

Chapter 9

# The GDR—A Normal Country in the Centre of Europe<sup>1</sup>

Ina Merkel



In view of the fact that a woman, who before 1989 belonged to the academic elite of East Germany in 2005, became chancellor of a united Germany, it is high time to ask whether current interpretations of the GDR, which move between the extremes of scandalising and exoticising, are still adequate for explaining such a phenomenon. While her father's position as a minister of religion may fit into the concept of the GDR as a 'niche society', the brilliant career of the parson's daughter does not. Angela Merkel finished secondary school with the Abitur (school leaving exams equivalent to British A Levels or International Baccalaureate), went on to study Physics and did her Ph.D. at the GDR's Academy of Sciences (*Akademie der Wissenschaften*). In the GDR, secondary schools, universities, and in particular the *Akademie* were places with limited access. Entering university or even academy meant at least showing loyalty; a truly successful rise within them demanded even more than that—it required political engagement. Politically insubordinate behaviour, let alone resistance, would have led Angela Merkel along a different path. My aim is not to denounce this person, but to highlight that the case of Dr. Angela Merkel shows us two things: first, the very normal prerequisites for rising up the social hierarchy which are common in all societies (achievement, loyalty); and secondly, the exceptional conditions that are evident in the career of everybody in the GDR as a highly politicised society, asking for a minimum of commitment.

The quest for discovering the connection between the common and the exceptional is also an integral part of the normalisation concept developed

---

1. Discussion paper. Translated from the German by Esther von Richthofen.

by Mary Fulbrook and her colleagues. Using this as an ideal type, any historical episode or period can be analysed by looking for both general developments and exceptional moments. Similarities and differences between societies or nations can be interpreted as different solutions to one and the same problem. They no longer need to be measured according to a given or a dominant norm. Stabilisation, routinisation, and internalisation are the prerequisites for supporting and upholding every functioning system. Such a set of conceptual categories opens up new possibilities for interpreting the GDR in two directions.

The first point I want to make here is that we should stop looking at the GDR in isolation as a self-contained society, but look at it rather in the context of post-war European modernisation. That requires analysing the GDR in relation to the macro-structures of broader social orders (Europe, industrial societies, etc.), as well as enquiring about the role of ‘circulating cultural meanings, objects and identities’, cultural transfers, and exchange processes under the conditions set by the Cold War and the Berlin Wall.<sup>2</sup> (Most historical analyses regard the GDR as an autarchic, self-contained structure. There are, for example, analyses of GDR art, DEFA films, GDR rock music, but neither artists nor GDR citizens ever went to the cinema exclusively, or even uniformly, to watch DEFA films.)

Secondly, I understand the everyday actions of individuals as a process of negotiation, which cannot be satisfactorily described in terms of the extremes of conformity and resistance. Society is a lived web of interconnections among individuals, imbued with different meanings. The system of norms and values representing the basic pattern and order of these interconnections does not define the particular meanings, but is, so to speak, a resource for individuals to draw on when attributing potential significance to individual meanings. It is open to interpretation. This ambiguity enables the members of a society to participate in different aspects simultaneously. They situate themselves in this field of forces up to the point where their own cultural interests are concerned. Everyday culture is the ability to make do with what is there—it is a creative process.<sup>3</sup> This is where the question

---

2. I am referring to the concept of a ‘multi-sited ethnography’, which was developed in George E. Marcus, ‘Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography’, in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1995): 95–117. The point of departure here is that the distinction between ‘system’ and ‘life-world’ can no longer be sustained, which means that ethnography, which focuses on the local, can also no longer be sustained. Every closed perspective should be abandoned in favour of new approaches that search for connections, relations, links, and could expand that part of traditional ethnography focusing on agency, symbols, and practices of everyday life.

