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MARY FULBROOK

THE ›STATE‹ OF GDR HISTORY

The ›state‹ of GDR history has moved on in two significant respects over the last two decades. First of all, a research focus on the East German state itself has been somewhat displaced, or at least complemented, by a heightened awareness of the significance of social and cultural aspects of GDR daily life as subjects of inquiry in their own right. This has led to the flourishing of new approaches to the social and cultural history of the GDR alongside a continuing focus on the major topics of the political institutions and structures, most particularly the apparatus of repression. Secondly, and in a different sense, the highly polarised debates of the early post-unification years have subsided somewhat, at least in terms of the intensity and on occasion ferocity with which controversies were conducted. Even so, there are lingering manifestations of highly political critiques and personal aspersions being cast, even on the part of otherwise respectable academic scholars. The old arguments about, for example, concepts of totalitarianism have far from lost their relevance or import, even if they are now couched in rather more sophisticated and differentiated terms than they were in the early years after unification. Despite widespread assertions to the contrary, there has as yet been no definitive resolution of these two strands of inquiry, with continuing differences particularly over ways of interpreting sources relating to subjectivities¹.

Our sheer knowledge of aspects of East German life has expanded exponentially over the last two decades. Particularly in the first few years after unification and the opening of the archives, there was an ever-growing accumulation of detailed monographs on particular historical events, such as the 1953 Uprising, the building of the Wall, the growth of dissent and opposition, and the revolution of 1989; on relations between the Protestant Churches (and to a lesser extent the Catholic Church) and the SED or the State Security Service (Stasi); on institutions and structures of power, including most significantly the Stasi, but also less obviously malign organisations such as some of the social and mass organisations; the development of international relations and relations with both the West and with Moscow; as well as works on particular social groups, and individual writers and artists. Perhaps the most striking feature of the last decade, however, has been the expansion of interest in ›culture‹ in a broader, more anthropological sense; ranging from private life and domesticity through the workplace and public spheres, as well as in the character of power, more broadly conceived than in the purely party political and institutional sense. Earlier conceptions of social history as the history of particular groups and of structural changes over time have been displaced and complemented by works opening up new areas of inquiry, and sensitive to issues of perception and discourse.

But, for all the wealth of suggestions and the proliferation of approaches, adequate conceptualisation remains problematic. The single most significant challenge currently facing historians of the GDR is now, in my view, to bring together and interrelate the levels of structures

1 Cf. most recently a review essay by Thomas LINDENBERGER, *Normality, Utopia, Memory and Beyond: Reassembling the East German Society*, in: *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 33 (2011), no. 1.

and subjectivities. This is, furthermore, related to questions of sources and the evaluation and interpretation of evidence; and to wider considerations about the significance of particular historical approaches.

The familiar controversies of the 1990s need little by way of further rehearsal; of interest here is the current position, which oddly still remains divided between those adopting one form or another of the highly elastic totalitarianism approach, and historians who start from a range of other perspectives not so easily lumped under one concept or label, but perhaps least offensively grouped together as ›socio-cultural‹. It is on these two sorts of approach that I shall focus, starting with the latter.

›Socio-cultural approaches‹ to GDR history

Over recent years, there has been a significant growth in works exploring the changing character of power, culture and social relations in the GDR, from a variety of perspectives. Variants have in common a sensitivity to the difficulties of understanding the GDR. For the first ten or fifteen years after unification, such approaches were often reflected in the search for appropriate concepts and on occasion wilfully oxymoronic labels: references to the significance of ›Eigen-Sinn‹, a ›ruled-through society‹, a ›welfare dictatorship‹, or – my own contribution – a ›participatory dictatorship‹². They often also explicitly reject dichotomous approaches, seeking to explore the complexities of the ways in which people were both shaped by and helped to shape the historical conditions through and in which they lived. This ›non-totalitarian‹ camp, to use a vague negative label for the time being, is large and diverse, not lending itself to easy summary: it includes scholars engaged in a wide range of approaches in social, cultural and anthropological as well as political and economic history. Recent years have seen a spate of studies emphasising aspects of society and culture while never losing sight of basic questions concerning the structures and exercise of power. A few examples must suffice to indicate the current richness of approaches and debates among ›non-totalitarian‹ theorists of the GDR.

Major contributions in this area have of course come from German-based scholars – including for example Arnd Bauerkämper, Thomas Lindenberger, Alf Lüdtke, Ina Merkel, Dorothee Wierling, and many others. Even before unification, there were the beginnings of such approaches, going well beyond the conventional textbooks focussing on political structures and institutions; one needs only to think of the path-breaking oral history research of Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling, carried out in 1987³. Since the 1990s there have been a number of institutions devoting considerable resources to GDR history, many in the traditions of political and institutional history, including the Hannah-Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Research in Dresden, the Forschungsverbund SED-Staat at the Free University Berlin, the Institute of Contemporary History's branch in Berlin, and the

