

Surprising Historical Counter-Developments in East and West-Germany. Condensed Results of a Socio-Historical Study of the 1950s

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ABSTRACT

The inequalities in development between East and West Germany identified in current sociological studies for example, have deep roots in the immediate postwar period [1]. It is surprising that these differences are not based on the obvious systemic discrepancies between socialism and capitalism—but rather on everyday contrasts in work and life, shaped by the specific conditions of practice during the postwar era. This can be convincingly demonstrated by comparing two important industrial companies: AG “Weser” in Bremen and the “Neptun” shipyard in Rostock. The presented study focuses on actor typologies and their significance for the social space of both large enterprises. The internal tensions that emerge and reveal drastic deviations make current developmental disparities between East and West Germany more comprehensible. The study to which this essay refers is based on intensive research in the company archives and on 67 extensive biographical-narrative interviews with employees of the two shipyards.

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The following essay examines an interesting phenomenon: the micro-social comparison of two working-class milieus in East and West Germany during the 1950s (Alheit et al., 1999) [2]. The research is based not only on extensive relevant socio-historical sources from the company archives of the two large enterprises under investigation—the “Neptun” shipyard in Rostock and the AG “Weser” shipyard in Bremen—but also on 67 in-depth biographical interviews with employees of both companies. The aim of the study is not a politically or ideologically motivated comparison, but rather a close examination of collective practices and individual life stories. This reveals an early contrasting development that has surprisingly little to do with the expected differences in political macro-structures: a divergent development of power constellations within the internal sphere of influence of the companies. The presented study focuses on actor typologies and their significance for the social space of both large enterprises. But the differing development of individual actors within the context of the two companies is also sensitively reconstructed. Ultimately, it is the dynamic interplay between biographical and collective experiences that constitutes the appeal of the study. A crucial methodological research tool in this context is the biographical narrative.

Exkursus: Narrative as a bridge between biography and collectivity. Narratives convey more than they explicitly state. That is, they express underlying structures that extend beyond

the subject matter of the narrative and beyond individual narrators themselves. Narration is—to use Karl Mannheim’s apt formulation “the representation of a connection related to a specific experiential space” (translation by the author) [3]. But the mode of representation also has its own inherent significance. As following convincingly described, it possesses three qualities of cognitive reconstruction that distinguish it from other modes of representing facts: a specific internal logic, which could be described as a structuring principle or—using a metaphor from linguistic theory—as a “grammar;” aside from this the dimension of processuality; and finally, that of perspective.

A life story narrative is clearly more than the sum of biographical experiences. Just as a film is not a simple sequence of photographed scenes but rather the dramaturgical expression of a unique overall event, so too must every biographical narrative be viewed as an individual shaping of a multitude of sequences of lived experience [4]. Each individual biographical experience shapes the overall biography not through its particular peculiarity, but through the way it is processed by the individual. Viewed in this way, experiences are not social ‘inputs’ that determine the overall form of a biography. They are to be understood as ‘intakes,’ as external stimuli which, however, only acquire their meaning through the individual’s unique processing structure—the very unique “grammar” of personal experience that can be described as “biographicity” [5-6].

The concept of intaking is also linked to a process that takes time. Experiences are processed, remembered, and ultimately made narratable. The ‘biographical’ does not arise mechanically in social stimulus-response chains. It is a complex process

of the construction of social reality. Over the course of a lifetime, however, the “process structures” change. The nature of external influences naturally shapes the logic of processing. Phases of conscious self-regulation autonomous planning and decisions—can be replaced by institutional procedures education and qualification processes, institutional support and therapy, rigid social controls, etc. or overlaid and suppressed by events resembling a trajectory—unemployment, accident, illness, addiction [7]. Crucially, the process-like character arises from specific “chains of events” that possess their own internal logic and are not arbitrarily interchangeable. They can be interpreted as either more autonomous or more heteronomous dispositions that the subject of a biography has adopted in the course of their life experiences.

In addition to the attitudes adopted ‘back then,’ the current biographical process structure also plays a role in the narrative recapitulation. It forms the “perspective” from which a life is (re)constructed. If, at the moment of narration, a process-oriented action structure dominates the course of life that is, the feeling that one has one’s life ‘in one’s hands’ and can shape it oneself the biographical memories will tend to be positively coloured. If the narrator is currently in a critical or even trajectory-like phase of life, the memory will accordingly appear in a different light.

Regardless of this current disposition, the “layering of experience by the biographical subject” is bound to general principles of order, which are acquired through “interactive practice [...] in early phases of ontogenesis” and have become an integral part of the everyday competence of adult social actors. The narrative form remains related to the structure of the ‘original’ action and experience. The narrative stream and the event stream exhibit a specific “homology”. This does not mean, however, that the narrative depicts ‘how it really was’; it only means that narrators must use the same rules of construction that underlie the ‘original’ action’, and that this is precisely why the narrative schema is structurally closer to the level of experience and action than, for example, re-reporting or arguing [8].

Of course, concrete autobiographical memory only tentatively resembles such ideal-typical structures of knowledge. And here, too, it seems more plausible to pay attention to inconsistencies—for example, the influence of hegemonic discourses on the biographical self-understanding of social actors. Undeniably, however, the interactional practices of a concrete, everyday context have an impact on the way social reality is recapitulated. This point is also useful because, particularly in an East-West comparison, it could lead to new insights into the dynamics of dominant and recessive knowledge profiles. But it also helps to reduce the risk of making the analytical focus on individual biographies so autonomous that the process structures of an isolated life course are cut off from their social environment, and the sequentiality and linearity of a specific biography become the sole corrective for the reconstruction of sociality. Incidentally, Bourdieu seems to have precisely this danger in mind when he polemicalises against the “biographical illusion” [9].

Comparable sociological considerations of knowledge regarding autobiographical narratives establish a connection between the uniqueness of narrated biographies and the mechanisms of influence of the social field to which they are subject. This becomes all the more apparent when we do not solely focus on the obvious conditions constituting social existence in modern “class societies,” but instead examine concrete everyday practices in

more manageable social fields. Large industrial enterprises are particularly interesting in this regard. The dynamics within such social aggregations often allow for insights into the development of societies as a whole insights that would be overlooked by a mere consideration of macrostructures.