3. Michel de Certeau, *Die Kunst des Handelns* (Berlin, 1988); John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London/Sydney/Wellington, 1989); see also the debates about ‘doing gender’ and performativity.

arises of how (GDR)-society is created and how it is normalised so that a belief in its unchanging nature emerges. Individuals do two things at the same time: they create or reproduce the social structures, and within these structures, they fashion their very own lives.

Historical societies are always analysed and described from the viewpoint of the respective situation of the present. Contemporary conditions (federal German, European) have been in a fundamental state of change since 1989. No matter whether this state of change is described as the dissolution of bipolarity, as the collapse and transformation of socialist society, as the transition into a 'second modernity', or as an erosion of a workers' society, changing contemporary conditions alter the need for historical interpretations. Hitherto dominant West German interpretations—dictatorship and modernisation theories—cannot permanently claim to be valid within united Germany. This is not only because these interpretations exercised hegemonic interpretative dominance over the Eastern part, but also because the old Federal Republic is changing fundamentally. New perspectives on GDR history are emerging, which is also the case with the normalisation concept under discussion here.

The new questions emerging in relation to the history of the GDR—this small, poor country with its short lifespan—reflect issues that are currently being discussed under the heading of a *second*, or *reflexive*, modernity.<sup>4</sup> The essence of this debate is the assumption that today's 'late industrial societies' are experiencing radical changes (individualisation and globalisation). These changes are accompanied by an erosion of old certainties, such as the 'taken for granted nature' of economic growth and technological progress and the dissolution of borders of nation states along with their inherent securities (the end of the society of work, the failure of family models, the new fragility of social conditions, fragmented identities, and so on). Basic principles of action consequently have to be renegotiated or refounded, both in general terms and in specifics. The central question is how social security, identity, and democracy are possible beyond full-time employment.

Beck and collaborators characterise the 'first' modernity, which attempted to offer precisely that degree of security and probably did offer it periodically in certain national societies, as half-modern, mixed-modern societies. Thus, we are dealing with structures made up from modern elements that are combined and merged with elements of counter-modernity. This applies to all industrial societies, including those in the socialist camp, though with a different *mélange*—and one worth analysing. The concept of

---

4. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernisierung. Eine Kontroverse* (Frankfurt M., 1996).

a ‘second modernity’ therefore offers a starting point that transcends the polarities of capitalism and socialism, the two political camps, and could restore the interdependence and correlation between the two, though without becoming universalist.

Ultimately, the concept of a second modernity means questioning the very notion of our own society as a western, modern industrial society. Western development can no longer be seen as normative. The hegemonic notion of interpretative supremacy in contrast to other developments can no longer be sustained. This means that an already pre-interpreted historical field is once again opened up for discussion.

Understanding the GDR as part of the ‘first’ modernity makes it possible to contextualise it as a moment in world history and as integrated into European and global developments, and to cease to treat it as an autarchic, self-contained construction that can only be comprehended in terms of its own particularities (scandalous, exotic). Conceptualising the GDR as a ‘completely normal’ European country, a ‘half-modern’ industrial society, does not overlook its special characteristics (secret police/*Stasi*, repressive political system, command economy, and so on), but declares these characteristic elements to be particular solutions to general questions that were also evident in other European countries of that time.

The central questions of these years were how to attain the peaceful coexistence of peoples after destructive war and inhuman genocide, how Germans could live with shame and disgrace, and how a renewed upsurge of aggression and violence could be prevented. The GDR’s answer was to embark on a route of expropriation, dictatorship of the proletariat, and state socialism. Western nations chose democracy, the public sphere and social free-market economy. However, they shared the idea of creating wealth through work and industrialisation.

## Cultural Transfer in the Context of the Wall

Post-war modernity was characterised by the development of an incredible mobility of people, goods, and ideas across given national borders, and special limitations regarding system boundaries. After 1961 GDR citizens were no longer able to enter western countries.

