Where we think we have caught hold of the Grail, we have only grasped a thing, and what is left in our hands is only a cooking pot (Georges Bataille, 1988 [1967]).

In late 1989, the unimaginable happened: GDR residents could freely enter West Germany, and one year later, the two Germanys were united. In that year, the country was in a state of jubilation. The euphoria was immense, especially in the GDR. Yet these joyous feelings quickly disappeared, and five years later they had given way to a general mood of dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration and despair. Many felt like the man in the street, cheated by the western world. Many missed the GDR, sighing nostalgically: “Then the world was still friendly, warm and convenient.” Interestingly, this mood was apparent in every social circle and layer of society. Even people who had prospered since the Wende often declared their frustration and disappointment. All in all, I hardly met anyone who was entirely satisfied with the changes that had taken place. The question is how this mood change should be interpreted?

There appeared to be various reasons for the widespread discontent. In the first place, many East Germans were disappointed by what the economic upheaval had engendered. In a market economy, only the fittest survive according to East German common opinion. This was seen as one of the causes not only of the high unemployment in the GDR, but of the painful fact that, in order to better themselves, people cheated on each other. The second reason why the capitalist world met with such strong disapproval in the former GDR was that since the Wende, social differentiation between people had increased considerably. This was said to have largely put an end to people’s involvement with each other. The third reason was that the relationship between East and West Germans did not work out as people had expected. On the contrary, because West Germans supposedly looked down on East Germans and their past society, East Germans collectively felt as if they had become second-class citizens in their own country. The changes in the consumer market that had occurred since the Wende were cited as a cause, a result or an illustration of the three different sources of discontent.
Before going into these issues more deeply, let me first outline the dramatic events that took place in the GDR from the moment that some of the East German population took to the streets in the autumn of 1989.

The Wende

In the summer of 1989, when East German holidaymakers in Czechoslovakia managed to secure entry to the west through the West German embassy in Prague, the call for change was beginning to sound in the GDR and would be declared more openly. Various letters to the editors of newspapers were published in which people – first cautiously and later ever more blatantly – demanded change: more openness, democracy and freedom. “Wir sind das Volk [we are the people]” was heard everywhere. “The people” no longer accepted not having a voice and being dictated to. They demanded changes to the existing East German power structure.

It was a rather specific section of the people that spoke out. The people who took to the streets and called for changes were generally those who had also previously been more critically involved in society: intellectuals, people active in the protestant church, party members, writers, artists, and journalists. The vast majority of East Germans were only remotely interested in politics that autumn.²

Just like in all the towns and cities up and down the country, meetings were organized in Rudolstadt from the middle of October 1989 – in churches, theatres, youth clubs and schools. There, too, the first initiatives were taken by the local intelligentsia. On October 16, some actors from the local theatre organized a meeting, and three days later a service to pray for peace was held in the Protestant church, after which the congregation walked to the Catholic church at the other end of the city center. In that first demonstration an estimated total of 2000 people took part. Although demonstrations had been held in other towns for over a month, various participants of that first demonstration in Rudolstadt remembered how scared they were when they went into the streets. They still vividly remembered the previous summer’s “Chinese solution” when the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing had ended in a bloody massacre. Considering how unthinkable it had always been in the GDR to voice a dissident opinion out loud in the streets, this felt extremely scary. Moreover, during the first demonstrations, police was everywhere, and photographs were taken of the demonstrators. Despite the fear, the numbers of people taking part in the demonstrations quickly increased. Once it became clear that the powers of state were not going to intervene with force, the
fear gradually made way for a feeling that people were witnessing a remarkably special moment in time.

From the end of October, national events started to take off at a rapid pace. On November 4, the biggest demonstration in the GDR's history took place in East Berlin; it was estimated that one million people took part. On November 7, a mass demonstration was held in Dresden, where for the first time people publicly called for the government to step down. That same day the government resigned, and on November 8, eleven members of the Politburo did the same.

During the following day's press conference on November 9, while Günter Schabowski, a member of the reduced Politburo, was giving an account of the recent events, an unimaginable thing happened. A piece of paper was shoved into Schabowski's hands, which he read out in front of the cameras. People watching the event on television later said that it seemed as if Schabowski did not know what he was reading, but his words meant that with immediate effect, the residents of the GDR were free to leave the country. The announcement was so unimaginable that initially it almost did not sink in. People could not believe their ears, it could not be true. The East German Reverend Weber, who later published his diary describing those astonishing days, explained the consequences of the televised broadcast of Schabowski's press conference as follows:

No-one seems to understand the significance of the announcement — Schabowski just as little as all those who saw him on live television. Slowly, a sort of shock situation emerges, and people begin to realize the huge significance. Does this really mean...? These hopes are immediately banished again. Impossible, a joke, one of the numerous fake decisions that people know so well: first your hopes are raised, only to be dashed by the subsequent interpretation. Or could it be possible? Indeed: the late news confirmed what people had not dared to hope. Thousands of East Berliners started to cross the border to West Berlin.3

On November 9, 1989, the border between both German states was opened. News spread very rapidly throughout the country, and within a couple of hours, the whole of East Germany was aware that the country was no longer hermetically closed to the outside world. The East German customs officers' initial reaction was reluctance, but it soon became clear to them as well that they would have to let the flocking mass of countrymen through the border without hindering them in any way. For the first time, no mirrors had to be held under the cars, no visas had to be checked, and no contents of cars and bags had to be subjected to a thorough search in case someone was being smuggled over the border. Everyone who wanted to
could freely pass the border between East and West Germany, to be received on the other side by the equally enthusiastic masses of West Germans.

What happened within the hours, days, and weeks thereafter dominated the news. All over the world the television showed the same images: blocked East German roads, mile-long rows of Trabants [East German car] trying to reach the frontier, indistinct masses of people at the border, and East and West Germans sobbing as they fell into each other’s arms on the western side. The promise that every East German would receive an amount of one hundred DM Begrüßungsgeld [welcoming money] on the west side was an additional incentive for most East Germans to go and see the world on the other side with their own eyes. Everyone went. In the first ten days after November 9, an estimated eight million East Germans crossed the border to West Germany.

Afterwards, most people still remembered vividly what they then felt. Many said they just could not control their tears when visiting West Germany for the first time. Especially its material aspects made a deep impression. What prosperity! It was all there! Everywhere, there were things for sale! Everything looked equally beautiful: the people, the streets, the houses, the cars, the shops, all of it! The attraction of the West German to the consumer side was also evident in the essays on the Wende, written by secondary school pupils in Rudolstadt. A 13-year-old girl described this attraction as follows:

Five years ago, how much we looked forward to our first trip to West Germany!! In those days we still had our old Wartburg [East German car, mw], and my grandfather drove us to West Germany. At the moment when the East German roads became West German, my grandfather said to my father, ‘You can tell that we are in the west.’ We drove on and collected the hundred DM that had been set aside for everyone, and then we went to the first shop we saw. My grandmother got out of the car, went into the shop, and at that moment she cried tears of joy. Then my mother asked my brother what he would really like…I could of course pick out something as well and I chose my first radio. That day, everything changed.

Another 13-year-old girl wrote: “My parents and I went by car to West Germany to do our Christmas shopping. We could not believe what we saw there. It was like being in heaven.”

