

# The Suspended: Blind spots in society

## Social mobility and political psychology of devaluation in East Germany since 1989

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“The characterization of protest as *ressentiment* must be examined for its discriminatory force, with which the ruling classes silence the voices of those below.”  
(Stegemann 2017:147)

### 1. Introduction

“Do you know someone who has been left behind?” was the FAZ headline on 26.2.2017. Next to it was a photograph of a horde of seedy-looking white men, framed as anthropological specimens: as primitives and illiterates, all with facial expressions that promised a willingness to be violent. The photo was taken in Texas and then removed from the internet in mid-March 2017. Ever since Donald Trump’s election victory, the western democratic world is in agreement that 1) it all couldn’t have been less democratic; and 2) the white men who had been left behind were at fault for his victory (or perhaps it was even Russian electoral manipulation). These states of mind need to be clarified. This is why I will pose a few questions at the outset. What was undemocratic in Donald Trump’s more-or-less democratic election? Who or what causes worldwide protest? Who are among the protesters? What are they afraid of? Who are these people who have been left behind – now held to be at fault for Donald Trump’s victory? And why is the US scenario reflected in German sensitivities?

Since the end of the GDR announced in 1989, since the unjust state was transferred to the just authorities and the majority of its population subjected to a “crass social change” (*cf.* Clausen, 1994), new opinion research and survey institutes, sociological institutes, NGOs and other institutions have all staged the success of the protagonists of the *Wende* [Germ.: “turn,” “change”]. However, this way of accounting excluded those who lost in the course of the Wall’s fall and those who were suspended from this German-German project in the 28 years that followed. Here we are speaking of the majority of East Germans who, beginning in 1989 and after 40 years of GDR existence, were confronted with events that they were not prepared for. The story of success continues to be written by people in the west, from the putative bearers of democracy, up until the present day. What does this mean? In order to better understand this, it is not only necessary to look back, but also to re-write social history in East Germany between 1989 and 2017. A political psychology of devaluation, degradation and damage, as well as an analysis of a “democracy without dialogue”, has not been performed for the reception of the German-German project to this day.

Such an analysis is highly relevant to current debates about the „society of social relegation“ (Nachtwey, 2016) in the concrete case of East Germans. I would like to contribute to an expanded discourse about post-Berlin Wall precariousness (*cf.* Castell & Dörre 2010) by focusing on the

*political psychology* of social decline in East Germany since 1989. An intended result of this undertaking would be, for example, to better understand – in terms of social diagnostics – the especially high numbers of East Germans who reject German EU policy.

## **2. Blind spots in society**

### **2.1. There is no social “we” in the values of unity**

The refugee policies, which the current German government introduced, multiplied fundamental social conflicts that can presently not be adequately explained and, even more so, not truly solved.

The fact of the matter is: the refugee crisis – a result of recent EU-administered decisions such as the multiple bank bailouts since 2007, the PIIGS states’ crises and also the proxy wars in the Ukraine and Syria, among others – is massively dividing the German populace. According to surveys by the TNS institute<sup>1</sup> from 2016, approximately 82% of Germans demanded a correction of refugee policies by chancellor Angela Merkel, policies that supported an unlimited opening of borders, unlimited immigration by millions of Muslims lacking documents, unlimited integration of them into the social institutions as well as unlimited family reunifications in Germany. The crisis was exacerbated by the media and political parties’ moderation: “We need qualified labor”, “We can do it”, “Welcoming culture”, “Unconditional help for war refugees”. This precipitated an exacerbation of existing tensions because the propaganda of the period took what even the politically uninitiated recognized as a *euphemizing approach* to the situation, and because, in the wake of refugee policy, the following emerged with apparent suddenness: social inequality, inequality in capital, a growing low-wage sector, unemployment, cuts in social services, child poverty, old-age poverty and, in addition, symptoms of a populace that has been *suspended*: left behind by economic growth and political development, and thus rendered socially superfluous. The hugely inflationary euphemism of globalization to the contrary, we are living in societies of precariousness and social decline (Marchart, 2013). The result? There is no social “we” of unifying values that can be established by acclamation. The implicit demand of a “we” in Merkel’s “We can do it” exclamation seems an inappropriate overreach in the face of social conditions. These conditions could not have been generated *ad hoc*. It is more likely that they have been carefully concealed since the German-German political *Wende*. They are breaking through the surface in the current fundamental social crises, and they are distorting the desired image of a “democracy without borders”.

