

Freedom foisted

30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the separation between Eastern and Western Germany is still not over. Quite the contrary: when it comes to political issues in particular, the differences between the formerly socialist East and the now as then capitalist West seem to have increased in recent times. **Chris Hann** and his students at the **Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology** in Halle are exploring the reasons for this development in their fieldwork in Hungary and Eastern Germany.

TEXT **JEANNETTE GODDAR**

To visit Elisabeth Köditz at the site of her field research in Gera, you take tram no. 3. The tram line connects Bieblach-Ost, a neighborhood in the northeast that is dominated by the typical prefabricated buildings known as “Plattenbau”, with Lusan, a similar neighborhood in the southwest. On your way to Lusan, you pass the Gera Arcaden shopping mall, tattoo and tanning studios, a democracy center, and “Café Kanzler”.

During the final years of the GDR, this suburb was home to 45,000 people who manufactured defense technology for Carl Zeiss Jena, extracted uranium ore for the Soviet-German Wismut corporation, and supplied machinery for a state enterprise (VEB) in the textile sector. Gera, a city that was hardly known to residents of the Federal Republic, was relatively industrialized compared to other administrative districts of the GDR. New apartment blocks were built whenever a new company began operations. There are sev-

en tram stops in Lusan alone. It is almost eerily quiet for the middle of a sunny day.

“The population here is only half of what it was in the 1980s,” says Köditz as the tram passes an abandoned building, one of two high schools obliged to close in the 1990s. How did it feel to be a high school graduate in an environment in which more and more of your neighbors were moving to the West, or to newly vacated apartments in the city center? The doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle intends to find out, as she is in touch with such a graduate, and also with an architect who supervises the dismantling of the Plattenbau buildings whose father was involved in their construction.

Elisabeth also knows what it is like to inhabit buildings of type P1, P2, QP or WBS 70 that everyone in the GDR was very familiar with. She lives in a one and a half room apartment in Lusan’s last Plattenbau row, just a few meters from the terminus of tram line 3. Her

Image change: Plattenbau estates such as Gera-Lusan were popular residential areas in the GDR era. Demand decreased after the reunification. Some houses were demolished, others refurbished.



GLÜCK AUF



Field researcher in Zwickau:
Katerina Ivanova examines the effects
that the economic changes after the
reunification have had to this day.

building has a concierge: not unusual in contemporary Eastern Germany, thanks to a mixture of marketing and the endeavor to adapt to demographic change. From 9 to 5, residents are able to order beverages, book the party room, or enquire about leisure activities, which is what Elisabeth Köditz did right after moving in. This is how she met a group of eight women that has become the core of her research. They meet every Tuesday to play rummy and talk, and Elisabeth Köditz records these conversations on her smartphone. With the women's permission, of course.

The next location is Zwickau in Saxony, 40 kilometers to the southeast of Gera. Katerina Ivanova, who is also a doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, arrived in the former GDR, after completing a master's degree in social anthropology in Bratislava. Unlike Köditz, Ivanova examines the changes of the past 30 years more from an economic perspective. In other words: from the perspective of class.

The Belarus-born researcher interacts with workers in the automotive industry. With people who used to build Trabant for VEB Sachsenring, as well as those who now work for Volkswagen

» What used to be normality was replaced by a time in which decisions were made by people who had until recently lived in another country – the old Federal Republic.

or one of its suppliers. "I want to find out how car industry workers have experienced the enormous changes that have occurred since the end of the GDR, and how they assess their current position," she says, "both in their working relations, and within society generally. I have found the two aspects to be closely interlinked."

INEQUALITY IN SAXONY AND LOWER SAXONY

For her research, Ivanova has chosen a place where the economic institutions of the GDR were not replaced by vast nothingness after the reunification. As a powerful symbol, the first VW Polo rolled off the assembly line in Zwickau simultaneously with the last Trabant in May 1990. The site is now home to a vehicle production plant capable of producing more than 1,300 Volkswagen cars in a single working day. Taking the supplier companies into account, the automotive industry in Zwickau has 40,000 employees, and the city is considered a showpiece of post-socialist transformation.

