

# *Getting and Spending*

EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN CONSUMER  
SOCIETIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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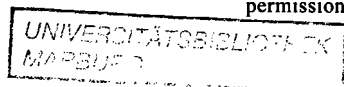
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*In memory of  
Roland Marchand  
(1933–1997)*

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*Consumer Culture in the GDR, or How the  
Struggle for Antimodernity Was Lost on the  
Battleground of Consumer Culture*

INA MERKEL

Those who know me know that I have drunk lots of water and hardly any wine, not to mention vodka or cognac. I really cannot speak of a feudal life, though I could have afforded one on my salary. Every morning I had one or two rolls with butter and honey, at lunch time we were in the Central Committee building and there I had either a grilled sausage with mashed potatoes or macaroni with bacon or goulash. In the evening I stayed at home, watched a bit of television and went to bed. . . . I have to say that it was my lot in life to live modestly and thereby maintain my performance. That way I never lost contact with the people, though security guards and others often created a situation where I was separated from the masses. But I always had direct contact with the masses in spite of it.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, this man did not need much to live on. He was not a pleasure seeker. He was an ascetic. But since when have people loved ascetics?

If Erich Honecker felt compelled to describe himself as a modest and unpretentious sovereign in this conversation with Reinhold Andert and Wolfgang Herzberg, he was reacting above all to a call to do away with privileges for party bureaucrats that was raised during the *Wende*.<sup>2</sup> In his most recent analysis of the elite of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), Michael Bodemann found that they all claimed that they did not enjoy special privileges. But their insistence that they lived just like "normal" citizens of the GDR was more deeply rooted, and not just a current strategy for self-justification. In the cultural value system of social democrats and communists, ascetic life-styles are part of the mental tradi-

1 Reinhold Andert and Wolfgang Herzberg, *Der Sturz: Erich Honecker im Kreuzverhör* (Berlin, 1990), 377.

2 In English, "the turnaround," i.e., the period of events leading up to the dissolution of the GDR with the (re)unification of Germany on Oct. 3, 1990.

tion of an upwardly mobile social group within the working class. The extent to which privileged access to consumer goods found a way into everyday life is revealed in an anecdote about Egon Krenz, the former head of the Free German Youth and Honecker's successor as party chief in October 1989. Around 1987 Krenz appeared on East German television in his everyday surroundings. While sitting in his living room and chatting amiably, a remark got away from him: ". . . and then in the evening I always drink a *can* of beer [emphasis added]." This exposed him as a drinker of Western beer, since East German beer was only marketed in bottles.

When first broadcast on East German television in late 1989, the first widely circulated report about the life of Politburo members at their forested retreat near Wandlitz, which had been off-limits to the general public until then, triggered profound indignation. Actually, the petit bourgeois ambiance on display was rather ordinary: chrome-plated bathroom fittings and a Western color TV set. Compared to the life-style of Western elites, this looked ridiculous, and East German outrage over the Politburo's interior decorating was difficult to comprehend. People were upset about trivialities, by the beer can and the video recorder, by things that – and this is what started it all – came from the West. "They preached water and drank wine," people said. This did not match the party leadership's claims of egalitarianism. In a society where consumer goods often were not universally available, but restricted and distributed according to strict guidelines, a sense of moral justice had become deeply ingrained – and now it was being challenged. But something else is revealed by these vignettes: Citizens of the GDR and the leaders of the state were obviously longing for the same things. They were, at least in matters of taste, not really very far apart.

The consumer culture of East Germany cannot be viewed as simply a collection of GDR products, a self-sufficient system cut off from the world market, as the few published analyses of East German design have depicted it. The specificity of this culture was shaped by a continual East–West discourse. An inevitable comparison was the constitutive moment right from the start. Fortunately, the struggle between the systems did not take the form of armed conflict, but was rather shifted to the marketplace. And it was here, in the sphere of consumerism, where the battle was won. Two different systems of cultural values collided, and since they developed in different social contexts, they were actually incomparable. On the one hand, in the East, the idea of socialist equality with its holy trinity of work, bread, and housing was paramount. This could be traced to an older generation's need for security after having been devastated by inflation, unemployment, and World War II. On the other hand, social and cultural differentiation in

the West had developed and deepened, deriving from experiences of upward mobility and postwar economic successes. Equality versus individuality? Tradition versus modernity? The vocabulary is prejudiced by the older forms of ideological confrontation.

What should be the subject of an essay that develops the study of a top-pled state system's consumer culture as a set of hypotheses? Why consumer culture? What can be explained or shown by it? Consumer culture is understood as the relations of a society's individuals to a historically and geographically specific collection of things, things that appear on the market as consumer goods and that are available to be purchased, used, and consumed. Consumer culture comprises the forms in which things are acquired and used in terms of practical appropriation and symbolic communication. The mental relations that individuals form toward the objects and spaces surrounding them, and the changes these relations undergo in the biographical course of possession and use, are the starting point of this historical investigation.

