Material Fantasies

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Chapter 4
Material Realizations

What we are thus arguing is not simply that ideology permeates the alleged extra-ideological strata of everyday life, but that this materialization of ideology in the external materiality renders visible inherent antagonisms that the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge (Slavoj Žižek, 1996).¹

Sometimes posing a question is the same as answering it. At first glance, this certainly applies to the question of how well the East German state succeeded in delivering its materialist promises. We all know what transpired. We have seen the images of grimy streets, long queues in front of shops, and people so happy to finally get their hands on a few oranges. We have heard them grumbling about the country’s material and consumer situation. It was primarily these complaints that drove so many people to the streets in the autumn of 1989. And one year later, these complaints motivated them yet again when it came to deciding their country’s future. By voting for German unity, most people were opting for well-equipped shops and the ability to buy fresh fruit all year around. They wanted to end the continual shortages and lack of materials.

Since the East German state was apparently not able to provide acceptable material conditions, it seems obvious to assume that the pact between government and populace did not hold out. Although hard to believe, the contrary was true. This chapter will show that the GDR’s difficult material situation actually functioned as one of the main pillars sustaining the alliance between state and citizenry.

Severe, Rational, and Centrally Planned

In the autumn of 1992, when I was in search of an appropriate fieldwork location, I made a short trip to the former GDR during which I visited various towns and cities. Apart from the appointments I had made in advance, my first impressions of the country were mainly visual. Wherever I came, I curiously viewed the streets, the public spaces, the tall apartment blocks in the suburbs, the interiors of the
libraries and town halls, the decoration in the few shops not yet renovated, and the little East German neon signs that were still there. I happened to visit Weimar on the day when the municipal rubbish collectors picked up large items, thus allowing me a glimpse of the remnants of people’s interiors that were now piled up on the side of the street. The overall scene left an impression similar to the ones I had encountered in the waiting rooms of public buildings. The colors were rather dreary. Most objects were rectangular, hardly adorned or plain, and rather drab. As far as the objects were decorated, these decorations did not seem to match the overall rectangular shapes of the objects. When I returned home, my general impression was that the GDR had had a rather severe material culture. When I later bought a catalogue with pictures of former East German consumer goods, this impression was confirmed.2

Almost a year later, when I had settled in Rudolstadt, the same severity struck me once more. The interiors of public buildings, shops and apartments, and the piles of rubbish on this town’s side streets all showed the same combination of frugality, severity, and scanty ornamentation that did not match the overall lines and forms.
Figure 4.3 – Rudolstadt, 1993, fish-shop
Source: Picture by the author.

Figure 4.4 – Rudolstadt, 1994, pile of rubbish
Source: Picture by the author.

Figure 4.5 – Eisenhüttenstadt, Leninallee, lamp and electric appliances shop, undated, 1970s
Source: Collection HO advertisement, Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt.
To me, a western outsider, the overall image came across as rather inconsistent and poor. Fortunately, a number of East Germans’ statements clarified that this impression was not solely down to (western) prejudices or my position as outsider. “East German objects represent the world at that time: it was a small world, a sad world,” remarked Stefan (a thirty-year-old student) when he saw something that reminded him of the old days while we were walking through the city of Jena. A similar connection was also suggested by Rudolstadt’s museum director. “Former East German society can be seen through its objects,” he said, showing me his little collection of East German consumer goods: a bar of soap, a packet of coffee, a bottle of hair tonic, and other everyday items, which he had hastily bought during 1989’s hectic autumn. Foreseeing that the GDR’s material world would soon disappear, he had found it important to store some of its everyday items. He did not know what to do with them, but future generations of historians might want to further investigate the relationship between objects of the period.

I later regretted neglecting to ask his opinion on that relationship. On the basis of what I had seen until then, I had come to associate the former GDR with severity and puritan rigidity. When I began to search for literature on home furnishings and design, it soon became clear that my associations were not purely coincidental. The East German material world appeared indeed to have been designed on the basis of ideas and convictions that could definitely be called severe.

Corresponding with the classical Marxist axiom that the material basis of society determines the social relations and mentality of a people, much thought was given to finding the right forms for East Germans’ daily lives. It was considered important for their further development to surround them with the right, socialist-proof material world. This was not only relevant for the public sphere (urban development and architecture), but also for people’s private lives, as highlighted by the editors of the popular house and interior design magazine, *Kultur im Heim*:

> If people’s living space was only the passive copy of their subjective qualities, ideas and tastes, we would not have to look at it from a social perspective; it would merely be a private affair. But because people’s living space plays such an important role in both the further development of human essence and the expression of socialist relationships, and because it has such a fundamental function within social psychology, its forms and shapes deserve to be dealt with in public. They are ‘res publica.’

According to the East German socialist doctrine, people’s material surroundings were not only the actual product of economic relations and human labor, they also played a significant role in encouraging the further development of people and
society. This dialectic between subject and object was not considered to be a neutral or value-free fact; its resulting development was seen as progressive, leading to mankind’s further enlightenment. “Our living space is much more than just a shield, a skin, or our life’s visual scenery – it is part of our essence, which develops with us and through which we find and achieve ourselves.”

In order for people to find the right material environment, they had to learn how to align their tastes and desires with what was needed to further develop society at large. Personal taste and society’s needs could only be matched once people had learned to recognize communal interests as their own. This could be accomplished by constantly instructing them to give up their acquired habits, primary impulses and individual desires, and question how they related to the needs of society at large. The main instrument to achieve this was the power of reason. “Empirical observation is not enough to understand reality in such a way that you grasp the total direction of historical movement and development in order to achieve the whole truth. For this, a high level of thinking is needed which can never be accomplished without a scientifically based world view.”

Although Marxist dialectics assumed that East Germans’ tastes would almost automatically develop along the lines sketched above – because “the enlightened human subject” would inevitably tend to favor “objects which are parallel to his essence” – this appears not always to have been the case. In order to help East German citizen-consumers find “forms of expression that are lebensbejahend [life-confirming], honest and true,” social scientists, philosophers, and designers studied the relationship between socialism, aesthetics, and taste. Their insights were popularized and disseminated by Kultur im Heim’s editors to reach and counsel the East German public. For more than thirty years, the editors explained to East Germans which forms and living room interiors were acceptable and which were not.