The trains were bulging, people took their old grandmothers and grandfathers along to collect the hundred DM to which they were entitled. One woman even told how she had seen a mother leave her pram behind at a station in East
Germany: she was determined to get to the FRG with her baby in order to collect two hundred DM, but could not get the pram into the jam-packed train.

Social scientists also noticed that above all, encountering western consumption was of significant importance to most East Germans. “In the days and weeks after the opening, East Germans gorged themselves on the symbolic goods of West German nation-ness...They flocked to the shopping centers and stores in a consumptive orgy.”\(^5\) When sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, originally from Poland, asked East Germans if their discontent also had anything to do with the quality of education, for example, he was made to understand that he had simply just not grasped it. This had nothing to do with education or the quality of welfare. It was about “the gratifying feeling of self-assertion, expressed in the act of consumer choice.”\(^6\)

In light of what I have described in the previous chapters, it is hardly surprising that so many East Germans experienced these events as their entry to “the promised land.”\(^7\) When Christa Wolf tried to put into words what stirred her and her countrymen in that euphoric autumn of 1989, she described those days as a “Traum-Zeit [dream time]”. East Germans were “einige Wochen lang...wirklich die, die sie sein könnten [for a few weeks, East Germans were truly who they could have been].”\(^8\) Although Wolf is extremely vague about what in her view was the main reason for this collective feeling of sudden self-realization, I read her description as a confirmation of my thesis: that East Germans, when they were at last given access to the wonderful world of the west, which up until then they had only been able to enter in their dreams, collectively felt that their dreams had come true and that reality was finally living up to them.\(^9\) Before going into more depth on this subject, I first want to describe further the developments that took place in and after the autumn of 1989, focusing specifically on economic and material changes.

After the opening up of the border on November 9, 1989, a rapid sequence of developments ensued in the GDR. On November 17, Hans Modrow, the new head of the East German government, put forward the idea of forming a Vertragsgemeinschaft [contractual community] with the FRG. The Ministry of State Security (the Stasi) was disbanded, citizens’ movement Neues Forum was admitted, the leading role of the SED was scrapped from the constitution, and refugees of the republic were granted amnesty. Articles appeared in the East German newspaper on the Stasi’s methods, and on East German television images were broadcast in which the lifestyle of the highest-ranking party officials in the village of Wandlitz was revealed. Especially the luxurious (by East German standards), western interiors, mostly purchased in Intershops, gave rise to mass rage: “[A] ll those years when they preached water, they were drinking wine!” was how an
older man expressed the people's anger. Scandals about corruption, abuse of power and illegal trade were revealed right up to the party’s top ranks. On December 1, 1989, the East German singer Wolf Bierman, who had been *ausgebürgert* [expatriated] in 1976, performed again in the GDR.

Meanwhile, demonstrations were still being held all over the country, with more and more people joining in. On November 27, the director of Rudolstadt’s museum, who had attended a number of demonstrations in Rudolstadt, Leipzig, and Dresden, wrote in his diary: “Stimmung kippt, massive Förderung nach Einheit Deutschland [Mood has shifted. Massive support for German unity].” Around that time, other reporters also noticed a change, which according to many was most clearly expressed by the different slogan the demonstrators were chanting. Whereas the earlier demonstrations upheld “Wir sind das Volk [We are the people]” (a slogan in which the democratic, politically idealistic aims of the first demonstrators resounded), this gradually made way for a slightly different slogan, which clearly voiced the striving for concrete political-economic and material changes: “Wir sind *ein* Volk [We are one people].” The switch in slogan was significant: the demonstrations, begun in an attempt to reform the GDR, were aimed more and more at the unification of the two German states.10

The call for unification was gaining ground everywhere. In December 1989 already, the East German *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU, Christian Democratic Union) acknowledged the market economy and announced it would strive for national unity. As the opening up of the GDR had set in motion a mass migration from east to west, the most important sectors of the East German economy were gradually becoming paralyzed, and the country was in danger of breaking up in chaos.11 This was one of the reasons that general elections were announced in the GDR for March 18, 1990.

In the meantime, however, there was also a surge in the opposite direction, albeit smaller and more limited in form. It mainly consisted of West German traders, who were very keen on serving the eager-to-spend East German public. Goods and market stalls were loaded up in the FRG and unloaded on the East German side of the border. In many East German towns, provisional market halls and tents sprang up to enable the East German population to purchase the desirable *Westwaren* as quickly and easily as possible. For the first time in history, the East German shops remained empty. Now that West German goods were available, nobody wanted to spend their money on East German stuff any longer. Even East German meat and vegetables could not compete against West German varieties. And while up until 1989, people had had to wait for years for the desirable Trabant, these same cars were now being given away for a pittance, sometimes even for nothing.
A West German furniture salesman who had opened a business in Rudolstadt right after the Wall fell, selling remnants bought up in the FRG, explained that it did not matter what he brought, it all sold anyway, “the people wanted everything, as long as it came from the west.” When traders from Bayreuth, a relatively nearby West German town, brought their wares to the market in Rudolstadt, everything sold like hot cakes, despite the fact that a pineapple cost 24.95 DM and a bar of chocolate 7.50 DM. With wages many times lower than in the FRG (even at the fictitious exchange rate of 1:1), these prices were indeed “überteuert [exorbitant],” but as the residents of Rudolstadt asked a local journalist: “Wann habe ich einmal die Möglichkeit, das Alles einzukaufen [when will I be able to buy all this?]”\(^{12}\)

Having a share of the west’s prosperity became the main focus in the run-up to the elections. Chancellor Kohl’s CDU presented itself as the party that had enabled West Germany’s good fortune. At the first of Kohl’s rallies, whilst giving the green light for the election campaign, he promised to achieve the same material prosperity in the GDR (blühende Landschaften, blossoming landscapes) that existed in the FRG. According to Kohl, that prosperity would only come about if the voters ensured that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was kept out of the government.\(^{13}\)

On March 18, 1990, something happened that most of the reporters had anticipated: the CDU won the elections in the GDR with an overwhelming major-
"Die Noch-DDR hat die schnelle D-Mark gewählt [the still existing GDR has voted for the fast DM]" was how the newspaper article described the CDU’s landslide victory. Economic and materialistic considerations had won over the more idealist, political aims with which the first demonstrators had taken to the streets in the autumn of 1989. East Germany’s inhabitants had voted for unification with the FRG as soon as possible, for the DM, and for the promised material prosperity of Kohl’s blühende Landschaften. Their voice was explicitly meant to oppose every attempt to develop an adapted socialism as suggested by the supporters of Neues Forum. After the elections, the previously mentioned director wrote in his diary: “Das Volk will seine Vergangenheit zu Grabe tragen...Auf dem Markt wird Erdinger Weißbier ausgeschenkt. Die Vorhut der neuen Zeit ist da: die Händler [the people want to bury their past...At the market West German beer is being served. The vanguard of the new era has arrived: the traders].”

