

Approaches to German contemporary history since 1945: Politics and paradigms

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All history may be intrinsically contentious; but contemporary history – particularly where one system has just been overthrown and its former citizens incorporated into another – is perhaps peculiarly contentious. Any historical interpretation comes complete with a baggage of political overtones; but contemporary history in Germany is particularly littered with the debris, not merely of academic debates on dictatorships of right and left, but also practical questions of ‘overcoming the past’ of two twentieth-century dictatorships.

Professional history is generally held – at least among the history-consuming members of the public, not to mention those paying the salaries of those who engage in the teaching, research and public presentation of history – to be something other than politics by other means. It is supposed to be telling us something true about the past – not something which is convenient from one or another political standpoint in the present. Historians, on this widely held lay view of professional history, are supposedly pursuing the reconstruction and representation of the past ‘as it really was’, and not constructing a ‘usable past’ for the present. Without some such faith, members of the public would spend their time more enjoyably watching creative films rather than documentaries, or reading works intended as fiction, not those masquerading as ‘fact’.

Yet, in reflecting on the development of contemporary history in Germany since 1945, it is striking just how closely particular historical approaches are linked to positions on the political spectrum. While quite obviously the case with respect to the politically constrained historical profession in the communist GDR, it was also, ironically, the position with respect to the allegedly ‘objective’ historiography of pluralist West Germany; and links between political positions and historical interpretations have remained very much in evidence in debates on GDR history since 1990. These close links are extremely problematic for any conception of professional history as a search for some ‘objective’ representation of the past, rather than a ‘usable past’.

My purpose here is not to provide a ‘history of ideas’ of historical approaches in Germany.¹ Rather, I want to reconsider the development of approaches

¹ There are many clear and detailed surveys of this nature available, and there would be little point going over the same ground more briefly here. See for example Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century. From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Hanover 1997 (German edition: *Geschichtswissenschaft im 20. Jahrhundert. Ein kritischer Überblick im internationalen Zusammenhang*, Göttingen 1993).

to German *Zeitgeschichte* in the light of wider questions about (even the possibility of) ‘value neutrality’ – questions which are relevant to history more generally, applicable to any period or problem. The peculiarly high tempers often evident in German debates may in part have to do with the highly sensitive character of contemporary history in Germany; but the underlying issues are of universal importance to historians of all periods.

After a brief outline of the theoretical issues, I shall move from a broad sketch of the ‘situatedness’ of German contemporary history into a narrower focus on the character of specific historical approaches or ‘paradigms’. In re-considering the relationships between historical paradigms and political positions in German contemporary history, it is possible to come to some more general conclusions about the relationship between politics and history.

1. The ‘nature of history’: current debates

On the one hand, many (perhaps most) practising historians operate on the assumption that history – or ‘historical science’ (*Geschichtswissenschaft*) – should indeed be in some sense ‘objective’, the ‘dispassionate truth’ about the past. On this view, it should be possible simply to ‘appeal to the evidence’, or ‘dig up more facts’, to resolve major disputes. There has been a tendency to rest content with the old adage: ‘before you study the history, study the historian’; the best that can be achieved by way of ‘objectivity’ is having the individual historian make a personal confession at the outset, and then, following in the steps of Max Weber, leaving his or her prejudices ‘at the door’ of the inquiry.² This manifestly has not been the solution in most of the major and highly politicised controversies in German contemporary history over the last fifty years.

On the other hand, a post-modernist would say that, even if one could assemble a set of individual ‘facts’ or undisputed single statements about aspects of the past, the ways in which such ‘facts’ were ‘emplotted’ would be a product of the present, not given in the past.³ Thus any ‘story’ which goes beyond mere ‘chronicle’ is essentially a creative construct of the historian, more akin to a

² Versions of this view can be found in Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History*, Basingstoke 2001, and Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, London 1997 (German edition: *Fakten und Fiktionen. Über die Grundlagen historischer Erkenntnis*, Frankfurt a.M. 1998).

³ See for example the classic work of Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore 1987 (German edition: *Die Bedeutung der Form. Erzählstrukturen in der Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt a.M. 1990); see also for example Frank R. Ankersmit/Hans Kellner (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History*, London 1995; and accounts of these views in Keith Jenkins, *On ‘What is History?’ From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, London 1995, and idem (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, London 1997.

work of fiction than a scientific analysis of the past 'as such'. Given that the past has disappeared forever, and given that stories are 'made' rather than 'found', there is, on this view, nothing against which to test any given version of the past.⁴ On this basis, the historical disputes in Germany would simply be an extension of political debates. (Given the style of much German historical writing, they could hardly be seen as fiction to be evaluated on aesthetic grounds – a category much loved by American postmodernists – although the extensive apparatus of footnotes and sources fostered in West German academia could certainly qualify for Barthes' notion of trying to create a 'reality effect'.) For a postmodernist, then, competing stories can be evaluated on aesthetic, moral or political grounds; but they cannot be judged in terms of whether one is a 'better' representation of the past than another.

These two views, baldly summarised, clearly represent extremes. Somewhere in between, if pressed to take a position, most historians would now probably agree that the old nineteenth-century 'meta-narratives', or the notion of one 'great story' about 'the past as it actually was', can no longer be accepted; and that a diversity of perspectives on the past can be taken from a diversity of standpoints in the present. This diversity of perspectives seems to be taken as cause for 'celebration' when the 'new' narratives are those of whichever underdogs are in historical fashion at any given time – the working classes, ethnic minorities, women, 'subaltern voices' – but is considerably more problematic when there are strong disagreements, with opposing sides equally claiming privileged access to 'the truth'. Thus the problem of competing narratives persists.⁵

Many practising historians are content to leave debates over the nature of history to those who devote their mental energy to 'doing' the philosophy of history.⁶ But the implications for notions of 'objectivity' in history cannot and should not be ignored. If we fail to deal explicitly with these issues, what are we to make of German controversies over contemporary history? Should we really just end up supporting whichever side in an argument seems to us politically more acceptable? If that is indeed the case, then what real difference is there, say, between the state-sponsored Marxist views of contemporary history in the GDR, which most West German historians would readily dismiss as little more

⁴ See particularly Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation. Getting the Story Crooked*, Madison 1989.