Going through entire volumes of the magazine shows that certain mistakes in taste were almost ineradicable. This particularly pertained to the preference for so-called old antique-looking objects and for things so abundantly adorned with frills, obtrusive splendor and fineries that they could be described as kitsch. Up until 1989, both phenomena were regularly subjected to critical scrutiny by Kultur im Heim’s editors. Time and again they tried to inform their readers that the “desire for decorations” and by-gone styles were expressions of a “deformed aesthetic consciousness,” which would have a far-reaching “inhibiting” effect on people individually and on society at large.

According to the editors, it was “tasteless, absurd, and kitschy to produce a salt-shaker in the form of an animal or mushroom.” What is more: it was “inappropri-
ate, and thus superfluous” to even decorate salt-shakers. Comparable statements reappeared quite regularly in a column to educate readers, called “the school of taste.” This column featured the right form and answered questions about a specific object. When, for instance, various stoves were illustrated, the reader was first asked to make a choice and then turn some pages further to read whether he had chosen the correct object or not, and why this was so. The preference for stove number seven, for instance, was right because “the structure and proportions of stove number seven are good.” If one opted for stove number eight, they explained that “this stove's form is unacceptable.” Preferring a fake, old-looking object was wrong because this choice was usually not based on a true understanding of the object. If people’s preference for old-looking objects was based on real knowledge (of the era when the object was made and used), it was acceptable. In such cases, the person’s preference was well informed, because he knew that “old objects express the heritage of craftsmanship and older generations’ taste, incorporating the mentality and way of life at that time.” The owner of the old-looking object was considered to have “a clear attitude towards yesterday’s objects,” enabling him to “ascribe the object its proper place, which is where it optimally serves its goal.” If such knowledge and insight did not exist, the attractiveness of old-looking objects was merely based on “immature understandings.” As it was obvious that most East Germans’ preferences were not based on true historical knowledge, the editors of the journal never tired of explaining why this was wrong. Sometimes this was done rather ironically: “Many people state that old is old and therefore beautiful. Some even respectfully call that ‘antique.’ But please, be consistent and turn off the lights, put two long twigs in your mouth and use them as a torch while you do the housekeeping.”

The editors of course fully understood that no one really wanted to return to these so-called cosy forms of illumination, because they were the silent witnesses of the miserable and exploited lives most people then lived. There was thus no objective reason, they went on to explain, to emotionally associate old-looking objects with positive notions – such as warmth or romanticism. People had to learn that their uninformed eye betrayed them when tempted to buy objects that were really “unnatural, meaningless, superfluous, unpractical, and overloaded” and “sugary, false, unreal, plagiaristic, badly faked, functionless, counterfeit.”

Similar reproaches also applied to objects that were not appropriate for East German circumstances at that time: objects whose production was extremely expensive for instance (because they were too big or unwieldy to use), or objects that were adorned in order to be adorned, that attracted attention in order to attract attention, that were different in order to be different, new in order to be new, or
derived their assumed beauty merely from the fact that they were supposed to be fashionable. Such taste preferences, according to the editors of the magazine, were dangerous because they made clear that too much importance was attached to material objects. In 1982 the magazine featured an article inviting readers to take a closer look inside a typical bourgeois home. The description of the interior includes a number of classical Marxist ideas:

Bald regt es sich die kurzen Wände entlang von allerlei verrenkten, misz-farbig gebeizten, heidenmäszig mit Kupfer beschlagenen Kasten und Kästchen, die wildbaumelnde Herde der Beleuchtungskörper rückt lär-mend ein, das ‘Künstgewerbe’ überflutet alle wehrlosen Standflächen. Schlangenlinien und Lilienwindungen wimmeln auf Tischdecken und Buchrücken; und drinnen, mitten in all dem schneidendfalschen Getön der ärgerlichsten Willkür, waltet die...Hausfrau [Soon the walls will be crammed with all kinds of cabinets and caskets in mismatched color stains and with dreadful copper fittings, the wildly dangling flock of lights over-hanging blatantly, and the arts and crafts flooding the helpless floor space. Squiggly lines and scrolling lilies will abound on tablecloths and book spines; and within, in the midst of all the incisively false tone of highly irritating self-righteousness, reigns...the housewife]12

This popularized version of Marxist ideas on the fetishist relationship between people and objects in bourgeois, capitalist societies showed East German readers that their preference for fashionable, so-called chic things actually conveyed a form of alienation that characterized life in capitalist societies. In these societies, so the argument went, the urge to obtain ever more possessions went hand in hand with growing rivalry, and there was no room for sincere relationships between people. “The constitutive moment of bourgeois enjoyment...is exclusiveness, the exclusion of others,” according to the East German philosopher Lothar Kühne in his book on aesthetics.13 It was up to East German designers and intellectuals to clarify these processes and explain to East German consumers that this was what would happen if they tried to surround themselves with objects that were dishon-est and insincere, from an enlightened design point of view.

East German rhetoric on design and material culture was dominated by rigid and absolute terms, by phrases about the essence of things, true and insincere desires, and an honest taste. Reason was the only relevant yardstick, and East Germans had to relate rationally towards their material surroundings. Any other orientation, like emotions, senses, or fantasy, should be subjected to logical scrutiny. Even aesthetics and taste had to be based on a well-balanced rational analysis.
People’s existing and former preferences were deemed irrelevant, except as starting points for further clarification and enlightenment.

In order to show how these abstract considerations were achieved in practice and what concrete objects they generated, it is necessary to first explain how the GDR’s production process was organized.

Production in East Germany aimed to optimally develop socialist society. As explained by the East German Minister of Culture in 1958: “True progress is what allows for or coerces further development.” Because general interests were best served when all available means, knowledge and capacities were used optimally, all East German production was centrally planned and mutually aligned: “East German economics is socialist, planned economics.” The production of consumer goods was centrally planned by the national planning commission and based on regional reports. After planning, the commission delegated different tasks (research, design, production, and sales) to the various production units and companies. Whenever problems occurred, the national planning commission assigned a study group to examine the situation and find a solution.

To show why this central organization best served general interests, reference was made to capitalism’s inefficient, extravagant legacy – an example of which was the production of light switches. In 1945, the region that was to become the GDR counted no fewer than seventeen different companies producing 1300 different light switches. Innumerable people throughout the country were thus involved with the same tasks, regarding the production of the same type of product. As this was considered an enormous waste of energy, manpower and financial means, the situation had to be changed as soon as possible. After careful examination, the amount of light switches was set at 178, which were no longer to be produced by seventeen, but only by two companies.

