

Peter Thompson. *The Crisis of the German Left: The PDS, Stalinism and the Global Economy.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005. viii + 136 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-543-9.



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Monumentalizing Critical Marxism

Peter Thompson's book adds to the growing literature relating to the PDS (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus), the German political party most closely associated with the territories of the former German Democratic Republic. Thompson has written a provocative interpretation of the PDS and its historical context. Readers who reject his Marxist economic determinism and his clear sympathy with the PDS (or at least strains within it) will disagree with much of his analysis. Still, his work is thought provoking, and deserves to be evaluated according to the tasks the author set himself, rather than attacked along well-worn political lines.

Interest in the PDS is likely to grow even more now that the party, as of mid-2005 renamed *Die Linke* (the Left Party), is poised to become an all-German party thanks to electoral agreements with dissatisfied social democratic elements in the territories that comprised the former West Germany. It returned to the German Bundestag in 2005 after falling below the representational minimum percentage in 2002. This reinvention of the party is by no means the first in the PDS's history, and it is that very history that provides the explanation for the party's

penchant for name changes. During a brief period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification, the PDS was known as the SED/PDS. Before that, it was simply the SED—the Socialist Unity Party, the Stalinist party that dominated the East German political system and was responsible for the abuses of the East German police state. The PDS thus carries considerable historical baggage. As Thompson notes, however, the PDS's historical roots in the GDR do not only work to its disadvantage, but actually serve as one of the foundations of its success in post-unification Germany. Thus the PDS must perform a balancing act, distancing itself from its Stalinist past while simultaneously associating itself with people's more positive experiences of the GDR.

Thompson's book evaluates the charge that "the PDS is simply the successor party to the SED and therefore irretrievably 'Stalinist'" (p. 3). In keeping with his focus on the uses of history to serve the present, Thompson promises to evaluate "the extent to which [the PDS] is a new departure from its own past, able to jump over its own shadow." To do this, he asserts that his book will "unpack the PDS's rucksack [of history] and find out what

is in it" (p. 4). To this end, and quite appropriately given the importance of history to the PDS, Thompson draws on Nietzsche's famous essay regarding the uses and disadvantages of history. Thompson's application of Nietzsche's categories of monumentalist, antiquarian and critical history is only partially successful, however, for reasons to be discussed below. More seriously, and contrary to his stated purpose, Thompson engages in very little actual unpacking of the PDS's historical baggage—at least in the sense most of his prospective readers will likely expect. In fact, the author provides little new historical information about the PDS, and instead seems to be more concerned with salvaging a socialism untainted by Stalinism that can still lend itself to use by the PDS. To be fair, Thompson openly acknowledges that he intended his book to provide a framework for interpreting and understanding the PDS in its historical context rather than a detailed historical analysis of the PDS. The study's sources reflect this emphasis: it is largely based on secondary sources or online resources rather than archival documents. It also draws on three interviews, conducted by the author with Gregor Gysi, Andre Brie and Yvonne Kaufmann, all three leaders within the PDS. Still, readers looking for a more in-depth treatment of the PDS's history would be better served by looking elsewhere. Finally, and incomprehensibly for a work that purports to be a study of the uses and disadvantages of history for the PDS, the author fails even to mention in passing one historical burden that has haunted the PDS since its first name change: the allegations that some of its prominent founders, members and leaders served as informants to the Stasi, the East German secret police.

Thompson first addresses Nietzsche's category of monumentalism, a style of imitating the past that he associates with Stalinism. Under Stalinism, power was reified as an end in itself, the goal of the bureaucracy became maintaining its own power, democratic aspects of democratic centralism dissipated and loyalty to the party surpassed loyalty to the revolution in importance. Moreover, outside the Soviet Union, the role of communist parties became the defense of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union itself. Somewhat cryptically, Thompson asserts that "to understand the SED and consequently the PDS as parties, it is necessary to recognize that the Stalinization of the GDR actually began in 1929" (p. 29). Through this line of reasoning, Thompson seeks to free the SED and by extension its successor the PDS from responsibility for enacting Stalinist policies in the GDR. The second Nietzschean category is antiquarianism, an approach that emphasizes preserving conditions as they

are. Antiquarianism in the GDR especially was found under Honecker, but by 1953, "the shift from classical to neo-Stalinism, from monumentalism to antiquarianism, was well under way" (p. 32).

