

## Introduction

### **Fieldsite**

Berlin is the ultimate postmodern space. It enjoys a shifting (until recently declining, now rapidly expanding), heterogeneous population, a discontinuous and ruptured history, old communists, young right-wing neo-Nazis, aging Red Army sympathizers – and, through the duration of this study, four foreign occupation armies “protecting” two opposed political and economic systems. I moved to Berlin in 1986 to study the relation of its dual political structure to everyday life. At that time little did I foresee the autumn revolution of 1989, when the desire for unity and continuity of the German *Volk*, for oneness, overwhelmed the diversity and duality of culture and politics, when Berlin’s chameleon nature, its refusal, or inability, to fix its political, cultural, or economic organs, caught the world by surprise: the people of Leipzig and East Berlin spearheaded a peaceful revolution, presaging an about-face in the city’s, and Germany’s, identity, as well as the end of the Cold War era. Berlin’s fluidity, its lack of final closure and essence, does not anomalize its place in history, however, but rather elevates it to an apotheosis of our time. More than perhaps any other city, it has periodized and shaped twentieth-century history in the West: 1914, 1939, 1989.

It took slightly less than a year to complete the about-face begun in the fall of 1989, transforming Berlin from a dual organization, a structure of two moieties (halves) within a tribe, into the (whole) capital of a nascent empire, suturing together its halved corpse composed of mangled limbs and appendages so out of place, so absurdly placed, as to mimic Picasso’s wildest fantasies of dismembered bodies. The Wall, that until November 9, 1989 sliced through the heart of its old center and

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encircled the western (so-called free) half, both parodied, and raised to paradigm, the liminality of boundaries: it simultaneously excluded and included, proving its own necessity while demonstrating its permeability. Dismantling the Wall, and what followed from that, German unification, was by no means foreordained. The forty-year division of Berlin, and that of Germany, much like the Cold War which that division symbolized, had its own momentum, and had developed its own behavioral rules and cognitive structures, unlikely to give way and disappear so quickly as a solid wall. This study is a history of some of these structures of division and belonging from the time when Berlin was two. It was completed in the final years of their disintegration, shortly before the Cold War era attained historical closure and the status of self-conscious myth.

For two and a half years, 1986–1989, I conducted fieldwork in East and West Berlin, listening to life stories and histories of events, researching the legal history of “kinship policy” in the two German states. Drawing upon this fieldwork, I analyze the “life constructions” contained in autobiographies of two generations of Berlin residents and compare them to the preferred version of the lifecourse offered by the two German states in their legal texts. In applying ethnographic methods and social anthropological frameworks to the study of residents in a large central European metropolis, this study will probably challenge readers more than exhaust them, pique more than define, and perhaps irritate more than satisfy. It contains all the characteristics of an experiment: deriving its knowledge from actual participation, blending the personal and empirical, reaching provisional and tentative findings.

Central to this examination are changes in naming practices and classification schemes, for which this study itself may serve as an appropriate example. Anthropological accounts derive coherence from rendering something foreign, such as names and categories, into something familiar. Even when the object of description – whether person, process, or structure – initially lacks coherence in its own cultural setting, it is the anthropologist’s task to come up with names and an ordering scheme that enables someone alien to it to grasp the particulars at hand. This task of making the object of study coherent – impracticable even in “cold” island cultures where boundaries have an appearance of timelessness and fixity – seems increasingly intractable to contemporary anthropologists who now perceive their local objects as active agents involved in national struggles, world markets, and transnational organizations.

