



Eli Rubin. *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 286 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3238-7.



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Published on H-German (January, 2014)

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Socialist Plastics

Ed. note: This review was solicited and written before its author became a review editor for H-German. Its appearance was delayed due to an extensive publishing backlog.

Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic moves beyond the totalitarian model to give us a history of plastics—and thus a glimpse into the everyday world of life in the GDR. Situating himself historiographically among the *Alltagshistoriker* (historians of everyday life), Eli Rubin uses the history of plastics in the GDR to examine the ways in which the state and the consumer demands of ordinary Germans were intertwined and able to influence each other, resulting in a unique culture of shared values.

By approaching the history of the GDR from the perspective of material culture, Rubin provides readers with the story of how the production and consumption of synthetic material allowed a middle ground to be forged between the needs of the political economy, the GDR population, and its designers. This study thus demonstrates how the GDR's ideology was inherently a part of the

consumption and production of everyday material objects. However, the story doesn't end there. By showing the ways in which citizens negotiated the limits of the East German government—how the regime's efforts literally and figuratively shaped the daily lives and objects of GDR citizens—Rubin illuminates the delicate dance between consumer agency and governmental power.

Drawing on a wide array of sources, including actual objects themselves, Rubin seamlessly weaves a narrative that approaches the history of plastics neither from the top down nor the bottom up, but rather from the center. In this manner he shows how plastics were used widely and according to specific purpose and were an inescapable part of everyday life in the *Volkswirtschaft* (people's economy).

Chapter 1, “1958, The Year of Consumption and Chemicals,” marks the Cold War climate in 1958 as a piv-

total time in the synthetic industry in the GDR due to the start of the GDR's Chemistry Program. Rubin identifies this period as the "consumer turn." As consumer production modernized and grew, the Chemistry Program gained momentum, and the GDR pushed to turn plastic technology into a massive "ersatz" culture, so much that the two forces of production and modernization became inextricably intertwined. It was in this year, at the Fifth Party Congress, that Walter Ulbricht announced his plan for the GDR to overtake West Germany in per capita consumption, and to limit the amount of goods coming in from the West and the Soviet Union. Lacking the raw materials needed to compete with Western consumer culture, the GDR needed to rely on homegrown synthetics to replace and produce the goods that would satisfy the average East German consumer. In order to sell the public in this endeavor, the GDR launched a propaganda campaign, to assert its chemistry program's superiority over that of the FRG. One of the most important parts of this project was to demonstrate the link between West Germany's chemical industry with the Nazi past. The SED explicitly contrasted "new" East German chemical companies (or newly nationalized, anyway) to those companies in West Germany that remained under the same ownership from the Third Reich. Not only did this project allow the East German regime to claim superiority over synthetic production in the West; it allowed the GDR to offer more evidence that West Germany was little more than a poorly disguised continuation of the Nazi economic-political regime.

Chapter 2 traces the history of functionalist design in the GDR. Rubin considers the rise of functionalist design as an example of efficient mass production. It signaled a shift towards a welfare dictatorship, the development of socialist consumerism, and the reappearance of Bauhaus- and Werkbund-influenced industrial designers, all part of "the bridge ... [that] helps connect the issue of plastics with the development of socialism in East Germany" (p. 43, emphasis in original). Rubin credits functionalist designers with having created a particular kind of socialist culture with their insistence that an industrial good's aesthetic should be less about excessive ornamentation and instead be based on the necessity of function. Designers thus turned to scientific principles and science-based synthetic materials in order to prove that modern design belonged to reason, and therefore to socialism. One of Rubin's most enlightening discussions is how GDR designers helped socially engineer East Germans to be better consumers. Seeing themselves as "guardians of taste," designers created what they believed to be aesthetically

pleasing products. But in order for socialist consumerism to work, they had to educate people about what constituted "good" (socialist, and therefore modern) and "bad" design, and about what products consumers should buy in regard to their usefulness to the individual and the collective (p. 226). By producing plastic products to help streamline and improve the everyday life of the individual, designers brought attention to plastic's larger importance in the collective. In turn, they were able to unite ideology with product consumption.

