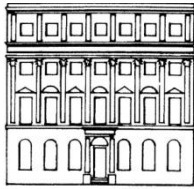


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*Normality, Utopia, Memory, and Beyond: Reassembling East  
German Society*

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### ***NORMALITY, UTOPIA, MEMORY, AND BEYOND: REASSEMBLING EAST GERMAN SOCIETY***

Thomas Lindenberger

MARY FULBROOK (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–1979: The 'Normalisation of Rule'?* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 344 pp. ISBN 978 1 84545 435 7. £58.00 \$95.00

ELI RUBIN, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), xviii + 286 pp. ISBN 978 0 8078 3238 7. \$49.95

MARTIN SABROW (ed.), *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009), 619 pp. ISBN 978 3 406 59045 0. €29.90

JAN PALMOWSKI, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945–90*, *New Studies in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 360 pp. ISBN 978 0 521 11177 5. £60.00

Historical studies on the GDR, mushrooming so suddenly because of the unexpected access to communist files in the 1990s, were long marked by a consistent duality. On the one hand, political history delivered abundant information about the party and the state, planned economy and omnipresent bureaucracy, physical terror and ideological indoctrination, and the resistance to all or parts of this by a small minority of intellectuals, artists, Christians, and other non-conformists. On the other, a vast range of social and cultural historiography tended to privilege groups and interactions more remote from official politics, focusing on everyday life under communist rule. This dichotomy was also mirrored in discourses and representations in the wider sphere of public memory culture. In consequence, elitist condemnatory narratives of the GDR as a dictatorship and popular, *ostalgic* imageries of the GDR as a lost living world still co-exist, side by side, often without much connection, but sometimes clashing as if they were irreconcilable. Only recently, deliberate

## Review Article

attempts have been made to overcome this image of a disjointed reality consisting of 'hard' political facts and 'soft' socio-cultural experience through empirical research and historical interpretation. What is at stake in such endeavours is nothing less than historiography's competence and capacity to 'reassemble the social' of a defunct polity in which, according to sociologist Sigrid Meuschel's famous dictum, society had ceased to exist at all.<sup>1</sup> Each of the works discussed in this Review Article confront this *problematique* in their own peculiar way.

### *'Normalisation of Rule': The 'Fulbrook School' of Understanding the GDR*

There can be little doubt about the stabilizing purpose and impact of the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 for the East German communist dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, difficult to determine the nature of the relative inner peacefulness marking the GDR from then to its sudden implosion in 1989. Was it the outcome of a regime of terror (including shooting at the border) and tight surveillance? Or of an effective regime performance in terms of providing modest material wealth and social security in exchange for political acquiescence? Or of a successful claim to legitimacy based on basic values such as anti-fascism, peace, egalitarianism, and decent work?

Let us suppose that each of these factors might have been relevant to some extent. Yet the challenge of understanding the intricate logic of their articulation remains. After all, we are dealing with a case of seemingly successful and lasting pacification of a society which, until 1961, had proved to be difficult to hold in check. For a number of years, Mary Fulbrook has been promoting the idea of conceiving of this change as a process of 'normalisation of rule' which took place in the middle period of the GDR's history, the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> She has

<sup>1</sup> Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR 1945–1989* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> See now Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Fulbrook, 'Introduction: The People's Paradox', in ead., *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, 2005); ead. 'Putting the People Back In: The Contentious State of GDR History' (Review Article), *German History*, 24/4 (2006), 608–20.

supervised a whole series of dissertation projects devoted to specific aspects of this process. Now an edited volume presents results from this endeavour along with contributions by a number of very distinguished scholars of the social and everyday life history of the GDR, which aptly show the merits, but also the limits, of this line of interpretation.

In her introductory chapter, Fulbrook places her concept of the 'normalisation' of East Germany after 1961 between two usages of the term already established in recent scholarship on European contemporary history and in memory and political discourses more generally. The first refers to a return to 'normality' as perceived and lived in Western societies, in particular, West Germany during the 1950s. Inner pacification and high growth rates ensured a general reorientation of large segments of the population towards the purportedly apolitical private sphere. This was complemented by an obstinate silencing of the disquieting aspects of the 'abnormal' war and the immediate post-war years. In the second usage, 'normalisation' was a recurrent term in some of the Eastern bloc countries, although it had very different implications. It was used both by power-holders and their dissident critics to characterize the years following the violent restoration of party rule, that is, after the thwarted uprising in Hungary 1956 and the Soviet invasion directed against the highly popular communist reform movement in Czechoslovakia in 1968. In this context 'normalisation' stood for legitimizing intentions on behalf of the dictators, but was perceived as a cynical propaganda tool by the societies undergoing it, since it implied curtailed citizens' and human rights, severe repression of dissidence, and, in the long run, material and spiritual stagnation.

Fulbrook's concept of a 'normalisation of rule' in the GDR claims a place between these two paradigmatic cases as a unique third type. It proceeds from the observation that even under an imposed state ideology monopolizing the official meaning of 'normality' for the benefit of the party state's dictatorship, post-crisis expectations of an expected return to how things should and could actually be were widespread among the people. In the case of the post-1961 GDR, Fulbrook identifies the following components of 'normalisation': 'stabilisation', 'routinisation of institutional structures and regular patterns of behaviour', the increasing 'predictability' of individual lives, and, along with these, a growing awareness and taking into account

## Review Article

of the rules of the regime, which might eventually result in their complete internalization by the ruled (p. 15).

