The Lives of Others (and Ourselves)

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Andreas Glaeser's *Political Epistemics* is an account of the rise and fall of the East German Socialism as a field of consciousness. Relying on extensive archival research and interviews (Stasi officers, secret informants & political dissidents), Glaeser offers a "theory of understandings" to provide a new angle on the question of how worldviews become institutionalized.

"In the first instance," says Martin Voigt, "I am a communist and only in the second instance am I human" (p. 255). Voigt, a former member of the Stasi, the secret police of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), is not exaggerating. A coworker, Peter Wagner, said to his wife when they married: "my work [for the Stasi] would always come first and second too and then there would be a big gap and only then came everything else" (p. 296). But Wagner got lucky; he could marry. Having to face the incompatible choices of a Stasi career or marrying a loved partner, people like Jürgen Buchholz chose the Stasi. In the GDR love for something beyond socialism could be understood as a bourgeois infatuation; a behavior unsuitable to the socialist self. Forty years later, Buchholz is not sure whether he made the right choice. These and other stories about the lives of others (especially political dissidents) and ourselves (Stasi officers) are at the center of Glaeser's imposing *Political Epistemics*. However readers should not expect a comprehensive history of the Stasi or a detailed account of opposition movements to the GDR. Glaeser's goal is to explain how individuals like Voigt or Wagner could produce such kind of understandings about their lives and how their understandings were validated by socialist institutions.

The book's guiding question is how individuals' understandings of their everyday life are conditioned by—but also shape—the institutions that surround them. Applied to the case of East German socialism, the question is: why did people support GDR institutions for decades? Central to Glaeser's analysis are the concepts of understanding and validation. People produce understandings about the world that need to be validated in order to become institutionalized. From this perspective, the GDR lasted as far as the Socialist Unity Party (SED) was able to produce understandings that were validated by socialist institutions and the population. Accordingly, the fall of the GDR was due to a major change in the validation of social life. With this interpreta-

tion, Glaeser challenges customary explanations of the fall of the GDR due to its inability to produce a liberal democracy and a market economy. The answer, for him, lies in processes of changing understandings.

Political Epistemics belongs to the rare class of books that transcends the boundaries of the case study and provides key insights into major problems across the social sciences. In response to ongoing interest in the *mechanisms* of social life, Glaeser offers a sophisticated framework that brings *processes* back in. For him, research based on processes can better capture the flow-like, ever-changing nature of social life, as opposed to scholarship that freezes, cuts, and formats social life in discrete mechanisms. Methodologically, he seeks to redefine the boundaries of the *historical ethnography* genre. And, to contribute to cultural- and postcultural-turn research, he proposes a *theory of understandings* that provides a new angle on the problem of how worldviews become institutionalized.

A Sociology of Understanding

In dialogue with the tradition of hermeneutic social thought, Glaeser defines understanding as "a process of orientation" (p. 10), which produces worldviews that become dominant but only temporarily. Since the world is constantly in the making, our understandings about it are repeatedly put at risk. Institutions bring regularity to social life. They embody a temporal, collective agreement in our understandings of the world and how it works. The GDR attained such kind of institutional stability for almost four decades. To obtain it, the Stasi played a key role in the GDR's "political epistemology."

Political Epistemology. The term refers to the ways a political institution (e.g., the SED) produces and certifies knowledge about itself. This knowledge has to be understood and validated by other institutions and the population. Validation, namely, the certification of an understanding, is critical to ensure the continuation of a political institution. In every life, validation adopts three forms: recognition, corroboration, and resonance. Recognition takes place in interactions with people deemed authorities. Corroboration occurs when we act in order to test our understandings. And resonance is the validation of an already existing understanding.

The repeated validation of a given understanding (what Glaeser calls iteration) contributes to the regularization or stabilization of the worldview behind that understanding, e.g., the supremacy of the GDR socialist imaginary as opposed to the capitalist imaginary. Consequently, regularized understandings become actual institutions. Hence, when institutionalized understandings change (as it occurred in the GDR throughout the 1980s), they bring about the disintegration of the institutions they embody.

