learn some things, but we were not really that stupid.]

Against this background, the initial onset and increasing emergence of *Ostalgie* [combination of nostalgia and *Ost*, East] should primarily be seen as a form of protest against the complete devaluation of East German life histories.⁴²



„Etwas mehr Einfühlungsvermögen könnte Kollege Müller bei der Einweisung seiner ostdeutschen Mitarbeiter schon zeigen.“

Figure 8.6 – Cartoon on German unification. The man pointing at the chair says: “This chair here, this desk here, understand?” His colleagues at the front of the picture comment: “colleague Müller could have been a little more sympathetic towards the East German employees during their job induction”

Source: Jörg von Morgen, Markus und die Besserwessis. Hamburg: Stern Verlag, 1992.

Although it was evidently painful for many East Germans to have to experience, from one day to the next, their whole lives and past being shoved to one side as if entirely useless, you cannot help but wonder: was that not precisely what the greater majority had passionately wanted themselves – at least initially? After all, was it not the East German population in the autumn of 1989 who desperately wanted to dissolve their country and join the FRG? The landslide victory of the CDU, the party most outspokenly aiming at fast unification at the first election in March 1990 was explicitly linked to the party’s promise that there would be no transformation whatsoever of socialism or the GDR. The majority of the East German population wanted then – as the museum director wrote in his diary at the time – to “bury the past as quickly as possible.” However painful the devaluation of their history might be, one aspect of East Germans’ complaints is notice-

ably absent: their own initial condemnation of East Germany before 1989. I therefore think that the West German disapproving glances also exposed something that many East Germans themselves simply did not want to see.

The Idealized West Glances Back

In discussions on inter-German relations since 1989, one important element was not touched upon: the fact that East Germans had strongly idealized the world on the other side of the Wall, in order to be able to subsequently identify with the positive image this had created. Beforehand, the west had been seen by many East Germans as the imaginary space where they assumed there was the ultimately perfect society. In West Germans they thought they recognized themselves in better material circumstances. It must have been extremely painful to have to witness after the *Wende* that this recognition was certainly not mutual. While East Germans fundamentally recognized themselves in their West German neighbors, those glances were ruthlessly averted by West Germans: “Us? Like you? Thank goodness no! You, like us? Why then? Based on what?”

Through the increasing contact between West and East Germans increased after 1989, it soon became apparent that the perfect West German existence was rather more the product of East Germans’ projected imagination than East Germans would have wanted to admit beforehand. This in its turn threatened to reveal what the previously idealized projection had in fact always been: a means of cleaning out less pleasant characteristics and experiences from their own collective self-representation. In my opinion, the supposed West German post-*Wende* contempt was so painful for East Germans because in the deprecating glances, they had to recognize what they had chosen not to see in their own representation of self.

In her book *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären*, East German author Annette Simon remarks that West Germans’ outlook on the history of the GDR has helped her to see more clearly a number of less pleasant aspects of her own life history. She recalls that although up until then she had always regarded herself as critical and dissident, it was only afterwards and through West Germans’ perspective on her history that she came to recognize the extent to which her previous perspective (on life, the GDR, and its history) was influenced by “den ‘Herrschenden’...diesen Staat [this state’s rulers]:” “I think it is important [to recognize] that our loyalty to the GDR, which was virtually drummed into us...that this loyalty had irrational, almost mystical dimensions. In one way or another, the think-patterns imposed on us were deeply embedded in our unconsciousness.”⁴³

The fact that West Germans' stares revealed what she herself had not noticed before makes her feel ashamed, Simon writes, and she suggests this is why so many East Germans so vehemently opposed the scornful West German bearing on their society and history: "Wenn man sich schämt, schlägt man lieber die Hände vors Gesicht als sich vor einen Spiegel zu setzen oder sich gar im Auge eines Westlers zu spiegeln [when people are ashamed, they prefer to hide their faces in their hands, instead of looking in the mirror, or mirroring themselves in West Germans' eyes]."⁴⁴

I think her analysis is right. Through the belittling glances from those with whom they enjoyed identifying themselves, East Germans were being shown how idealized their own self-portrait had been. Because this would have been a painful confrontation, most East Germans chose to avoid the critical, judgmental glances from the West German other after the *Wende*. They kept them at a distance by using well-known forms of capitalism critique: "In the west, everything revolves around money," thus assuring themselves of general recognition and approval. Since almost everyone can to some extent agree with these words, they resemble the official East German state's label of anti-fascism – for almost no-one would dare to defend the contrary.

In East Germans' representation of their society's post-1989 *Werdegang*, it was capitalism, the Wessi and his accursed attributes (money and consumerism) that were responsible for their once so solid society being suddenly devoured by envy and mutual rivalry. Literally translated, the words often uttered were: "Since the *Wessis* and the DM arrived, our whole society has changed" – as if these were just powers of nature rather than developments and tendencies involving their own life and fellow countrymen.⁴⁵ Recognizing that it was first and foremost East Germans who were jealous and competing with each other would have devastated the representation of their own society as a unit of warmth and solidarity.

In my opinion, the initial emergence of *Ostalgie* should be seen in this light: as a counterbalance to the threatening realization that it was an East German who no longer wanted to have a beer with his neighbor because since becoming redundant, he was a loser. *Ostalgie* functioned according to a similar mechanism as the East Germans' previous desire for the west. Both collective representations helped East Germans to close ranks against the imaginary enemy, which prevented them from being who they really wanted to be. Before, East Germans basked in the harmonious image of the West German as the one they in fact would have been if only history had drawn the line differently. Those collective fantasies helped them to hide the unpleasant aspects of their own society from view. In that representation, there was always an implicit enemy (the Wall, history, "them up there") that

prevented them from achieving true harmony. With the help of this fantasy, East Germans attempted to convince themselves that they would only be inclined towards great mutual solidarity. The fact that this failed was blamed on alienating circumstances.

Then came the *Wende*. Finally, East Germans expected to become just like their idealized image of the west. That did not happen, and the harsh light of the emerging capitalist society revealed that East Germans were also united by collectively disguising experiences of competitiveness and crab antics. In my opinion, the pain that unification caused in former East German society is for a large part due to the fact that it robbed East Germans of a collective fantasy – thus revealing what was hidden within its harmonious representation. “It is this traumatic moment of the political qua encounter with the real that initiates again and again a process of symbolization...[leading] to the emergence...of a new social fantasy...in the place of the dislocated one, and so on and so forth.”⁴⁶

No longer able to escape in the fantasy that they were actually just the same as the idealized other on the other side of the Wall, East Germans initially took refuge in a new fantasy, that of *Ostalgie* (and I paraphrase): “In the past we led a warm, comfortable life, but since 1989, not much of it is left because of that accursed capitalism.” In this way, East Germans were trying to hold onto the main thing which the *Wende* threatened to destroy in their country: the escape route to fantasy.

Conclusion

Initially started as a project on consumption, it is no coincidence that this book came to revolve around the role of fantasy in social life. Given the close relationship between consumption and identity, and corresponding to recent anthropological analyses of ‘identity’ as impossibility, I claim that consumption is one of the ways in which people try to substantiate their identity fantasies.

Fantasy

My use of the term fantasy is inspired by a number of recent works in which philosophers and social scientists show the benefits of applying the main tenets of Jacques Lacan’s legacy to social scientific and historical theorizing.¹ The most frequently raised objection with regard to the use of psychoanalytic theory in social sciences concerns using concepts and ideas that were developed for studying individual subjects and apply them to the social field. One way to circumvent this problem is by studying the social as the sum total of many individuals – assuming that, because the members of a certain community or society have shared the same experiences, their emotional reactions are also comparable. This line of reasoning not just runs the risk of wrongfully generalizing individual experiences and reactions, but fails to take into account the social aspect, in as much as this refers to the relationships *between* people. Inspired by the work of political scientist Yannis Stavrakakis on the political significance of Lacan, I have followed a different trajectory. My starting-point is the parallelism between Lacanian thinking on “the impossibility of identity” on the one hand, and recent anthropological insights on the intrinsic fallibility of the constructions anthropologists study as culture on the other.²

According to Stavrakakis, there is no reason to maintain a strict dividing line between the individual psychological level – the traditional realm of psychology and psychiatry – and the collective level, to which social scientists and historians usually restrict themselves. In Stavrakakis’s opinion (which is deeply inspired by Lacan’s body of thought) the boundary between both is fictive. From the very moment an individual is introduced to the world of agreements and rules we term

culture (described by Lacanians as the symbolic order), he feels amputated, or, as Stavrakakis put it, a “lacking subject.”³ Where culture requires classification, designation and valuation of experiences (this behaviour is male, that is female, this behaviour is correct, that is not), introduction to culture means to be subjected to arrangements and rules. This means that experiences that formerly simply existed, are suddenly being classified as unsuitable (not only as strange, unknown, but also as reprehensible in a moral sense). Giving them up is experienced as a loss; where there was unity, there is now delimitation, definition, and selection. People try to overcome that loss, searching for the experience of completeness which characterised their lives before they took part in and subjected themselves to social interaction. However, that search is in vain. Not just because it attempts to find what is forbidden, but also because undifferentiated being is at odds with the social necessity to be recognised as an individual. Man is an “inchoate collection of desires,” and it is only thanks to society’s rules and agreements that a certain degree of consistency can be found and experienced.⁴ “I” as a more or less distinct, recognisable unit therefore exist only by the grace of sacrifice, lack and loss.

By seeking fulfilment (that is to say: an existence where the chaos of human endeavour coincides with the collectively shared agreements and rules), people come to identify with matters that seem to represent fulfilment. In personal life, these can be for instance the promise of true love, and/or a role or task that promises fulfillment – such as a career or motherhood. Although experienced individually, such promises are socially constructed and therefore shared and collective. More easily recognisable as being socially defined, are the promises and perspectives that figure in the public domain, the most obvious of which are those of a religious or ideological nature. In addition, social groups can also seem to offer complete fulfillment – think for example of football clubs or student bodies, thus causing the self-image of the group’s members to correspond (for a certain period) to that of the group to which they belong.

Because all the identifications people undertake by definition occur within “socially *available* discursive constructions such as ideologies,” the succession of “failed identifications or rather [the] play between identification and its failure,” which people undertake in order to fulfil themselves is a “deeply political play.” That play, however, is not without liability. Not only are the stakes high, but it is also doomed to fail. “A lack is continuously re-emerging where identity should be consolidated. All our attempts to cover over this lack...through identifications, that promise to offer us a stable identity, fail.”⁵ No permanent match is possible between the interpretative frameworks that enable people to organize their experi-

ences and give meaning to their lives on the one hand, and their everyday experiences, sensations and perceptions on the other.

Although this brief extract from basic Lacanian theory primarily relates to the individual domain, it underlines that the agreements we use to define as culture should not only be recognized as facilitating (mutual bonds, recognition, meaning making and communication), but also as restrictive. In my opinion, this approach offers a useful startingpoint for present day anthropology.

During the past decades, anthropologists have time and again stressed that the living environments, cultural categories, values, ideologies and classes which anthropologists study are not the result of laws of nature, geographical adjustments or an historical unilinear revolution. They are manmade constructions, which could have turned out very differently.

People need to categorize, classify and draw boundaries in order to discriminate – for instance between just and unjust, dirt and cleanliness, us and them. At the same time, everyday life continually confronts them with the inadequacy of this undertaking. How, for instance, do you define ‘us’ in multi-ethnic societies? How to account for female leaders when competitiveness is classified as a male characteristic? How to maintain that solidarity is one of our main characteristics, when the fear to be denounced by one’s neighbours is omnipresent? The intrinsic fallibility of the agreements people live by, is particularly threatening when a society is confronted with episodes or events that are impossible to comprehend within the existing interpretative framework. When, for instance, a society is struck by unexpected outbursts of inter-ethnic violence, the story of “us” (being a society, a nation, living peacefully together) loses its credibility. In such circumstances, when the symbolic order is unable to meaningfully assimilate people’s experiences, it threatens to be revealed for what it is: not self-evident, seamless and smooth as glass, but man-made, messy and typically full of gaps and cracks.

Except for the fleeting moments of ecstase and jouissance, an everlasting match between the interpretative frameworks that enable people to organize and give meaning to their lives on the one hand, and their everyday experiences, sensations and perceptions on the other is impossible. Any seemingly self-evident, seamless and smooth coherence is the fictive (and temporary) result of a political-ideological struggle about who and what we are. According to Lacanian theory, both thinking of and striving for such unity demonstrates the essentialist fantasy we are collectively inclined to fall prey to. Descriptions like identity X or society Y disguise the fact that they are merely attempts to experience a degree of unity and structure which does not and cannot exist enduringly. The “thing” that continuously destroys these endeavors is referred to by Lacanians as the Real. By applying

this term, they refer to the universal impossibility (both at the individual as well as at the collective level) to constitute a discursive identity which fully captures and matches reality.

More than twenty years ago, Michael Taussig already remarked that it was high time to change the anthropological spotlight: instead of constantly focusing on the constructed character of this or that category, anthropologists should start questioning how it is that people nevertheless manage to convince themselves that their constructions are real.⁶ In my view, Lacanians' work on the subject, searching for a stable identity, offers a worthwhile starting-point to rethink the dialectics between the existential necessity and ultimate fallibility of culture.

Once people are confronted with the make-believe of what they simply used to refer to as 'us,' or our culture and society, hard work awaits them to restore their confidence in the symbolic order as a meaningful discursive framework that can support social structure and allow for mutual recognition. The history of the GDR, with its dramatic succession of totalizing stories and their complete failures, perfectly demonstrates the relevance of these general theorems. Or, as the man at the Rudolstadt Christmas market snapped, when asked about the country's recent transformation: "We've been betrayed for the third time." Three times betrayed, that is three times believed, or at least invested in an ideal, a coherent story, a representation of "our" life, future and ultimate goal, and three times confronted with its complete breakdown; 1945 was the first pivotal moment when the simultaneous need for, and impossibility of a firm, existential rooting presented itself unrelentingly. Daily life painfully illustrated the make-believe that had upheld the previous symbolic order. Fear and animosity reigned while hunger destroyed the last remnants of society. Everything people used to believe in or had simply taken for granted – the unquestioning belief that neighbours do not harm each other, that we Germans are of the same kind – all this had gone astray. Losing the war not only shifted the frontiers of Germany, it primarily shifted its inhabitants' expectations as to what life may have in store, and their notions about what to expect of their fellow human beings. No hold, no certainty was left – an experience well captured by German author Christian Geissler, who referred to it as the Void.

The German population's overall reaction was telling: a general retreat from the public realm. Silence reigned and people turned inward, individually trying to rebuild the material remnants of their lives. As understandable as these reactions may be, they nevertheless convey an impossible position. The knowledge that *homo homini lupus est* is not the best basis to build a life on – let alone a sense of commonality, of togetherness, of us.⁷ No matter how inconceivable it is that people in this situation searched for solace in a new promise of mutual solidarity, that

was at the same time absolutely imperative. It is impossible for a society to survive while simultaneously admitting that its mutual solidarity has failed. In order to function, a society needs some vaguely shared notions of who we are, where we come from and what we have in common. Especially in circumstances such as these, a new symbolic order has to be created, providing new rules and agreements on how to live, what to value and what to despise, in order to obtain some sort of hold or trust in the future.

This was the main task facing both German states after the war: to restore people's confidence in the symbolic order as a meaningful discursive framework, able to support social structure and allow for mutual recognition. A new symbolic structure had to be created, which also had to help eliminate the reality which had just manifested itself with such devastating force. Albeit embedded in different ideologies, and achieved at a different pace, the politics of both German states that tried to accomplish this, also show remarkable commonalities.