Mutual alignment not only took place at the national level, but also internationally. The socialist bloc countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Aid cooperated in production and trading. Their cooperation was largely based on forms of exchange in which money played a subordinate role. “It was almost medieval; we simply exchanged commodities,” an East German philosopher explained ironi- cally. These international agreements caused a great deal of problems. Frequently, the GDR did not receive the agreed amount of commodities, or they were not delivered in time, or their quality was worse than expected. When, for instance, Hungary did not deliver the ordered number of batteries in time, there was no other option but to wait, because Hungary produced batteries and the GDR did not. At a national level, such problems were the order of the day. In spite of such
shortcomings, the system of central (national and international) planning was not open to discussion.

An additional advantage of the plan system for the national economy was that product design could also be monitored centrally. Because, as sketched above, it was considered important for the inhabitants of the socialist state to be surrounded by the right forms, it was convenient to develop a national style that was in keeping with material culture’s educative and progressive function. Professional designers were asked to take the lead in clearing the existing product-landscape and searching for a new, truly socialist form. In this way, they played an important role in restructuring East German material culture and adjusting it to the new state’s demands.

The main task given to East German designers was to reduce the variety of forms and end the “form-wilderness” of objects.17 Starting in the late 1950s, the orders were for an all-encompassing “assortment clearance.”18 This meant designers had to critically study all sorts of items, from coffeepots and washing-up bowls to socks, in order to select the most appropriately designed objects, which were then chosen for further production. The selection criteria were the same as discussed above: there was no room for bourgeois taste preferences or objects that expressed people’s “desire for prestige” or “petty bourgeois ambitions.”19 Showing off or making others envious was inappropriate and did not conform to socialist society’s egalitarian ideals.20 Objects considered as kitschy were also deemed inappropriate for production. If an object was designed in such a way that its function was hidden behind an irrelevant decoration, the object was considered dishonest, because it renounced its primary aim – to serve a specific goal. Usually, such objects also renounced their origin because their appearance suggested another area of production than the one in which they were actually made. Comparable critique applied to richly decorated objects, whose adornments disguised their industrial origins. People who preferred to be surrounded by such things were actually trying to escape from the present time.

These points of departure underpinned East German designers’ search for forms that expressed contemporary, industrial means of production, and that were in keeping with the innermost functions and aims of the products concerned. All this was to be done as economically as possible, because all available means had to be used in a sensible and responsible way.

Thrift thus became the leading principle. It was regarded as an important virtue – not just for purely economic reasons (the amount of money, raw materials, and manpower used during production), but also from a more qualitative perspective. Too much adornment diverted attention from an object’s function.
Uneconomically designed objects in general tended to overwhelm and belittle their users. In time, a material culture of frugality developed in the GDR. Both for economic reasons and inspired by an idealistic search for honest forms in line with present-day reality, designers tried to find forms and objects that were little more than their function’s packaging. Because an object’s appearance had to be subordinate to the people who used it, the ideal form resembled a wrapping or cover. Then the object could show what it was meant for: for closing, sealing and covering (technical) functions. This perspective gave rise to an economically inspired aesthetics.

The result was a rigidly functionalist design, in which objects with straight lines and angles were preferred to rounded or curved forms. Producing rectangular objects was easier and more efficient (with little loss of material) and they were easier to transport and store. It is therefore no wonder that kits became important “symbols of progress” in the GDR, since they “rationalize[d] production and show[ed] the world to be manufacturable.” The ultimate aim was to develop a “rational engagement with furniture parts” that would “turn all elements into a uniform system.”
In time, objects came to be merely recognized as parts of a larger whole, and the highest praise was reserved for objects that were perfectly able to “adjust – to an ensemble, an assortment, a collection, a kit, a room.” Because it would not work to combine a straight bed with a curved cabinet, more and more object forms were adjusted to suit each other. The possibility to stack objects became a form quality in its own right, and ever more designers opted for straight, clear lines and forms, and for a neutral and plain color: grey.25

The fact that more and more objects tended to look alike was not deemed a disadvantage, because the key search was for “design qualities that were not determined by originality, but by objectivity.” The idea was to develop forms “of which even the smallest detail was rationally determined,” with a mutual alignment of all outer characteristics. Such forms were the result of scientific thinking. In them, “science and rationality found their formal expression...even though they were mediated by the designer’s subjectivity.”26

While doing all they could for the continual adjustment, merging and exchangeability of separate elements and parts, East German designers were ordered to investigate how “built-in furniture” could further save space. And by the end of the 1960s, the “link between furniture and architecture” was being investigated in order to discover how separate parts of housing accommodation could be turned into “different elements of a uniform system.” Sometimes the entire interior of
a flat, the furniture and its lay-out were aligned. In such cases it was crucial to execute the “formal coherence” of all parts, down to the tiniest details. “Separate products were to show their family resemblance very clearly, details of form were to recur, colors were to be adapted to each another, standardized parts were to be used, and the whole thing should be subject to a modular system.”

Rational, functional, enlightened, in accordance with present-day reality, no deceit, no insincere seduction, mutual alignment, and as economical as possible: those were East German design’s main tenets to optimally serve society’s further development. The overall image is overwhelmingly consistent, with everything being subordinate to reason. If a form was right, one could learn to appreciate it. Because modernist designers’ vision seamlessly embraced the government’s cost-cutting aims, the two parties naturally found each other in an outspokenly frugal material culture.

Because, as mentioned before, all decisions in the East German planned economy were taken or confirmed centrally, the overview presented above certainly suggests that the state ultimately even decided how people were allowed to furnish their apartments. However, one of the main reasons why East German history is so fascinating to study is that, in spite of its rigid ideology and seemingly rigid economic structure, it was characterized throughout by internal contradictions. Nothing was what it seemed, and this certainly applied to the material world, which in a number of ways came to look slightly different than what is sketched above.

The main reason why everyday reality did not match the previously mentioned ideal lies in the fact that the designers’ role in the production process, which although definitely greater than in market economies, was frequently frustrated by two different factors. First, there were the ineradicable, bourgeois taste preferences of the people with whom they collaborated during production, and second they had to deal with the rigid, international economic circumstances. Thus, many designers’ propositions frequently crashed before they were even taken into production. By describing and analyzing this process in the following section, I give a concrete illustration of what East Germany’s “constitutive contradictoriness” refers to in the domain of material culture.