From that moment on, East Germany’s transformation happened very quickly – especially in the material sense. More and more East German goods lay untouched on the shop shelves. When it was announced that the Währungsunion [financial union] would take place on July 1, 1990, whereby East German coins would disappear and payment in both countries would be in DM, people stopped buying anything from the GDR. Almost immediately after the elections it was made known that the previously desirable automobile, the “Trabant P 601 in der Ausführung Limousine und Universal [Trabant P 601, type limousine and universal]” could be purchased “ohne Vorbestellung [without pre-ordering].”15 “[U]nter dem Motto Ansehen – Kaufen – Mitnehmen” [Under the motto ‘see – buy – take away’], a completely unknown phenomenon in the GDR, the car was freely available.16 Dramatic price cuts were made everywhere. Shoes which used to cost 190 Ostmark were suddenly available for 29.60 Ostmark, and things people used to have to queue for could now be had for almost nothing. East German shop spaces were bought up by West German chains, existing purchase agreements with East German producers were cancelled, and even sheet music produced in the GDR was seen as ramsch (junk), “als ob Chopin für den Westen anders komponiert hätte [as if Chopin composed differently for the west].”17 While there had been only one newspaper in the GDR, now there were suddenly numerous papers and magazines for sale, full of advertisements offering things for sale that would have been completely unthinkable in the old days: pieces of land and other investment opportunities, for example, but also sexual favors and services.

What was happening in the sphere of consumption found its official confirmation on July 1, 1990. From that day on, only one coin was used throughout the entire country. With that, the reunification of the two Germanys had practi-
cally become a fact. In the days that followed, East German banks were inundated. Long queues formed in front of them as everyone came to exchange their money. Bank assistants worked overtime to deal with the huge stream of people. They worked on in the evenings to exchange the hated Aluchips [derogatory name for East German marks made of aluminum] as quickly as possible for the equivalent in the desired DM. Everyone wanted to know what their money was worth, how much “schönes Geld [beautiful money]” they had precisely, as a bank worker at the Sparkasse (one of Germany's largest banks) explained. Although people could obviously have calculated that themselves, the bank worker emphasized that people simply wanted to see it with their own eyes.

For East Germans, the DM was their entrance ticket to the western world – to “heaven on earth,” as the 13-year-old girl had described in her essay. Moreover, many also considered it an opportunity to clean up the life they had led up until then. Many couples who had married a long time ago took their new money to the west in order to buy each other another wedding ring. Only two styles of wedding ring had existed in the GDR, and practically everyone had worn the same one.

With the arrival of the DM, the East German material landscape changed at lightning speed. Shops were fitted out and decorated differently, old East German shops were obliged to shut down, and new shops were opening their doors ev-
ery day. According to the director of Rudolstadt’s *Industrie und Handelskammer* [Chamber of Commerce], at first for shops household electrical goods and jeans, were immensely popular, and the same applied to garages, taxi companies and driving schools. Businesses were set up that had never existed before in the GDR, such as video stores, game halls, insurance companies, estate agents, sex shops, and computer shops. Alongside all these new retail opportunities, the street scene was also enlivened with brightly colored western advertising. “Once again the magician waved his magic wand, and up sprung new signs above the new shops. At last, long cherished desires could be fulfilled. And what next? Now, said the magician to the people, everything will be quick and easy.”

And quick it certainly was. Walking round Rudolstadt in 1994, I found it hard to imagine that scarcely five years ago, people had had to stand and queue for bananas and oranges, while no-one knew what a kiwi was. And where most western visitors had struggled in 1988 to spend the obligatory 25 exchanged marks a day, by 1994 Rudolstadt had everything for sale that a spoilt westerner could desire: from gold-rimmed long-drink glasses to fresh basil, and from thrillers by John le Carré to the latest model of widescreen television. Queues were nowhere to be seen, on market days the public sauntered leisurely over the market square, and a supermarket had been set up just outside the town center, with nearly 6000 square meter of floor space offering more than 85,000 items. In a material sense, Rudolstadt had become identical to any other West German provincial town. The residents dressed according to the same fashion trends as their West German contemporaries, and about a hundred advertising brochures landed in their letterboxes every month. Here, too, the post office workers had to work overtime when mail-order companies issued their new catalogues, in order to unpack and dispatch all the catalogues as quickly as possible. The kiosk sold 19 different magazines on finance and the stock exchange, and posters hanging in bank offices said: “Ansprüche sind wie Kinder: Sie wachsen [Demands are like children: they grow],” or “Papa sagt, hier wächst unser Geld schneller als ich [Papa says that here our money grows faster than I do].” And a totally different type of poster hung in the post office: an address you could apply to if you were suffering from compulsive buying.

The former socialist society’s material landscape had been completely transformed, and everything the East German population could scarcely have dared to imagine had actually happened in an extremely short space of time. As we know, this did not go hand in hand with the joy and contentment everyone had expected.
East Germans’ Dissatisfaction

The vast majority of Rudolstadt’s residents were quite negative about the emergence of the western consumer culture. In fact, the mood was unmistakably gloomy, which in many ways had to do with the changes that had occurred in consumption. Although hardly anyone seemed to really want to return to the GDR, feelings of nostalgia were widespread, and many people reacted as if they had been stung by a wasp when asked questions about the transformation in the country’s consumer culture. Paraphrasing what so many people felt then: “Yes, now we have everything, but our lives have certainly not improved. Nowadays, it is only about money. Before, there was nothing, but now we cannot afford anything. Because of capitalism, there is nothing left of the life we had, and the former solidarity between people is gone.”

This was roughly the message circulating throughout the GDR in 1994. After a while I even stopped writing down comments like these. They were expressed so often that I began to simply list them under the heading “standard story” in my diary. The most surprising aspect was that nearly everyone I spoke to seemed to confirm the above statements more or less. During the fifteen months I lived in Rudolstadt, I met only a few people who were really positive about the country’s transformation. Strangely enough, not all of them had gained the most in financial or economic terms from the country’s Wende. The dissatisfaction extended to all layers of society, and even those who were better off than before, either in an absolute or relative sense, were often unsatisfied with the transformation.

Although the complaints were certainly not just directed at the country’s material transformation, everything did seem to hinge around this. Paraphrasing, the crux of the problems could be described as follows:

In exchange for material wealth, we had to give up everything that used to bind us. Whereas mutual solidarity was once the core value, nowadays there is only one God, and that is Mammon. Our former existence embodied a great deal of mutual warmth and involvement, but nowadays everyone cheats the other in order to better himself, and that is all down to capitalism, the new money and the goods. Our former lives have been stripped of all of their positive attributes.

Three female workers at the municipal Diakonie [social ministry] said that since the Wende, they had become distinctly more suspicious and mistrusting. “And that is a good thing too,” one of them remarked bitterly, “for whoever is trusting, is stupid. Everyone just walks over you. If you are gullible and kind, people just
exploit you.” In this day and age, they complained, everything revolved around money and goods. This crept into the work situation as well, even if someone’s line of work did not give rise to such behavior at all – for example, if she was a social worker. Partly due to their growing differences, people’s contact with each other had contracted considerably since the Wende. People no longer trusted each other, they did not greet each other in the street, and friendships were broken because a sudden feeling of rivalry had arisen. Additionally, life had become so hectic that people did not have time for each other. All three women knew of marriages in their neighborhood which had suffered from the changes. Even the atmosphere in family circles was often spoilt due to the underlying rivalry and distrust engulfing everything. One of the women described how the onset of capitalism had drastically changed the feelings between members of her own family.

In the past we always came together for big celebrations. That does not happen as often now. It has become too expensive, and we no longer have time for each other. We also trust each other less. Whenever we meet up, everyone is always checking: what has he got, what has she got, how did he get it, she must be doing well, how is that possible, how much is he earning, how is she spending her money, etc. This ruins the atmosphere, and because of that we are no longer so open and trusting with each other. In the past, if one family member had a birthday, the whole family was invited to dinner: we made Klöße with meat and possibly lettuce if we could get it, and then pudding with coffee afterwards and home-baked Kuchen. But now when it is someone’s birthday, it is only celebrated if it is a child, and then we invite each other round in the evening, only to come and grill sausages on the barbecue. It has become too much of an effort; we no longer have or take the time, and we do not feel like doing it any more. It has all become so depressing... The one has lost his job, the other cannot find a nursery.