### **2.2. An invisible group of migrants**

This text will focus on sections of the East German populace, losers of the German-German political *Wende* after 1989, plus losers in the globalization shift (EU) after 2002—on the history of their social mobility, their experiences of precarification, and their protests. In the refugee

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Umfrage: Deutsche fordern Korrekturen in der Flüchtlingspolitik. Rund 82 Prozent der Deutschen fordern von Kanzlerin Angela Merkel (CDU) Kurskorrekturen in der Flüchtlingspolitik. Die befragten Deutschen äußern sich ebenfalls zu eine Wunschkoalition nach der Bundeswahl 2017, Focus Online, 10 September 2016, URL: [http://www.focus.de/panorama/videos/meinungstrend-unter-deutschen-buergern-umfrage-deutsche-fordern-korrekturen-der-fluechtlingspolitik\\_id\\_5920207.html](http://www.focus.de/panorama/videos/meinungstrend-unter-deutschen-buergern-umfrage-deutsche-fordern-korrekturen-der-fluechtlingspolitik_id_5920207.html). Last accessed: 20 March 2017

policies of the current government, these people who were “suspended” see themselves confronted by a third change in the way they are being left behind. Here, a collective pain threshold seems to have been ultimately crossed. Spaces of social resistance and fault lines can no longer be brushed over. However, for many it has become clear: at the moment, facts and factors are colliding that do not mesh, that cannot be negotiated away and cannot be reconciled. On the one hand, the media and political parties begin their attack, refusing to recognize any connection to the social realities—social and cultural trenches among them—that have been produced over the last 28 years. On the other side, a previously invisible group of citizens becomes visible: the losers of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the populace unrooted by devaluation and exclusion (Schultheiss & Frisinghelli, 2003), the East German “refugees” within unified Germany, the ones on the periphery, the people no one speaks of. But even here, euphemisms about Europe will not be able to cover up the social facts<sup>2</sup> that were produced domestically over time. Up until now, superordinated organizations such as the FRG or the EU were able to efface this population segment, simply submerging it. Extrapolations are then performed on mixed populations. Problems are artificially suppressed: for example, the consequences of the rapidly sinking fertility rate for women from East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or discrimination against women (which was unknown in the GDR), and the concomitant construction of a discourse of equal opportunities.

The general (West German) expectation that a group of citizens that has been left behind should charitably confront the demographic (and other) problems of the state – which is not longer perceived to be such since the development of the EU – is flawed and inappropriate. Since there has been no focus of the agenda or even a remote thought lost on reparations for social grievances in East Germany (and, from the perspective of German federal democratic policy, this cannot be allowed to happen), an unspoken exclusion has ensued, characterized by the establishment of collectively experienced trauma<sup>3</sup> and the creation of new enmities. The media do the rest, as does the discourse produced by intellectuals who simply generalize without knowing the sociological details or even the social fields close-up. In „Soziales und kollektives Gedächtnis“ (1988),<sup>4</sup> Aleida Assmann speaks of the difference between official and unofficial memory. Devaluations and damage to human dignity that were experienced as collective trauma belong to an East German’s unofficial memory. Since this memory is also sacrificed to “forgetting on demand” (Simon, 1997, S. 25), as Dieter Simon calls it (and, in addition, to persecution on

