Material Fantasies

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Veenis, Milena.
Material Fantasies: Expectations of the Western Consumer World among East Germans.
Amsterdam University Press, 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 year 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). 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

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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-
ously gave me their valuable comments on sections of this book, or whose involvement supported my project in other ways. In alphabetical order they are: Mireille Berman, Anne Gevers, Rob van Ginkel, Suzanne Kuik, Birgit Meyer, Mattijs van de Port, Irene Stengs, Alex Strating, Bonno Thoden van Velzen, and Jojada Verrips as well as my parents and my sister Clara. Val Kidd deserves a special mention for her invaluable and speedy editing and translating during our particularly enjoyable and productive collaboration.

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.