- 2 Early contributions include, for example: Richard BESSEL, Ralph JESSEN (eds.), *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, Göttingen 1996; Konrad H. JARAUSCH (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience*, New York, Oxford 1999; Hartmut KAEUBLE, Jürgen KOCKA, Hartmut ZWAHR (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, Stuttgart 1994; Jürgen KOCKA (eds.), *Historische DDR-Forschung. Aufsätze und Studien*, Berlin 1993; Jürgen KOCKA, Martin SABROW (ed.), *Die DDR als Geschichte. Fragen, Hypothesen, Perspektiven*, Berlin 1994; Thomas LINDENBERGER (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn*, Cologne 1999; Thomas LINDENBERGER, *Volkspolizei. Herrschaftspraxis und öffentliche Ordnung im SED-Staat 1952–1968*, Cologne 2003; and my own works: Mary FULBROOK, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949–1989*, Oxford 1995; and what is effectively a companion volume, focussing on social history, ID., *The People's State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, Princeton, London 2005.
- 3 LUTZ NIETHAMMER, ALEXANDER VON PLATO, DOROTHEE WIERLING, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, Berlin 1991.

Stiftung Aufarbeitung der SED Diktatur. The very names of some of these institutes symbolically embody their research missions. Most notably with respect to socio-cultural approaches, perhaps, is the Potsdam-based Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung; under the successive leaderships of Jürgen Kocka, Christoph Kleßmann, Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, the ZZF has provided a highly stimulating institutional basis for comparative, inter-disciplinary and socio-cultural approaches to GDR history, fostering collaborative research on the part of both east and west Germans in cross-fertilisation with international scholars.

While in the pre-1990 period non-German scholars of the GDR tended to be found predominantly among Germanists and political scientists, the field of GDR history has gained increasing international attention, although largely without the financial and institutional backing the field has enjoyed in Germany. It makes little sense now to talk of distinctive ›national‹ perspectives, given the internationalisation of scholarly publications, conferences, controversies and indeed also the historians themselves: given the international pool from which excellent academics are increasingly drawn, it would be hard to categorise the many native German historians of the GDR currently employed in UK or US universities as ›British‹ or ›American‹, despite the fact that they publish with major anglophone university presses. It is perhaps the case that the political implications of historical interpretations are less immediate or less sensitive beyond German borders. But while the personal backgrounds of historians obviously informs some of their interests, it is quite clear that approaches, debates and discourses transcend national borders in every sense of the term.

Power is far from absent from these sorts of approach. Among French historians of the GDR, recent approaches have been quite explicitly theorised as ›socio-cultural‹, even and perhaps especially while treating topics entailing ›hard power‹.⁴ Sandrine Kott's work on factories, and that of Emmanuel Droit on the Stasi in the East German education system – instrument of repression, surveillance, and now a »site of memory« – provide excellent examples of the way in which it is possible to address central issues of power from a culturally sensitive framework⁵.

In contrast to totalitarian approaches, where agency is primarily located at the top of the political hierarchy (and among oppositionalists), agency is, in the majority of works from a socio-cultural perspective, quite explicitly diffuse and unevenly distributed across different social and political locations. The micro-politics and structures of everyday life are key framing assumptions in this approach. The possibility of pressures from different groups of the population in affecting SED policies, as well as the ways in which communist policies constrained and shaped what was possible, are for example at the forefront of Donna Harsch's investigation of women and the family. Harsch writes of the interactions between »a manipulative state and manoeuvring women«, where both – despite quite unequal power relations – affected the other⁶. Works by Inge Markovits, Andrew Port, Mark Landsmann and Jeannette Madarász take us into the areas of law, economics and the workplace, as well as highlighting the experiences of different social groups and their strategies for negotiating improvements under difficult circumstances, stressing the significance of a capacity (or otherwise) for collective action and pursuit of individual interests under different conditions⁷. The work of functionaries

4 For an overview, see Sandrine KOTT, Emmanuel DROIT (eds.), *Die ostdeutsche Gesellschaft. Eine transnationale Perspektive*, Berlin 2006; Ina MERKEL (ed.), »Wir sind doch nicht die Meker-Ecke der Nation«. *Briefe an das DDR-Fernsehen*, Berlin 2000.

5 See for example Sandrine KOTT, *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'État dans la société est-allemande*, Paris 2001; Emmanuel DROIT, *La Stasi à l'école. Surveiller pour éduquer en RDA*, Paris 2009.

6 Donna HARSCH, *Revenge of the Domestic. Women, the Family and Communism in the German Democratic Republic*, Princeton 2007, p. 2.

7 Inge MARKOVITS, *Justice in Lüritz. Experiencing Socialist Law in East Germany*, Princeton 2010;

as intermediaries between those ›above‹ and those ›below‹ has also been highlighted in recent work that explores the complexity of state structures⁸.