The Paradox of Real Socialism

In chapter 1 Glaeser analyzes the growing importance of ideology among Eastern European socialisms. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, real socialism emerged and developed only due to evident, objective material causes. Paradoxically, to fulfill the objective laws of socialism, socialist countries in Eastern Europe relied more and more on ideology, rather than on self-evident material changes. In the GDR, the Socialist Unity Party undertook a process of "consciousness-driven social transformation" that had no connection with the theory and practice

of Marxism-Leninism. Not innocently, the Stasi was born a year after the creation of the GDR with the mission of policing the process of consciousness-construction.

Constructing an East German socialist consciousness required a "monolithic intentionality" (chapter 2), that is, a dominant and validated understanding of the reality of the GDR that was collectively internalized by the party and the entire population. The achievement of such a socialist *pensée unique* relied on two main organizational principles (democratic centralism and central planning of production and consumption of goods), pervasive propaganda, and the Stasi.

The Stasi. Full-time Stasi employees were recruited at an early age. The twenty-five officers interviewed by Glaeser joined the force when they were 18-19 years old. Potential candidates, with the required working-class background, were selected and could hardly refuse the great honor of serving the party. After accepting, they attended the Stasi school, where over time training increased from a few weeks to several years, and where students internalized the socialist consciousness. A point not quite emphasized by Glaeser is that at school students were the victims of the kind of secrecy, distrust, and denunciation they will have to enact after graduation. Stasi students were watched by fellow Stasi students and anonymously denounced (and thus punished) for acts of excessive individualism and bourgeois behavior (e.g., to dress with clothes that were too fashionable). Later, their job as full-time Stasi officers would be a reenactment of school policing practices: "those higher up did not trust those further down," says Georg Assmann, "that's why they wanted to know everything, down to the last little detail" (p. 328).

Guardians of the Party State

The Stasi took orders not from the parliament but from the party, which was beyond the reach of any Stasi investigation. So, when the party died, the Stasi died. Before its dissolution in 1989 (not probably when its numbers peaked), the Stasi had 91,000 full-time officers and about twice the amount of helpers (including secret informants). Currently, it is believed that between three and five percent of the adult population collaborated with the Stasi at one point in their life.

Over the years the Stasi evolved into something more than a secret police. It became a culture (chapter 6). Stasi officers created their own socio-professional networks (e.g., going on vacation to similar destinations or marrying Stasi partners—perhaps the best way to reconcile love with a Stasi career). So by 1980s, its members belonged to a cast. Therefore, the working-class background of potential Stasi students was progressively set aside, to the extent that more than ninety percent of new recruits entering the Stasi university (no longer a school) came from Stasi families.

Enemies of the Party State

Divided into two chapters, part IV of the book (arguably the best) studies the individual life stories of political dissidents. Chapter 7 presents their biographical background and the following chapter details the dynamics of dissident group formation. Social origin poorly predicts how someone became a dissident. For instance, children of Stasi officers embraced activism against the GDR, while children of protestant ministers (the church being one of the key scenarios of political opposition) were Stasi officers or worked actively as secret informants. Glaeser thus seeks to elucidate how different understandings of the same reality emerged among individuals with overlapping biographical backgrounds.

Against the liberal interpretation of opposition movements, Glaeser offers an approach that highlights individuals' embeddedness in a place. The opening of chapter 7 is a first-rate account of how the neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin turned into the center of political activism, inhabited by individuals disenchanted with the hypocrisy of the system.[1] Systemic hypocrisy started already at school, where teachers scolded students for watching the same Western TV programs that teachers themselves secretly watched, as their children confessed to schoolmates. So at school Ulrike Poppe, like future dissidents, found herself living in a dual world, forced to learn how to be in and out of the socialist consciousness.

From individual stories, Glaeser moves into accounts of how the validation of dissidents' understandings paved the way for civil rights movements. Groups, such as Women for Peace (which Poppe joined), started to provide alternative and institutionalized understandings to the GDR. The result was that by the mid-1980s a small public sphere had emerged in the country. The church (especially its public spaces) was critical in enabling the socialization practices that led to the formation of dissident groups. Although not acknowledged by Glaeser, church spaces were no less central for the making of opposition movements in countries with conservative dictatorships: Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal. Not to mention the Solidarity movement in communist Poland.[2]

Guardians No Longer Catch Enemies

How did the Stasi endeavor to control dissidents? Exempting readers from gruesome stories, Glaeser details three major control strategies: preventing group formation, decomposition, and secret informants. Decomposition is probably the most sinister and German-socialist strategy. This "form of terror" (p. 494) consisted in the destruction of the self. At school, Stasi students were trained in psychology to understand "agency" and learn how to undermine it. Later, as Stasi officers, they would erase the subject's individual self using all available means. For example, rumors were spread, career paths were brought to strange halts, workloads suddenly multiplied to keep the subject busy, frequent breaks into the subject's home would annihilate her self-confidence… More extreme measures (e.g., planned accidents, physical punishment) were not backed by superiors, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, because they could entail an international public relations problem for the GDR.