The role of the West German *Wirtschaftswunder* in countering the material, social, moral, and psychological consequences of the war can hardly be overestimated. The American backed consumer society offered the West German population "an imaginary cultural space where they could distance themselves," not only, as the quotation continues, "from the Nazi past," but also from the complete breakdown they were confronted with.⁸ Painful past experiences were silenced and people were encouraged to work and focus on material security and well-being. The new West German state acquired legitimacy and popular support by successfully constituting the framework for a new symbolic order, centred round material wellbeing and consumption as the means to forget and start anew.

Socialist politics in the GDR were fundamentally different, but their promise of a new beginning, a new society, new forms of humanity, bereft of social frictions, mutual mistrust or competition also functioned as state-ordered amnesia. And because all this was to be accomplished through a materialist restructuring of society, the East German state equally accredited the material domain with renovating and amnesiac powers. This combination, of materially establishing social equality in order to counter recent experiences of social tension, formed the basis of newly built East German society.

Both East and West German societies were thus rebuilt by state-sanctioned forms of materialist amnesia. But whereas the disguising role of post-war West German materialism was vigorously revealed some twenty years later by the protests of younger generations – often referred to as *die 68-er Generation* [the generation of 1968], the initial historical selection on which the GDR was founded, was not to be called into question. And because silencing the void was from the very

beginning the core around which society was constituted, the fear of and taboos on those experiences were also constitutive of the social relations that developed within it. Consequently, the society that came into being on East German soil was not only held together internally by a certain ideology but also by a shared secret, that had to remain hidden at all costs.

Originally embraced as a means to draw a line between the dark past and the bright future, equality became East Germany's central trope and the main symbol of East German society – not just officially, but also experientially. And although socio-economic equality was certainly achieved to a certain extent, the egalitarian doctrine was of course unable to fully capture social reality. Equality's role as symbol of East German society, initially made possible by selective filtering of (post) war experiences, continued to demand the twisting and denial of undesirable experiences. Whereas claims of social solidarity and loyalty dominated the public sphere, the experiences of *homo homini lupus est*, which Germans had suffered so bitterly during and after the war, continued in a very diluted and disguised form in East Germans' everyday lives. The gap between ideological promises and everyday reality, which characterized material life in the GDR, also typified the social climate.

Both the egalitarian dogma as such and the taboo on publicly exploring its feasibility created a surplus – of practices, experiences and feelings that were prohibited. Standing out was not only a sure way of meeting the state's secret service, it was also branded as norm-breaking behaviour in everyday social contact. The warmth that characterized East German social life was partly the result of a generally shared ban on differentiation. Initially motivated by painful collective experiences, and legitimized by the official state-ideology, the taboo on distinction functioned as a double-edged sword: solidarity, mutual equality and social safety were the positive, and thus presentable reverse of the crab antics which found their mildest expression in the frequently posed question “du glaubst wohl, du bist was besseres [so you think you are better, huh?].” The egalitarian dogma, that implicitly banned social differentiation, operated deep into the private domain. The warmth that characterized East Germans' existence also covered up potential competition and antagonisms.

The socialist dogma of equality was the (state sanctioned) way in which encounters with the traumatic reality, that equality preached as solidarity, also implied distrust and the Stasi, was hidden from view. The *Nische* was another way. But whatever the cover and however half-heartedly people upheld it, East Germans were mutually bound by (sharing the common secret of) a traumatic and forbidden reality. In as much as the egalitarian doctrine threatened to be revealed

for what it was (an arduous struggle to uphold an artificial we-category), East Germans had two escape routes at their disposal, in order to avoid the potentially painful confrontation with the fact that the ideology they so willingly subscribed to, did not fully correspond to their actual experiences. Both escape routes, realistic enough not to be easily exposed as such, boiled down to the material domain of life. Scapegoating the state for not delivering the cargo it promised, and fantasizing about a life amidst western abundance, allowed East Germans to uphold some sort of faith in their collective self-representation as being more or less harmonious.

The reason that precisely the material world acted as cover, was that within the official state ideology the material was presented as the solution for all (unnamed) problems. State and citizenry found each other in a publicly disseminated materialist ideology to combat social inequality. In the GDR there was a “deep-seated consensus with the material economic values of the system,” according to which material improvement would form the basis of future, all-encompassing salvation.⁹ For as long as the GDR existed, its public sphere was dominated by exuberant promises about economic success as the basis for social solidarity and equality, which were not realised in practice. The schizophrenia between promises and reality became more visible every day. The western material world nestled in this gap. Many East Germans believed that in the west, reality and ideal were not so far apart, and that the inhabitants of West Germany and their ideal selves were one and the same. In this fusion, consumer goods played an important role.

In many East Germans’ perception, West German affluence seemed to offer the ultimate fulfilment of all that their own existence lacked.¹⁰ Although they merely seemed to long for the material wellbeing they themselves so visibly missed, I contend that their all-encompassing harmonious interpretation of the beautiful-looking western world was an implicit way to imaginatively erase their own society’s non-harmonious characteristics, without having to acknowledge or recognise them as such. The main reason to describe this conglomerate of half-conscious collective representations as a fantasy is that the term fantasy not just refers to longing, but also to the implicit interests people have in doing so. “The collective fantasy masks the insights that it contains.”¹¹ Whereas related concepts, like (day) dreaming or desiring, are usually applied to refer to the perfected version of reality that people long for, fantasy is a construction that attempts, first and foremost, to cover up reality’s lack. Taking daydreams to represent an ideal, I use the notion of fantasy to express its double-edged character: by representing an ideal, a fantasy derives its force from its attempt to hide why the ideal is not reality. By explicitly attempting to deny imperfection, the imperfection is implicitly inscribed in the idealised representation itself.

Because fantasies are often meant to erase, the taboo is implicitly part of the idealized representation. And although the advantage of fantasizing is, that the imagination only observes the ideal, it is also a defence mechanism, meant to hide the unnamed discord from view.

This certainly also accounted for the East German representation of life in the prosperous west. Although it appeared to revolve around individual self-realization in full social harmony, its power of attraction seemed to be derived from the impossibility of this combination within the GDR. There, individual aspirations could only be realized within the strict confines set by the state, and they were smothered in the mutually exacted equality under penalty of social exclusion. Crab antics were translated as warmth and harmony. Acknowledging this would not just have had a devastating effect on the much appraised East German solidarity. Recognizing that their warmth partly depended on the equality-centred, illicit cohabitation with the state, would also have robbed East Germans of the scapegoat “die da oben [them up there],” to whom they could ascribe all the acknowledged failures in their existence.

People thus cherished their fantasies of the west as if these were dreams about ‘our life’ amid prosperity, whereas they were actually about the combination of prosperity-*cum-Gemeinschaft* [with community], which was impossible in their country.¹² The almost magical representations of the west, captivating so many East Germans before the *Wende*, coincided with the fact that the unnamed problems in their own country did not seem to exist there. “If only we could live our lives in such splendid material circumstances, everything would be fine” – so the fantasy went. Eradicating all unwanted elements and experiences, the fantasy helped to preserve the existing discursive framework that allowed for mutual recognition. The central importance of western consumer potential was even recognized at the official state policy level. Officially, the western world was despised, but some of the most loyal state functionaries and party members obtained part of their pay in western currencies.¹³ In this way, the state unwillingly acknowledged a feeling that was widespread in the GDR: that East German identity was best expressed in the language of western commodities.

East German history shows that culture – whether regarded as a set of implicit rules and agreements, or as a web of significance – demands selection, which in itself creates a surplus, of practices, experiences and feelings that people are unable to make sense of within the confines of their cultural categories. These processes may be easier to recognize in dictatorially ruled societies, where the dominant ideology, rules and regulations are more explicit and restrictive than in democratic, open societies, but the processes at work are more general. Earlier I referred to ex-

amples taken from our own (western, late capitalist) society, where we make sense of female leadership and male vulnerability by creating extra categories in order to understand our classificatory surplus. But not all surplus is as easily captured and accommodated. In situations where the surplus concerns experiences that might have a fundamentally destructive effect on people's collective self-image, scapegoating and fantasy are common solutions. They enable people to close the gaps in their symbolic order, in order to uphold the discursive framework of society, by ascribing its failures to factors beyond their control.

One reason to explicitly focus on fantasy's role in people's everyday lives, is because it refers to an internally contradictory, layered phenomenon. While revealing the ideals which people aspire to and cherish, fantasies acquire their propelling force from covering over the symbolic order's vulnerable spots. They thus invite historians and social scientists not to take people's desires at face value, but to unravel the tensions on which they thrive. By inviting us to focus both on what people express *and* silence, fantasy's theoretical value is that it forces us to "consider the expressed words of the actors, without ignoring what they did not want to articulate clearly, as well as what they found difficult to articulate at all."¹⁴ It forces us to incorporate people's irrational motives into the stories they tell us.

Although fantasies refer to an absent reality (usually the future), their breeding ground and goals are created within the confines of the existing symbolic order. It would therefore be wrong to regard fantasies as the opposite of reality. By promising that reality could actually be perfect, fantasies play a crucial role in sustaining the fundamentals of people's discursive constructions of reality. This is what Lacanians refer to when they state that "fantasy supports reality [by] (temporarily) closing its gaps and cracks."¹⁵

Hegemony

The strong appeal of western consumer goods in the former socialist bloc is often interpreted as an implicit critique on the socialist states and societies. Katherine Verdery, for instance, formulated it quite pointedly: "Acquiring consumption goods and objects conferred an identity that set one off from socialism."¹⁶ Although I agree with Verdery that East Germans' desire for western consumer goods was a way of criticizing the state, this does not mean that the critique as such set them off from socialism. Positing socialist state's inhabitants in opposition to the states in which they lived, unwillingly confirms a bipolarized frame of reference with regard to the socialist world as inhabited by clear-cut categories of oppressors and

oppressed. This perspective is not only wrong, it also tends to victimize the people living under socialist rule, representing them as being passively inscribed by dictatorial rule.¹⁷ In this book I have shown that life in the GDR is better understood if we focus on the “ambiguities of domination,” and on the ways in which people “have internalized their own surveillance,” often to such an extent, that it is imperceptible where compliance ends and coercion begins.¹⁸ This insight has proven to be relevant in order to understand the dynamics of power and the relationship between state and society in the former GDR.

In chapters three and four, I showed that the socialist ideology in the GDR was not just implemented from above. After 1945, the new powers of state offered the East German people an ideology which would transform the life lessons confronting them, into promises worth pursuing: as part of the material improvement, unity would be restored and mutual solidarity would reign once more. These promises meant, that, although the painful lessons (1) would be freed of their socially poisonous sting, (2) they still occupied (in disguised form) the central place in the public domain which their importance demanded, while (3) the social need to silence them was at the same time obeyed.

Within the ideology to which the East German symbolic order owed its unity, social differentiation was said to have been result of capitalist relations of production, which, thanks to the development of socialist society and the accompanying denazification, were apparently eradicated once and for all. They had been there, but now they were gone – swept away by collective and state-sanctioned efforts. In an unthreatening form, the most essential-but-unmentionable was embedded in the dominant symbolic order, allowing society to close its ranks. The socially destabilizing recognition of society as an internally divided and potentially antagonistic ‘unit’ had gone, or at least seemed to have disappeared. Exploring it was strictly forbidden throughout East Germany’s history.

Thanks to the beautiful sounding socialist promises of mutual solidarity following on from material improvements, with which the new powers responded to the prevailing shortages and traumas in 1945, a half-hearted form of identification with the state and socialism developed in the GDR. The history described in this book well illustrates the functioning of hegemony. Hegemony can only be achieved if the ones seeking power succeed in linking their goals and endeavours with those of their subordinates. The best way to achieve this is by appealing to more general elements that extend over and beyond the explicit ideology. Žižek has worded this very clearly: “In every ideological edifice, there is a kind of ‘trans-ideological’ kernel, since, if an ideology is to become operative and effectively ‘seize’ individuals,

it has to parasitize on and manipulate some kind of ‘trans-ideological’ vision that cannot be reduced to a simple instrument of legitimizing pretensions to power.”¹⁹

As examples of such trans-ideological components, Žižek mentions “notions and sentiments of solidarity, justice, belonging to a community, and so on.”²⁰ Crucial elements of the socialist ideology, contained in the notion of mutual equality, ensured that a certain commitment arose between the state and citizens of the GDR. That this commitment was not generally recognized or visible to those involved, was partly due to the fact that dictatorial power was exercised rather subtly in the GDR. There were hardly any public displays of force. The socialist regime was able to convince most people that they were unable to change the situation, and most people understood that the best option was to just follow the rules. This resulted in a remarkable relationship between rulers and ruled, well analysed by historian Corey Ross. He shows that the relationship between the domains we usually designate separately as regime and society, should be regarded in East Germany as “areas of overlap, or better still as fields of negotiation,” where a “process of interaction and mutual dependence between rulers and ruled” took place.²¹ Employing different mechanisms (amongst which the use of the term anti-fascism as the state’s official label and the socialist dogma of equality have probably played the most important role) to enmesh East Germans in the state’s rituals of legitimation, the dictatorial state seems to have been able to partly *coerseduc* (a contraction of coerce and seduce) its inhabitants to a form of what Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe (writing about postcolonial Africa) has called the “illicit cohabitation” between dictatorial states and their inhabitants.²² The major consequence of conformity’s exonerating function was that “the minority of people who chose not to conform...experienced a complete lack of understanding from those around them, who felt provoked or even threatened by the civic courage of others.”²³

Those who showed the guts not to conform, experienced painful consequences; they usually not only had to give up their career and professional prospects, but they also encountered repudiation and social marginalization.²⁴ A general climate of vigilant alertness was the result. People learned that it was wise not really to trust others, outside the close circle of relatives and friends. This coerseduction, facilitated by both the omnipresence of the language of power and the fact that people learned “[to] internalize their own surveillance,” ensured that in the course of time, a form of “conviviality” existed between rulers and ruled, in which mutual equality was the principal binding factor.²⁵

This does not mean that East Germans entirely approved of the situation in which they found themselves. There was a great deal of moaning, especially about

matters of provision and consumption. The reason these issues were relatively openly discussed was that, unlike the corruption of promises on the social field, right from the beginning it was in the interest of both state and citizens to recognize the material problems as the cause and solution for the failure of the symbolic order that had manifested itself so awfully in the recent past. Consequently, the residents of the GDR were to a certain extent able to discuss freely the material shortages. And they certainly did, sometimes cautiously, but often in public as well. Complaints in this sphere subsequently motivated the powers to wheel in extra cartloads of oranges at politically sensitive moments in order to placate the local population. Because the East German state and its citizens found each other in the non-mentionable problems where it concerned society's social sphere, the materialist elements of socialist ideology functioned as *lingua franca*. The all-encompassing consumption-critique functioned like a valve, sanctioned from above: complaints about provision expressed sources of dissatisfaction regarding issues which remained unspoken.

Although East Germany's history is primarily a chronicle of domination and compulsion, extensive forms of cooperation did exist in the GDR between state and citizens, which partly contributed to many people scarcely being aware of their own subordination. The sniggering and withdrawing to the *Nischen* demonstrated that the subordination and adjustment were not complete, but as I pointed out in chapters five and six, both cultural forms show that the adjustment was also more internalised than people themselves were possibly aware.

