In 1996, Katherine Verdery asked what comes next after socialism. She then turned an anthropologist’s lens on post-socialist processes of transition to illuminate the meaning of change in the lives of central and eastern Europeans.[1] It is now seventeen years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. That distance presents an important opportunity to revisit how different nations have charted their transitions. What are the lasting legacies of socialism in Europe? How have post-socialist governments shaped these transitions to democracy and free markets? To what extent have central and eastern Europeans been able to shape their own lives? With this collection of longitudinal studies of the life courses of East Germans, the editors—sociologists Martin Diewald, Anne Goedicke, and Karl Ulrich Mayer—offer one of the first, most comprehensive assessments in the English language of how two different systems and institutions have shaped the lives of East Germans and how East Germans have dealt with the transition to the new Federal Republic of Germany. Their approach also links the study of East and West Germany with post-socialist countries of central and eastern Europe in ways that should motivate further comparative study and discussion. The authors would go so far as to claim that their methods allow them to predict and understand how lives unfold from preceding events and phases across political and social systems. Such claims, however, also raise challenging methodological questions about predictability, the nature of agency and the sociological capacity to illuminate the lives of East Germans through their work-related transitions.

This volume is not casual reading for someone interested in the study of East Germany, the process of German unification, or the transition to post-socialist systems. It will take some time to digest the fount of data this study generates, but the authors have for the most part very thoughtfully and carefully conceived this group of essays. They draw their analyses from the East German Life History Study (EGLHS) and make comparisons with a West German Life History Study and data they have gathered from research on central and eastern Europe. Between 1991 and 1992, researchers organized face-to-face interviews that averaged two hours and forty-five minutes each with 2,331 East German men and women from four birth cohorts (1929-31, 1939-41, 1951-53 and 1959-61). They followed up on these first interviews in 1993 with a second postal survey and then with a third panel study between 1996 and 1997. A fourth study included East German men and women born in 1971. Project field workers used a standardized life history questionnaire that reconstructed respondents’ educational, occupational, family, residential, and social network histories as month-by-month event histories. Consequently, the multitude of variables is analytically thick and at times the authors’ writing styles and choice of language can be cumbersome. While it is difficult for the reader to keep all of the various findings in mind, the essays provide useful data and assessments for a range of scholars and professionals. The end results offer a de-
tained and work-related set of snapshots into the lives of East Germans and their relationships with socialism and the new unified state.

After a first, introductory chapter, Mayer uses chapter 2 to question the assumed legacies of socialism and discusses how the East German experience under socialism may or may not have motivated and aided the transition to a unified state. Based on high levels of political control, one could expect limited East German initiative and investment in careers, more reliance on the state and at least a partial withdrawal to pursue more personal life goals after socialism. Mayer, however, argues that the use of monetary and material incentives by the East German state to engineer socialism and control people ultimately undermined the ideal of collectivism. Instead, East German socialism actually fostered individual agency, the conscious use of socialist incentives in relation to intimate social networks, and the obstinate pursuit of personal goals (pp. 41-42). Furthermore, generational patterns should have strongly influenced the structure for diverging experiences after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Echoing the oral history research of Dorothee Wierling, Mayer argues that for East Germans born around 1930, the GDR offered more favorable career chances, but as these older cohorts occupied the higher-level positions under socialism, the GDR became more and more closed to those born around 1960, further limiting educational and occupational opportunities for younger East Germans.[2] Mayer also identifies the persistence of more traditional German attitudes toward work under socialism, but suggests that socialism should have aided women in transition. Both their high level of training and work experience, especially in public service occupations, Mayer hypothesizes, should have served as attractive assets in the transition period to the more merit-based system of West Germany. Interestingly, Mayer also notes a higher level of horizontal job shifts than expected during socialism because of discontent with imposed regimes of placement. Mayer believes that this degree of mobility may have provided many East Germans with greater flexibility during the ensuing periods of intensive transition (pp. 34-35). The high degree of political and social constriction, Mayer suggests, could therefore have also resulted in a significant pool of motivation and mobility experience for those East Germans seeking opportunities with arrival of the West German system (p. 42).