As Fulbrook puts it in her introduction, this proposition deserves critical consideration in several regards. She suggests that 'normalisation' is meant to serve as an 'ideal type' for comparisons with other cases. Yet, technically speaking, its components lack the definitions required for the application of an ideal type analysis. This consists in measuring the relative deviation of the empirical cases from the model expectation. If 'stabilisation', 'routinisation', 'predictability', and 'learning to play by the rules' are proposed as key components of an ideal type, their measurability must be established in advance. What concrete properties of which events and actors are to serve as indicators of 'stability' and 'routine'? Should we look out for certain statistical regularities and patterns? What concrete modes of behaviour have to be taken into account in order to make a statement about specific actors' notions of the 'predictability' of their life circumstances? Does it matter whether notions of the 'normal', 'normality', or 'normalisation' played any part in the thinking of the actors themselves, whether at the time (to be derived from archival sources) or today (as could be ascertained from interviews)? How can we determine whether citizens of a communist state have internalized the 'rules'? Does 'internalization' mean that they are not even aware that they are playing by these rules?

Fulbrook does not develop such concrete criteria for the pertinence of her 'ideal type'. One of the main arguments she uses to substantiate her model at a general level is the outstanding importance of the 'substantial minority' among the GDR population consisting of small functionaries who 'appeared . . . to have developed somewhat more leeway and room for a limited degree of partially autonomous action within the local sphere' (pp. 24–5) during the 1970s than their counterparts in Poland and Czechoslovakia. 'Appeared to have . . . somewhat more' – in view of the current state of research I consider this speculative pre-assumption. Our knowledge of these communist regimes has not yet reached the required density and coherence to allow us to come up with such conclusions, in particular in the case of Czechoslovakia, which intuitively lends itself best for a comparison. Therefore Fulbrook's claim that 'arguably normalisation in the GDR was rather more successful than in the neighbouring Eastern European states' (p. 26) is also by and large impressionistic. Even in

the application of her own criteria ('stabilisation', 'routinisation', and so on), it could be asked why, logically speaking, the 'somewhat more leeway' enjoyed by small functionaries rendered 'normalisation' per se 'rather successful'. And how did this relate to the majority of non-functionaries? Does the 'normality' experienced by the loyal service class stand for the whole of society?

On the other hand, Fulbrook concedes not only that a 'normalisation' on the West German model did *not* occur in the GDR, but that the mere fact of being the smaller state within a divided country undermined the belief of its own citizens in claims to such 'normality' (p. 26). 'Normalisation of rule' thus remains a fuzzy object of knowledge. It lacks the level of abstract model construction and the clear definitions of its individual components and their interdependency, including criteria for the explanatory power of differences between the model and empirical findings, which it requires if it is to serve as an ideal type *sensu stricto*. Since Fulbrook mobilizes social science approaches such as 'ideal type' and cross-national comparison it is all the more surprising that her discussion of 'normalisation' circumvents any of the standard sociological approaches to this topic. There is not a single mention of 'classical' approaches in the tradition, for instance, of Erving Goffman or Michel Foucault. Their pioneering analyses of the historical interdependency of behaviours, truth production, and practices of disciplination in a set of concrete institutions of normalization (the prison, the asylum, the hospital, and so on) have nowadays become standard fare in social and cultural theory.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, we are given the opportunity to follow Fulbrook's concerns more closely by looking at the outcome of her own practical application of the concept in the book's concluding chapter, a research report entitled "'Normalisation" in the GDR in Retrospect: East German Perspectives on their Own Lives' (*sic*). In 2005 Fulbrook distributed some 350 questionnaires combining quantitative and qualitative items to East Germans in East Berlin and East Brandenburg in order to find out how they (and obviously not their 'perspectives') perceived their lives under state socialism. The reader is given

<sup>4</sup> See Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York, 1971); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977); and, most recently, Jürgen Link, *Normalization* (Minneapolis, 2004).

## Review Article

no precise description of the questions submitted; nor is the regional bias of the survey discussed (under communist rule, Berlin and its vicinity were always better off in material terms and less hostile to the regime than the southern districts of the GDR). Fulbrook also fails to provide any data about the class, educational, and occupational status of her respondents during socialism and thereafter. To make a long story short, I will pick out one item: 'The extent to which respondents agreed with the statement that it was possible to lead a "perfectly normal life in the GDR"', broken down into six age cohorts born between 1917 and 1979 (p. 298). My point is not that the result, namely, that older generations are a bit more polarized on the issue than the younger ones, while in both there is a safe absolute majority responding 'partly agree' and 'strongly agree', is not worth discussing. It is that the suggestive method by which the data was obtained, that is, by putting the term 'normal' into the informants' mouths, is highly questionable. During the first decade after unification, the claim to have led a 'ganz normales Leben' (I assume that this is what they were asked—unfortunately the German version is not given) became popular among East Germans as a defensive discourse when they had to face the public devaluation of their economic, social, and cultural capital. This also becomes clear in the way in which Fulbrook takes the responses to her questions about the impact of Stasi intrusion into the respondents' lives at face value. After fifteen years of demonization by the media of all East Germans as having been nothing but puppets of the secret service, it is almost a matter of simple self-esteem that nowadays they reject the notion that the Stasi had been omnipresent in their lives, and claim to have been something like normal people.

Fulbrook makes no systematic effort to deconstruct the textual material she has amassed. Thus its different discursive layers and their relation to different temporal frames of actually lived experience cannot become visible. Probably the narrations she collected in these interviews were not exhaustive enough for such a hermeneutic approach. This, of course, is one of the typical weaknesses of hybrid interview methods, which neither meet the requirements of strict quantitative methodology with the concomitant checks on reliability and validity of the collected data nor allow for the extensiveness of biographical-narrative interviews and their in-depth analysis as a historical source. After more than twenty years of highly sophisticat-

ed interview research in the field of GDR history (Wierling, Niethammer, von Plato, Alheit, to name only a few), glossing over basic standards of methodology is perplexing.