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Schoelkopf, K. Entwurzelung ist die gefährlichste Krankheit, Welt Nr. 24, 8. 2008, URL: [https://www.welt.de/welt\\_print/article2692014/Entwurzelung-ist-die-gefaehrlichste-Krankheit.html](https://www.welt.de/welt_print/article2692014/Entwurzelung-ist-die-gefaehrlichste-Krankheit.html). Last accessed: 20 March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bartens, W. Traumatische Erlebnisse prägen das Erbgut. Depression und Trauma werden häufig an die nächsten Generationen weitergegeben, auch wenn sie zunächst nicht genetisch sind. Über soziale Prägung also? Forscher haben nun herausgefunden, dass Erlebnisse auch die Gene verändern können, SZ.de, 14 April 2014, URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/gesundheit/genetik-traumatische-erlebnisse-praegen-das-erbgut-1.1936886>. Last accessed: 21 March 2017.

demand), what remains are symptoms of an acute precariousness and mental disorders that are then delegated to administrative bodies and health insurers.

### **2.3. Social construction of reality**

„Those *suspended* from society vote for populists, let themselves be seduced and are incalculable. Those who have not been left behind and are privileged are now blaming themselves,”<sup>5</sup> as Rainer Hank puts it in the FAZ. What becomes clear in this rhetoric is the following: a collective bewilderment of the privileged class, which wrings its hands and rejects any conceivable “blame” with big gestures. In this spectacle, which is expertly staged by the dominant media, the aspect of the *social construction of reality*, of transmissions and projections, is particularly tangible. However, there is no enemy in the sense of the “rightist mob” or the “rightist agitator”. These are constructs of meaning in social spaces that were heavily damaged and now have a high level of *vulnerability*. This phenomenon should be taken seriously, as to do so might potentially end the chronic devaluation of dissidents.

There is hardly any literature about the systematic devaluation of East Germans after 1989. Vivian Heitmann’s study „Unverbindliche Welten? Die Wiedervereinigung aus der Sicht von psychisch Kranken und ihrem sozialen Umfeld“ (Heitmann 1999)<sup>6</sup> is thus a pearl in a pile of sand. She did a study between 1990 and 1994 that intended, as she herself wrote: “to give a voice to the side whose experience seemed to have become irrelevant due to the reunification” (Heitmann, 1999, p. 8)<sup>7</sup>

### **2.4. A scenario from the sociology of catastrophes**

Already in 1994, five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Lars Clausen diagnosed a “crass social change”: “The two Germanys have a lot in common – except for language. We talk – and we feel – less with one another than any side could have ever noticed” (Clausen, 1994, p. 229). In the meantime, this fact of speechlessness has expanded into full-blown and hardened conflict. The beginning of the observation and analysis of the conflict, which is essentially an increasing incoherence in social constructs of meaning and values and includes concepts of democracy and freedom in East and West, is dated to 1989 in this debate. It is assumed that social facts in East Germany are so complexly layered that it is not possible to just study one generation or just one symptom in order to reflect the entire story. In the framework of the observation and analysis of East Germany, numerous social events related to the fall of the Berlin Wall and transformation crises occurred simultaneously for the period under observation, starting in 1989.

Examining these events and crises individually is relevant for three reasons. First, such a crisis of transformation as in the “*Wende*” is in itself a crass social change (Clausen); many in a series create social anomie (Durkheim) or collective trauma (Assmann). Second, in reference to other

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hank, R. Kennen Sie vielleicht einen Abgehängten? Die „Abgehängten der Gesellschaft wählen Populisten, lassen sich verführen und sind unberechenbar. Die nicht-abgehängten Privilegierten suchen nun die Schuld bei sich. Ein Kommentar, FAZ.NET, 27.11.2016, URL: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/arm-und-reich/abgehaengte-sind-der-neue-geist-der-gesellschaft-14546418.html#void>. Last accessed: 20. March 2016.