In chapter 3, Goedicke examines how West Germany’s formal institutions and reform strategies influenced East German working lives and families at the macro-economic level. Initial currency reforms and privatization helped increase East German productivity. However, East German trade with the Soviet Union subsequently collapsed because of the monetary reforms, most notably the high currency valuation. Consequently, massive layoffs in the primary and secondary sectors, coupled with early retirement schemes, increased part-time work; an increase in commuting to West Germany and migrations abroad, resulted in the “passive tertiaryization” of the East German economy (p. 57). As for the results of West Germany’s guidance, Goedicke draws a balance of costs with relative marks for success in East Germany. A “window of opportunity” opened for East Germans from the end of 1989 until mid-1992. In this period there were significant new employment opportunities, but the window closed with the completion of the formal transfer of institutions and privatization (p. 60). In the early period, wages rose faster than productivity and gaps in income and infrastructure between East and West Germany narrowed. West Germany was generally able to limit the mass migration of East Germans, stabilize the political situation, and enable a high material standard of living. The economic situation since 1992 has remained acute. Some industries, especially chemicals, wood, and measure and control devices, have survived and entered international markets with solid organization and capitalization. Most firms, however, have continued to reduce staff in private and public services. Incomes have remained stable or even declined and mass unemployment in East Germany has hovered between 15 and 20 percent. From this perspective, the rate of East Germany’s catching up to West Germany in terms of disposable income, capital formation, productivity and GDP has actually slowed since 1992 (pp. 61-64).

Chapter 4 assesses to what degree the different assets, training, and experience that East Germans accumulated under socialism actually served to promote career mobility, became useless, or hindered East German career paths after 1989. This chapter starts with the lingering public discussions that East Germans tend to be apathetic, spoiled, and lacking in self-initiative when compared with their West German neighbors (p. 66). However, authors Diewald, Heike Solga, and Goedicke find that the long-term economic crisis is due less to the slowness or passivity of East Germans than the large-scale restructuring of jobs and firm organization (p. 74). They attribute part of this problem to the inability of West German institutions to mobilize existing human resources and point as well toward the crisis that West German institutions brought to the unified state (p. 86).
As for what East Germans brought to the new Federal Republic, the authors argue that the most important factor in East German life paths has been the experience of the massive restructuring of the economy and occupational positions within the job market (pp. 79, 300). The personal assets of East Germans actually tended to have a lower impact on how East Germans fared in transition, but assets, especially mobility experience and acquired skills, have helped in the search for new employers, albeit under the extremely restricted conditions of the job market. The authors also find little evidence that former East German political loyalties and party membership led to discriminatory hiring practices. In fact, those in the higher echelons of the socialist structure before 1990 were able to maintain their careers and status. The “window of opportunity” witnessed a high frequency among East Germans of self-employment and entrepreneurship, but beyond that window, self-initiatives have not fared as well because of western competition, low levels of collateral for credit, and the marginal nature of many of these endeavors (pp. 79-84). The results of all of this, the authors suggest, is a “trichotomy” in terms of opportunity. One-third of the population became extremely vulnerable to layoffs. Another third was able to remain employed but has faced changes in occupation and status. A final third has navigated the transition without severe changes in status and work (p. 88).