⁵ See for example Joyce Appleby/Lynn Hunt/Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth about History*, New York 1994; see also Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London 2000.

⁶ Despite what I go on to argue, this is not necessarily a Bad Thing in itself. There is an element of truth in the 'bumble bee' notion of historical theory (mooted already by Max Weber); if a bee started exploring the theoretical relationship between its body mass and wing span, it would be unlikely ever to get off the ground for fear of being incapable of flying. Historians, like toddlers starting to walk, may be able to 'just do it' without being able to articulate exactly how they are doing what they are doing.

than a 'legitimatory science' in service of the state, and the variety of highly politicised West German approaches to contemporary history? The latter clearly were (and still are) able to compete for a hearing in a pluralist intellectual context; but are we really happy with a theory of historical knowledge which implies that the 'market' will take care of the truth, or that the only reason for preferring, say, a structural approach to history over a narrative in terms of individual motives is that the former is associated with being 'left-liberal' (or of course vice versa, for those whose political sympathies run in the other direction)?

Elsewhere, I have developed the argument that rather than (or in addition to) looking at the political views of the individual historian – the well-trodden approach to the question of 'value neutrality' – it is important to pay attention to key aspects of the wider historical paradigm.⁷ By 'paradigm' I mean the underlying assumptions – whether explicit or implicit – which inform matters such as: the wider 'historical pictures' (*Geschichtsbilder*) within which a given topic or period is framed; the conceptualisation of the problem; the kinds of questions which are asked; the theoretical categories through which the 'empirical evidence' is sought and 'netted'; the purposes and shape of the historical representation which ultimately emerges. Some aspects of a paradigm may be rooted in deeply held beliefs about the nature of being human; other tenets are perhaps more mundanely methodological in nature, more casually held and easily discussed, amended, or discarded.⁸ Analysis in terms of paradigms will allow us to see the relationship between politics and the practice of history from a somewhat different perspective.

2. The association between political positions and historical approaches in Germany

One of the most striking features of German contemporary history to someone socialised within Anglo-American academia is the extraordinarily close relationship which in Germany is often assumed to exist between historical approaches and positions on the political spectrum; there also appears to be an intense and widespread concern with history as a key tool in constructing an 'acceptable identity' in the present. There is of course some degree of associa-

⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, London 2002.

⁸ This varies within and across different sorts of paradigm: while what I call 'paradigms proper' are rooted in fundamentally different philosophical assumptions and meta-theoretical starting points (about, for example, the existence or otherwise of 'deep structures', or the construction of gender), 'perspectival paradigms' may be mutually compatible in theoretical terms but merely illuminate different substantive aspects of the past (the history of the working classes, the history of women, and so on). There is not space here to discuss the details of this argument further.

tion between historical paradigms and politics in Anglophone historiography too, but among German historians this relationship appears to be particularly intense. And even when carried out in a relatively civilised professional manner, the widespread and unquestioning insistency of attempts to evaluate historical interpretations in terms of their political positions, and to cast historical research in the light of identity construction projects, is distinctive.

Thus contemporary history in West Germany before 1989 was characterised by periodic violent controversies. Debates over particular issues flared up and tempers soared beyond anything one might expect in a scholarly setting; debates over whole approaches to the recent past periodically took on dimensions of personal involvement and vituperation that, witnessed by outsiders, might seem not merely out of proportion but indeed entirely out of place in the academic world. This comment applies not merely to obviously politicised controversies, such as the notorious *Historikerstreit* of 1986/87, but also to a whole range of serious scholarly controversies.

For example: the historically far more fruitful row over ‘intentionalist’ and ‘functionalist’ approaches to the Holocaust, when the contours of the differences became clear at a conference (ironically held in the genteel British royal setting of Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park) in 1979, was far more heated than the published version conveys.⁹ As this debate developed through the 1980s, it became clear that political sides were attached to different historical positions: thus ‘intentionalist’ interpretations of the Holocaust were branded as ‘right-wing’ (Klaus Hildebrand, Andreas Hillgruber), while ‘functionalist’ or ‘structuralist’ approaches were assumed to be intrinsically more left-wing (Hans Mommsen, Martin Broszat). Key underlying questions in this debate were ‘where then does responsibility lie?’ or ‘Who is – or is not – put into the frame?’

More generally, particular approaches to history have been almost automatically labelled in terms of politics. Thus ‘societal history’ (*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*) or ‘structural history’ was held to be in some way intrinsically left-wing, whereas the ‘history of events’ (*Ereignisgeschichte*) was inherently ‘right-wing’. For many years it was common to refer to the ‘left-liberal Bielefeld school’ of historians (Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka), as though the political adjective always had to go with the location and noun; and indeed on its development as a contrast to political history in the 1970s the key protagonists of this ‘critical social science’ approach to history explicitly proclaimed a sense of political commitment and social responsibility. Meanwhile, ‘historians of

⁹ See particularly Tim Mason’s seminal essay, Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism, in: Gerhard Hirschfeld/Lothar Kettenacker (eds.), *The ‘Führer State’: Myth and Reality*, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 23–42; and Ian Kershaw’s masterly discussions of the issues in *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 4th edn., London 2000 (including a comment from experience about the atmosphere of ‘acrid debates’ at the 1979 conference, p. 69).

