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RETHINKING LOCALITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE: CONTRIBUTIONS TO EAST–WEST GERMAN HISTORY

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ANDREW DEMSHUK, *Bowling for Communism: Urban Ingenuity at the End of East Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 272 pp. ISBN 978 1 501 75168 4. $39.95

MARCEL THOMAS, *Local Lives, Parallel Histories: Villagers and Everyday Life in the Divided Germany*, Studies in German History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 320 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 85614 6. £65.00

'Place as metaphor suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extra-local, all the way to the global.'[1] As a restricted spatial category understood in relational terms, locality is shaped by translocal and other social relationships and interpretations. Local units are spaces of action and organization that are furnished with meaning by actors. Locality is thus not solely a product of its dichotomous correspondence with the global;[2] rather, it is people who make the local into their own personal life-worlds—be they rural, urban, hybrid, or otherwise defined—by negotiating the specific local meaning of large-scale transformation processes on the ground.

The renegotiation of the local amid the upheavals of post-war East German and East–West German history has been addressed by two new publications: Andrew Demshuk's study of 'urban ingenuity' in late socialist Leipzig, and Marcel Thomas's Ph.D. thesis on comparative local history in divided Germany. Both studies are examples of social history 'from below', taking a local perspective rooted in the history of everyday life and adopting an empirical approach that

Trans. by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL)

[1] Arif Dirlik, 'Globalization, Indigenism, Social Movements, and the Politics of Place', *Localities*, 1 (2011), 47–90, at 57.
[2] Angelika Epple, 'Lokalität und die Dimensionen des Globalen: Eine Frage der Relationen', *Historische Anthropologie*, 21/1 (2013), 4–25.

combines sources from local archives with oral histories. I will begin by introducing each book in turn before comparing them in light of the question: to what extent can the provincialization of East–West German contemporary history and the concept of locality help deepen our understanding of the socio-historical transformations that took place after 1945 in both rural and urban areas?

In his 2020 monograph *Bowling for Communism: Urban Ingenuity at the End of East Germany*, Andrew Demshuk addresses the still-thorny issue in GDR historiography of the relationship between state and society, especially during the era of late socialism. Demshuk takes as his case study the city of Leipzig during the 1980s, and in doing so builds on existing research that uses the GDR's second-largest city as a means to explore the negotiation of space and local power under state socialism.[3] Demshuk examines how various local actors attempted to 'save their city' in the face of both the increasingly dramatic deterioration of Leipzig's inner-city housing and infrastructure, and the conditions brought about by central planning and the shortage economy. He organizes his study around the planning, construction, and opening of the Bowlingtreff—a sport and leisure facility with a bowling alley, a gym, pool tables, Poly-Play arcade game machines, restaurants, and cafés that was built between 1984 and 1987 in a former electrical substation on Wilhelm-Leuschner-Platz in the city centre. A new, postmodern entrance building was also added. In total, the conversion works required over 40,000 hours of volunteer labour, and the facility remained in operation until 1997. The remarkable thing about the Bowlingtreff is that it was planned without any formal approval from the central government in East Berlin and built largely outside official procurement procedures. Demshuk interprets this so-called *Schwarzbau*,[4] or illicit building, as an uncompromising riposte by urban actors to both the heavy restrictions placed on urban development in the late GDR and the general sense that the city was falling into dilapidation while 'Berlin' stood idly by. He also sees it

[3] Christian Rau, *Stadtverwaltung im Staatssozialismus: Kommunalpolitik und Wohnungswesen in der DDR am Beispiel Leipzigs (1957–1989)* (Stuttgart, 2017).
[4] Where this essay uses the prefix *Schwarz-* to denote illegal or illicit practices, it does so to reflect historical usage in the GDR, which predates the current debate over whether this idiom has acquired racist connotations in modern Germany.

as a means of appropriating a Western culture of consumption and leisure. Buildings like the Bowlingtreff were possible because local politicians, city planners, architects, residents, and volunteers formed an alliance that operated within the constraints of the official regime, but also practised 'urban ingenuity' by working beyond its narrow confines for the benefit of the actors' local area (*Heimat*): the city of Leipzig.