The Quotation has been translated by the author. Para, 3

desired neoliberal and democratic changes, the East German populace is considered to be reactionary – recently, spaces of protest and resistance have been opening up here to a previously unknown degree. Third, one has neglected to take up the dialogue so desired by East Germans and is now confronted by a “surprising” situation of potential speechlessness and rejection that is “naturally” ignored and denied by a “big mouth of western values”.<sup>8</sup> As Bernd Ulrich wrote at the end of his article „Wie Putin spaltet“<sup>9</sup> back in 2014: “world views have been clashing in past weeks that seem not to have been communicated for quite some time now.”<sup>10</sup> 2014 doesn’t seem to be that long ago, since evident gaps between opinions are now only dealt with using hate speech and verbal criminalization. A debate on social-psychological anomie would have been necessary—and, indeed, should have been begun in 1989—for the purpose of better understanding the collective sensitivities in the “East”, instead of continuing to devalue them. This is precisely what the present dialogue is meant to address.

### **2.5. The suspended: a generative problem**

This text thus makes an attempt at unveiling the subcutaneous genesis of opposing social forces, as they are currently being perceived throughout German society, in parallel to the developmental history of the privileged and new German establishment. This means deriving an anti-globalization revolt, undertaken from below, that articulates itself in political fields of resistance within society. At stake, here, is the genealogy of a populace that has been successively left behind since 1989, with particular emphasis placed on East Germany, the territory of the former GDR. The generation born there between 1945 and 1975 will be addressed here. When the events of 1989 occurred, the younger members of this population were in the educational system, in training and at the beginning of their professional careers; the older members had studied and been credentialed and/or working in careers for many years. From then until today, theirs has been a history of devaluation, degradation and exclusion; they were exempted from equal opportunity and political participation, while their fate was simultaneously veiled. It is precisely this subcutaneous social history of the so-called opposing forces, those who have been devalued, abandoned, excluded, and left behind—in a word, those who have been *suspended*—that will first complete the history of *social mobility* in Germany since 1989.

### **2.6. Antagonistic mobility**

Many millions of people are a part of this group under observation. The last census in the GDR in 1988 counted approximately 17 million people. In 1989, approximately 150,000 “GDR refugees” fled: they followed the “picnic refugees”<sup>11</sup> over the green border between Hungary and Austria.

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<sup>8</sup> Ulf Poschardt, Der Westen soll Putin umarmen, Die Welt-Online, 3.3.2014, URL: <http://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article125387514/Der-Westen-sollte-Putin-umarmen.html>, Stand vom 23 March 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Bernd Ulrich, Wie Putin spaltet. Die Zeit, Nr.16/2014, 10. April 2014, URL: <http://www.zeit.de/2014/16/russlanddebatte-krise-putin>, There is no paragraph, because the article is just mentioned at that place

<sup>10</sup> Bernd Ulrich, Wie Putin spaltet. Die Zeit, Nr.16/2014, 10. April 2014, URL: <http://www.zeit.de/2014/16/russlanddebatte-krise-putin>, Para, 32

<sup>11</sup> 19. August 1989. Die erste Massenflucht aus der DDR, Bis zur Maueröffnung sollte es noch rund drei Monate dauern, doch an der österreichisch-ungarischen Grenze wurden die Barrieren schon am 19. August 1989

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, dramatic work migration to the West set in; this served to rapidly decrease the East German populace on the former territory of the GDR. A few years later, the famous return of the uprooted occurred, as those who were unable to establish themselves in the West came back East, and no longer found their own “home” upon returning. The suspended became the stranded, and later the devalued, in their own country: an invisible group of migrants caught up in negative *social* mobility. Social decline de-couples East Germans from the German/German project, and turns them increasingly into the displaced and refugees in their own country. These are “second-class people” who miss out and disappear in the atomization of high-rise apartment buildings or the clinical anonymity of rehabilitation clinics. In the parlance of the Springer newspaper company, they became known as the “lost generation” of Hoyerswerda, Rostock, Halle and Frankfurt/Oder.

Work migration also flowed in the opposite direction, as West Germans came East. They arrived with West salaries and a *jungle bonus* (Buschzulage),<sup>12</sup> an ironic phrase that ventured from the German colonial period into the present day; it refers to a “bonus for German administrators or soldiers for service beyond the border of their homeland”. Beginning in 1989, these conquistadors of the new German democracy were sent to occupy all public administrative positions in culture, business, science, art and politics.