Yet lending coherence and familiarity to culture is only part of the task of an anthropological narrative. A second and equally essential task is to understand *how* the inchoate is made coherent and *how* the exotic is made familiar. The porousness of Berlin's borders and the kaleidoscopic identity of its natives, a dynamism of place and person not found in most anthropological fieldsites, makes Berlin an attractive place to study processes of coherence-building. For the very diversity within and of Berlin has been a challenge to statesmen and social engineers, from Otto von Bismarck to Helmut Kohl, whose goal has been to bring these differences into line, to arrest and control their activities, to create out of human chaos a classical unity, a linearity of time, a uniformity of space. Berliners in this century, however, as well as the nations and states to which they belong, have not been able to delineate themselves by exclusive characteristics within stable boundaries; they have been undergoing constant transformations that have both antedated and followed abrupt changes in political and social life.

This study of Berlin, then, will not be a dissection, from a single vantage point, of continuity and change within a coherent culture. Native categories of Berliners as well as my own descriptive units are shifting significations given meaning through temporal action in a context. During the course of my fieldwork, the two German states bought from and sold Berlin property to each other, individuals changed citizenship in the middle of their lifecourse, and shortly after the end of my stay in Berlin, one state annexed the other. These changes were part of a dialogue, however distorted and coercive at times, whose meaning for those on one side of the Wall made sense only with respect to the meanings on the other side, which in turn made sense only when considered in the global context of the Cold War.

### **Dual organization, politics, culture**

Contrary to assumptions that East and West Germany were independent systems capable of being separately analyzed, the two Germanies are to be understood only in terms of their relations as parts of a whole. Beginning with the Russian and American/Western Allied occupation of Germany in 1945, the Berlins took on characteristics of a dual organization, that is, with moieties developing a matching, asymmetrical dual classification of the universe. Anthropology, inspired by the classic essay *Primitive Classification* by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, first published in 1903, has an illustrious history of trying to explain the cross-cultural practice of dualistic forms of thought and

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organization, often reducing political, aesthetic, and economic classificatory schemes to derivatives of women exchange at the level of cross-cousin marriage. Lévi-Strauss (1958) contributed to this debate by showing how marriage exchange was linked to a dualistic world view, based on what he attributed to a universal tendency to use binary oppositions in classification.<sup>1</sup> We need not fully agree with Lévi-Strauss' attribution of cause in order to argue for continued use of the concept "dual organization." Most analyses of moieties considered dual structures merely at one point in time and only in their cultural manifestations, without an adequate account of the political factors that create and sustain them over time.<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that all such structures throughout history were created for political reasons, however obscure those original struggles are to us today.<sup>3</sup>

The Germanies, from 1945/1949 to 1989, provides us with a rich historical example of the attempted construction of such a dual organization, one that began in 1945 with an occupation by two foreign, ideological opponents, who in 1949 created dual political organizations. This 1949 political-territorial division drew its justification from competing conceptual paradigms of social-cultural organization (socialism versus capitalism). Each state tried, in turn, to create its own cultural ideal in an intimate process of mirror-imaging and misrecognition.<sup>4</sup> Due to an increasing asymmetry in economic power, East Germany built the Wall in 1961 to provide a protected space for its utopian experiment. By the mid eighties the economic asymmetry had increased, notwithstanding the Wall, and those aspects of dual organization already created outside the state sphere began to crumble rapidly. In 1989 the political experiment came to an abrupt end. On October 3, 1990, the two states and societies completed formal governmental unification.

Political structures, such as states, are often studied by experts as something reified, autonomous, and causally connected to "culture." Yet they are part of a cultural order, formed historically, not to be viewed as part of a natural order, independent of and somehow opposed to culture. They get their meaning from contemporary culture and give meaning back to it; they are legitimated in a myriad of ways in everyday life much as they also shape life, in the extreme case by formally legalizing or criminalizing sets of practices. During the Cold War it was generally assumed that social and cultural formations were coterminous with or existed within states, and that states determined the boundaries of meaning systems. (In East Germany, an individual

who tried to cross state boundaries without prior approval was officially called a *Grenzverbrecher*, border criminal.) This impoverished understanding of politics both mirrors back to the class of modern politicians their own grandiose notion of self-importance, their sense that they determine boundaries, as well as confirms and reproduces the importance of the social scientist and journalist who fixates on this reified, narrow notion of politics presuming that s/he is studying what is significant.

