



## **Thomas Lindenberger, Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance,**

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"Workers," painting (close-up) by Norwegian artist Aksel Waldemar Johannessen, roughly 1915. Private collection, Oslo. Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)

## Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance

by Thomas Lindenberger

"*Eigen-Sinn* – [...] denoting willfulness, spontaneous self-will, a kind of self-affirmation, an act of (re)appropriating alienated social relations on and off the shop floor by self-assertive prankishness, demarcating a space of one's own. There is a disjunction between formalized politics and the prankish, stylized, misanthropic distancing from all constraints or incentives present in the everyday politics of *Eigen-Sinn*. In standard parlance, the word has pejorative overtones, referring to 'obstreperous, obstinate' behavior, usually of children. The 'discompounding' of writing it as *Eigen-Sinn* stresses its root signification of 'one's own sense, own meaning.' It is semantically linked to *aneignen* (appropriate, reappropriate, reclaim)."<sup>[1]</sup>

In *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, the 1995 English translation of Alf Lüdtke's now seminal edited volume,<sup>[2]</sup> the author explains in a glossary (not contained in the original 1989 German version) a somewhat cumbersome term hitherto unknown in scholarly discourse: *Eigen-Sinn*. This word – commonly rendered in English as "stubbornness" – has since become a key concept in German and even international scholarship for a specific approach referred to collectively as *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life, the main varieties of which were presented in the volume. As early as 1986, Alf Lüdtke, then active at the Göttingen Max Planck Institute for History, had proposed using the household word *Eigensinn* to gain a better understanding of the behavior of factory workers.<sup>[3]</sup>

A quarter of a century later, the word *Eigensinn*, sometimes written hyphenated as *Eigen-Sinn*,<sup>[4]</sup> can be found in the titles of some several hundred German books. These usually refer to the everyday meaning of the word and its almost universally negative connotations derived from the context of dealing with obstreperous children, albeit with a reversal of the usual bias.

Nowadays *Eigen-Sinn* (often with hyphen) is meant to evoke positive associations, for instance when applied to a highly gifted child (with a supposed or actual behavioral disorder).<sup>[5]</sup> Music groups<sup>[6]</sup> and art educators<sup>[7]</sup> who have reclaimed the word for themselves use it to express individuality and ambiguity as attributes of creativity. An *eigensinniges Kind* on the other hand – literally a "child with a mind of its own"– used to be something clearly negative. Such a child was considered obdurate, a "problem child" who resisted the educational efforts of adults.

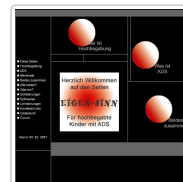
The concept of *Eigen-Sinn* used in everyday history in its original application cannot be reduced to the one or the other, and this very ambiguity is part of its "subtext." This is no coincidence. The fact that the term is not explicitly defined in any of the literature – save for the special case of the glossary entry cited above – is indeed very much in keeping with the methodological self-understanding of historians of everyday life. Its "discovery" by Alf Lüdtke was actually a very conscious reference to the ambiguity found in earlier usage of centuries past, an approach this article will adopt as well.

### **Eigen-Sinn – A child of the 1980s**

Alf Lüdtke's endeavors in the mid-1980s to introduce such a term into scholarly debate were part and parcel of the search for new concepts and ways of thinking among critical intellectuals in the old Federal Republic. The varieties of Marxism prevalent at German universities since the protest movement of 1968 had meanwhile lost much of their attractiveness and credibility. At the same time, New Social Movements were confronting a self-styled critical historiography with new questions and orientations. By publicly criticizing conventional practices of historiography, history workshops linked to NSMs formed a kind of non-university-affiliated "grassroots movement" opposed to what they saw as an antiquated academic "guild".<sup>[8]</sup> They, along with academic historians interested in the history of everyday life, were interested in focusing on real, existing individuals and their perspectives. What historians of every stripe had practiced unquestioned for generations, in Germany in particular, namely the wholesale subsumption of the actions and motives of countless individuals under "great events" – wars and revolutions, hyperinflation and depression, rationalization and technological revolution, collapse and economic miracle – now suddenly seemed questionable in light of political slogans such as "dare more democracy"<sup>[9]</sup> and increasing individual emancipation.