On the whole, the results of this survey are therefore not very surprising. East Germans are well-known for cherishing the greater security of life under socialism while acknowledging that a return to the GDR is not desirable. In her final discussion of this result, Fulbrook posits that the ‘“people’s own voices” perhaps [?] deserve more respect in a democracy than to deny their validity as essentially misguided misperceptions, or (ironically) the effect of suffering from a form of “false consciousness”’ (p. 319). This is certainly an honourable motive when embarking on field research of this sort, but it cannot dispense historians from the task of treating the traces left behind by these voices in methodologically adequate ways. These ‘people’, Fulbrook continues, ‘deserve, at least, to be given a hearing as an authentic expression of subjective experience, even if the sophisticated observer will pick up on certain patterns of discourse in a given historical context’ (p. 319). Since no source ever speaks for and by itself, ‘authenticity’ in historiographical texts has to be constructed by careful individual and collective contextualization. ‘Picking up on certain patterns’ may, in the long run, be a more respectful and insightful way of dealing with the testimonies than sacrificing methodological rigour for the sake of a populist posture.

Yet this critique of Fulbrook’s concept of normalization and her application of it should not be misunderstood as a rejection of the subject, or of the substantial empirical contribution that she and her students have made in recent years to a more nuanced understanding of GDR history. In particular, I do not share the recurring objection that to ascribe anything like ‘normality’ to the GDR per se contributes to belittling its dictatorial nature. On the contrary, I fully sympathize with the attempt to take at face value some obvious changes in the enclosed GDR, its growing tranquillity, its proverbial predictability which would later earn it the dubious honorary title of the ‘most boring country in the world’, its cradle-to-grave welfare security promises and their partial fulfilment.

Some of the eleven remaining chapters by other authors contribute valuable insights into this process. They are divided into two sections. The chapters in the first part, entitled ‘Normalisation as Stabilisation and Routinisation? Systemic Parameters and the Role of



## Review Article

Functionaries', form a coherent though far from homogenous exploration of the basic assumption of the normalization-of-rule model. The second section, however, is more diffuse, offering very diverse reflections of principle rather than actually treating what is suggested by the title, namely 'Normalisation as Internalisation? Conformity, "Normality", and "Playing the Rules"'. For reasons of space, I will limit myself to discussing only a selection in order to exemplify some of their strengths and weaknesses.

Jeannette Madarász's essay, 'Economic Politics and Company Culture: The Problem of "Routinisation"' is among the smaller group of contributions which explicitly pick up the ideal type 'normalisation of rule' in order to demonstrate its fruitfulness. She discusses the paradox of stability and inner erosion at the core site of societal integration of the GDR, the workplace in large, state-owned enterprises. 'Normalisation' in this context refers to the development of patterns for negotiating interests between the workforce and the party state in a routinized, non-confrontational manner. She follows these changes through the period of reform attempts in the planned economy and their failure in the 1960s up to the advent of Erich Honecker's welfare state policy prioritizing the fulfilment of the consumer interests of workers. For anyone familiar with the GDR's economic and enterprise history most of this is not new, yet Madarász convincingly brings out one particular aspect, namely, the barely conceivable tension between increasingly routinized (and thereby also internalized) practices of compromise between upper and lower levels of the economic hierarchy and the concomitant experience of stagnation from the mid 1970s on, resulting in frustration, lethargy, resignation, and eventually widespread individualization. In her conclusion (p. 75) Madarász correctly points to the remarkable degree of enthusiasm for mobilizing policies such as the brigade movement during the 1960s, and the widespread optimism of the early 1970s as prompting this sense of resignation with its well-known long-term consequences. However, it remains unclear how precisely this finding relates to 'normalisation of rule'. Put to the test of reality it quickly dissolves into a seemingly constitutional contradiction between expectations and their ongoing frustrations, which we might call a 'normal' feature of life in general and of life under communist rule in particular. A discussion of whether this diachronic logic of routinization, rising expectations, and permanent frustration proves or dis-

proves the assumptions on which Fulbrook's model is based would perhaps have contributed to its better understanding.

Esther von Richthofen's chapter, 'Communication and Compromise: The Prerequisites for Cultural Participation', dealing with the activities of grass roots functionaries in cultural mass organizations also claims to put Fulbrook's ideal type into practice. In the end it suffers from a lack of specificity when it comes to showing how these actors negotiated cultural needs with party representatives (apart from a somewhat superficial recapitulation of some of the recent approaches in German historiography on social and everyday life in the GDR). By contrast, two other contributions in Part I, George Last's 'Rural Functionaries and the Transmission of Agricultural Policy: The Case of *Bezirk* Erfurt from the 1960s to the 1970s', and Dan Wilton's 'The "Societalisation" of the State: Sport for the Masses and Popular Music in the GDR', take a different approach to fulfilling the editor's commission. In these cases, 'normalisation' features only in the introductory or concluding remarks and in a number of sub-headings and adds nothing decisive to otherwise informative treatments of their respective subjects.

Jan Palmowski, by contrast, while dealing with a topic very similar to von Richthofen's, offers a third variant. He discusses 'normality' and 'normalisation', but based on detailed case studies of grass roots functionaries taken from the study discussed more extensively at the end of this Review Article. His essay, 'Learning the Rules: Local Activists and the *Heimat*', presents biographies of two *Heimat* activists, showing how they learned to use the programmatic and material constraints imposed by the party as a source of negotiating power when it came to giving their respective *Heimat* activism a specific local meaning. The first example describes a young *Neulehrer* of 1945, full of idealism and belief in creating a new 'socialist *Heimat*', who, however, was not accepted by the traditional *Heimat* activists in the Saxon town of Altenburg. As a convinced Marxist-Leninist, he remained a respected outsider. The contrasting case of a Cultural League functionary in Mühlhausen, who was twenty-five years younger, reveals a much more pragmatic handling of party expectations in order to serve his clientele's interests and needs. From interview passages Palmowski quotes the three golden rules of a successful *Heimat* culture functionary: (1) never criticize the party, 'not in the slightest' (2) no contacts between the Cultural League and foreign

