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978-0-521-03007-6 - Dictatorship, State Planning, and Social Theory in the German Democratic Republic

Peter C. Caldwell

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Dictatorship, State Planning, and Social Theory in the German Democratic Republic

The introduction of centralized state planning and party dictatorship dramatically altered the environment for social theory in communist East Germany. This book examines the way the German Democratic Republic (GDR) worked from the point of view of its leading experts in law, economics, philosophy, and cybernetics. Like other state-socialist countries, the GDR aimed for a postcapitalist modernization, which it hoped to achieve by way of dictatorship. Caldwell makes use of newly available archival sources to demonstrate how state-socialist politics and social theory both merged and collided. From the 1950s onward, figures such as the economist Fritz Behrens, the jurist Hermann Klenner, and the philosopher Ernst Bloch struggled with the basic contradictions of state socialism that eventually led to its collapse. The plan, for example, forbade markets yet could not function without them; the party-state subordinated the rule of law to its own decrees yet also called for a regular and reliable system of rules; Marxist-Leninist philosophy rejected idealism yet made its own idealist claim to know the purported laws of historical development. With a clear explication of basic concepts in Marxist economics, this book is an accessible introduction to the elements of state socialism that its leading proponents saw as most important.

Peter C. Caldwell teaches modern European and German history at Rice University. An Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Professor Caldwell has published extensively on twentieth-century German political and legal thought. His 1997 book, *Popular Sovereignty and the Crisis of German Constitutional Law: The Theory and Practice of Weimar Constitutionalism*, provided a new account of the challenge of democratization in interwar Germany.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521820905

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First published 2003
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Caldwell, Peter C.
Dictatorship, state planning, and social theory in the German Democratic Republic /
Peter C. Caldwell.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-82090-1

1. Socialism – Germany (East) – History. I. Title.

HX280.5.A6 C35 2003

335.43'0943'1 – dc21

2002067680

ISBN-13 978-0-521-82090-5 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-82090-1 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03007-6 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-03007-2 paperback

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Preface

Studying intellectuals under state-socialist dictatorship presents the historian with a dilemma. On the one hand, a guiding principle of intellectual history is to take intellectuals seriously; whether or not one agrees with a thinker, one should seek to reconstruct that thinker's arguments as clearly and consistently as possible, not reduce them to their context. On the other hand, intellectuals of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) considered themselves committed to the goals of the Socialist Unity Party (SED).¹ Even the "heretics" of the system wanted to build a solid wall between socialism and capitalism to protect the allegedly antifascist East German state against the allegedly fascist forces of the Western, capitalist world. In other words, context directly determined what they wrote. The first approach to intellectual history stresses the individual's contribution to human discourse – and risks losing sight of the fact that the official intellectuals of the GDR were willing participants in a one-party dictatorship. The second approach views the intellectuals as mere functions of a general political system – and risks obliterating distinctions among intellectuals as well as their real contributions to important problems.² An intellectual history of the era must avoid both dangers. It also needs to take account of the Marxist-Leninist tradition

¹ On the self-understanding of GDR philosophers and their concern with forming people's socialist consciousness, see Dieter Wittich et al., "40 Jahre DDR – 40 Jahre Philosophie in der DDR," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 39 (1989), 990–1012.

² The literature on philosophy exemplifies the problem. See the work of Norbert Kapferer, which views philosophers from "outside" as part of the political system of the GDR: *Das Feindbild der marxistisch-leninistischen Philosophie in der DDR, 1945–1988* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990); idem, "... vom philosophischen Erbe abgetrieben?" Lukács' und Blochs Weg in der SBZ/DDR mit Blick auf den 'Fall' Heidegger," in Volker Gerhardt and Hans-Christoph Rauh, ed., *Anfänge der DDR-Philosophie: Ansprüche, Ohnmacht, Scheitern* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2001), 222–59. By contrast, see the viewpoints of philosophers who worked within East Germany, available in Norbert Kapferer, ed., *Immanen-sichten ostdeutscher Philosophen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), esp. Peter Ruben, "Von den Chancen, Kaderphilosoph zu werden," 7–29.

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itself. Marxism-Leninism emphasized the creative, revolutionary power of materialist political thought yet also systematically repressed creativity with the aim of forming a uniform worldview that served the party. These aspects of Marxism-Leninism were frequently in tension with each other.

The wider socialist tradition is nearly 200 years old and includes a variety of approaches to social organization in response to industrialization: from small-scale socialist communities to efforts of international economic organization, from ethically oriented Christian socialism to the technocratic conceptions of some post-1945 Social Democrats. Even those movements that claim Marx, Engels, and Lenin as their intellectual mentors contain divergent approaches to politics. The present study focuses on one particular strand of socialist thought that took shape after the First World War in the Soviet Union and served as a model, both imposed by the Red Army and emulated by communist activists, in Eastern Europe after 1939. That socialism sought to consolidate state power under the control of the party and was guided by examples drawn from the Soviet experience. In the pages that follow, “socialism” is often used in the polemical sense of East German intellectuals to refer only to state socialism rather than to the wider range of positions within the socialist tradition. At the same time, my use of the term “state socialism” should not obscure the problems that tradition poses for all varieties of socialism. But that discussion belongs in a different kind of book.