Consumer culture in East Germany is indeed a wide and unexplored terrain. After the *Wende*, Western observers made their first attempts to tackle this problem. The documentary film *Flotter Osten* (Dashing East) was a compilation of advertising films, and the exhibit "SED – Schönes Einheits Design" (Socialist Unity Party – The Beauty of Design Unity) was organized. Not only do such compilations emphasize all the things about GDR society that strike West Germans as peculiar, they also reflect deeply rooted ideas about it as a "society of shortages." Experiences of scarcity are viewed as the basis for mental characteristics that were supposedly typical in East Germany, like greed, the thirst for pleasure, and a sense of entitlement. Such clichés became more firmly established during unification and symbolically converged in the banana.<sup>3</sup>

The term "scarcity" has been constructed from the perspective of a society shaped by consumerism and abundance. Full shop windows over here, long lines over there. But how does this shape the experiences of the residents on either side? What is perceived as a shortage and when, and what are the alternatives for action used to deal with shortages? In what kinds of daily routines and basic mental patterns is scarcity reflected? It is true that the GDR was not capable of adequately satisfying the needs of its citizens

3 In the opening scene of the television series "Trotzki," which was broadcast in 1993, a family in Leipzig sits watching TV. At first, father and son watch soccer, then, under general protest, the mother switches to a program on folk music. The daughter continues to change the channel and accidentally gets a news broadcast reporting on the Leipzig Monday rallies. The family's jaws drop. Cut. All four stuff bananas into their open mouths, so that symbolically their mouths are gagged.

in every case. It was not that certain things were too expensive, but that some were always in short supply or altogether absent — this had been a common experience since the 1960s. But it is incorrect to conclude that because of the limited range of consumer goods, life-styles and living conditions in East Germany were broadly undifferentiated, homogenized, or uniform. Compared with that of the Federal Republic, the apparent shabbiness, oneness, and cheapness of GDR consumer culture present enough material for such a theory, but this would only describe superficial phenomena. In dealing with scarcity, citizens of the GDR developed a wealth of inventions, the ability to improvise, mutually supportive behavior, patience, and frugality. One of the primary values of East German society (which is currently being nostalgically transfigured) was that basic needs should be subsidized, such as foodstuffs, housing, energy, and children's clothing.

These brief introductory remarks should indicate that the analysis of GDR consumer culture is a highly problematic and multifaceted field of inquiry that has hardly been investigated, except within the polarized framework previously mentioned. A comprehensive examination would have to involve sharpening the eye and directing attention to historical, social, and generation-specific differences within East Germans' living situations and life-styles.

First, such a study would involve the differentiation of an apparently homogeneous consumer culture. Life-styles reveal social differences in class, social standing, gender, and generation in all their cultural dimensions. Apart from the fact that in the GDR there were thoroughly class-specific social differences that are represented in different kinds of life-styles, it is also interesting to look at how cultural distinctions could have functioned in a supposedly classless and egalitarian society. Undoubtedly, differentiating characteristics such as gender and generation or city and state increase in their distinctive value, but that is also true of all modern industrial societies. We should also find a clear expression of political attitudes, social functions, and educational differences in the practices of consumption.

At this point, it is necessary to explain the importance that the Western world of consumer goods had for East Germany. Were the objects from the West simply put to use or were they deliberately used in such a way that, stripped of their original social context, they served totally different cultural functions? Under East German conditions, for example, West German hair shampoo, regardless of the brand, had such a distinctive value for certain people that empty shampoo bottles were lined up in the bathroom like

icons for guests to see. Highly fashionable clothing produced in the West was another example. Some readers may recall the huge quantity of Italian raincoats (the "NATO-skins") smuggled into the GDR in the early 1960s. Wearing such clothing was ideally suited for political provocation. In the 1970s teachers could still become irate over the wearing of blue jeans. The possession of Western goods set the owner apart and helped him or her stand out in the crowd. But the opposite was also possible; one could achieve the same effect by consciously and openly refusing to wear or own consumer goods from the West.

Second, an investigation into the cultural practices of acquiring, using, and consuming goods might provide us with information about the historical transformation of specific basic mental patterns and conditions. In this respect, we should avoid a consumer-positivist approach, and our questions should not be restricted to indicators of an improvement in living standards, or per capita consumption, or the degree to which consumers are supplied with the latest consumer goods. Instead, we should focus on changes in primary attitudes. With respect to the analysis of East German consumer culture, we must give special consideration to the specific admixture of existing mental traditions and new attitudes toward consuming. Such a consumer culture can only be reconstructed as a collage of elements with different historical origins, different concepts of aesthetic composition, and contradictory political programs to satisfy primary needs.

The two analytical directions previously sketched aim to reconstruct the social practice of consumption and therefore take place on the level of experience or everyday life. Before attempting to understand something about mental structures from an analysis of specific sources, I briefly outline the theoretical background of the political strategies and orientations that, ideologically mediated, were also contested in the field of consumer culture.