everyday life' were held to be further to the left – although, given the close proximity of state-sponsored Marxism over the border in the GDR, the label 'Marxist' was not quite as available to West German historians of the 'History Workshop' persuasion as it was to Anglophone followers of Christopher Hill, E. J. Hobsbawm or E. P. Thompson. Similarly, it was often implied that uncritical use of the word 'nation' or the writing of national history inevitably entailed some creeping conservative nationalism, to be denounced at all costs.¹⁰ The correspondence between political fault-lines and historical approaches became particularly clear as celebrations over the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 were accompanied by debates over the putative death of (left-wing) structural history and the alleged triumph of (right-wing) narrative history emphasising the role of the individual personality.¹¹ Conversely, the history of everyday life was sometimes attacked as merely a left-wing form of romanticism; even perhaps, unintentionally, some form of apologia for Nazi crimes. Some debates moved into far more profound questions of morality: thus Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer tackled the question of whether one should seek to treat the history of the Third Reich as just another short period of German history, a mere dozen years to be dealt with in the same way as any other – or whether this would be beyond the bounds of the morally permissible, and in itself a historical distortion of the unspeakable suffering and evil unleashed by this regime.¹²

The list of specific controversies could be extended at length; specialists will recognise each of these controversies and be able to add many more. In the most general terms, and with regard to virtually any historical period, different theoretical approaches often appeared to be extremely closely linked with well-defined positions on the political spectrum. Divisions between West German historical approaches were almost automatically assumed to overlap with, indeed be virtually synonymous with, political differences on a pluralist spectrum.

In the GDR, by contrast, there could only be one officially permitted theoretical paradigm, and one quite explicitly allied with a particular political agenda: that of Marxism. In the course of the 1950s, those historians who refused to

¹⁰ For a survey along these lines, see Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality*, Oxford 1997; see also Richard J. Evans' critique of what he sees as Berger's unnecessary alarmism (though curiously by pointing out that 'national' paradigms were scarcely a new or growing phenomenon of the 1990s), 'After Reunification', in: Evans, *Rereading German History*, London 1997, pp. 234-235, p. 242.

¹¹ See for example the measured contributions to this discussion in Jürgen Kocka, *Vereinigungskrise. Zur Geschichte der Gegenwart*, Göttingen 1995.

¹² The debate between Broszat and Friedländer is reprinted in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians' Dispute*, Boston 1990. For the German texts, see Martin Broszat/Saul Friedländer, 'Um die "Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus"'. Ein Briefwechsel, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 36 (1988), S. 339-372.

be constrained by this political agenda were weeded out of the profession. Many experienced acute political difficulties; some fled to the West. At the same time, however, a handful of prominent Marxist historians – among them Jürgen Kuczynski and Ernst Engelberg – came to dominate a rising generation of new GDR-trained historians. The wider preconditions for free-ranging intellectual exploration – choice of theme, access to sources and secondary literature, collaboration and debate with colleagues at home and abroad, character and scope of eventual publication – were all very much out of the control of the individual historical researcher. While remoter periods of history were more readily dissociated from the search for a ‘usable past’, and were often compatible with western approaches, contemporary history in East Germany was clearly shaped to serve political purposes.¹³ And not merely shaped; also on occasion deliberately distorted. Thus, there were the famous ‘blank spots’ (*weiße Flecken*) where inconvenient facts could be conveniently omitted – one major instance being the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939–1941.¹⁴

The role of the communist resistance (or ‘fighters against fascism’) was over-emphasised; the victimisation and murder of Jews and others on ‘racial’ grounds was severely under-played in comparison to the ‘class struggle’. Capitalist West Germany was represented as being not merely physical home to former Nazis but also still at the historical stage of being a breeding ground for ‘fascism’. The chief claim to legitimacy of the GDR was that it was the ‘anti-fascist state’ whose founding fathers had suffered and been persecuted under Nazism but had ultimately triumphed over evil to produce a new and better world. One of the emotive tasks of the representation of contemporary history, then, was to ensure that younger generations were not only informed of the heroic deeds of the anti-fascist fighters, but were sufficiently enthused and infused with their spirit to keep up the fight and carry the flame to ensure the glorious future. The cult of Ernst Thälmann, the public commemorations and physical representations of the past in ceremonies, statues, museums, exhibitions, and sites of memory such as former Nazi concentration camps (most notably Buchenwald) were all part of this wider political agenda.

With unification in 1990, the political context of course changed. Some academic battle lines shifted; but while the official Marxist historiography of the GDR was totally discredited, the East German heritage nevertheless had implications for West German approaches. West and East German historians were

¹³ See for example: Georg Iggers (ed.) *Marxist Historiography in Transformation: New Orientations in Recent East German History*, Oxford 1991; Konrad H. Jarausch (ed.), *Zwischen Parteilichkeit und Professionalität. Bilanz der Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR*, Berlin 1991; Georg Iggers/Konrad H. Jarausch/Matthias Middell/Martin Sabrow (eds.), *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als Forschungsproblem*, Munich 1998, among other contributions to a re-evaluation.

¹⁴ See for example Hermann Weber, Die “weißen Flecken” in der Geschichte, in: idem, *Aufbau und Fall einer Diktatur*, Cologne 1991.

now able freely to debate with each other – though on unequal terms, given the massive theoretical, institutional and political changes the latter had to contend with. Political fault-lines were cross-cut as left-wing East German historians who were critical of the GDR teamed up with West German conservatives in denouncing a repressive state as ‘totalitarian’.¹⁵ Old-style West German ‘societal history’ became more open to (somewhat Americanised) ‘new cultural history’; many proponents of ‘history from below’ conceded that there might be a larger picture beyond the antiquarian mosaic stones of everyday life; historians of ‘high politics’ recognised the wider hinterland of social constraints and economic processes. And new controversies – the alleged role of the Third Reich in ‘modernisation’ processes, the supposed Nazi roots of West German social history, among others – blew up over old terrain, producing complex crossover patterns: the ‘brown’ roots of supposedly ‘left-liberal’ social history were avidly dug up; and ‘ex-1968ers’ appeared to be the leading lights of a ‘new Right’ in the 1990s.¹⁶ All of this produced much excitement and a whiff of scandal within the German ‘historical guild’.

Even these recent developments underline the point: to an observer somewhat distant from the smoke of the battle lines, it is striking just how closely related political positions and historical approaches are assumed to be in Germany. Indeed, this relationship is virtually institutionalised in habitual procedures for academic careers in the Federal Republic, with lengthy ‘apprenticeships’ entailing dependence on powerful sponsors, and the frequent involvement of political considerations in appointments to professorial chairs and directorships of historical institutes – all in some contrast to the ‘value-neutral’ expectations of the notoriously heavy-weight academic output itself. The *de facto* association therefore requires a little closer inspection.