Demshuk arranges his source material to support his main argument, in which he examines various historical constellations of urban ingenuity in Leipzig. His first chapter focuses on private attempts by the city's residents to stem the decline of their immediate surroundings and improve their living conditions. First, he examines the grievances (*Eingaben*) addressed to officials of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED) regarding poor living conditions, shortages of materials, and neglected maintenance. He then goes on to look at restoration work carried out independently on residential and community buildings—often with the support of informal bartering networks—as well as illegal activities such as the theft of materials and equipment or illicit house occupations (*Schwarzwohnen*).[5]

The second and third chapters discuss a group of reform-minded architects in Leipzig who drew up urban development plans to preserve the historic character of the city centre by making light-touch, modernizing interventions and filling vacant plots. This approach was successfully implemented in only a handful of projects, however, as the limited resources available from the relevant local agencies mainly went into building prefabricated *Plattenbauten*. In spite of economic and political realities—or perhaps even because of them—in the late 1980s these actors tried to showcase their ambitious design proposals for the city centre by means of an international architectural competition; yet their visionary ideas were dismissed by Leipzig residents as 'castles in the sky'. Demshuk then presents a successful alternative model in his detailed fourth chapter on Leipzig's *Schwarzbauten*. Alongside the aforementioned Bowlingtreff, these include the student club in the Moritzbastei, which was developed in the 1970s by a group

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[5] See also the special issue of the *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, 43/1 (2021) on 'Living through the *Wende*: Housing and the Home *c.*1989'.

of volunteers, as well as several smaller private projects to build leisure facilities outside the city centre. Nonetheless, Demshuk concludes that even these few successful attempts to 'save the city' merely papered over the fundamental problems of urban decay, housing shortages, and the structural weaknesses of the planned economy. His fifth chapter therefore stresses the importance of urban decline as a factor in the Leipzig protests that began in autumn 1989.

Our scene now shifts to Neukirch in der Lausitz, near Dresden, which lies around 265 miles as the crow flies from Ebersbach an der Fils, outside Stuttgart. These two villages, which had followed similar economic and socio-structural patterns of development after industrializing in the late nineteenth century, unsurprisingly embarked on divergent trajectories under the two different social systems post 1945. Ebersbach benefited strongly from West German economic growth, achieved town status in 1975, was modernized into a commuter settlement, and today has over 15,000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, Neukirch was reformed into a socialist village and initially underwent a slower process of change which accelerated in the wake of the late socialist economic crisis and the sweeping structural changes that took place in East Germany after 1989/90, leading—as in many East German settlements—to demographic and infrastructural decline. Today, this municipality in Saxony is home to an ageing population of around 5,000 people. The inhabitants of Neukirch and Ebersbach have probably never heard of each other, let alone visited their respective towns; yet Marcel Thomas's Ph.D. thesis, published in 2020 under the title *Local Lives, Parallel Histories: Villagers and Everyday Life in the Divided Germany*, seeks to bring the two into dialogue by tracing their 'parallel' post-war histories, and is well worth reading.

Thomas asks how 'large-scale transformation processes' (p. 13) after 1945 were experienced, negotiated, and interpreted in each of these local contexts. He recounts the post-war histories of Neukirch and Ebersbach primarily through the memories of everyday life, interpretations of the present day, and understandings of history held by residents of the two towns ('ordinary Germans'; p. 4), and in the process reveals that the inhabitants did not construe their local lives as stories of opposed systems, following the logic of the Cold War. Instead—and herein lies the parallel between the two towns—they understood themselves through

a narrative of two autochthonous communities that defied externally imposed conditions and took independent action to safeguard the progress of their rural localities in pragmatic and largely unpolitical ways. 'What makes their histories "parallel" is that individuals who lived hundreds of kilometres apart in similar ways localized the diverging modernization processes which transformed their lives in the divided nation' (p. 276). Rural localities, Thomas argues, 'were not mere backdrops to the emergence of two very different societies, but key arenas in which change was mediated' (p. 16). In other words, his study adopts a comparative approach rooted in the everyday history of the local in order to contribute to a broader post-war East–West German shared history—one with a social history slant—that builds on the detailed existing picture of East–West differences by documenting connections and appropriations between the two systems.[6]