## Review Article

countries, and (3) no contact with the churches. In this case the cultural functionary was transformed into a buffer between the party state and the people, instead of bringing the party state's utopia to the people. Although in both cases 'learning the rules' can be shown to be an essential feature in the *Heimat* functionary's practical work, Palmowski ends with a critical assessment of 'normalisation' as a concept. First, *Heimat* activism, though seemingly motivated by a set of innocuous and 'normal' dispositions and preferences (preserving nature, cultivating hobbies), also contained the potential of its grass roots activists to confront what had gone wrong as a result of the socialist state's regulations and failures—ornithologists observing birds in nature as part of 'their' normality could not gloss over 'abnormal' environmental pollution. Secondly, none of Palmowski's forty-five interviewees ever used the term 'normality' or any of its derivatives. Finally, he contends that the concept of 'normalisation' obscures more than it enlightens because it presupposes an ideal-type phase within the development of East German *Heimat* activities. This, however, cannot be identified, as more or less 'harmless' and quietist hobbies were always pursued at the same time and often by the same people as activities which had an 'abnormal' critical potential, such as ecological, nature preservation, or city conservation issues.

The second section of the book contains contributions commenting on or complementing Fulbrook's concept of 'normalisation' in more associative and sometimes also contradictory ways. Alf Lüdtkke's essay engages with one of the basic implications of any notion of 'normality', namely, the assumption that specific individuals can be seen as examples of a 'normality' which might be expressed numerically, by graphs and tables, but also through certain pictorial conventions, constituting a 'diagonal' normativity informing a 'public transcript' of expected behaviours and characteristics of individuals. Against stereotypes such as that embodied by the public figure of the 'hero of work', Lüdtkke posits findings about individual 'practices of work' which discarded such expectations: the stubborn sense of 'workers' honor'; the disjunction between utter conformity to political expectations and subjective indifference in the case of a former female textile worker; the professional attitudes of a career-minded engineer untouched by 'internalised' SED (Socialist Unity Party) values; or the case of the Stasi informer who went into the business of denunciation not for the sake of internalized values but in order to

find satisfaction in writing and being listened to. Lüdtke insists on the disparate phenomenology of these randomly chosen examples of 'normal' people, all acting within the same frame of time and space, and ends with the obvious question as to what 'normalisation' can actually reveal about historical actors if it is intended to cover such disparateness.

Ina Merkel's essay, 'The GDR—A Normal Country in the Centre of Europe', begins from Fulbrook's definition, but takes it to a higher level of transnational comparison. According to Merkel, the significance of 'normality' and 'normalisation' can be only assessed within the context of post-war European modernization compared across the East-West divide on the one hand, and set against the recent notion of a second, reflexive modernity, on the other. Merkel thus transposes 'normality' into the semantic field of the historical actors themselves, as their 'relational and evaluating concept' in their 'mentalities of everyday life' (p. 199) when they compare their own predicaments with those in other societies, and in the case of East Germany *the other society*. This approach highlights *aspirations* for normality while allowing for the actors' sense of the actual lack of normality, or as Merkel nicely puts it: 'The "normal condition" of the GDR was that its citizens did perceive themselves as a "not quite normal" society, but as one which did absolutely aspire to "normal" conditions in their near and the more distant future' (p. 202). By stressing the ambiguity of 'normalities as temporarily accepted and simultaneously questioned conditions of social stability, which, for a certain period of time, can give individuals a necessary security of action' (p. 203), Merkel renders Fulbrook's static conception more dynamic but also more precarious with regard to objective criteria of validation.

Dorothee Wierling's account of normalization takes quite a different angle. Based on her pioneering studies of generational experiences in GDR society she juxtaposes the lack of 'normal times' experienced by the cohort born around 1929, and growing up with the experience of increasing normality for those born twenty years later. Both processes converge in the perception of the 1950s as the decade during which regaining 'normality' was the main aim of society as a whole. But while this laid the ground for a sense of biographical fulfilment among the first generation from the 'normal' 1960s on, the very same state of security and predictability began to be felt, by

## Review Article

those born around 1949, as 'depressing boredom of stabilisation, and the emptiness of routinisation' (p. 218) – the flipside of normalization undermining any easy sense of normality. Wierling substantiates this observation by quoting psychoanalytical insights into the counter-productiveness of constant and external control for processes of internalization of normative sets, because they prevent personal beliefs and needs from becoming independent from authority (cf. p. 219). Marc Allinson's 'test' of the normalization thesis by exploring the 'normality' of the year 1977 also underlines the explanatory limits of this concept, since it was, at best, normality under conditions of permanent economic precariousness that the SED was able to provide.

Merrilyn Thomas's contribution on Britain's gradual recognition of the GDR during the 1960s and 1970s ('Aggression in Felt Slippers: Normalisation and the Ideological Struggle in the Context of Détente and *Ostpolitik*') in the first part of the book and Angela Brock's essay on the education policy of the SED state ('Producing the "Socialist Personality"? Socialisation, Education, and the Emergence of New Patterns of Behaviour') deserve a separate discussion. They share an astonishingly uncritical affirmation of some of the SED's fundamental self-representations, namely, the 'normality' of the GDR as a nation-state and the 'good core' of its educational ideology, a 'socialist personality' which was badly applied but not repressive in itself. The testimonials of former *Jugendwerkhof* inmates could have made rewarding reading in this case.

Read as potential 'proofs of the pudding' for the 'normalisation' concept, these essays have so far yielded contradictory results. Some describe the phenomena which the concept claims to explain without making much or any use of the term (Last, Wilton); some take it to another level of reflection (Lüdtke, Merkel); yet others reconstruct its phenomenology (routine, internalization, stabilization) while rejecting or relativizing the notion of 'normality' (Palmowski, Wierling, Allinson); while some affirm the SED leadership's claims to the historical legitimacy of its dictatorial rule on the grounds of the 'normality' of the GDR as such (Thomas, Brock). Only Madarász and Richthofen try to apply the concept as an 'analytical tool', but with mixed results. Put to the test of historical interpretation, 'normalisation of rule' remains a rather inconclusive concept. In particular, its epistemological status is difficult to assess. Is it an analytical term introduced *ex post* by the observer? Or an actor's term within a

grounded-theory approach? Or an overarching concept of societal development reflecting the normative concerns of the researcher? None of this and a bit of all of it, is the impression gained from reading those contributions which claim to adopt Fulbrook's programme, while some manage to go beyond the limits of this concept.