#### CONSUMER IDEALS IN THE ABSENCE OF CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS

The class enemy wants to do us harm by trying to direct the needs of the population toward the so-called American life-style. In reality, this American life-style is nothing but a life of luxury for the few, paid for by the majority, who squander the material values that working people have created.

We want all working people to live in prosperity, and working women especially to be liberated from time-consuming household work as much as possible. That is why we also advocate the opening of many more Laundromats.

Sometimes we also have to deal with customers who already want to live in a way that will only be possible once West German militarism has been subdued, once the seven-year plan has been fulfilled, and once socialism has been victorious.

To them, we say: If you want to buy more, you have to produce more. If you want quality goods, you will have to do quality work.<sup>4</sup>

This short text contains the most important elements of public negotiations over the population's needs: The ideal of a better society is constructed in terms of the comparison with Western consumer society, which has the distinct disadvantage of excluding certain social groups from consumerism. Concepts of equality that regard the distribution of socially produced wealth as being independent of class, social position, education, and achievement are also fundamental ideals of communism: "To each according to his needs." Under the conditions of classlessness, consumerism as symbolic capital would no longer make sense. Only those items that were really needed would be available for consumption. Things are reduced, even in their aesthetic form, to their use value. From this ideal perspective, luxury appears to be doubly negative. It excludes the working masses from enjoyment and creativity; labor and material are wasted in the production of such luxury goods.

Under postwar conditions, however, the communist ideal underwent some changes. As a goal of existence, communism receded into the distance, something Bertolt Brecht spoke of as the "troubles of the plains." A slogan from the 1950s, "[t]he way we work today is the way we will live tomorrow," required the working class to forgo consumerism for a relatively long period, and this while neighboring West Germany was enjoying an economic boom in clear view of all East Germans. A conflict of interests resulted that was so strong and pervasive that it not only endangered social peace but also forced the party leadership to revise constantly its plans for economic reform.<sup>5</sup> The economic reform of the early 1960s, the New Economic System (*Neues Ökonomisches System* or NÖS), failed not merely because of the economic and political demands of the Soviet Union but primarily because of working people's resistance, whereby they more or less successfully demanded higher salaries and more stable prices across the board.

The socialist utopia intended to create an alternative society in direct competition with the West: equality instead of social diversity, and commu-

4 Submitted to the East German politburo on Sept. 16, 1961; source: Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Berlin (hereafter SAPMO-BArch), DY 30/IV 2/610/14.

5 See André Steiner's chapter in this book.

nity or collectivity instead of privatism. It was based on the experiences of poverty among the working class and peasants during the economic depression of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s. But instead of increased poverty and visible exploitation, postwar development gave the capitalist countries enormous (and unexpected) prosperity, with a visible increase in affluence among the population. Yet the political elite in the East did not understand the change in capitalist societies and clung to old-fashioned ideals.

The building of a new society was difficult because industry in what had been the middle part of Germany had been largely destroyed or dismantled; reparations to the Soviets had to be paid, and, as a result of disproportional prewar development, the government was forced to focus on reestablishing mining and heavy industry. For many years, textiles and industries that made consumer goods were neglected. For decades, shortages of household goods – from washing machines to refrigerators to clothing – were in fact preprogrammed. An ambivalent, but for the most part restrictive, middle-class policy took care of the rest. In contrast, the Federal Republic was supported and financially subsidized by the United States. The result was the so-called economic miracle of the 1950s, when almost overnight empty shops were filled with an abundance of consumer goods. Yet workers in the West held political demonstrations as employment rates fluctuated. How one evaluated the situation depended on one's point of view: Either side could point to certain criteria and feel superior. The West pointed to consumer opportunities; the East, to high employment and social welfare programs.

Fixated on creating social security and aided by an ongoing rise in prosperity, party leaders in the GDR could be assured of popular support. Both the leadership and the people shared the same idea of what prosperity meant, for example, the increased consumption of butter and meat, and of what modernization meant, for example, an increase in the per capita number of refrigerators, televisions, and automobiles. Frugality, patience, and orderliness were all traditional virtues that were celebrated equally on all sides. This consensus was reached by a generation that, on the basis of shared experiences of need and scarcity, could agree on modest prosperity and social security despite differences in their postwar careers, that is, upward or downward social mobility. This generation agreed to postpone pleasure seeking and laissez-faire tendencies, and this agreement was often expressed in anti-American terms. Such an initial consensus was extremely stabilizing, even under difficult circumstances (e.g., ongoing supply crises) when the population threatened to strike or to refuse to vote.



Because consumer goods are conveyed to individuals through the market, the relation between public and private is also reflected in consumer culture. One of the distinguishing features of East German history is that supplying the population and satisfying basic requirements were both seen as top political priorities and constantly debated in public. The programs for Politburo meetings and party congress debates referred to the "constant improvement in the satisfaction of material, cultural, and intellectual needs." Catching up to Western societies and overtaking them in the competition to improve living standards would once and for all prove the superiority of socialist democracy and its planned economic order.