3. Historical consciousness as a part of the present: The functions of history

Historical consciousness is inevitably a part of the present. At a private level, family stories about the past construct meaning and situate an individual’s place in an ever-changing present, even over two or three generations. And in the realm of politics and public representations, historical interpretations carry major implications for people’s lives. Strategies of denazification after 1945, and treatment of defendants’ testimony in the war crimes trials of the

¹⁵ The most notable early example here is Armin Mitter/Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten*, Munich 1993. Stefan Wolle’s later work, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur*, Berlin 1998, is far more nuanced in its interpretations; the shift in dominant stylistic register, from anger to irony, is also notable.

¹⁶ See for example Rüdiger Hohls/Konrad H. Jarausch (eds.), *Versäumte Fragen. Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus*, Munich 2000.

later 1950s and 1960s, were informed by interpretations of the way in which the Nazi system functioned; political and legal proceedings both relied on and stimulated historical research.¹⁷ The ‘totalitarian’, ‘Hitler-and-his-henchmen’ view of the Third Reich, which was current in West Germany among professional historians as well as politicians in the 1950s, and in popular interpretations to this day (notions of ‘cumulative radicalisation’ in a ‘polycratic regime’ hardly trip off the tongue of the average *Stammtisch* regular), served to underline horror at the evils of the Nazi regime, while effectively exonerating the vast majority of Germans from any real complicity. ‘Hitler-orders’ or ‘*Führer-Befehl*’ provided a convenient cover-up for complicity. In the public political sphere, innumerable debates and stormy controversies on the representation of a peculiarly awful past in anniversaries, memorials, museums and sites of memory have punctuated German history over the last half century.¹⁸

The contemporary implications or ‘functions’ of a historical interpretation do not always explain its acceptance, and should in principle be irrelevant with respect to the evaluation of its academic merits (on which more in a moment). But the political consequences can be very powerful. Oddly, for all its substantive differences, the wider functions of GDR history were quite similar to those of at least some (by no means all) pre-1989 West German approaches. The East German official view of Nazism as a form of fascism carried by an array of ‘militarist-imperialist capitalists’ and their Junker allies served to exonerate the masses in a comparable way to the totalitarian approaches popular in some quarters in the West. Equally, on both sides of the Wall a version of ‘false consciousness’ could be found: in the western case, the emphasis on Hitler’s personal charm suggested that many Germans were ‘duped’ and fell under his spell; in the East German case, the Marxist notions of ideology and false consciousness (‘the ruling ideas of the age are the ideas of the ruling class’) could be explicitly appealed to in order to explain (away) the role of the complicit masses.¹⁹ Thus we see extraordinarily similar political functions with respect to the exoneration of ‘ordinary people’ in historical interpretations which in other respects are politically totally opposed to each other.

In the decade and a half since the fall of the Wall, similar processes of seeking to account for the past and provide a story in the present have been at work. Although there was not a sudden wealth of new archival material available, the history of West Germany was cast in a new light: the once much maligned Federal Republic became, in the moment of passing of its cosy status as ‘political dwarf’ with entry into the real world of economic difficulties and

¹⁷ Cf. for example Hans Buchheim et al., *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, 2 vols., Munich 1967.

¹⁸ See for example Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, Cambridge 1999.

¹⁹ See for example Kurt Pätzold’s introduction to idem (ed.), *Verfolgung, Vertreibung, Vernichtung*, Leipzig 1983, p. 8, p. 16.

international responsibilities, a political home to be respected, with a constitution that had genuinely stood the test of time. Habermas' prematurely proclaimed 'patriotism of the constitution' began to become a reality; there was a new-found pride, often bordering on arrogance, among West Germans.

At the same time, the political battle lines with respect to the history of the GDR started to shift. With the opening of the vast archives of a communist state documented with truly Prussian thoroughness and efficiency, there was a massive proliferation of research, media debate and publication on the GDR.²⁰ As people discovered the sheer extent of surveillance and informing by the Stasi, or were accused of complicity in a 'second German dictatorship' akin to its evil predecessor, there was a flurry of journalistic revelations, political memoirs and partisan publications seeking to accuse or exonerate. There were also intriguing 'insider' accounts of the inside workings of power in the secretive SED-state. The lengthy sessions of the parliamentary commissions of inquiry (*Enquête-Kommissionen*) produced volumes of expert and eye-witness testimony and often highly acrimonious debate. Shades and degrees of relative condemnation (aggressive, expansionist, genocidal Third Reich, versus subordinate, miserable, Soviet satellite state GDR) of dictatorships of right and left came into play, as did shades and degrees of implicit anti-communism (Cold Warrior, fellow-traveller, sympathiser), complicating debates over characterisation of the GDR. And interpretations of the GDR informed both juridical and practical 'restructuring' in the 1990s.²¹

A further, and for many East Germans the major, complication was that this history *mattered*. People lost their jobs, their emotional bearings, and their friends over it – and this in a context of massive psychological reorientation and practical changes. Historical interpretations also, more intangibly but no less importantly, affected the ways in which people perceived and interacted with each other, and thus indelibly if invisibly shaped social relations in the present.

German historians have also generally seemed remarkably concerned about the role of history – and hence of professional historians – in constructing a particular version of historical consciousness in the present. This is evident not merely in debates over museums and public memorials (the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, for example); it is also evident in pleas for a particular approach to the professional research and writing of history. Much current effort is being

²⁰ Given the sheer volume of post-1990 publications on the GDR, the following footnotes are severely restricted only to works of particular relevance to my argument or explicitly mentioned in the text. For further references, see for example the overview of GDR research in Rainer Eppelmann/Bernd Faulenbach/Ulrich Mählert (eds.), *Bilanz und Perspektiven der DDR-Forschung*, Paderborn 2003; and for a recent overview in English of key areas of debate, see for example Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, London 2002.