Although many East Germans afterwards contended that their seeming conformity was merely a formal act which should not be taken seriously, this was not publicly expressed. As Wedeen points out, power "not only [resides] in orchestrated displays of obedience, but also in the silence about domestic politics that characterizes daily life." Participating and acting as if (reality was as beautiful as described on paper), East Germans clearly illustrated that the regime was able to "make most people obey most of the time." Discreetly laughing about the outward signs of conformity which they displayed, East Germans reinforced and diffused the power of the authoritarian socialist regime.²⁶ Silencing the extent to which central elements within the East German symbolic order (claims of social solidarity and loyalty) were actually corrupted by experiences of mutual alertness and lack of trust, East Germans helped to cover up the gap between the ideological promises on the one hand and everyday reality on the other. And although their fantasies about a life amidst western goods were certainly a form of critique on the government that failed to deliver what it promised, the critique as such remained within the state-sanctioned hegemonic frame. It was, as Niethammer

rightly pointed out, an “officially licensed valve,” through which frustrations and discontent were expressed that had to remain unspoken. This is not to say that East Germans supported the state. What it does say is that in this way, they tried to close the gaps in their leaking symbolic systems, upholding the existing discursive order which allowed for mutual recognition. Being the indirect result of the state’s main ideological promises, East German fantasies about the west helped to reproduce and sustain the state’s utopian ideals – amidst scenes of material wellbeing. West German affluence was the bright epicentre of the East German “politics of utopia,” the main centre of the state’s hegemonic project.²⁷ By cherishing their fantasies as if these were dreams about (paraphrasing) “our life in a more prosperous form,” East Germans succeeded in collectively upholding a perfected self-representation from which all unwanted elements and experiences were eradicated.

Although the realization of this ideal identity occurred in the west, the specific location of this imaginary space was irrelevant. Rather than being concrete, it was a fantasy – a state-legitimized fantasy, supported and enabled by the explicitly materialist politics of identity the GDR had nourished. Western consumer goods were the referential incarnations of an imaginary world, conjuring up not just an imaginary geography, but more importantly, an imagined collective identity, which was perfect in the Lacanian sense of the term; an identity in which all experiences, feelings and desires would be reconcilable with the dominant cultural categories, ideology and discourse.

Every society has to come to terms with the impossibility of attaining jouissance as fullness; it is only the fantasies produced and circulated to mask or at least domesticate [the] trauma that can vary, and in fact does vary immensely, [for] what we fantasize, is what we are lacking: the part of ourselves that is sacrificed when we enter the symbolic system of language and social relations.²⁸

That is why I stated earlier that “the purpose of fantasy is not to satisfy an (impossible) desire but to constitute it as such.”²⁹

This interpretation links my research to a long tradition of anthropological theories on domination and subordination. A long time ago, Godelier highlighted that when rulers and ruled share the same ideological space, this does not necessarily mean that they mutually agree on the meaning they bestow on it. In his work *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott has made it clear that the seeds of critique are often enclosed in the kernel of the hegemony. Because the promises used by rulers to sell their claims, have to match with trans-ideological elements, their promises subsequently form the root of future criticism:

The crucial point is rather that the very process of attempting to legitimate a social order by idealizing it always provides its subjects with the means, the symbolic tools, and the very ideas for a critique that operates entirely within the hegemony. For most purposes, then, it is not at all necessary for subordinate classes to set foot outside the confines of the ruling ideals in order to formulate a critique of power. The most common form of...struggle arises from the failure of a dominant ideology to live up to the implicit promises it necessarily makes. The dominant ideology can be turned against its privileged beneficiaries not only because subordinate groups develop their own interpretations, understandings, and readings of its ambiguous terms, but also because of the promises that the dominant classes must make to propagate it in the first place.³⁰

The history of the GDR is a good illustration of Scott's suggestion that future criticism is almost implicit in the ideological promises with which a dictatorship attempts to legitimise its power. Because East German socialists took up with the needs and desires which prevailed among East Germans after the Second World War in order to bring their central ideological messages across, they formulated certain (ideologically informed) promises. As they failed to live up to them, whereas they kept proclaiming them up till the end of the GDR, they were responsible for the critique when their materialist message of salvation was not delivered. It is pertinent that Scott suggested that also in European socialist countries the root of criticism would be contained in the promises that functioned so prominently in "real existing socialism."

[T]he ideology formulated by the ruling class to justify its own rule provided much of the symbolic raw material from which the most damning critique could be derived and sustained...[I]t is clear that a radical critique of existing arrangements may arise in virtually any subordinate class that takes the dominant ideology at heart and, at the same time, penetrates in daily life the realities that betray or ignore the implicit promises of that ideology.³¹

Since an ideology never serves everyone's material best interests, it can only catch on and bind people if it succeeds in appealing to (unspoken) social-psychological desires and interests (mostly with regard to unity, harmony, reconciliation), or a people's alleged superiority. When ideological representations then manage to dominate the public sphere, they help to suggest social unity and mutual connection. But this suggestion is always at odds with the antagonisms that cut across

society. And when, as is the case in dictatorships, naming and exploring these are strictly forbidden, the unrealized extra-ideological appeal offers the breeding ground and ingredients for fantasies which provide a binding force where the ideology has failed.

Fantasies are in fact the implicit by-product of ideologies. East Germany's past is a clear example of the thesis that ideology and fantasy can be seen as communication vessels. They assume, feed and constitute each other by denying the most essential but unmentionable antagonisms in the social fabric of society. The one delivers the message which helps to disguise them, whereas the other seems to offer the implicit solution if the unifying message threatens to lose its binding force.

Fetishism, Commodities, and the Senses

The strict East German design ideologists warned their compatriots above all not to yield to the improper temptation of (western) kitsch. According to them, doing so was a form of escapism – an escape route which they called fetishist. As I am discussing the same phenomenon, and also interpret East Germans' strong desires for the material world of the west as an escape, albeit of a different kind, the question arises why I call it a fantasy. What is the added value of that term, as compared to fetishism?

Within Marxist theorizing, the term fetishism expresses a form of illusion which occurs when (under a capitalist mode of production) workers are estranged both from themselves and the surrounding (material) world. Deprived from the control of their own labour and productive power, they are no longer able to recognise their own or other people's labour in the products surrounding them. Considering that these products do have a value (for they do have a price), that value seems to originate from the products themselves. This is what Marx calls the "mystical character of commodities."³² Valuable in and of themselves, they entice people to purchase them, suggesting that their value can improve the purchaser's existence. According to Marxian thinking, this pattern can be broken and the estranged person can be freed of his alienation, by a revolutionary metamorphosis of society's socio-economic structure.

Where the term fetishism within Marxist theories applies to a pointless attempt, through the magical characteristics of commodities, to escape repressive and estranging socio-economic circumstances, I previously remarked that in my opinion, the escape is of a different kind. East Germans attributed healing and harmonious powers to the western world of consumption in order to turn a blind

eye to the gaps (consisting of crab antics and the so called warmth sold as mutual equality, exacted under penalty of social exclusion) in their own society and symbolic order. This is definitely not a (class-related) escape from socio-economic conditions, but rather a case of avoiding the potential recognition that “[o]ur societies are never harmonious ensembles. This is only the fantasy, through which they attempt to constitute and reconstitute themselves.”³³

In my view, East Germans not so much tried to escape circumstances that could in principle have been arranged differently, thereby putting a stop to their estrangement. They tried to evade conditions that are part of existence, albeit reinforced in the East German context because the dictatorial state did not allow for an open exploration of prevailing antagonisms and (social) tensions.

The fetishism of commodities, which Marx and his followers claimed could be solved by changing the social-economic circumstances, is in my opinion unsolvable. As Stavrakakis points out: “[I]f consumerism [castigated as a substitute for autonomy [or]...an inadequate compensation for the denial of a more meaningful life] is so inadequate, how does it manage to resist the unmasking operations of its critics, how does it retain its hegemonic grip?”³⁴

The term fetishism, generally used for the description of materialist fantasies, aims to bring across “the compulsive power,” which especially material objects can have.³⁵ It is a valuable term, that reminds us of the irrationality at the heart of what is usually presented as a well-considered and rational choice: determining the value of goods. Commodity fetishism is a fantasy, and as such, part of existence – both in its capitalist as well as in its socialist form. It is interesting to note, however, that fantasies are so often materialistic: at the individual level (think of shopaholics), but primarily also at the collective level. The world-wide spread of consumer capitalism is probably the most striking example of materialist fantasies, but older examples are known. Long before the American model of consumption began its world-wide victory march, numerous materialist fantasies were described and analysed in the anthropological literature under the headings of cargo cults and fetishism.

There are a number of specific historical reasons, discussed in this book, why East Germans’ collective fantasies of the prosperous west were so explicitly materialist. Apart from these, however, I think that there is another, more general reason why the East German cargo fantasies were locked into and fed by imagining a materially better life. I believe, in other words, that it is not a coincidence that fantasies are often of a materialist nature. In the last part of this conclusion I will focus on what I deem the underlying reasons.

In many East Germans' perception, the material world of the west represented their ideal society, unhindered by the social shortcomings and tensions which undercut their everyday existence. Notwithstanding the romanticized character of their representations, their assessment of the western dream world was not just imaginary. It was regularly fed through real contacts. When that happened, it was remarkable that people primarily revered the delightful sensory impressions these meetings aroused: they were physically touched by the western world's scent, its colours, gloss and tactile features, and of course by the taste of western products, which presumably differed strongly from East German wares.

East Germans' stories about this topic highlight a feature of the relationship between people and material culture that up till recently has scarcely been dealt with in social science theories: the sensory way people got acquainted with objects. In my introduction, I already pointed out that anthropological theories on material culture traditionally start out from what objects represent on the one hand, and their (deceiving) irresistibility on the other. The fact that people's recognition of the material world is primarily sensory has been almost ignored by social scientists up until recently.³⁶

Only in the past fifteen years have anthropologists become aware that the sensory characteristics of social life are worth being investigated. This has led to a large amount of studies focussing on the senses, but it is remarkable that up till now the sensory turn has not featured in (social science) theories on the relationship between people and their material surroundings.³⁷

In my introduction I paid particular attention to the works of Campbell and Miller. Both authors were instrumental in providing new impulses for social scientific thinking on mass consumption and the relationship between man and material culture. Campbell showed that objects serve as solid attributes to satisfy desires which, according to him, cannot ever be satisfied, because they are related to the unbridgeable gap between imagination and reality. The question I raised earlier was whether it was really a coincidence that these desires are attached to material things. The importance of Miller's work is due to the fact that he took seriously the empirical observation on the intricate relation between people's supposed identity and material goods – a relation he furthermore conceptualized as interactive and dynamic. My main objection to his work is that, by emphasizing the constitutive potential of consumption in the development of identity, Miller does not sufficiently take into account the problematic nature of the term identity and the existential weight of the term alienation.

The aspects of East Germany's history which I have analysed so far, clearly illustrate that East Germans' desires for West German consumer goods were prompted

by a fantasy that these goods would help them to achieve a harmonious society and at last become (I paraphrase) “who they had always wanted to be.”³⁸ According to me, East German history demonstrates that the desire for improving reality is not so diffuse and undefined as Campbell’s premise. In the GDR, it was prompted by the (ideologically supported) fantasy, that a better material environment would close the gaps in the symbolic order. Although this fantasy can only be understood in relation to the GDR’s history (in which material goods played a major role, both in manifesting the void, and in the subsequent formation of the ideological pact meant to cover it), this was not the only reason for its materialist character. This also had to do with the sensory way East Germans became aware of the abundant material and consumer world in the west.

East Germans’ descriptions of the west were full of examples referring to the gloss, the colours, the lovely feel, the taste and smells in that world; all stimulating the senses and therefore transferring information in a very direct (physical) way, about the world from which they originate. Since Proust began his magnum opus, *à la recherche du temps perdu*, with a sketch of how taste sensations may evoke memories,³⁹ it is common knowledge that the senses are capable of transferring certain types of “knowledge” (in this case about the past), in a physical manner.⁴⁰ It is, however, no coincidence that in the previous sentence I have chosen to print the word knowledge between quotation marks: I want to emphasize that transferring information through the senses is by definition an utterly subjective and irrational process, resulting in utterly subjective, non-rational knowledge. Because material objects reach us through our senses, they penetrate, as French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Warnier has observed, “deep into the psyche of the subject because [they reach] it not through abstract knowledge, but through sensori-motor experience.”⁴¹

Knowledge derived through the senses is the kind of knowledge that is embedded in impressions, memories, associations, images and emotions. It is therefore only partly and at a later stage receptive for rational and critical examination and scrutiny. Exactly because material objects present themselves to us in a sensorial, irrational manner, they are the ideal vehicle for cognitive processes which are rather hindered than helped by the intellect. I am alluding to processes of desire, identity formation, memory, and, above all, fantasy.⁴²

As explained above, fantasies help to cover the impossibility and unattainability of a solid, well-bound identity or truly harmonious society. The reason why material culture is such a useful fantasy-prop, is that the search for (individual or social) fulfilment generates, as argued by Dutch anthropologist Gosewijn van Beek “a strong incentive to actually capture part of this world as inalienable pos-

session in an effort to control precisely what is uncontrollable: one's identity in relation to the world."⁴³

By looking at an object which appeals to them, people recognise some aspect of themselves in it. The thing might represent a typical feature of their life-style, character or self-image – as highlighted in Mary Douglas and Marshal Sahlin's (neo-) structuralist approach. Perhaps the observer recognizes something in the object that he himself would like to be, incorporate, resemble, or look like. No matter how: the object represents something which applies to the observer. "[T]he self is mirrored in the potential object of acquisition with questions which are rarely formulated and hardly ever articulated: 'is that for me?'; 'Am I like that?'; 'Could that be (part of) me?'; 'Could I be like that?'; 'Would I like to be like that?' and so on; an endless series of questions which are acts of self-formation in themselves."⁴⁴

While gazing at an object and (implicitly) asking oneself such questions, something happens to the observer. He does not just see the object, but while looking at it (perhaps also touching it briefly, or possibly smelling it), an image is evoked of how it will be, how it will feel (how the potential purchaser will be as future possessor, how he will feel, how life will be and feel) when he puts on the object, sits on it, reads it or cooks with it, when it is in his living room or garage. The senses, stimulated by the object (via the eyes but possibly also through the fingers, nose and tongue) provoke a series of associations and images whereby he (his body, his being) is briefly full of what he sees – fulfilled by the associations and images which the object has aroused through his senses.

More than a decade ago, the Finnish sociologist Pasi Falk (also inspired by Lacanian theories) remarked that "[t]he pursuit of completion is the core around which the whole system [of consumption, mv] revolves."⁴⁵ I agree with Falk that the insatiable desire that objects may arouse, is related to a desire for completeness, fulfilment, unity, indivisibility. It is a desire that appears to be quenched by purchasing, by consuming. One of the reasons why I think that consumer desires can be so irresistible, is that in our contact with objects a sensory process is set in motion that is hardly accessible for rational consideration. This associative process suggests, in a physical way, that identity fulfillment, symbolic closure is possible: if I have that, I am like that. Conveyed in a non-rational, sensorial way, material objects promise to bring what they look like; solid, inalienable and whole in relation to the world. This promise is irresistible, and the desires that things raise are linked to what we could call the intrinsic impossibility to realise a firm identity.

As stated earlier, Miller's theory evolves round the relationship between consumption and identity. He attempted to break with the Marxist inspired theories of consumption that so long dominated social science debates, and in which con-

sumers were portrayed as the unwilling victims of capitalist structures – estranged from the only source of true self-fulfilment, they wrongly recognise commodities as value-adding elements or keystones of their identity.⁴⁶ This perspective of consumption is to a great extent based on the premise that productive labour is the most decisive factor in the way people manifest themselves in the world. According to Miller, this assumption has become outdated in today's consumer society, for people no longer manifest themselves and their identity through work, they use consumption to shape their lives. In one of his monographies about Trinidad, analyzing Christmas as cultural feast, Miller states, with an ironic nod to the central place of work and production in Marxist theories: "It is the *consumption* of apples and grapes, not their production, nor their origins, which defines what [the inhabitants of Trinidad] are."⁴⁷

I agree with Miller that consumption plays a central role in current processes of cultural and individual self-development. It is, however, remarkable that Miller fully disregards the problematic character of terms like identity, self-construction, culture and authenticity. He seems to consider "self creation" as an unproblematic given. And estrangement is for him merely a temporary phase, which can successfully be terminated by consumption as appropriation.