Competition between the two systems was directly addressed and visible to everyone in the marketplace. In this way, consumer culture takes on another symbolic dimension. It becomes an important means of rating the differences and cultural aspects of the two systems.

It is possible to distinguish discrete historical phases in the GDR's relationship to the West and in its relationship to the growing needs and sense of entitlement of its own citizens. The original ideal of providing for basic needs in a way that was not only adequate but more rational and progressive gradually gave way. When the first boutiques and specialty shops (*Exquisitläden*) opened, the event reflected a new attitude toward consumption.<sup>6</sup> When Honecker came to power, the *Intershops* were also opened to the general East German population, and new delicatessens (*Delikatläden*), selling Western chocolate for East German currency, were established.<sup>7</sup> These measures not only recognized growing popular discontent; they also meant that the government had abandoned its attempt to create an antimodern project.

Those who believed in communist ideals were not concerned with producing more and better refrigerators and televisions, even if these were precisely the criteria by which the people measured the success or failure of public policy; rather, they sought alternatives to limitless consumption, the throw-away society, and consumerism as compensation for boredom. Despite having contrasting or competing aesthetic ideas, the party leadership and the avant-garde intellectual elite shared the antimodern project as a common point of departure.<sup>8</sup> They each wanted what was "best for the

6 At first these shops sold only one-of-a-kind clothing from trade fairs. They later sold clothes made in Paris or London in limited numbers and for astronomical prices.

7 Intershops sold goods for foreign currency. Originally meant for travelers in transit and Western foreigners, these shops were opened to citizens of the GDR with Western currency after 1973. Western currencies eventually functioned as a second currency within East Germany.

8 Bauhaus competed with a minimalist petit bourgeois standard once the idea of bourgeois luxury for the worker had to be withdrawn for economic reasons.

worker." In the late 1950s, opening remarks by a ministry functionary at a conference on standardization, which would become a key concept of the 1960s reform efforts, characterized precisely contemporary discourse:

Colleague Beier: I have yet to find anyone upset about the fact that Volkswagen has a standardized format, although two-and-a-half million cars are on the road. Why not? Because it is a perfected product. I also do not believe that there is anyone here who would complain about a refrigerator that only came in one model, if it was cheap and good and served its purpose, or a vacuum cleaner or whatever. The important thing is that the product really is perfected and has the advantage of being cheap. Those people who want something special and can afford it, they are welcome to it, they should just have it made for them by a craft production cooperative. I do not think we have any fools here who are going to start offering all women standardized hats . . . [laughing agreement] . . . or making standardized neckties for the men or anything like that. Nobody is going to start getting ideas like that. . . . A lot of people want a Wartburg and do not have any problem with the fact that there are only two models in production. You can order the Wartburg in different colors, with chrome detailing or without. I have yet to meet anyone who is upset about the fact that we really only produce two kinds of cars. The only problem is producing a lot of them.<sup>9</sup>

In this short text, the main discursive element is addressed: standardization versus individuality. For different reasons, the party leadership and the intellectuals agreed that the needs of the people – and here the reference was always to the needs of others and never to their own – could be developed and steered in certain directions. What was best for the working people, however, were price and function. At this conference, most of the discussion concerned the range of goods. Instead of five different models for refrigerators, in the future only one model would be made by a single producer – although in different sizes. With standardization, the East German government justifiably hoped to make products more affordable by saving on development costs and materials. In a planned economy, these kinds of considerations made sense. But this argument also mentioned a possible reservation that future consumers might have: restriction of individual choice might prove too severe. The possible objection to an excessively uniform life-style was then ironically anticipated and trivialized. Hidden in the argument was an agenda for educating working people, which was pursued in different ways by intellectuals and party personnel.

The masses were expected to storm the gates of (bourgeois) high culture and to be systematically exposed to it, especially that of the eighteenth and

9 Pressekonferenz zur Tagung über Standardisierung am 11.2.1959, SAPMO-Barch, DY 30/IV 2/60/65.

nineteenth centuries. And they were also supposed to develop good taste, which was expressed as the rejection of petit bourgeois ostentation. Intellectuals and party functionaries shared aesthetic criteria: They rejected decoration and embraced simplicity and clarity of form, as well as functionality and durability. There was little agreement, however, on the consequences for design itself. As long as it remained a question of stripping the wood curlicues off the cabinets and banning plush and pomp from the apartments, throwing away the family crystal and taking that bellowing stag off the wall, both sides could fully agree. Together they fought against kitsch. But as soon as someone tried to realize modern, Bauhaus-oriented architecture and functionality on a practical level, the two groups ended up on opposite sides of the barricades. For example, the head architect Hermann Henselmann described how Ulbricht demanded overnight that he add a façade in Stalinist confectionery style to his modern glass and concrete design for the now legendary Stalinallee in East Berlin.

