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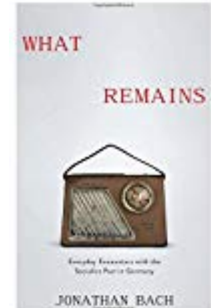

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Memory, Appropriation, and the Material Remains of "Real Existing" Socialism

After more than a decade of back-and-forth as well as an asbestos scandal, Germany's federal government decided to replace East Germany's Palace of the Republic with a reconstruction of the Berlin Palace that had stood in its place until the 1950s. To some, this was an erasure of history. After all, the Palace of the Republic had housed the East German Parliament. To others, it was a return to European normalcy. In the time before Germany's two twentieth-century dictatorships, the Berlin Palace had served as the main residence of the ruling family of the German Empire. The conflicts over the future of this building are a striking example of complicated questions about memory and the material remains of East German socialism that are at the heart of Jonathan Bach's *What Remains: Everyday Encounters with the Socialist Past in Germany*.

What happens to the material culture(s) of everyday life in a state that disappeared as rapidly as the German Democratic Republic did in 1990? And who gets to decide what significance these objects —be it consumer goods or the built environment —have for the process of "working through the past" (p. 6)? Bach's study of postsocialist encounters emphasizes material culture as a site of struggle over meaning. Across Bach's four case studies, East and West Germans, young and old, amateur collectors and professional historians engaged in competing acts of appropriation that imbued material objects with significance. Bach argues that at every stage the debates over these objects also reflected intense contestation over the meaning of dictatorship, the Nazi and socialist pasts, the status of Germany in Europe, and ultimately, the meaning of Germany as a democracy. In other words, what is at stake in the ways material remains are being appropriated for memory is nothing less than "what we consider contemporary German identity" (p. 6).

About a decade after unification, East German consumer goods made a comeback in the East and took on a new desirability in the West. But what for critics of *Ostalgie*—a neologism combining the German word for East with the German word for nostalgia—read simply as trivializing dictatorship, Bach shows to be a complex phenomenon with different modes of nostalgia in East and West. Chapter 1 mobilizes Marilyn Ivy's distinction between modernist nostalgia and nostalgia of style. Bach suggests that Ostalgie in East Germany was a longing not for the socialist state or life in a dictatorship, but for socialist (and modernist) longing itself. Because socialist states had deferred "true communism" to the future, life in socialism was characterized by constant longing. The (unfulfilled) promises of socialism spelled frustration. But they also allowed for a sense that a better future lay ahead. Bach argues that East German longing was also always connected to aspirations to the material wealth of the West such that unification at the same time promised and failed to bring redemption. It is the subsequent foreclosure of longing for the not-yet that allowed for consumer objects from the former East to become reminders of a time when a better future seemed possible. In Bach's argument, Ostalgie worked quite differently in the West, where the fascination with East German design was disconnected both from the past and East German identity. Hence, East German design can be "reassembled and redeployed" (p. 31). To be sure, these two different modes of appropriating the socialist past traverse the East/West divide to some extent. Especially the latter mode of appropriating styles disconnected from the past did not remain limited to the West. What both modes of Ostalgie have in common was that they each relied on the renewed commodification of East German goods in the postunification republic. (Renewed) commodification first allowed objects to remain in circulation and become objects of different modes of appropriation. Whether East German material culture functioned as an aesthetic blank slate, a romantic longing for longing itself, or whether it signaled apologia for dictatorship and invited comparisons to the glorification of Nazism, Bach shows that its meaning was never straightforward.

Chapter 2 stays with consumer objects but shifts the focus to a different kind of conflict. The chapter follows amateur collectors in the former East who turned their collections into museums of the everyday. In a memory landscape that—up to the turn of the millennium—seemed dominated by historians' interest in totalitarianism and dictatorship, the amateur museums were a kind of antipolitics that sought to resist the political appropriation of the everyday. To some professional historians, this amounted to a trivialization of the regime. They sought to redirect scholarly attention to the everyday, but not as "the opposite of dictatorial rule but its complement" (p. 47). As was the case for chapter 1, Bach's goal is not to decide the conflict between amateur collectors and historians. Rather, by first representing the objects of the everyday, the amateur museums took the crucial first step to invite appropriation that made the conflicts over their significance for memory possible in the first place.