Whereas Miller seems to have a rather optimistic view on the development of identity, kept in motion through a dialectics between people and objects, I tend to think of this process as a continuously doomed to fail attempt to construct a true and solid identity. The dialectic between identity and consumption is in my opinion propelled by estrangement – not as a temporary phase in a continual process of further self-development, but as an existential condition that drives our consumption behaviour, ensuring that as soon as consumer desires for material possessions (as the requisite props for a bound and solid identity) are satisfied, this brings about disillusionment – as Campbell rightly emphasized and expounded theoretically. The history of East Germany, with its succession of ever new endeavours to create a frictionless symbolic order, shows that there is good reason to incorporate Stavrakakis en Žižek's work in our thinking on (collective) identity; recognizing it as an intrinsic impossibility, and thus as a necessarily traumatic attempt. If we want to understand the consumption–identity–culture nexus, we ought to rethink their mutual relation: in as far as people use consumer goods, or refer to consumption as an expression of their collective or individual identity, they refer to a wish, a desire, to create and constitute what is fleeting, impermanent, and shot through with contradictions and antagonisms.

On the basis of the East German case, I suggested that in the outward appearance of material objects, people think they recognize (an aspect of) their so highly

desired “own identity,” or, at the collective level, “authentic culture” – no longer as a desire or fantasy, but as an achievable reality. Because objects present themselves to people in a variety of sensorial ways, they are such suitable vehicles to substantiate desires and dreams, ideologies and fantasies. The power of things is largely determined by the fact that, contrary to subjects, they are complete and unnegotiably real. As Van Beek pointed out, it is precisely “the ‘incompletion’ of the subject in relation to the world” that plays an important role in the relationship between people and material objects.⁴⁸

Exactly because the intrinsic incompleteness of our identity leads to an “incentive to actually capture part of this world as inalienable possession in an effort to control precisely what is uncontrollable: one’s identity in relation to the world,” the possession of an object always leads to the emergence of new desires, as Campbell explained so well. We simply cannot create our (collective) self, not even through purchases. And although acquiring objects can perhaps in theory provide the ingredients for further self-development, it is invariably the inconsistency, the elusiveness and intrinsic unfulfilment of the subject and his identity which cause detachment, disappointment, confusion, desires and fantasy. Buying things is an attempt to avoid such feelings. People buy things which on the outside possess a characteristic of their make-believe true self, in material and concrete form, in the vague suspension of disbelief that they themselves will become just as solid and real, as complete and indivisible as the thing they have purchased.⁴⁹

This interpretation owes much to Van Beek’s analysis and to the perspective developed by Campbell, with its focus on things as the concretization of a wideranging, non-materialist desire for perfection. I fully agree with Campbell that the desire for a perfecting of reality is the nexus around which consumption revolves. But I disagree with him on the role of the materiality of objects in arousing that desire. According to me, it is to a large extent due to that very materiality and the accompanying sensory characteristics of things, that they become irresistible in the ways mentioned above.

I see, smell, touch and taste something that looks as I (want to be)
And if I buy it, I am (albeit fleetingly).

This is fetishism, and as such, a fantasy, about “fulfilment and ultimate arrival.”⁵⁰ Although it is easier to think of fantasy as an individual phenomenon, the history of East German and West German consumer goods demonstrates that fantasies can also be a collective phenomenon, aiming at perfecting and harmonizing the social domain.

The fantasy in the former GDR was beautiful, and it did function as a bond, uniting people in what seemed merely to be a shared desire. Immense was the euphoria in 1989 when the Wall came down. Stavrakakis's work explains the pain that followed so soon: "The more beatific and harmonious...a social fantasy, the more the repressed, destabilising element will be excluded from its symbolization – without, however, ever disappearing."⁵¹

The destabilising element had indeed not disappeared, and the *Wende* was traumatic. The crab antics, eradicated from the official ideology and symbolic order of the GDR, appeared in the open when the fantasy was unmasked. Since then, the residents of the GDR are confronted with forms of mutual contact and experiences which had been written off in the GDR under a passionately preached form of mutual involvement and solidarity. And although East Germans desperately desire their social world to change, longing for other forms of contact and social interaction, this desire is not going to be fulfilled. In daily life it appears to be more difficult than one wishes, to have a beer with a loser if you yourself are a winner – or vice versa. Apparently, common desires only function as bond if supported by shared lies and secrets, which are a more effective bond for a group than the truth.⁵²

Notes

Introduction

- 1 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959), 3.
- 2 See Zygmunt Baumann, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London / New York: Routledge, 1992), 168-71.
- 3 Patricia Spyer, "Introduction," in *Border Fetishisms. Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York / London: Routledge, 1998), 1-13, here: 9.
- 4 Helga Schubert's lecture at the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam took place in the summer of 1994.
- 5 Karl Marx, *Het Kapitaal. Een kritische beschouwing over de economie. Deel 1: Het productieproces van het kapitaal* (Bussum: De Haan, 1974 [1867]), 30.
- 6 Conrad Lodziak, *The Myth of Consumerism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 158.
- 7 See for example Marshall Sahlins, "La Pensée Bourgeoise. Western Society as Culture," in *Culture and Practical Reason*, ed. Marshall Sahlins (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 166-205. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
- 8 Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
- 9 Daniel Miller, *Modernity. An Ethnographic Approach. Duality and Mass Consumption in Trinidad* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), resp. 63-74, here: 63. For his positive evaluations, see *ibid.*, 65 and 79. For the negative sides, see Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, 187. Last citation from *ibid.*: 190.
- 10 *Ibid.*, resp. 191 and 215.
- 11 See especially the work of Mattijs van de Port, "Registers of Incontestability. The Quest for Authenticity in Academia and Beyond," *Etnofoor* XVII no. 1/2 (2004): 7-22. And Mattijs van de Port, *Ecstatic Encounters. Bahian Candomblé and the Quest for the Really Real* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).
- 12 Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, 137.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Colin Campbell, "The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism: Reflections on the Reception of a Thesis Concerning the Origin of the Continuing Desire for Goods," in *Experiencing Material Culture in the Western World*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 36-49, here: resp. 38 and 86.
- 17 Campbell, "The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism," 36-49.
- 18 Campbell, "The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism," 39.

- 19 See Lutz Niethammer, "Glasnost privat 1987," in *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, ed. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 9-76, here: 39.
- 20 See historian Jacco Pekelder, who indicates that for as long as the GDR existed, a fierce debate was raging in the Netherlands about how this state should be considered: as a totalitarian dictatorship (thereby referring to the work of H. Arendt and that of C.J. Friedrich) or as an attempt to realize a true socialist state. After some time, the latter position statement was announced by more and more voices in the Dutch political landscape. Jacco Pekelder, *Nederland en de DDR. Beeldvorming en betrekkingen 1949-1989* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1998).
- 21 Konrad Jarausch, "Beyond Uniformity. The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR," in *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 3-17, here: 4.
- 22 Detlef Pollack, "Modernization and Modernization Blockages in GDR Society," in *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 27-47, here: 27.
- 23 Scott Moranda, "Towards a more holistic history? Historians and East German everyday life. Review Article," *Social History* 35 (2010): 330-8, here: 332.
- 24 Thomas Lindenberger, "Die Diktatur der Grenzen. Zur Einleitung," in *Herrschaft und Eigensinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Thomas Lindenberger (Köln / Weimar / Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), 13-35, here: 17. Also see Mary Fulbrook, "Herrschaft, Gehorsam und Verweigerung – Die DDR als Diktatur," in *Die DDR als Geschichte. Fragen – Hypothesen – Perspektiven*, ed. Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 77-86. And see Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 25 Moranda, "Towards a more holistic history?," 331.
- 26 Jarausch, "Beyond Uniformity," 11.
- 27 Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 41.
- 28 Jarausch, "Beyond Uniformity," 9.
- 29 Resp. Pollack, "Modernization and Modernization Blockages in GDR Society," 27. Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, 2. Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, 47. Also see Pollack, who has described East German society as a "deeply divided and fissured society, essentially conflicted and contradictory," Pollack, "Modernization and Modernization Blockages in GDR Society," 29. Ross also stated that "the basic characteristic of East German society was [the] constant and systemic tension," Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 66. Last quotation from *ibid.*, 60.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 31 See: Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die DDR als Geschichte. Fragen – Hypothesen – Perspektiven* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994). Martin Sabrow, "Dictatorship as Discourse. Cultural Perspectives on SED Legitimacy," in *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 195-212. James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Simon Tormey, *Making Sense of Tyranny. Interpretations of Totalitarianism* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 1995). Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society From Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). And the contributions compiled in Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Herrschaft und Eigensinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Köln / Weimar / Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1999).
- 32 Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, resp. 55 and 60.

- 33 Ibid., 63.
- 34 Maurice Godelier, *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power among the New Guinea Baruya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Paul Eiss and Thomas C. Wolfe, "Deconstruct to Reconstruct: An Interview with Maurice Godelier," *The Journal of the International Institute* 1 no. 2 (2004): no pages.
- 35 Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa* 62 no. 1 (1992): 3-38, resp. 25, 10, and 25. See Moranda, "Towards a More Holistic History?," 333. Also see Lisa Wedeen, "Acting 'As If': Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40 no. 3 (1998): 503-23. And Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 36 Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Introduction: States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State," in *States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2001), 1-39, here: 5.
- 37 Alf Lüdtke, "'Helden der Arbeit' – Mühe beim Arbeiten. Zur mißmutigen Loyalität von Industriearbeitern in der DDR," in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994), 188-217.
- 38 McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany*, 13.
- 39 Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945-68* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 158.
- 40 Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London / New York: Routledge, 1999). Slavoj Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," *New Left Review* 183 (1990): 50-63. Julia Hell, "History as Trauma, or, Turning to the Past Once Again: Germany 1949/1989," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96 no. 4 (1997): 911-48. Port, "Registers of Incontestability," Terry Eagleton, *Trouble With Strangers. A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
- 41 See Robert A. Paul, "Psychoanalytic Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1985): 177-202. For a detailed ethnography inspired by psychoanalytic notions, see Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture. Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and the early work of Arnold Epstein, for instance, "Tambu: The Shell Money of the Tolai," in *Fantasy and Symbol: a Psychoanalytic Point of View*, ed. Robert H. Hook (London: Academic Press, 1979), 149-206.
- 42 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 13.
- 43 Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man. A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xv.
- 44 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 13.
- 45 Compare Laplanche and Pontalis: "Selbst in ihren am wenigsten bearbeiteten Formen erscheint die Phantasie nicht auf eine intentionale Absicht des wünschenden Subjekts reduzierbar... In dem Maße, in dem der Wunsch in die Phantasie verwoben ist, wird diese auch zum Ort der Abwehrvorgänge, wie... Verkehrung ins Gegenteil, Verneinung, Projektion. Solche Abwehrvorgänge sind ihrerseits unauflöslich mit der Hauptfunktion der Phantasie – der Wunschinszenierung – verbunden, einer Inszenierung, bei der das Verbot in der Position des Wunsches immer gegenwärtig ist," Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 392-3.
- 46 But see the work of Bonno Thoden van Velzen and Wilhelmina van Wetering, *The Great Father and the Danger: Religious Cults, Material Forces, and Collective Fantasies in the World of the Surinamese Maroons* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1988). Birgit Meyer, "Visions of Blood,

- Sex and Money: Fantasy Spaces in Popular Ghanaian Cinema,” *Visual Anthropology* 16 no. 1 (2003): 15-41. Port, *Ecstatic Encounters. Bahian Candomblé and the Quest for the Really Real*.
- 47 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology. An Introduction* (London / New York: Verso, 2007 [1991]), 6.

Chapter 1

- 1 Thanks are due to Anne Gevers and Alex Strating for these descriptions.
- 2 Relevant with regard to the argument presented in this book is especially the recent literature on the senses. See for instance the journal *The Senses and Society*.
- 3 See Blok, who paid attention to the anthropological negligence with regard to fieldwork a long time ago, and who describes that much boils down to developing sensitivity for clues. Anton Blok, *Antropologische perspectieven* (Muiderberg: Coutinho, 1978), 26.
- 4 For an early example, however, see Colin M. Turnbull, *The Mountain People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).
- 5 In chapter six, I describe and analyze the role of the East German material world in western representations, where it figures as a symbol of the country's assumed pitch-black past in general.
- 6 See for example Robert Pool, “There Must Have Been Something... Interpretations of Illness and Misfortune in a Cameroon Village” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 1989).
- 7 Also see Abram de Swaan's farewell speech which focuses explicitly on the importance of these very forms of transference and countertransference in the social-scientific knowledge process; Abram de Swaan, “Wijsheid achteraf. Rede bij het emeritaat als universiteitshoogleraar aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam,” *De Gids* 170 no. 2 (2007): 87-102.
- 8 Charles Lindholm, “Romantic Love and Anthropology,” *Etnofoor* XIX no. 1 (2006): 5-23, here: 7.
- 9 See (especially his references on p. 180), Robert A. Paul, “Psychoanalytic Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1985): 177-202. Also see the contributions in Aaron H. Esman, ed., *Essential Papers on Transference* (New York / London: New York University Press, 1990).
- 10 Milena Veenis, *Kartoffeln, Kuchen und Asado. Over de verborgen keuken van Duitsers in Argentinië* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995).
- 11 George M. Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 293-316. And George M. Foster, “The Anatomy of Envy: A Study in Symbolic Behavior,” *Current Anthropology* 13 no. 2 (1972): 165-202.
- 12 Foster, “The Anatomy of Envy,” here: 175.
- 13 About mistrust in Romania, see David A. Kideckel, *The Solitude of Collectivism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), xiii. On the same issue in Hungary, see Martha Lampland, “Pigs, Party Secretaries and Private Lives in Hungary,” *American Ethnologist* 18 no. 3 (1991): 459-79.
- 14 Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man. A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 366.
- 15 Mattijs van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars, and Other Instances of the Wild* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 100.
- 16 For a rich and detailed analysis of how inhabitants of Austria dealt with and especially kept silent about the most painful part of the past, the Second World War, throughout various periods, see Anne Gevers, *Façades. Oostenrijkers en het oorlogsverleden* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995).

- 17 Suzanne Kuik and Milena Veenis, "Professor of the Dark Side: an Interview with Bonno Thoden van Velzen," *Etnofoor* 18 no. 2 (2005): 87-105, here: resp. 94 and 92.
- 18 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 19 Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (New York: Tavistock, 1985).
- 20 Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines. From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).
- 21 See for instance the work of East German psychiatrist Hans Joachim Maaz who, although he has formulated highly relevant insights, continuously attempted to show that the emotional, social and cultural developments in East Germany were determined by the fact that it was a dictatorship. Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1991). Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Die Entrüstung. Deutschland, Deutschland: Stasi, Schuld und Sündenbock* (Berlin: Argon, 1992).
- 22 See also Paul Betts, "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture," *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 731-65.
- 23 Andrej Plesu, "Intellectual Life under Dictatorship," *Representations* 49 (1995): 61-72, here: 63.

