



Birgit Müller. *The Disenchantment with Market Economics: East Germans and Western Capitalism.* Translated by John Bellamy, Jennie Challender, and Kathleen Repper. European Anthropology in Translation. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. ix + 244 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-217-9; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84545-506-4.



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Market Delusions

“Disenchantment with market economics” is the type of phrase that comes easily to mind in 2009. But Birgit Müller, in her book of that title, is not describing the fallout from recent financial market actions within the global economy. Indeed, the bulk of her research was undertaken from 1988 to 1994, with occasional exceptions. Müller thus describes an earlier state of disaffection—one that followed the introduction of market economics into the formerly planned economy of the GDR—and focuses on the shift in social relationships around the *Wende*. This is thus a book about German reunification that alights on other, broader questions of politics, economics, and society. It emerges from the discipline of social anthropology—although one could also align it with “industrial sociology” or “enterprise anthropology.” But to confine it to one of these narrow fields would be to damn it to a sliver of the audience it deserves.

Paradoxically, the very narrowness of the study affords the book its wide scope. Müller wisely and fruitfully chooses to focus on three East Berlin enterprises. Two of these made a rocky transition to the market econ-

omy via the *Treuhand* and privatization processes. The other was subsumed by a large multinational company at the moment of the *Wende*, becoming another “node” in its global operations. These three enterprises—each with a manufacturing and industrial production base—operate and develop in distinct ways, giving Muller’s survey a satisfying reach across both workplace relations in East Germany and the processes of reunification and marketization.

One finds in the book an account of the way social positions—inclusive of political allegiances to party, work brigade, and enterprise—map onto two different economic and political systems. Like other anthropologists and sociologists of socialist-capitalist “transition,” Müller finds a strong continuation at the upper echelon: many enterprise bosses from East Germany retained managerial positions under capitalism; workers remained workers. Of course, those socialist managers retained enterprise power, but traded party-derived for capital-derived power. A more remarkable way into these matters are those cases Müller finds of what

might be called a “pull to orthodoxy”—those people who, in the 1980s, were strongly committed to the SED and socialism, then become strongly attached to the philosophies and doxa of market economics post-1990. Critics remained critics; followers continued following. To wit: workers were much more willing to seek change within the enterprise than managers.

Müller admits in the first sentence of her preface that she held a skeptical attitude toward the “rapid political unification” of Germany, in contrast, as she notes, to the enthusiastic official discourse. While this enthusiasm was carried forward by the “happy endings” offered in many popular histories and (neo)liberal triumphalist accounts of the Berlin Wall coming down, these narratives are tempered by Müller’s skeptical, attentive ethnographic account.

She enters her story about the enterprises she discusses before the collapse of the GDR as a widely imagined possibility. Consequently, she reports, in her relatively chronological account, employees’ dim awareness of a different future. As it ultimately approached, some shared her skepticism—including those who buckled up for work as brigades to defend the country from swelling protest actions. Others awaited the changes with anticipation. Once the change came, Müller obtained interesting material from the self-alterations her informants made in the assessment of the socialist state and their own biographies: many made the claim that they knew the system would end, but that it was strong. Everything was forever, until it was no more—as Alexei Yurchak’s recent book on the last Soviet generation puts it.^[1] For Müller, the embedded nature of socialist power and hierarchical relationships offer one answer to the question of why GDR subjects did not see those changes coming.

But Müller is not content with static accounts of East German society and its aftermath. She highlights the creativity and nous required to navigate the idiosyncrasies of the planned economy. As with much anthropology, this book analyses subjects, adaptation, and the imagination. In it, Müller is concerned to question “issues of power and personal autonomy,” before and after the *Wende* (p. 1). This point is a crucial one to stress for readers who may wish to immediately dismiss Müller’s “reunification skepticism” as apologism for the GDR. The text does a great deal of work to show the inequalities and irrationality of the GDR, and highlights the cronyism, nepotism, and tireless influence of the SED in these enterprises. This task is accomplished via a strong focus on the workers of the “workers and peasants’ state,” one

that follows their descriptions of the ways in which paths to promotion and internal change were influenced—that is, stymied or opened up—by external powers.

Although in some ways this pre-*Wende* material foreshadows the processes of change that are to follow, it represents an important documentation of everyday GDR realities. One finds little influence of the Stasi here, for instance, except in various rumors about employees. The main drama of the account comes from the quotidian. The benefit of her ethnographic account is precisely a focus on such unremarkable moments as a way to get at the people involved, who have often become merely anonymous actors in broader social scientific and humanities analyses of the *Wende*. For Müller, many processes of “change” occurred in her chosen locations: “what ... were working people able and willing to change in the enterprises following 1989? How did they reflect upon their actions and upon the possibilities that now opened up to them with the collapse of the old authoritarian social structure?” (p. 1).

As Müller notes, the initial stages of the *Wende* contained deep reservoirs of hope. The sudden emergence of a dialogue between socialist ideals and market economics opened up a space for critical encounters and questioning of assumptions: many people did not want to do away with “socialism”—rather, they wanted to do away with the grotesque form it had taken in the GDR.