“Far Too Modern for Our People,” and Economic Gaps

East German designers often had a hard task, for they were actually battling two fronts at the same time. While attempting to adjust East Germans’ taste preferences
to present-day circumstances and challenges, they were constantly hindered at the production site. When a particular design was ready for production, it regularly happened that the factory suddenly decided that other interests had to prevail, or a party-member with a good position at the factory suddenly decided to change the design according to his own liking. This happened quite frequently, sometimes because he did not like the product or did not know anything about design. One designer told me about an older female party-member who held a high position at the factory where one of his products was to be made. When the designer showed her cloth samples, she crankily remarked: “Oh no! We don't want those materials! No, this is far too modern for our people! That one is too daring, and that one is too colorful. No. This is what we will do.” She then simply swept his plans off the table. Another designer explained in more detail that designs were often discarded or changed because East German policymakers, party-members and people with a high position in industry usually had a totally different taste than professional designers:

The former category was often from a poor, working class background, where there was only enough money for the bare necessities. For a long time those people had looked up to a somewhat flashy form of comfort, which for them was the ultimate ideal. The interiors they had seen at the mayor and the notary’s house – that was what they wanted: a shiny cabinet with glass doors, enabling one to see the beautiful glass-ware and the fancy dishes inside, a beautifully adorned candelabra on top, and a copious sofa next to it, with beautiful and richly decorated upholstery. That was their petty bourgeois image of an ideal home and how things were done by people in a certain position. That was the image of prosperity they would strive for if they obtained such a position themselves and what they wanted to spend their money on. So those were the kinds of objects that had to be made. When confronted with something that was too modern, too simple, and too plain – for instance a white tea service without golden edging or enrichments – they told us: “That is not what our people want.” And maybe that was correct, but they themselves did not want it in the first place. The petty bourgeois ideal always remained intact in our country, and whenever some high-ranking party member had something to say, he could change the plans to suit his own wishes.29

This story shows that at the local level, those who were responsible for the state’s frugal policy only subscribed to the economic aspects of its thrifty ideology on material culture and design. The match between the economic necessity of thrift
Figure 4.8 – Multiple room wall system ‘Frankfurt,’ undated, early 1970s

Figure 4.9 – East German living room interior with wall system ‘Carat,’ 1972
Source: Collection “Kultur im Heim,” Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt.
and most designers’ frugal ideas, which was pledged at the national level, was locally frustrated by party bosses and others in power who clung to their old taste preferences, even though they were not sensible or socialistically sound. If even loyal party members’ tastes were not susceptible to rational consideration, we might safely conclude that East German material reality was less open for change and enlightenment than the lucid socialist ideals would suggest.

This was exactly my experience on visiting the former GDR for the first time, when I was struck by the odd combination of strict lines and mismatched ornamentation. The furniture on Weimar’s streets showed a striking compromise between designers’ functionalist-inspired and economically reasonable ideas on the one hand, and falling behind, petty bourgeois taste preferences of party-bosses and most consumers on the other – a compromise between modern lines and a cozy-looking decor.

A comparable compromise manifested itself in the way chipboard was used. The product as such perfectly suited the socialist state’s ideals: it exemplified the optimal use of raw materials, was visibly industrially produced and thus perfectly present-day. Remarkably, most chipboard objects and furniture that were produced and used in the GDR were covered with plastic foil with a wood design, thus disguising the manufactured product, making it look like natural wood. Just like the party-bosses, who adjusted modern objects to old-fashioned taste preferences, the chipboard embellishments also proved that the sound socialist ideas on design were not as widely appreciated as well-meaning idealists hoped.

Most designers knew that their ideas for functional products were relatively unpopular. “Many people didn’t like objects that clearly showed their function. They wanted to have richly embellished things, with for instance a flowery edging and elegant finish,” a middle-aged female designer told me. Her remark was substantiated by many East German consumers. “In our country, everything always looked the same: straightforward and unadorned. We didn’t like that. We preferred objects with a little adornment here, and a little trimming there,” people explained to me. But trimmings and adornments were not in line with socialist policy, and designers stuck to a rational, more or less ageless ideal, where form follows function.

At the academy, students even learned to design contrary to the somewhat softer, rounded, fashionable (and western-looking) forms that so many East German consumers desired, as Karin, a 35-year-old designer, explained:

These forms were regarded as a genuflection for naive consumers, whereas consumers needed to be educated. And that was what we were for. It was
not our task to make what people wanted or liked. Because what they liked and wanted was no design. It had nothing to do with design at all – that was what we learned.

But frequently she too had to accept that once her well-considered designs were being produced, they would be embellished with colorful, flowery motives.

The material objects that came to dominate the East German product world were the result of an interesting combination of factors and forces: the modernist ideas of relatively highly educated designers who were supported by national policies (if only for economic reasons), but constantly frustrated by the unenlightened taste preferences of consumers, some of whom had the power and capacity to actually obstruct designers’ work.

The third force that had a major influence on the East German material landscape was money. When discussing material culture’s everyday form and socialist ideals with a highly educated, prominent party member, he snarled curtly: “Ideology?? Socialist personality??? Come on! It was all a matter of money! Our objects were ugly because we couldn't afford anything else. Besides, there was no need to please the eye; people bought everything anyway.” All the beautiful, educative ideas on design discussed above were swept aside as completely irrelevant. The GDR’s material appearance and decor had primarily been determined by the country’s poor economic situation. His remark further clarified what I had seen on the side streets of Weimar and Rudolstadt: an impossible compromise between modern-enlightened and traditional-bourgeois, that was further compromised by the GDR’s permanent lack of money and raw materials.

The impact of East Germany’s economic developments on its material culture can hardly be overstated – especially with regard to the period from the end of the 1970s. “In fact,” a retired doctor explained to me, “East German economics were characterized by gaps. There was a constant succession of gaps and shortages, and in fact this was pre-programmed in the socialist economic system.” To illustrate his point, he referred to the area he knew best: the pharmaceutical industry.