In chapter 5, Goedicke takes a closer look at the impact of East German firm privatization and restructuring on the transition experiences of East Germans and their individual employment opportunities. Goedicke finds that most East German firms took a conservative path, offering a more traditional range of products and services. East German firms were also generally reluctant to recruit and train new personnel after 1989, given massive job reductions, early retirement plans, and the subsequent oversupply of labor across the economy. As a result, the youngest and oldest cohorts were practically missing from the job market (p. 99). The results for East German women in transition have been mixed. In many households, women have become the main breadwinners after their partners lost their jobs in the primary and secondary sectors. Those women and unskilled workers who worked for former GDR employers or their successors depended in large part on the possibility of staying with them (p. 111). Women in public administration and service jobs, such as teachers, were able to profit from relative job stability. Some of the new private service sectors, such as banking and insurance, allowed other women to find new employment (p. 298). Exposure to global market conditions, however, hit sectors of the East German economy with particularly high concentrations of female employees in industries like light manufacturing, textiles, clothing, and food processing (p. 111). In terms of employment East German women faced higher unemployment rates than their West German counterparts until rates began to equalize after 1995. Before then, East German women were also twice as likely as their male East German peers to be out of work (p. 304).

As Heike Trapp shows in chapter 6, hidden disparities of gender and age also characterize the life courses of East Germans and employment outcomes in the new Federal Republic. The shift in regimes brought a convergence toward West Germany’s more gendered work arrangements: most notably, the move from a dual earner/state-career society toward a dual earner/female part-time homemaker model, in which men were fully employed and female partners held most of the household caregiving responsibilities (p. 117). Trapp found that the risk of unemployment for women was widespread across birth cohorts and highest for the youngest cohorts, who faced intense competition entering the job market in the 1990s. With the exception of the 1960 birth cohort, however, East German women were only slightly more likely than men to become unemployed in the new Federal Republic after 1995, but women were less likely than men to find employment after periods of unemployment. Women born around 1940 were the most disadvantaged because they were the least likely to have acquired occupational qualifications or to have improved their qualifications under socialism (p. 119). Women born around 1960 were more often confronted with West German personnel policies and practices that appear to have reinforced gender-specific ideas about family responsibilities and time constraints that denied women access or the chance to remain in the positions they held (p. 136). Most importantly, Trapp found that gender and age were mutually reinforcing for women when it comes to reentering the job market. Younger East German women are returning to the job market more quickly than their older cohorts. In comparison, East German men born around 1960 were the least affected by unemployment and had the best chances of reentering the job market after unemployment (p. 128). From this view, inequality tends to accumulate over time, particularly after women begin to have children.

In chapter 7, Heike Solga questions the presumed rise of meritocracy since 1989 and examines how East Germans’ chances of mobility have changed within the transition from a system based on political loyalty to a
system more based on merit. Mobility under socialism was a matter of political loyalty, but, according to Solga, a tight link between gender, education, and occupation that strengthened inequalities over time also existed in East Germany (p. 151). With reunification came a greater degree of meritocracy, albeit with some key qualifications. East Germany became an extended workbench of West Germany and not a true service-based economy (p. 155). The proportion of blue-collar workers, especially unskilled laborers, increased after 1989. Other class shifts depended on class position. Large proportions of the upper service classes moved into self-employment and had better access to good jobs, ironically establishing a “new” petty bourgeoisie (p. 161). Much of the old professional classes retained their positions in 1996 and with it a higher chance of upward mobility. Few administrative and managerial personnel, however, retained their jobs in the same period. Unskilled workers and coop farmers were the most disadvantaged and most likely to experience unemployment (p. 156). Party membership was generally not a disadvantage during the transition, so long as one had a high degree of education. When compared with the retention rates of former elite classes in other post-socialist countries in transition such as Russia, Poland, and Hungary, Solga concludes that these findings indicate a clear shift to a system based on merit. However, for those who opposed the old authoritarian system and perceived this socialist legacy of job retention, there was no real sense of “poetic justice” (p. 163).