²¹ See for example A. James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany*, Cambridge 2001.

devoted to the conceptual or methodological search for ways of writing a common German-German history since 1945 that, it seems at least implicitly to be assumed, will in some way assist in the process of helping to 'grow together what belongs together' (to adapt Willy Brandt's famous phrase).²²

Thus debates over contemporary history are also inevitably debates over the present. But it should be noted that the political 'function' of an account does not necessarily relate either to the intentions of the individual author, or to the scholarly validity of the historical interpretation offered.

4. Progress in historical interpretations? The possibility of paradigm shifts

The existence of a close relationship between historical interpretations and contemporary politics in Germany is indubitable. Yet political relevance is not and has not been the only criterion for evaluating different historical interpretations, and most (western) professional historians would probably try explicitly to claim that it should even be in principle inadmissible.

Historical debates are not only (or always) about political implications, but (also) about the extent to which given theoretical interpretations account for the evidence. And forms of 'progress' towards 'better' historical interpretations – a notion to be defined more directly at the end of this essay – irrespective of political implications, can indeed be discerned in the record of contemporary history in Germany.

The debate between functionalists and intentionalists that raged so heatedly in the 1980s, for example, has been at least in part resolved by new ways of thinking about the issues, as in the combination of a 'polycratic' interpretation of the state with a focus on Hitler's personality and intentions, under the notion of 'working towards the Führer', developed by Ian Kershaw.²³ Moreover, while historians in the GDR were obviously constrained in this respect, West German contemporary history did not develop merely as a navel-gazing element of domestic politics (though at times it may have appeared to outsiders rather like this) but was also – as indicated by the reference to Kershaw – part of a very much wider international community of debate: scholars in

²² See for example the contribution by Konrad H. Jarausch to this journal. The very nature of the task he has set himself is arguably peculiarly German in its – implicit – concern with constructing a new 'master narrative' for a united German state that in some way seeks to integrate both the 'predecessor histories'. Explicitly, he might wish to distance himself theoretically from this interpretation of the enterprise; but this at least is how it appears.

²³ See particularly Kershaw's recent two-volume biography of Hitler: *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris*, London 1998, and *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis*, London 2000 (German edition: *Hitler 1889–1936*, Stuttgart 1998; *Hitler 1936–1945*, Stuttgart 2000).

other European countries, in north America, Australia and elsewhere were deeply engaged with German contemporary history, and international scholars from across the world have made some of the most significant contributions to debates on German contemporary history. The political fault-lines within the West German historical profession did not thus present insuperable barriers to the advancement of a theoretically-informed historical understanding of the Third Reich, although the continued relevance of this ‘past which will not pass away’ – to adopt for a moment a phrase taken from a notorious article by Ernst Nolte – undoubtedly played a key role in the heated character of some controversies.

The same process of re-conceptualisation through debate is taking place with respect to more recent ‘contemporary history’ since 1989. Here too we can see productive shifts in paradigm, though the contours of the debates are as yet less familiar. It is worth therefore exploring these more recent debates in a little more detail.

Several distinctive and contrasting approaches to GDR history developed in the 1990s. Very roughly, one set of approaches came from the stable of societal history, the history of everyday life, history from below; the other from political history in the conventional sense, in ‘top down’ analyses from above. These paradigms were not in some sense ‘innocent’, new births of the 1990s arising from nowhere to understand the GDR ‘as it actually was’, without an inherited set of preconceptions and political connotations. Earlier controversies over the Third Reich and a previous record of political spats tended to colour, in different ways, new debates over ‘the second German dictatorship’. Old antipathies, animosities and battle lines informed the new line-ups as competing interpretations were put forward to account for the GDR.

In particular, an almost crusading claim to being *the* model, *the* theoretical framework for describing, explaining, and denouncing the GDR, was put forward on behalf of a revitalised notion of totalitarianism, which, having been effectively flogged to death as a term for the Third Reich, enjoyed a sudden renaissance with respect to former communist states. The concept of totalitarianism is, essentially, a negative concept, defining modern ideologically-driven mass-mobilising dictatorships in terms of the ways in which they differ from modern democracies, and highlighting the explanatory importance of force and indoctrination. This is ‘history by contrasts’; we shall return to its implications in a moment.

The main theoretical alternatives to totalitarian theory in the 1990s came from a social history or history of everyday life perspective, from scholars such as Alf Lüdtke, Hartmut Kaelble, Hartmut Zwahr, and many others.²⁴ The earlier (pre-1990) oral history research project carried out by Lutz Niethammer, Dorothee Wierling and Alexander von Plato, also raised issues to do with ‘experienced realities’ which tended to be ignored or downplayed in a focus on

structures of power and repression.²⁵ Many social historians eschewed the search for a single, hegemonic conceptual model, pursuing instead in-depth analysis of particular social groups or topics.²⁶ Yet out of this continuing work on GDR social history one or two key concepts emerged in the 1990s which signified an alternative view of the GDR to that of totalitarianism.

5. The 'battle for concepts': why are some approaches more politicised than others?

These on-going debates may be used to illustrate certain more general features about ways of doing history; and in particular, questions to do with conceptualisation and emplotment. Let us focus particularly on totalitarianism.

Individual definitions of the concept differ. Some analysts use it as a descriptive concept, and look for changes over time; hence they distinguish between an early phase of 'real' totalitarianism and later modified 'late-' or 'post-totalitarian' phases, as though it were an essentialist description of the way the GDR 'really' was at a specific time. Others adopt a more ideal-typical approach. Klaus-Dietmar Henke, for example, defines totalitarianism as an ideal type in terms of three features: a monopolistic centre of decision-making; the unlimited extent of the decisions made by this centre; and the unlimited potential of sanctions. The would-be totalitarian state may or may not be successful in practice.²⁷

For many proponents of the concept, the real key is political; namely, highlighting contrasts with the democratic west. Klaus Schroeder, to take a notable example, critiques social history approaches which emphasise '*Herrschaft*' (authority) rather than '*Macht*' (power) because they fail, in his view, to make an adequate distinction between state/society relations in communist states and in democracies, where societies are also affected by the state and 'drenched with authority'.²⁸ Taking a slightly different tack, Horst Möller's contribution to the German Parliament's first commission of inquiry (*Enquêtekommission*) sought to demolish the contrasts between Marxism-Leninism and Nazism.²⁹

²⁴ See for example Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Kocka/Hartmut Zwahr (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, Stuttgart 1994; Alf Lüdtke/Peter Becker (eds.), *Akten, Eingaben, Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte*, Berlin 1997.