Chapter 2

- 1 Christa Wolf, *Patronen van een jeugd* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1990), 71.
- 2 Ina Merkel, "Leitbilder und Lebensweisen von Frauen in der DDR," in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994): 359-83, here: 361.
- 3 Gareth Pritchard, *The Making of the GDR 1945-53. From Antifascism to Stalinism* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 26.
- 4 Sociologist Hilde Thurnwald wrote about this issue in her book from 1948, see, for an excerpt: Hilde Thurnwald, "Gegenwartsprobleme Berliner Familien," in *Das gesplittene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990. Texte und Dokumente*, ed. Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner (München: Beck, 1993), here: 123.
- 5 Historians debate the exact amount of reparations paid to the SU by the GDR. These amounts are derived from Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 84; and Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand. The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge (Mass.) / London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 22. The GDR had to provide about 30% of its industrial capacity, the FRG about 3%. Combined with the Marshall Aid given to the FRG, it is clear that the GDR paid the bill for the war. Between 1945 and 1953 it paid "the highest known level of reparations in the 20th century," Ross, *The East German Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR*, 48.
- 6 Jochen Laufer, "From Dismantling to Currency Reform: External Origins of the East German Dictatorship, 1943-1948," in *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 73-91, here: 76.
- 7 Laufer, "From Dismantling to Currency Reform: External Origins of the East German Dictatorship, 1943-1948," 86 n.21. This came to 80% of the remaining iron and steelworks (including large sections of the railway network), electro-industry and mechanical engineering; 75% of the car, precision engineering and optical industry, see Georg C. Bertsch, Ernst Hedler and Matthias Dietz, *SED. Schönes Einheit Design* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1990), 15.

- 8 Rainer Gries, *Die Rationen-Gesellschaft. Versorgungskampf und Vergleichsmentalität: Leipzig, München und Köln nach dem Kriege* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1991), 120.
- 9 *Ibid.*, resp. 107, 99. Daily calorie intake dropped regularly to the life-threatening level of 700. Leipzig had only 9% newcomers whereas the population of Rudolstadt grew by more than 40% after 1945.
- 10 Resp. Herman Glaser, "So viel Anfang war nie," in *So viel Anfang war nie: Deutsche Städte 1945-1949*, ed. L. von Putendorf and Michael Schöneich (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989), 10. Gries, *Die Rationen-Gesellschaft. Versorgungskampf und Vergleichsmentalität: Leipzig, München und Köln nach dem Kriege*, resp. 19, and 74.
- 11 Stig Dagerman, *Duitse herfst. Een naoorlogse reportage* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1989 [1947]), 87.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Mark Allinson, *Politics and popular opinion in East Germany 1945-68* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 45. See also Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 133.
- 14 According to a verbal estimate by Dr. Heinz Doeblen, one of Rudolstadt's historians, *Kreis* [district] Rudolstadt had about 70,000 inhabitants in 1945 and two years later 30,000 more. The numbers of inhabitants in those years cannot be found in the town's archives. In an item dated 17/10/1945, written by the *Landrat* and addressed to the mayors of *Kreis* Rudolstadt, the announcement was made that 25,000 *Umsiedler*, due to be arriving shortly, had to be offered accommodation. *Landratsamt Rudolstadt Archiv* (LRA): E 50/1987. Information about refugee camps can be found in: *Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar* (THW): 1059.
- 15 Except for the previously quoted figures, this number consists of: 747 members of the *Wehrmacht*, 10 Jewish inhabitants, 128 residents of a care home who had been deported under the so-called euthanasia programme, and 12 others who died at the hands of the Nazis. Peter Langhof, "Die Zeit des Dritten Reiches," in *Geschichte des Landkreises Rudolstadt*, ed. Werner Thomas (Rudolstadt: Landratsamt, 1992), here: 50.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Dagerman, *Duitse herfst*, 45.
- 18 Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 55.
- 19 Policies were carried out by local KPD and SPD politicians who were steered by the SMAD to whom they had to report. LRA: E50/1987.
- 20 Unfortunately when the SMAD left in 1949, most of this material from the East German city archives was taken as "Russian property" to the Soviet Union.
- 21 LRA: E-249.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 THW: Land Thüringen, Bureau des Ministerpräsidentes, Aktenr. 534/535.
- 25 Victor Klemperer also begins his diaries of the first post-war period by describing the struggle for material possessions, Victor Klemperer, *So sitze ich den zwischen allen Stühlen. Tagebücher 1950-1959* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1999).
- 26 Herman Weber, *DDR. Dokumente zur Geschichte der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1945-1985* (München: Deutschen Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), 34.
- 27 Joachim Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991), 42-3. Although Gauck's father was not taken away till 1951 (forced to work in a labour camp near Lake Baikal, in the southeast of the Soviet Union, until Stalin's death in 1955), the experience described by Gauck is similar to those left behind in 1945, 1946 and later.

- 28 Bodo Ritscher, "Die NKWD/MWD-‘Speziallager’ in Deutschland. Anmerkungen zu einem Forschungsgegenstand," in *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten*, ed. Jürgen Danyel (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), here: 169-70. German historian Alexander von Plato presents almost identical figures, Alexander von Plato, "Sowjetische Speziallager in Deutschland 1945 bis 1950: Ergebnisse eines deutsch-russischen Kooperationsprojekt," in *Speziallager in der SBZ. Gedenkstätten mit ‘doppelter Vergangenheit’*, ed. Peter Reif-Spirek and Bodo Ritscher (Berlin: Links Verlag, 1999), 124-49.
- 29 Alongside the original letters, the archives still have copies of the replies. This allows one to see who received a reply and when.
- 30 Hermann Weber, *DDR. Grundriß der Geschichte 1945-1990* (Hannover: Fackelträger Verlag, 1991), 32.
- 31 Ibid. Also see Alexander von Plato, "Denunziation im Systemwechsel. Verhaftete, Deportierte und Lagerhäftlinge in der SBZ um 1945," *Historical Social Research* 26 no. 2/3 (2001): 179-203.
- 32 THW Bestand: Land Thüringen, Bureau des Ministerpräsidentes Aktenr. 534/535.
- 33 Unpublished and undated document made available to me by *Superintendent* Traugott Schmitt, Traugott Schmitt, "Lebensbild des Georg Schmunck, der sieben Jahre des Straflager Bautzen als 'das gelbe Elend' überlebte," (Rudolstadt n.d.).
- 34 Peter Langhof, "Die ersten Schritte nach der Katastrophe," in *Geschichte des Lankreises Rudolstadt*, ed. Werner Thomas (Rudolstadt: Landratsamt, 1992), 52-70, here: 58. In 1950 and 1951 the SED was also cleansed; 150,000 members were banned, and many social democrats who were in contact with the West German SPD were taken prisoner. Weber, *DDR. Dokumente zur Geschichte der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1945-1985*, 152.
- 35 Weber, *DDR. Grundriß der Geschichte 1945-1990*, 25.
- 36 Zero Hour or *Stunde Null* [German capitulation], Pritchard, *The making of the GDR 1945-53. From antifascism to Stalinism*, 16-7.
- 37 Christian Geissler, *Een generatie zwijgt* (Amsterdam / Brussel: Meursault, 1961). The quotation is from the book's cover.
- 38 Wolf, *Patronen van een jeugd*, 197. Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 163. John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins. Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 122.
- 39 Alfred Döblin, *Schicksalsreise, Bericht und Bekenntnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1947). Excerpt in Hans M. Enzensberger, ed., *Europa in Trümmern. Augenzeugenberichte aus den Jahren 1944-1948* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1990), here: 19-20.
- 40 Geissler, *Een generatie zwijgt*, resp. 4 and 7.
- 41 See for instance Dorothee Sölle, *Waar het visioen ontbreekt verwildert het volk* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1987), 19. Uta Hallwirth, *Auf der Suche nach einer neuen Identität? Zum nationalen Selbstverständnis in der westdeutschen Presse 1945-1955* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1987), 64. Also see the German psychiatrists, Michael Moeller and Hans Joachim Maaz (respectively West and East), who both state that the financial prosperity in West Germany derives its expressiveness and power mostly thanks to the ability to mask pain, sorrow and feelings of guilt. Michael Moeller and Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Die Einheit beginnt zu Zweit. Ein deutsch-deutsches Zwiesgespräch* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1993), 152. Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat. The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 76. Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove Press, 1975 [1963]). Geissler, *Een generatie zwijgt*, 214-5.
- 42 Döblin, *Schicksalsreise, Bericht und Bekenntnis*, here: 20.

- 43 Jolande Withuis, *Opoffering en Heroïek: De mentale wereld van een communistische vrouwenorganisatie in naoorlogs Nederland 1946-1976* (Meppel / Amsterdam: Boom, 1990), resp. 166 and 170.
- 44 Maya Todeschini, "The Bomb's Womb? Women and the Atom Bomb," in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering and Recovery*, ed. Arthur Kleinman et al. (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 102-57, here: 133.
- 45 Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, "Introduction," in *ibid.*, ed. Arthur Kleinman et al. (Berkeley / Los Angeles), 1-31, here 23.
- 46 Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).
- 47 Gesine Schwan, *Politik und Schuld: Die zerstörerische Macht des Schweigens* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), 129.
- 48 I observed a similar situation in a German community formed in Argentina after the Second World War. There, too, people's primary aim was to build a solid house, complete with a garden and fence to ward off the outside world. Milena Veenis, *Kartoffeln, Kuchen und Asado. Over de verborgen keuken van Duitsers in Argentinië* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995).
- 49 See Michael Wildt, "Changes in Consumption as Social Practice in West Germany During the 1950s," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judt (Washington DC: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 301-17, here: 315.
- 50 See Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Chapter 3

- 1 John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 123.
- 2 According to Borneman, "Nazi propaganda...tended toward hysteria in its...portrayals of the Russians as a bestial, inferior race," *ibid.*, 122.
- 3 Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land: Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990: Texte und Dokumente* (München: Beck, 1993), 15.
- 4 Detlef Pollack, "Modernization and Modernization Blockages in GDR Society," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 27-47, here: 37.
- 5 Many of those who were adults in 1945 continued to feel strong loyalty towards the GDR until the end. This was largely due to the fact that the East German state had offered them better career opportunities than they would have had otherwise, Christine Muusse, "'Wir sind hier nicht angekommen'. Senioren in Leipzig en het DDR-verleden: een zoektocht naar identiteitsvorming en identiteitsbehoud." (MA Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2003). Also see Christoph Kleßmann, "Rethinking the Second German Dictatorship," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 363-72. And see Jürgen Kocka, "Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft," in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994), 547-54. Ross, Fulbrook and Jessen all show that the loyalty of the so-called *Aufbaugeneration* [the reconstruction generation] later came to seriously thwart changes in the GDR. Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002). Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

- 1995). Ralph Jessen, "Mobility and Blockage during the 1970s," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 341-63.
- 6 Helga Herting, "Sozialistischer Humanismus – sozialistischer Realismus," *Weimarer Beiträge* 14 no. 5 (1968): 901-28, here: resp. 916 and 903. Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 33. The singular character of Auschwitz was actually rebutted in this perspective, see Jürgen Danyel, ed., *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), here: 35. For a detailed analysis of how the East German state and politicians related to the debate on the persecution of Jews, reparations to Jewish victims, and Israel, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
 - 7 Günther Kühn and Wolfgang Weber, *Stärker als die Wölfe* (Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1976), resp. 17 and 276.
 - 8 Herf, *Divided Memory*, 189.
 - 9 Timothy R. Vogt, *Denazification in Soviet-Occupied Germany: Brandenburg 1945-1948* (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 5. Also see Herf, *Divided Memory*, 337.
 - 10 Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 46.
 - 11 Günther de Bruyn, *Verschoven stad. Een jeugd in Berlijn* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1993), 353.
 - 12 Danyel, ed., *Die geteilte Vergangenheit*, 31.
 - 13 Herting, "Sozialistischer Humanismus–sozialistischer Realismus," 902.
 - 14 Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR 1945-1989* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), resp. 221, 71 and 78.
 - 15 Günther de Bruyn, *Vierzig Jahre. Ein Lebensbericht* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 22.
 - 16 Frank Trommler, "The Creation of History and the Refusal of the Past in the German Democratic Republic," in *Coping with the Past: Germany and Austria after 1945*, ed. Lutz R. Reuter, Volker Dürr and Kathy Harms (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 79-94, here: 83.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 83-4.
 - 18 Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, 33-4.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 34.
 - 20 Sally Falk-Moore, "Introduction: Moralizing States and the Ethnography of the Present," in *Moralizing States and the Ethnography of the Present*, ed. Sally Falk-Moore (Arlington: American Anthropological Association, 1993), 1-17, here: 4.
 - 21 Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa* 62 no. 1 (1992): 3-38, here: 4.
 - 22 Konrad Jarausch, "Beyond Uniformity," 3-17, here: 4. Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, 55.
 - 23 See Hell: "the new social order that emerged in the GDR...was founded upon the notion of the 'People-as-One,' a conception of society as essentially homogeneous and unified...[which] categorically denies that division, conflict, and antagonism are constitutive of society." Julia Hell, "History as Trauma, or, Turning to the Past Once Again: Germany 1949/1989," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96 no. 4 (1997): 911-48, here: 916.
 - 24 Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, 34.
 - 25 Annette Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären* (Giessen: Psycho-Sozial Verlag, 1995), 48.

- 26 Jürgen Danyel, Olaf Groehler and Mario Kessler, "Antifaschismus und Verdrängung. Zum Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in der DDR," in *Die DDR als Geschichte: Fragen – Hypothesen – Perspektiven*, ed. Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 148-53, here: resp. 149 and 52.
- 27 Herf, *Divided Memory*, 390-1.
- 28 Gert Hagelweide, *Das publizistische Erscheinungsbild des Menschen im kommunistischen Lied: Eine Untersuchung der Liedpublizistik der KPD (1919-1933) und der SED (1945-1960)* (Bremen: published in-house, 1968), 190.
- 29 *Kultur im Heim*, 1968/6: 4. And Kurt Hager, *Beiträge zur Kulturpolitik: Reden und Aufsätze 1972 bis 1981* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1981), 11.
- 30 Catherine Pence, "'You as Woman will Understand': Consumption, Gender and the Relationship between State and Citizenry in the GDR's Crisis of 17 June 1953," *German History* 19 (2001): 218-52. On representations of women's roles, see Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 11.
- 31 Gareth Pritchard, *The making of the GDR 1945-53: From Antifascism to Stalinism* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 155.
- 32 Michael Wildt, "Changes in Consumption as Social Practice in West Germany During the 1950s," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judt (Washington DC: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 301-17, here: 304.
- 33 Rainer Gries, *Die Rationen-Gesellschaft. Versorgungskampf und Vergleichsmentalität: Leipzig, München und Köln nach dem Kriege* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1991), 133.
- 34 Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins*, 62.
- 35 Burghard Ciesla and Patrice G. Poutros, "Food Supply in a Planned Economy. SED Nutrition Policy Between Crisis Response and Popular Needs," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 143-63, here: 143.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 118.
- 38 Karin Zachmann, "A Socialist Consumption Junction. Debating the Mechanization of Housework in East Germany, 1956-1957," *Technology and Culture* 43 (1999): 73-100, here: 73.
- 39 Stephan Merl, "Staat und Konsum in der Zentralverwaltungswirtschaft. Rußland und die ostmitteleuropäischen Länder," in *Europäische Konsumgeschichte: Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Siegfried Siegrist, Hartmut Kaelble, and Jürgen Kocka (Frankfurt / New York: Campus Verlag, 1997), 205-42.
- 40 Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen, "Einleitung: Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR," in *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, ed. Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 7-24, here: 12.
- 41 Philipp Heldmann, "Konsumpolitik in der DDR Jugendmode in den sechziger Jahren," in *Konsumpolitik: Die Regulierung des privaten Verbrauchs im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hartmut Berghoff (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 135-59, here: 135.
- 42 Lutz Niethammer, "Glasnost privat 1987," in *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, ed. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 9-76, here: 39.

- 43 David Crowley, "Warsaw's Shops, Stalinism and the Thaw," in *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. Susan Reid and David Crowley (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 25-49, here: 26.