Thompson's analysis is at its strongest when it remains faithful to Nietzsche's original emphasis on how the categories describe the way individuals or even states use history, and Thompson's characterization of Honecker's use of history seems to correspond exceptionally well with the antiquarian approach. However, Thompson demonstrates a tendency to go far beyond Nietzsche's intent. Often he uses Nietzsche's terms as shorthand for an entire historical period and transforms them into historical phases of development that blend sequentially one into the next, from critical to monumental to antiquarian. This practice is neither consistent with Nietzsche's use of the concepts nor particularly useful, and leads to a sense of the categories as being rather monolithic and oversimplified.

Nietzsche's third category is critical history. This style "takes history and subjects all of its aspects to a radical criticism ... in order to change the present" (p. 37). Within the workers' movement, the period of Critical Marxism lasted from the 1850s to the 1920s. This period involved "fundamental and radical opposition" as the bases for "a critique of society and history" (p. 9). Elements of critical history are found throughout the period of the GDR's existence, too, "via Havemann and Biermann to Gorbachev" (p. 37). Moreover, critical groups within the GDR used history in their attacks on the system and fought about "who was the true possessor of and successor to the communist tradition" (p. 38). The PDS, according to Thompson, can rightly claim to have inherited this legacy. As he notes, "history and the interpretation of historical events and figures continue to play an important integrative role in ... discussion within and around the PDS" (p. 43).

Thompson's second chapter addresses "the rise of the working class as a substantial political force in both East and West" between 1917 and the 1990s. The author characterizes this period as one of integration of the workers' interests "into the social project" (p. 44). Here Thompson identifies the year 1974 as a turning point, as the year beginning "the shift away from social policy based on mass political integration" (p. 44). In the course of the chapter, the author further pursues the idea that GDR socialism was not true socialism as Marx intended. As Thompson bluntly puts it, "real-existing socialism" means "non-existent socialism" (p. 54). At the same time, the GDR

provided for the needs of workers in order to purchase their political cooperation. For this reason, a certain degree of nostalgia for the GDR persists that the PDS can draw upon. This second section of the work also elaborates on two concepts introduced at the beginning of the book, the “Long Cold War” and the “Short Political Century.” The first refers to the period of inter-systemic rivalry between 1917 and 1990. According to Thompson’s interpretation, during this era, political systems in both East and West were forced to integrate the concerns of the working class into the political system, and decision-making reflected the primacy of politics rather than economics. In the West, this integration was made under the auspices of a social democracy emphasizing political gains and forsaking the idea of revolution. In the East, the Bolshevik Revolution solidified into a kind of half-socialism, and under Stalin, the revolution became frozen as a result of bureaucratic efforts at self-preservation. For the GDR, especially after 1953, bureaucratic self-preservation boiled down to policies aimed at gaining the political acquiescence of the working class by providing it with job security and decent living standards.

These developments in both East and West played out against the backdrop of the so-called Short Political Century, an era between 1929 and 1974 marked by a long-term upward wave in economic growth. Thompson defines the political century as “the massification of politics and the subordination of market imperialism to social inclusivity” (p. 51). This inclusiveness was forced on both East and West “by the sheer specific weight of the industrial working class and its central role in the productive process” (p. 51). After 1974, however, the world saw “increasing trends towards the globalization of production, distribution, and exchange” (p. 52). The real changes began in 1974, which ushered in an era of neo-liberalism, first under Pinochet in Chile, soon followed by the deregulation and neo-liberalism of Thatcher and Reagan. These developments marked “the end of the ideal of the growth-based social democratic welfare state in the West” (p. 78). The East did not have these options, as social peace there rested on the purchase of political cooperation through expenditures on job security and economic well-being. As a result, flexibility to alter economic policy aggressively was not available.