The specific problem of this story lies in the self-empowerment of the “West” as a protector of a democratic cause of unified values for Germany as a whole since 1989; at the level of social psychology, these unified values had never existed before the fact. This act of self-empowerment of the “West,” shored up by references to the ethics of social ideology and value creation, occurred in diametrical opposition to the thinking and living sentiments in the “East” and has thus exacerbated the incoherences that have underlain it from the start. Concern was then raised when the suppressed “other” (as of 2014, at the latest) was then publicly declared to be the

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durchbrochen. Rund 600 DDR-Bürger nutzten ein "Picknick" der Paneuropa-Union für eine spektakuläre Massenflucht. Sie hatten ein erstes großes Schlupfloch gefunden, „19th August, 1989. The first mass exodus from the GDR. It would be three months until the opening of the Wall, but at the Austrian-Hungarian border, the barriers were already broken on the 19th of August. Roughly 600 GDR citizens used a „picknick“ sponsored by the Paneuropean Union as an opportunity for a spectacular mass flight. They had found the first major crack [in the Wall].“

Spiegel Online, 16.8.1999, URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/19-august-1989-die-erste-massenflucht-aus-der-ddr-a-35349.html>. Last accessed: 21 March 0917.

<sup>12</sup> Das Wort „Buschzulage“ landete auf Platz zwei bei der Wahl zum Unwort des Jahres 1994. Für uns Osis war dies jedoch kein Unwort. Es war die Beschreibung real existierender gesellschaftlicher Ungerechtigkeit. Westdeutsche Beamte aus den alten Bundesländern erhielten neben ihrem ohnehin höheren Westgehalt auch noch weitere Zulagen, damit sie uns beim Aufbau Ost helfen konnten. Diese Ungleichheit war jedoch nicht nur auf den öffentlichen Dienst beschränkt., in: Marcel Helbig, Ossi-Diskriminierung. Nicht nur Migranten haben es schwer, auch Ostdeutsche massiv unterrepräsentiert, The word „bush bonus“ took second place in the 1994 contest for Silliest Word (*Unwort*) of the Year. For us Easterners, though, this was no joke. It was the description of a real existing social injustice. In addition to their already-higher salaries, West German state employees from the former West Germany received additional compensation for helping us with „Building Up the East.“ This disparity was not limited to the public sector, either.

Migazin. Migration in Germany, 21. 1. 2015, URL: <http://www.migazin.de/2015/01/21/ossi-diskriminierung-nicht-migranten-ostdeutsche/>, Last accessed: 22 March 2017.

“right” or “new right”. Concern, because for many East Germans something is being repeated that they knew from *Stasi* times: the ban on a differing opinion and free speech.

It is the “other’s” knowledge, which was not supposed to exist, that is now being discriminated against and stigmatized in the terms of the “better argument” (Porello 2017, p. 10ff.)<sup>13</sup> or rather “dominant argument”. This process of counteractive migration patterns and antagonistic mobilities – between the established society of the winners of the fall of the Berlin Wall (West) and the invisible society of the losers of the fall of the Berlin Wall (East) – is a conflict that has not yet been heard, but is overdue.