Chapter 4

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, "Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 1 no. 2 (1996): 77-86, here: 77.
- 2 Georg C. Bertsch, Ernst Hedler and Mattias Dietz, *SED. Schönes Einheit Design* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1990).
- 3 *Kultur im Heim*, 1977/4, 34.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Jutta Schmidt, "Über die Gestaltung des sozialistischen Menschenbildes," *Einheit* 21 no. 11 (1966): 1434-44, here: 1436.
- 6 *Kultur im Heim*, 1977/4, 34.
- 7 Ibid. See for instance, Lothar Kühne, *Gegenstand und Raum: Über die Historizität des Ästhetischen* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1980). Herbert Letsch, *Der Alltag und die Dinge um uns* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1983). Martin Kelm, *Produktgestaltung im Sozialismus* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1971). Alfred Hückler et al., *Einführung in die industrielle Formgestaltung: Lehrbrief* (Berlin: Eichenverlag der KDT, 1983). Horst Redeker, *Das Dilemma der Dekadenz* (Berlin: Institut für angewandte Kunst, 1958). Horst Redeker, *Chemie gibt Schönheit* (Berlin: Institut für angewandte Kunst, 1959). Erhard John, *Kultur – Kunst – Lebensweise* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1980).
- 8 I deem it important to stress that the ideals described here were certainly not limited to the GDR, or the other countries of the socialist bloc. Comparable ideals were widespread then, and also very much en vogue in many western / capitalist countries. Also see Scholz & Veenis, in which we show that exactly the same discussions on the social role of design took place in West as in East Germany at that time, with comparable forms being the result. In both countries, enlightening consumers was supposed to play an important role in relation to the country's dark past – for the false romanticism the Nazis had used to blind the masses, was to be eradicated. Nathalie Scholz and Milena Veenis, "Cold War Modernism and Post War German Homes. An East-West Comparison," in *Cold War Culture*, ed. Joes Segal, David Romeyn and Giles Scott-Smith (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).
- 9 All references are from *Kultur im Heim*, resp. 1980/3, 41; 1973/5, 24-26; 1968/6, 4 and 7.
- 10 *Kultur im Heim*, resp. 1965/1, 27; 1965/3, 39; 1988/6, 27; 1977/1, 1; 1968/5, 1; 1965/3, 27.
- 11 *Kultur im Heim*, 1969/1, 49 and 1966/4, 22.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Kühne, *Gegenstand und Raum*, 186.
- 14 *Neue Werbung*, 1958/4, 1.
- 15 Peter Christian Ludz, ed., *DDR Handbuch* (Köln: Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen, 1975), 638.
- 16 The example is taken from Hirdina's outstanding history of design in the GDR, Heinz Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie. Design in der DDR 1949-1989* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1988), 131.
- 17 Ibid., 56.
- 18 Ibid., 64.
- 19 *Kultur im Heim*, 1971/3, 1.

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 See for instance *Kultur im Heim*, 1971/3, 1.
- 22 Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie: Design in der DDR 1949-1989*, 58.
- 23 Ibid., 129.
- 24 Herbert Pohl, "Rationeller Umgang mit Möbelementen," *Form und Zweck* 2 (1970): 13-5. Again, this development was certainly not exclusive to the GDR and other socialist countries. The rationalization of furniture and interior design has been a globally successful trend – think of Ikea and Lundia.
- 25 Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie*, 135.
- 26 Ibid., 139. Although the material expression of variety and subjectivity was not stimulated in the GDR, this is not to say people were unable to give a personal interpretation to their material surroundings. See Merkel, who explicitly warns not only to focus on the official ideology with regard to design and material culture, in order to then draw the unjustified conclusion that "it was impossible to develop different lifestyles" in the GDR, Ina Merkel, "Working People and Consumption Under Really-Existing Socialism: Perspectives from the German Democratic Republic," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 55 (1999): 92-111, here: 379. Also see Miller, for ways the inhabitants of a uniformly designed neighbourhood in East London appropriated their flats via individual furnishings. Daniel Miller, "Appropriating the State on the Council Estate," *Man* 23 (1988): 353-72.
- 27 Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie*, resp. 162, 163, 129 and 133.
- 28 During my fieldwork I interviewed ten graphic designers.
- 29 Also see Fehérváry, who shows that clashes between designers and party functionaries were a well-known phenomenon throughout the socialist bloc. Krisztina Fehérváry, "Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 no. 2 (2009): 426-59.
- 30 TSR: W 634. The paper is not dated, but its place in the record suggests it refers to 1983 or 1984.
- 31 Allotments were responsible for the production of honey and certain small stocks. RSA: *Volkswirtschaftsplan der Stadt Rudolstadt*, 23/11/1975.
- 32 LRA: E52/19 (1796): September, 16 (1963).
- 33 LRA: A8697 (1983), n.d.
- 34 Interestingly, East German rat-poison was called Delicia. East German product naming practices are worth studying; note the following names: Lebona (probably perfume), Decenta (probably sanitary towels), Fekama (against insects), Gentina (washing powder), Immuna (tampons), Thania (perfume), Alberna (sun oil), Landina (cream) and Duolit & Duotex (against insects). Helmut M. Bien, ed., *Schmerz laß nach. Drogerie-Werbung der DDR* (Dresden: Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, 1992), resp. 41, 19, 32, 18, 23, 23, 22, 14, 29 and 19.
- 35 There was of course also an ideological argument why too much attention to packaging was subject and not in line with socialist mentality. For a discussion on this, see the journal *Neue Werbung*.
- 36 Klaus Hedrich and Hans-Olaf Schneider, "Die Senkung stoffwirtschaftliche Verluste als Erfordernis wachsender Effektivität bei der Befriedigung des Ernährungsbedürfnisses unter den Bedingungen umfassender Intensivierung," in *Konsumtion und umfassende Intensivierung*, ed. Hans Rößler (Halle: Abteilung Wissenschaftspublizistik der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, VEB Kongreß- und Werbedruck, 1988), 68-80.
- 37 The car example is not entirely true: the famous East German Trabant was made of a mixture of cotton and creosote, but in the stories about the car that circulated after the *Wende*,

- it was affectionately known as *Auto von Pappe* [car made of paper] or *Pappschachtel* [paper box].
- 38 TSR: W 634. For cautious expressions of consumers' dissatisfaction, see Regina Dorniok, "Bekleidungsbedürfnisse und ihre Befriedigung als ein Aspekt sozialistischer Lebensweise," (Berlin: Humboldt Universität, 1984).
- 39 See Stokes, for a beautiful history of synthetic materials in the GDR. Raymond G. Stokes, "Plastics and the New Society: The German Democratic Republic in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 65-81. From the mid-1980s, cautious criticism and appeals (implicit) for change (differentiation of payment, for instance) were expressed. See Hans Rößler, "Entwicklungstendenzen der Konsumtion bei umfassender Intensivierung," in *Konsumtion und umfassende Intensivierung*, ed. Hans Rößler (Halle: Abteilung Wissenschaftspublizistik der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, VEB Kongreß- und Werbedruck, 1988), 30-45. Helmut Seidl, "Konsumgüterproduktion und umfassende Intensivierung des Reproduktionsprozesses," in *Konsumtion und umfassende Intensivierung*, 2-14.
- 40 Kurt Bernheier, *Konsumgüter aus Produktionsmittelkombinaten* (Berlin: Verlag der Wirtschaft, 1986), 38. I.S. Scharow, "Die Intensivierung der Produktion und die Erhöhung des Niveaus der Bedürfnisbefriedigung," 14-24, here: 38.
- 41 TSR: W 509, 19/10/1976.
- 42 See Rainer Schedlinski, "Die Blindensprache der Macht," in *Vom Bauhaus bis Bitterfeld. 41 Jahre DDR-Design*, ed. Regine Halter (Gießen: Anabas, 1991), 12-18, here: 16.
- 43 Mary Fulbrook, "Methodologische Überlegungen zu einer Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR," in *Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, ed. Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 274-98, here: 280.
- 44 Lutz Niethammer, "Glasnost privat 1987," in *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, ed. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 9-76, here: 39.
- 45 Matthias Biskupek, *Wir Beuteldeutschen: Satiren, Glossen und Feuilletons* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel, 1991).
- 46 Zbigniew Czwartosz, "On queueing," *Archives Européennes à Sociologie* (1988): 3-12, here: 9.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 48 TSR: W 785, report from December 1984.
- 49 See Verdery, who deals extensively with hoarding, especially in Rumania. Katherine Verdery, "Ethnic Relations, Economies of Shortage, and the Transition in Eastern Europe," in *Socialism. Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice*, ed. Chris M. Hann (London / New York: Routledge, 1993), 172-87.
- 50 Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land: Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990: Texte und Dokumente* (München: Beck, 1993), 381.
- 51 See Sampson on corruption, especially in Rumania, and its role in obtaining and maintaining legitimacy for (local) politicians. Steven L. Sampson, "Bureaucracy and Corruption as Anthropological Problems: A Case Study from Romania," *Folk Dansk Etnografisk Tidsskrift* 25 (1982): 63-97.
- 52 TSR: W 134, 15/03/1980.
- 53 LRA: 2S 725/70, 07/05/1970.
- 54 LRA: A 8697.
- 55 Also see also Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, "Introduction: Barter, Exchange and Value," in *Barter, Exchange and Value: An Anthropological Approach*, ed. Caroline

- Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-21, here: 2.
- 56 Ibid., 8.
- 57 Ina Merkel, "Consumer Culture in the GDR, or How the Struggle for Antimodernity Was Lost on the Battleground of Consumer Culture" in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 281-300, here: resp. 292 and 294.
- 58 Chris M. Hann, *A Village Without Solidarity: Polish Peasants in Years of Crisis* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1985), 161.
- 59 Lisa Wedeen, "Acting 'As If': Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40 no. 3 (1998): 503-23, here: 505.
- 60 Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21.
- 61 Ibid., 147.
- 62 Wedeen, "Acting 'As If': Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," 515.
- 63 Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: the Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," *American Ethnologist* 22 no. 2 (1995): 375-402, here: 393.
- 64 LRA: E52/19 (1796), 16/09/1963.
- 65 Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 62.
- 66 Ralph Jessen, "Vom Ordinarius zum sozialistischen Professor," in *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, ed. Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 76-108, here: 106.

Chapter 5

- 1 Sally Falk-Moore, "Introduction: Moralizing States and the Ethnography of the Present," in *Moralizing States and the Ethnography of the Present*, ed. Sally Falk-Moore (Arlington: American Anthropological Association, 1993), 1-17, here: 3, [italics in orig.].
- 2 See Scott, who uses the same expression, all in the same boat, in his analysis of farmers and their resistance, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1985), 328.
- 3 Simon Tormey, *Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 140.
- 4 Ibid., 143-4.
- 5 Ibid., 144, 145.
- 6 Maurice Cranston, "Should We Cease to Speak of Totalitarianism?," *Survey* 23 no. 3 (1997): here: 18.
- 7 My quotes are from the Dutch translation of this book, Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1991), 112-3.
- 8 Also see Hauer, who agrees that East Germans suffer collectively from what she calls a "Mitläufer-Syndrom" [Hanger-On Syndrome], Nadine Hauer, "Das Mitläufer-Syndrom. Kommunikation über ein Tabu in Österreich und in Deutschland," in *Mythen der Deutschen. Deutsche Befindlichkeiten zwischen Geschichten und Geschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Frindte and Harald Pätzolt (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1994), 87-100, here: 94. Criticism of such interpretations can be found in Merkel, who challenges what she calls the "Repressionsthese [Repression thesis]," Ina Merkel, "Leitbilder und Lebensweisen von Frauen in der DDR," in

- Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994), 359-83, here: 378.
- 9 Armin Mitte and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten. Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte* (München: Bertelsmann, 1993).
 - 10 See Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945-68* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 2-3 n.4.
 - 11 *Neue Saale Zeitung*, 18/6/1994.
 - 12 Also see Michael Lukas Moeller and Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Die Einheit beginnt zu zweit: ein deutsch-deutsches Zwiegespräch* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 108.
 - 13 See Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland*, 27-33. Also see Christa Wolf, "Das haben wir nicht gelernt," in *Angepaßt oder mündig? Briefe an Christa Wolf im Herbst 1989*, ed. Petra Gruner (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1990), 9-12.
 - 14 Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland*, 30.
 - 15 Just like all other mass organisations, the FDJ formed part of the National Front (which further consisted of the SED and so-called Bloc parties). This organisation was known to be extremely loyal to the state.
 - 16 Nearly all young people between the age of 14 and 18 were FDJ members. After they became 18, most members left, except for students: in 1988 more than 95% of the students at Humboldt University were members of the FDJ, John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins. Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 163.
 - 17 Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land: Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990. Texte und Dokumente* (München: Beck, 1993), 489.
 - 18 SBZ: *Sowjetische Besatzungszone, Soviet Occupied Zone*.
 - 19 Kleßmann and Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land*, 460-2.
 - 20 Hermann Weber, *DDR. Grundriß der Geschichte 1945-1990* (Hannover: Fackelträger Verlag, 1991), 305.
 - 21 Unpublished report from the secretariat of Rudolstadt's Council of the VKSK district representatives' conference 02/02/85 / *Bericht des Sekretariats des Kreisvorstandes Rudolstadt zur Kreisdelegiertenkonferenz des VKSK (Verein für Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter)*.
 - 22 Martin Sabrow, "Dictatorship as Discourse: Cultural Perspectives on SED Legitimacy," in *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 195-212, here: 196.
 - 23 James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119.
 - 24 Mary Fulbrook, "Methodologische Überlegungen zu einer Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR," in *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, ed. Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 274-98, here: 282.
 - 25 Merkel, "Leitbilder und Lebensweisen von Frauen in der DDR," 378.
 - 26 John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 164.
 - 27 Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945-68*, 158.
 - 28 Resp. *Wochenpost*, 14/04/1994, *Neue Saale Zeitung*, 21/12/1993, *Het Parool*, 09/04/1994, *Ost Thüringer Zeitung*, 15/12/1993, *ibid.*, 14/01/1994.
 - 29 Willem Melching, *Van het socialisme, de dingen die voorbijgaan: een geschiedenis van de DDR 1945-2000* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2004), 301.
 - 30 Moeller and Maaz, *Die Einheit beginnt zu zweit*, 19-20.
 - 31 See Fabian on presenting people as "our contemporary ancestors" as an affirmation of one's power, Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