Some works quite explicitly seek to treat the GDR as a version of a ›modern‹ industrial and consumer society – again in some contrast with the approach of those totalitarian theorists for whom a prime concern is to maintain the significance of the distinction between dictatorships and democracies. There has been a wide range of attempts to capture the material, social, cultural, and ideological aspects of East German life. Work on the GDR as a society of consumers as well as producers was given an early boost by Ina Merkel's anthropological approach, and has since been taken further by many other scholars⁹. The interrelations between the priorities of the ruling SED, the constraints of the economic and political context, and questions of privacy and the domestic sphere have drawn increasing interest: Eli Rubin's work on synthetics – despite some misguided introductory theoretical remarks – provides a novel way into understanding the qualities of the world that East Germans inhabited, in the quite literal sense of the term, and the ways in which they creatively constructed their ›selves‹ in an ever evolving environment, where aesthetics, politics and economics intersected with issues of personal identity and physical comfort¹⁰. Paul Betts has explored ›private life‹ in a state that had little respect for personal privacy; his point is precisely to examine the ways in which ›privacy‹ was both sustained and constrained by and through the political context of this most intrusive state; the book even opens with an analysis of the Stasi¹¹. Josie McLellan's research focuses on ›love in the time of communism‹, and Dagmar Herzog presents new ways of approaching GDR history through analysis of sex¹².

The legacies of the past continue to preoccupy historians of the GDR, looking at ways in which new identities were shaped out of the heritage of the Third Reich and war, as in the work of Frank Biess¹³. Policies towards youth and the tensions between rebellion and socialisation to conformity have also been the topic of interesting studies by scholars such as Alan McDougall and Mark Fenimore, building, in different ways, on work in related areas by Uta Poiger and Alan Nothnagle¹⁴. Focussing on explicit attempts to educate the new socialist citizens of the

Andrew PORT, *Conflict and Stability in East Germany*, Cambridge 2007; Mark LANDSMAN, *Dictatorship and Demand. The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany*, Cambridge/Mass. 2005; Jeannette MADARÁSZ, *Communication and Compromise in the GDR, 1971–1989*, Basingstoke 2003; ID., *Working in East Germany. Normality in a Socialist Dictatorship 1961–79*, Basingstoke 2007.

- 8 See for example Esther VON RICHTHOFEN, *Bringing Culture to the Masses. Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR*, Oxford 2009; George LAST, *After the ›Socialist Spring‹. Collectivisation and Economic Transformation in the GDR*, Oxford 2009.
- 9 Ina MERKEL, *Utopie und Bedürfnis. Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 1999; ID., Felix MÜHLBERG, *Wunderwirtschaft. DDR-Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren*, Vienna, Weimar, Cologne 1996; see also, for example, Judd STITZIEL, *Fashioning Socialism. Clothing, Politics and Consumer Culture in East Germany*, New York, Oxford 2005.
- 10 Eli RUBIN, *Synthetic Socialism. Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic*, Chapel Hill 2008; see also my review of this book in: *American Historical Review* 115 (2010), p. 1549–1550.
- 11 Paul BETTS, *Within Walls. Private Life in the German Democratic Republic*, Oxford 2010.
- 12 Dagmar HERZOG, *Sex after Fascism. Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Princeton 2005.
- 13 Frank BIESS, *Homecomings. Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany*, Princeton 2006.
- 14 Alan MCDUGALL, *Youth Politics in East Germany. The Free German Youth Movement 1946–1968*, Oxford 2004; Mark FENEMORE, *Sex, Thugs and Rock 'n' Roll. Teenage Rebels in East Germany*, New York 2007; Uta POIGER, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels. Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, Berkeley/Calif. 2000; Alan NOTHNAGLE, *Building the East German Myth. Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1949–1989*, Michigan 1999.

future, given the heritage of Nazism, Benita Blessing's attempt to capture the qualities of the East German classroom in the early post-war years complements the work of Charles Lansing on schoolteachers making the transition from Nazism to Communism in Brandenburg¹⁵. Jan Palmowski adopts an »everyday history« approach, drawing on the concepts of Alf Lüdtkke, Michel de Certeau and others to examine social and cultural practices in *Heimat* activities; he explores the ways in which citizens came to accept the »socialist transcript« as one to which they felt, under existing power relations, they would have to conform, but which did not displace other identifications that, under the altered circumstances of 1989, were able to come to the fore¹⁶.

How have these works served to change our views of East German past? Many approaches suggest we should be more open to consideration of GDR in its own terms, as for example in the notion of the »socialist modern«¹⁷. Some works have brought more clearly to our attention the significance and diversity of opinions and attitudes among the population to developments, such as the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, that were for a long time recounted as a self-evidently repressive measure with little concern to plot popular perceptions and responses¹⁸. The question of periodisation is no longer as contentious – or as simply formulated – as it was in the 1990s. Notions of, for example, an alleged »decline and fall in stages« since 1953 (based on the Mitter and Wolle interpretation of GDR history)¹⁹, or a »second founding« of the GDR with the building of the Wall, have been overlain both by more complex conceptualisations of power and resistance in everyday life, and more ambivalent chronologies of the twists and turns of cultural policies, the alleged emancipation of women, or the shifts from utopian and collectivist aspirations to pragmatic individualism, and other themes addressed in recent works, including those cited above. Debates have been clarified with respect to the development, transformation and eventually unstoppable decline of the economy, or the move from ›provisional‹ status to international acceptance in the complex Cold War field of forces that marked the parameters of international relations and foreign policy; even so, there remain widely differing views depending on the explanatory weight given to factors such as the roles of *Ostpolitik*, internal dissent or changes in Moscow, the intrinsic reformability or otherwise of a planned economy, when considering stability and destabilisation, persistence and collapse²⁰. Yet there remain enormous lacunae in some of the most significant areas, including – surprisingly, given the way it looms so large in the historiography – the impact of the Stasi on everyday life²¹. And despite an accumulation of detailed studies of particular social groups, conceptua-