²⁵ Lutz Niethammer/Alexander von Plato/Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung*, Berlin 1991.

²⁶ See for example the regular stream of articles and monographs emanating from the ZZf and elsewhere, discussed further below.

²⁷ Klaus-Dietmar Henke (ed.), *Totalitarismus. Sechs Vorträge über Gehalt und Reichweite eines klassischen Konzepts der Diktaturforschung*, Dresden 1999, p. 12.

²⁸ See particularly Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat. Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft*, Munich 1998, pp. 632-648.

He argued that the ideologies of Marxism-Leninism and Nazism may have been different but were equally nasty in practice; racism and class murder were as bad as each other; and, if the reality looked different from the theory, it was because totalitarian aims were never achieved perfectly because of resistances, opposition, and niches. Dictatorships of left and right were to be morally and politically condemned; in this version, ‘comparing’ does more or less end up ‘equating’. Although the heat of earlier debates over this concept has died down, it remains widely in use, not merely as a loose term in general public discussions but also as a theoretical concept among professional historians.³⁰

If we reconsider totalitarianism theory as a paradigm, then we have the following employment. The cast list is essentially dichotomous: ‘regime’ versus ‘people’, ‘state’ versus ‘society’. The key actor is the regime. In any narrative, it is the SED (or its Moscow masters) which initiates policy, imposes its will: it is the acting subject of history. The ‘people’ are the object of whatever hits them from on high, being manipulated, coerced, indoctrinated and so on; they are cast as passive victims, perhaps tainted accomplices, occasionally heroes when they show ‘resistance’ or ‘opposition’. But even their very acting is essentially merely reacting, acting against. The story is one of Manichean moralising.

The problem with this plotment is not that it is necessarily wrong in all details; nor that a political critique as such is out of place in principle (few would argue that, for example, historians should remain ‘value neutral’ with respect to the Third Reich, so it is illogical to expect this for other regimes); but rather that far too much is screened out by the black-and-white filter that is imposed on the ‘buzzing, blooming confusion of reality’. The selective casting and the one-way narrative structure cumulatively serve to distort the way lives were actually lived, power experienced and enacted, characters formed and transformed, over forty years of East German history. The imputation of essentially nasty motives – power for power’s sake – and the concentration on peculiarly nasty means (both visible force and more insidious surveillance and manipulation by the Stasi) together present a distorting picture in that they only constitute a part of the story. In a court of law, witnesses are committed to telling ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’. Historical representations may or may not be more complex than legal testimonies, but to reveal only part of the picture is as misleading in a historical account as it is in a court of law. And there is an enormous range of experience, activity, and social and cultural change which can neither be conceptualised nor accommodated within the narrow filter of the totalitarianism model.³¹ In many respects, life in the GDR was simply just much more ‘ordinary’ for large numbers of people

²⁹ Deutscher Bundestag (ed.), *Materialien der Enquetekommission ‘Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland’*, Frankfurt a.M. 1995, Vol. IV, pp. 14ff.

³⁰ See for example the introduction to Clemens Vollnhals/Jürgen Weber (eds.), *Der Schein der Normalität. Alltag und Herrschaft in der SED-Diktatur*, Munich 2002.

than the totalitarianism concept allows for; it is for this reason that people who felt they were able to lead 'perfectly ordinary lives' complained that they could not 'find their own past' in the books which were coming out of this theoretical stable in the 1990s.³²

A sense of unease with the totalitarian approach has been registered in many quarters, though no single alternative concept has (yet) emerged as clear winner in the succeeding debates. The most notable candidate was the notion, originally coined by Alf Lüdtke and subsequently taken up by Jürgen Kocka, of the GDR as a *durchherrschte Gesellschaft* – a society 'drenched through with authority'.³³ Roughly, what this points to is the idea that there was no area of GDR society which was not in some way affected or coloured by the political environment. The notion has subsequently been criticised, even among those sympathetic to the approach, on the grounds that it tends implicitly to operate with a dichotomous model of state/society relations comparable to that of totalitarianism. Rather than focussing on power and repression from above, however, attention is re-focussed on resistances, opposition and (non-)conformity from below.

The notion of '*Eigen-Sinn*', again originating from Alf Lüdtke, has also stimulated some highly original and interesting research, without having pretensions to encapsulating more than selected aspects of life in the GDR.³⁴ Among those still battling for copyright on 'the' ultimate concept, meanwhile, there has been growing recognition that all was not merely to do with repression and (non-)conformity, and that an attempt had to be made to conceptualise other aspects of GDR history. Alternative concepts, such as Konrad H. Jarausch's concept of a paternalistic 'welfare dictatorship' (*Fürsorgediktatur*), were floated in this connection, but never quite acquired the widespread usage enjoyed by the others just mentioned.³⁵ The problem with this last concept is that it does little more than raise attention to one substantive aspect of the regime, with

³¹ I explore some of these aspects further in my forthcoming book, *Perfectly Ordinary Lives? A Social History of the East German Dictatorship* (to be published by Yale University Press); and also in a collaborative project on 'The "Normalisation of Rule"? State and Society in the GDR, 1961–1989', based at University College London (sponsored by Arts and Humanities Research Board, AHRB). There is not space to go into greater detail here.

³² A phenomenon noted by, for example, both (West German) historian Ulrich Mählerl and (East German) historian Stefan Wolle, among many others: Ulrich Mählerl, *Kleine Geschichte der DDR*, Munich 1998, p. 8, and Wolle, *Die heile Welt* (fn. 15), p. 15.