States, and the inter-national order they are said to represent, are recent cultural inventions, merely 200 years old; their autonomy is always constrained by the culture in which they exist. Certainly the fact that one of the two states I studied – throughout the eighties considered the tenth-strongest economic power in the world – has now dissolved itself, indicates how much governments, regardless of the power they exercise and of their own sense of self-importance, are dependent for meaning on a particular cultural ordering. This in no way denies the fact that all states try to monopolize the rules and terms controlling the reproduction of culture. Nonetheless, we may be witnessing a major transformation on a world scale in the “national order of things” (I am borrowing the felicitous phrase from Lisa Malkki 1992), for states are increasingly limited in their sovereignty by other competing cultural creations, such as bureaucracies, pan-national drug cartels, multi-national corporations, inter-national markets, the European Community, and cosmopolitan and local ethnic identities. Whatever the results of this process, states are and will remain part of cultural orders, and thus capable of being understood using the same analytical tools we use for other cultural artifacts.

### **Authority and structure**

Unlike a “history” that fundamentally derives its authority from a chronologically enclosed past, my authority in this book stems primarily from the fact that I was there for the telling of the story. Although my sources are heterogeneous, many of them purely historical and not anthropological in nature, they are made to serve my ethnographic account, not, as many a historian would be prone to, made to serve a chronological narrative. In the past several decades old antagonisms between history and anthropology have considerably dissolved. Not only do the practitioners in the two fields borrow from each other, but it has recently become the vogue for anthropologists to avoid the contemporary fieldwork setting and engage in a necro-anthropology, escaping

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into a past colonial encounter between ethnographer and native, or between the West and the Third World, rather than directly confronting the ubiquitous processes of colonization in the present or in the First World. This movement has further blurred distinctions between the two disciplines.

Yet, I would argue, the most significant shift within anthropology has not been the putative “break” fomented by its marriage with history as past, but rather is located in the re-examination of its authority and a reappropriation of the traditions of its practitioners: an attempt to remain true to a science of the study of all humankind while at the same time overcoming anthropology’s tawdry origins as a tool of Western empire-building. This necessarily involves renouncing the forms of authority that sustained this project. By bringing northern European and Western civilizations under an anthropological gaze, ethnographers confront most directly the dilemma facing contemporary science as a whole: they deprive themselves of authority derived from the power asymmetry between scientist and subject, ethnographer and native, the privileged First World and underprivileged Third World.<sup>5</sup> Thus “the field” for anthropology no longer remains a particular place in the southern hemisphere inhabited by illiterate dark-skinned peoples, nor is it a space – in which we are forever confined – where past generations of ethnographers did their fieldwork. It has incredibly broadened in scope, and the locus of authority lies not in the reproduction or critique of past colonialism but in very present systems of domination.

Along these lines, we might say that the oppositions most often attributed to history and anthropology, in that the former prioritizes diachrony and the latter synchrony, or the former “unfurls the range of societies in time, the other in space” (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 256), are less significant than the fact that both historian and anthropologist construct their objects in the present. But, while both anthropologists and historians construct accounts mediated by the historical time of the writing, the ethnographic account distinguishes itself from the historical by privileging its *historicity*: the “having been there” in dialogue with the living other during the construction of at least part of the history about to be told.

The credibility of my account, therefore, must ultimately rest neither on any particular asymmetry nor on any claims of exclusive access, but on my ability as an anthropologist to interpret experience during the Cold War from an experience-near present, constructed in a dialogue between myself and the actual participants about whom I write.