Thomas's study is divided into six chapters, each of which examines an aspect of the parallel histories of Neukirch and Ebersbach in closer detail, presenting findings from each case study in turn before drawing succinct conclusions from them. Chapters one and two address the changing discourse around rurality and community, which were discussed in new terms amid the political and economic transformations of the countryside post 1945, as well as during debates over the perceived backwardness of rural locations that also took place in Neukirch and Ebersbach. In both localities, Thomas notes, the mania for social planning and modernization that characterized the first three post-war decades initially led people to reject notions of traditional rurality; yet from the late 1970s, under the influence of economic crisis, stagnation, and mounting scepticism at the idea of progress, there was a return to tradition—for instance through positive associations with the notion of *Heimat*, or 'homeland'. Yet the redefined social relationships and ideas of solidarity within each village remained ambivalent. The increasing need for privacy and personal autonomy led residents to actively renounce the practices of communal life as soon as they could (this happened more quickly in Ebersbach than in Neukirch); yet they also engaged in nostalgic

[6] Frank Bösch, 'Geteilt und verbunden: Perspektiven auf die deutsche Geschichte seit den 1970er Jahren', in id. (ed.), *Geteilte Geschichte: Ost- und Westdeutschland, 1970–2000* (Göttingen, 2015), 7–37.

reminiscence over those same practices and lamented their disappearance. In chapter six, Thomas returns to residents' understandings of history from the 1970s onwards—specifically in relation to the changes in their localities after 1945—by examining local historiography in chronicles, calendars, commemorative publications, and so on. Here, he persuasively demonstrates that these appropriations of the past do not merely express wistful memories of vanished life-worlds, but are also attempts to control the accelerating process of change by creating localized meanings.

Questions of local identity and belonging also shaped local responses to new arrivals, as Thomas shows in chapter three. Long-standing locals in Ebersbach and Neukirch attempted in similar ways to marginalize refugees, foreign workers (*Gastarbeiter* and *Vertrags-arbeiter*), and newcomers from urban areas by excluding them spatially and by claiming the sole right of interpretation over 'their' locality through narratives of local homogeneity. These discourses of self-understanding also permeated mutual perceptions of the divided Germany, which were defined by a 'parallel process of othering and estrangement' (p. 164), as Thomas argues in chapter four. While the residents of Neukirch increasingly imagined West Germany as an idealized alternative to their day-to-day struggle with the shortage economy and as a cultural benchmark for their expectations of their own future—something that Thomas demonstrates primarily with reference to the many imaginative attempts by Neukirch's inhabitants to receive Western television—the people of Ebersbach tended to ascribe less importance to 'the national question' and 'the East' in their self-understanding during the decades following the war. At most, these ideas provided reassurance over Ebersbach's own successful development, as Thomas shows by pointing to the strong image of the 'backward' East in the town's public memory.

Chapter five examines political changes on the local level from the late 1960s onwards, along with the renegotiation of legitimacy and participation. Thomas argues that in both states, the local became an arena in which new forms of participation were established from below within the confines of the different political systems—a phenomenon that Thomas calls 'give-and-take politics' in the chapter title. In Neukirch, he points to the local activism and volunteer work that went

into establishing a recreation area, as well as self-sufficiency strategies and grievances submitted by way of protest during the 1980s, while in Ebersbach he describes a citizens' initiative to found a youth centre and a creative protest against poor road safety.

With their focus on the 'self-organizing society', Demshuk and Thomas form part of a recent trend in GDR social history—one that does not simply see the relationship between the dictatorial state and social thought and activity in the late GDR as indicative of a society that was subject, in Jürgen Kocka's formulation, to *Durchherrschung* (the permeation of authority),[7] but instead searches for sites of political and cultural participation within official structures.[8] From this perspective, which builds on reflections regarding *Herrschaft als soziale Praxis* (domination as a social practice)[9] and the 'participatory dictatorship',[10] local power is understood as a field of interaction and negotiation between private, individual motives, communal relationship networks, and the dictates of the socialist political and ideological system—a constellation of 'small worlds' in which various actors developed their own attributions of meaning. And in Demshuk's and Thomas's case studies, the meaning produced by the various actors is the local itself. 'Although officials professed that the people were working with them as a sign of belief in the system, in reality the people came, not for communism, but for the sake of Leipzig and their urban community' (Demshuk, pp. 5–6; see also Thomas, pp. 197–205). For active residents on both sides of the German and the rural–urban divides, civic life was focused on one's *Heimatort*, or home turf, and on improving local living conditions. To this end, they engaged in a 'mutually beneficial trade-off' (Thomas, p. 232) with state actors who

[7] Jürgen Kocka, 'Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft', in id., Hartmut Kaelble, and Hartmut Zwahr (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1994), 547–53.

