

Judd Stitzel. *Fashioning Socialism: Clothing, Politics and Consumer Culture in East Germany.* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005. XII + 260 S. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-84520-282-8.



Reviewed by Eli Rubin

Published on H-German (April, 2006)

In the parlance of the GDR, the term *hektische Modewechsel* stood in for a critique of the West's consumer-driven capitalism as much as any other term. The term is interesting: aside from its rather blunt propagandistic intonation, the need to put "hectic" in front of *Modewechsel* was significant, because the GDR was not rejecting style simply because it changed. That would have been impossible: fashion is *about* changing styles. The GDR's planned economy, of course, could not accommodate changes in style and did not like unanticipated changes in consumer tastes. So, the decision to criticize not fashion, but rather the rapidity of its turnover in the West, demonstrates the difficult situation the GDR was in as it attempted to compete with the West in areas such as fashion, which it both needed and which potentially stood against all its foundation.

Judd Stitzel's book is the first major study to get at the double game played by the GDR in the area of fashion—not just in the textile or clothing industries but also in regards to fashion *qua* fashion. More than merely providing a blow-by-blow account of East German fashion development,

Stitzel aims to illuminate the larger tensions between the state and the society, and within the state itself, by using fashion as the "thread" that the readers are invited to "pull" upon to unravel the complex fabric of the GDR. As such, the volume succeeds in educating readers not only about the fashion and the clothing industry, but more importantly, about the structures of the command economy and the difficulties it had in negotiating the dictates of socialist ideology and the demands of consumers.

Stitzel's book, based on his excellent dissertation (Johns Hopkins, 2001), consists of seven chapters. In them, he treats the discourse on clothing and fashion in socialist East Germany; structures of the economic planning bureaucracy and the clothing industry in East Germany; difficulties that designers, magazine editors and most importantly the "Fashion Institute" had in developing a high quality "socialist" fashion not beholden to the West; prices and their impact on consumption patterns and especially the ever-present issue of quality and value of clothes; overproduction and overstocking (or "glut") in the socialist planned

economy; paradoxes associated with so-called boutique stores in the GDR; and finally, attempts to get at ordinary East Germans' notions and attitudes towards fashion and clothing in the GDR.

In these seven chapters, Stitzel claims to be doing a number of things: he aims to rewrite the periodization of GDR consumer history while also subverting previous models of GDR and Cold War historiography. These, by focusing on issues of Sovietization and Americanization and by their monolithic characterizations of the SED as a monolith, have ignored the extent of influence on the GDR exercised by ordinary East Germans and low-level government and party functionaries. Stitzel wants to dispel the notion that the building of the Berlin Wall marks the major turning point in the history of East German consumerism. Perhaps most importantly, the author intends the book as an example of interdisciplinarity, tying together distinct realms of historical inquiry such as "ideology, gender, politics, economics, bureaucratic machinations, culture and society" (p. 6). Most of all, this is a "history of the middle," and not just the top or the bottom (p. 7). These are very ambitious claims to make for a book of this size. It may be more accurate to say, as this review will suggest, that Stitzel's *dissertation* accomplished the kind of historiographical *tour de force* that he seems to boast of in the introduction. With virtually all substantive historiographical discussion edited out of this book, and very little serious contemplation of the larger meaning of the subject of fashion, it is hard for Stitzel to sustain these big ambitions.

This problem ought not to undermine the majority of the work here. Inspired in part by the work of GDR consumer studies pioneer Ina Merkel, Stitzel's own research on the fashion industry and the Party's dealings with it is unique and groundbreaking. Chapter 1 nicely hones in on the discussion of needs versus wants (or "luxuries") in the early GDR and shows how this discourse evolved from original Marxist ideas. Party

leaders were resigned to the fact that they would have to respond to ever-changing definitions of "need" vs. "luxury." This issue that drives straight to the heart of fashion, and one could argue that this issue not been resolved in modern capitalism; in East German socialism it certainly was not. Even after 1953, when the regime generally started "seeing" consumers more, officials' talk about the "need" for East Berlin to be the leader of fashion did not translate into economic reality, due to lagging East German textile production. Stitzel's point is that if we consider the regime's discourse about fashion, we would think that the East German leadership took the need to keep up with the West in clothing and fashion seriously. They did seem to be worried that if their citizens did not or were not able to dress properly, it would signal a deeper inability to build socialism to their western rivals. The corresponding reality was different, as chapter 2 explores.