In chapter 8, Johannes Huinink and Michaela Kreyenfeld illuminate how marriage and fertility have changed with reunification. Socialism tended to favor early family formation because of GDR state support for stable employment and childcare, moral appeals to the health benefits of earlier childbearing and the role marriage and children played in East German access to housing and other restricted goods and services. After 1989, child rearing, educational opportunities, and employment have become less mutually compatible for East German women, marking the end of the GDR pattern of starting families at an earlier age. East German women still have higher first birth rates than their West German cohort counterparts. For East German women, however, having a partner and children has actually increased their risk of unemployment, so that the career chances for women with and without children have begun to diverge. Huinink and Kreyenfeld suggest two possible factors for this shift: the growing importance of “women’s career planning,” due to the presence of more job options and increasing competition, and couples’ demand for stable, predictable employment because of increased economic uncertainties. Most glaring from the authors’ perspective is the fact that employment uncertainties do not generally contribute to the postponement of childbirth among unemployed women. In terms of acquired skill levels, East German women without formal educational qualifications before unification had fewer children under socialism because of the disadvantage of limited income. After unification, the pattern reversed. Women without formal qualifications have the highest chances to give birth (pp. 181-182).

In chapter 9, Diwald and Jörg Luedicke test how much the transformation from socialism to capitalism has challenged the stability of individual East German social networks. They find evidence both for the collectivist imprint of socialism and the biographical self-determination of East Germans. Despite the assumption that most social relationships outside the immediate family were instrumental in nature under socialism, Diwald and Luedicke also find that these relationships were more highly differentiated in function and that socialism’s end brought a widespread sense of loss in terms of social networks. In her oral history research on family companionship under socialism, Wierling found close companionship within families, especially between mothers and children. Diwald and Luedicke find that since 1989, core family relations continue to serve as buffers to losses in other life domains. Moreover, family members have tended to avoid changes that could undermine mutual support in the face of political, social, structural, and systemic changes (p. 212).

In chapter 10, Diwald investigates the extent to which the transformation of East Germany has opened up new opportunities for generating and mobilizing effort and self-initiative. This approach focuses on the interplay of control beliefs and working lives, but the chapter does not clearly present its findings. The section on East German agency in the concluding chapter does a better job at questioning the ineptitude of the homo sovieticus, as well as differentiating between subjective control beliefs and the room available for individual expression of free will. This research helps illuminate how transition has influenced the widespread sense of uncertainty among East Germans that Wierling first noted in her research. Diwald, Goedicke, and Mayer contend that the implementation of West German institutions created new opportunities, but also instilled rigid rules and new forms of paternalist supervision, which have limited more localized decision making, self initiative, and pluralistic opinion. The numerous experiences of occupa-
tional re-examination combined with the import of West German personnel and genuine lack of East German associations and political parties at the federal level, the authors argue, have further increased the sense of East German subjection to external forces (p. 310). Moreover, firm closures and mass redundancies left less room for individual agency. Managing the enormous acquisition of new information and adapting to the new system also severely taxed the biographical resources for coping (p. 311). East Germans between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four faced the sharpest possible loss of control beliefs and decision-making room with the end of socialism. They gained some layoff protection in the West German system, but they were also highly disadvantaged in their attempts to reenter the job market, which contributed to low levels of self-esteem and heightened pessimism about individual effort (p. 303).

In comparing different paths of transition in chapter 11, Diewald and Bogdan W. Mach do not find an ideal pathway among former Soviet-bloc countries. Market economy transitions have in general taken their toll across the region. The loss of productive capacities and the slow nature of economic recovery have been similar in East Germany, Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. The authors do reiterate the unique national and institutional dimensions of East Germany’s transition. They find that East Germany experienced relatively low income inequalities and poverty rates and had the fastest improvements among other transition countries when measured by standards of material living. Consequently, the transition in East Germany delivered no windfall profits, no nouveaux riches, and no merchant and oligarchic capitalism as in other post-socialist countries. Instead, the transition in East Germany has generally abolished political capital in favor of human capital. For most post-socialist countries, however, the authors conclude that the shift to meritocracy has not been as self-evident. In comparison, both East Germany and Poland experienced a widening earning gap between highly skilled and skilled workers. Entrepreneurs and self-employed persons in both countries encountered severe earnings losses. In contrast, Poles experienced more of a shock in the initial five years of transition with greater accepted risks of earnings losses in exchange for higher occupational stability and reduced unemployment. Since then, Poland has become more of a success story. Poles have experienced the emergence of a relatively prosperous form of owner capitalism. Education and training seem to pay off more across the whole occupational market. Consequently, broader populations have experienced substantial upward mobility in real wages and job opportunities than in East Germany (pp. 266-268).