15 Benita BLESSING, *The Antifascist Classroom. Denazification in Soviet-occupied Germany, 1945–1949*, New York 2006; Charles LANSING, *From Nazism to Communism. German Schoolteachers under Two Dictatorships*, Cambridge/Mass. 2010.

16 Jan PALMOWSKI, *Inventing a Socialist Nation. Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR*, Cambridge 2009.

17 Katherine PENCE, Paul BETTS (eds.), *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, Michigan 2008.

18 Patrick MAJOR, *Behind the Berlin Wall. East Germany and the Frontiers of Power*, Oxford 2010.

19 Armin MITTER, Stefan WOLLE, *Untergang auf Raten. Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte*, Munich 1993; although it should be noted that Wolle has subsequently modified his approach considerably, adopting now what might be called the ironic mode in his popular histories of the GDR.

20 See for example Jörg ROESLER, *Momente deutsch-deutscher Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte 1945 bis 1990. Eine Analyse auf gleicher Augenhöhe*, Leipzig 2006; André STEINER, *Von Plan zu Plan: Eine Wirtschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, Munich 2004; Hope HARRISON, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall. Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961*, Princeton 2003; Mary E. SAROTTE, *Dealing with the Devil. East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969–1973*, Chapel Hill 2001.

21 But see for example Jens GIESEKE (ed.), *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, Göttingen 2007.

lisation of wider changes in the structure of society over time remains partial, as does an understanding of how people themselves changed over the course of time²².

The resurgence of the totalitarianism model

Alongside this explosion of socio-cultural approaches, totalitarian theory has experienced a resurgence, and this perhaps particularly – and surprisingly – in the Anglophone historiography of the GDR. It is easy enough to understand why the label itself is widespread in popular usage, deployed as it is to denounce regimes that differ markedly from western democracies, and especially why it was so common in the 1990s among Germans who were personally relieved to be freed of the division and oppression of the Cold War period. But it is less easy to see why the theoretical approach has remained so persistent among scholars, with arguably growing popularity beyond the borders of Germany.

It is also actually harder than one might think to identify what exactly totalitarian theorists want to argue. Generally, they emphasise repression, coercion and indoctrination: they explicitly or implicitly suggest that, effectively, the GDR's history must be primarily written in terms of perpetrators, collaborators and victims²³. Despite occasional explicit disclaimers, such an approach generally maintains a predominant focus on the agency of the leading party and regime at the expense of ›society‹, except when people engage in active resistance to oppressive power. People appearing to agree with the regime are effectively duped, persuaded or coerced into being ›collaborators‹; their views and agency are not to be taken seriously, unlike those opposed to the regime.

Common to all totalitarian approaches is an attempt to group historical regimes on the basis of common characteristics in terms of political control and the ideologically driven transformation of society, associated with the destruction of alternative views and associations. But beyond this, there are several variants. Sometimes this has to do with periodisation, particularly with respect to the ways in which regime power shifted from early overt oppression to less visible forms in what is sometimes labelled ›late totalitarianism‹. Sometimes it has to do with the criteria included in the composite definition. Lists of between three and six indices may be held to be characteristic of totalitarian regimes; thus we have the classic versions of Friedrich and Brzezinski, and of Hannah Arendt, alongside Juan Linz's triad, among others. There are also attempts to ensure that the concept can encompass dictatorships of quite different ideological persuasions. With respect to the Third Reich and the GDR, Peter Grieder seeks to refine the concept by the addition of hyphenated qualifiers, offering the distinction between ›charismatic-genocidal totalitarianism‹ and ›bureaucratic totalitarian states‹²⁴. This is basically a definitional rather than explanatory exercise: it decides what are to be the defining characteristics of an ideal type of ›totalitarianism‹, and then ranks historical regimes against these features, in terms of the extent to which they meet some or all of the criteria, and the respects in which they depart or change over time.

22 For an introductory overview see Arnd BAUERKÄMPER, *Die Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, Munich 2005, which, like many other works, pays greater attention to the early years than to development in the 1970s and 1980s.