The overarching goal of state socialism was for society to become conscious of itself and to act as a conscious master of its own existence – through the medium of the militant party, acting through the state. This goal involved an ideological justification of one-party rule, as critics from Mikhail Bakunin and Rosa Luxemburg on have pointed out. It also involved extensive planning of the economy, manipulation of law, and intervention in education. I argue that the goal of total, conscious control came into question in the work of economists, lawyers, and philosophers, often in spite of their attempts to reinforce the state-socialist system. The society that the disciplines claimed to describe and thereby master was not so simple. It consisted not of one, unified social world but of many separate worlds, each following its own distinctive logic: the worlds of the firm, of the planning apparatus itself, of law, of the classroom. The many facets of modern life eluded conscious examination and control from a single, higher consciousness. And indeed, the party itself, that supposedly conscious actor of state socialism, was yet another complex system with its own internal logic. The East German intellectuals had to concede that if the party was in fact just another organization, with no higher claim to know the greater world, then state socialism had lost the justification for its own existence.

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Without the support of Rice University and outside funding agencies, this project would have taken many more years to complete. In particular I would like to thank the Office of the Dean of Humanities at Rice University; the Center for the Study of Cultures at Rice University; the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD); and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for their generous support over the past five years. Professor Rüdiger vom Bruch and Professor Sigrid Meuschel were kind enough to serve as my academic hosts for part of this period.

Rice University has offered an intellectual community that I never thought possible. Jane Dailey, Michael Maas, David Nirenberg, and Michael Willrich provided invaluable assistance at the start of the project. Allison Sneider, Sarah Thal, and Joel Wolfe all read significant portions of the manuscript as part of a working group on modernity and modernization. They were aided in this endeavor by others in the Rice History Department, in particular Carol Quillen and Mark Schmeller. Florian Kreutzer, DAAD Professor in the German and Sociology Departments, never faint of heart, read the entire manuscript and offered helpful suggestions near the end of the project. Betty Joseph helped me to reread Marx systematically as part of a team-taught graduate seminar. My students, both graduate and undergraduate, have constantly forced me to attempt to express myself clearly; I thank in particular the students of History 459 and Connie Moon. Outside of Rice, Mehmet Tütüncü assisted me in understanding the problems of planning and productivity measurement. Roger Chickering, Slava Gerovitch, David Good, John McCormick, Bill Scheuerman, Jérôme Ségal, and the participants in the Chicago Law and History Colloquium all offered advice along the way. Dr. Hans Schilar took some time out of his busy schedule at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften to discuss economics in the GDR, and Professor Dr. Hermann Klenner was willing to share some of his experiences in the field of law. Professor Dr. Hans-Christoph Rauh of the University of Greifswald shared some information about GDR philosophy.

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Finally, Gerd-Rainer Horn and an anonymous reader provided helpful criticisms of the manuscript at Cambridge University Press.

I am deeply grateful to a number of librarians and archivists: Milton Figg, Anna Youssefi, the entire Interlibrary Loan staff at Rice University, and many librarians whose names I unfortunately don't know at the Humboldt University in Berlin, the University of Michigan Law Library, the Harvard Law School, and elsewhere. Among the many archivists who have taken time out to help me, I would like to thank in particular the archivists at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Dr. Klaus Klauss allowed me to make use of the Fritz Behrens Papers at an early stage, and Heike-Fanny Braun, Christina Wilke, and Birgit Kühn led me through the process of ordering relevant materials over the course of several months. Marianne Mruszek of the Universität Potsdam-Aussenstelle Babelsberg aided me with the papers of the former Deutsche Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaft "Walter Ulbricht." Dr. Karlheinz Weigand of the Ernst-Bloch-Archiv in Ludwigshafen was a great help with the Bloch Papers. Mark Thiem was a great aid at the Universitätsarchiv of the Universität Leipzig, as were Dr. Hans-Christian Hermann and Frau Franke at the Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Leipzig. Christine Bobzien of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung took time out from her busy schedule to provide me access to the Günther Kohlmeier Papers. Imka Schuster provided invaluable assistance with photographs and graphics. Last but certainly not least, Solveig Nestler of the Bundesarchiv-Stiftung Archiv Parteien- und Massenorganisation did a wonderful job of steering me through party-related materials.

In the end, a book is part of ongoing discussions in one's life; without those discussions, the spark wouldn't be there to write in the first place. I have been discussing and arguing politics with Susan Havens Caldwell for about a quarter of a century and hope to do so for the next twenty-five years as well. Since around 1981, Mark Swofford has discussed radical politics and other matters with me at length, though the occasion to discuss has sadly grown less frequent as life has progressed. Finally, Lora Wildenthal has been with me, intellectually, politically, and in so many other ways, for more than a decade now. I wrote this book for her.

I thank Paj Books for permission to quote passages from Heiner Müller's *Mauser*, translated by Carl Weber, in *The Battle: Plays, Prose, Poems* (New York: Paj, 1989); and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich for permission to quote passages from Stanislaw Lem, *A Perfect Vacuum*, translated by Michael Kandel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).