Nonetheless, many of the workers Ivanova talks to do not see their personal experience of transition as a success story. Their lives are shaped by memories of a system that was their normality, which has given way to a new era in which decisions were foisted

on them by people from another country – the old Federal Republic. "Almost everybody has negative memories of the 1990s," says Ivanova. This is because they were affected by unemployment, reduced working hours, or early retirement, but frequently also because the freedom and democracy that had been fought for in 1989 – especially on the streets of East Berlin and Leipzig – were linked to the feeling of being subject to new external controls.

"Of course they are not opposed to the unification in itself," explains Ivanova. "However, many of them tell me about people from the West dominating their lives from then on – because they told them which qualifications were of value and which were not. Or because they chased quick profits, for example with insurance policies that nobody needed, or with cars that people in the Western states no longer wanted to drive."

The Treuhandanstalt, the organization that arranged the privatization, restitution or closure of more than 20,000 Eastern German enterprises between 1990 and 1994, also figures prominently in people's memories. "My impression is that the organization's work was perceived as corrupt and as a form of colonialization," says Ivanova. All of these aspects gave rise to a feeling of being treated as second-class citizens. >

Right Car construction in Zwickau: the legendary "Trabi" still rolled off the assembly line of VEB Sachsenring in 1989. Workers used to install many parts manually.

Bottom Nowadays, the production processes for the VW Golf, built in the successor plant, are mostly automated.





Top Teamwork: work had a pronounced social function in the GDR. It was a matter of course that birthdays were celebrated with one's colleagues at work.

Left Loneliness in the Plattenbau: empty apartments have been a conspicuous feature of Gera-Lusan and other Plattenbau estates since 1990. The tenants drying their laundry on this balcony were the only residents left in this building.

» Socialist understanding is based on the idea that each individual makes a small contribution to the collective. After the reunification this changed, even for those who did find new jobs.

And what about now, almost 30 years later? Inequality between those working in Saxony, in the former GDR, and those working in Lower Saxony, in former West Germany, is still an issue. The situation was brought to public attention in May 2019 when representatives of the metalworkers' union IG Metall presented the Management Board of VW with a debt certificate for 16 million working hours: the number of extra hours (calculated according to collective wage agreements) that Zwickau-based VW employees had worked since 1990, compared to their western peers.

EVERYONE WANTS TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED FOR THEIR WORK

This is why the relationship with Volkswagen is rather ambivalent, Ivanova reports: "On the one hand, people are aware of the fact that the situation would be much worse without VW. On the other, the unequal treatment is perceived as discrimination." She also hears again and again about management positions still being monopolized by Westerners – "often by persons who only come to Zwickau for a few years in order to advance their career."

In the course of her research, Ivanova will explore how these perceptions have contributed to rising nationalism and ethnic segregation and the degree to which this has paved the ground for the rise of a right-wing populist party: "My hypothesis is that in Eastern Germany a form of economic dispossession took place in particular cultural and historic circumstances, including collective memories of socialism, negative experiences after the re-

unification, and the sustained feeling of being dominated by the West."

Both doctoral students anticipate shedding light on the rise of the populist AfD party. Elisabeth Köditz attended an AfD rally in Erfurt shortly after the party had won around one in ten votes in Thuringia, enabling it to enter the state parliament in 2014. She did not attend as a protester, but as a seeker of answers. "I could feel that something was brewing in my environment. I wanted to understand what it was," she explains. "What better way to find out than to talk to people?" In effect, that day marked the start of the participatory observation that she now continues in Gera.