It has to be underlined to the credit of the editor that she has not attempted to streamline these obvious differences. While it is customary to complain that edited volumes lack thematic or conceptual focus, this is a rare case of a productive encounter between different positions all referring to one contested, precarious, and, in the best sense of the term, risky conceptual proposition. Read with a critical eye, this volume can be recommended as an introduction to some of the dilemmas and paradoxes of understanding the East German experience with communist rule.

#### *Synthetic Socialism*

Eli Rubin also focuses on the middle and late years of the GDR and on the way in which everyday life was impregnated and structured by the regime's policy of consumption. He follows the intentions and impact of integrating plastics into the overall fabric of economic activities and consumption, from the production sector to the everyday life of average citizens. Rubin's study thus provides a convincing example of how to combine the history of an industrial sector with the history of state socialist ideology and transformation of everyday life. It deserves praise as a practical demonstration of how to overcome the traditional divide between political/economic history and societal/cultural history very common also in GDR studies.

Before I examine this claim in detail, however, Rubin's introduction cannot go uncommented. Against the integrative grain of his own work, it is couched in a less than ecumenical spirit. In order to define his ambitions Rubin could not resist the temptation to divide up the research landscape in a rather partisan and out-dated way. From the viewpoint of the year 2009, we can look back on twenty years of steadily diversifying research on the GDR and unifying Germany, making these topics among the most pluralistic and innovative in contemporary history worldwide. Does one really have to rehash the old stories about 'bad' 'neo-conservative triumphalism'?

## Review Article

(throwing Ernst Nolte, Dan Diner, and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk into one pot) and 'good' bottom-up historians, themselves compartmentalized into *Alltagshistoriker* (that is, Niethammer plus Lüdtkke), the 'Potsdam group' (an unwieldy construct) and, of course, the 'Fulbrookians', in order to allow one's own (undeniable) originality to shine in the most favourable light? I think we should instead inform readers about how and why we relate to the—in our modest opinion—good works of colleagues, or choose to reject the less good ones regardless of ideological or other affiliations which we have become accustomed to associate them with.

Having said this, it may not come as a surprise that I share some of Rubin's criticism of Mary Fulbrook's concept of 'normalisation', and appreciate his study as a demonstration of how the internal stabilization of the GDR in the period under consideration can be explained by focusing on the entangled changes in economy, ideology, and material culture—a rather 'improbable' success story, or, at least, not a 'normal' one.

Rubin starts this story with the launch in 1958 of the Chemistry Programme (*Chemie-Programm*), which constituted one of the core agendas in the SED's promise to overtake West Germany in per capita consumption within the next seven years. Rubin rightly terms this shift in policy the 'consumer turn', whose staging was closely linked to the SED's fifth party congress in July 1958, and which was otherwise marked by a renewed spirit of highly ideological voluntarism, such as the encouragement of 'cultural revolution' complete with a new socialist Decalogue and a campaign against Christianity. Rubin stresses the internal, basically economic constraints as well as external and traditional factors in connecting utopian goals with the construction of a large-scale chemicals industry: the endemic shortage of raw materials within its own territory; the GDR's dependency on the Soviet Union; and a tradition of policies encouraging autarky stretching back to the Nazi period and late Imperial Germany. After laying the ground in this chapter Rubin treats the integration of plastics into GDR life in three areas: design; apartment construction; and everyday consumer goods. A fifth chapter connects these findings with the questions developed at the beginning. How did the creation of a consumer world based on plastics contribute to the dictatorship's legitimacy? Did it improve the party state's chances of finding greater acceptance for its communist utopia among the people?

Rubin's overall argument that plastics were congenial to constructing socialism is developed in a particularly convincing way with regard to the astonishing career of the small community of East German industrial designers firmly rooted in inter-war Bauhaus functionalism. Shunned by dogmatic ideologists for their modernist and 'anti-national' aesthetics during the early 1950s, they made a comeback by offering solutions to the many challenges posed by the transition to plastics: saving expensive material resources by economies of scale; functionality defined in terms of time-saving handling of appliances and furniture in private households; and an aesthetic of timeless durability immune to the dictates of fashion. This confirmed state socialist claims to rationality with regard to the new socialist man's way of life which saved time and resources, while distancing the GDR from the West's decadent culture of waste. The chapter on plastics in apartments expands this notion of imbuing a new lifestyle with the logic of materiality. Old furniture simply would not fit into the standardized apartment buildings made of prefabricated elements (*Plattenbau*). Advertising the new, plastic-covered and thus easy-to-clean kitchens and living rooms in popular magazines and newspapers offered a welcome opportunity to market not only the achievements of the socialist apartment construction programme and the new chemicals-based industries, but also a rational lifestyle permitting women to combine gainful employment with household duties. Rubin examines these strategies for charging the meaning of everyday life with utopian values when it comes to utilitarian items such as plastic tubs, children's toys, eating utensils, and so on. But while these campaigns established and reaffirmed the notion of an intimate, quasi-natural link between growing output in the chemicals industry and the improvement of individual living standards, the fifth chapter shows the obstacles to putting such ideas into practice. Here Rubin is able to re-connect his culturalist argument with the basics of economic history, delivering an innovative and nuanced reading of the failures of the SED's New Economic Policy (*Neue Ökonomische Politik*) during the 1960s. The processing of synthetics for myriads of household items (the proverbial '1000 little things') had to be achieved by hundreds of small, state-owned (*volkseigene*) enterprises. But increasing the autonomy of the state-owned enterprises without exposing them fully to the pressures of market forces resulted in waste and bad quality, prompting the recentraliza-



## Review Article

tion of planning in the hands of a separate central institution charged with standardization and quality management. 'In short, rather than mixing the best of both [that is, market and planning] systems, the reforms managed to mix the worst of systems' (p. 174). The subsequent increase in output of consumer products in the early 1970s and their successful distribution to GDR consumers confirms Rubin's astute characterization of the failing reform economics of the 1960s.