Entitled "The Logic and Contingencies of Planning, Producing, and Distributing," chapter 2 attempts to trace the design, supply, production, distribution and consumption of clothes in order to develop an understanding the social life of clothes in socialist East Germany along the lines of Arjun Appadurai's theoretical framework. By producing a framework of the planned economy, Stitzel hopes to explore the social and economic relations of the human actors involved and to build a history of the middle. Stitzel succeeds at this task, inundating the reader with minutiae concerning the GDR's planned economy while not ignoring the its bureaucratic policies and structures. The more centralized a planned economy was, the less flexible it could be to shifting demands and needs of consumers; but attempts to decentralize and introduce flexibility into the system, as the reforms of the 1960s intended to achieve, lessened their socialist character. Production of clothing heightened this dilemma because fashion is particularly difficult to plan in advance, requiring spontaneity, innovation and resistance to bureaucratization. The socialist system was characterized by the "log-

ic" of *Tonnenideologie*, or quantity over quality. This "logic" caused considerable trouble: women in particular complained about the availability of quality clothing--clothes that fit well, flattered different body types and sizes and most of all, followed fashions. This last point sets up Stitzel's later chapters on gluts and on prices in particular, the two most important chapters of the book. (One concern I have is the use of the word "logic" with little or no explanation. We ought to explore the idea of the potential logic of socialist economics and aesthetics and political ideology in general, and if Stitzel is going to use the word, it deserves more thought in this regard.)

Chapter 3 focuses on the Deutsches Modeinstitut, the government's attempt to control the aesthetic discourse of fashion once it realized that aesthetic meanings of what was "desirable" led inexorably to demand for goods which could and did throw the idea of planning fashion completely out of kilter. Rather than letting the West set the pace, why not try to control desire in the East by developing communism's answer to Paris and Milan--"socialist fashion"? The idea never came close to fruition. The work of the Modeinstitut is nevertheless fascinating, especially the language employed in the institute's flagship journal, *Frau von Heute*. The best example is the dichotomy created between "Herr Geschmack" and "Frau Mode." The Modeinstitut wanted to find an objective, scientific, standardized and "standardizable" means of judging and measuring fashion--something in line with sober, rational and distinctly *masculine* "taste" as opposed to the irrational, emotional and thus dangerously *female* "fashion." This distinction between sober taste and irrational fashion is not limited to postwar East Germany, but finds its reiterations in numerous places.[1] What was distinctly East German was the way in which this "text" was interwoven into the twin themes of "education" (*Erziehung*) of consumers and "standardization"--both important buzzwords of the late 1950s and 1960s in East Germany.

Chapter 4, "Economies of Value and Politics of Price," does admirable work in explaining the arcane price structure of the East German economy. In a seemingly contradictory manner, some prices (for items like basic garments) were kept low while others were kept high. Stitzel finds that prices for fashion items remained consistently high, largely because factories had a built-in incentive to claim high production costs for production steps that didn't lead to any discernable improvement in the product (p. 84). This "hidden inflation" was not desired by the government, but it was inevitably created by the system. Prices also reveal a central sort of dissatisfaction expressed by the population. Issues of aesthetics, quality, fashion, design and gender accompanied price policy. Spending practices became another way in which consumers experienced the presence of the state in everyday life, since the state set prices.

