Material Fantasies

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

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 mate-
rial 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 west-
ern 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 rela-
tively 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 establish-
ment 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.”

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.”

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). 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.*

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.”

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.” 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 arises 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.” 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.” 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.” This gap is consequently the source of new materialist desires, but the “consummation of desire” is always and inevitably a disillusioning experience.

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.”

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. 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. 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. 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. 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,” 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 “[a]n 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:

[An 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.” 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.

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. 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.”

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.”

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, idealistional conformity between rulers and ruled.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{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”
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.

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.”

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. Although there is a long-standing tradition of applying psychoanalytic theory to anthropology and history, 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, 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. 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.
While people simply need to categorize, classify and draw boundaries in order to discriminate (between just and unjust, dirt and cleanliness, us and them), every-day 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 theo-rems. 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. 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. 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. 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.