The following in-depth analyses of the two shipyards already mentioned AG “Weser” in Bremen and the “Neptun” shipyard in Rostock will further specify the indicated “practices.” And here, too, it becomes clear that the uniqueness of biographical memory is shaped by social structures of knowledge and orientation, that biographical and collectivist aspects are, in a sense, intertwined. What remains fascinating, however, is that the comparison of two large companies, one from East and one from West, makes the ‘drifting apart’ of the two societies after the Second World War more concretely comprehensible than all the political and ideological contrasts that were artificially exaggerated by both sides.

The “Socialisation” of a Milieu: the Bremen-Based AG “Weser” in the 1950s

Areas of Tension in the Social Space of the AG “Weser”

The social space of the Bremen shipyard workforce, as the socio-historical analysis has shown is characterised by several distinctive features [8]. The workforce exhibits surprisingly low local mobility. Their value system and residential environment overlap. Many maintain more or less close personal contacts beyond the shipyard gates. Intra-family succession plays a crucial role in workforce recruitment. Sons and close relatives of shipyard workers are integrated into the workforce relatively easily—apart from periods of high unemployment in the early 1950s. This means that the frequency of face-to-face contact within the social milieu is relatively high. Repeated encounters with important interaction partners are part of everyday practice.

In a social world constructed in this way, social capital that is, the dimension of “relationships” is not a scarce, but rather an extremely important resource for social positioning. Influential actors within the milieu are urgently dependent on a certain amount of social capital. Employees with very limited social contacts can hardly be considered part of the “core milieu.” On the other hand, mere frequency of contact within the milieu is certainly not enough to shape the dynamics of interaction. Women, for example, are at the centre of community activities within the milieu, but they are by no means the most influential social actors. The ‘classic’ working-class milieu is a counter-milieu; that is, the relationship to the dominant social milieus also plays a role. However, this cannot be guaranteed solely through dense networking within one’s own milieu. Processing external influences on the milieu (e.g., technological change or political-ideological pressure) requires as it were ‘politically coloured’ cultural capital (political, cultural, and technical qualification processes, as well as, where applicable, educational qualifications) a resource that, alongside social capital, determines the dynamics within the milieu. It even seems plausible to assume that both capital resources are bipolar in nature from the perspective of societal modernisation, with social capital representing more of a “traditionalism” and persistence of the existing social milieu, while cultural capital is more responsible for modernisation and “milieu change” [8]. This tension between vital community-building practices and the pressure of modernisation (see the following figure 1) gives rise to mixtures of the two opposing symbolic capital resources—social vs. cultural capital—suggesting the formation of social types.

volume of capital +

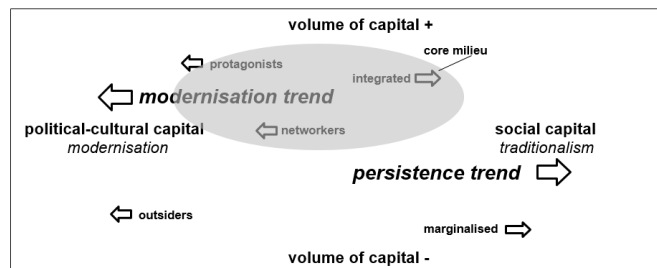


Figure 2: Specific Area of Tension Within the Social Space of Ag “Weser”

The graphic clarifies two findings of the interpretation: It demonstrates once again that it makes perfect sense to speak of a “core milieu” that, in addition to the “integrated,” must include the “protagonists” and the “networkers.” This core milieu is clearly distinguished from the “marginalised” and, above all, from the self-exclusive “outsiders.” At the same time, however, it becomes clear that the core milieu itself is undergoing change. Efforts to maintain the status quo and those to modernise were already competing in the 1950s. The protagonists can certainly be described as ‘proactive modernisers,’ while the networkers function more as ‘defensive’ or ‘reactive modernisers.’ They compensate, as it were, for the erosion of traditional interaction patterns in a ‘modern’ way. The “integrated”, on the other hand, act in a structurally conservative manner. They represent as the largest sub-milieu the astonishing persistence of the West German working-class milieu well beyond the mid-1950s. They demonstrate that the prominent social science theses on upheaval are certainly not ‘wrong,’ but undeniably premature and astonishingly undifferentiated. Looking at an exemplary working-class milieu of the early GDR can complement this interpretation.

The emergence of an “autonomous milieu”: Developments within the Rostock “Neptun” shipyard.

In comparison to the social space of the Bremen shipyard workforce, the social environment of the Rostock shipyard—as the socio-historical analysis demonstrates was subject to more profound processes of change after the Second World War [8]. The risky doubling of the workforce in 1948/49 naturally created a new social climate. Over-all, a situation arose in which certain institutional and political frameworks—certainly also due to the extremely difficult economic situation following the Soviet dismantling of industry in the Soviet Occupation Zone—considerably restricted the operational scope for action and made the lowest production unit, first the ‘column’, later the ‘brigade’, the final link in a chain of contradictory and, in some cases, dysfunctional planning decisions. Such a development shapes the “conjunctive experiential space” (Mannheim), more specifically, the social climate of the workplace environment, and makes two conceivable forms of reaction equally plausible: the collapse of traditional resources of solidarity and moral economy in the ‘classic’ working-class milieu, or a kind of subtle resistance against those conditions, which can certainly lead to other forms of milieu identity.

The results of both the socio-historical analysis and the collected life stories strongly point to the second scenario. That is, there is much to suggest that a development began in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the early GDR that ultimately led to the establishment of a functional counter-milieu among the working class. The term “functional counter-milieu” is intended to indicate

that the motive for resistance is not to be understood as politically or ideologically motivated, but rather stems primarily from the sometimes absurd planning deficiencies of everyday working life. One can certainly assume a connection to the *longue durée* of class experience, except that the symbolic ‘class enemy’ has disappeared and ‘the Party’ does not simply take its place—as it did in (petty) bourgeois dissent circles. Rather, the hidden symbolic power of the emerging counter-milieu rests precisely on the fact that, according to official state doctrine, the “hegemony of the working class” has become historical reality.