23 There is no need to go through the long history of the concept of totalitarianism from the 1920s onwards. For early post-unification versions, see for example: Klaus-Dietmar HENKE (ed.), *Totalitarismus. Sechs Vorträge über Gehalt und Reichweite eines klassischen Konzepts der Diktaturforschung*, Dresden 1999; Klaus SCHROEDER, *Die DDR: eine (spät-)totalitäre Gesellschaft*, in: Manfred WILKE (ed.), *Die Anatomie der Parteizentrale. Die KPD/SED auf dem Weg zur Macht*, Berlin 1997; and Klaus SCHROEDER, *Der SED-Staat*, Munich 1998.

24 Peter GRIEDER, *In Defence of Totalitarianism Theory as a Tool of Historical Scholarship*, in: *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (2007), p. 562–589, here p. 576.

In recent applications to the GDR, the approach is reduced to a bare core: essentially only highlighting the fact that the SED sought ›total control‹, irrespective of whether this was achieved in practice²⁵. In this minimalist version, we have merely a descriptive label with little explanatory power or discriminatory reach. It serves to reproduce the claimed aims of those in power; but does little, without further analysis straying well beyond the label itself, to help understand the ways in which and the conditions under which such aims were only partially realised, challenged, subverted, and so on.

These versions of ›totalitarianism‹ are descriptive. Their ›truth‹ is indeed merely trivial, precisely in virtue of the way the term is defined: this particular state meets these listed criteria, thus it can be described in terms of the theoretical concept which it embodies; it has been defined precisely in terms of these criteria. If one is interested in classifying a group of states in a particular way, with respect to certain common features, then it can of course be done in this way, rather than using any other classificatory system for purely heuristic purposes – for example, in terms of capitalist economies versus state-controlled centralised economies, or multi-ethnic empires versus monoglot nation states, or ›post-fascist‹ states versus those that remained democracies through the twentieth century, and so on. It may thus be useful purely as a preliminary to exploration of a set of cases thus defined – and hence true by definition – and not as an *explanation* of anything.

The totalitarianism model is only a genuine ›theory‹ when it goes beyond this, to suggest why the listed criteria are the most significant in relation to historical dynamics and change. And this is when it begins to cause problems. For the narratives arising from such a starting point tend – whether or not the particular scholar always wants this to be the case – to fall readily into employment in terms of ›collaborators‹, ›victims‹, ›being complicit‹ and so on, with little focus on what is beyond the reach of the dominant forces seeking total control²⁶. There is little or no conceptual space for what one might call non-oppositional authenticity and agency, which has, when it appears to be serving the aims of the state, to be redescribed in terms of ›seduction‹ and ›integration‹ or ›the devil com[ing] dressed as an angel, dictatorship masquerad[ing] as career advancement‹²⁷. This is fundamentally a version in non-Marxist colours of the Marxist theory of ›false consciousness‹. It is neither adequate to the task of capturing the wide range of changing views and attitudes in any given society; nor helpful in understanding (rather than dismissing, denouncing, or ›unmasking‹) what lies beyond the scope of such an interpretive grid.

When such aspects do float into the wider picture, the totalitarian theorist may resort to a form of functionalism in assessing not the subjective experiences of the actors involved, but rather the consequences of people's actions for the functioning of the regime. Peter Grieder, for example, concedes that SED policies to draw larger numbers of women into further and higher education may have offered welcome opportunities to women which cannot be solely evaluated, and hence effectively dismissed, in terms of the SED's own undoubted need for an educated and enhanced labour supply at a time of labour shortage and acute demographic imbalance (Grieder overlooks emancipatory goals). Nevertheless, Grieder instantly qualifies this concession by suggesting that ›by allowing themselves to be mobilised, these women helped to confirm, perpetuate and strengthen a dictatorship bent on establishing total control over the population, even if levels of complicity varied from person to person.‹ He hastens to add that

25 As for example most recently in Gary BRUCE, *The Firm. The Inside Story of the Stasi*, Oxford 2010.

26 GRIEDER, *In Defence of Totalitarianism Theory* (as in n. 25), is again an excellent example of this. There is not space here to go through this fully, but see for example the discussion of ›victims‹ and ›accomplices‹ on p. 579–580.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 577 and p. 580.

»to draw attention to this is not necessarily to condemn the women concerned«, but instantly again adds a qualification by doing precisely that, effectively calling them collaborators: »on the contrary, many of them collaborated for very sound reasons and may even have benefited from doing so«²⁸. He continues by applying the same arguments to members of the bloc parties and mass organisations, and comments that a »large number [...] enjoyed the leisure activities of the Free German Youth, yet by so doing they helped to affirm the regime's organisational monopoly over young people«²⁹. Functionalism in relation to the totalitarian model of the state displaces empirical exploration of the people's own perceptions of their situation.

There is really no way out. On the totalitarian model, either people are repressed and hence victims; or, if they do not feel this way, they are unintentionally serving to stabilise the regime and are hence, functionally if not intentionally, »collaborators«. Or of course they can – eventually – successfully challenge the regime, because, as Grieder puts it, »systems of this type go against human nature«³⁰. There is simply no other form of acceptable employment in this theory, other than in relation to how attitudes and behaviour serve to sustain, uphold or challenge the regime seeking »total control«.