In the past we used to look forward to someone coming to visit us, but now? We react very differently to each other. An intimate conversation is a thing of the past. That just does not happen anymore. We do not want to be saddled with each other’s problems, and we do not let people get close to us anymore. Everything has changed completely. You do not know who is honest and who is not, whether it is a lie or not. One is even a bigger cheat than the other, and then there is the mutual envy in the family. We had just bought a new car, and my brother remarked: “A new car? The other one was still running ok?” But it is none of his business how I spend my money, what I do with it! His daughter is always dolled up like a princess, but I do not ask him how he can afford all that!

When asked why they no longer wanted people to get close to them, she replied:
We all used to be a bit more equal in the old days. Now I surely would not think of letting my family see my bank statements! And nowadays you have to present yourself, you have to know how to sell yourself – they taught us that at a retraining course. In the past, that would not have played a role at all, people only looked at who you genuinely were. Appearance? Presentation? But now you have to present yourself as well as possible. You have to please those above you, 

*anschleimen und arschkriechen* [sucking up and ass-licking]. It is all just blah blah blah these days. Where I first worked, many people had to be laid off after the *Wende*, but I was kept on. I trusted that all would go well and did not get involved with anything. But my colleagues went to the boss and said to him: “We have young children, work is very important for us.” Then I was given the sack, and the others could stay. That was a breaking point for me. Since then, I no longer trust anyone anymore.

Everyone hides in his own little shell, and we all only live for ourselves. The Stasi might not be around anymore, but now it is the employers who put you under pressure. In the past, when we were all in the same boat, we all had the same problems. And even if you had different problems, they were political or to do with the Stasi. But today it has changed. People assume that if you have a problem, you are responsible for it. People have become more egoistic. The main thing is: I am alright. That is why you have to stand up for yourself. Soon I am going to see my aunt in the west and I now know already what she will say: “New car?? How is that possible???”

No, nobody needs to know as much about me as they did in the past. It does not serve any purpose. I was brought up with the idea that you had to love your neighbor like yourself, but tell me honestly: can I love those who play me a mean trick? You have to learn to deal with it. I always used to deal with things spontaneously. Now I just sit and listen. I do not say too much, and contemplate quietly. I no longer trust anyone. Everywhere you go you are deceived anyway: by the authorities, at the *Treuhand* [Trust agency].22

The fact that I was dismissed due to the actions of my colleagues, I have not got over that yet. That has changed my life. Someone’s face alone does not tell you. With everyone you must ask yourself: can I trust them or not? And everything is connected to the pressure to achieve, to be more than your neighbor, and to have more than your neighbor: he already has that but I do not yet have it, she looks better than me, and so on and so forth. Struggle, envy, jealousy, wanting more than at first, wanting more than others, joining in the fight for status, that is what it is all about these days.

Her long story contains all the themes that cropped up in nearly every conversation I had with people: about how money ruled the world, that the atmosphere between people was not what it used to be, that pressure to achieve, jealousy, mutual rivalry and distrust had come to dominate the once so egalitarian and jovial society. Since the *Wende*, people withdrew to their own four walls – even more
so than in the East German Nische society, and that was due to capitalism and its accompanying lifestyle, in which everything revolved around money and material possessions. From the moment the country became western, nothing remained of what used to be East German existence: all the warmth and friendship had made way for egoism. This resonated everywhere, and the newspapers regularly published cynical jokes, making fun of the central role of egoism in current society.

The fact that East Germans had little faith in society and the future after the Wende is also demonstrated demographically. In the period between 1989 and 1992, the number of marriages that took place in East Germany dropped by 62 percent—a “marriage shock” which has almost no parallel in history. Even between 1942 and 1946, the number of marriages in Berlin only dropped by 30 percent. East German death rates for 1992 were not yet available when political economist Nicholas Eberstadt carried out his research, but on the basis of the 1991 figures, it was clear that death rates had increased in all age categories since the Wende, and “many of these increases were dramatic.” According to Eberstadt, the most significant illustration of the shock phase the GDR was going through three years after 1989 was the fall in the number of births in the former East Germany: in 1992 this had dropped by 55 percent compared to three years earlier. Industrialized societies...have scarcely ever registered such radical declines in fertility – not even during the chaos and destruction attendant upon defeat in total war...Eastern Germany’s adults appear to have come as close to a temporary suspension of childbearing as any large population in the human experience.”

Similar trends were also visible in Rudolstadt. Whereas 877 children were born in Kreis Rudolstadt in 1988, that number had dropped to 287 in 1993. The annual number of marriages showed a similar slump: in 1988 there were 578, in 1993 only 177. In addition, I heard about a surprisingly high number of suicides. Some even knew of several people who had decided to end their lives. One of the women from the Diakonie reported that since the Wende, at least three people in her village had committed suicide. One of them, a man, threw himself under the train after having been dismissed. Another was a 21-year-old woman who had had a child almost exactly a year ago. These are the most extreme stories I recorded, but I met many people who admitted that they too no longer had any faith in the future. “In ten years? I hope I am still alive then,” a 35-year-old woman joked bitterly when she spoke of how much her life had changed recently. Just like many others, she admitted to missing the GDR. Then she knew what she was living for, she still had a job, a purpose, a structure, something to do. But now? She was going mad sitting at home, not being able to do anything because everything she could think of would cost money.
I listened to lots of stories like these – dismal, bitter tales from people who said they had completely lost their desire for and grip on life since the Wende. Even in the little café under my apartment which was frequented mostly by Wessis, Wossis (East Germans who wanted to be seen as successful Wessis) and other Möchtegerns [wannabe’s] working in Rudolstadt, many people complained about the destructive Werdegang [development] of the once so harmonious society. Sometime before articles about Ostalgie started to appear in the German media, a GDR night was organized in this café.

That night the café was decorated with East German attributes: East German consumer goods (packets of beans and other preserves) were placed in between bottles of alcohol, old maps of East Germany adorned the walls, and there were lots of GDR memorabilia on the bar. Many visitors had put on part of their old FDJ uniforms, and some greeted each other with the FDJ’s usual slogan, “Wir sind bereit [we are ready].” Others had pinned on GDR badges such as “für ausgezeichnete Leistungen [for excellent achievements].” Remarkably, however, the music played was not from the GDR era. Only the most popular current hits sounded through the bar, one of which was the East German band Der Prinzen’s song “Alles nur geklaut [everything’s just stolen],” undoubtedly the most popular song at that time. During my stay in Rudolstadt, I heard the song everywhere: in shops, cafés, the gym, and also in people’s homes. The chorus went like this:

es ist alles nur geklaut, heho heho
    [everything’s just stolen, heho, heho]
es ist alles ja nicht mein’, heho heho
    [nothing here belongs to me, heho, heho]
es ist alles nur gestolen, nur gelogen, nur geklaut
    [everything’s just stolen, lied about, and taken]
entschuldigung, das hab’ ich mich erlaubt, heho, heho
    [apologies, I allowed myself to do it]
das hab’ ich mich erlaubt
    [I let myself do it]

I could not help hearing the lyrics as an ironically cutting criticism of the central role of money in the current society.