The second half of the book shifts the focus from East German consumer goods to the built environment. The third chapter focuses on the former East German Palace of the Republic. Debates about the future of the building divided East Germans, many of whom sought to preserve the building; conservatives, many of whom sought to rebuild the imperial Berlin Palace; and younger generations, who engaged in forms of creative appropriation of the space. Bach argues in this chapter that what was at stake ultimately in these conflicts over the building was a conflict over the nature of German modernity. The decision to rebuild the Berlin Palace—while erasing the East German past by reverting to the early twentieth century—recovered a time of German "continuity with European traditions rather than divergence" (p. 119). In the final

chapter, Bach turns to the Berlin Wall. If the preceding chapters were about the ways in which the material "remains" of the disappeared socialist state invited struggles over appropriation that were always also struggles over Germany's past, chapter 4 suggests that the different attempts to appropriate the Berlin Wall were also struggles over the future of the city. No example shows this more clearly than the site of the East Side Gallery, dividing the neighborhoods of Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain. Shortly after unification, the memorialization of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of death and state-socialist excess seemed to have been the purview of liberal triumphalists and conservative anticommunists; the East Side Gallery produced a curious inversion of this alignment. When the site threatened to disappear (and was later moved) due to the construction of luxury condos, left-wing activists marched for its preservation. A remnant of the wall had turned into a symbol of struggle against gentrification.

So, is there a place for East Germany in German democratic memory? The East German generation born before and reaching adulthood after unification faced particular difficulties. Those difficulties are the subject of the epilogue. After all, that generation at the same time inherited the East German past and was called upon to reject it in the name of democracy. Bach finds hope in a play that liberally mixed Shakespeare, an East German play, production notes on the East German play, and criticism of the postunification world. Material remains continued to demand appropriation. In the play, the postsocialist generation appeared to appropriate the persistent "official" celebration of 1989 as "Germany's one successful democratic revolution" (p. 182)—remember, Bach is concerned with memory, not history—and own the Federal Republic's democratic energy.

Bach's book is not a book of history. It is mostly concerned with contemporary uses of the immediate past. As such, it risks being overtaken by current events. His attention to the ways that material remains of a bygone past invite and resist appropriation seems timelier than ever, with current debates over the role of the built environment for historical memory currently raging in Germany, Britain, and the United States. Material remains require work to imbue them with significance, and their value is not independent of but produced by the competing struggles of appropriating the remnants of a distant past. Bach's book reminds us that debates over the erasure of the past are not new. But he also shows that the removal of material remains is not analogous to the removal of history. In the case of the Palace of the Republic's replacement with a reconstructed Berlin Palace, Germans embraced choosing one past over another. When in 2016, Black activists demanded the renaming of what many considered racist street names in Berlin, their demands were met with anxieties over the erasure of history.[1] But their demands were not for an erasure of history but for greater "respect for the history of people of African descent in Berlin."[2] These conflicts reinforce Bach's attention to competing claims to the past and their inscription and reinscription in material remains and lend extraordinary significance to his project.

The book's methodological success also makes its shortcomings all the more frustrating. When it comes to the concrete examination of the different cases, Bach's book often lacks attention to some key specificities of the German context. Again, the reconstructed palace can serve as an example. In recent years, there has been growing attention to how the double memory of Nazism and state socialism—as urgent as these are—has served to obscure Germany's colonial past and made it harder for people of color to mount challenges to the way race functioned in postwar Germany. These debates are not merely academic. Rather, as the struggle over the memory landscape of German colonialism in Berlin shows, they were and are grounded in the claims of activists on the ground.

To avoid missing these crucial aspects of the conflicts over the palace, one does well to turn elsewhere, for example to Fatima El-Tayeb's treatment of the debate in ***Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der Postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*** (2016). Nonetheless, the central virtue of Bach's book is that more attention to the specificities of the German context do not run counter to but potentially complement his conceptual apparatus.

Notes

[1]. Maritta Adam-Tkalec, "Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße: Kein Respekt gegenüber der Geschichte Berlins," ***Berliner Zeitung***, August 26, 2016, https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/mensch-metropole/umbenennung-der-mohrenstrasse-kein-respekt-gegenueber-der-geschichte-berlins-li.39529.

[2]. Die Initiatoren des 3. Festes zur Umbenennung der Berliner M*straße, "Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße: Mehr Respekt vor der Geschichte von Menschen Afrikanischer Herkunft in Berlin - Offener Brief an die Redaktion der Berliner Zeitung," Africavenir, August 30, 2016, http://www.africavenir.org/fr/newsdetails/archive/2016/august/article/umbenennung-der-mohrenstrasse-mehr-respekt-vor-der-geschichte-von-menschen-afrikanischer-herkunft-i.html?tx_ttnews%5Bday%5D=31.

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