Chapter 3 focuses on the vast amount of synthetics that became a significant part of the mass construction programs in the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as the *Plattenbau* (prefabricated housing complexes). These housing projects comprised identical, boxlike structures filled with apartments of identical shape and size, furnished with mass-produced identical furniture (a necessity, in order to keep up with the rate of *Plattenbau* construction) and household items. Using interviews and other printed sources, Rubin breathes life into these otherwise sterile shelters. Former residents of these apartments claimed that visiting a neighbor's apartment could be a surreal and confusing experience, making it difficult to know whether one was in one's own apartment, or in the one across the hall. These massive prefabricated housing projects forced plastics into the homes of East Germans. Thus, Rubin shows how the new plans for housing coincided with a specific campaign to create a new living culture in the GDR and how utopian socialist dreams of entirely plastic apartments was just one of the ways in which plastics would change lives and allow "the plastic age [to] finally lead to 'the age of communism'" (p. 108). Ultimately, as Rubin demonstrates, these housing projects restructured East Germans lives for the worse: by being forced to replace their old furniture with mass produced cookie-cutter pieces, East Germans felt marginalized and disconnected from their past instead of modern. With frustration and bitterness, they realized that they could never bring back beloved traditions—private and public—that plastics replaced.

Building upon earlier discussions about the consumer turn, the Chemistry Program, modern design, and the mass-produced housing program, chapter 4 brings these narratives together to examine plastics' reputation in the GDR and how it entered East Germans' consciousness. In this chapter, Rubin makes clear the difference between synthetics' significance in East Germany and plastics in the West. In the GDR, plastic had the reputation of being a highly valuable material and a symbol of technological progress and growing industry. Indeed, synthetics "ra-

diated the *image* of a wonder material” that was advantageous for the individual and collective. In the West, consumers considered plastics to be cheap, disposable, and thus inferior (p. 120). Rubin’s examples, such as the Leipzig Trade Fair, advertisements, department stores, and household publications, show plastics’ rise in popularity in the 1960s in the GDR. Ultimately, the aggressive advertising and propaganda campaign for plastics succeeded, and East German consumers developed a common and shared concept of (plastic) quality.

Finally, chapter 5 examines the relationship between aesthetics, plastics, and the GDR economy. As Rubin notes, “economics is inscribed with questions of aesthetic judgment and taste, and that taste and aesthetic judgment are inherently inscribed with questions of economics” (p. 170). From the perspective of production, this chapter outlines how plastics were produced, circulated, and distributed, and highlights the industry’s development as well as weaknesses and problems. Rubin points out that the industry lacked two key elements for the production of massive quantities of plastic: petroleum and technology. Ironically, the GDR could not produce enough plastics to keep up with the consumer demand that it had created. Those consumers who needed and wanted plastic

products were often unable to purchase them. Despite, or perhaps because of, the state’s struggle and promises to provide enough synthetic products to the GDR population, plastic became the one material that remained in the collective consciousness of GDR citizens.

This book sets the tone for an important chapter in the historiography of the GDR, linking traditional documents with the material cultural artifacts so important for the “cultural turn.” Rubin is thorough in his chronicling of the history of plastics in the GDR, from his examination of political and economic decision makers that ushered plastic production to the forefront of the GDR command economy, industrial designers, plastics in the home and the every day, to finally, ordinary people’s accounts of the role that plastics had in their lives. What is important to remember, as Rubin notes, is that the story of plastics and the the story of the GDR government are one and the same: plastic was just one aspect of the everyday objects that existed in GDR citizens’ lives because of state initiatives. The population may have practiced autonomy over what plastic meant in their lives, but ultimately, this material was born out of an ideology that drove the economy and, therefore, a distinctly *East German* society.

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Citation: Shannon Nagy. Review of Rubin, Eli, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

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