Here too, nothing but criticism. The pressing question is why so many people were utterly negative about the new era. As mentioned before, my interlocutors gave various reasons for the depression they had collectively fallen prey to. The first was complaints concerning the economy and the economic structure of so-
ciety, second the social differentiation which the introduction of capitalism had led to, and lastly the humiliating feeling of being treated as second-class citizens. Running through everything was the dissatisfaction with the changed morals as a result of the Wende from socialism to capitalism.

**Three Reasons for East German Despondency**

*Fraud, privatization and unemployment*

When trying to distribute questionnaires, I noticed that a great number of houses in Rudolstadt had stickers on their front doors outlining and commenting briefly on East Germans’ collective experience of the country’s economic Wende. The stickers were meant to keep traders and sales representatives at bay. The texts differed, but one of the most common was: “We are insured for everything. We do not want to be converted to join a sect, we already have a vacuum cleaner. We also possess an encyclopedia. We do not want to change our newspaper or our weekly. Please do not disturb us! Thanks!”

The stickers were a reaction to one of East Germans’ first experiences of the down side of the capitalist economy. Immediately after the country was opened up, it was overrun with West German traders and representatives, and the stickers summarized succinctly a number of collective experiences which had enraged those in the former GDR. Everywhere people had come banging on doors, trying to sell goods and services, thereby taking blatant advantage of East German naivety regarding the workings of the market economy. Playing to the feelings of desire and insecurity about the future, they sold expensive insurance deals for things people did not have to insure, or even could not insure against. People were persuaded to book trips to areas which on closer investigation appeared not to exist, or they had to pay absurdly high prices for products of poor quality.

In the early days after the Wende, the former GDR was a goldmine for speculators. Because land and real estate had been almost worthless in the former socialist economy, West German speculators anticipated an opportunity. Even before the Währungsunion [financial unity], West German estate agents headed off en masse to the GDR, searching for the best pieces of land and objects that looked interesting. “Wie im Goldrausch, seien sie allen durch die DDR gestiefelt [they all charged round the GDR, as if they had gold fever],” explained an assistant at one of the construction companies that were quick to seize their chance to earn “eine schnelle Mark [a quick mark].”28 The transformation of value that came with the introduction of the capitalist market economy was so unimaginable for nearly all
East Germans that they were an easy prey to the slick young men of capitalism. In Rudolstadt numerous stories circulated about people who had closed seemingly lucrative deals during the Wende, which later proved to be cases of downright fraud.

Alongside the feeling that unfamiliarity with the rules of the capitalist economy was being abused, the economic changes that had occurred in East German society since 1989 also enraged everyone because of the way the East German economy was privatized. Since the Wende, there was scarcely anything left of East German industry. Although everyone could see how outdated and herunter gewirtschaftet [economically hollowed out] most of the East German production companies were, the general expectation had nonetheless been that many of them would be restored once West German production companies would set themselves up in the former GDR. That did not happen. East German companies were too poorly maintained, and their productions methods were far below international standards (especially in ecological aspects). And because wages and other production costs in neighboring countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic were much lower than in Germany, the West German companies that were considering setting up additional branches mostly preferred other countries to the former GDR. Thus, the Treuhand was forced to sell off very cheaply a large number of companies and factories that had been relatively productive before.

This was also the fate of the huge chemical concern in Rudolstadt, which until 1989 had employed 7000 people. In 1993, the company was sold to two Iranians for the symbolic amount of one DM. The new owners, having received a vast sum of money from the state of Thuringia intended for the renovation and conservation of the factory, dismissed 6300 of the employees. Shortly afterwards they disappeared – taking with them the renovation subsidies. Since then, Thuringia has tried many different ways to keep the factory going, but in 1994, the remaining 700 employees were uncertain about their jobs. Just like the majority of East German production companies, the factory had belonged to the international top in East and Central Europe at the time of the GDR. Many of Rudolstadt’s residents simply did not understand why the company and its products were suddenly dumped without a trace after the Wende. Many suspected that the downfall of East German industry was a case of evil intent; West German producers were said to have much to gain by destroying all the competition. For them, the GDR would only be worthwhile as a distribution market, and they would have tried to prevent anything really flourishing here.29

The former employees of the chemical factory formed a substantial part of Rudolstadt’s unemployed. In 1994, the percentage of jobless officially fluctuated around 20 percent, but the statistics only included those people who were entitled
to unemployment benefit. Many women whose husbands worked, 55-plussers who came under a different entitlement category, and the great numbers of people who thanks to *Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen* [job creation measures] were helped in finding temporary work were not included in these figures, which brought the actual percentage of unemployed to nearly double that amount.\(^3\)0 This means that at least 35-40 percent of Rudolstadt’s residents who wanted and were able to work were unemployed. This was undeniably one of the significant reasons why the GDR’s economic transformation enraged so many people.

A large portion of the unemployed (both in Rudolstadt as well as in the rest of the country) consisted of women, who were accustomed to working and to derive – unlike in the old FRG – a significant part of their identity from their work. Most of them suffered considerably from the feeling that they were no longer needed and did not belong anywhere. “We have no experience with this,” the head of Rudolstadt’s *Wohnungsamt* explained. Whereas in the old days, people’s existence was mainly structured around work, now that this had ended, many felt that everything simply ceased to exist. All that was left was the emptiness and the feeling “ich werde nicht mehr gebraucht [I am useless, nobody needs me].” Precisely because unemployment had not existed in the GDR, East Germans did not know how to cope with this phenomenon. The many unemployed women had no idea at all of how they could adapt to life without having a job, nor had they seen any role models. I met many women who spent their days drearily on the couch, waiting till their husbands came home in the evening and not knowing what to do with the rest of their lives.

Besides the bitter consequences of the economic privatization and the frequent fraud of which they been made victims, there was a third reason why many East Germans were dissatisfied with the economic unification of the GDR with the FRG. This was because East Germans who did have a job earned only 70 percent of those in an equivalent job in the west. As rents and the costs of living were by this time at a similar level as in the former FRG, this meant that working residents of the GDR had much less to spend than those in the old federal republic.

These reasons illustrate why many East Germans criticized the economic transformation of their country. Apart from that, dissatisfaction and disappointment was also related to the fact that after 1989, the whole GDR’s economic structure had to be converted, reorganized, renovated, privatized, and reimbursed in a terrific hurry. This caused a rapid increase in the social differentiation of society.

**Increased Social Differentiation**

By the year 1994 it was evident throughout Rudolstadt that not everyone had benefited equally from the country’s transformation. Especially in the town center, huge
differences were visible between the buildings and streets that had been renovated, and those that had not. Whereas some shops were identical to the shiny, garishly colored shopping paradises that overshadow the shopping streets in the west, others had not changed visibly in forty years. If you looked down from the castle that towers above Rudolstadt to the town below, you see a similar picture unfolding. Buildings that had obviously not been touched for forty years stood next to those that had recently been given a complete make-over. Similar contrasts between old and new, neglected and renovated were visible everywhere: at parking places and on motorways, where next to the shiny, brightly colored Mercedes and four-wheel drives, a great many old Trabants were still chugging along. Comparable differences could be seen in the interiors of houses and public areas. In chapter seven, I described the visible differences between the decoration and interior design of the houses that had undergone an entirely new refurbishment and those which showed no sign of having being changed in the past forty years. Whenever I visited people at their place of work, the same picture was evident; there was often a great contrast between the rooms where the managers worked and those that could be accessed by everyone or where subordinates worked. The differences in outward appearance were so obvious that people going to work everyday became aware of
a divided society, one half of which scarcely seemed to matter, while the other half appeared to be fully in control.