Today we have about eighty thousand different medicines. Some of them chemically work the same, curing the same symptoms. This variety was considered undesirable in the GDR. Therefore, the amount of medication was limited to about two thousand types: there was one medication for each symptom. This could have worked well, but the problems were insurmountable when one of the ingredients was not available. Then the whole plan went haywire, and certain medicines were simply not available. This
was almost perpetually the case: then there were no medicines for headaches, and then there was nothing for rheumatics or corns, etc.

In spite of the country’s continual shortages and planning deficiencies, official policy never openly revealed or discussed the less than rosy economic situation. Time and time again, people were confronted with announcements applauding the latest positive developments in the field of production and public welfare.

In 1978, for instance, a picture of the so-called Ecometer was displayed on every street corner (see figure 4.10). Its message read: “Out of every working hour, every mark [the GDR’s currency, mv], and every gram of raw material, we obtain more useful products.” In light of the ongoing shortages that plagued East German planning and production at the time, the message comes across as an outright lie. But as I mentioned before, nothing was what it seemed in the GDR, and that also applied to this message. For it was indeed true that East Germany managed to produce ever more with ever fewer materials. An employee of a furniture manufacturer told me laughingly how this came about: “You want to know how we managed to make more pasta out of less wheat? We simply enlarged the holes in our macaroni!” It was a joke, but when she explained how the furniture industry managed to continuously raise its production levels, the reality was no laughing matter.
There were plenty of ways to increase production. If, for instance, we used more expensive materials, we didn’t have to produce as many items. Another trick was to send the products back and forth. For example, we bought chair components from company X, assembled them at our company, then sent them – still as separate components – to a firm to upholster them, after which the items were returned to us, and we produced the chair that was then sent to yet another company which packaged the products. By continually sending objects back and forth, their price went up and so did our turnover. Once we had bad luck: the Russians delivered the materials we had ordered at a lower price than expected. This made our production cheaper than planned, reducing our turnover. The party summoned us to explain what had happened, and we were reprimanded. Nowadays this is inconceivable – we would be delighted to obtain cheap materials! From a market-economic perspective, it is a clear example of things being turned upside down.

The story not only exemplifies some of the planned economy’s main failures. It also shows how much effort people put into upholding the beautiful-sounding promises despite the stubborn and disappointing reality confronting them.

“In fact it was impossible,” a woman explained, “to make plans, let alone achieve them.” She had been responsible for making and checking the economic plans for Rudolstadt region’s thirty bookshops, but she pointed out how impossible it was to know in advance how many books would be sold in each shop in the following year. One could not make solid plans, but it was a public secret that the plans were creatively adjusted afterwards.

Sometimes this happened in public. Then, reference was made to the objective reasons (i.e. caused somewhere else) for why the plan was not accomplished. For instance, an archive record of an Exquisit shop’s plan states: “Because there are objective reasons for insufficient fulfillment of the plan, trading figures for February have dropped statistically by one-and-a-half million.” Usually, however, the plans were adjusted less discernably – by creative accounting. In Rudolstadt’s Allotment Association’s plans for the year 1975, one column mentions that the small stock figures had not improved since last year, whereas another column mentions a 10 percent rise. When I asked her to explain, the archives assistant said this was probably correct: she assumed that the gardeners had acquired fewer animals, but slaughtered more than in the previous year.

These examples show, each in their own way, that people did their utmost best to uphold the positive tone so characteristic of the GDR’s public sphere. Apart
from creative accounting, understatements and other forms of beautification were frequently used to flatter developments. If it was impossible to leave out a negative development, people often enveloped it in beautiful-sounding phrases. A confidential archive document from 1963 about trading and supplies in Rudolstadt mentions the following: “The women of our area are still very much engaged in all the issues pertaining to the maintenance of peace and the problems of the Moscow Agreement, but also in matters of supply.” The document is telling: twenty-six positive words, followed by an almost negligible six-worded remark. The same applies to the following message on the state of affairs concerning food supplies, which dates from the year 1983 and has a positive ring:

The available amount of potatoes guarantees the population a stable supply in the nearby future. Problems exist in the preservation of quality, due to increasing Schwarzfleckigkeit [black spot]. In the vegetables category we are able to provide sufficient lettuce, rhubarb, onions, white cabbage and sauerkraut. There are also enough apples.

The positive tone of the message is so dominant, that it takes a second read to realize that the population of Rudolstadt had to be satisfied, in the middle of June, with a rather limited choice of vegetables, while the potatoes had black spots.
Besides quality, the appearance of most consumer goods also suffered from the poor economic circumstances, the director of Gera’s Museum of Applied Arts explained, while showing me the museum’s East German packaging and consumer goods collection. Going past the material remains of the old days, he repeatedly drew my attention to the poor and loveless appearance of the products. “And then always this serial production,” he sighed, pointing to the drugstore products. The color of the label was the only way to tell whether you were holding a bottle of pills for headaches, diarrhea, or stomach-ache, or if it was a bottle of shampoo, nail polish remover, or hair lotion. But even the colors were difficult to distinguish. They were all of the same dull hue. In this country, yellow was never really yellow and blue was never really blue. There was simply no money to obtain good, richly pigmented coloring.

Since East German packaging was usually of a rather coarse, thick paper that bore some resemblance to cardboard and typically had a very loose structure, the colooured ink was almost entirely absorbed into the paper’s pores. Most packaging was therefore reminiscent of today’s vaguely colored, eco-friendly toilet paper. It often had a simple white sticker with “light bulb, 40 Watts” written on it. The general image was extremely disconsolate. The director showed me a packet of biscuits, and judging by its appearance, it could have contained anything – from elastic bands to rat poison – except biscuits.34
The GDR had insufficient financial resources to produce vibrantly colored paint, good paper, or a variety of packaging. Sometimes the overall shortages were such that extreme measures were necessary. An inhabitant of a hamlet near Rudolstadt told me that one day, when the Soviet Union was unable to deliver the agreed amount of maize, the whole country was ordered to plant maize. Even the garden of the small local school did not grow anything but maize that year.

In order to rid itself of international dependency, East German industry was continually encouraged to “cut back and intensify the use of indigenous resources” and “abgestimmte Veredlungskonzepte [coordinated refinement concepts].” No matter how beautiful the words, in practice it meant that the holes in the macaroni were bigger, or that chair-leg producers used so little metal that chairs could easily sag under the slightest weight or movement (see figure 4.13).