Areas of Tension in the Social Space of the “Neptun” Shipyard

This astonishing systemic configuration, which could certainly be interpreted as an irony of history, naturally shapes the dynamics within the milieu-specific social space as well. The willingness to engage in subtle resistance presupposes the experience of coherence and solidarity within the milieu. Thus, for the Rostock working-class milieu as for the AG “Weser” workforce social capital represents a particularly important resource. A contrasting profile within this milieu is a variant of capital that similar to the Bremen example can be described as a blend of political and cultural capital. While a tension arises between tendencies toward preservation and modernisation in the Bremen ship-yard milieu, the social semantics in the Rostock working-class milieu appear to function differently: In the area of concentration of “social capital,” orientations such as equality and autonomy play an important role, while in the core area of “political-cultural capital,” tendencies toward conformity and exposure are more readily observed. “Conformity” here means adapting to the political and institutional preferences of the newly emerging GDR society—a fundamental prerequisite for prominent positions, especially in the workplace. The conflict constellations observed in this context reveal distinctly different profiles than in Western circles. For example, upward social mobility has a different connotation: it is not part of a more or less accepted modernisation process as in the West, but—given the strictly egalitarian orientation in the East—is essentially ignored. Even the astonishing rise of a worker to shipyard management, by Western standards, can be presented quite unpretentiously as a career path ‘appropriate to the milieu.’ Even downward social mobility does not appear to pose a significant threat. The egalitarian climate of the milieu relativises it. In this tension between egalitarian communal practice and political-institutional exposure, mixtures of the two polarising symbolic capital resources (social vs. political-cultural capital) emerge, which—as in the Bremen example—suggest the formation of social types.

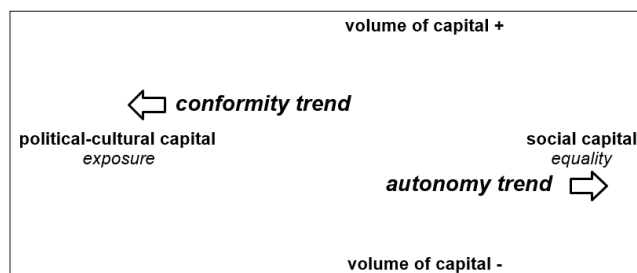


Figure 3: Basic Tensions in the Social Space (“Neptun” Shipyard)

Actor typologies in the East German working-class milieu
A systematic review of the biographical interviews suggests a classification into four actor types:

- **The Type of the New Protagonist:** Like the “protagonists” in the West, “new protagonists” are generally members of the functional elite within their social milieu (active SED members with ‘company careers’; members of the company union leadership

and the factory management). They possess social capital, but their dilemma lies in the fact that they must constantly deny their relatively ex-posed position if they want to be accepted within their milieu. Yet, there is compelling reason for them to do so. The new protagonists almost always have re-markable qualifications and have achieved considerable accomplishments.

• **The Type of the New Integrated:** “New integrated” actors possess substantial social capital and enjoy recognition, particularly within their companies, and de-fine their own identity very strongly through their work. As in the West, the pro-totype is male, group-oriented, and egalitarian with a pronounced proletarian habitus. The newly integrated workers, especially brigadiers and their collectives, are the core of that subtle “counter-milieu” that only emerged in East Germany during the post-war period. They differ from the West German “integrated” workers precisely because they are not representatives of a trend toward stagnation, but rather, on the contrary, representatives of a new autonomy. However, this autonomy has only limited modernisation effects. Initially, it leads to the stabilisation and expansion of the milieu.

• **The Type of the Double Worker:** “Double workers” are certainly not a creation of real socialism. The burden placed on women in both professional and family life, without the sometimes exemplary conditions of the later GDR years, represents no qualitative difference from the situation of female workers during the Weimar Republic, nor does it differ dramatically from the post-war situation of the few female shipyard workers in West Germany. Rather, the burden on women in the young GDR is even greater: They are both heavy labourers and specialists in community building. Professional development opportunities remain extremely limited. Women act as a kind of ‘buffer’ for the unpredictable development of production, essentially ‘holding the reins’ for the modernisation efforts driven by the male-dominated qualification drive.

• **The Type of the Outsider:** Of course, there are also social actors in Rostock’s working-class milieu who, while clearly belonging to the milieu, are not members of its core. At least, they lack sufficient social capital to easily ‘belong.’ Compared to the Western type of “marginalised” individuals, the “new marginalised” in the East are also products of the GDR-specific new dynamics within the social milieu. They do not yet possess the connections that would ‘naturally’ link them to the countercultural activities of the lowest production level. This is especially true for people from other regions and cultures who, for example, came to the shipyard in Rostock during the ‘relocation’ of half the workforce in 1948/49. However, this also applies to members of middle management who are characterised by over-adaptation to the interests of the plant management. In any case, they do not belong to the core group.

Portrait of the “New Integrated” as a Prototype “East”

The interview material about this prototype was quite convincing [8]. However, for presenting this type in the present context, a literary example from the early GDR is surprisingly even more suitable, one that has attained astonishing political and symbolic significance as a novel and especially as a film. One of the most remarkable DEFA productions, Frank Beyer’s film “Spur der Steine” (Trace of Stones incidentally starring the famous GDR-actor Manfred Krug as a headstrong carpenter foreman), devotes considerable space to the theme of autonomy among the “new integrated.” Interestingly, the film disappeared from the programme at the Cinema International in East Berlin three days after its premiere in 1966 and was not shown again until 23 years later. Apparently, the topic was still too sensitive in 1966. Its screenplay is based on a rather debatable, unbearably didactic

novel by Erik Neutsch, which was also published in 1966. Key passages of this novel read as if ‘against the grain’ convey a sensory impression of that autonomous counter-milieu which does appear in our material, but is only explicitly addressed in passing.

The plot of the nearly 1000-page novel is quickly summarised: Hannes Balla, a robust foreman of a carpentry crew, as workaholic as he is unpredictable, transforms from a selfish money maker into a labour hero and a loyal SED Party member. This transformation is also due to the Party Secretary of the fictional construction site that serves as the setting, a dynamic and unorthodox organiser named Horrath, who convinces Balla not only as a communist but also as a human person. However, it is precisely this human element that ultimately leads to Horrath’s downfall. He falls in love with the young engineer Katrin Klee, begins an affair with her alongside his marriage, and even fathers an illegitimate child. His moral failure lies in his refusal to acknowledge this love to his wife or, fully, to the Party, which ultimately destroys their relationship and also brings an end to his Party career. Balla, who had also set his sights on Katrin, is a sad witness to this downfall. There is no happy ending. The novel concludes with an elegiac reflection on “communism in here.” The main plot is flanked by a series of contradictory characters: the overwhelmed construction site manager, a shy but talented engineer from a Protestant family, the Party Secretary’s wife, who was abused as a child, a narrow-minded Party functionary out of touch with reality, the assertive old communist and resistance fighter, a member of the political committee who has an answer for every problem, and even the chairman of the state council. All the characters seem contrived; hardly any of the described individual developments are convincing, but the underlying theme how the GDR can win over genuine workers to tackle the major challenges of the future is certainly discernible.