While the *nouveaux riches* ostentatiously honked the horns of their flashy cars as they drove round Rudolstadt’s market square and had new kitchens measured, sometimes costing over 100,000 DM, the less fortunate went on shopping trips to Poland. A travel agency in Rudolstadt organized these one-day trips to the town of Görlitz, just over the border, where the day-trippers could take advantage of
the cheap lace blouses, plush animals, “crystal” glasses, bright flowery “porcelain” dinner services, “real leather” jackets for 10 DM, and jeans recommended as “real Live’s Strauss [sic]: there is nothing more American.”

One time I went along. After the woman I sat next to in the bus had walked round the market all day, she flopped down, exhausted from shopping. She could not stop talking about how successful her day had been. At least four times she told me about the crystal glasses at 8 DM a piece, for which she would have to pay at least 30 DM in Rudolstadt. She had bought as many as she could carry and had already signed up for the next day-trip. She wanted to have more of that glassware and was going to buy some as presents for all her relatives. In the old days, the luxury of crystal glasses was unattainable for ideological reasons; nowadays, such glasses were for sale on every street corner. But whereas her neighbors were able to buy them in Germany, she had to travel abroad to get them. For only there, at a Polish market, was she able to indulge in a shopping spree and feel completely happy.

The increased social differentiation of society was a significant cause of East Germans’ frustration. The pain it inflicted was aggravated by two factors; the growing differences had wide-ranging effects on the social contacts between people, and secondly because East Germans were made to understand in all sorts
of ways that they should accept these developments – as that is what it takes to be successful in the free capitalist market. Ideologically, the growing differences seemed to be entirely accepted. Both factors deepened the pain caused by the social differentiation as such.

The escalating social rivalry had chilled and hardened the general atmosphere in society. Due to the greater differences, it often happened that people who used to be good friends suddenly after the Wende did not see enough in each other to warrant keeping in touch. It occurred just as often that people who beforehand associated with each other in a normal and sometimes even genuinely friendly manner did not want to know one another after the Wende because they suddenly felt superior.

And so, in numerous different ways, East Germans learned by bitter experience how important it was in a capitalist society to convince others of your own merits. You had to always keep up as good an appearance as possible to prove your capacities to others. This was what Claudia – the secondary school pupil referred to before – explained bitterly once when we were talking about West Germans: “Die? Die können spielen glücklich zu sein [Them? They can act like they are happy!],” she sighed, and she explained what she meant by that:

Every time West German musicians come to play for my parents’ orchestra (her parents were professional musicians, mv), they manage to present themselves so well that the entire orchestra is impressed beforehand already. ‘Wow! This is going to be something special.’ When they subsequently start playing, it is not until much later that my parents and their colleagues realize that those West German musicians actually play only as well as they themselves and are not impressively better at all.

As East Germans were generally unfamiliar with the principle of showing off, they themselves were often the victim of people who were better at these tricks. The East German owner of a Bureau für Imageberatung [image consultancy], established in Berlin in 1994, told a Dutch journalist that East Germans were not good at seeing through simple (outward) trickery. According to him, this was because it had been especially important at the time of the GDR for people to adapt and gear themselves to the collective to which they belonged. Consequently, he explained, East Germans had in fact continually been taught how not to stick their neck out. They still struggled with this, he explained, for in the old days it was ideologically reprehensible to stand out too much from others. People were therefore basically ashamed to do so now. And because East Germans were not accustomed to pierc-
ing through the fancy words and polished exteriors, they had become an easy prey for all kinds of deception since the *Wende.*

Apart from that, many people also struggled with the growing differentiation of society because they had different ways of fulfilling the freedom to shape their own lives as they saw fit. The previously mentioned *Diakonie* workers described how many friendships had suffered under the increasing possibilities: suddenly one did this, the other did something very different, and consequently it was obvious that people had less in common and were less like each other than they had previously thought. One of the women remarked dismally: “Diese sogenannte Freiheit hat viele Ketten gesprungen [this so-called freedom has broken many ties].” And the head of the *Wohnungsamt* [housing department] explained that even people who had previously complained about the high degree of uniformity dominating life in the GDR now saw that this very aspect of East German existence had something nice and egalitarian about it. As everyone’s lives had been organized in the same way, people felt and expressed themselves as more equal than was the case nowadays:

We all lived in the same block of flats, which we left in the morning to go to work, where it was known what would happen in the course of the day. The child went to the nursery, later to the *Krippe* [crib] and later on to school. In each case he was taken care of ten hours a day and when you came home in the evening you also knew he had watched Notruf [TV program] and then could go to bed. At work everyone got a hot meal. That cost seventy pfennig a week. The food was inedible, and everyone complained, but the doctor ate the same horrible food in the canteen for the same amount as everyone else, and then, because it was so horrible, he like everyone else went to the kiosk on the other side of the street to get a piece of *Kuchen.* Had he wanted a tomato salad, that was impossible, just like it was impossible for all of us. Even if he had paid shall we say fifty Ostmark, he still, just like everyone else, would not have got a tomato salad. Today, however, this same doctor can have his assistant bring him a different salad every day if he fancies it. And it is totally unthinkable that he would eat it together with her. What is more: he will keep her at a great distance. He employs her, but the difference in salary between the two has become so large; and regarding these differences, he has even fooled her that he has got himself seriously into debt in order to set up the practice, so that although he had to take her on, he can only offer her a low salary. So he does not want her to know that these days he has a real carpet in his
living room and not the same carpet from the Konsum [shop] we all had before. In the past we all bought the same stuff because there was nothing else. This made it more equal. The wages were different, but much less different than now. And because there was nothing, everyone was able to buy the same with his money. It is true there was not much, but what there was, was for everyone.

From this lengthy anecdote it is clear that in the old days differences did exist, but because they came less to the fore, there was less reason for jealousy than is the case nowadays. In this way people could deceive themselves and others that such feelings had not or hardly ever existed in the GDR. Whereas now? In the words of one of the Diakonie workers, “jealousy seeps through society like corrosive acid.”

This is a meaningful statement, which in the first place clarifies that more than just political freedom was repressed in the GDR. Under the motto of mutual equality, socio-economic differences were ideologically toned down and covered up. Moreover, in a practical sense they were indeed not so apparent because the lack of consumer goods ensured that what little there was had been shared relatively honestly, leaving people collectively longing for the west. Second, the statement is also meaningful because it reveals that the pain caused by increasing differentiation was very much linked to the fact that nowadays this was ideologically legitimized instead of condemned. Under the motto that everyone is responsible for their own existence and that differences are just part of life, in present-day society no-one needs to be ashamed of driving around in an expensive car and feeling too good to drink a beer with their unemployed neighbor. According to the same ideology, no-one but yourself was responsible if you decided to insure yourself for worthless things, book a holiday to a place that didn’t exist, or got persuaded to buy a basic vacuum cleaner for nearly 1000 DM.