The quality of East German products became worse and worse, the country was simply runtergerubelt [Russicism, literally: roubled down], and ever more people began complaining: about the bottles of beer – which people used to turn upside down to check whether they contained flakes, as beer was made from surrogates instead of real malt and hops; about the clothes made of surrogate cotton, which caused excessive perspiration when worn; about the chocolate produced with almost no cacao; about the butter that contained too much water; about the
chewing gum that fell apart when you chewed it and later became so hard that it almost broke your teeth; about the jeans-surrogate which the GDR eventually managed to develop, but which did not even look like the original; about the furniture made from pressed paper, which miraculously did not fall apart spontaneously; about the water taps made of plastic, and the cars made of paper; about the sandals that were made of pressed paper instead of leather, with plastic soles instead of rubber.37

As these examples show, East German products were to a certain extent fake: fake chocolate, fake cotton, fake rubber, beer, butter, cars and wooden furniture. Dissatisfaction was growing. People not only complained about the quality, but also about products’ appearance, their availability, variety and price. In one of Rudolstadt’s Exquisit shops, female customers were unsatisfied with the garments on display: they were not enticed by “trousers made of polyester-silk with bright glittery effects.” They did not want to spend half their wages on stuffy winter jackets, for they wanted “elegant, cotton, fur-trimmed coats.”38 But they were not available.

Billboards along East German highways never stopped showing that: Chemie gibt Brot, Wohlstand und Schönheit [the chemical industry will provide bread, welfare and beauty]. This motto, which once expressed a promising future optimism, in the end was merely cynical, unable to conceal the fact that there was not enough money for cotton, metal, hops and malt. But none of this could really be said out loud.39 If there was no butter, newspapers published articles explaining in detail that butter was actually not very healthy and that margarine was preferable.

In the GDR, the reality was always embellished. The media outdid each other with their jubilant declarations: “Year after year the planning goals for the production of consumer goods are fulfilled and improved” or “the rate of agrarian production has grown during the year 1986 and is five times higher than in the period 1981-1985.”40 Shops aimed to “cream off more money [in the next year] and in the years thereafter,” and economic diagrams always showed a rising trend.41 Whenever Honecker or another important politician travelled through the country, the houses along his route were painted afresh and the field in front of the factory he was going to visit was sprayed with green paint.42

In the course of East Germany’s entire history, the optimistic and cheerful messages remained the same: it won’t take long, we’re doing our best, and it is getting better. East German public life was dominated by positive words, whereas everybody could see with their own eyes how dreadful the economic situation actually was. Because every level of East German bureaucracy messed around with facts and figures, trying to enhance reality on paper, Mary Fulbrook concludes that
Honecker and his colleagues lived in a “hall of mirrors, where the messages that were reflected from the center came back from the provinces in a slightly moderated form.”

I always wondered what it would have been like to live amidst beautiful promises and the harsh reality of beer with flakes and chocolate without cacao. I have given a few examples of the complaints and dissatisfaction this caused. It would not have been difficult to extend the list and fill many pages. One would therefore expect East Germans to have increasingly turned away from the state, de-identifying with it and its false promises. One would expect the pact between state and citizens, which was based on high hopes and far-reaching promises in the wake of material improvement, to be crushed by the disappointing East German material conditions. To a certain extent, that was indeed the case. It is no coincidence that when German historian Lutz Niethammer was doing an oral history project in the GDR in 1988, he was particularly struck by the omnipresent critiques on the country’s material situation. And of course, these critiques played a central role in East Germans’ mounting desires vis-à-vis the western consumer world.

At the same time, however, it soon became clear to me that the material and economic hardships people suffered also generated behavior and forms of social contact that characterized East German life in a positive way. It may be hard to believe, but the pact between state and citizens seems to have partly survived – in spite of the frustrations about unfulfilled promises – because the promises were not fulfilled.

**Queuing and Mutual Equality**

Material shortages were a recurrent theme in my conversations with East Germans. Many people told me that in the old days, experience simply taught them that it was not wise to go shopping with specific items in mind. After all, you could never be sure which goods would be available or not. Sometimes there was no washing powder, sometimes no milk. After the *Wende*, Matthias Biskupek, a writer from Rudolstadt, described the GDR as the country inhabited by *Beuteldeutschen* [shopping-bag Germans]. Due to the permanent shortages, East Germans always had a shopping bag with them. One never knew in advance what would happen – one might even run into something that one just happened to need...

People were therefore always preoccupied with being able to buy certain things. This is not to say that they were constantly buying things. They were constantly trying to make deals that would allow them to buy or obtain things in the future.
For an outsider like me, it was fascinating to hear their stories. Not just because they opened up a world I did not know, but also for more theoretical reasons. The constant shortages made the East German economy function according to a completely different set of values than I knew. Whereas the value of money declined, social contacts were invaluable. But the deplorable material situation also triggered forms of behavior that had profound effects on East German social life.

I overheard innumerable stories about the different methods people used in order to acquire all their bare necessities. People were constantly exchanging and arranging necessary purchases. At work, women frequently circulated notes so that they could all write down what they needed from the supermarket, the grocery store and the butcher. Then they allocated the tasks, and one went to queue here, the other there. “As soon as we heard that they had a specific kind of meat somewhere, everyone left work in order to get a place in the queue. But even then, you often came home empty-handed, because the saleswoman had put it aside for her acquaintances,” a middle-aged civil servant recalled. Because shopping in the socialist bloc was so unpredictable, the Polish psychologist Zbigniew Czwartosz has compared socialist consumers with hunters:

The Poles go shopping like hunters go hunting. Just like hunters, they do not know precisely ‘what’ they will manage to track down. They do get a clear hint when to start the action. And that is the sight of a queue. We react to the queue like a fisherman to a jerk on his bait. We get a thrill of emotion and enter the stage of our everyday life theatre.46

As soon as there was a queue somewhere, people joined it – even if they did not know what they were queuing for. All they knew was that at the end of the queue something was for sale, and it hardly mattered what that was: rare goods were always useful. So instead of asking what was for sale and whether one needed it, the automatic reaction when seeing a queue was simply to think “buy it.” Czwartosz’s five-year-old son once came home very disappointed, saying that he had not been able to buy parsley, because there was no queue anywhere. “The lack of a queue met a gap in his knowledge about shopping.”47

Czwartosz’s article illustrates that people’s desires were to a great extent determined by the (un)availability of goods. This conclusion corresponded with the stories I heard. One of my acquaintances in Rudolstadt told me the following story:

Whenever the supermarkets put signs on a certain product to indicate that individual customers were only entitled to buy a limited amount, it was obvious that this product was in short supply. Just for fun, we then
placed the sign somewhere else – on a product that was widely available. Within no time that product was sold out, whereas the product that was really in short supply was not sold at all!!