For Max Planck Director Chris Hann, participant observation is the most important method of social anthropology. It was pioneered by the Pole Bronislaw Malinowski, who 100 years ago conducted long-term research on the Trobriand Islands, now part of Papua New Guinea. A central characteristic of participant observation, Hann explains, is to "live like the locals as far as possible, and to observe them in their everyday lives and working relations as closely as they allow you to." Without, he adds, identifying with them: "The key to success is to develop empathy without going native."

According to Hann, it makes no difference in principle where the observation is performed: "Of course, there are great differences between Gera or Zwickau and New Guinea 100 years ago," he says, "however, anthropology at home is nothing new in our discipline." The key point is to question or suspend one's own world view. This effort to relativize is indispensable, even if one makes use of theories explicitly

Field researcher in Gera: Elisabeth Köditz is digging into the social background shaping the rise of the AfD in Eastern Germany.



rooted in the European history of ideas, such as Köditz's operationalization of the recognition concept of social philosopher Axel Honneth, and conducts one's research in the heart of Europe.

Honneth, the former head of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, considers the desire of human beings to have their achievements in society acknowledged to be a central dimension of recognition. Köditz also draws on Karl Marx's linking of production to social reproduction. "It is perceived as disrespect (*Missachtung*) if I cannot reproduce myself economically when I'm prepared to do so, but the opportunities are highly limited and the employment outlook is grim. If the jobs available don't pay a decent wage, don't acknowledge workers' previous experiences, and don't offer a long-term prospect, this is a disrespect to the individual. Disrespect is the op-



Long-term observer in Hungary: Chris Hann has witnessed the hopes placed on the country's EU accession, as well as the great disappointment that has occurred since.

posite of recognition (*Anerkennung*)," says Elisabeth Köditz.

Comparisons between the present day and the GDR era crop up frequently in her conversations. The women she meets to play cards with are pensioners who have spent most of their working lives in socialist enterprises. The doctoral student finds that they rarely invoke work as a source of income, but rather reminisce about their brigade and larger collectives, about enterprise cells of the SED (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany) or the FDJ (the Free German Youth), the *Subbotnik* – nominally voluntary work on Saturdays, often devoted to cleaning up the local environment – and going out to dance with colleagues.

"Work had a pronounced social function in the GDR. It was not unusual for work to structure large parts of leisure activities and private lives," explains Köditz. This aspect disappeared after the reunification, regardless of whether or not one could find a new job. The process of winding up the GDR transformed the notion of work "away

from the socialist understanding of each subject making a small contribution to the collective, towards a concept of work as personal fulfillment for the individual citizen."

THE POST-REUNIFICATION PERIOD REMAINS UNRESOLVED

Elisabeth Köditz herself originates from Thuringia. This federal state did not exist when she was born. Along with so much else, the 14 administrative districts of the GDR disappeared in 1990, to be replaced with five new federal states. Having grown up in one of the new states is an asset to Elisabeth Köditz in her field research. "'Where are you from?' is often the first or second question that people ask me," she reports. "My place of birth has an impact on my life, both in the East and in the West, despite the fact that I was born just a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall."

When she was 19, Elisabeth Köditz moved to Duesseldorf to attend university. "At university I was considered 'the East German', in the 21st century, by fellow students who were my age." This is another central question of her research: "What are these values and experiences that are transmitted across generations?"

The research conducted by the two doctoral students is timely. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the end of the GDR cannot be considered purely as the advent of freedom. "From our social anthropological perspective, the concept of freedom – like any other concept – has to be placed within a societal context," says Chris Hann. According to the Max Planck Director, it is necessary to find out what freedom means for individuals in concrete terms: "How was freedom perceived in the past, and how is it perceived today? And how does it relate to socio-economic living conditions?"

Social anthropologists must adopt a critical stance to Enlightenment philoso-

phers such as Immanuel Kant or Voltaire, who lay claim to universally valid concepts of freedom. According to Hann, "it is not enough to focus on the rights and aspirations of individuals. This is where other thinkers such as Herder and Rousseau come in, who were concerned with the flourishing of entire peoples, nations, and communities." He explains further that this critical approach often goes against the grain of dominant ideologies – of colonialism in the past, and of liberal ideas in the present day. Malinowski's most famous student, New Zealand-born Raymond Firth, once described anthropology as the "uncomfortable science," a conclusion Hann endorses.