Some aspects of this fine study, however, invite further discussion. On the whole, it is more, though not exclusively, about projections and encouragement of the consumption of plastics than about the practice of consumption itself. Rubin introduces a handful of interviewees who represent different life experiences and attitudes as GDR consumers. Standing alone, some of these consumer biographies make interesting reading, but the analyses are superficial and rather serve the purpose of illustration. They do not render less plausible the overall argument that introducing plastics in East Germany was a matter of supreme politics entangling macro economics, regime legitimacy, and everyday life, giving it a peculiar 'made in the GDR' appeal—on the contrary. But a close-up, ethnographic inquiry into the usage of plastics would have to reconstruct consumer biographies in a much more systematic way, and this would probably have transcended the frame of Rubin's already highly complex and rich research agenda.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there is one peculiarity in Rubin's style which I find somewhat perplexing. He prefers to use original German key terms where an appropriate and easily understandable or definable English version obviously exists. That we may come across several instances of *ersatz* in a book about plastics goes without saying. But why the constant talk of *Volkswirtschaft* and *Herrschaft*?<sup>6</sup> In the case of *Volkswirtschaft* Rubin justifies his practice by pointing to the difficulty of translating the term *Volk*, since it means more than the Western 'citizen-

<sup>5</sup> See, as an example, Margarete Meggle-Freund, 'Zwischen Altbau und Platte. Erfahrungsgeschichte(n) vom Wohnen: Alltagskonstruktionen in der Spätzeit der DDR' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Jena, 2004) <<http://margarete.meggle-freund.de/content/view/15/53/>>, accessed 23 Mar. 2011.

<sup>6</sup> That I, along with Alf Lüdtke, am credited with introducing the term *Herrschaft* into GDR research is very flattering, but off the mark. We merely picked up standard Weberian sociology, as other GDR researchers had already done one or two generations before.

ship' or 'place of residence', involving 'blood, tradition and nationalism', making it 'similar' to the National Socialist term *Volksgemeinschaft* (pp. 229–30 n. 28). Meanings of words may shift according to their connotations, specifically, their place in different fixed word combinations. For centuries now *Volkswirtschaft* has been and still is nothing but the standard German term for 'national economy' or, in the good old days of Karl Marx, 'political economy'. East German workers and party functionaries alike had the 'national' in the sense of 'state economy' in mind when they said *Volkswirtschaft*, in contrast to *Betriebswirtschaft*, the economy of the individual enterprises. The recurrent use of *Volkswirtschaft* and *Herrschaft* instead of 'the (national or macro) economy' on the one and 'rule', 'authority', or 'domination' on the other contributes to an exoticizing tone, as if only the untranslated jargon of local academia could adequately render the strange peculiarities of this perished living world in the heart of twentieth-century Europe.

Yet, setting aside style and superfluous exercises in claim-staking, to which one could add an astonishing number of spelling and grammatical mistakes in the rendering of German terms, Rubin's study stands out as a highly original and effective contribution to our understanding of the GDR in its middle period. This is a rare case of crossing conventional borders between different sub-fields of research, of combining the development of an industrial sector with aesthetics, consumer policy, and everyday life. Following the paths of one specific material, plastics, it admirably reconstructs how the private and the public were interwoven with each other – a model for future studies.

#### *Memory Sites of the GDR*

A different way to approach the legacy of the GDR is to assess its impact on memory culture in present-day Germany. The title of Martin Sabrow's edited volume *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* raises high expectations. After all, it was Pierre Nora's legendary *Lieux de mémoire* (of France) which essentially contributed to the breakthrough of the memory paradigm both in scholarly reflection about societies' relations to the past and in the rising value of remembering the past in culture, whether popular or elitist, in the last two decades. The orig-

## Review Article

inal idea proposed that memory sites work as focal points for references to the past which are shared by a given group of people and which, thanks to their relative durability, create and stabilize the sense of identity of such *collectivités*. The latter do not necessarily have to be whole nations; they can also be other groups such as generations, professions, movements, or local societies.

The tricky thing with regard to the GDR, however, is that the identities it inaugurated were quite fuzzy, unstable, and difficult to ascribe to an entity endowed with stability in time and space. Not everything which is nowadays regarded as typically 'GDR' by Western observers can serve as an example of such identity-creation, or, if it does, the historical relevance of such identity groups must be questioned. This is not at all problematic so long as we are dealing with units corresponding to 'la (Grande) nation', as in Nora's case. But in the case of practices of remembrances focused on the GDR, it quickly becomes clear that the lack of historical legitimacy and collective recognition which accompanied its existence to the end, and which enabled its swift dissolution into the FRG, makes it difficult to define *topoi* which share the longevity and self-evident existence of the century-old *héxagone*. It was not by chance that many East Germans discovered their 'East Germanness' only *after* the event, after unification, in confrontation with West Germany and in reaction to West German projections onto the East.