³³ See particularly the contributions by Lüdtke and Kocka in: Kaelble/Kocka/Zwahr, *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (fn. 24).

³⁴ See for example Thomas Lindenberger (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur*, Cologne 1999.

³⁵ Konrad H. Jarausch, Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship, in: idem (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a socio-cultural history of the GDR*, Oxford 1999, pp. 47–69.

little sense of historical dynamics over time or interrelations between different elements.

The main contribution made by these debates, however, was that they have served to open up whole new avenues of research and highly fruitful approaches to diverse aspects of GDR history.

6. New paradigms: the 'normalisation' of GDR history?

There has thus been an increasing shift away from the search for *the* summary concept; and at the same time there have been welcome departures from – or perhaps better, welcome additions to – the early overwhelming focus on topics such as repression and opposition, the churches and Stasi infiltration, or SED relations with Moscow. The chronological focus has broadened (perhaps not yet sufficiently) from concentration on the early foundation of the dictatorship, and the decline and collapse at the end; attention has shifted to understanding stability and change across the full forty years. Research projects, monographs and articles have proliferated among an increasingly international field of scholars: studies of rural regions, socialist towns, mass organisations, gender, generations, socialisation, education, professional and social groups, power relations at the micro-level of the factory floor, now complement the continued traditional focus on political and international history.³⁶ New lines of cultural analysis have opened up aspects of youth culture, popular music and leisure activities, and the hidden history of GDR consumer society, linking in with trends in recent north American historical research.³⁷

³⁶ It is impossible to provide anything like a comprehensive list of relevant work in these constantly growing fields, to which full justice cannot be done in this brief survey (for overviews of many fields, see Eppelmann/Faulenbach/Mählert, *Bilanz* [fn. 20]). A few recent titles may be selected, to stand as merely indicative of the range of current scholarship: Evemarie Badstübner (ed.), *Befremdlich anders: Leben in der DDR*, Berlin 2000; Arnd Bauerkämper, *Ländliche Gesellschaft in der kommunistischen Diktatur*, Cologne 2002; Richard Bessel/Ralph Jessen (eds.), *Die Grenzen der Diktatur*, Göttingen 1996; Gunilla-Friederike Budde (ed.), *Frauen arbeiten*, Göttingen 1997; Peter Hübner/Klaus Tenfelde (eds.), *Arbeiter in der SBZ-DDR*, Essen 1999; Renate Hürtgen/Thomas Reichel (eds.), *Der Schein der Stabilität: DDR-Betriebsalltag in der Ära Honecker*, Berlin 2001; Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'état dans la société est-allemande*, Paris 2001; Jeannette Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971–1989*, Basingstoke 2003; Patrick Major/Jonathan Osmond (eds.), *The Workers' and Peasants' State*, Manchester 2002; Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins. Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR*, Berlin 2002.

³⁷ See for example: Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary. Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989*, Chapel Hill 2002; Annette Kaminsky, *Wohlstand, Schönheit, Glück. Kleine Konsumgeschichte der DDR*, Munich 2001; Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*, Cologne 1999; Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock and Rebels*, Berkeley 2000; Michael Rauhut, *Beat in der Grauzone*, Berlin 1993.

Following the traditional German historical habit of hanging academic discussion on 'round' anniversaries, there have been particular outpourings (often with not merely a research agenda but also a 'public education' function) on occasions such as the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Wall (1999),³⁸ the tenth anniversary of unification (2000), and the fiftieth anniversary of June 1953 (2003); there have also been wider-ranging conferences proclaiming in their very title that *Überhaupt ist vieles viel verschiedener*.

It is not merely the range of topics and the depth of detailed knowledge of specific areas that have grown. There have also been key shifts in underlying paradigm. The history of the GDR has become in some respects 'normalised' in the sense in which Martin Broszat used this term in pleading for a 'normalisation' of approaches to the Third Reich. The 'emplotment' of GDR history itself has – although this has barely been registered explicitly as yet – correspondingly changed in significant ways.

First: the wider conceptual framework. Rather than being analysed purely as an instance of a modern dictatorship (to be compared with the Third Reich, or contrasted with the democratic West), GDR history is being 'uncoupled' from contemporary politics by many historians. This means that aspects of its history can be analysed within a variety of wider 'historical pictures', depending on focus of interest. For some, the focus is (again) that of an 'advanced industrial society', with variations on the trends and challenges common to other modern societies, both capitalist and communist; thus for example it is possible to compare the 1960s in West and East Germany, consumerism and youth movements in capitalism and communism, or patterns of industrial protest in East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia.³⁹ It should be emphasised that any such 'framing' in a wider picture will be for heuristic purposes only, in pursuing a specific research question: there is no more intrinsic merit to writing a history of both Germanies simultaneously (for purposes of 'identity construction') than there is to treating either or both German states as case studies within a different analytic framework. The key theoretical point here is to realise that an analytic framework is merely that: a useful focus for a particular investigation, rather than some 'essentialist' statement about the way the past 'really' was.

Secondly, the analysis of processes within the GDR itself is no longer essentially dichotomous – as in the totalitarian model – but has in many recent

³⁸ See for just one example: Christoph Kleßmann/Hans Misselwitz/Günter Wichert (eds.), *Deutsche Vergangenheiten – eine gemeinsame Herausforderung. Der schwierige Umgang mit der doppelten Nachkriegsgeschichte*, Berlin 1999.

³⁹ There is of course an excellent tradition of this sort of nuanced approach, as in Christoph Kleßmann's series of volumes on the two Germanies: *Die doppelte Staatsgründung. Deutsche Geschichte 1945–1955*, Bonn 1982, 5th edn. 1991; *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation. Deutsche Geschichte 1955–1970*, Bonn 1988, 2nd edn. 1997; and, with Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990*, Munich 1993.

works become much more multi-faceted. The narrative is no longer cast in terms of a one-way street, roughly along the lines of what might be called ‘*SED-Befehl*’: in other words, accounts structured in terms of ‘the SED decided this, or wanted that, or ordered the other; the people were forced accordingly, or resisted, or opposed’. Instead, there is far greater awareness of activities and initiatives coming from many sides, and of ambiguities and complexities in the ways in which East Germans lived their lives, perceived and ‘made’ their own history – although, to paraphrase Marx, not always in conditions of their own choosing.