- 32 Melching, *Van het socialisme, de dingen die voorbijgaan*, 301.
- 33 Moeller and Maaz, *Die Einheit beginnt zu zweit*, 61. Also see Guggenberger, who explains tensions between East and West Germans as following: "The...irritation between East and West Germans can for example now be traced especially to differences in aesthetic observations. For us in the west, the GDR, the past, is more than anything an aesthetic vexation," Bernd Guggenberger, "Die politische Aktualität des Ästhetischen," *Leviathan: Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft* 21 no. 1 (1993): 146-62, here: 151.
- 34 See Annette Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären* (Giessen: Psycho-Sozial Verlag, 1995). Harald Pätzolt, "Das Verführerische am Stalinismus," in *Mythen der Deutschen: Deutsche Befindlichkeiten zwischen Geschichten und Geschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Frindte and Harald Pätzolt (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1994), 105-15, here: 105. On the inability to communicate the East German past to westerners, see Moeller and Maaz, *Die Einheit beginnt zu zweit*.
- 35 Andrej Plesu, "Intellectual Life Under Dictatorship," *Representations* 49 (1995): 61-72, here: 62.
- 36 Peter Schneider, *Vom Ende der Gewißheit* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1994), 58.
- 37 See a quote by Czech film director Milos Forman: "When you are not allowed to talk, you know what you want to say...But when you're free, you have to decide what's important. And that's more difficult," Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 149.
- 38 *Die Zeit*, 05/11/1993.
- 39 Willem Wertheim, *East-West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia* (Den Haag: Van Hoeve, 1965), 26.
- 40 Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 233. In the GDR, this role, alongside the arts, literature and theatre, was primarily played by religion, for the principal stronghold of criticism and resistance in the GDR was undoubtedly the Church.
- 41 William Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 1994), 355-67, here: 365.
- 42 Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa* 62 no. 1 (1992): 3-38, here: 5.
- 43 Ervin Goffman, "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," *American Anthropologist* 58 no. 3 (1956): 473-502, here: 478.
- 44 *Die Zeit*, 05/11/1993.
- 45 See Frindte, who remarks that this was exactly one of the ways people spent their free time which helped them to silently "step out" of society ("aussteigen"), Wolfgang Frindte, "'Vertrauen ist gut, Kontrolle ist besser...': ein sozialpsychologischer Erklärungsversuch zum gesellschaftlichen Umbruch in der DDR," in *Mythen der Deutschen: Deutsche Befindlichkeiten zwischen Geschichten und Geschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Frindte and Harald Pätzolt (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1994), 115-33, here: 129. Also see Fulbrook, who considers the allotments to be just like the non-political attitude of most East Germans: "the subordinate masses were genuinely content to leave politics to a well-meaning...élite and to retreat into private niches, cultivating their gardens," Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 141.
- 46 L.'s previously mentioned Personal File, obtained for personal use.
- 47 See Borneman, who commented: "romance was the dominant genre in which authority was represented and legitimated in relations between state and citizen in East Germany,"

- Borneman, "Trouble in the Kitchen: Totalitarianism, Love, and Resistance to Authority," 93-4. Also see Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," 25.
- 48 According to Wedeen, many in Syria consider the newspaper as a "functional tablecloth," Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 2.
- 49 This does not detract from the fact that even then, many people found the enforced security a burden and felt imprisoned. Here too we can speak of a positive distortion retrospectively. See following chapter and also Kolakowski, who speaks of the "slave-like security," Leszek Kolakowski, "Communism as a Cultural Formation," *Survey: A Journal of East and West Studies* 29 no. 2 (1985): 136-49, here: 144.
- 50 Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 215.
- 51 Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Introduction: States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State," in *States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2001), 1-39, here: 37.
- 52 Lisa Wedeen, "Acting 'As If': Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40 no. 3 (1998): 503-23, here: 504-5.
- 53 Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," 4.
- 54 Just as people had done under Nazi rule, see Klemperer's analysis of the language of the Third Reich, Victor Klemperer, *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii). Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Leipzig: Reclam, 2005 [1947]).
- 55 German historian Dorothee Wierling concludes that the "East German identity" was an "identité malgré / trotz alledem," Dorothee Wierling, "Is there an East German Identity? Aspects of a Social History of the Soviet Zone / German Democratic Republic," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* XIX (1990): 193-208, here: 207.
- 56 The GDR was also described as a *Nischengesellschaft*. The term *Nische* for describing a feature of East Germans' existence was initially used by the first permanent representative of the FRG in the GDR, Günter Gaus.
- 57 However, as will be discussed in chapter six, the state was able to infiltrate even the closest circle of confidants.
- 58 Pätzolt, "Das Verführerische am Stalinismus," 110.
- 59 See a statement by (East) German politician Lothar de Maizière, in an interview with McElvoy: "The combination of the daily tussle with the system in all of its negative aspects and the modest happiness which we strove for and often achieved inside it has given us a feeling of belonging together, a separate identity," Anne McElvoy, *The Saddled Cow: East Germany's Life and Legacy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), here: 227.
- 60 Hermann Weber, "Die Geschichte der DDR. Versuch einer vorläufigen Bilanz," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 41 no. 3 (1993): 195-205, here: 195.
- 61 Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 233.

Chapter 6

- 1 Günther de Bruyn, *Verschoven stad. Een jeugd in Berlijn* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1993).
- 2 The problems and painful elements of East German society and history were primarily dealt with in novels. Evemarie Badstübner-Peters, "Ostdeutsche Sowjetunionerfahrungen. Ansichten über Eigenes und Fremdes in der Alltagsgeschichte der DDR," in *Amerikanisierung*

- und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland 1945-1970., ed. Hannes Siegrist and Konrad Jarausch (Frankfurt / New York: Campus Verlag, 1997), 291-314, here: 292.
- 3 Joachim Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991), 41.
 - 4 Borneman mentions the term “regime of fear”. John Borneman, *Belonging in the two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 178.
 - 5 Michael Lukas Moeller and Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Die Einheit beginnt zu zweit: ein deutsch-deutsches Zwiegespräch* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991). Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1991).
 - 6 Günther de Bruyn, *Vierzig Jahre: Ein Lebensbericht* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 40.
 - 7 Ibid.
 - 8 *Freund* is friend and *IM* is *informeller Mitarbeiter*, literally: informal employee, i.e.: people who secretly collected information for the Stasi.
 - 9 All Gauck’s quotes in the following paragraphs, except those in which I refer to his book, are based on notes taken during his lecture at the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam, which took place on September 22, 1998.
 - 10 One yard of records amounts to about ten thousand pages. All in all, the Stasi left about 1.8 billion pages in which the experiences of over six million people have been described meticulously. Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR*, here: 11. According to the employee of the Stasi archives I visited in Gera, about one-third of the East German population is mentioned in the archives. This includes people with only one reference but who had not (yet) been watched. Also see Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR*, here 61: onwards.
 - 11 According to one of the MfS guidelines, as cited in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land: Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990: Texte und Dokumente* (München: Beck, 1993), 432-3.
 - 12 Interestingly, similar power was granted to the President of the USA in September 1950: “[It] even gave the President powers to intern ‘potential subversives’ in concentration camps during security emergencies. This...provision remained on the statute books for no less than 20 years,” Mel van Elteren, *Americanism and Americanization: A Critical History of Domestic and Global Influence* (Jefferson / London: McFarland & Company, 2006), 83.
 - 13 Christa Wolf, *Patronen van een jeugd* (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1990), 32-3.
 - 14 It deviates too much from the subject to deal with the issue of how it is possible that Wolf herself had also worked as an *IM*, but the film *Das Leben der Anderen* [The Lives of Others] illustrates that the line between perpetrator and victim could be extremely thin.
 - 15 Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR*, 97.
 - 16 See Foucault’s, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977).
 - 17 *Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (ASKD): 003 067 (“Lehrmaterial für die zentrale politisch-fachliche Schulung”), August 1984, “Zum Reise- und Touristenverkehr von Bürgern der DDR in das sozialistische Ausland und der Verhinderung seines Mißbrauchs.”
 - 18 Ibid., 4.
 - 19 Ibid., 7.
 - 20 ASKD: 003 156.
 - 21 Also see Tefft who states that “espionage seems to generate the need for more espionage” because it “may provide unreliable information” and because “agents often betray their employers.” Stanton K. Tefft, *Secrecy. A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980), 337.

- 22 ASKD: 003 156.
- 23 ASKD: 003 017.
- 24 ASKD: X/291/76/II.
- 25 Jo Winter, *Die Bande* (Leipzig: Mehlhorn, 1995), 3 and 22.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 1/26.
- 27 Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR*, 27.
- 28 Those people were already members of the party, and the Stasi preferred to recruit its collaborators from less obvious categories. Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR*, resp. 48-49 and 27-40.
- 29 Wolf, *Patronen van een jeugd*, 36.
- 30 I heard about this letter through the grapevine. Neither the addressee nor the author knows that I have read it. I therefore do not include the contents here.
- 31 They were officially employed by the MfS. They managed and were responsible for the activities of the service's informal employees.
- 32 NRC/HB August 23, 1997.
- 33 Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland*, 85.
- 34 Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 55.
- 35 Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten: das unheimliche Erbe der DDR*, 36.
- 36 Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland*, 81.
- 37 Wolf, *Patronen van een jeugd*, 15.
- 38 Annette Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären* (Giessen: Psycho-Sozial Verlag, 1995), 68.
- 39 Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, 55.
- 40 Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.
- 41 Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *Václav Havel, or, Living in Truth. Twenty-two Essays Published on the Occasion of the Award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel*, ed. J. Vladislav (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 36-123, here: 82. Writing on Burma, also see Christina Fink, *Living Silence. Burma under Military Rule* (Bangkok / London / New York: White Lotus & Zed Books, 2001), 110.
- 42 Maurice Godelier, *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power among the New Guinea Baruya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 148.
- 43 Simon Tormey, *Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism* (Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 153.
- 44 Also see Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule*, 130.
- 45 Resp. George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 293-316, here: 296. *Idem.*, "The Anatomy of Envy: A Study in Symbolic Behavior," *Current Anthropology* 13 no. 2 (1972): 165-202, here: 185. Cit. by Foster, "The Anatomy of Envy: A Study in Symbolic Behavior," here: 185.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, *Antropologen op zoek naar de sterke man* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), 65-6. And Peter Wilson, *Crab Antics: The Social Anthropology of English-Speaking Negro Societies of the Caribbean* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1972), 58. Also see Taussig, who observed that envy "could be aroused by anything...No common denominator held the list together...unless it was something to do with the exuberance of life itself." Michael Taussig, "The Sun Gives Without Receiving: An Old Story," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 no. 2 (1995): 368-98, here: 385.
- 48 Wolf, *Patronen van een jeugd*, 197.

- 49 See Von Plato: "People often did not even talk about it with their own family." Alexander von Plato, "Denunziation im Systemwechsel: Verhaftete, Deportierte und Lagerhäftlinge in der SBZ um 1945," *Historical Social Research* 26 no. 2/3 (2001): 179-203, here: 201.
- 50 Traugott Schmitt, "Lebensbild des Georg Schmunck, der sieben Jahre des Straflager Bautzen als 'das gelbe Elend' überlebte," (Rudolstadt n.d.), 33.
- 51 Von Plato, "Denunziation im Systemwechsel: Verhaftete, Deportierte und Lagerhäftlinge in der SBZ um 1945," here: 202.
- 52 Ibid., 203.
- 53 Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa* 62 no. 1 (1992): 3-38, here: 3.
- 54 Fink, *Living Silence*, 110.
- 55 Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 146.
- 56 Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Introduction: States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State," in *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2001), 1-39, here: 33.
- 57 Also see Slavoj Žižek: "The position, not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person, is the very form of ideology, of its practical efficiency." Slavoj Žižek, "Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 1 no. 2 (1996): 77-86.

Chapter 7

- 1 Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1991), 287.
- 2 Patricia Spyer, "Introduction," in *Border Fetishisms. Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York / London: Routledge, 1998): 1-13, here: resp. 5 and 9.
- 3 Gerald Diesener and Rainer Gries, "'Chic zum Geburtstag unserer Republik'. Zwei Projekte zur Produkt- und Politikpropaganda im Deutsch-Deutschen Vergleich," *Geschichtswerkstatt* 25 (1992): 56-69.
- 4 Two-thirds of the population of East Germany had West German relatives. John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins. Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 144. According to estimates, every year roughly DM 2.2 million (either in the form of money or in kind) poured in from the FRG to GDR inhabitants. For the West German givers, the costs were tax-deductible, just like the aid given to developing countries.
- 5 Maaz, *Psychogram van Oost Duitsland*, 37.
- 6 *Intershops* were set up in 1962. Unfortunately, I was not able to trace how the East German state presented this cavity in the official ideology. Alongside *Intershops*, where only western goods could be purchased with West German money, in the early 1960s there were also so-called *Exquisitläden* where luxury items produced in the GDR were sold at exorbitant (*Ostmark*) prices.
- 7 Hanns Werner Schwarze, *Die DDR ist keine Zone mehr* (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1969).
- 8 Until the FRG recognised the GDR as a separate German state, the trade between the two countries was often referred to as trade between different German zones.
- 9 The official exchange-rate was 1 *Ostmark* for 1 *Deutschmark*. On the black market, one usually obtained about 7 times as much.

- 10 I will come back to the theoretical implications of this issue in my concluding chapter.
- 11 Hermann Glaser, "Einführung. Kultureller Möglichkeitssinn: Politische Bildung und deutsch-deutscher Diskurs," in *Was bleibt – was wird. Der kulturelle Umbruch in den neuen Bundesländern*, ed. Hermann Glaser (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1994), 15-27, here: 22.
- 12 A similar argument to mine on objects that evoke nostalgia is put forward by Stewart (1984): miniatures help to remind us of the by-gone days of handcrafts. Such objects act as intermediaries between the anonymity of mass and the desire for "authenticity." See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). Also see Jean-Pierre Warnier and Céline Rosselin, *Authentifier la Marchandise: Anthropologie Critique de la Quête d'Authenticité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).
- 13 Annette Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären* (Giessen: Psycho-Sozial Verlag, 1995), 60.
- 14 Thomas Rosenlöcher, "Der Untergang der Banane," in *Begrenzt glücklich: Kindheit in der DDR*, ed. Wilhelm Solms (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1992), 7-12, here: resp. 10, 8, and 9.
- 15 *Ibid.*, resp. 9 and 11.
- 16 As leader of the "Bereich Kommerzielle Koordinierung" [commercial coordination section] and state secretary of foreign affairs (from 1975), Alexander Schalck Golodkowski was the GDR's great *Devisen-Beschaffer* [hard currency provider]. Wolfgang Kenntemich, Manfred Durniok and Thomas Karlauf, *Das war die DDR: Eine Geschichte des anderen Deutschland* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1993), 244. Under his leadership, all East German wares of international value – art, costly handwork, but also East German political prisoners – were sold to the west for hard currency.
- 17 Spyer, "Introduction," 9.
- 18 During my stay in Rudolstadt, I heard various people uttering these and the following statements.
- 19 See Simon, who also uses the comparison with twins. Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären*, 11. And Von Plato: "Despite the efforts of the GDR state, West Germany's values and norms, its currency and standard of living, became the yardstick against which all else was measured." Alexander von Plato, "An Unfamiliar Germany. Some Remarks on the Past and Present Relationship Between East and West Germans," *Oral History* 21 no. 1 (1993): 35-43, here: 41.
- 20 Johannes Piskorz, "Die DDR als Schatten. Vom Mythos der deutsch-deutschen Symmetrie," in *Mythen der Deutschen. Deutsche Befindlichkeiten zwischen Geschichten und Geschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Frindte and Harald Pätzold (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1992), 187-92, here: 190.
- 21 Schwarze, *Die DDR ist keine Zone mehr*, resp. 15 and 99-100.
- 22 For the relationship between material and economic progress on the one side and feelings of Germanness on the other, see Mühlberg, who shows that for East Germans, the DM was the main symbol of a better life, Dietrich Mühlberg, "Kulturelle Ursachen für das Scheitern des Staatssozialismus. Verordnete Kultur und Mangel an Akzeptanz," in *Was bleibt – was wird: Der kulturelle Umbruch in den neuen Bundesländern*, ed. Hermann Glaser (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1994), 37-45. Gallenmüller & Wakenhut explain that from a list of the twenty most significant symbols of identification in the FRG, seven referred to material and economic terms (Wirtschaftskraft, DM, Produkte 'Made in Germany', Wohlstand, Westlicher Lebensstil, Freie Marktwirtschaft and High-Tech-Industrie). Jutta Gallenmüller and Roland Wakenhut, "'Nationale Identität'. Konzeptualisierung und Entwicklung eines Fragebogens zur Erfassung des Bewußtseins nationaler Zugehörigkeit," in *Mythen der Deutschen: Deutsche Befindlichkeiten zwischen Geschichten und Geschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Frindte and