In a bold move, Martin Sabrow now proposes a set of items from the defunct GDR as candidates for the status of memory sites, although this may be at odds with the original concept's sociological claims to empirically based plausibility and sustainability over time. Strictly speaking, it would have been more accurate to put a question mark behind the title of the book, because what awaits the reader is a rich but uneven collection of forty-nine essays, ranging from eight to twelve pages in length. Most of them, in one way or another, address the issue of whether the particular item under consideration can and/or should qualify as a functioning 'memory site' – or not. In some cases, the essays leave the reader to ponder this question, and just tell the story of their item from beginning to end (for example, 'Alltag und Privatheit', 'Die Ständige Vertretung', 'Westberlin', 'Das Helsinki-Abkommen'). The majority of essays first describe the historical phenomenon as such, switching to a short discussion of its quality as a memory site only at the end. In several cases it is assert-

ed that, despite its recurrence in memory discourses, a specific piece of GDR history ('Einkaufsbeutel und Bückware', 'Palast der Republik', 'Die Mauer', 'Das Westpaket') does *not* qualify to be regarded as memory site, or at least only in a very limited sense. Sandrine Kott contributes one of the most original articles, coming up with a negative result of this sort. Her highly effective 'short story' on the East German *Kinderkrippe* offers a biting critique of the very idea of considering this a memory site for East Germans. She starts by citing evidence that the perception of collective education of toddlers as something typically 'totalitarian' and thus 'GDR' was, in the first instance, a projection of West German experts intent on defaming an institution which was otherwise widespread all over Europe, East *and* West. What follows is a highly informative, ten-page historical reconstruction of the social and cultural history of the crèche and the recurring disputes that have always surrounded it, from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Only a few of the articles stick consistently to the task of examining the quality of the memory site in question by narrating its career as an object of remembrance which eventually induces the stability of memory communities. This is true of both Jens Gieseke's article on the Stasi and Barbara Könczöl's comparison between the GDR's Mayday rituals (not a memory site) and the demonstrations held on 15 January (commemorating the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht) (a memory site), and of Marina Chauliac's excellent study of the *Jugendweihe* (youth consecration ceremony), whose astonishing career after 1989 undoubtedly makes it a marker of East German identity in unified Germany. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk's 'Puhdys', the GDR's most successful rock band, Christoph Classen's 'Sandmann' (a daily TV programme for pre-school children which, since 1989, has prevailed over its West German competitor) and Ina Merkel's 'Trabant' can also serve as excellent examples of combining sound historical knowledge with sensitive observation of more recent commercial and nostalgic practices. They aptly illustrate how popular culture and everyday life in the GDR, and their current remembrances, eventually crystallize into memory sites with some chance of becoming a lasting tradition for a large section of the population, and with potential to be handed down the generations. For the minority of political activists, Ralph Jessen can show how the *Montagsdemonstrationen* (Monday demonstrations) in Leipzig, which

## Review Article

precipitated the decisive breakthrough of the peaceful revolution in the autumn of 1989, later developed into a specific pattern of protest techniques in unified Germany, one which is also used to promote much more specific, single-issue agendas. In this case, the subject in question might serve as a memory site, but one which is marked by highly divergent associations and validations among those who invoke it, depending on the heterogeneity of East Germany's post-unification society.

On the whole, the reader of this volume is left with a mixed impression. Some of the articles make excellent reading; others are boring and show signs of less inspired routine or, in the case of a couple of *Zeitzeugen* 'expert' contributions, self-serving affirmation. Martin Sabrow provides a conceptual introduction to the volume, developing an analytical frame in which the public in present-day Germany is structured by a tripolarity of 'memory landscapes' which provide the basic construction principle for remembering the GDR: a 'dictatorship memory' focused on the perpetrator-victim dualism; an 'adaptation memory' connecting the sphere of power with the living world; and a 'progression memory' setting the original potential of the socialist project against its later degeneration. Written in the elegant and eloquent style which is Sabrow's brand, this introduction is worth reading as representing the advanced stage of debate on memory culture in the German public.

Ultimately, this volume serves several purposes. It certainly works as highly instructive reading for non-experts, including non-academics, who want to know more about the GDR without having to read forty-nine separate monographs. For GDR experts it provides a welcome opportunity to sharpen their sense of the applicability of Nora's venerable concept of *lieu de memoire* and of the 'collective memory' concept in the Halbwachsian tradition more generally. The recent popularity of such transfer experiments has triggered a virtual wave of similar edited volumes pertaining to the Balkans, East Central Europe, Europe as a whole, and further world regions. Sabrow's editorial achievement in this field lies in the experimental and, to this extent, also risk-taking approach which offers us a chance to cultivate our sensitivity for a subject that will occupy German *Befindlichkeiten* for quite a while.

*Politics of Everyday Life*

One of the outstanding achievements of the last book under review here is that it shows that, despite all the inherent risks of romanticist projection and simplification, 'people's history' can be dealt with in a sophisticated manner, balancing high methodological standards with empathy for actors 'on the ground'. Jan Palmowski's study of *Heimat* activism as a 'politics of everyday life' covers more than four decades of communist domination in all cultural matters. It looks at the ways in which local enthusiasts for such venerable hobbies as stamp collecting, ornithology, folklore, hiking, and so on, found ways of adapting to the constraints set by the party state. They did so partly by adopting the official ideology of a new socialist nation, and partly by infusing it with their own sense of localism, thereby gradually undermining its hyperbolic aspirations to create a new socialist culture. In a rare case of innovative methodological design, Palmowski combines three analytical approaches: an analysis of domination as a social practice entailing the actors' *Eigen-Sinn*, inspired by Alf Lüdtke; James W. Scott's notion of the interplay between 'public' and 'hidden transcripts', which he enlarges by introducing 'private transcripts' as a third, mediating category; and Victor Turner's theory of the 'social drama' as an approach to deconstructing the performative production of social meanings in conflicts about culture politics between the party and its insubordinate antagonists on the ground.