The eastern *Bundesländer* are by now hardly "new". Yet it is only slowly dawning upon the Western German public that reunification entailed millions of disrupted biographies. The "humiliations, insults, and injustices" of the post-reunification years need to be "addressed by a united Germany" – these are the very clear words used by Saxony's Integration Commissioner Petra Köpping in 2018 in her book titled "Integriert doch erst mal uns!" ("We need to be integrated first!"). Along with a number of journalists from Eastern Germany who have been pursuing the issue for several years, but have only recently begun to attract general attention, and have a few social scientists, the Halle-based doctoral students are helping to "close a significant scientific gap," Chris Hann comments.

LABOR MIGRATION TEARS FAMILIES APART

Hann himself has been conducting research in Hungary for more than 40 years. He traces the consequences that the changes that occurred after the fall of the Iron Curtain have had on large sections of the population. He reports, for example, about the employees of a

A symbolic act: on June 27, 1989 Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn (right) and his Austrian counterpart Alois Mock (left) severed the border fence in an iconic staged gesture. Hungary had been the first country of the Eastern Bloc to dismantle most border installations in May. Since 2015, Hungary has been using barbed wire to shut itself off once again – nowadays to the South, to keep out unwanted “migrants”.



Daimler Benz factory in the provincial capital Kecskemét, who work for around one quarter of the wages their colleagues in Stuttgart receive for performing essentially the same work. Hann considers such inequalities, and the disruption of families which occurs when young people opt for labor migration, to be among the main reasons for the success of the populist prime minister Viktor Orbán: “People expected a lot when Hungary joined the EU – because they were promised a lot. Few of these promises were kept.” According to his analysis, the initial entrenchment of a neoliberal market principal in Hungary has generated populist “counter movements” that are exemplified in Orbán’s Fidesz party.


Similar tendencies can be observed in other countries of East-Central Europe. The doctoral projects of Katerina Ivanova and Elisabeth Köditz are associated with the “Visegrád Anthropology Network,” a cooperation involving social anthropologists in Hungary, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia – those four countries that have formed a loose political alliance following an agreement signed at Visegrád in 1991. The goal of the Network, initiated by Hann, is to support

social anthropological research into post-socialist economic changes and their consequences for social and political relations throughout the region.

Elisabeth Köditz believes that the fact that the AfD is set to establish itself as the Eastern German people’s party is linked to decades of Western German hegemony. She participates in the “Aufbruch Ost” (“Eastern Awakening”) initiative that was founded in 2018, mostly by students from Leipzig who did not want the public sphere to be monopolized by organizations such as AfD or the anti-Islamic movement Pegida. “I have no doubt: one reason for their success is that they use racist

attitudes to channel something that could and should be addressed in other ways,” says Köditz.

She considers it important to contrast the right-wing populist narrative with an emancipatory left-wing alternative. Is she working as a scientist on behalf of the “Aufbruch Ost” initiative, which attempts to do just that? “I think of myself as an involved anthropologist,” she replies. “It seems like a worthwhile endeavor to me, if I can contribute to finding new formats for acknowledging Eastern German histories.” ◀

 www.mpg.de/podcasts/freiheit (in German)

SUMMARY

- Anthropologists are conducting field research in Eastern Germany and provincial Hungary to examine the impact on the local population of the fall of the Iron Curtain and ensuing transformations.
- The connective function that work had within the socialist system disappeared after 1990, and along with it the sense of community and recognition that had been crucial aspects of the working environment.
- Negative experiences during the years following reunification and lasting inequality lead people to feel disadvantaged and make them more likely to sympathize with populist parties.