- Harald Pätzolt (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1994), 173-86, here: 179-80. See also Kleßmann & Wagner, for a report dated 1961 in which an East German supposes that the majority of the East German population would rather live on the other side because it is materially better there, but that West Germans must watch they do not start acting like rich uncles. Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gesplittene Land: Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990: Texte und Dokumente* (München: Beck, 1993), 35. Also see Schwarze, who reports the Weimar Republic was called the “Firma statt Staat,” while the FRG was known as the “Konsumgesellschaft statt Staat” [resp. company instead of state, and consumer society instead of state], Schwarze, *Die DDR ist keine Zone mehr*, 99.
- 23 As explained in the first chapter of this book, I do not do much justice to historical fluctuations. That certainly applies here, as after a difficult initial phase and until half way through the 1970s, there was a certain sense of optimism in the GDR, largely thanks to the improved material standard of living. By the mid-1970s, dissatisfaction with material consumption had spread throughout the country, as shown in a relatively reliable representative survey (not meant for publication) carried out by the *Institut für Meinungsforschung* (controlled by the SED) in Leipzig. In 1975 only 37.1% of the interviewees thought shopping facilities in the GDR were good. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 139.
- 24 Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins*, 287.
- 25 Heinrich Böll, *Hierzulande* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1963), 12.
- 26 Wielenga notes that the Nazi past “had stigmatised (whether they wanted it or not) Germans’ identity,” Friso Wielenga, *Schaduwun van de Duitse geschiedenis. De omgang met het nazi- en DDR-verleden in de Bondsrepubliek Duitsland* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1993), 70.
- 27 Schwarze, *Die DDR ist keine Zone mehr*, 13.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Resp. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 32. Also see Wilk, who states that “if colonial time is at the heart of colonial cosmology, style and fashion are its outward concrete symbols.” Richard Wilk, “Consumer Goods as Dialogue About Development,” *Culture and History* 7 (1990): 79-101, here: 85, [italics in orig.]. Ellen Lissek-Schütz, “Es gab durchaus ein richtiges Leben im Falschen. Über den Diskurs mit ostdeutschen Kulturverwaltungen,” in *Was bleibt – was wird. Der kulturelle Umbruch in den neuen Bundesländern*, ed. Hermann Glaser (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1994), 109-17, here: 113. Although Hungarians were not able to identify with another country to the same extent as East Germans could, they also tended to regard the socialist period in their country as a disturbance, a hindrance to what otherwise would have been their normal historical development – read: as it was originally meant to take place. Equally, the west was seen as the place where “normal” life was possible. Krisztina Fehérvári, “Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 no. 2 (2009): 426-59, here: 429. The socialist period was regarded by many as an aberration from what was seen as the normal course. Krisztina Fehérvári, “American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a ‘Normal’ Life in Postsocialist Hungary,” *Ethnos* 67 no. 3 (2002): 369-400, here: 371. Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins*, 201.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 31 Diesener and Gries, “‘Chic zum Geburtstag unserer Republik’ Zwei Projekte zur Produkt- und Politikpropaganda im Deutsch-Deutschen Vergleich,” 60.
- 32 Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation*, 287.
- 33 Spyer, “Introduction,” 9.

- 34 Or, as in the brochure advertising nostalgic-looking roof tiles: “Wo ich den Alltag vergesse, bin ich zu Hause” [where I forget daily life, I feel at home]. Another brochure featured living room furniture with the slogan: “Den Alltag vergessen – die Freizeit genießen” [forgetting daily life – enjoying leisure].
- 35 Spyer, “Introduction,” 9.
- 36 See Catherine Pence, who in an article aptly entitled “The Myth of the Suspended Present: Prosperity’s Painful Shadow,” sketches the East German state’s promise of future salvation, which would be realised thanks to improved material consumption conditions and by covering up a painful past. Catherine Pence, “The Myth of a Suspended Present: Prosperity’s Painful Shadow in 1950s East Germany,” in *Pain and Prosperity. Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History*, ed. Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 137-60.
- 37 Lutz Niethammer, “Glasnost privat 1987,” in *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, ed. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 9-76, here: 39.
- 38 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 7.

Chapter 8

- 1 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (New York: Zone Books, 1988 [1967]), 130 [italics in orig.].
- 2 Also see Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989* (Chapel Hill / London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1.
- 3 Christian Weber, *Alltag einer friedlichen Revolution. Notizen aus der DDR* (Stuttgart: Quell, 1990), 23-4.
- 4 During my stay in Rudolstadt, I asked 465 secondary school pupils from various schools to write an essay on a number of topics chosen by me, including the *Wende*.
- 5 John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins. Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 321.
- 6 Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), 170.
- 7 Chris Hann, “Introduction,” in *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Local Practice*, ed. Chris Hann (London: Routledge, ASA Monographs no. 31, 1993), 1-30, here: 7.
- 8 Christa Wolf, *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou. Texte 1990-1994* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994), 45.
- 9 See Annette Simon, who also showed that during the *Wende*, East Germans felt for the very first time that “Realität und Wunschproduktion werden eins” [reality and wishes merged]. Annette Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären* (Giessen: Psycho-Sozial Verlag, 1995), 15.
- 10 Hans A. Baer, “Conversations with two Former Socialist Unity Party Members: Views of Life in East Germany,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 20 (1995): 387-412.
- 11 Robert Darnton, *Berlijns Dagboek 1989-1990* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1990), 189.
- 12 *Thüringer Kurier*, 26/02/1990: 11.
- 13 Darnton, *Berlijns Dagboek 1989-1990*, 205.
- 14 Newspaper cutting with no reference, from a diary made available to me of the period around the *Wende*.
- 15 *Ost Thüringer Nachrichten*, 17/03/1990.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 20/03/1990.

- 17 *Thüringer Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28/06/1990.
- 18 Wolf, *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou*, 50.
- 19 It is interesting that the issue concerning the lack of trust was seen by many as typical of the post-socialist era (thus not of the GDR and the Stasi). Although we can interpret this as typical of the total denial regarding the topic Stasi, I prefer to think that the existence of the secret service was such an obvious part of daily life that the associated distrust had become a completely internalized and scarcely conscious part of the East German psyche and hardly noticed, as “implicit social knowledge,” Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man. A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 366.
- 20 Unlike most conversations, I did record this one.
- 21 Potato dumplings are a typical Thuringian dish.
- 22 The *Treuhandanstalt* was set up shortly after the *Wende* by the German government in order to privatize and sell former East German state-owned companies.
- 23 Nicholas Eberstadt, “Demographic Shocks in Eastern Germany 1989-99,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 46 no. 3 (1994): 519-33, resp. 526 and 520-1.
- 24 Statistics on Rudolstadt in the period before 1989 taken from *Statistische Jahrbücher der DDR 1988 bis 1990*, and after the *Wende* taken from *Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik*.
- 25 See the article on suicide attempts in Berlin in *Profil* (no. 29, 13/07/1992: 51). Also see Alexijevitsj on post-*Wende* suicides in the former Soviet Union, Svetlana Alexijevitsj, *In de ban van de dood* (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 1995).
- 26 Literally meaning: would like to. Add: be rich. *Möchtegerns* are the New Rich or those who would like to be seen as such.
- 27 For more about *Ostalgie*, see Jonathan Bach, “‘The Taste Remains:’ Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany,” *Public Culture* 14 no. 3 (2002): 545-56. Daphne Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,” *Ethnos* 64 no. 2 (1999): 192-211. Paul Betts, “The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture,” *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 731-65. Roger F. Cook, “Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism,” *Seminar* 43 no. 2 (2007): 206-20. Rainer Gries, “‘Hurrah, I’m Still Alive!’ East German Products Demonstrating East German Identities,” in *Over the Wall / After the Fall. Post-Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*, ed. Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Elena Gapova (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 181-200. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010).
- 28 *Der Spiegel*, 13/1990: 140 onwards.
- 29 Throughout Germany much criticism was voiced on the way privatisation of the GDR was handled. American historian Charles Maier remarked: “the Treuhand was becoming the symbol for a capitalist takeover that was at once rapacious and inefficient,” Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 295.
- 30 Some claimed that actual unemployment was even around 50%, see e.g. an article in the West German journal *Profil* (no. 29, 13/07/1992: 50 onwards). And Maier stated that “over one million out of four million workers were without jobs and another million and a half on subsidized...make-work assignments,” Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*, 298.
- 31 *De Telegraaf*, 10/12/1994.
- 32 *Ibid.*

- 33 The term pain here is not just used figuratively. See McDonald & Leary, who showed that social exclusion is often not only linked to mental but also physical pain, Geoff McDonald and Mark R. Leary, "Why Does Social Exclusion Hurt? The Relationship Between Social and Physical Pain," *Psychological Bulletin* 131 no. 2 (2005): 202-23.
- 34 Monika Maron, "Peinlich, blamabel, lacherlich: Monika Maron über das neue Opfergefühl ihrer ostdeutschen Mitmenschen," *Spiegel* 35 (1992): 136-42, here: 138.
- 35 This supplement was meant to cover the additional costs of residing abroad, but many saw it as a kind of compensation. This is why East Germans thought that only due to the extra earnings (and career opportunities) were West Germans prepared to work in the East German jungle.
- 36 This measure did not refer to everything collectivized between May 1945 and October 1949 or taken away by the Russians, but only to the real estate belonging to people who had decided to leave the GDR.
- 37 See a relevant article in *Stern* 15/04/1992: 46.
- 38 *Neues Deutschland*, 11/02/1994. For an East German perspective on the restitution of houses in the former GDR, also see Daniela Dahn, *Wir bleiben hier oder Wem gehört der Osten. Vom Kampf um Häuser und Wohnungen in den neuen Bundesländern* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1994).
- 39 Leo Ensel, "Warum wir uns nicht leiden mögen," *Psychologie Heute* 21 no. 11 (1994): 42-5, here: 42.
- 40 *Neues Deutschland*, 20/05/1994.
- 41 *Profil*, 13/07/1992: 50.
- 42 Much has been written about *Ostalgie* in the media; an especially insightful article appeared in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 2004).
- 43 Simon, *Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären*, resp. 63, 47-8, and 48.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 45 Anthropologists Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch showed that the introduction of money often seems (or is said) to have negative consequences which, on further investigation, appear to pertain to other phenomena that already existed before, but that, with the introduction of money, were objectivized and could thus be categorized under one common denominator, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, "Introduction: Money and the Morality of Exchange," in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, ed. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-33.
- 46 Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London / New York: Routledge, 1999), 73-4.

Conclusion

- 1 Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London / New York: Routledge, 1999). Slavoj Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," *New Left Review* 183 (1990): 50-63. Julia Hell, "History as Trauma, or, Turning to the Past Once Again: Germany 1949/1989," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96 no. 4 (1997): 911-48; Mattijs van de Port, "Registers of Incontestability. The Quest for Authenticity in Academia and Beyond," *Etnofoor* XVII no. 1/2 (2004): 7-22; idem, "Circling around the *Really Real*: Spirit Possession Ceremonies and the Search for Authenticity in Bahian Candomblé," *Ethos* 33 no. 2 (2005): 149-79; Terry Eagleton, *Trouble With Strangers. A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2009).
- 2 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 13.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 18.

- 5 Ibid., resp. 36 [italics in orig.], 29, and 35.
- 6 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York / London: Routledge, 1993), xv.
- 7 Literally: man is a wolf to his fellow man.
- 8 David Crew, "Consuming Germany in the Cold War: Consumption and National Identity in East and West Germany, 1949-1989. An Introduction," in *Consuming Germany in the Cold War*, ed. David F. Crew (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 1-20, here: 14.
- 9 Lutz Niethammer, "Glasnost privat 1987," in *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, ed. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 9-76, here: 39.
- 10 See John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 288.
- 11 Mattijs van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars, and Other Instances of the Wild* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 153.
- 12 Freely taken from Žižek, who states that the birth of nationalism which engulfed large areas of Eastern Europe in the 1990s, corresponded to "a desire for capitalism-cum-Gemeinschaft," Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," 61.
- 13 Only the most loyal East Germans were chosen to visit capitalist countries if that was required for business reasons. The financial bonus they received for such trips was paid in West German currency. BstU, KD Rudolstadt (Gera), 003017: "Berichterstattung zur Dienstreise Frankreich," 7/12.-16/12/86, 4.
- 14 Alon Confino, "Fantasies about the Jews: Cultural Reflections on the Holocaust," *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 296-322, here: resp. 307 and 310.
- 15 Resp. Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 62, and Mattijs van de Port, "Dat wat rest...over sacralisering en de ongerijmdheden van het bestaan" (Free University, Amsterdam): 6
- 16 Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 29.
- 17 See Konrad Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), the contributions in Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen, (eds.), *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), and in Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow, (eds.), *Die DDR als Geschichte. Fragen – Hypothesen – Perspektiven* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994).
- 18 Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 47.
- 19 Slavoj Žižek, "Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 1 (1996): 77-86, here: 83.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 62-3.
- 22 Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa* 62 no. 1 (1992): 3-38, here: 4.
- 23 Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 107.
- 24 Also see Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (Bangkok / London / New York: White Lotus & Zed Books, 2001), 110.
- 25 Resp. Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," 10, and Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 147.
- 26 Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, resp. 146, 147 and 153.
- 27 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 152.

- 28 Yannis Stavrakakis, "Objects of Consumption, Causes of Desire: Consumerism and Advertising in Societies of Commanded Enjoyment," *Gramma* 14 (2006), resp. 102 and 92.
- 29 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 101.
- 30 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1985), here: 338 [italics in orig.].
- 31 *Ibid.*, 339.
- 32 Karl Marx, *Het Kapitaal. Een kritische beschouwing over de economie. Deel 1: Het productieproces van het kapitaal* (Bussum: De Haan, 1974 [1867]), 1.
- 33 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 74.
- 34 Stavrakakis, "Objects of Consumption, Causes of Desire," 87.
- 35 Patricia Spyer, "Introduction," in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York / London: Routledge, 1998), 1-13, here: 4.
- 36 But see Pasi Falk, *The Consuming Body* (London: Sage, 1992), Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), and Patricia Spyer, "The Body, Materiality, and the Senses," in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006), 125-131.
- 37 Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Philips, "Introduction," in *Sensible Objects. Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Philips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 1-31, here: 11.
- 38 Also see Krisztina Fehérváry, "American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Postsocialist Hungary," *Ethnos* 67 (2002): 369-400, for an account of how the inhabitants of Hungary saw socialism as an aberration from their supposedly normal development.
- 39 Marcel Proust, *Combray* (Amsterdam: Bezige Bij, 1970), 52-4.
- 40 On the importance of the sensorial aspect in social science studies of food, see Milena Veenis, *Kartoffeln, Kuchen und Asado: Over de verborgen keuken van Duitsers in Argentinië* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995), 5-6.
- 41 Jean-Pierre Warnier, "A Praxeological Approach to Subjectivation in a Material World," *Journal of Material Culture* 6 (2001): 5-25, here: 10.
- 42 See also Taussig on this topic. Referring to Proust, he states that "[t]he past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us)," Michael Taussig, "The Sun Gives Without Receiving: An Old Story," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995): 368-98, here: 369.
- 43 Gosewijn van Beek, "On Materiality," *Etnofoor* IX (1996): 22.
- 44 Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell, "Introduction," in *The Shopping Experience*, ed. Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (London: Sage, 1996), 1-15, here: 4.
- 45 Pasi Falk, *The Consuming Body* (London: Sage, 1992), 144.
- 46 Daniel Miller, *Material Consumption and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
- 47 Daniel Miller, *Modernity. An Ethnographic Approach. Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 320 [italics mv].
- 48 Van Beek, "On Materiality," 22.
- 49 And were consequently disappointed, if only because by comparing their identity with an object, they themselves create the conditions whereby their so called identity, "can be alienated in the most concrete sense: by stealing, destroying, selling etc.," Van Beek, "On Materiality," 22.
- 50 Spyer, "Introduction," 9.
- 51 Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 64.
- 52 Žižek, "Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach," 83.

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