Nothing destabilizes the distinction between "quality" and "value" as much as prices. An unaffordable item of high quality is not of much use, and therefore, in a sense not of high quality. The affordability of goods does have a relationship with their quality, although often this relationship is inverse. But pointing out this relationship in the context of fashion in East Germany shows how the specific economic structure of the planned economy actually changed what was quality, thus underscoring Stitzel's point at the beginning of the chapter that price policy ought to be seen as closely intertwined with "discourse" and aesthetics and fashion.

Chapter 5, "Embarrassment of Surpluses," is a fascinating look at the problem of the production of clothes that consumers refused to buy. The stereotype is that East Bloc life was characterized by shortages and chronically empty store shelves, but in fact--especially in East Germany--the problem was really how little of what people wanted to buy was produced: a problem of satisfying wants, rather than needs. Clothes produced in the GDR were not well-fitting; they were not in style;

they did not look nice. As a result, most of them were not bought. The regime tried to unload them with deep discounts at season-end sales and special "cheap" stores called BIWA. The BIWA were closed, however, because they did not fulfill their role, and clearance sales continued, but the value of this chapter is that Stitzel shows us how a differentiation and Bourdieu-esque "distinction" occurred in the GDR. Poor residents of the GDR wore BIWA clothes. Above the level of pure subsistence there is taste and choice, and then there is differentiation and class, a major paradox for the goal of attaining socialist consumption and socialist fashion.

The corollary to BIWA and the phenomenon of distinction were the *Exquisitladen*, boutique stores in which fine (usually western) fashions and other wares were sold at high prices. These stores offered an outlet for the desire for high fashion not satisfied by East German industry and acted as a sponge for the chronic surplus of disposable income in East Germans' pockets. These stores, and their failure, are treated in chapter 6. Fashion consumption patterns completely diverged from "the plan." People did not come in only when they were ready to make their one big annual purchase, but rather constantly. Most were "just looking," but this phenomenon showed the regime the clear preference of the population. In response, the regime expanded them, increasing their accessibility to the public, until they ceased to be exclusive or exquisite in any way.

Most indicative of the unpredictability of consumer behavior are some of the many sources of the attitudes of everyday East Germans vis-à-vis fashion and clothing that Stitzel presents in his final chapter, "Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Practices and the Relationship between State and Society." Perhaps the most important finding that Stitzel makes in his research is that well into the 1970s, a *majority* of women made their own clothes—even though the GDR was making a major push to eliminate or

streamline traditional forms of housework for women, although synthetic fibers were slated to replace expensive, fragile natural fibers and although piles of ready-to-wear clothes went unsold. The significance of the finding cannot be understated: first, it meant that the process of industrialization in which people become ever more integrated into a labor-divided technological system as described by Ruth Schwarz Cowan, reversed itself.[2] The ability to satisfy individual taste came more from the individual than the outsourced producer, an outcome completely unthinkable in most postwar capitalist economies. Additionally, it means that not so much changed from generation to generation, especially for women, as some have theorized. Surely these women were learning to sew and tailor from their mothers? If so, how does this information play into the idea of a "GDR Generation" recently raised by Dorothee Wierling?[3] Also, does this outcome describe Marx's original vision of the worker in the communist utopia as having the ability and the freedom to overcome the alienation of labor, doing her own work for herself? Was this trend an example of communism in spite of itself?

There are a lot of fascinating issues raised by the excellent, trailblazing research done by Stitzel here. Unfortunately, the length of the book does not leave enough room for contemplation of these issues as a means of revealing the larger significance of East German fashion. Stitzel's work rises above the fetish "work" done earlier on East German society that focused on "Trabis" or "Wohnkultur" to celebrate them out of exotic or whimsical curiosity. Stitzel's research contains real historiographical significance, but he does not spend enough time on the meta-discussions to help us see why clothing and fashion really matter.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), especially Erica Rappoport's essay.

[2]. See Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

[3]. Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Eli Rubin. Review of Stitzel, Judd. *Fashioning Socialism: Clothing, Politics and Consumer Culture in East Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11689>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.