In chapter 12, Diewald revisits the question of German unification and the degree to which the paths of East and West Germany have diverged or converged in terms of labor market flexibility, adaptation to global competition, technological developments, and organizational change. His findings suggest that East Germany is not necessarily following a path different from West Germany. The pace of flexibility is roughly the same in terms of economic development and employment rates. From this perspective, Diewald concludes that the signs of labor market catastrophe are more visible in East Germany due to the more difficult starting point, but those indicators are also part of the larger trend involving the unified state. Diewald uses these findings to support the assessment that West Germany implemented outdated institutions and regulations and consequently led to lower East German economic development (pp. 291-292). Given the complex nature of the authors’ examination of East Germany in transition, this German-German dimension will require more in-depth comparison beyond labor market flexibility.

In their conclusions, Diewald, Goedicke and Mayer raise several issues. Goedicke warns that East Germany has become more and more of a sideline issue in German politics. Meanwhile, Goedicke portrays a bleak landscape for many East Germans. There is still a significant loss of hope for reintegration into the economy and the possibility of continued migration abroad. More and more houses are empty. Social networks have dissolved. Young people lack training. Right-wing extremism is increasing. East Germans in general have lower confidence in the future and higher levels of worry and concern across age groups. On the bright side, however, Goedicke reaffirms that East Germans prefer the new system over the old. They see democracy as a positive change, although they are more critical of its actual practice (pp. 61-64). The authors also ask about the methodological advantages of sociology for examining social change through individual lives rather than through institutional, ethnographic, or anthropological studies. They believe that they have found an “indispensable method for tracking both the processes and the outcomes of the transformation” of East Germany and perhaps other post-socialist transitions (p. 292).

The work of these scholars offers convincing evidence for the ability of sociology to delineate major
work-related events in lives in transition. Their findings should finally lay to rest the notion of the unmotivated East German and suggest rather the dominant role of massive economic restructuring and work-related position in understanding how East Germans have fared through transition. The authors also show that East German biographies actually do matter. The experiences, skills, and personal social networks they gained under socialism could play a secondary role in holding jobs, moving up, or reentering the job market. However, their findings suggest that institutions influence the individual sense of control more so than control beliefs shape how persons can actually shape their lives (p. 311). From the authors’ perspective, therefore, how lives unfold is fairly predictable (p. 296), although they also note that their findings include “unusual turbulences” and “unexpected continuities” (p. 293). How predictable are individual lives? Or, for that matter, how well can scholars predict historical development? The examination of work-related data is key to this approach and the authors make a strong case that work is in fact central to understanding how institutions and biographies are involved in individual transitions and experience. The sociological lens of work, however, may not capture the whole picture of life pathways and may therefore obscure our view of agency and other questions of narratives, identity, memory, and meaning in the lives of East Germans. What could a sociology beyond work reveal? Moreover, what do sociological approaches miss that other disciplines and methodologies may further illuminate? Paul Cooke’s recent book, for example, on how Germans have used the discursive space of East Germany, in some ways elides a closer examination of what happened to East Germans across transition, but his studies of media, especially East German use of the internet, suggest how much many East Germans are moving beyond their socialist past and reshaping more hybrid forms of identity through their non-work related activities.[5] Nevertheless, the work of Diewald, Goedicke and Mayer makes an important contribution to the study of East Germany and should stimulate further discussions on how to measure and explain the historical development of central and eastern Europe since socialism.

Notes


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