Which doesn't mean that Marx's dictum had lost any of its currency: that people "make *their own history*, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted."<sup>[10]</sup> Quite the contrary. It had therefore become all the more urgent to ask what the relationship was between individuals, socialization and domination in highly modern industrial and class societies at the level and from the perspective of the many individual historical protagonists? How does one grasp historically the many "nameless" workers and peasants, servants and peddlers, prostitutes, journeymen, etc., how should one conceive of their actions and non-actions as concrete objects of research?

In a post-1968 climate critical of capitalism, the history of everyday life primarily focused on the male industrial worker and his collective mode of existence as a



Website  
 "Eigen-Sinn. For highly gifted children with ADS,"  
 screenshot, September 1, 2014  
[www.eigen-sinn.homepage.t-online.de](http://www.eigen-sinn.homepage.t-online.de)

"class." This also became the focus of the new term *Eigen-Sinn*. The aim was to probe the emancipatory potential of the workers' movement, the working class, and a working-class life. The West's "farewell to the working class" (André Gorz) and the sobering realization that the GDR as the self-proclaimed "first workers' and peasants' state in German history"<sup>[11]</sup> had failed both economically as well as intellectually and morally made the results of these investigations rather meager in retrospect. In the threefold sense of Hegelian *Aufhebung* – preserved, canceled, and raised to a higher level – the historiographic concept of *Eigen-Sinn* was able to leave behind the post-Marxist context it emerged in, without ever needing to distance itself from these origins. *Eigen-Sinn* nowadays is a useful historiographic concept for understanding individual behaviors and actions that impact on the sphere of power and domination: submission and revolt, resistance and dropping-out.

How this came about will be explained in the following in three successive stages. We begin with the linguistic context of the Enlightenment, in which Alf Lüdtke encountered *Eigen-Sinn* in a meaning that seemed to hold particular promise for his research into the needs and orientations of industrial laborers. The second stage will reconstruct the rather particular zeitgeist and epistemological interest of historians who used and elaborated the concept prior to around 1990. The probing and still unsettling question was the working class's "submission to an [imposed] order" (Max Weber) manifest above all in the glaring absence of resistance among workers under Nazism. Against the backdrop of an increased interest in the history of daily life in the GDR as of the mid-1990s, a third stage looks at one of the more successful transfers of the concept to newer fields of research and its subsequent adoption in general historical research.

### **Eigen-Sinn and work**

The entry for *Eigensinn* in Grimm's German dictionary, published in 1859 in volume three, reads "*animus difficilis, obstinatus*" (a difficult, obstinate mind) or, with reference to a person, "*difficilis homo*" (a difficult person).<sup>[12]</sup> What exactly "difficult" means is open to debate. The dictionary entry is kept rather neutral, obviously referring to the conventional use of the term for someone considered hard to deal with. Meyer's encyclopedia from 1888 is more precise on the other hand. Here it's about the relationship between reason and unreason, about someone who sticks to his opinions against all arguments: "*Eigensinn*, the stubborn insistence on an opinion or an aim despite the fact that obvious reasons have proven it to be wrong or misguided, for no other reason than because it is one's own."<sup>[13]</sup> That such behavior would be seen in a negative light from the rationalist perspective of a nineteenth-century encyclopedia should be fairly obvious.

Nevertheless, in sources from before this age of absolute faith in science no less a figure than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe used *Eigensinn* in a positive way, referring to inner strength, to individual perseverance. In *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, he has a homeowner say the following: "Our tenacity with regard to possessions [...] can sometimes give us great energy. It is due to this very obstinacy [*Eigensinn*] that my house was saved. When the town was burning, they tried to save and salvage what they could and bring it to my place. I forbade it, ordered the windows and doors to be shut, and turned against the flames with several of my neighbors. Our efforts succeeded in preserving this part of the town. Everything was still in its place the next morning, the way you see it and the way it's been for nearly a century."<sup>[14]</sup>

In this instance *Eigen-Sinn* stands for the insistence on something against a

majority opinion or mood, aimed at saving something of one's own (*Eigenes*) – a house – by following one's own judgment. This *Eigen-Sinn* is situation-related ("When the town was burning ...") and is based on power resources ("I forbade it ..."). A tenacity expressed as defying expectations in certain interactions and that is immediately conspicuous to outside observers is also evident in the following find which inspired Alf Lüdtkke to develop a concept around the word *Eigensinn*.

