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.

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Contents

List of Illustrations   vi
Preface               vii
Acknowledgments      ix

Introduction: Modernization, Modernity, and the Plan 1
1 The Economics of State Socialism: Productivity and the Law of Value 14
2 The Legal Theory of State Socialism: Socialist Legality, the Laws of Historical Development, and the Plan 57
3 Philosophy and State Socialism: Consciousness, Dialectical Materialism, and Hope 97
4 From Planning Metaphysics to Cybernetics: Planning, Technology, and Politics after Revisionism 141
   Conclusion          185

Bibliography          197
Index                 215
Illustrations

1 Fritz Behrens (1909–1980)  page 26
3 Fred Oelssner (1903–1977)  43
4 Hermann Klenner (b. 1926)  67
5 Karl Polak (1907–1963)  94
6 Rugard Otto Gropp (1907–1976)  114
7 Ernst Bloch (1885–1977)  119
8 Walter Ulbricht at the Economic Conference of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party and Ministerial Council on June 24, 1963  147
9 “The Aggregate Control Circle of Cognition”  155
10 Gunther Kohlmey (1913–1999)  173
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).\footnote{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.} 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.\footnote{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, Schatten (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2001), 222–59. By contrast, see the viewpoints of philosophers who worked within East Germany, available in Norbert Kapferer, ed., Innenansichten ostdeutscher Philosophen (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), esp. Peter Ruben, “Von den Chancen, Kaderphilosoph zu werden,” 7–29.} An intellectual history of the era must avoid both dangers. It also needs to take account of the Marxist-Leninist tradition...
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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