Another woman told me: “Because we were always running after goods, the GDR was frequently referred to as the running-club.” Often people started to stock Christmas presents around September already, for if you started in December, you would certainly not find everything you needed in time. The same applied to the ingredients for baking Christmas cakes – almonds, for instance, or raisins, or coconut. Such foodstuffs were always scarce, and whenever they were available, they were sold out within a few hours, “because people do their utmost best to meet their year-round needs.” Hoarding was common practice in the GDR. People did not buy what they needed but what they were allowed to (sales of so-called deficiency goods were limited).

An older woman from a village close to Rudolstadt once told me about the day her daughter wanted to buy a winter coat. Her husband and daughter went into town together to find a coat. She had told them not to worry about money: the most important thing was that they buy a good, warm coat. When they came home later that afternoon, they appeared not to have a coat, but a bathing suit. They had not seen any winter coats at all, but as soon as they saw the bathing suits, there was no doubt in their minds at all, and they instantly decided to buy one. After all, you never knew whether bathing suits would be available next summer.

The father in this story knew that his daughter actually needed a bathing suit, but often people simply bought an item just because it was hard to get – even if they knew they were not going to need it themselves. Such haphazardly bought items did not necessarily end up in the attic. Frequently, something turned out to be useful in an unexpected way, for instance when you ran into an acquaintance who appeared to be in need of that specific item and who was happy to exchange it for something you yourself needed.

Due to the continual shortage of a wide range of goods, the customer was never king in the GDR, but treated as beggar. The opposite applied to people who worked in a shop or restaurant. They were extremely powerful. “I never had such a large circle of friends as zu DDR-Zeiten [the days of the GDR], when I worked in a shop selling household goods,” a young man told me. Everybody came up to him asking: “Do you happen to have a so-and-so, can you arrange this or that for me?” A similar story came from a woman who worked in a restaurant. She explained that she was regularly exchanging restaurant seats for goods. On special occasions she and her colleagues reserved tables for special guests – the women working
in the children’s wear shop, for instance, who could have a seat in exchange for babies’ nappies.

As these stories show, it paid to have a job in a shop or other access to scarce goods and services. Many people grew strawberries or asparagus in their garden as exchange-capital. Such luxury goods were always scarce, and being unnecessary, they were unaffordable and therefore very suitable exchange objects. “Goods are the real currency in this country. Those with something to give have the potential to obtain.” Certain goods such as spare parts for cars and building materials were always hard to get. They were invaluable: once you obtained such goods, everything else was accessible. One way to obtain them was by maintaining an extensive exchange network. The significance of such networks was highlighted in a story told by Mr. Linke, a middle-aged man who used to work as a taxi-driver. He managed to build his own house which, considering the permanent shortages of building materials, had certainly not been easy. He bought only a small amount of the required materials in shops – the rest he had managed to acquire through all kinds of unofficial arrangements. It had taken him only eight years to build the house, which was a relatively short period. He could only achieve this, he explained, because he had done nothing else but work and build, and because he knew a lot of
people (through his work) who were able to get him what he needed. He sometimes refused to drive people unless they brought him a bag of sand, stones or mortar. He explained that this was the reason why so many houses in the GDR looked as if they were made from different scraps of materials. “Everything was so scarce, that you were happy to get at least something; the question of whether it fitted in with the rest was completely irrelevant. The result usually looked rather hotchpotch: different sizes of kitchen tiles, and general mismatching in almost every domain.”

The permanent shortages and waiting-lists also led to widespread bribery and corruption.51 The man who owned the only furniture shop in Rudolstadt that was still successful after the Wende told me that he believed the reason for his success was that he was the only one who had always traded fairly. That is: he had always divided up the available furniture in an honest way. Even when high-ranking party-members came to the shop and asked if he could arrange a certain couch or side table, he treated them in exactly the same way as he treated others: they could put their name on a list, and then they had to wait. In most shops, things went differently. A woman told me about her attempts to acquire a new television set. She was on the waiting list, and one day a saleswoman told her that a delivery of new televisions was expected the next morning. Because she really wanted one, she arranged for some of her family to spend the night on the pavement in front of the store. In the end, she was able to buy a television, but even so, she had seriously reckoned with the possibility of coming away empty-handed. Certain goods were so scarce and so desired, she explained, that they were usually sold under the counter. As soon as they arrived, the salespeople put them under the proverbial counter in order to sell them to the person with whom they had made an agreement (usually a person who happened to have something the saleswoman needed). When the specific customer arrived to buy the so-called Bückwaren [articles sold under the counter], the saleswoman bent down to get the objects from under the counter and sold them. Referring to these practices, many shopkeepers said that their job actually did not involve selling goods, but redistributing them.

The same situation applied to services. Sometimes, people even traded places on a waiting list – for example when buying a car. The continual shortages led to the habit of moonlighting, and East Germans developed other creative tactics. Under the motto “private above adversity,” people frequently stole materials from their workplace in order to trade them amongst each other. These practices were generally known – business crime was even recorded in the plan.52 A form of bribery was even used by the state from time to time – for instance, when the political situation was tense, or when something special was about to occur (elections).
Such situations were designated as *versorgungspolitischen Schwerpunkte* [supply-political main points]. In order to secure a calm and reasonably satisfied mood amongst the population, scarce goods were made available in order to buy popular support. A few extra truckloads of oranges were enough to obtain a satisfactory result or, as was stated in a report on the local political situation in the year 1983: “Further progress was attained [through] politically influencing the availability of extra consumer goods for popular supply.”

East Germany’s widescale corruption undoubtedly had far-reaching negative economic consequences, but from a social point of view, the consequences were markedly positive. As sketched above, social life in the GDR was upheld by large-scale exchange networks which kept people informed of each other’s wishes, needs, frustrations and searches. Theatre tickets were exchanged for stockings, baby clothes were bartered for a bathroom-mat, and if you knew someone who kept rabbits or worked at a butcher’s shop, you would certainly be tucking into rabbit or goose at Christmas. Money played a subordinate role in these networks. Whereas national economics were plagued by continual financial shortages, the majority of the East German population had enough money at its disposal. Their main problem was the inability to spend it on things they really wanted.