If totalitarian theory goes beyond the purely definitional or descriptive version, then, it generally assesses behaviour with respect to how people are constrained by the regime's powers of coercion and indoctrination, or how their actions functionally serve to sustain an illegitimate regime in power; or, by contrast, how they sought to challenge such regimes. It thus allows relatively little if any space for aspects of history that do not fit these particular conceptual receptacles and »knowledge-guiding interests«. There is a particular difficulty with the tendency among totalitarian theorists to explain away any evidence of adaptive or consensual behaviour and to fail adequately to address the cultural variability and historical transformation of norms and values.

The totalitarian employment thus does a serious injustice to the complexity of historical subjectivities, explored in more detail by those adopting a socio-cultural approach. Furthermore, most historians with any anthropological sensitivity would probably reject the underlying premises about either an unchanging »human nature«, or one that is so easily duped or »seduced« that any apparent acceptance can be readily discounted as the effect of »indoctrination«.

Closely related to this theoretical approach is what should perhaps be the irrelevant question of the political evaluation of historical works. Surprisingly, even two decades after unification, in some quarters any attempt to explore what East Germans themselves said or say about their own lives appears to be intrinsically politically suspect.

While historians generally agree that their purpose is interpretation and explanation, not exculpation or condemnation, and despite an apparent lull in the political storms that often coloured academic debates in the 1990s, there is still much political sniping from the sidelines. Gary Bruce, for example, goes so far as to refer to »the poisonous debates that swirl around the field of East German history«, and believes that »the spate of English-language monographs that have appeared in the last few years ... flirt with exoneration. The pendulum, which has swung far away from the very real, very harmful, very controlling aspects of the regime, must start its swing back«³¹.

By using a particular language of analysis, alongside selective rendering of quotations and

28 Ibid., p. 579–580.

29 Ibid., p. 580.

30 Ibid., p. 584.

31 BRUCE, *The Firm* (as in n.25), p.2; ID., Review of Andrew PORT, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic*, in: H-German, H-Net Reviews (2007), URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13766> (10th of April 2011).

(mis)representations of arguments, Bruce has suggested that any attempt to explore what East Germans meant by what they repeatedly call »perfectly ordinary lives« wilfully underplays the repressive aspects of the regime and hence serves, whether intentionally or inadvertently, to exonerate the dictatorship³². In Bruce's case the argument is about the implications of an argument rather than the individual author's intentions. However, interpretations should stand or fall by the historical evidence and the quality of the argument, and not by their alleged political implications – whether in the view of the SED or of current critics of the former regime³³.

It is worse when scholars not merely look at what the implications of an interpretation might be, but seek to claim that these implications are precisely the (non-academic, political) reason *why* a scholar might prefer one interpretation to another. I can most readily illustrate this with respect to misplaced political critiques of my own work. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, for example, speaks in a book review of my alleged »Weichspülen« der Diktatur« and claims somehow to have privileged access to my supposed »geschichtspolitischen Absichten« – though how he can so confidently impute to me views I do not actually hold, I am not sure³⁴. Klaus Schroeder similarly goes so far as to suggest explicitly that I have for some time been writing history with serious if camouflaged political intent. In a review of the German version of my »People's State«, Schroeder elevates this as the alleged underlying purpose of my work over the last couple of decades, introducing me as the »britische Wissenschaftlerin Mary Fulbrook, die sich bereits in mehreren Beiträgen um eine wissenschaftlich getarnte Weichzeichnung der DDR bemühte«³⁵. His review continues in much the same vein, imputing views and intentions to me that I do not hold, failing to engage with or significantly misrepresenting my arguments, and indulging in sarcasm in lieu of serious critique. Unsurprisingly, I completely reject these and related interpretations of my scholarly intent and academic attempts to understand German history. It also remains unclear to me why scholars claiming to find consensual elements in the Third Reich do not seem to run the risk of being accused of being closet sympathisers with Nazism in the same way as historians of the GDR currently do with respect to the communist state.

Ways forward: Structures and subjectivities

It is important to note that the subject of inquiry does not necessarily overlap neatly with theoretical approach. Some works – particularly those on historical upheavals, political structures and institutions – necessarily focus on ›hard‹ power and evident repression, surveillance, instrumentalisation and manipulation for political ends, with the state at the very forefront and centre of analysis. Many scholars – and not only those who are explicitly committed to totalitarian theory – prioritise a focus on the state as the context and source of policies, and focus on

32 Gary Bruce, for example, belittles my approach by calling a one-sentence summary a »refrain«, see BRUCE, Review of Port (as in n. 31), footnote 5; he omits a key phrase in one of my sentences that he quotes, thus rendering the sense both inaccurate and ridiculous, see ID., The Firm (as in n. 25), p. 8; Bruce does not engage with the analysis advanced in my Anatomy of a Dictatorship (as in n. 2).

33 For the theoretical difficulties, which go way beyond the individual characteristics, political commitments and moral preferences of any given historian, see Mary FULBROOK, Historical Theory, London 2002; and ID., Approaches to German Contemporary History since 1945. Politics and Paradigms, in: Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History 1 (2004), p. 31–50.