In 1790, the "popular philosopher" Christian Garve, who wrote educational tracts in layman's terms in the spirit of the Enlightenment, published a report entitled *On the Character of Peasants and Their Relations against the Lords and the Government*, based on his observations of the rural population in Silesia, republished in 1974 in a facsimile edition by Kurt Wölfel.<sup>[15]</sup> Lüdtkke refers to it in a lengthy footnote as a "text 'of dense description'" about "the behavior of serfs in Silesia against their lords," quoting from it as follows:

"Part or even a consequence of their [i.e. the peasants] being insidious is a certain *Eigensinn*, which makes the peasant distinct when he is embarrassed or when some prejudice has become deep-rooted in him. As his body and his limbs get stiff the same happens apparently with his soul. He, consequently, gets deaf to all propositions. [...] Nothing else raises stronger antipathies against peasants than when one becomes aware of this *Eigensinn* in him. What, after all, is more difficult for the superior to stand than if those who are subject to him does not listen to him?"<sup>[16]</sup>

Two key features of the later concept are evident in Garve's text. First, he addresses and reflects on the relationship between observer and observed as one determined by both social and cognitive factors. Peasants seem "stubborn" [*eigensinnig*] in the eyes of higher-placed persons. At the same time they're immune, as Garve writes, to the propositions of "well-meaning" enlighteners – not out of "malice," but because the views of their own kind mean more to them than those of judges or higher-ups, or because of their "clumsiness of intellect" due to their lack of "culture" and "knowledge." "The humanitarian" will thus "find reason to show patience and forbearance."<sup>[17]</sup> The same applies – one might justifiably add, *mutatis mutandis* at the end of the twentieth century – to the historical anthropologist of our day and age interested in these individuals and still committed to the values of enlightenment.

The concepts generated in the process of observing cannot be wholly shorn of their social determinants. By bringing to mind again and again this immanent limitation, the observer recognizes that apart from his inability to comprehend the "stubborn" peasant on account of the social disparity between them there is also a cognitive barrier to understanding. The *Eigensinn* of Silesian peasants is not only reflected in the disconcerting experience of the lords and traveling scholars who encounter them, but is indicative of an entirely *different* way of thinking and understanding. This emphasis on the difference in meaning (*Sinn*) in the eye of the mindful observer and the meaning in the eyes and the actions of the observed, a meaning that belongs to him only, which is his "own" (*eigen*) – the peasant with a mind (*Sinn*) of his own – is alluded to through the use of a hyphen (*Eigen-Sinn*), which Alf Lüdtkke was early to adopt in his own writings.<sup>[18]</sup>

But there is another dimension of the concept in Garve, the second key feature. *Eigen-Sinn* cannot be divorced from the physicality of those investigated. Garve makes an analogy between the "rigidity" of their limbs and souls – a context-dependent observation, as illustrated by the following scene.

"Everyone can undoubtedly recall having seen the [treacherous] faces of peasant

boys, the one eye, or maybe both, stealing furtive glances from under half-closed lids; the mouth agape and twisted into a derisive, slightly stupid smile; head pressed against his chest or perhaps lowered to the ground, as if he wanted to hide himself; in a word, faces reflecting fear, imbecility and simplicity, mixed with scorn and aversion. Such boys, when you want something from them or talk to them, stand motionless and mute like a log. They answer no question the passerby asks. Their muscles are stiff and immobile. But as soon as the stranger removes himself a little, they run to their companions and burst into loud laughter."<sup>[19]</sup>

*Eigensinnige Körperlichkeit*<sup>[20]</sup> – "idiosyncratic physicality" – enables these individuals to distance themselves from lordly demands, both during direct interactions with them and after the authority figure or observer has turned away and left. Sharpening one's gaze for the nonverbal, body-related dimensions of behavior, investigating the bodies of individuals as sense organs that are both meaningful and meaning-investing apart from meaningful words and symbols is a core element of Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn*.

