Material Fantasies

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

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

Nothing but good things about the past, except for material provision. Capitalism was responsible for the total corruption of morality, social ties and economic security. The story was both simple and one-dimensional. Although I wondered frustratingly what I was doing wrong, it was remarkable that at the same
time ideas emerged, almost intuitively, on the reasons for this specific representation as well as on western prosperity’s impact on the former East German existence. These ideas partly stem from conversations and the more or less concrete material I collected, but they mainly derive from much vaguer sources. Again, this may not be a ground-breaking observation, and there are plenty of specialized journals and volumes in which the methodological and phenomenological pitfalls of anthropological knowledge production are dealt with. But apart from these specific sites, in general anthropological texts and case studies, language’s inadequacy in conveying relevant anthropological information is hardly problematized or reflected upon, and neither is the question of which non-verbal sources the anthropologists’ understanding is based on.

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

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

**Reactions to My Presence**

Astonishingly little has been written about the resistance and negative reactions that anthropologists encounter during their research. We hardly ever read about unwilling respondents, about the anger and sometimes downright aggression
that anthropologists’ questioning presence arouses, or about the insights gained from all this. Yet during both my field research experiences, people’s defensive and negative reactions to my questions have had a significant impact on how I became acquainted with the particular society. My attempts to talk to the people of Rudolstadt about their longing for western goods, the changes in consumption that had taken place, or the ensuing deep disappointment often met with opposition, for example when I distributed questionnaires on consumption.

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

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

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

These were extreme reactions. More often people were simply defensive or in denial when I asked about the extraordinary meaning formerly attached to western goods. Once, when sitting in the cafe in the market square with the barkeeper, watching the shoppers leisurely picking out what they wanted from the fully laden vegetable, fruit and clothing stalls at the market, I asked out loud what the market scenery must have looked six years ago. The woman snapped at me: “Well, things have not changed that much you know!” Knowing that six years ago there had always been a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and that the supply of affordable clothing could never meet the demand, her reaction was remarkable. Another time, I was walking down the street with Karl, a youth worker who lived in Rudolstadt, on our way to a restaurant. It was winter, and it got dark early. Despite the twilight, the mountains of rubbish that piled up everywhere on the pavements were still clearly visible. They contained entire kitchens and all the other things you could think of, from
sofas to office chairs, televisions, fridges, and cots. I had seen this scene before. Every time, on the special days that large items of rubbish were to be collected, the pavements were piled high with a huge assortment of things, which I now knew to consist of old East German household goods (see figure 4.1 and 4.2, chapter 4). I got the impression that, with the arrival of the western consumer world, the residents of Rudolstadt collectively seized the opportunity to substitute as many of their possessions from former times as quickly as possible for new things. When I drew Karl’s attention to the mountains of rubbish, saying that it seemed as if people were simply throwing away everything that reminded them of the GDR, he denied this vehemently and immediately changed the subject.

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

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

This interpretation is to a large extent based on experiences as described above, and on my reflections on them. Reflection on the subjective nature of field research has been an important development in the history of anthropology. I find it remarkable, however, that the emotional reactions which the anthropologist’s presence evokes have been discussed so little as a source of anthropological knowledge and insight. In their writing, anthropologists hardly devote attention to the
extent to which they were informed by the emotional interaction between themselves and their interlocutors. Even in the theoretical literature on anthropological knowledge production, most attention is paid to the potential pitfalls and problems during verbal contact, resulting in texts in which much theoretical significance is ascribed to the literal conversations between the anthropologist and his informants, in order to provide insight into the intersubjective nature of anthropological knowledge.⁶