Apart from the fact that the Wall entailed a very real borderline, it had different meanings for different generations, for different social environments, for East and West Germans. It did not simply shut out the world; rather, it gave it a very special meaning. In terms of the normalisation

concept under discussion here, the building of the Wall was for some people a political and economic necessity, and for others it was scandalous. While people born until 1961 could decide whether to stay or leave, generations who were young in the 1970s (that is, the birth cohorts of 1955 to 1965) grew up with an insurmountable state border. This age group was used to the Wall as simply being there. The existence of the Wall was an accustomed normality. But what are we to make of that? Even if the Wall could definitely not be crossed, it was nonetheless imagined as surmountable. The Wall was one form of normality. Modernity, which includes the free transgression of borders, was another. How can we relate these two competing normalities to one another, and what did that entail for an individually lived 'normal' life and for images of normality? Did they coexist next to one another, did they accommodate themselves to each other, or were they mutually exclusive? How was the Wall incorporated into everyday behaviour?

On the one hand, the Wall meant shutting out the western world; but on the other hand, it also meant precisely the opposite, namely permanent virtual transgressions of the border. The emigration of people, experiences, goods, and ideas determined life in the GDR in a decisive manner. Because of the Wall, those objects, people, ideas, metaphors, plots, and so on that did manage to cross it attained a very special meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural exchange has so far barely been examined, and if at all, then only in terms of the cultural hegemony of Americanisation in the West and Sovietisation in the East. But how can we grasp cultural transfer, cultural exchange, and so on in the normalisation concept? To begin with, it is necessary to see the GDR as a sovereign state, and to ask in this context what goods, ideas, and people could legally cross the border and were even politically encouraged to do so, and which parts of the outside world could therefore be publicly present in the GDR.

Looking at the example of cinema in the GDR, it is noticeable that—aside from the dominance of Soviet and Eastern European films—modern European films from Scandinavia, Italy, France or Great Britain were very present. They often entered the cinemas in synchrony only a few months after their original release date. Popular American cinema arrived in the GDR in the form of a few selected films that appeared some years after their original release, but were sometimes shown for years on end to a never tiring public. This was certainly not merely the result of the restrictive policy relating to film and cinema, but also of the perpetually precarious foreign currency situation. The GDR's policy of international cultural exchange paid

---

5. Compare Ina Dietzsch, *Grenzen überschreiben? Deutsch-deutsche Briefwechsel 1948–1989* (Köln/Weimar/Wien, 2004).

most attention to other ‘culturally marginalised’ societies in Eastern Europe or other new nation states. These were wooed, made visible, and made accessible to the East German public. From an official perspective, it was a matter of a consciously selected section of the world, which, however, was very quickly and irreversibly contradicted by Western television. In the perfectly normal process of globalisation, goods, ways of life, values, and news crossed the borders of the GDR, where they took on a life of their own, since individuals appropriated them according to their own needs, norms, and principles. The world was present even in the GDR, and here it unleashed yearnings, comparisons, and dreams.

Aside from the virtual experiences of the world, there were also real encounters in the form of travel (even for a few—travel overseas, work-related trips), visitors (relatives, artists, sports teams, politicians, business people, and so on) and events (Leipzig trade fair, World Festivals, documentary film festivals, etc.). In the perceptions of foreigners—relatives, Western television, and radio commentaries, etc.—life in the GDR was reflected in a particular way. Encounters with strangers have consequences for one’s perception of oneself. The Other functions as a mirror in which one can perceive and understand the Self quite differently. In these encounters, a conception of normality is developed.

In the mentalities of everyday life, normality appears as a relational and evaluating concept. This means that a given situation is seen as different, deviant or uncomfortable—in short, deficient—when opposed to other historical or social situations or desirable conditions. The concept of normality is therefore first of all based on a comparison: a comparison with the past, with other societies, with cultures or ideals. The fact that it is a relational concept means that it inevitably entails notions of comparison and of measurement. These notions are not permanent and unchanging, but are always filled with new, concrete historical contents. There is no universally applicable anthropological scale of measurement against which circumstances can be measured and assessed in terms of their normality. And no measure can be applied to a society from outside. (What is normal from a Western European perspective does not necessarily apply to Eastern European situations.)

