

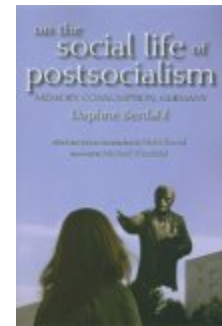


Daphne Berdahl. *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Edited by Matti Bunzl. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xx + 166 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35434-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22170-4.

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## Remembering and Representing: Vietnam, East Germany, and Daphne Berdahl

*On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* is a posthumous collection of Daphne Berdahl's essays, written over the course of her regrettably short career. Editor Matti Bunzl has gathered seven short essays, one previously unpublished, from Berdahl's fieldwork in the former East Germany, and one from her research on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, DC, based on her master's thesis. With a foreword by Michael Herzfeld and introduction by Bunzl, both of whom have collaborated with Berdahl as editors of other volumes, this is a lovingly made tribute to their departed friend and colleague, and clearly a valuable collection of her lesser-known works. The resulting volume is not without its flaws, but it is an excellent example of Berdahl's major contributions to anthropologies of memory and consumption, and to European ethnography, all presented in her charmingly intimate and perceptive style. Ultimately what this collection achieves is proof of what a great loss to anthropology Berdahl's death really was. The questions left unanswered and incomplete serve only to tease us with ideas Berdahl had intended to develop in her two works-in-progress. Her legacy is one of profoundly humanizing ethnography, perceptive insights into the experience of postsocialism, and a wealth of tantalizingly unfinished ideas for her future readers to explore.

Given that this is an edited collection, the question that presents itself to the reviewer is to identify the clear choices that were made in compiling and arranging

Berdahl's work after her death. In this case, editor Matti Bunzl has constructed a volume out of existing publications, adding only one unpublished essay, to the seven discrete pieces that have been printed elsewhere. These were never meant to be presented together, and, though they are closely related, they do not build on each other or contribute to a wider narrative in any substantial way. I would love to have seen an analytical retrospective from the two additional contributors, but Herzfeld's foreword and Bunzl's introduction have provided us rather with appreciative praise and a flattering biography but little critical assessment of the work that follows. Usefully, the introduction provides the reader with context in the form of a chronology of Berdahl's trips to the field, showing how her theories of "*ostalgie*," consumption, and memory shifted over time, as did her orientation toward East and West, present and past. Still, it is clear to the reader that the aim of this piece was not to evaluate Berdahl, but to honor her memory and articulate, through praise of her work, her teaching, and her friendship, how profoundly her loss is felt.

The chapters are arranged in three consecutive parts, reflecting the trajectory of her field sites: the memorial mall in Washington, DC; the village of Kella, on the East German border; and the East German city of Leipzig. This arrangement conveys a sense of familiarity with each field site, highlights the social and methodological differences between village and city, and enables readers to settle in among the deeply human characters that inhabit

both places. “This organizational principle,” writes Bunzl, “is also meant to underline Daphne’s unwavering commitment to ethnography” (p. xv). A more irritating aspect of this arrangement is that anecdotes from the field are repeated almost verbatim in several chapters. This is not uncommon in academic writing, though obvious redundancies are usually removed if similar pieces are to be published together. Bunzl writes, “The encounter of such redundancies seems a minor price to pay for the reward of reading Daphne’s beautifully crafted essays and the ability to appreciate them in the context of her scholarship at large” (p. xx), but the effect of their constant iteration is to obliterate any overarching thematic narrative, and to make it difficult to read the book from cover to cover. Even though Berdahl addresses different themes, after reading the section on Kella, I felt as if I had read the same (excellent) essay four times. Consequently, this book does not work as a single, unified text that is developed throughout; it does not fully showcase the evolution of Berdahl’s ideas over time, as the introduction suggests. Rather it is an assemblage of distinct but related articles, all in the same state of completion.

My disappointment with this collection is all the greater because these short ethnographies are such gifts. They are engaging, insightful, and teachable. Both Berdahl and her informants come across as relatable and sympathetic characters, and a reading of any one of these essays will facilitate a deeper understanding of memory, consumption, and postsocialist Germany.

Having lived in Dresden, another East German city, for about two years in the early 2000s, I recognize the experiences of my friends, colleagues, and teachers in Berdahl’s generous and expertly crafted representations of the *Wende*, (meaning “the turn,” the German name for the period of transition to capitalism and reunification, p. 35). The postsocialist experience in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), was characterized by a sudden and extreme loss of security and confidence in one’s national ideology, in “German” citizenship and East-West co-evalness, and even in that bedrock of communist identity, one’s labor. As discussed in “The Spirit of Capitalism and the Boundaries of Citizenship,” and “Consumer Rites,” the *Wende* paradoxically paired the influx of West German goods and rush to capitalize on newly opened markets in the East, with the sudden collapse of East-German business and industry, and the lack of East German consumer power. A marked inequality emerged between West and East German citizens in terms of their buying power, their cultural competence as consumers (p. 34), and as “winners” and “losers” of the *Wende* (p.

94). One of Berdahl’s informants perfectly captures an attitude that I heard often while living in Dresden: “Unemployment is for our understanding the worst thing there is. We were all raised to be socialists, and we were taught that work is what separates humans from animals. That is what we learned. Suddenly to be without work is unthinkable for us” (p. 53, also p. 95). While the history books teach us that the economic collapse of the East German state led to the reunification of Germany and the “triumph of capitalism,” Berdahl artfully illustrates the human consequences of that transition: “feelings of profound loss, longing, and displacement in a period of intense social discord” (p. 131).