The third section of Thompson’s work returns its attention to the PDS and to the original question of its relationship with the SED. While PDS leaders stress that 1989 represented a break with the SED’s Stalinism, some of the SED’s history was positive and still benefits the

PDS. In Thompson’s words, “the main concern is not to throw the Marxist baby out with the Stalinist bathwater” (p. 67). Conventional explanations for the disappointment in the fifteen years following 1989 and any related sympathy for the PDS hold that these result from the “nature of the ‘revolution’ of 1989 and its consequences” (p. 89). In contrast, Thompson asserts that the *Wende* is actually merely one symptom of a larger crisis with its origins in the economic downturn of the mid-1970s, a crisis that itself is part of longer-scale changes during the twentieth century. Hence in Thompson’s analysis, the discontent of former East Germans is not due to post-1989 experiences but is rather the result of long-term economic developments that in turn sparked a crisis in the East Bloc and thus led to revolution and unification. Unfortunately for the citizens of the GDR, the revolution in the East came at precisely the same time as the West was undergoing pressure from the same economic changes. As Thompson succinctly put it, East Germans “wished for the economic miracle but got the crisis of globalization instead” (p. 89). Thompson asserts that in the uncertain climate of unified Germany and post-communist Europe, post-communist socialist parties have done well not out of simple protest or an “old boys’ network” of communists, but rather due to the memories of social solidarity and economic security provided by the communist system and convenient forgetting of the negative aspects. So *Ostalgie* is about wanting a return to “the welfare, not the dictatorship” (p. 96) of the Honecker era.

According to Thompson, the PDS as one of the successor parties to the German workers’ movement in the twentieth century is well poised to harness this nostalgia, as the PDS emphasizes social over economic issues. Thompson concludes his study by calling on the PDS “to lead a return to the critical traditions of the international workers’ movement” (p. 125), clearly revealing his own stance regarding the PDS. Thompson’s call for the PDS to return to the Critical Marxism of the glory days of the workers’ movement raises the possibility that his entire work can be read as a Nietzschean monumentalization of what Thompson identifies at the beginning of his book as the critical period of Marxist historical thought. Nietzsche warned in his essay about the implications of this kind of approach to history: “As long as the soul of historical writing lies in the great driving impulses which a powerful man derives from it, as long as the past must be written about as worthy of imitation, as capable of being imitated, with the possibility of a second occurrence, history is definitely in danger of becoming something altered, reinterpreted into something more beautiful, and

thus coming close to free poeticizing.”[1] Thompson appears to be following precisely this line of historical interpretation, thus running the risk of altering and idealizing the subject of his history, in the process rendering it more beautiful, but less true.

By way of conclusion, let me return to the issue of Stasi cooperation. As Thompson notes, the new PDS program adopted in 2002 contains a statement that the party “condemns all crimes committed by the GDR state between 1949 and 1989” (p. 123). This is as close as the party has come to condemning the alleged activities of some of its members and leaders on behalf of the Stasi. Such a blanket renunciation is different from a thorough examination of the party’s own history, however. As Nietzsche wrote regarding critical history, “A person [or a party] must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it, in order to be able to live. He manages to do this by dragging the past before

the court of justice, investigating it meticulously, and finally condemning it.”[2] The PDS’s continued unwillingness to examine its own past and that of its leaders regarding alleged Stasi cooperation does not bode well for its commitment to a critical history. That Thompson—in a study that claims to unpack the PDS’s historical baggage for examination—does not even mention this issue, even to refute it, unnecessarily weakens a problematic though provocative book.

Notes

[1]. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” trans. Ian Johnston, <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>.

[2]. Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.”

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