Conceptions of normality are formed not only by one’s own experiences and through the tales of older generations; rather, real experiences (of things or people) and virtual experiences of other worlds (stories, films, music, etc.) also play a significant role. Standards for one’s own life are derived here, and on occasion, articulated. Clothing styles play an important role here as well.

Wearing jeans, for example, was a way of symbolising border transgression. Young people in the GDR wore jeans to show that they belonged to universal youth. The desire to own a pair of genuine jeans and to wear them

in public, for example, in school, should not in the first instance be interpreted as a provocative demonstration against the ‘socialist way of life’, but could rather be seen simply as an expression of young people’s conception of normality, namely that they could also wear an article of clothing that was seen as modern ‘everywhere’. In the 1960s, this was still regarded as problematic (evidence of Western attitudes and hence hostile); in the 1970s, in the context of attempts at internationalisation (international recognition), jeans were regarded as ‘normal’; and in the 1980s, Honecker had them imported into the GDR. Whereas the youth of the 1960s had to endure the contradiction between the Wall as segregation and wearing jeans as virtual transgression of the border, the youth of the 1970s could regard this contradiction as having been negotiated, and the youth of the 1980s interpreted the importing of jeans as an anticipated crossing of the border in the foreseeable future.

Popular culture—the ways in which people use, reject, and subvert cultural-industrial products and thus create their own meanings and messages—always contains marks of power relations, traces of the dominant and subordinate forces that are so central to each social system and to social experiences therein. At the same time, it contains signs of resistance or evasion. The power of popular culture lies in the negative, in the capacity to use jeans in the 1960s to transgress boundaries and thus to express opposing social values. A society’s popular culture not only provides insights into competing norms and values, but also material which one can interrogate as to how individuals give significance to this ‘text’ for their own conceptions of their lives.

It is in the essence of popular culture to transgress boundaries, it includes visions of different ways of life, it provokes comparisons with one’s own life, and offers material for desires and dreams. These are not necessarily directed at escaping from one’s own world—they can also facilitate a form of arrangement with it, or even make it possible in the first place. The presence of the outside world and of globalisation processes is not something external or foreign, but rather was inherent within life in the GDR. The questions of how the world was incorporated into the GDR, how it was present, and how it was appropriated, are in my opinion highly interesting topics for analysis that could help to rescue the GDR from its special status.

## **The GDR as a Negotiated Society—Conceptions of Normality**

A second dimension of normality can be determined when looking at everyday life: namely, normality as ‘unquestioned naturalness’ (*Selbstverständlichkeit*),

or, to put it differently, normality as habitual actions. Mary Fulbrook uses the terms stabilisation, routinisation, and institutionalisation to discuss this naturalness at a societal-institutional level. These terms primarily evaluate the capacity of individuals to live their lives under particular circumstances. Following the theories of Michel de Certeau, this could also be understood as the ‘art of action’, in other words, as the ability of individuals to ‘make the best’ of given conditions and circumstances, or as creativity and innovation in negotiating social relations. It is the question of how society is not just endured by individuals, but rather is negotiated and formed by them, and ultimately, is made by them.

In such a concept, the question of the limits of Ulbricht’s and Honecker’s power is not just posed at the level of structures and reduced to the dichotomy of authority and resistance, but rather is seen as the outcome of processes of negotiation. It is a question of how far older social patterns, such as bourgeois/ proletarian heritage or tradition/modernity, continue to exist, and how far individuals retained their habits (work ethos, family ties) within them—and thus the extent to which individuals could retain a degree of autonomy. This entails searching for limits, gaps or weaknesses in the system of domination and orientating oneself according to individual strategies within given circumstances.

