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André Steiner. *Überholen ohne einzuholen: Die DDR-Wirtschaft als Fußnote der deutschen Geschichte?* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2006. 192 S. EUR 19.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86153-397-9.

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Why Ask if the GDR's Economy Was a Footnote to German History?

How useful is a rhetorical question in a book's title? This volume, edited by AndrÃ© Steiner, leaves one to wonder, since only a few of the volume's contributors directly address the question of whether the German Democratic Republic's economy was a "footnote to German history." The question seems to serve primarily as a straw man in an attempt to root the first post-unification decade of scholarship on the GDR's economy in the master narratives of traditional German economic history. The volume, which paradoxically does not contain any footnotes, stems from a 2002 conference at the Zentrum fÃ¼r Zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF) in Potsdam. Well-respected, established economic historians of Germany, most of who rarely (if ever) focused on the GDR, were asked to examine East Germany's economy using concepts and frameworks borrowed from their work on other periods and economic systems. The conference aimed to determine both the unique and generic characteristics of the GDR's economy in order to place East Germany in broader historical and international contexts, while tracing both ruptures and continuities.

Underlying the analyses in this volume are two divergent yet sometimes complementary approaches. The first views the GDR primarily from the perspective of the capitalist market economy and emphasizes systemic shortcomings and breaks with the past. The second focuses on the historical development of economic subsystems and stresses elements the GDR shared with all late industrial societies. Both approaches–and many of the volume's contributors–argue that East German economic history can teach important "lessons," usually about how to avoid "failure." While the volume does not break any new substantive or methodological ground, many essays offer thought-provoking observations and useful overviews of selected aspects of (East) German economic history. Gerold Ambrosius considers the economic order, Hajo Riese economic theory, Toni Pierenkemper labor policies, Werner Plumpe industrial relations, Christoph Buchheim foreign trade, Raymond Stokes technology, and Manfred Schmidt social policies.

In his suggestive but unfortunately very short introduction, Steiner argues that the example of the GDR helps to guard against scholarly interpretations that describe German economic development as an ineluctable

march toward a liberal market economy. To describe the GDR as a forty-year *Sonderweg* is clearly too simplistic and distorted. At the same time, Steiner argues, the GDR took to an extreme many trends and lines of development in German economic history, such as the strong role of the state and aversion to risk. One also cannot dismiss the unmistakable break in longer lines of development created by the GDR's conscious construction of a new economic system as an alternative to capitalism. One of the volume's explicit agendas is to examine the GDR's unique mixture of "Sovietization" with older yet modified "German traditions."

By historicizing the GDR's economic order in the context of German and European industrialization, Ambrosius goes beyond most analyses of the GDR's well-known systemic weaknesses to point out several interesting similarities and differences among economic orders of recent German history. Ambrosius argues that all German economic orders since the *Kaiserreich* based a large portion of their legitimacy on economic growth and were characterized by a high degree of regulation. Riese also emphasizes historical continuities and commonalities, arguing that the theoretical basis of East Germany's planned economy was the mirror image of the classical liberal approach of capitalism. Socialism and capitalism were mirror images of each other, both rooted in older liberal economic traditions.

The unfortunate title of Pierenkemper's contribution, "Forty Years of Futile Effort," reflects certain biases and (stereotypically "Wessi") perspectives that run throughout the essay. Although he expresses some hesitation about its appropriateness, Pierenkemper's use of a "market" paradigm to examine labor and work in the GDR gives the impression that his analysis forces the GDR into an established grand narrative of German history rather than understanding it on its own terms. Like many of the volume's other contributors, Pierenkemper uncritically repeats several clichÃ©s about power, authority, and the relationship between state and society in the GDR that have long been complicated or abandoned. Plumpe shares Pierenkemper's predicament of reluctantly framing his essay with a term–in his case, "industrial relations"–that ultimately is inappropriate for the GDR.

In part due to its inherently transnational nature, foreign trade lends itself to more straightforward comparisons, as Buchheim demonstrates in his essay about the "Achilles' heel" of the GDR. Autarky as an alternative model to globalization was common to all Soviet-bloc countries, which suffered many of the same consequences of the inevitable competition with the West in increasingly globalized markets. Buchheim also integrates the GDR into the history of German foreign trade stretching back to the *Kaiserreich* by demonstrating the tension across regimes and time periods between the tendencies toward globalization and isolation.

Stokes is one of the volume's few contributors to explicitly answer whether the GDR was a footnote to German economic history. He uses the question as a creative frame for his entire essay. Inspired by Georg Bertsch's and Ernst Hedler's description of the GDR as the "Galapagos Island" of design, Stokes argues that this metaphor may also apply to its technology. Just as Charles Darwin learned much from the island's life forms, which were significantly different from those in the rest of the world, we can learn much about the pre-history of technology from the unusual case of East Germany. Schmidt also emphatically declares that the topic of East German social politics is worth more than just a footnote to German economic and social history. But the bias and teleology in his justification is unsatisfying: the GDR is a "textbook example" of the erroneous path of striving for full employment and social security that ends in a well-developed welfare state overwhelming its economic base and ultimately failing.

Like Stokes and a few other contributors, Schmidt asserts that consumption and the official goal of a socialist consumer society were of central importance to the East German economy. These observations, coupled with the recent explosion of innovative scholarship on East German consumption, make it all the more curious that Steiner's volume does not contain a single essay that approaches GDR economic history from the side of demand rather than supply or from the bottom rather than from the top. This volume thus might be seen as an example of the sort of economic history against which contributors to a recent forum at H-German on the need for a "new economic history of Germany" have argued.[1] Steiner's volume clearly could have benefited from integrating consumption into more traditional narratives of (East) German economic history, just as recent studies with approaches and methods borrowed from conventional economic history have enriched our understanding of German consumption.

While this volume helps to embed the GDR into "mainstream" German economic history, it stops short of what might be considered the next logical step–modifying the "master narrative" to accommodate recent

findings of experts on the GDR. It may be too much to ask the contributors to this volume to make such a step. With the exception of Steiner, Stokes, and Schmidt, they have not previously published significantly on East German history and in general do not draw on or engage with scholarship on the GDR published since the mid- to late-1990s. It is also worth noting that virtually no English-language scholarship is cited in the essays' select bibliographies. The book nonetheless performs a valuable service by challenging experts on the GDR to do more to integrate their subjects into the larger context of German history while retaining notions of the GDR's uniqueness and complexity. Also particularly useful is the book's forty-one-page timeline of significant events in East German economic history.

Note

[1]. "H-German Forum: Do We Need a New Economic History of Germany?" in H-German (Summer 2007), at `http://www.h-net.org/~{}german/discuss/econ/econ_index.htm`.

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