[8] Jörg Ganzenmüller and Bertram Triebel (eds.), *Gesellschaft als staatliche Veranstaltung? Orte politischer und kultureller Partizipation in der DDR* (forthcoming).

[9] Alf Lüdtke, 'Einleitung: Herrschaft als soziale Praxis', in id. (ed.), *Herrschaft als soziale Praxis: Historische und sozial-anthropologische Studien* (Göttingen, 1991), 9–63; Thomas Lindenberger, 'Die Diktatur der Grenzen: Zur Einleitung', in id. (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne, 1999), 13–35.

[10] Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, 2005).

themselves hoped to gain legitimacy. The different limits of the two political systems ensured that the increased demand for more responsive politics in both East and West Germany during the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to historically unique local structures of participation in each state. Civic life in Leipzig and Neukirch flourished more in the context of state-sponsored participatory programmes, and only ever in local or individual contexts, while in intellectual terms it was imbued with links to communal labour and folk regionalisms that were designed to bring tradition into harmony with radical transformation.[11] In the West German Ebersbach, by contrast, the people's growing desire for participation was channelled into interest groups and public debate, and thus into the broader institutional fabric of representative democracy.

Both studies make a particularly valuable contribution to political and cultural history in the East–West German context by showing, in persuasive empirical terms, that there was a rupture in the citizen–state relationship in the GDR during the 1980s, so that the people's high expectations of the 'welfare dictatorship',[12] which had been nurtured by the regime itself, were profoundly disappointed, and their confidence in the state's will and capacity to act was eroded (Thomas, pp. 216–23; Demshuk, pp. 149–70). When symbolic ordering principles and historical semantics lose legitimacy, the fundamental assumptions underpinning them come into view, and this erosion of trust in the state during the late GDR reveals a statist, yet community-oriented and locally focused understanding of society—one that was characteristic of East German industrial modernity as a whole. The historical context for this politico-ideological formation strikes me as important for achieving a clearer understanding of the 'social fractures', as Steffen Mau puts it, of the era of transformation in East Germany after this consensus came to an abrupt end in 1989/90.[13]

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[11] Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945–1990* (Cambridge, 2009).

[12] Konrad Jarausch, 'Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship', in id. (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, trans. by Eve Duffy (New York, 1999), 47–69.

[13] Steffen Mau, *Lütten Klein: Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* (Berlin, 2019), 13–18, 244–9.

On the level of social history, changes to political cultures of participation in local contexts open a promising field of investigation that is broad in spatial terms and spans the junctures of history.[14] In his conclusion, Thomas merely hints that 'parallel histories of responses to change in East and West Germany were part of a broader European history' (p. 278), while Demshuk repeatedly refers to 'high modernism' (especially in chapter two) as the dominant current in post-1945 urban planning in both East and West Germany, the 'lifeless aesthetic results' (p. 57) of which formed the main target of his actors' engagement. He also draws occasional comparisons with historical architectural developments in other European cities such as Wrocław and Frankfurt am Main, though he does not expand these into broader socio-historical parallels. Future research could build on Demshuk's and Thomas's findings by focusing more closely on the connections between sweeping structural changes and shifts in cultural values—for example by conducting an asynchronous comparison of de-industrialization in local work cultures in the UK and East Germany, as Lutz Raphael has suggested.[15] This could form just one part of a comparative experiential history of European societies in the second half of the twentieth century—one that would take specific regional developments and variations into account.

One key consideration when describing transnational transformation processes is the fact that they are locally embedded. Conversely, we often only develop an initial impression of these processes via individual actions, to which relevant meanings are ascribed. Marcel Thomas and Andrew Demshuk offer stimulating analyses based on empirically rich case studies that will be of interest to scholars of East–West German histories and the transformation of rural and urban spaces alike.

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[14] Christina Morina, 'Geteilte Bilanz: Überlegungen zu einer politischen Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands seit den 1980er Jahren', in Markus Böick, Constantin Goschler, and Ralph Jessen (eds.), *Jahrbuch Deutsche Einheit 2020* (Berlin, 2020), 145–68.
[15] Lutz Raphael, *Jenseits von Kohle und Stahl: Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte Westeuropas nach dem Boom* (Berlin, 2019), 18, 327–8, 353.

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