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

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

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

There is, however, a rich tradition in psychology (albeit clinical) to reflect on the informative nature of mutually emotional contact between people. Initially developed by Freud, the recognition of transference and countertransference’s importance as informing processes is presently shared by all branches of clinical psychology. By explicitly paying attention not only to how the people being investigated react to his/her questioning presence, but also to the feelings they evoke in him/her, the anthropologist has an important source of information at his/her disposal.⁹ The suspicion I encountered among German emigrants in Argentina and
how I experienced constantly having to justify my research were extraordinarily relevant sources of information there. During my stay in the former GDR, another response pattern gradually became discernable when I realized that people’s reactions during conversations regularly made me feel as if I had to almost belittle myself: pretend not to know things, and emphasize that I too was insecure. Apart from numerous little incidents that gradually formed a pattern, I also noticed this when once I went to a disco with a couple of friends and was attracting more attention than I found comfortable. For my own sake as well as for my companions, I adapted my dancing accordingly. All in all, the way I compelled myself to behave was reminiscent of the analysis given a long time ago by anthropologist George Foster, who described the central, unarticulated role of envy in some societies. He made it clear how people unwittingly model their behavior and conceal anything that could cause the slightest provocation, for fear of arousing envy in others. Foster quotes extensively from the work of anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff. Those quotes read as a concise guide to what to do and how to act for visitors to the former GDR:

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

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

I was fortunate that Stefan's remark put into words what I had only felt and for that reason found more difficult to use as information. The distinctly subjective insight and information his remark brought about – as a verbalization of innumerable other impressions – was highly relevant for it made manifest what other-
wise remained unsaid (paraphrasing): In the implicit comparison with others who come across as self-confident, we tend to feel small and insignificant. The inkling that this comparison and the feelings of inferiority it aroused had somehow played a role was highly relevant. It colored the general representation of the ex-GDR as a warm and harmonious society in a new way. How exactly the overall positive representation related to the vague insights described above, and what role material culture and consumption played in this, will become clear throughout this book.

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

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

Material Culture and Tell-Tale One-Liners

The experiences in my contact with Rudolstadt’s residents and the significant selections they appeared to make regarding their past and present life were not the only aspects that supported my intuition. As mentioned before, there were two other sources that proved to be highly illuminating: the material world, and the incidental remarks that somehow struck me, even though I often did not quite understand why. Since material culture played such a central role in my research,
it goes without saying that I was more focused on and paid more attention to the material surroundings than I would have done otherwise. I gathered a lot of information on the topic – listening to people’s stories, going through relevant journals, collecting the advertisements in my mailbox, interviewing designers, shopkeepers, salespeople, etc. But in spite of all this, I remained an outsider, without a real clue as to the significance the western object world had had for so many people before 1989.

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

In the morning I visited a former LPG [agricultural production cooperative] to interview some women who had temporary jobs there as part of an employment scheme. The women were growing cut flowers – chrysanthemums, roses and such like. Because their jobs were financed by the state and they were not dependent on the free market for their turnover, the atmosphere in the greenhouse was relatively peaceful and not too hectic, but the mood of the women was decidedly despondent. When I got to chatting to them, they told me how their lives had changed after 1989. Their stories were almost identical to those I had heard countless times during my stay in Rudolstadt; they were stories about loss. The Wende had not been kind to any of the women. They were nearly all dismissed immediately. Being out of work for a long time meant that they had to scrimp and save to make ends meet. They felt useless, finished, lonely and left to their own devices until they were able to come work here. The majority of them had worked on a conveyor belt or operated machinery in large production companies during the time of the GDR, and from an early age they had belonged to a collective. The day-to-day tasks, the colleagues, and the social environment that went with that had always been a fundamental part of their lives, around which the rest of their daily chores were organized. And now? Once the two-year work provision scheme was finished, that would be the end. There was no hope of other work. As women, most of them a bit older and mothers, they might as well forget it.

The greenhouse where the flowers were grown was old and dilapidated, and nearly everything round about it was proverbially grim and grey, not helped by the chilly December weather. Mud, tractor tracks, trampled grass, a shaggy dog, and a scrapped Trabant dominated the scene. At some point, one of the women led me inside the building for the interview. Here, too, everything looked old and worn: large formica tables, a broken sink, bare walls, a cold stone floor, a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling and small, sagging metal stools. After the interview I went to the toilet. It was in a hallway that was as dark, dismal and
cold as the rest of the place. The tiles on the wall were faded and cracked, the hook to shut the
door was hanging loose, and under the door was an open space so that you could see other
people's feet. The toilet seat was cold, the water I washed my hands in was cold, and the towel
was cold and clammy.