Party leaders were suspicious of objects designed in a consistently functional way. They looked ascetic, frugal, and cheap. They therefore failed to serve one of their most important functions: the suitable representation of prosperity in order to document socialism's superiority. The attempt to create an aesthetic alternative eventually failed in the clash between the desire to help the people accumulate things quickly (with inexpensive apartments and affordable furniture, with modern household technology and a small car for everyone) and the fear that these things, and the architecture especially, looked cheaply made. After Honecker attained power in the early 1970s, this was openly admitted and the socialist state visibly began to advocate Western bourgeois aesthetic standards. Ultimately, it even seemed as though the antibourgeois GDR had preserved traditional bourgeois values better than its neighbor.

#### THE RELATION OF INDIVIDUALS TO THE OBJECTS OF CONSUMPTION

In this section I discuss the sources and methods that could be used to ground historically concrete definitions of East German consumer culture. Fortunately, a great deal of source material is available for an experiential-historical approach to everyday life in the GDR. In addition to conducting oral history interviews,<sup>10</sup> which is now becoming an accepted

10 Gert Selle proposes to take a complete inventory of houses and to ask owners about their relationships to this world of objects; Andreas Ludwig takes another approach when he asks contributors to tell the history of their material objects. See Gert Selle, "Produktkultur als Aneignungsereignis zwischen industrieller Matrix, sozialen Normen und individuellem Gebrauch: Überlegungen eines kul-

method in Germany, the petitions and citizens' letters to state and communal institutions provide a less well known, yet authentic and extremely valuable resource. A third group of sources includes feature films, documentaries, and literary works – all of which provide rich descriptions of everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

On December 29, 1981, Franz S. from Frankfurt an der Oder wrote to East German television:

Dear Comrades!

While Christmas shopping at an HO<sup>12</sup> shop for leisure and sports equipment in Frankfurt/Oder, I experienced an incident that had an entirely negative effect on the shopping atmosphere. It is not my intention only to criticize. Perhaps when you are making programs, my shopping experience can be treated satirically.

With socialist greetings,

Franz S.

*Report on an incident experienced personally while buying snowshoes on 12/21/81 at HO-Freizeit in Frankfurt/Oder:*

With this incident I would like to show how consciousness is negatively influenced by lack of interest in commercial activity.

To be specific:

For the last fourteen days, shop employees at HO-Freizeit have been letting citizens know that on 12/21/81 snowshoes could be purchased. At 2 p.m. on 12/21, 100–120 citizens stood waiting for the store to open. (My comment on this: is it necessary to organize such a concentrated sale for this kind of item, price: DM 12.50?)

After the store opened, citizens stormed inside. Seventy citizens went to the back and formed a dense crowd.

After a long wait, a box was pushed out, onto which the 70 citizens threw themselves. There were screams, pushing, and a good deal of rummaging around, since snowshoes come in different sizes.

The saleswoman's reaction: make room here – do not block the door – each person can only buy one pair. It would have been better if the salesclerks had undertaken to presort the shoes, instead of expressing their unqualified and impolite views to the citizens. The store organization here was an organized chaos! Another incident: There were wooden sleds on sale. Citizens asked if there were any fiberglass sleds and if some could be brought out from the back? The saleswoman's answer: Yes we have some, but the wooden sleds have to be sold first and then we'll bring the others out.

turarchäologischen Amateurs," in Wolfgang Ruppert, ed., *Chiffren des Alltags: Erkundungen zur Geschichte der industriellen Massenkultur* (Marburg, 1993), 23–47, and Andreas Ludwig, "Sensibilität für die Alltagskultur," in Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, ed., *Alltagskultur der DDR: Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung "Tempolinsen und P2"* (Berlin, 1996).

11 Regarding feature films as source material, see Ina Merkel, "Die Nackten und die Roten: Zum Verhältnis von Nacktheit und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR," *Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung* 18 (1995): 36.

12 Retail outlets were organized as "trade organizations" (*Handelsorganisation* or HO) for specific types of goods.

The final blow! At the exit there was a roll of wrapping paper and every citizen was supposed to tear off a piece for himself. On the paper it said: "Merry Christmas and happy shopping."<sup>13</sup>

In this report, which I take to be an ethnographic description in the best sense of the term, different basic patterns of typical East German forms for acquiring goods are illustrated. They include waiting and hunting and, I would add, gathering – three topoi that imply a deferment of needs satisfaction.