Former East German author Monica Maron (who left the GDR long before the Wende) provides a striking analysis of the pain caused by increasing social economic differentiation in the former socialist society. In her view, the disappearance of socialism in the GDR primarily meant that the ideological constraint on mutual inequality had disappeared, which in the old days had to a certain extent supported “the losers” by giving them at least some ideological credit. Maron states bitterly that after the Wende:

[East Germans primarily] miss their familiar equality. When they all had less rather than more, or in any case had the same, they apparently also felt equal. One of the most frequently posed questions in this country was:
you surely think you are better? But no-one was better…In matters of taste and culture, the assertion that we were living in the dictatorship of the proletariat was certainly not a lie. And then suddenly this was over, just like that; that is what hurts the most.34

I agree with Maron. The main reason why the increasing differentiation was so hard to bear was because the growing opportunities and freedom of movement had made visible and expressible what formerly had remained hidden – under an ideological taboo, under shortages in material consumption, and under the associated collective (and therefore mutually binding) desires for a prosperous world.

A New Existence and Second-Class Citizens
Besides the complaints discussed above, many East Germans were very frustrated because they felt like second-class citizens in their own country. This feeling was presumably to a large extent the result of the arrogant way they were treated by West Germans.

Since the Wende, all of East German life has changed. Not only the political, economic, and judicial structure of society has changed, but also its material, infrastructural characteristics. A psychologist working at the Diakonie in Rudolstadt recalled that during the Wende, she realized at an early stage how all-embracing the transformation awaiting her and her compatriots would be. Because she feared she would lose her grip on life, she forced herself to investigate what exactly would change and what the legal consequences would be, at least in a small area relating to her work with young people. When talking about it five years later, she remembered well how much time and effort this had cost her during that period:

I was determined to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the developments. I wanted to understand what was going to happen, and how the new society that was about to appear would function. I wanted to understand what I was up against. I spent many nights engrossed in employment law and juvenile law, but I am probably the only person who did this so intensively then. Most people let themselves be entirely overpowered by what was happening.

Many people explained that their dissatisfaction with the Wende was indeed not only linked to the terrific speed with which the changes had taken place, but also to the fact that the entire East German existence was reshaped in a tested West German model. Nothing that had existed in the GDR appeared to be worth keeping. To illustrate this point, people referred to the long-winded discussions that
had raged in 1993 and 1994 over the question of whether one of the former East German traffic signs, the so-called grüne Pfeil [green arrow], could be retained in the east of Germany and possibly even adopted throughout Germany. Most people felt that the lengthy political commotion was out of proportion to the speed with which all of the former GDR had been rigorously crushed. The fast and painstaking way their existence had been shoved to one side gave people the feeling that they themselves were considered worthless.

One area where this feeling was actually confirmed was in the way job vacancies arising in the former GDR were filled after reunification. From the moment the socialist society ceased to exist, a large number of jobs had to be reallocated, for example in areas such as justice and law and order. In addition, everyone in the civil service was checked for Stasi involvement, and most people whose involvement was proven were dismissed. Together with the large number of jobs created by the introduction of the market economy, a large number of positions became vacant. During the reallocation process, East Germans often noticed that people from the old FRG were systematically given preference over East Germans. This was partly inevitable, such as with former East German public prosecutors, judges, and the majority of the police force. But the fact that the new directors of the museum and theatre in Rudolstadt were also from the west met with less approval. The same applied to the many West German civil servants added to Rudolstadt’s administration. In general, the predominant feeling was that East Germany was being governed by West Germans who were not good enough to achieve their ambitions in their own country, but seized the opportunity in “the east.” In addition, East Germans were paid only 70 percent of the salary of an equivalent job in the west, whereas for their activities in the east, West Germans received an extra supplement, commonly described in scathing tones as Busch- [bush] or Dschungelzulage [jungle supplement].

A further development which contributed to making East Germans feel like second-class citizens in their own country concerned one of the most controversial conditions of the German unification treaty: the right to property reimbursement. According to this clause, all real estate illegally appropriated by the East German state after 1949 had to be given back to the original owners. This measure caused a massive transfer of property in the eastern part of Germany, and everywhere East German residents’ houses and land were handed over to people who for decades had considered themselves West Germans. In some communities, 80 percent of the houses and land were reclaimed. When I lived in Rudolstadt, the closing date for applications to claim reimbursement of property had expired. A total of 3500 applications were submitted, of which 32 percent had been settled by the
middle of 1994. According to the head of Rudolstadt’s branch of the Amt für offene Vermögensfragen [office that dealt with reimbursement claims], three-quarters of the requests were settled. A salient detail, however, is that the 3500 claims related to 10,000 real estate items. The average reimbursement claim was for three buildings. This means that those who had left the GDR at the time were generally the ones who already owned a great deal. And it was precisely those people who benefitted from this measure.

Many East Germans experienced the manner in which the right to property reimbursement was claimed as a painful and concrete example of West Germany taking over the GDR financially and materially. It was by and large West Germans who benefitted the most while East Germans lost out, and this general feeling was roughly expressed in an article in Neues Deutschland (the former East German party newspaper): “Alle Eigentümer sind gleich, die westdeutschen gleicher38 [all owners are equal, but the West Germans are more equal].”

By 1994 not much was left of the happiness and mutual reconcilement which had prevailed between East and West Germans during the Wende. “The Wall is gone, but the wall in our heads has become even bigger,” was one of the comments typifying the mutual relations. Germany was in danger of becoming a country of Ossis and Wessis. East Germans thought that West Germans acted as if they had the world in their pockets. According to East Germans, this arrogant attitude was primarily prompted by West Germans’ perspective on the world, which was supposedly based on money and status. Because East Germans generally had little of either, West Germans did not acknowledge them. It frequently happened that West Germans reminded East Germans that they did not amount to much, were unworlby, were behind the times, and still had a great deal to learn. Also for this reason, most West Germans (once again: in the eyes of East Germans), in retrospect, regretted the unification of the two Germanys.

It was true that the German media regularly published articles implying that West Germans would actually have preferred to let the Wall stand. This was usually motivated by the exorbitant costs involved in restoring and modernizing the GDR. Because so much money was spent on bringing the former GDR to a comparable level as the western part of the country, West Germans frequently reacted disgruntled at the increased prosperity in the former GDR. A middle-aged woman told me, for instance, that when she and her husband had been on holiday to Spain with her sister from the west, and the rest of the group in the coach heard that they were from the GDR, they were showered with questions: “Wie könnt ihr das denn leisten [how can you afford this]?” Even when she tried to put a stop to the questions by saying – wrongly – that her sister had paid for the trip, again new
discussions began: “You did not contribute anything to our pension pot, yet now you are getting our good money!” At one point the East German woman asked one of the West German women if she herself had worked. It turned out the woman was receiving a pension because her husband had worked. Even after all this time, it could still infuriate my East German interlocutor: “Time and time again we still have to belittle ourselves and show gratitude because we too have that lovely money! As if we have not worked the past fifty years!”

The sluggish relations between West and East Germans were the topic of many jokes published in the local newspapers and in joke books. Here is one about West Germans’ changed attitude towards German unification:

An Ossi and a Wessi meet each other.

The Ossi says to the Wessi: “We are one nation!”

The Wessi replies: “So are we!”39

West Germans’ anger regarding the high costs of the unification and the supposedly fast enrichment of East Germany were the theme of many cartoons, as were the unworldly traits East Germans thought West Germans assigned to them.