34 Ilko-Sascha KOWALCZYK, review of Mary FULBROOK (ed.), Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–79, in: Historische Zeitschrift 291 (2010), p. 278–279, quotations from p. 279.

35 Klaus SCHROEDER's review of the German version of my book »Ein ganz normales Leben«, in: Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat 26 (2009), p. 177–180, quotation from p. 178.

examining effects of political policies on particular groups. Others prioritise rather the agency of subjects and seek ways of exploring the exercise of power and resistance or self-protective strategies in everyday life. Employing notions such as Alf Lüdtke's concept of »Eigen-Sinn«, many scholars have highlighted the ambiguities and complexities of the interrelations between the regime and the people who not merely lived within but also to a considerable extent participated in and helped to sustain as well as subvert the state. My own notion of a »honeycomb state« referred to the ways in which large numbers of East Germans participated – whether willingly or unwillingly, actively or passively – in the micro-structures of power, without ever being able to address the outer boundaries, both metaphorical and physical, of the state, thus combining a limited degree of agency with realistic strategies in relation to obvious constraints³⁶.

As indicated, a key point of contention, or difference in narrative framework, between the various approaches sketched above relates to the question of agency and the role of people's beliefs and attitudes. The ways in which subjectivities are themselves shaped and transformed by actions and contexts, and the ways in which, in turn, these help to shape the ways in which the GDR developed, is as indicated the subject of much research; but it remains highly contentious. A central issue across all approaches is that of how one explains patterns of consent or adaptation to what were indisputably dictatorial conditions. This becomes particularly clear when considering, for example, the apparent paradox of widespread memories of what many East Germans still claim were »perfectly ordinary lives« within a clearly repressive, walled-in state – a paradox which can be too quickly or simply written off in terms of *Ostalgie* in a period of heightened personal insecurity and high unemployment.

There is of course a substantial problem concerning how to evaluate evidence of subjectivities. There are a vast number of pre-1989 sources for people's attitudes and perceptions, both in their own words and in the reports of others: citizens' petitions (*Eingaben*), diaries and letters, life histories produced for different purposes, the oral histories reported in the »protocol literature« produced by East Germans, as well as the 1987 study by Niethammer, von Plato and Wierling; opinion surveys produced by the Institut für Meinungsforschung beim ZK der SED, and the Leipzig Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung; reports on »moods and opinions« produced by the mass organisations, the trade union league (FDGB), local party reports, and the Stasi; and innumerable other sources, including visual and literary materials. There is simply a mountain of material; lack of sources is not a problem. But evaluation remains problematic for more reasons than merely the obvious one: the constraints on modes of expression under a dictatorship. When we look at sources produced before 1989 as evidence of popular opinion, constructions of the self, or representations of past and present in life stories, there are innumerable issues concerning context, purposes and audience. Not least, we risk making generalisations based on quite different kinds of sources for different periods.

Sources produced after unification, by contrast, such as memoirs and oral history interviews, are associated with rather different problems and provide quite different means of trying to access and interpret legacies of the past, in what might be called an archaeology of past subjectivities. People were not experts on their own society; while being constantly aware of the Stasi's presence, for example, most people knew remarkably little about the sheer extent and activities of the Stasi before the revelations which emerged after the fall of the Wall. At this point, their reflections will be affected by the widespread sensationalism of media coverage, and a need either to highlight or downplay the impact of the Stasi on their lives, depending on context. More generally, the ways in which people look back always have as much to do with the later context of their lives as with their earlier experiences. It is then possible to recognise defensive reactions, selective memories and reconstruction of certain aspects of the past as

contrasting favourably with the uncertainties and insecurities of a later present. Analyses of *Ostalgie* have become a further growth industry in the historiography of the (ex-)GDR.

But these features of such post-unification sources are also part of their potential. Here, we can see what perceptions of contrasts between different types of society former East German citizens have developed after crossing the historical transition and living in a radically new regime, that of the enlarged Federal Republic of Germany. We can gain some sense of discourses and concepts that were current before 1989, or that circulate subsequently in an attempt to make sense of salient aspects of former experiences. Such interviews can provide clues as to ways of thinking about the world, combinations of identities and patterns of life, the complexities of apparently self-contradictory attitudes and behaviours, the ways in which it was possible both to be critical and to participate, the ways in which people constructed and sustained a sense of self and personal identity even while their lives and perceptions were shaped by the periods and places through which they lived. They always, however, need to be adequately contextualised within a wider set of sources and interpretations.

Works on generations can be particularly fruitful in this connection, by exploring the intersections between the ways in which people seek to make their lives – and make sense of their lives – and the significance of the wider historical context as they reached particular life-stages or social ages. By combining sources from both before and after 1990, it is also possible to work towards some kind of broader understanding of the ways in which the legacies of an earlier past lingered on, both among those generations who had lived through the Third Reich (and before) and among younger East Germans, to shape the ways in which the GDR developed and was ultimately remembered.