In this text, three kinds of waiting are practiced. First, one waits for the delivery of the snowshoes; second, one waits for the store to open after the lunch break; and third, one waits for the wooden sleds to be sold out so that the fiberglass sleds can be purchased. Waiting for the delivery refers to production capacities that were unsatisfactory in terms of quantity, a fact that GDR citizens had to face when shopping for all kinds of consumer goods. Beginning with a new automobile (which had an average waiting period of eight to fifteen years), the list is endless: refrigerators, washing machines, mopeds, oranges, telephones, and so forth. Added to this were the strategies for distribution, which differed with each consumer item, but basically followed the pattern of first come, first served. The list of orders and the lines that formed were prototypical cultural–historical forms. Both had egalitarian consequences for the consumer: You were served when it was your turn, regardless of your gender, income, or social function. As this basic democratic principle was violated ever more openly over the course of East German history, the socially explosive charge inherent in waiting was exposed. An important part of the cultural–historical figure of waiting were personal relationships to the distributors, which could be established through relatives, acquaintances, corruption, or direct petition. The usual metaphors for that were terms like *Bückware* (*bücken* is the German word for "to bow down") or *Vitamin B* (as in *Beziehung* or connections).

This indicates a dynamic that was even stronger in the other two examples of waiting: namely, the power relations that are often established between the salesclerks and the shoppers resulting from the shortage of goods. Historically, this was not unique to East Germany and is often witnessed in times of war and natural disaster. In this case, however, there was a certain gratification in the power of control. The sales personnel made the

13 Regarding letters from TV viewers as a historical source, see Ina Merkel, "In Hoyerswerda leben jedenfalls keine so kleinen viereckigen Menschen': Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR," paper presented at the conference "What is the Text of the Text? Reading the Files of East German Bureaucracies" at the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., Oct. 1994. Revised versions of these papers will be published in Peter Becker and Alf Lüdtke, eds., *Akten, Eingaben, Schaufenster: Die DDR und ihre Texte: Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag* (Berlin, 1997).

customers wait as long as they pleased. Countless jokes about unfriendly and slow customer service in the GDR demonstrated that the snowshoes were not a unique or even extreme case.

For the other topoi, hunting and gathering, I have also chosen consciously archaic-sounding terms to emphasize the anachronistic aspects of these consumer practices. In this case, the consumer tracks down an object in the truest sense of the word. It was spotted somewhere, this or that friend has already tracked it down, and now the hunter has been lurking around a specific place for weeks, waiting for the moment to ambush. Together with other hunters, he or she finally pounces on the object, grabs it, and holds tightly onto it. Often objects were hunted even though one could not make immediate use of them. Gathering and hoarding for later use, or for trading, were also part of the game. I know someone who stored three complete Trabant exhaust systems in his cellar. Experience had made him wise after he had been forced to wait weeks to have his car repaired. For this reason, GDR citizens always had a shopping bag with them – you just never knew what you might encounter in the course of any given day. You would first get in line and only then ask what was being sold.

The chain of associations for hunting and gathering can be played out even further. The most closely related figure was that of trade. The widely celebrated social networks were often not much more than private markets for trading in kind; anyone could take part if he or she had something to exchange or was prepared to pay a higher price for something that someone else had tracked down or gathered. Cars were traded for land, a vacation spot on the Baltic Sea was traded for work laying tiles, West German currency was traded at the rate of 1:5, and so forth.

It was then only a small step from exchanging services to the small-scale production of goods. East Germans had always taken care of themselves, especially when it came to fashion and dress. When you bought an article of clothing at the local HO, you altered it that very same evening. A pleat was sewn into pant legs or diapers were dyed, and you made your own pottery in an alcove in your apartment.

To make the opposite point, however, I would like to return to the story of the wooden sleds. I have already reported that all of them had to be sold before the fiberglass sleds would be offered. In other words, there was something in the store for which you did not have to stand in line. I can say with reasonable certainty, based on experience, that the store was full of items. They might have had jump ropes and gymnastic batons, clamp-on ice skates and roller skates, canvas sport shoes and two-piece gymnastics outfits, and all might have been available in huge quantities. Only the snowshoes and fiberglass sleds were in short supply. Perhaps there were also no downhill

skis or bindings. But the typical visit to an East German store ended with a successful purchase, an experience so normal that it is missing from government files. Everyday routines were not the subject of consumer complaints. The shortage of some goods was counterbalanced by the abundance of others. They comprised the standardized range of goods or remained on the shelves unnoticed. Dead stock was not necessarily ugly or unusable. Intellectuals bought slow-selling items, such as bowls made of unpainted and unpolished glass or plain white dishes, at rural outlets by the truckload and took them to Berlin. And villagers hauled unwanted goods languishing in urban stores back to the countryside.