The first part of the book develops the basic ambivalence of communist culture politics with regard to traditions of *Heimat* activism. These traditions were instrumentalized for the implementation of the concept of anti-fascist ideology and 'socialist realism', while *Heimat* activists themselves preferred to focus on the local and regional meanings of their activities. It was only in the course of accelerated modernization after 1958 that a specifically 'socialist *Heimat*' culture was developed: festivals for workers and sports festivals (*Arbeiterfestspiele, Spartakiaden*); TV programmes featuring folk music; and the promotion of the GDR's own pop music (*Schlager*). All this was meant to testify to the GDR's new identity as a modern, future-minded society. The shortcoming of this cultural policy, however, was its lack of grass-roots mobilization. While the popularity of such manifestations helped to establish a sense of the GDR as a specific place to live in, its socialist and anti-fascist mission was largely lost on *Heimat*

## Review Article

activists. Thus there was a reversal of the relationship between *Heimat* and the socialist project: 'Whereas in the 1950s heimat had reinforced the themes of anti-fascism and socialism, now socialism and anti-fascism reinforced the essence of the socialist heimat, the GDR' (p. 107). This finding has far-reaching consequences, as it allows us to trace the emergence of the GDR as a lived collectivity, bound in space and time, and its dissociation from the claims of the socialist project back to the 1960s. This dissociation can be considered a prerequisite both for the revolutionary developments of the late 1980s and for present-day *Ostalgie*.

The main empirical part of Palmowski's study, however, is devoted to the Honecker years. Part II, entitled 'Public and Private Transcripts', shows how a much more pragmatic approach in cultural policies allowed for a broad popularization of *Heimat* activism within the limits set by the party, while at the same time the specifically socialist content of such activities was lost. Enjoying pride in local customs and participating in communal activities to improve the local infrastructure in the pervasive *Mach mit!* (Join in!) initiatives gave GDR citizens plenty of opportunity to indulge their understanding of local identity while remaining lukewarm with regard to the overarching socialist claims of such activism staged by the state: 'It was possible for individuals and communities to engage publicly in the socialist heimat without assuming the identity of GDR citizens' (p. 149). Extending the freedom to engage in local initiatives contributed to a 'euphemization of power', Palmowsky concludes, but not to a "'normalisation" of everyday life' since, from the party state's point of view, 'the citizens' acquiescence was bought at the cost of activists developing local meanings that were separate from, and even opposed to, those of state and party' (pp. 184-5). One realm in which the ensuing 'marked disrespect for authority' was played out most forcefully, as demonstrated convincingly in a separate chapter, was in conflicts about environmental destruction and the decay of old inner city quarters. Although the party successfully monopolized and contained environmentalist and preservationist activism within the boundaries of its own mass organizations, the seed of continuing frustration about the party's responsibility for the accelerating deterioration of the environment undermined the belief of even these loyalists in the system, and made the state of the environment one of the most sensitive issues for the party's credibility.

Part III, 'Power, Practices and Meaning', enriches these insights into the persistent precariousness of the SED's *Heimat* policy by presenting two local case studies. The chapter on Holungen in the Catholic diaspora of Eichsfeld carries on the motif of environmental damage mobilizing the social and cultural resources of a local milieu against the consequences of the expansion of the local potash mine. Far from turning to rebellion and defiance of state authority as such, local citizens stubbornly worked against the threatened destruction of the landscape by using the power of religious symbols and invoking *Heimat* on public occasions, thus reasserting their *Eigen-Sinn* vis-à-vis party rule while leaving power relations as such untouched. *Heimat* discourse and practice served to euphemize the reality of power relations while allowing for the staging of 'social dramas' within the limits set by party rule.

The second case study portrays a village which was a model of socialist *Heimat* work, Dabeln in the northern district of Schwerin. After the completion of enforced collectivization, a group of young, enthusiastic party members there had developed widely acclaimed *Heimat* activities, including their own folk music band, which was eventually featured on nationwide radio and TV programmes. This success story, however, also had a dark side. Combining oral history and Stasi sources, Palmowski reconstructs how, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the Stasi had used several dozens of informers, among them the chief activists of the local Kulturbund section, to repress oppositional attitudes and activities in the village community. This pervasive Stasi presence, however, could hardly be broached in the interviews. Silence about this breach of the community had been established and maintained throughout the decades and was also observed vis-à-vis the researcher. Thus the village community continued to exist in a deeply precarious state, which is why Palmowski firmly rejects any notion of 'normalisation' of rule once the immediate confrontation between state repression and parts of the village had subsided (p. 293). In the concluding chapter Palmowski not only recapitulates the rich findings of his superb study, but also surveys the short careers of some of the *Heimat* activists as revolutionaries during the implosion of communist power in 1989-90.

Palmowski's study can undoubtedly be considered one of the most powerful and original contributions to a deeper understanding of the interaction between regime and society in recent years. It sets



## Review Article

methodological standards, in particular with regard to the combined use of archival sources (including Stasi files) and oral history in micro-historical settings. The fact that far from excluding each other, East German histories of political domination and everyday life can and should be integrated into a dense narrative texture of submissiveness and agency, of public and hidden transcripts, has rarely been demonstrated in such a convincing manner.

In the long run, such an approach will serve our understanding of the second German dictatorship much more than its retroactive 'normalisation' on behalf of 'the people'. Like Rubin's study of the 'plasticization' of the GDR, such bottom-up studies of the intricate ways in which East Germans created their own sense of belonging to a country in which the vast majority of them had never had the chance to govern themselves will be helpful also with regard to the understanding of present-day memory culture. They might serve as welcome antidotes to the search for merely assumed, if not erroneously presupposed, East German sites of memory, as has seemingly been the case in several of the miniatures commissioned for Sabrow's ambitious editorial project, *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*.

To understand East German memory culture and its functions in present-day Germany requires an exploration of the fabric of social practices, political interventions, and individual commitments which encouraged the millions of East Germans to consider their environment as something to which they belonged while rejecting the party state's offering of a socialist GDR identity. Such a sense of *Heimat* could (and still can) exist only in opposition to the overarching ideological propositions of the whole collective, in particular, when these are predicated on the identity constructions of a totalizing centralism. It may safely be assumed that cherishing their *Heimat* under the tutelage of the party's strategies of *divide et impera* boosted the ability of East Germans not only to integrate into a unified and necessarily federalist Germany, but also to establish themselves in it as a highly distinct and lasting feature of German and European diversity.

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