This Hypothesis Will Be Verified at Several Key Points in the Novel:

“Horrath felt the brigadier’s icy rejection, felt Balla snubbing him. He couldn’t explain why. Perhaps, he thought, he just didn’t want to be disturbed in his work frenzy. These kinds of carpenters consider anyone who comes just to talk to them completely superfluous in the world. I should take off my jacket and help him out so he doesn’t think I’m afraid of getting my hands dirty. Before the Party sent me to school, dear Balla, I went down the mine shaft day after day. Don’t think it was a pleasure when we lay on our stomachs and drilled. Or I should remind him that we’d met before, even if only briefly. That’s exactly how I remember you, with the pearl in your left ear. I’m supposed to give you my best regards from the Baltic Sea, from the port of Rostock.”

Balla perked up. He sat up in surprise, his knees bent, and looked Horrath straight in the eye. But he gave no indication of his thoughts. Greetings from Rostock? Could we have met there before? Your face immediately gave me the impression that I didn’t trust it. When I saw you a few days ago, albeit only from a distance, it seemed to me as if we knew each other. But our acquaintance must have been very superficial. I never forget a face; you can count on it. But yours has vanished into my memory, as if into a fog. So, you haven’t done me any harm. Or have you...? Nothing good can be expected from you anyway. I could thank you for this greeting. That’s what you’re hoping for now, isn’t it? But you’re the Party Secretary. And that’s enough for me not to answer you. Do you understand me, lad? Balla asked loudly: ‘I hope they explained the occupational safety regulations to you. So that I won’t be to blame me if you break your neck [10].’

The prototypes of the conflict stand facing each other: the brigadier and the Party Secretary. This scene would be unconvincing if it were a random confrontation, like the “wild Balla” and the “clear-sighted Horrath,” for example. However, the scene thrives on an ‘objective’ dynamic. Brigadier and Party Secretary represent an already literary antagonism, like ‘king and beggar,’ ‘worker and capitalist.’ Brigadier and Party Secretary are clearly antipodes that require no further explanation. “Nothing good can be expected from you anyway,” Balla muses, “...you’re the Party Secretary. And that’s enough for me not to answer you.”

The GDR is not even 20 years old, and at the heart of its social life, a conflict has taken root that threatens its legitimacy not an ideological conflict, but a pragmatic dilemma about work and wages: “Horrath Felt the Brigadier’s Icy Rejection.” The brigadier, for his part, since he is consciously perceiving Horrath as a Party Secretary for the first time, can react dismissively because “Party Secretary” is associated with an already established experience (“And that’s enough for me not to answer you.”). The novelist who employs this contrasting pattern must be able to draw on established everyday knowledge. Certainly, he has an almost pedagogical interest in breaking down the antagonistic constellation, but the events can only become dynamic if there is a real dynamic inherent in the basic situation.

Of course, the very first scene shows in which direction the novel will develop: Horrath, too, was a worker before he went to the Party school; and Balla doesn’t seem entirely unmoved. Does he know the Party Secretary? Was there actually a past encounter? The assumption that they will talk isn’t very risky. However, the distance seems insurmountable for the time being. The antagonism persists.

But what is the basis of this antagonism? The Party Secretary’s perplexity (“He couldn’t explain the reason for it.”) seems rather implausible. The association, “perhaps... he doesn’t want to be disturbed in his work frenzy,” at least points in a certain direction: Balla represents the type of worker who shows no social interest beyond his job, his brigade, and his wages. Such people are, of course, difficult to criticise in a socialist system. They are good and motivated workers (“work frenzy”) and are therefore urgently needed for building society. But they cannot be forced to take on additional tasks, least of all Party involvement. An interest in sufficient and adequate work and a good wage is not dishonourable.

Erik Neutsch intensifies the real conflict inherent in his dramatic confrontation by stylising the brigadier into a kind of artistic figure. Balla is a carpenter. His brigade, which has long been engaged in large-scale cement casting (as depicted in “Trace of Stones”), appears as an ‘objective’ anachronism. With their black overalls, carpenter’s hats, and the pearl in their left ear, they represent the insignia of traditional craftsmanship, which modern times have long since transcended. Balla will later remove the pearl from his left ear after finally agreeing to wear the Party badge. The motif of avant-garde modernity competes with the symbol of a long-gone tradition. However, the average brigadier in the GDR is not a man from the 19th century, but usually a modern industrial worker. The fundamental conflict to which the quoted scene refers is not the antagonism between craft and Party, between tradition and modernity, but a contradiction that “socialist modernity” itself created. This hidden dynamic can also be seen in other parts of the novel:

“More heated than usual, arguments raged at every location about one of the fashionable movements, which were guaranteed to be

invented at least every six months, usually never lasted long, and always hid behind some slogan or other, this time behind this one: ‘socialist work, learning, and living’. Up until now, Balla and his brigade had almost always been able to deflect such discussions with the laconic remark: ‘Things are never as bad as they seem.’ Sometimes, however, when he was under too much pressure, he had admitted to the fashion, been left in peace from then on, and never had to worry about it again. Once, he was even publicly praised for it, honoured as an activist, although he could hardly remember the name, a difficult-to-pronounce Russian name, that had been given to the method.”

Erik Neutsch places the brigadier’s conflict with the respective management levels in a real context: the competitive movements of the late 1950s, and in particular the founding phase of the “socialist brigades.” The distance between the political initiatives and the lower production units becomes apparent (fashionable movements... invented at least every six months... never lasting long... always hidden behind some slogan or other), and with it, the Party’s failings. The text plausibly demonstrates, with astonishing directness, how the “fashionable movements” were themselves exploited by the workers. Here, the novel comes close to the real problems. The antagonism between “brigadier” and Party Secretary” takes on a very concrete form. The problem arising from this contradiction is of considerable consequence for the organisation of East German industry and goes far beyond the grassroots conflict, as Neutsch has the experienced political committee member explain:

“For over ten years, we have given the well-intentioned among the old intelligentsia the opportunity to become accustomed to the conditions of our state power. Many young engineers have earned doctorates and diplomas at our universities and colleges. We would be poor Marxists if we believed that all of this had no effect on them, even if they often still resist it. Precisely for this reason, the Party must help them, so that order is restored to the management on our construction sites. Site manager, foreman, brigadier that is the order. The engineer, not the brigadier, determines when and where construction takes place. Both consult with each other on how to improve, always improving that is what we understand by a relationship of trust. It is simply impossible to begin with complex industrial construction methods otherwise.”