Although it happened later than in West Germany, by the end of the 1950s stores in the GDR were fully stocked with goods for sale. State television broadcast advertisements each evening, shopping bags were filled, people were well dressed, apartments were comfortably decorated, and the dining tables groaned under the weight of plentiful abundance during family celebrations. East Germans, however, remained unsatisfied and continued to search longingly for that extra special something. GDR consumers were not characterized by proverbial modesty or patience but by dissatisfaction loudly expressed. "Grumbling," which became habitual, illustrated an important mental characteristic. One grumbled at someone or grumbled with someone about something. At the dinner table, family celebrations, collective events, the alliances that formed spontaneously while waiting in line – everywhere you went there was something to grumble about. Grumbling illustrates one form of psychic compensation that relieved some of the pressure of everyday hassles and helped people overcome a difficult daily life. At the same time, it showed a certain sense of community, since what was articulated in the family or on the street were often interests that transcended the individual. Grumbling constituted the GDR citizens' internal consensus that in being annoyed they were one. It was a form of collective refusal to agree with the party and government, or just an objection to new slogans and extra demands of the local authorities or the boss at work. You grumbled about those above you but also about those below you. Related to the habit of grumbling was a specific form of humor that revealed an ability to laugh at one's self, one's situation, and the shortcomings of GDR daily life.

Inherent in this grumbling were elements that served to stabilize the system, since it often included suggestions for improvement, which indicated that people were still willing to put up with the system and believe in its possible reformation. It was only when criticism turned to anger, resignation, or desperation that the system was really endangered. Grumbling in

the GDR and generally certainly has many more cultural meanings – now constructive, now subversive. East German society developed and became colorful precisely by the very fact of grumbling.

Was East Germany really a country of stymied hunters and gatherers; of traders, craftspeople, and tailors; of snappish salespeople and sloppy waiters; of pontificators, grumblers, and naggers? There is a danger that the practices and strategies described here will be interpreted as personality characteristics, as fixed mental traits. Have they all disappeared with the society that gave rise to them? Or have they proved to be just as useful in the new society? Are Westerners not also always on the prowl? What is the difference between today's bargain and yesterday's convenient opportunity? If you looked for a printed T-shirt then, now you look in vain for a plain one. The monotony of the GDR consumer world has just been replaced with a new monotony of Western consumerism. As a result, to locate the peculiarities of consumer culture in East Germany, we are forced to use a different approach.

The activities that have been heretofore discussed (waiting, hunting, gathering, trading, and subsistence production) not only focus on shortages but also highlight specific kinds of social groups that determined the cultural value of certain goods, that is, which goods were luxury or specialty items and were therefore suitable for distinguishing oneself. To get at the root of the particularities of GDR consumer culture, we must not rely solely on scarcity as a blanket explanation. We should also ask what social, cultural, and generational differences were expressed in the specific forms of the acquisition of consumer goods and what were the consequences for their function as a means of distinction in social discourse.

When they started to produce the Schwalbe, I was seven; by the age of fourteen I had one of my own. I used it to go to school, to the outdoor swimming pool, or to my vacation job. Later it brought me punctually to work in all kinds of weather, even in snow and ice. Almost always anyway. When it failed to start, I tried to push start it; if that did not work, I went at it with screwdrivers and a wrench. In no time the most important parts were taken apart and usually repaired as well. . . . However there were times when I hated the little bike. Schwalbe riders know the feeling. Burned into my memory are the moments when the ignition failed in the pouring rain and I had to work on it while freezing on the side of the road.

I loved my Schwalbe passionately when I raced through the countryside in high summer with my shirt open – my hair, which was long then, flying in the wind. A bit of "Easy Rider," Made in the GDR.<sup>14</sup>

14 Jörg Engelhardt, *Schwalbe, Duo, Kultmobil: Vom Acker auf den Boulevard* (Berlin, 1995), 7ff.

The object described here so emotionally was quite ordinary – a 1960s mass production moped that underwent few changes and is still in use. There were times when one had to wait to buy one, but almost everyone in the village got around on it. Originally conceived as a vehicle for older people with knee problems, it had footrests and side fenders. Yet this owner describes a deeply felt relationship that he had as a young person with this object, a sort of love–hate relationship. It was only after the *Wende*, when it was no longer produced, that the Schwalbe became a cult object and achieved a symbolic meaning far beyond its use and exchange value (and it was from this perspective that the author describes it). Much like the Trabant, the Schwalbe has come to represent the everyday life of a lost world. It has this specific value primarily for young people and for Westerners – in other words, for those who did not have to ride one around in the former GDR. Today, they are letting their Schwalbes slowly rot in their sheds. Aside from the act of cultural revaluation, what is left of the personal relationship between the Schwalbe rider and his or her vehicle?

Remarkably, the highly personal relationship to this commodity remains intact. It is based on long-term use. Individual biography and object biography are welded to one another and help take each other's measure. The object has memory value for that period in life that is the most intensely remembered, namely, youth. In addition, through these specific memories, which are bound up with the strengths and weaknesses of the object, the individual finds himself among an illustrious and extensive society of Schwalbe riders. Because the designs remained unchanged over long periods, East German consumer goods possessed the capacity to create communities of consumers around loyalty to well-known brands.