Members of older generations were deeply split by their experiences of the Third Reich, overlaying earlier differences rooted in age-related experiences of the First World War: the ›front generation‹ and the ›war-youth generation‹ – which had provided particularly strong support for Nazism – gave way, in effect, after the Second World War to a scarred and decimated ›KZ generation‹. This was divided between the majority who had conformed to Nazism and suffered from its defeat – including the millions of refugees and expellees at war's end – and the minority who had been persecuted, fled or opposed Nazism and survived to return and build what they hoped would be a ›better Germany‹ after the war. The paranoia and recourse to violence among the generation of the founding fathers can only be fully understood in the context of this historical past. The significance of a younger generation, who might be called the ›1929ers‹, for the construction and continuing positive support of the GDR is highly striking. Utterly shocked by exposure as teenagers to high levels of violence at the end of the Second World War, those of the right social and political backgrounds were readily mobilised by the new regime at a time of massive turnover of personnel and transformation of structures – a turnover and a consequent ›mobilisation from above‹ that was far greater in the East than the West at this time. Once caught up in the new system of the GDR, many 1929ers were effectively held in a Weberian ›iron cage‹ of conformity; yet they also committed themselves to ›building up‹ the new state in the 1950s at precisely the time when, as young adults, they were seeking to ›build up‹ their own new post-war lives and families, finding life partners and having children. This ›self-mobilisation‹ remained distinctive throughout their lives as functionaries of the mass organisations, stalwarts of the state-run economy, members of the social and political elites; and the 1929ers, whose adult lives had been entirely lived within the confines of the communist regime, retained the fondest memories of the GDR even well after its demise. Among younger generations, those born during the Third Reich tended to be passively disaffected, while people born in the early years of the GDR combined idealism, resignation and growing frustration, and contributed more actively to the discontent of the later 1980s and the explosion of voices in 1989³⁷.

37 This paragraph summarises arguments developed more fully in Mary FULBROOK, *Dissonant*

Constructions of ›normality‹ were historically highly variable, as can be seen, for example, in the sphere of assumptions about gender roles. While older women – despite their participation in the paid labour force during the war and especially in the post-war years – tended to consider it ›normal‹ for married women to cease working once they had children, younger East German women increasingly came to see it as ›perfectly normal‹ to combine motherhood with paid work throughout their adult lives, apart from periodic maternity breaks. The ways in which East Germans learned to »play by the rules« were also very variable: increasingly aware of the sanctions, many older East Germans began to mouth official scripts and behave in ways expected of them in different contexts, while retaining an inner distance and a lively awareness that things had once been and could be very different; younger cohorts, arguably, began to internalise certain values and norms, while aspirations and life courses became routinised, as did assumptions about a degree of social security and state responsibility for areas such as child care or health care. The relations between these sorts of changes in normative perceptions and wider historical developments across different periods – notably marked by the construction of the Wall, the period of relative stabilisation and détente, and then the growing economic, political and international destabilisation of the 1980s – remain to be adequately interpreted. But it is quite clear that, taken in the context of the century as a whole – an »age of extremes« – the period of détente in the 1960s and 1970s was one of the longest periods of relative peace, without wars or massive domestic violence, to be experienced in the lives of many twentieth-century Germans. This allowed a certain stabilisation and routinisation to set in, which may have been felt as increasingly restrictive to the point of frustration and stagnation, but which should not be counted out of any historical account of the GDR.

Conclusion

Given the wealth of current approaches to GDR history, both within and beyond Germany itself, it would be foolish to do anything beyond setting a personal agenda for where the field should develop. In my own view, the attempt to connect more detailed exploration of the subjectivities and perceptions of different social groups with wider historical structures and contexts is one of the most promising avenues to explore – but this will by no means be a priority for other scholars in the field.

It is integral to the health of historical debate that new fields and themes should continue to open up, as those who are interested turn their creative attention to ever new sources, approaches and lines of inquiry. There has been much (often merely programmatic) debate about embedding GDR history within a »German-German« history, or a »transnational« and »intertwined« history. This, it seems to me, is essentially a matter of what questions are being asked, and hence choice of what would be the most appropriate framework of analysis. For some purposes, focussing on the intertwined histories of the two German states may be more fruitful than, say, comparing the GDR with other communist states, or with other industrial states, or alternative ›modernities‹, or exploring in depth some aspect that is purely internal to the GDR itself: different frameworks and levels of analysis are more or less relevant and fruitful in relation to different questions that may be asked. Similarly, the increasing internationalisation of research and discussion is a prerequisite for continued productivity. Diversity and debate are key: and even such a cursory survey as this suggests that the field will continue to flourish, even and perhaps especially as the political tempers that have so often accompanied interpretations of the GDR begin finally to wane and the recent past truly becomes history.

Lives. Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships, Oxford 2011, based on research supported by the Leverhulme Trust; see also Dorothee WIERLING, *Geboren im Jahr Eins. Der Jahrgang 1949. Versuch einer Kollektivbiographie*, Berlin 2002.