But along with this anxiety, Berdahl also describes the incredibly creative and resourceful phenomenon of “*Ostalgie*,” (a German neologism meaning nostalgia for the East). Far from being merely a feeling of identification with and longing for the GDR, *Ostalgie* was and is a productive force, which has gone through three distinct phases, identified by Berdahl in “(N)ostalgia for the Present,” “Consumer Rites,” and “Goodbye Lenin, Aufwiedersehen GDR.” Initially *Ostalgie* appeared in unnamed acts of minor resistance: the women of Kella donning their smocks in defiance of West German fashion, the friend who proudly parked her GDR-made “Trabi” next to her West German relative’s “68,000 DM Mercedes” (p. 43), and other choices favoring Eastern products over Western ones. These choices re-instilled value and pride in East German labor and production (even though many East German companies had been bought out by Westerners), through the structures of the capitalist market. But these choices also recalled pride and patriotism for “an East Germany that never existed” (p. 44). In its second incarnation *Ostalgie* mobilized the capitalist market to validate and re-narrate the daily experience of East German life. The mass marketing of GDR-themed products, the creation of Ost-Discos, retro bars and beers, and the “museumification” of East German life each represented different ways of remembering the GDR past. Berdahl writes, “*Ostalgie*, then, does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory” (p. 56). In its final form *Ostalgie* morphed into reflexive commentary, “dominated by a certain cynicism, irony, and parody” (p. 131). The hit film *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003) and new-but-retro GDR-themed products, now reclassified as “kitsch” or “camp,” seemed to “celebrate and naturalize capitalism as the inevitable outcome of socialism’s demise” (p. 131), but not without that touch of nostalgic love for what is gone. Against the

overwhelming influx of Western capitalism, Ostalgie was an adaptive process that demonstrated the dignity, ingenuity, and independence of East Germans who made the transition to capitalism on their own terms.

One valuable aspect of Berdahl's work, which has not been emphasized in this text, is her acute focus on the materiality of memory. In each of her essays on memory and nostalgia, particularly "Voices at the Wall," Berdahl explores the constructions of social memory through specific objects: the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, the carved names on the glossy wall's surface, and the physical offerings left by visitors to the monument. Berdahl carefully considers the physical and visual impact of these objects as influential aspects in the negotiations of collective memory and historical narrative that take place at the site of the memorial. The wall's singular characteristics, from the controversy over its construction to its magnetism for object offerings, make it a site unique among other monuments: "It is a contested site where memory, biography, and personal histories call attention to, challenge, and resist unified and traditional versions of American identity and government, thereby reflecting as well as constructing a diversified and skeptical sense of national identity" (p. 25). Although it does not appear to be one of Berdahl's theoretical aims, she has deliberately complicated the relationship of humans and their things, de-centering the role of human intention in the construction of social memory. The result is a much more nuanced understanding of the presence and importance of the memorial in the construction of a historical narrative about the Vietnam War. As with the consideration she gives to GDR-made and GDR-themed products in the construction of GDR memories during and after the Wende, Berdahl's work on the wall recognizes that objects are not merely the bearers of memory, but also the bricks in their foundation, placing her deservedly among the likes of Daniel Miller, Bill Brown, and other important contributors to materiality studies.[1]

Among all the essays, "Mixed Devotions" is a special treasure. In this intensely personal account, in which she calls upon the emotional weight of her mother's battle with cancer to discuss her reaction to her friend and informant's bout with a similar illness, Berdahl displays both her fallibility and her deep humanity as a researcher. Judgment distorted by her generous caring for her friend, Berdahl admits to reproducing, through her pushy attempts to help, the same East-West inequality

that her friends and informants in Kella so resented in West Germans. Recognizing this, and her displaced anger at the loss of her own mother, Berdahl parlays her experience into several teachable moments, from the role of the church in postsocialist social life, to the challenges of ethnography in Europe, and the nature of her friendship with her informants. Her revelations about her dual insider/outsider status and the cultural distance in between make this particular essay a must read for any student of anthropology.

Finally, for those hoping to see a glimpse of her unpublished work, the essay "Local Hero, National Crook" outlines the cultural perceptions of the East German entrepreneur, Jürgen Schneider, who had invested heavily in the redevelopment of East German properties, while defrauding West German banks. A modern folk hero, his adventures in fraudulent philanthropy provide the perfect example to contextualize the terms and conditions set by East Germans on their transition to a capitalist ideology, and the re-inscription of their national boundaries and identities.

This collection is an excellent introduction to Daphne Berdahl's generous and insightful ethnography; it will appeal to students of Germany, postsocialist studies, materiality studies, and the anthropology of memory, and to undergraduate-level instructors. While fans of her work may enjoy the convenience of having Berdahl's essays, including one previously unpublished, together in the same tome, the fact remains that the individual pieces do not cohere into a single readable text. Potential readers must consider whether the accessibility and new offerings in this volume weigh heavily enough in favor of purchasing it—rather than just downloading its contents piecemeal from online journal archives. Regardless, Berdahl's work does not disappoint, and her readers will be rewarded by her perceptive research, skillful prose, and humanizing insights. Bunzl and Herzfeld, whose introduction and foreword contextualize her life and work, have done a great service to their dearly departed friend, and to Berdahl's many readers, who have them to thank for this valuable collection.

#### Note

[1]. Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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