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

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

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

The differences in outward appearance between both toilets had a strong effect on how I felt
in each one. In the East German toilet I had felt numb, whereas here I felt nice and comfort-
able. That feeling was mainly aroused by the material differences between both places. Yet
the interior design of the West German washroom was not what I would usually have found
particularly attractive. In other circumstances, I would probably have viewed it with some
contempt, as decidedly chintzy. The very reason I now felt so comfortable there was because
I had just come from such utterly desolate surroundings – both materially and mentally. This
did not mean, however, that my visit to the West German washroom made me feel grateful
to be back at last in the prosperous west. The very opposite was true, for although at that mo-
I felt chilled by the material and mental gloom that was so omnipresent in the former GDR, it was precisely due to the huge disappointments and to the hopes and expectations which now and then glimmered through the gloom (and became so charged in the autumn of 1989) that my stay in Rudolstadt was such an exciting and moving experience. I really enjoyed being there, and I would never have exchanged my time there for a stay in the FRG. What my senses experienced in the West German material surroundings and the pleasant feeling that overcame me in that West German washroom went much further and had a much deeper impact than merely a desire for material prosperity as such. At that moment, I experienced the warmth and shiny finish of the West German toilet as a kind of consolation for the material and mental desolation of the GDR and the visible downfall of all the hopes and expectations which I had felt that morning in the East German LPG. As if the West German toilet made up for what had gone wrong in the former GDR.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Although such life lessons can sometimes be neutral or positive, or at other times negative and depressing, they always relate to knowledge that is so self-evident that everyone knows that this is just the way it is. Consequently, such knowledge is also typical in that it is not often articulated and therefore not easily found:
Implicit social knowledge is a reservoir of insights that are not contained in a society’s canons; knowledge that is not embodied in the language of newspapers, books or academic journals; knowledge that you will not be able to find under any of the keywords in a library catalogue; knowledge that is not included in regular syllabuses of schools and universities. Knowledge that does the rounds of [a] society like a scent that finds its way into everything and everybody.15

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

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

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

While the allotment chairman’s passing remark had highlighted the fact that an embedded form of distrust was also part of the GDR’s heritage, the way I unwittingly adapted my behavior during my stay made it clear to me that it was important to avoid envy. Slowly but surely, the impression evolved that the Standard
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Story about the GDR being a warm society of mutual equality also functioned to cover up the distrust, envy and rivalry that had also existed, while the material culture of the west offered some sort of comfort or consolation. Although at first very tentatively, I thus began to recognize the relationship between what Dutch anthropologist Bonno Thoden van Velzen described in a recent interview as a society’s “covered culture,” and the “emotional undercurrents” hiding under it.17 I only gained insight into the relationship between the two domains by explicitly focusing on the emotional interaction between myself and others, the conspicuous silence pertaining to specific topics, my personal experiences with the material culture I investigated, and by taking some seemingly trivial utterances to be an entrance to the non-discursive, social knowledge that this society had in stock.

Generalization, Differentiation

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

One of the main problems within this anthropological school was that the barely defined concept of culture almost seemed to have acquired powers of its own. It was thus not only essentialized and fixed, but also taken to be the determining factor of behavioral patterns (culture A makes its people behave in such and such way) instead of the starting point of analysis. Both the culture under consideration and the people practising and experiencing it were thereby frozen into unchangeable units. Culture, however, is not the driving force behind people’s behavior; it is the visible and ever changing outcome thereof. It is not culture that
dictates how people act, think and value something. If striking patterns are discernible in people’s acts, thoughts or values, we should rather aim to discover the causes, reasons and interests behind these patterns. That is what this book aims to do: to investigate the possible interests behind a relatively generally imparted self-image. In this regard, it stands in a long tradition of anthropological research.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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