As figure 8.6 suggests, many East Germans experienced West Germans as neo-colonialists, who not only thought that their money could buy the whole of the GDR including its inhabitants, but also that they could do anything they liked. Some thought the way West Germans acted in the former GDR was like “Herrenmenschen in einer Kolonie [lords in a colony],”40 which made many East Germans feel like “Heimatvertriebene [displaced persons in their own country].”41 That even children were aware of the feelings of humiliation so strongly present in the former GDR was apparent from the following excerpt from an essay that a 14-year-old boy wrote entitled, “Deutschland. Ein Land von Ossis und Wessis? [Germany. A country of Ossis and Wessis]:”

Ich finde es schlimm so die Ossis hinzustellen als wären sie dumm, sie wüssten nichts, haben noch nie was von HiFi und Video gehört. Es stimmt ja das wir noch einiges dazu lernen müßten, aber so dumm waren wir nun wirklich nicht. [I think it is bad that East Germans are looked upon as being stupid, or do not know anything, and have never heard of hi-fi and stereo. It is true, we still had to learn some things, but we were not really that stupid.]

Against this background, the initial onset and increasing emergence of Ostalgie [combination of nostalgia and Ost, East] should primarily be seen as a form of protest against the complete devaluation of East German life histories.42
Figure 8.6 – Cartoon on German unification. The man pointing at the chair says: ‘This chair here, this desk here, understand?’ His colleagues at the front of the picture comment: “colleague Müller could have been a little more sympathetic towards the East German employees during their job induction”

Although it was evidently painful for many East Germans to have to experience, from one day to the next, their whole lives and past being shoved to one side as if entirely useless, you cannot help but wonder: was that not precisely what the greater majority had passionately wanted themselves – at least initially? After all, was it not the East German population in the autumn of 1989 who desperately wanted to dissolve their country and join the FRG? The landslide victory of the CDU, the party most outspokenly aiming at fast unification at the first election in March 1990 was explicitly linked to the party’s promise that there would be no transformation whatsoever of socialism or the GDR. The majority of the East German population wanted then – as the museum director wrote in his diary at the time – to “bury the past as quickly as possible.” However painful the devaluation of their history might be, one aspect of East Germans’ complaints is notice-
ably absent: their own initial condemnation of East Germany before 1989. I therefore think that the West German disapproving glances also exposed something that many East Germans themselves simply did not want to see.

The Idealized West Glances Back
In discussions on inter-German relations since 1989, one important element was not touched upon: the fact that East Germans had strongly idealized the world on the other side of the Wall, in order to be able to subsequently identify with the positive image this had created. Beforehand, the west had been seen by many East Germans as the imaginary space where they assumed there was the ultimately perfect society. In West Germans they thought they recognized themselves in better material circumstances. It must have been extremely painful to have to witness after the Wende that this recognition was certainly not mutual. While East Germans fundamentally recognized themselves in their West German neighbors, those glances were ruthlessly averted by West Germans: “Us? Like you? Thank goodness no! You, like us? Why then? Based on what?”

Through the increasing contact between West and East Germans increased after 1989, it soon became apparent that the perfect West German existence was rather more the product of East Germans’ projected imagination than East Germans would have wanted to admit beforehand. This in its turn threatened to reveal what the previously idealized projection had in fact always been: a means of cleaning out less pleasant characteristics and experiences from their own collective self-representation. In my opinion, the supposed West German post-Wende contempt was so painful for East Germans because in the deprecating glances, they had to recognize what they had chosen not to see in their own representation of self.

In her book Versuch, mir und anderen die ostdeutsche Moral zu erklären, East German author Annette Simon remarks that West Germans’ outlook on the history of the GDR has helped her to see more clearly a number of less pleasant aspects of her own life history. She recalls that although up until then she had always regarded herself as critical and dissident, it was only afterwards and through West Germans’ perspective on her history that she came to recognize the extent to which her previous perspective (on life, the GDR, and its history) was influenced by “den ‘Herrschen[den]…diesen Staat [this state’s rulers].” “I think it is important [to recognize] that our loyalty to the GDR, which was virtually drummed into us…that this loyalty had irrational, almost mystical dimensions. In one way or another, the think-patterns imposed on us were deeply embedded in our unconsciousness.”43
The fact that West Germans’ stares revealed what she herself had not noticed before makes her feel ashamed, Simon writes, and she suggests this is why so many East Germans so vehemently opposed the scornful West German bearing on their society and history: “Wenn man sich schämt, schlägt man lieber die Hände vors Gesicht als sich vor einen Spiegel zu setzen oder sich gar im Auge eines Westlers zu spiegeln [when people are ashamed, they prefer to hide their faces in their hands, instead of looking in the mirror, or mirroring themselves in West Germans’ eyes].”

I think her analysis is right. Through the belittling glances from those with whom they enjoyed identifying themselves, East Germans were being shown how idealized their own self-portrait had been. Because this would have been a painful confrontation, most East Germans chose to avoid the critical, judgmental glances from the West German other after the Wende. They kept them at a distance by using well-known forms of capitalism critique: “In the west, everything revolves around money,” thus assuring themselves of general recognition and approval. Since almost everyone can to some extent agree with these words, they resemble the official East German state’s label of anti-fascism – for almost no-one would dare to defend the contrary.

In East Germans’ representation of their society’s post-1989 Werdegang, it was capitalism, the Wessi and his accursed attributes (money and consumerism) that were responsible for their once so solid society being suddenly devoured by envy and mutual rivalry. Literally translated, the words often uttered were: “Since the Wessis and the DM arrived, our whole society has changed” – as if these were just powers of nature rather than developments and tendencies involving their own life and fellow countrymen. Recognizing that it was first and foremost East Germans who were jealous and competing with each other would have devastated the representation of their own society as a unit of warmth and solidarity.

In my opinion, the initial emergence of Ostalgie should be seen in this light: as a counterbalance to the threatening realization that it was an East German who no longer wanted to have a beer with his neighbor because since becoming redundant, he was a loser. Ostalgie functioned according to a similar mechanism as the East Germans’ previous desire for the west. Both collective representations helped East Germans to close ranks against the imaginary enemy, which prevented them from being who they really wanted to be. Before, East Germans basked in the harmonious image of the West German as the one they in fact would have been if only history had drawn the line differently. Those collective fantasies helped them to hide the unpleasant aspects of their own society from view. In that representation, there was always an implicit enemy (the Wall, history, “them up there”) that
prevented them from achieving true harmony. With the help of this fantasy, East Germans attempted to convince themselves that they would only be inclined towards great mutual solidarity. The fact that this failed was blamed on alienating circumstances.

Then came the Wende. Finally, East Germans expected to become just like their idealized image of the west. That did not happen, and the harsh light of the emerging capitalist society revealed that East Germans were also united by collectively disguising experiences of competitiveness and crab antics. In my opinion, the pain that unification caused in former East German society is for a large part due to the fact that it robbed East Germans of a collective fantasy – thus revealing what was hidden within its harmonious representation. “It is this traumatic moment of the political qua encounter with the real that initiates again and again a process of symbolization…[leading] to the emergence…of a new social fantasy…in the place of the dislocated one, and so on and so forth.”

No longer able to escape in the fantasy that they were actually just the same as the idealized other on the other side of the Wall, East Germans initially took refuge in a new fantasy, that of Ostalgie (and I paraphrase): “In the past we led a warm, comfortable life, but since 1989, not much of it is left because of that accursed capitalism.” In this way, East Germans were trying to hold onto the main thing which the Wende threatened to destroy in their country: the escape route to fantasy.