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John Borneman

Excerpt

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Following the onslaught of the revolution of 1989, this Cold War dialogue is also historical, i.e., subject to a *before* and *after* coding, and hence enclosed in a fixed chronological period, a category for historiography, much like the “middle ages,” the “renaissance,” “antiquity,” and the “eighteenth century.” That my object of study has now fortuitously become a historical category alters the exclusivity of my account (for this period is now open to historians also), but it does not fundamentally alter the nature of my account’s authority, that is, ethnographic authority derived from the particular dialogic relationship I established with East and West Berliners in the years 1986 to 1989.

I begin chapter 1 with a description of my entrance into the field and the dialogic space in which I worked. Additionally, I give a schematic overview of the issues dealt with in the book, their relation to my fieldsite, to anthropology specifically, and to social science generally. Chapter 2 focuses on how I know what I know, or rather, how I came to know what I wrote. Chapter 3 summarizes the demographic context; chapter 4 engages in a comparative analysis of the history of kinship law. Chapters 5 through 8 present the life constructions of two generations in the two Berlins; they are not ethnographically self-contained narratives, for generations invent themselves only upon reflection about difference and context. Hence each generational narrative informs (on) the other, and my own story is constructed with this in mind. Chapters 5 and 6 examine transformations in kinship in East Berlin; chapter 7 and 8 analyze kinship transformations in West Berlin. Chapter 9 presents final conclusions in a discussion relating marriage to family and nation. Finally, the postscript is about events subsequent to this study: the collapse and dissolution of the East German state, the unification of Berlin, and the refiguring of a united Germany.



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## 1

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## Naming, categorizing, periodizing

In fact history is tied neither to man or to any particular object. It consists wholly in its method, which experience proves to be indispensable for cataloguing the elements of any structure whatever, human or anti-human, in their entirety. It is therefore far from being the case that the search for intelligibility comes to an end in history as though this were its terminus. Rather, it is history that serves as the point of departure in any quest for intelligibility. As we say of certain careers, history may lead to anything, provided you get out of it.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*

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George Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd, 1966 [1962].

Ordnung muß sein. Das weiß man schon von klein.  
(Order is all. We learn that when we're small.)

German aphorism

### Entering Berlin

Upon entering one of the border zones that divided the Germanies, either along the Elbe River, or between East and West Berlin, the first question put to you by the East German border guards was: "Where are you going?" The answer revealed not only intended destination, but also political standpoint and understanding of postwar history. The question would elicit simultaneously a name, a categorization, and a periodization. I encountered this situation on September 1, 1986, as I "entered the field" – the anthropological euphemism for going to live with the people one is about to study. That morning my West Berlin friends had wished me luck in leaving Berlin and going to East Berlin. My point of entry was Checkpoint Charlie. I was already quite aware that responding to the border guard's question with "East Berlin" would undoubtedly result in a correction: "This is Berlin, GDR, not East Berlin." If I said, "East Germany," I would be insulting my hosts, for this name implicitly questioned the legitimacy of the German Demo-