The Party is clearly fighting on several fronts: it must convince the sons and daughters of the “old intelligentsia” to assume responsibility and take their leadership role seriously; and at the same time, it faces the task of persuading the workforce—which at least within companies operates autonomously to relinquish its newly gained autonomy (“The engineer, not the brigadier, determines when and where construction takes place.”). While the Party itself no longer appears responsible for the organisational problems between management and production units—a strong indication that such problems were commonplace (“... to help restore order to the management of our construction sites”) the social constellation that this appeal presupposes is not without its irony: the SED can easily rely neither on the loyalty of the bourgeois intelligentsia, which at the beginning of the 1960s still constitutes a large part of the technical intelligentsia, nor on that of the broad working class, which has apparently found its own way of determining “when and how construction takes place.” While disciplining and integrating the old intelligentsia does not appear to pose any real difficulties for Party strategy (“... therefore the Party must help them”), the challenge lies in the resistance and autonomy of the working class:

“We... must educate the people who draw up the plans and then build in socialist think-ing, in conscious work discipline [...]. But what is the situation now? The engineers are treated like shoeshine boys by the guild journeymen. They are rushed around, given wood, given cement... If not, there’s trouble. Sometimes it’s still revenge for the fact that it used to be the other way around. Nobody denies that. The engineers, the techni-cians, were the faithful servants of the corporations. They drove the workers on, in most cases [...]. But what a pathetic sentiment it is to want revenge today.

The description of the conflict is clear (“The engineers are treated like shoeshine boys by the guild journeymen.”), but its interpretation remains ambiguous: On the one hand, the motif of tradition is brought to the fore again (“guild journeymen”), the responsible brigadiers are not behaving in accordance with modern times; on the other hand, how-ever, the “new age” itself is used as an explanation, namely the reversal of hierarchies (“Sometimes it’s still revenge for the fact that it used to be the other way around”). That is to say, a kind of “new working class” has indeed emerged, evidently autonomous and aware of its potential. But this new class still needs education by the Party (“We, on the other hand, must educate people [...] in socialist thinking”). The only concrete specifica-tion of the educational goal is, of course, “conscious work discipline” and the ac-ceptance of the old company hierarchy: “Site manager, foreman, brigadier—that is the order.” It seems rather unlikely that the workers will relinquish their newfound autono-my for this. Even the at least partially reformed Balla expresses this skepticism:

“If we want to pour cement, we get lumber; if we want to build formwork, we get grav-el. Bottlenecks everywhere.’ I’m running myself ragged over a few wooden beams. I say... it’s enough to drive you to despair. The brigadier is back to being the errand boy. And the worst part is, you just accept it. I keep meaning to slam my fist on the table, on this construction manager, this Party Secretary. I just can’t bring myself to do it any-more. Damn it, and I’ve got someone at the crack house who’s got me figured out. His name is Bast. He goes out drinking whenever he feels like it. And I thought I could change him.”

Balla has evidently “consciously” submitted to the Party-sanctioned work discipline, relinquished his autonomy, and subordinated himself to the old hierarchy (“The briga-dier is back to being the errand boy.”). But he doesn’t seem at all convinced of his self-discipline. Work organisation continues to fail (“If we want to pour cement, we get lumber; if we want to build formwork, we get gravel. Bottlenecks everywhere.”). The only difference seems to be that Balla “can no longer bring himself” to “slam his fist on the table.” Ultimately, this unconvincing restraint doesn’t bring him any closer to solving the overall problem. The conflict, so to speak, shifts to the next level. “Bast” is the name given to the ‘new Balla’ (“Goes out drinking whenever he feels like it”). And even Bal-la, who is still close to him and could most likely understand him, “can’t change him.”

In fact, the novel’s overall concept remains mired in this unresolved dilemma. The ideal-ised concluding scenarios seem contrived and unrelated to the quite discernible real-world problems. Essentially, the novel comes across as a poor metaphor for the only so-cialist project on German soil. The thesis that a kind of autonomous counter-milieu is emerging at the heart of the working class in the young GDR, which the various levels of management from the Party leadership to the factory executives—cannot control,

certainly seems highly plausible. It is not without a certain irony of history that this self-assured “new working class” may well be the cause of the economic decline of that so-cialist project in East Germany.

Development Dynamics within the “East” Milieu

As in the West German shipyard milieu of the 1950s, movements and dynamics can also be observed in the East German social milieu. The identified sub-milieus each represent specific actor profiles within the social sphere. However, while in the West strong ten-sions exist between a “pole of modernisation” and a “pole of persistence,” and the activ-ities of the “protagonists” in particular tend toward a “socialisation of the milieu,” which undoubtedly contains lasting modernisation effects, a counter-trend can be observed in the East in several respects: The milieu is only modernising weakly and shows no signs of erosion. In a certain sense, we can even speak of a re-traditionalisation of the work-ing-class milieu. A dynamic unfolds between the poles of “autonomy” and “conformi-ty,” and instead of a “socialisation of the working class”—which was practically a polit-ical imperative for the GDR—an autonomous counter-milieu emerges.

This milieu is represented by the “new integrated,” undoubtedly the most interesting type of actors in the East German milieu. Based on such cautious comparative trends, the dynamics of this milieu can be vividly illustrated once again using the sketch intro-duced above:

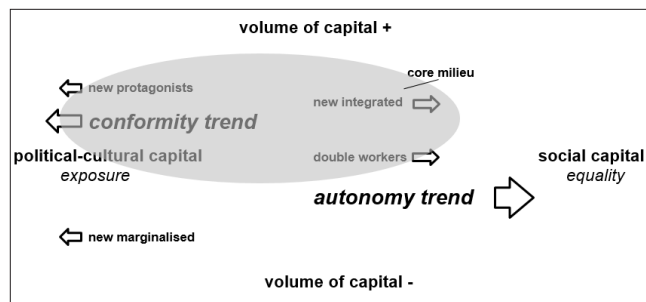


Figure 4: Basic tensions in the social space (“Neptun” shipyard)

The East German graph also clarifies two findings of the previous interpretation. It shows that even for the social milieu of the GDR, it makes perfect sense to speak of a “core milieu” that, in addition to the “new integrated,” must also include the “new pro-tagonists” and the “double-working women.” This core milieu is clearly distinct from the “new marginalised.” In contrast to the internal dynamics of the West German milieu, the East German core milieu—despite the contrasting dynamics—appears to be much more stable and even continued to grow in the 1950s. This is also related to the fact that the system-compliant new protagonists, who usually come from the milieu of the new inte-grated, perform their leadership functions in an exceptionally defensive manner, thereby further promoting the pursuit of autonomy (especially in the area of wage policy).