Traditional economic thinking has long seen barter as the forerunner or breeding ground for financial deals. The East German situation actually showed the opposite: here, barter functioned as a way to solve the problems originating in the financial economy. The stories I recorded in Rudolstadt show that barter should certainly not be seen as a non-monetary form of trade. Even if people negotiated the goods and amounts to be exchanged, there were no external, objective criteria to calculate the value of exchanged goods. Value was determined solely by both parties’ interests in the other’s possession. And when goods and desires happened to match, an exchange was made. There was no financial gain, and the entire process was set in motion by people trying to satisfy their own desires, helping each other along the way. The social element was a welcome side-effect, independently adding value to the interaction. Because the implicit rule that you get something from me and I get something from you is a far more social affair than an exchange organized according to externally recognized values (money), barter is a form of exchange “which creates social relations in its own mode.”

The anecdotes about barter and exchange I encountered in Rudolstadt clearly illustrate Mauss’s widely accepted idea that the exchange of goods encourages mutual solidarity. A wide web of social relationships was woven throughout the town, linking everyone to countless others through countless strands. Through the pro-
cess of bartering and exchanging goods, people were in touch with and linked up with others.

The other major consequence of permanent shortages, that is to say queuing, had a similar effect. Standing in line together, waiting for scarce goods, led to a certain commonality amongst the queuing people. Existing social-economic differentiations faded temporarily – everyone had to queue up for oranges, the doctor just as much as the worker and the party-member just as much as the critical teenager.

While standing and grumbling together, people experienced something communal that surpassed the mutual differences prevailing elsewhere. Although people with a rich network of acquaintances or a higher social position probably spent less time queuing than others, they also had to stand and wait until they were served, or to see what was for sale. If they wanted to obtain scarce goods, they were also dependent on factors beyond their power. Thus, queuing also had a certain leveling, democratizing effect and: “[A]rticulated (in grumbling) were of/ten interests that transcended the individual…in being annoyed they were one.”57 The fact that people knew each other’s needs and wants also helped to create a certain intimacy or community feeling, which was the direct result of the GDR’s continual scarcities and economic misery.

Interestingly, solidarity amongst the East German population, which the socialist state had promised, was indeed a result of the material situation – not because it had improved, but because it failed to improve. Anthropologist Chris Hann draws a comparable conclusion about Polish farmers before the upheaval of 1989-1990. The highly praised mutual solidarity, which the Polish state made a great ideological song and dance about, was primarily experienced when people were queuing together in front of a shop: “[A] true spirit of solidarity developed during the hours (sometimes days) they spent waiting at the shop for the delivery truck to arrive.”58

More generally, one could even conclude that, in as much as solidarity and feelings of commonality did characterize East German daily life, they were to a certain extent the result of the state’s inability to fulfill its material and consumer promises. People suffered the same shortages, almost everyone (except the small circle at the head of the socialist unity party) had to stand in the same queues, and scarcity compelled people to develop a much larger social network than they otherwise would have had. All those very practical, everyday forms of sharing and social contact generated a feeling of commonality, solidarity and mutual equality that people dearly missed after the Wende.

Life in the GDR was dominated by a huge discrepancy between the state’s claims and everyday reality. Nothing was what it was said to be. Newspapers
merely presented beautiful promises that hardly anyone gave credence to. The re-
tired judge mentioned before, who had remained a loyal party-member, recalled a
party conference in the mid-1980s. While socialist praises were again being sung
in the most beautiful words, he shoved a note to one of his party colleagues stating:
“Sure, things are great in this country! That’s why the shops are always empty, and
there is nothing for sale.” Looking back, he compared the GDR with the fairytale
of the emperor’s new clothes: “Everyone had to be jubilant about things no one
could see.”

Although ultimately no one believed that the beautiful-sounding words would
ever become reality, people still cooperated in reproducing them – perhaps not
wholeheartedly, but grumbling and complaining, secretly sending notes to each
other, but still... at all bureaucratic levels people beautified reality. Everyone helped
to uphold a reality no one believed in.

It is reminiscent of the situation in Syria, evocatively described and analyzed
by political scientist Lisa Wedeen. She describes a country where the inhabitants
collectively act as if they believe in the language of power. The insincerity is so
evident that the question arises of why politics are based “on the external and eas-
ily falsified trappings of loyalty, rather than on people’s internal beliefs.” Wedeen’s
comments are highly relevant when trying to understand why the pact between
East German citizens and the state remained intact in spite of material promises
not being fulfilled.

According to Wedeen, people participating in actions they do not believe in
contribute to a mentality of powerlessness, thus implicitly proving and helping to
realize the power of the state. Participating and acting as if reality was as beautiful
as described on paper shows that “the regime can make most people obey most of
the time.” This binds people. It incriminates them, making them “aware of their
willingness to comply.” In doing so, they become enmeshed with and part of the
state apparatus.

Wedeen’s conclusions aptly capture what I have tried to show empirically in
this chapter: that it was impossible to draw a line between the East German state
and its citizens. Everyone helped to enhance the printed version of reality. Party
bosses and ordinary people – everyone complained about unadorned tea services
and empty shops. And as Mary Fulbrook showed: the beautiful-sounding prom-
ises were sent from the center to the rest of the country, after which almost equally
beautiful messages were sent back from the regions to the administrative center. It
was almost impossible to think of a position “strictly outside or inside the state.”
East Germans were not only subordinate to the power and language of the socialist
state, in myriad ways they also reproduced them themselves; by writing that plans
had been achieved again, and that the women in the Rudolstadt area were primarily occupied with “issues pertaining to the maintenance of peace.”

Instead of studying East German society as one in which everything was determined and orchestrated by the centre, it is more beneficial to focus on the constant “interaction and mutual dependence between rulers and ruled.” The next chapter will deal with this interaction and mutual dependence. There I will show that it was specifically the East German state’s omnipresence which eventually privatized the state: “[P]recisely because [the state] had lost its limits, in a certain sense [it] became increasingly vergesellschaftet [indistinguishable from society].” This certainly plays a role in explaining why during my fieldwork so many East Germans kept on defining themselves as East German.