Thirdly, the assignment of historical roles has become far less moralising or condemnatory; people are no longer cast simply as villains or heroes, victims or accomplices. In many accounts, they emerge as enterprising individuals capable of deploying diverse avenues of interest representation, communication, irony and even humour (not always an attribute for which Germans have historically been noted) – a development also evident in films and novels which, in ironic vindication of Marx, recast the ‘second German dictatorship’ not as tragedy but as farce. Thomas Brussig’s *Helden wie wir* and *Sonnenallee* may, on some views, serve quite wrongly to render the GDR and specifically the Stasi ‘harmless’; the box office success of the (far more convincing) parody *Goodbye Lenin* nevertheless illustrates that such revisiting of the East German past as comedy is striking a widely felt chord.⁴⁰

Recognition of the diversity of cultural and religious milieus, social groups and generations; analysis of social processes of stigmatisation and criminalisation; exploration of East German participation in international trends in youth culture, popular music and consumerism; reconsidering East German history in wider frameworks of comparison than solely that of a dictatorship; all these recent shifts in historical research are allowing East Germans to re-enter the pages of the history books. In short, approaches to the history of the GDR are becoming infinitely more nuanced and colourful than they were a decade ago.

My comments above about ‘emplotment’ and ‘casting’ in recent approaches to contemporary history do not, therefore, relate solely to political preferences or a philosophical standpoint on whether or not ‘voices from below’ should be ‘heard’ as loudly as the voices of those in power. They relate to the empirical analysis of the diverse combinations of factors which interact in any set of historical changes. If historical research reveals, for example, the input of *Eingaben* and women’s voices in the background to the GDR Abortion Law of 1972, or the relationship between different types of workers’ protest and regime

⁴⁰ The distinctive humour of the GDR is well captured in this film, which even uses virtually word for word one of the *Eingaben* cited by Ina Merkel in Lüdtkje/Becker, *Akten, Eingaben, Schaufernter* (fn. 24), p. 283.

responses in new social policies, then these inputs from different quarters should play a role in the historian's narrative. To emplot GDR history purely in top-down mode (SED policies lead to effects on people) is inadequate, not because it is held to be 'right-wing', but because to screen out entirely the range of processes of interest representation and negotiation which lead into policy formation is over-simplified. Similarly, to cast historical actors in a one-dimensional manner ignores key changes in collective identities, experiences, and characteristic behaviour patterns under changing social and political conditions.

7. Theory and politics in contemporary history

What then can we conclude about the relationships between politics and contemporary history?

First, the political relevance of historical interpretations is not – or not merely – a matter of the values or 'political agenda' of the individual historian, to be 'neutralised' by prior admission of partisanship. Of course individual historians are real people, and as such no more immune to intense personal views on the subject matter with which they are dealing than are the people they are studying. But this is not – or not only – the key issue in this connection. The political relevance of historical interpretations is also fundamental. Any historical account which deals with sensitive aspects of a recent past – and contemporary history in Germany since 1945 has been particularly sensitive – will inevitably be of political relevance. Historical interpretations have political implications, whether intended or not, and whether the functions accord with the political position of the author or not. And similar functions can be performed by quite different paradigms.

Secondly – and crucially – if we believe that professional historians (should) produce something other than fiction, myth or ideology, then neither the political position of individual historians, nor the political functions of any given account should be the key determinant for choosing between conflicting historical approaches. Returning to the theoretical discussion as the start of this essay: if we do not accept the naïve empiricist case – that an appeal to 'the facts' will distinguish 'better' from 'worse' – and are equally unhappy with post-modernist relativism, then we need to be more explicit about the character of the historical enterprise.

Based on the recognition that history is inevitably a theoretical endeavour, it is possible to argue that 'better' historical approaches will:

- use concepts which are not 'essentialist' ('the way the world really is') but theoretical constructions, heuristic tools, open to qualification and 'disconfirmation';

- account better for more of the ‘empirical evidence’, bearing in mind that all ‘evidence’ is theoretically contaminated by the questions asked and the concepts used to analyse sources;
- not entail ‘screening out’ too much (thus wilfully one-sided ‘ideal types’ in the Weberian sense may prove highly problematic if used crudely);
- be open to reasoned debate, revision, and critique.⁴¹

In the light of these criteria, the relationship between politics and historical paradigms can be clarified.

Rather than ‘imposing narratives’ (as postmodernists would have it), historians pose puzzles. They put questions to the past, which can in principle be answered. It is thus crucial to think clearly about which broader frameworks of inquiry might be most appropriate for exploring specific questions (whether, for example, analysis of aspects of GDR history are ‘framed’ in the context of globalisation, industrial societies, dictatorships, communist states). The more detailed conceptual apparatus is also an essential tool. Rather than searching for characterisations of the whole, it is arguably more fruitful to look at combinations of factors by using a lower-level conceptual framework allowing comparisons across selected cases.⁴² Concepts defined at a relatively abstract level can be applied across a variety of periods and cases (‘hard’ and ‘soft’ strategies for dealing with worker discontent, for example). Such concepts should in themselves be relatively value-neutral, wilfully constructed, seen as heuristic tools rather than articles of faith.

History as puzzle-solving requires constant navigation back and forth between sources and theories, questions and evidence, rather than commitment to a political camp or identity agenda. And German contemporary history, perhaps more than any other, needs to be particularly clear about these issues.

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⁴¹ This summary of criteria draws on my argument in *Historical Theory* (fn. 7), and is also included in a forthcoming article in *Historically Speaking*, 2004.

⁴² On methods in comparative history, see for example Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich. Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999; and on related theoretical issues, Chris Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit. Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, Cologne 1997.