This core milieu is clearly distinct from the new marginalised. The development of the working-class milieu in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the early GDR, compared to the West, was characterised by a number of framework conditions that left an unmistak-able mark. First, the establishment of a socialist state lent the working class as a whole, and especially certain aspects of the labour movement’s tradition, a symbolic weight that became detached from the actual cultural expressions of the working class. For the polit-ical power centre, this symbolic weight, however,

began to represent a legitimising burden that could hardly be underestimated. In all centralist plans for restructuring society, a certain threshold of loyalty could not be crossed: a “workers’ and peasants’ state” could not be established against the will of the workers and peasants. This meant, however, that the fundamental concerns of the working class—adequate housing and living conditions, secure employment, and a good wage—had to be guaranteed not only ideologically, but also in reality.

The post-war situation not only made it difficult to guarantee adequate living conditions, which remained elusive well into the 1950s, but also, due to industrial dismantling in the socialist “brother country” of the Soviet Union—and dramatic raw material shortages, made the right to work a central problem for political planning. Symbolic rewards, such as the rapid implementation of educational and management promotions for a small working-class elite, could not compensate for these dilemmas. The development of a satisfactory wage structure that (a) was accepted by the working class and (b) also took into account the economic options of a functioning planned economy remained entirely unresolved.

As the research material demonstrates, the problems therefore did not arise along ideological lines, but rather in relatively pragmatic areas of everyday life. The briefly mentioned expansion of the workforce at the “Neptun” shipyard in 1948/49, which was completely unjustified from a business perspective and extremely risky from an organisational sociology standpoint, surprisingly did not lead to dramatic conflicts within the workforce, but rather to a subtle confrontation between the ‘grassroots actors’ in production and the levels of company planning and management, which naturally—at least symbolically also included the Party leadership and the company trade union leadership. This covert conflict became “institutionalised” in the continuous and economically precarious bargaining processes for adequate wages, which, by no means touched only at the “Neptun” shipyard in Rostock, but structurally triggered two symptomatic developments: (1) a significant increase in autonomy for the lowest production units and (2) a gradual erosion of productivity standards.

(ad 1) The brigade, as the lowest production unit, and especially the brigadier, who increasingly developed into a ‘tariff specialist’ and ‘negotiation virtuoso’ in setting work quotas, formed, in a sense, the crystallising core of an autonomous proletarian counter-milieu. This milieu incorporated many elements of traditional German working-class culture but also developed new characteristics. The decisiveness of wage autonomy, enforced at a sub-organisational level, as early as the 1950s is demonstrated by the conflicts surrounding June 17, 1953. The anchor case of the “new integrated” workers in our data suggests this. Even at this early stage, the escalating over-fulfillment of quotas in many industrial plants indicates that, in setting quotas, the brigades’ power to enforce them and the skills of the brigadiers were able to prevent an agreement on ‘real’ quotas in favour of improving the wage situation. The state’s attempt to impose stricter production quotas clearly broke the tacitly established practice of grassroots participation and led to manifest resistance. Its political and symbolic power was evidently so enduring that, for example, at the “Neptun” shipyard, immediately after June 17, 1953, a directive from the factory director was circulated stating that “all quotas ordered against the will of the workers [...] were withdrawn and that future quota increases [...] were to be implemented only with the workers’ consent”:

The autonomy of the lowest production unit had thus prevailed. The SED state capitulated to an “informal council structure” within the production sector. This was explicitly not a political-ideological ‘victory’ for the workers, but rather the pragmatically achieved autonomy in wage matters. The half-hearted attempt to reverse this effect by abolishing the brigades (1957) had no impact because the bargaining structures remained virtually intact. The reintroduction under the label of “socialist brigades” (from 1958 onwards) even increased the autonomy of the basic unit, because it now also extended to the sphere of reproduction. The core of an autonomous workers’ counter-milieu crystallised in the early GDR around the everyday practical problem of wage disputes (over the setting of the norm).

(ad 2) The economic outcome of this exceptionally interesting socio-structural development is, of course, precarious. During the 1950s, ‘overachievement of standards’ increased dramatically. 200%, even 300%, fulfillment of standards was not uncommon. Artificially generated peak performance (e.g., concealing overtime to suggest more lucrative overachievement) also falls into this. As a result, productivity declines. Clear standards become impossible to discern; rational planning is rendered impossible. Furthermore, performance plans and group wages fragment the wage system to such an extent that fair compensation can no longer be guaranteed. The relative autonomy of the workforce has an economically counterproductive effect possibly the seed of later economic collapse.

“Broken Modernisation”: A German Configuration

A close comparison of the two shipyard milieus already reveals striking differences. The following section will examine the specific characteristics of each milieu individually before a summary relates the findings to the overall theme of this essay: What significance does the concept of biographical significance have for the analysis of collective developments?

Just as the “old worker-specific proletariat” persists in a certain sense within the Bremen shipyard workers’ milieu, so too can a continuity be observed in the actions, trade union and political activities of the Bremen shipyard workers, initially connecting to the traditions of the Weimar era beyond the Nazi period. Until 1953/54, the workforce at AG “Weser” was experienced in struggle, ready for action, highly organised, and in some parts politically radical. It demonstrated a considerably higher readiness for militancy than the trade union leadership and frequently rejected compromises negotiated by the latter [11]. Labour disputes and internal conflicts often arise from grassroots actions in individual trades or workshops and are either subsequently legitimised by the union leadership or not at all. Even though union shop stewards usually lead these labour disputes, all of this points to a considerable degree of self-confidence, self-organisation, and autonomy among the shipyard workers.

However, this autonomous workforce action diminishes in the second half of the 1950s. Here we observe a significant shift: Instead of workplace action, in which autonomous grassroots activities interacted with union strategies, there is now almost exclusively institutionalised bargaining by the unions and the works council. Since these unions—especially in the Social Democratic-dominated city of Bremen—maintain close ties to the state and understand how to utilise its resources to improve the working class’s situation, one can speak not only of an institutionalisation of interest negotiation but even of a kind of “socialisation” of the needs and interests of the working class.