However, once the option for a period of “self-criticism” was dismissed, East Germans began to approach the new reality—market capitalism—but in intriguing ways. “The brief historical moment of the German *Wende* from autumn 1989 to summer 1990 became for the workers a crucial experience that called into question ideas about the rationality of the market economy, the legitimacy of ownership, and democratic control. Their ideas of ‘market,’ ‘private property’ and ‘democracy’ became objects of my research, and are questioned as to their ideological nature” (p. 2). Müller’s book finds new everyday practices happening within these spaces, as life experience negotiated new realities. Or, to put it in a more philosophical register, socialist ontologies and epistemologies were placed in a radically new context—that of a market economy. The inventiveness of socialist subjects—the everyday negotiation of “the plan,” shortages, and party-takes on a new color here. Müller’s account also exploits the interpretive possibilities of the clash of an “imagined” West and the “really existing” West into which East Germans were thrown.

One of the most interesting chapters in the book en-

tails a description and analysis of the ways in which the corporate philosophy of the multinational corporation functioned (or not) for those workers from the former planned economy. In their new “family” at the multinational, “employees were summoned” to a sense of “belonging” within the home of corporate ideologues (p. 167). Identity was no longer tied to the “people” of the GDR, but to one’s workplace: as MÃ¼ller reminds us, the “family” is just as readily a hierarchical model as an egalitarian model—and also an indefinite one. Nevertheless, an ambiguous metaphor never stood in the way of an industrious corporation.

This company pursues what MÃ¼ller justifiably dubs a “civilizing mission” in the East—like many corporations at the time. They were to offer the beaten-down *Ossis* the good news of capitalism, managerialism, and so on, doing so by constructing categories of identity rooted in management philosophy that both contradicted and complemented each other, such as competition, success orientation, or family. Through such emphases, the corporation sought to correct the aberrant ontologies of those in the East. The corporation bolstered this activity through a mythology of “continuation”—that is, a history that said socialism was simply an “interruption” to the East German company’s history within the conglomerate. Such bogus history provided the multinational—successful, western, capitalist—with a superior claim to power and secured its rights to impose its corporate, managerialist form.

This “form” took on the shape familiar to many of us from experiences elsewhere in the neoliberal economy: “it turned the universe of economic rationality into a universe of emotional uncertainty” (p. 170). The instrumental use of insecurity was used to motivate workers and perpetuate a “cult of the winner” (p. 180). The winner, of course, is not a loser. And “loser behaviors,” as defined within the corporation by a prominent poster, were precisely those behaviors that were necessary to be a “winner” in the planned economy. The individual worker is left to innovate in prescribed ways, becoming an entrepreneur within the enterprise, working within the family as an individual. Socialist man was succeeded by self-made man. MÃ¼ller finds that this corporate philosophy provoked two characteristic types of behavior within former GDR subjects: adaptation and refusal.

In the latter part of the book, one senses—and feels—frustration with the manner in which the *Wende* was managed. Many social and political alternatives were closed off. Opportunities for change were ignored.

MÃ¼ller is particularly concerned with the inability of unions—in both East and West Germany—and workers to mobilize together, to find solidarity, and to fight against fairly obvious injustices. She focuses here, for instance, on the disjuncture in wages: at one point, an eastern production group, working in the same factory as a western group, was earning wages at half the western rate per hour.

In such contexts, according to MÃ¼ller, animosities and stereotyping began to emerge. Although MÃ¼ller is not informed by that tradition, rich material might be found here for a psychoanalytic reading of *Ossi/Wessi* relations. In the binary stereotypes—in which *Ossi* traits are just as easily held to be *Wessi* traits—a distinct pattern emerges of splitting and projecting. *Wessis* find in the *Ossis* many character traits which they dislike within their own group; *Ossis* find in the *Wessis* an “archetype” of capitalism that both appeals to and repulses them. It is perhaps also worth noting that there is rich material elsewhere for a further Kleinian reading of the manner in which workers deal with workplace circumstances: one finds a complex, “depressive,” open position in some, while others adopt a “paranoid-schizoid” position to new forms of social relations.

Nevertheless, MÃ¼ller’s focus on “material control” and “ideological power” makes for a strong and important thesis. Her use of theory is selective and astute, making way for insights into the quiet battles for control and power within the enterprise and related areas of everyday life. In the final part of the book, she returns to her central question, asking again: “in the transition to the market economy, has the workforce gained or lost in personal autonomy and self-determination? Has the market economy brought them the freedom they had hoped for?” (p. 3).

Her answer could be paraphrased as a tentative “kind of.” She sees some gains in autonomy and determination. But she notes that the capitalist myth of the “self-made man” rubs up against the structural constraints of reunification: redundancies, unequal salaries, and longer hours for *Ossis*. In general, those former GDR subjects who found work in (former) West Germany were more successfully integrated and psychologically content than those who had remained in the East.

But something revealing remains in the forms of fond remembrance and identification she finds after the *Wende* in many subjects who were deeply unhappy with the GDR at the time. Wolpert, one of her informants, identifies strongly with the corporate philosophy of his multi-

national employer. Yet, he stresses that his success is partly determined by strong socialist values or ideals he had learned as a child in the GDR. Articulated differently, this sentiment might be shouted down as “Ostalgie.” Yet, it goes to the heart of Müller’s book: the complex blend of attachment and alienation at work in the memories and identities of (former) East Germans under the conditions of market capitalism and the planned economy. Or, indeed, as she writes elsewhere: “where worldviews and personal attitudes, developed from socialist experiences, determine economic behavior and the view of the

market, the self-evident functioning of the market mechanism appears in a new light” (p. 125). This book usefully captures and describes those moments when the light fell in new and unexpected ways on otherwise outdated assumptions.

Note

[1]. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

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