An exemplary field for studying these issues is pleasure. There are many areas of people’s lives that are structured, determined, influenced, and enforced by the state and the system, but pleasure and enjoyment are not among them. They can be regulated, to be sure, but they cannot be forced into existence. If that is the case, then how can it be that, despite such admittedly different experiences and ways of life in the East and West, people laughed at the same films and idolised the same stars? Is this a case of anthropological constants? If people’s laughter is subversive, then we need to ask why the state does not intervene to forbid the relevant film—or does everybody interpret a filmic situation in the light of their own individual conditions, thereby rendering it harmless for the system?

In relation to these questions, the normalisation concept makes a lot of sense, because it allows us to ask what assumptions and standards individuals use to evaluate their own lives and the circumstances in which they live. The question is therefore how given social conditions, socially propagated norms and values, and value systems, which are circulated through virtual reality, affect individual constructions of norms. Individuals put together their own systems of norms and values. From the reservoir of norms and meanings, they pick out orientation markers that are relevant for their own individual lives. In this process, there will be moments of agreement with socially standardised perceptions (working hard), or stubborn retention of

norms that are ‘outdated’ (obedience), ‘western’ (fashion, hedonism), ‘bourgeois’ (social distinction, entrepreneurial spirit), or norms which are otherwise denounced, dismissed or tolerated. The cultural reservoir on which individuals draw contains all socially circulating norms and values, including those that are seen negatively, and those that are in competition with each other.

The ‘art of action’ (de Certeau) or ‘playing the rules’ (Fulbrook) are categories directed at the simultaneity of discipline and doubt, agreement and disagreement, conformity and resistance. One can behave according to established norms without agreeing with them. I can voice opposition towards them and yet simultaneously regard them as necessary in an exceptional situation. That is what is meant by negotiation: in the knowledge that, for example, forbidding bourgeois rights and freedoms (freedom of speech, free elections, freedom to travel) is a politically restrictive act of interference, which is not ‘normal’, I can temporarily regard this intervention as necessary. There was, for example, no public protest when the Wall was built. Rather, this measure was met with a certain kind of agreement, and a minimum of acceptance and political understanding within society. This acceptance was not, however, secured in the longer term—in other words, after a few years these measures were increasingly questioned: restricted travel, subventions, the electoral system, and so on were criticised ever more strongly.

The ‘normal condition’ of the GDR was that its citizens did perceive themselves as a ‘not quite normal’ society, but as one which did absolutely aspire to ‘normal’ conditions in the near and the more distant future. Many GDR citizens shared with each other the hope that with international recognition, a solution to the question of citizenship, an end to the arms race, and so on, the borders would be opened. The conception of normality had as its goal a society in which all restrictions would be lifted. The GDR or perhaps socialism was seen as a transitional phase of society that was necessarily afflicted by weaknesses—and, to be precise, weaknesses that were different from those experienced by western societies. This means that every period has its own (negotiated) normality, even if it has come off the rails, but that in every period conceptions also circulate about what is not quite right, not correct, not ‘normal’, that is, what cannot be accepted in this way in the long-term.

The mass exodus and the peaceful revolution of 1989 can be interpreted in many different ways, but they can also be seen as a forcible reclamation of conceptions of normality: these included street demonstrations and demands, public discussion of social questions of general concern, problems and possible solutions, participation in power, getting to know Europe, articulating the right to a private sphere, protection of the environment, and

urban preservation. That such a normality was, in the end, only attainable by giving up other normalities (state sovereignty, full-time employment) points to the fact that normality is always the result of negotiation, a historically concrete compromise, in which not all perceptions can be realised at the same time.

The concept of normalisation is well suited to looking at these kinds of compromises and processes of negotiation and asking how individuals in given circumstances make something out of them—namely, their own lives. This concept allows us to do so without evaluating the perceptions of normality that circulate and compete at any given time. It makes it possible to describe normalities as temporarily accepted and simultaneously questioned conditions of social stability, which, for a certain period of time, can give individuals a necessary security of action.