This points to a process that began in the second half of the 1950s and initiated the transformation of the entire milieu. The density and high degree of networking within the shipyard worker milieu was established in the first half of the 1950s not solely within the company—primarily through trade union and political (i.e., predominantly Social Democratic) organisation. This occurred not only through the majority of shipyard workers' membership in the trade union and the fact that shipyard workers' families in Bremen's working-class districts overwhelmingly supported the SPD, but these organisations and the works council also formed the framework within which the "protagonists of the milieu" operated. Works councils and local party officials represent the intermediary bodies in mediating between the work environment and the overall social and political system. Their role and the function of such an existing network are of paramount importance for managing the daily lives of shipyard workers and their families—from finding housing to setting up school camps. Even the independent actions of trade unions and sections of the workforce operate within the framework of this network.

With the establishment of a hegemonic bloc of the Social Democratic Party and trade union leadership that governed the state of Bremen for decades, a process of alienation began between these organisations and the workers' milieu. While union membership and voting for the SPD remained a given for the majority of shipyard workers, they became increasingly superficial. Intermediary institutions lost their significance in structuring the milieu. This "socialisation" of the labour movement and social conflicts had, on the one hand, certain material advantages for the workers for example, in terms of improving equal opportunities for their children or finding housing—but on the other hand, the milieu lost an important part of its organising inner-structure. This had consequences not only for the ability to act within the workplace, but also weakened the milieu's network rooting in everyday life.

Complaints about the dwindling sense of belonging during the 1950s are found in almost all the life stories of the interviewed members of this milieu. In this process, the "milieu protagonists" are the driving force, while the "integrated" slow this development. With their considerable social (and lesser cultural) capital, they are bound to the traditional milieu, whose erosion directly affects them. However, the protagonists do not intentionally or for self-serving reasons such as career advancement weaken the milieu through their actions. Their conception of representing interests within the political and social system of the Federal Republic is more "modern," more nuanced, and more rational than the old forms of networking and action within the milieu, and thus more effective in improving the situation of their colleagues. That they, in their intention to do what is best for their milieu, contribute to dissolving its autonomy and thus weakening the milieu as a whole, is also a certain irony of history.

(1) The consolidation of the working-class milieu at the "Neptun" shipyard went hand in hand with the preservation of certain traditional characteristics. Loyalty to the social system, at least to the shipyard management, accompanied by distance and even protest, was just as much a part of it as collegiality and solidarity among the workers. A proletarian ethos was linked to the self-confidence of the skilled workers. In their everyday lives, the pursuit of order, thrift, and sometimes considerable modesty, as well as the ability to seize opportunities, were important. Enjoying social interaction remained a defining feature. A specific social-democratic or communist 'milieu culture' cannot be identified. It either never existed in that form within the shipyard environment

or it broke off with the social upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s and was permanently lost.

Nevertheless, it seems plausible to characterise the East German shipyard milieu as "autonomous." The concept of autonomy has many dimensions, some of which are closely linked to the scope of action available to workers under the conditions of the Soviet Occupation Zone/GDR, while others are more general in nature. The more general dimensions primarily include influencing factors arising from the work process itself. Since the beginning of large-scale shipbuilding, the shipbuilding production process has afforded workers' considerable autonomy, both in managing their own working hours and in making independent decisions regarding their technical and craft skills.

Such 'open spaces' which can also be linked to constraints of self-regulation increased rather than decreased in the late 1940s and 1950s because they were now connected to specific systemic conditions. Like other workers in East German industrial enterprises, shipyard workers directly experienced the weaknesses of the economic system of "real socialism." To keep the shipbuilding production process running, they not only had to compensate for contradictory, belated, or otherwise disrupted planning decisions made by the shipyard management, and more frequently by higher-level economic management bodies, but also to mitigate the consequences of a discontinuous production flow. This production flow, partly caused by the shipyard itself, but partly due to the shipyard's position at the end of a long chain of suppliers who by no means always met their delivery obligations in terms of deadlines, product range, and quality, demanded a high degree of work knowledge, initiative, and autonomous decision-making from the workers. This might begin with the seemingly simple question of whether a slightly different size screw might be more suitable for the task, and could culminate in independent intervention in material procurement. Not least from these circumstances arises a considerable degree of self-confidence, which quite obviously characterised not only shipyard workers in the GDR. This experience of autonomy, resulting from the concrete work processes and job requirements of the young GDR, undoubtedly forms the basis of the autonomous proletarian milieu in East Germany.

The desire for self-employment intensified with the escalation of wage disputes at the beginning of the 1950s. The autonomy of the brigadiers and brigades became most evident in the following years during the negotiation of production quotas, as well as in wage setting in general, and thus in the procurement of work orders. A comparison with the immediate post-war situation at the AG "Weser" demonstrates that workers' scope for negotiation in wage setting was not "specific to the GDR." However, this scope expanded dramatically in the East German working-class milieu during the 1950s. A dynamic that made the derailment of production quota development almost irreversible was linked to the events surrounding June 17, 1953. The reversal of the quota increase imposed on all companies and the stipulation of worker consent to quota increases represented a far-reaching compromise based on conflicting interests. In the aftermath of the shock of the events, the state and Party leadership sought to appease the workers through social concessions and to keep them from engaging in political resistance.

Peter Hübner's assessment that relations between the working class and the political regime require a constant balancing of political and social interests gets to the heart of the conflict, as does his conviction that the political regime must strive for compromises of interest below the threshold of political conflict [4]. After June

17th, this balancing act was clearly linked to a gain in autonomy for workers within the factories. Essentially, there was an enshrining and partial expansion of comprehensive internal wage negotiation opportunities, which could be particularly well utilised by brigades and similar work groups. That this success in securing and increasing wages was quite ambivalent seems not to have been considered at the time. In reality, however, the increase in autonomy for the workers has long-term consequences that contribute to the destabilisation of the GDR's economic system.

The basic structure of the shipyard workers' milieu is increasingly becoming the brigade, even at a time when it is still entirely focused on its productive function. Here, the "new integrated workers," with their considerable social capital, act in a way that ultimately drives the trend toward autonomy. Everything indicates that, with the movement of the "brigades of socialist labour" since the late 1950s, the scope for action can be expanded once again through the addition of an educational function.

The two preceding sections further demonstrate the contrasting developments already indicated. German working-class milieus are indeed caught up in the "dynamics of the system." The West German working-class milieu begins to erode in the 1950s—albeit much more slowly than conventional analyses would suggest. The East German post-war working-class milieu stabilises—certainly not in a way that conforms to the system, but rather in a decidedly "countercultural" manner. In both societal configurations, the working-class milieu gains a remarkable influence: in the West through a comprehensible process of "socialisation," and in the East through the completely unexpected establishment of "autonomous" forms of self-organisation. It is surprising that the successful "socialisation" of proletarian tradition and culture does not occur in the socialist part of Germany, but rather in a welfare-state-protected variant of capitalism. It almost seems like a cruel twist of fate that the ideologically pampered working-class milieu of the GDR developed an "anti-state" profile and eluded the economic rationalities of a centrally planned economy, while the West German proletariat lost its cultural autonomy and, to a considerable extent, merged into the broad bloc of social milieus that constitute the new middle classes. In both cases, we can observe a developmental process that is best characterised by the term "broken modernisation."