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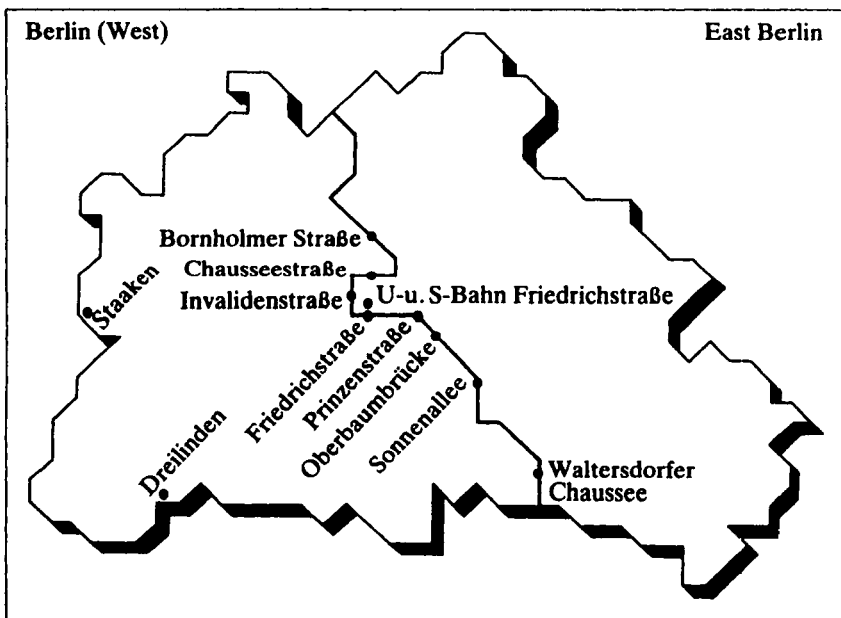
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cratic Republic as a state by raising the then-heretical concept of *Wiedervereinigung*, reunification of the nation. If I said “the German Democratic Republic,” it would have sounded as if I was mocking them, for they used only the initials: the GDR. The correct answer would have been simply “Berlin.” I was leaving Berlin and preparing to enter Berlin. Caught between innocence and ignorance, I avoided the question, handed over my papers, and told them that I was part of an official research exchange program and in fifteen minutes was supposed to meet the Director of International Relations for Humboldt University at the Ministry of Higher and Technical Education in Marx-Engels Platz 2.

These conflicts and confusions over naming and periodizing, while consciously poignant in the case of the divided city of Berlin, are neither unique to the contemporary Germanies nor to the era of the Cold War. Classification schemes are always sites of political contestation.<sup>1</sup> To name is never neutral; it involves description and evaluation, it categorizes. The organization of history is precisely such a struggle concerning the legitimation of particular classificatory systems. Chronologically ordered sequences, the usual device of the historian, are themselves quite arbitrary, based on prior assumptions about the significance of events. “What makes history possible,” writes Lévi-Strauss in his

Figure 1. The two Berlins, 1989.



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famous attack on Sartre, “is that a sub-set of events is found, for a given period, to have approximately the same significance for a contingent of individuals who have not necessarily experienced the events and may even consider them at an interval of several centuries. History is therefore never history, but history-for” (1966: 257). Historians order events into stories that often purport to be impartial accounts, but are not since they are always based on the perspective of particular actors. Ultimately, the historian chooses what and for whom s/he will narrate. In this study, I, as the inscriber, analyst, interpreter, will be classifying selected conflicts over naming, categorizing, and periodizing between 1945 and 1989 in Berlin.

The initial question, “Where are you going?”, put to me by the border official was intended to elicit less my destination than my point of departure. And my point of departure suggested to the border guard an answer to the more important question, “To whom do you belong?” Belonging, in turn, is a cultural identity, dependent on familial, social, and political membership, or, expressed in analytical terms: kinship, nationness, and citizenship. As an American driving into the GDR with a West German automobile and a Dutch license plate, why did the border guards let me in? Since I am neither German nor a GDR citizen, how could I claim belonging?

Simply answered: I was part of a research exchange system. At one level, I was being exchanged, as *Austauschobjekt*, object of exchange, though only temporarily, for a GDR citizen who was sent for the same period of time to the United States. Even more significant, I was part of an exchange of words: after my research stay I would return home and represent the GDR in my work, much as their researcher would represent the United States upon his/her return home. This makes obvious sense if we think briefly about the basic rule of exchange systems, formulated by Marcel Mauss (1925) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949), that societies exchange three items: words, women, and goods. The Germanies applied a sex-neutral rule: they exchanged words, people, and goods.

Indeed, the major difference between West German–GDR and USA–GDR exchange lay precisely in the category “people.” Whereas the two German states traded many words for words and some goods for goods, they did not trade people for people – and herein was the source of tension: they disputed each other’s citizenship. Both states presented themselves to the world as proprietors over the same group of nationals. West Germany went so far as to claim all citizens of the GDR as its own,