You can, for example, distinguish associations of kitchen appliance owners by generation. The first generation of couples, married in the 1950s, owned the same refrigerator, the Kristall 1401; used a belt-driven washing machine from Schwarzza (the WM 66) into the 1980s; and called the Multimax drill their own. The next cohort formed fifteen years later around the same products, with somewhat newer designs and manufactured by the same companies. Eastern Germans still bond over certain standardized and mass-produced commodities. Catchwords are enough for mutual recognition. "Remember the Multimax?" is enough to start a lively conversation. At a time when GDR-specific experiences are being disqualified and are proving to be dysfunctional in relation to Western consumer society – the private hoarding of commodities makes no sense in a capitalist economy – the discourse about specific brands is enough to reestablish an East German identity. Advertisers have tried repeatedly to exploit the recogni-

tion value of these products. Only a few have managed, however, not to miss completely the feeling of life in the GDR.

With extraordinary rapidity, an entire world of objects has disappeared from our material world. The few remaining commodities will likely attract increased attention. Even the old "shelf warmers" – unpopular products – have assumed a kind of cult value. It would be interesting to discover which objects produced in the GDR still exist in eastern German households, are needed and used there, and which objects have found a place as representative pieces in western German cupboards. (Western Germans are especially fond of relics from the former political culture, such as pins and flags.) The results of such an inquiry could tell us a great deal about the symbols and signs being used in the discourse between East and West – and their respective meanings.

#### ON CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CONSUMER MENTALITIES

The history of users of kitchen appliances shows a profound continuity in the East German world of objects. It is inevitable that mental traditions will be imputed to East German consumers. The cultural–historical figures of waiting, hunting, gathering, and trading that have been described are also relevant for the entire history of the former GDR, although we should not lose sight of their historically specific forms. For this reason, I would like to examine the historical transformation of the primary attitudes toward consumerism in yet another way. Continuity and change in consumer culture can be studied in terms of the introduction of new consumer goods and new sales practices, such as self-service. I would like to suggest an approach to periodization that is based on generational change. The different, almost antagonistic, relations that successive generations assume toward consumption essentially depend on consumer experiences each generation had when it was young. For the changes that took place during the period analyzed here, several themes regarding the generationally specific transformation of basic mental attitudes emerge. They are based on observations made within the framework of a life–history research project with a different topic and would therefore have to be further analyzed and worked out separately.

First, we can observe one transformation in the shift from durable consumer goods to those based on fashion trends and fads. Whereas it was common for the prewar generation to spend its whole life with one set of furniture (which it usually acquired when a young couple started a family), the postwar generation can already talk about two or three complete changes

of furniture and interior decoration. Whether this is because the objects themselves are no longer designed and produced for long-term use or whether it has to do with increased mobility in terms of space and relationships remains unclear. It is true, however, that these generations differ profoundly in their mental relations to objects. The new generation no longer maintains, repairs, or protects them for long-term use. Generation-specific differences in maintenance and care can be observed even with those objects for which one had to wait for years in the former GDR, such as automobiles, and which therefore required care and maintenance.

The result is an inability to throw something away and, inherent in this attitude, an enduring defense against renewing household technology. Objects that had become obsolete or no longer worked properly were kept in storage for years. The renunciation of such attitudes does not take place within one generation; rather, it is inevitably relinquished piecemeal over the course of generations.

Second, we can also observe a mental shift from long-term planning, long-term deferment, and saving of money for a purchase, to spontaneous purchases that sometimes require credit or loans. This not only implies the cultural devaluation of individual debt to the status of a peccadillo. It also means that one goes into debt for things not necessary for daily living but required for cultural distinction: a high-end amplifier, a new automobile, and so forth. Values of frugality and modesty have been abandoned for a sense of entitlement that represents their exact opposite.

Third, stocking up practices that were customary twenty years ago have disappeared almost entirely: Potatoes are no longer stored in cellars, fruit and vegetables are not conserved, even coal for the winter is bought weekly as needed. The disappearance of storage habits has a lot to do with the industrialization of foodstuffs, but it also implies an increased feeling of security in terms of one's immediate, short-term survival and the easy availability of consumer goods.

This feeling of security has been confirmed and strengthened by a new form of selling, namely, self-service, that was introduced in Germany in the 1940s. The depersonalization of sales transactions has been perceived as a democratization of access to goods, even if that is not actually always the case. Self-service suggests that one can take what one needs and make independent decisions about products.

To understand better the historical transformation in dominant mental attitudes toward consumption (which have only been thematically explored here), it is necessary to analyze historical source material more closely to

determine the extent to which the change is generational and class-specific. This is also true of any attempt to say which salient features of East German consumer culture will remain and what this will mean for the collision of the everyday worlds of eastern and western Germans.

Buying and selling are public acts, yet consumption takes place in private. Within consumer culture, the relations between public and private, between individual and society, are reflected in a special way. The discourse about consumerism as outlined in this chapter must be analyzed in terms of its general societal meanings. What changes in consumer mentalities portend for a society's cultural values, and what the consequences will be, continue to be the decisive questions.