Undeniably, the social structures of both German post-war societies were modernised. The drastic confrontation between social elites and the working population that still characterised the 1920s was replaced in the neo-socialist GDR by a normative egalitarianism that significantly enhanced proletarian social conditions. In the Federal Republic of Germany, a spectacular development of the welfare state prevented the real and even the symbolic continuation of traditional class struggle scenarios. The "social democratisation" of society—even under Christian-social auspices—relativises conventional class profiles and integrates the proletariat to the point of almost complete diffusion of its traditional cultural and political autonomy.

The effect of this astonishing integration process in both German societies is, of course, highly ambivalent in the long run for each of the different political systems. In the GDR, it gradually destroys the rationality of economic planning and brings society to the brink of economic collapse early on. The remarkable informal autonomy of the working class by no means leads to a visible gain in rationality and civility. Given the de facto power to shape policy at the company level, the deficit in political-democratic participation remains in need of explanation. The subtle tension

between the sub-milieus of the "new protagonists" and the "new integrated," and the astonishing hegemony of the second type of actors, who insist on autonomy, demonstrate that post-conventional development opportunities and processes of re-traditionalisation are in balance here. The moral economy of the successful pursuit of autonomy remains defensive. It is based on the guarantee of the satisfaction of basic needs, which already belongs to the *longue durée* of pre-modern plebeian [12]. The pursuit of qualifications, which characterises the remarkable willingness of the new protagonists to engage in further training, is underdeveloped in this mentality. Stagnant or even 'broken' social modernisation processes are the necessary consequence. Social development has been slowed down.

In West Germany, the integration of the working-class milieu, which began in the 1950s, led to an "opening of the social space" Traditional social positions blurred and gradually began to dissolve [13]. The "socialisation" of the working-class milieu observed here was reinforced in subsequent decades by political support for upward social mobility through education. While this shifted the traditional boundaries of social milieus, it also relativised the dynamics within the social space: The upward trend was devalued by its inflation. Opportunities to enter the (academic) labour market became increasingly scarce. The pressure to acquire qualifications led to irreversible exclusion at the bottom of the qualification pyramid [14].

Such obvious disruptions to socio-structural modernisation certainly have their roots in the 1950s. The tension between the actor type of the "protagonists" and the traditionalist "integrated" is revealing. It shows that the development of the Federal Republic of Germany can only be interpreted as a fractured modernisation. The protagonists' hidden success lies in the astonishing results of institutional modernisation, but not in parallel experiences of "individual modernisation" [15]. The protagonists do not even acknowledge their central role in the modernisation process of their social milieu. The contradiction between institutional modernisation and mental traditionalism characterises a society whose facade is changing at a breathtaking pace, but whose mental disposition remains largely structurally conservative. And the working-class milieu even in its objective dissolution clearly belongs to the persistent social groups [16-22].

A new, yet morally and economically "classic" working-class milieu in the GDR, and a disintegrating yet mentally structurally conservative milieu in the FRG, are at the center of economic and institutional modernisation processes in both German post-war societies and are increasingly losing the status of actors that is ascribed to the proletariat of "organised modernity" at least in the tradition of the political left. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why German society, after reunification, still appears outwardly modern—given the social challenges of contemporary history, the threat to democracy and the welfare state, and the dangers of climate catastrophe and wars that violate international law but inwardly seems rather unstable and lacking in perspective. This diagnosis seems risky and makes a kind of interim assessment worthwhile.

The analysis of the two working-class milieus of the 1950s, resulting in a "broken modernisation" with very different developments, focuses considerations once again on the status of what "modernisation" actually means. Previous analyses had already made it clear that modernity does not represent a coherent cultural practice, but rather that alongside subdominant countercultures such as Romanticism, the German Youth

Movement at the beginning of the 20th century, or the alternative movements in the con-text of 1968] three modern “subject codes” each gaining hegemonic influence: the bour-geois subject from the end of the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century, the employ-ee subject from the end of the 19th century to around 1970, and the postmodern subject from the last quarter of the 20th century to the present day [23].

It is symptomatic that Reckwitz consistently chooses the most socially privileged seg-ment of the identified subject configurations—the educated bourgeoisie, the “organisa-tion man,” and the new “creative class” as evidence for his praxeological descriptions, even though lower-middle-class women also achieved remarkable careers in early mo-dernity workers in “organised modernity” participated in the development of new cul-tural practices, and the emerging creative class split into neoliberal cultural capitalists and alternative self-political figures [24-25].

The working class examined in this essay—essentially the lower-level variant of Reck-witz’s “employee subject not only intensifies practices such as the assumption of respon-sibility in work organisation (especially in East Germany). It seems to be a “collective actor” in its own historical decline; and this not only occurred significantly earlier than the loss of its hegemony is usually dated (around 1970), but ironically—also across sys-tems, both in the West and the East Germany—as early as the 1950s. This observation casts a disconcerting light on the “actor hood” of the working class. It does not appear that the cultural ascent (West) or the gain in autonomy (East) was anything like a politi-cal “project.” Rather, the praxeological interpretation is more convincing: that the histor-ically developed arrangement of practice itself is the actual “actor”: the functionality and dysfunctionality of the settings in which certain practices have greater or lesser chances of being realised.

On the other hand, the replacement of the “employee subject” as a hegemonic cultural ‘subject code’ of the “Social-Democratic 20th century” and the beginning of the trans-formation of prevailing practices of work, intimacy, and technologies of the self depend on “protagonists” who break with the hitherto dominant practice. Everyday actors like Rudolf Brandt and his wife are examples of this: the works council chairman, because although suppressing this fact is political actions push the boundaries of his milieu and thus endanger its continued existence; his wife, because with a morally conscious af-front to her party’s education policy she enables her sons to pursue an educational career and attain a higher social position. The creative potential for action hidden in their actual activities can only be understood if dialectically a resource undoubtedly framed socially is assumed to exist beyond the “actor ship” of practice, a resource connected to the bio-graphical potential of these individual actors.

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