### **2.7. Post-democracy: ambiguity of promises after the fall of the Berlin Wall**

In the course of the economic reunification in 1990, an additional divisive aspect was added to a reciprocal estrangement: the “devaluation of elementary material and mental dispositions from the GDR period”<sup>14</sup> (Rauschenbach 1995, p.:10) .<sup>15</sup> The German/German project is an example of *post-democracy* that was introduced with a gigantic promise to the people of East Germany; it became known as the “promise of the *Wende*” during the Kohl era. The former federal chancellor Helmut Kohl promised the East Germans *blooming landscapes* – a metaphor for an economic vision. In addition to the “blooming landscapes”, Kohl promised a “mental-moral *Wende*”, a fundamental regime change in which the formation of a liberal-democratic consensus would be purchased with the liquidation of an existing mentality and morality, and the discrediting and discarding of the East German state’s institutions would be accompanied by the discrediting and discarding of their rational and moral underpinning. This political slogan was a *Wende* slogan for a better democracy. At a moment when East Germany was in a state of total submission, the social dependence on the *Wende* promise could be strengthened and expanded. And even as it fostered social dependencies on the “*Wende* promises”, the FRG created a *social-psychological and psycho-political vacuum: blind spots of society* that simply do not exist on the rhetorical map of reunification. Within these strategies of post-democracy, *Wende* winners could occupy space without any inhibitions. The project “land occupation East” – as I would like to term it based on the theory developed by Klaus Dörre about the “*Neue Landnahme*” (Dörre 2009)<sup>16</sup>, which was also known as “*Aufschwung Ost*” – prospered. However, the “*Aufschwung Ost*” took place without East Germans and was the second German economic wonder after the end of the Second

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<sup>14</sup> Brigitte Rauschenbach, *Deutsche Zusammenhänge. Zeitdiagnose als politische Psychologie*, Edition Interform, Zürich, 1995, S. 10

World War.

### **3. Prospects**

#### **3.1. A change of course**

What was neglected? What can be corrected? What does a future vision for a democratic society of equal opportunity and political participation look like?

In my view, the resistance in the populace against further measures of a capitalist reconstruction of society should be taken seriously. For this demand, the German critic of capitalism Walter Benjamin left us with a *recipe for interrupting catastrophes*: “The idea of progress is founded in the idea of catastrophes. That it *will go on* is the catastrophe.” (Benjamin, 1990, p. 683)

Pausing on the treadmill of capitalist catastrophe accumulation is the order of the day. *Resistance means interrupting progress* – and reversing it. In a contemporary rendering, this might be dubbed “the interruption of democratization”. Up until now, capitalism bred its critique in a post-political heritage of global governance, with the expectation that it could permit its internal criticism to accumulate, and then put it to use. Recently, however—and here we close the circle to the beginning of the text— one is confronted with new protagonists who have appeared in the arena of past globalization games (Sloterdijk, 2005), those who are “disgusted”. Formerly opposed to one another, globalists and globalization critics joining forces against a completely new threat, against the subcutaneous resistance that emerged from their collateral damages, against the suspended. This is the decisive change on the stage of globalization. When the suspended enter the arena (of globalization via democratization), prior iterations of globalization-critique must be taken to involuntary account. The stunned (media) accusations such as “attack on globalization” clearly demonstrate this change of scene; it boils down to an end of globalization and its prior forms of critique.

#### **3.2 Democratizing democracy**

The „democratization of democracy“ ( Offe 2003) is a prospective demand of “the suspended”. The central question of democracy is still: “Do the excluded have a voice?” (Stegemann 2017, p.?) And if so, what would they say? Let us alter the perspective for a moment, and direct our view to the interior. Let us reduce the speeds of industry 4.0 and Big Data. Let us stop the Revolution of Military Affairs (RMA), the war for energy resources and Peak Oil, the war for markets, growth and leadership. Let us attempt to interrupt the well-financed trends of the globalization industry and the flows of high-tech creative workers, branded as “transnational movements” or “the futures of world society”. Let us try to look at groups of people whose “other” languages and argumentative frameworks are unheeded, who are denied a social affiliation and whose need for dialogue is ignored. Let us try not to devalue the collective needs of resistance—whether in the new German federal states, the old German federal states, in Eastern Europe or the Europe of the PIIGS states—as nascent fascism or as a failed integration into market, but rather as something genuinely social – a response to systematic subjugation. People have needs for collectives, heritage, affiliation, language and space. They need collective frames of reference, ritualized recollection and a reproductive memory in order to survive. Let

us take the resistance to a neo-liberal loss of control in (East) Germany and elsewhere in the world seriously, and discover the solutions that it attempts to offer.

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