As for the third strategy (secret informants), the Stasi depended on 180,000 of them. Usually between two and three informants would serve a single officer. Nonetheless, Glaeser's Stasi interviewees admitted that over time recruiting adequate informants not only became harder but also officers themselves had to disguise the information. A remarkable finding is that not only informants but also Stasi officers progressively moved into a comfort zone. For instance, in the 1980s some secret informants repeatedly left dissident meetings before key decisions were made, so that they could not report sensible information to the Stasi. And, likewise, the interviewed Stasi officers acknowledged to have grown more porous to listen to criticism of the GDR from their informants.

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[1] Abandoned by the GDR for its bourgeois past, Prenzlauer Berg became a space where dissidents could safely transform the neighborhood's big private apartments into public spaces of political contestation.

[2] A European-wide study would explain how, despite operating in regimes on opposite sides of the political spectrum, religious institutions in catholic and protestant countries became a vehicle for democratization.

The Fall of a Field of Consciousness and Beyond

According to Glaeser, no discrete mechanisms can be isolated to account for the fall of East German Socialism. It was rather an active process, in which socialist institutions failed to produce understandings about themselves that could be validated by the population via recognition, corroboration, or resonance. When the 1989 events unfolded, the party could no longer react because it did not understand what was happening. Even Stasi reports were of little help.[3] As those familiar with the history of the French and Russian Revolutions would acknowledge, the inability of dominant political institutions to stay in touch with reality is a well-known interpretation of major historical transformations. *Political Epistemics* is a meaningful addition to this interpretative tradition.

Yet, Glaeser's book does not fully clarify whether the development of novel understandings beyond the socialist field of consciousness necessitated the emergence of a new language. This was the case in France in 1789. In being informed about the fall of the Bastille, Louis XVI apparently asked: "So, is it a riot?" To which the Duke of Liancourt replied: "No, sir. It is a revolution." This exchange reveals how much Louis XVI's understanding of the event was shaped by Old Regime language. To use Glaeser's terminology, the word "revolution" would belong to a new language that did not resonate among Old Regime institutions (especially, the monarchy) and yet its validity was corroborated by the action of revolutionaries at Bastille. Hence, deeply transformative understandings of social life seem to be cast in a new, emerging language.

In the case of the GDR in 1989 Glaeser provides compelling evidence to argue that the party's inability to understand what was happening might be linked to its inability to catch up with a new language, even within socialism itself.[4] Glaeser's evidence suggests that novel understandings about unfolding events in the GDR throughout the 1980s were built upon a new language, one in which words like "civil society" moved to the center and socialist language moved progressively to the periphery.

Readers would notice that the publication of *Political Epistemics* coincides with a fascination for socialist life among some Eastern European countries. Setting aside the ongoing and contested rehabilitation of Stalin in Russia, two of Germany's most recent international blockbuster movies, *Good Bye Lenin* (2003) and *The Lives of Others* (2006), vividly recreate everyday life shortly before the fall of the GDR. And now and until the end of 2013, Berliners and visitors can admire "The Wall," a gigantic multimedia recreation of an ordinary November day in Berlin in the 1980s.

Andreas Glaeser's theoretically sophisticated and empirically elegant account of the rise, development, and fall of the GDR as a field of consciousness greatly improves our *understanding* of the understandings that governed that country over four decades. And in so doing, it could

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[3] Afraid of being scolded by their superiors, Stasi officers wrote their reports using a language that became more and more standardized and detached from real events.

[4] Whereas in the Soviet Union the words "Glasnost" and "Perestroika" channeled reform efforts, in the GDR such words were censored, to the point that even Soviet publications stopped being officially distributed by the party among its members.

not only help us to make better sense of the lives of others there but also of ourselves, submerged in the current validation crisis of neoliberal institutions.

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