Lüdtke first formulated this viewpoint in his research on industrial workers at the height of industrialization. It is worth mentioning another key text that lent itself to a historical-anthropological reading: the reports of a young pastor, Paul Göhre, about his months-long experience as an unskilled laborer in the machine-tool division of a large Berlin industrial enterprise in the late nineteenth century.<sup>[21]</sup> Göhre was a nuanced observer of the various skilled tasks carried out there (molder, lathe operator, borer, etc.) and the pressure to cooperate under the adverse conditions of ubiquitous factory rules, but he also gave a detailed account of the way workers interacted with language and their bodies, as well as the way in which they struck a balance under these circumstances between approaching others and keeping one's distance. This included, in particular, teasing one another and playing pranks, behaviors which were embedded in the work routine and allowed them to display their physicality and manliness. "Pauses" like this, including "illicit" breaks or the prolongation of downtimes, enabled workers to satisfy needs of their own and did not necessarily lead to conflicts with the factory regime. "[T]hese interactions and expressions were not meant primarily as direct resistance to demands 'from above'; instead, they expressed a space of their own – *Eigensinn* (self-will or self-reliance)."<sup>[22]</sup>

### **Eigen-Sinn and resistance**

Naturally, there was more to developing this concept than a methodical exploration of working-class lives in a bygone era from the perspective of their workplace. The "worker" and "working class" as objects of study are linked to certain political interests and expectations, as well as to the knowledge of disappointment and historical failure. Thus, *Eigen-Sinn* was always in some sense about reconstructing the opportunities and limits of labor politics.

Engagement with the history of Nazi dictatorship grew more intense around 1968 and went hand in hand with the rediscovery of less orthodox varieties of Marxist thought. Thus, the working class as a collective subject with "nothing to lose except its shackles" became the focus of critical historiography. In this reading of capitalist history, fascism figured as the most extreme form of the rule of capital, whereas the working class, led by a Marxist vanguard party, was considered its most relentless foe. Young classroom Marxists were thereby following the lead and fulfilling the hopes of leftist intellectuals of the early 1930s.

"And every day the proletarian heart burns with a sense of deprivation and injustice ... Until that day when the fiery red glow will finally erupt. It will overflow like an irresistible river of lava, melting down the profit economy, with all its hunger and subjugation, into a better world. That day will come!" a Social Democratic editor in the Ruhr region wrote in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression.<sup>[23]</sup> Two years later, the Nazis crushed organized labor within a few months, and "the day" famously *didn't* come. The overwhelming majority of workers did not put up *any* resistance in the ensuing years. "What Happened to the 'Fiery Red Glow'?" was the title of Alf Lüdtke's 1989 essay about the collaboration and conformity of workers under Nazi dictatorship. According to Lüdtke, the conformism of industrial workers can primarily be traced back to their relations at the workplace, the work that secured their material and social livelihood. Workers were forced to cooperate – in the manner Göhre described in detail: an involuntary cooperation born of necessity – in order to ensure their survival. Individual and collective considerations had to overlap; discipline at the workplace had to be combined with a degree of autonomy. When workers appropriate the existing power relations (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*) at the workplace – to be more precise, the specific demands that are placed on them as subjects in the "ruling organization" (*Herrschaftsverband*) of a factory – they do so in order to survive. Even under the political conditions of dictatorship, it was all about giving meaning to their other-directed existence, having a "meaningful sense of self." For male factory workers, in particular, pride and confidence in the quality of their work played an important role.

Appealing to this sense of the value of one's productivity was one of the Nazis' most effective means of persuasion. Respect for "diligent work" was the repeated focus of propaganda. An especially clever gambit in the months of consolidation after seizing power on January 30, 1933 was declaring May Day an official holiday, including its first observance as such in a state ceremony at Tempelhof Field in the Reich capital. That all trade unions were outlawed the next day, that workers and entrepreneurs alike were forced to join the German Labor Front, did little to change the enormous suggestive power of publicly recognizing the value of physical labor. The literature has offered ample proof that workers reacted positively to this and other social-policy measures as well as to the decline in mass unemployment brought on by massive military buildup.<sup>[24]</sup>

As this example shows, *Eigen-Sinn* used in this way is – contrary to a common misconception – not only not synonymous with "resistance" but actually helps our understanding of why resistance and open rebellion did not occur where it would have been expected. In the case of workers in Nazi Germany and their failure to engage in large-scale resistance, the *Eigen-Sinn* of the masses contributed to stabilizing the new power relations, however precarious this stability may have been. "Contribute" means that nevertheless every form of rule is based to some extent on physical violence, whether openly and arbitrarily or tied to legal procedures. In the case of Nazi dictatorship, the



Exhibition opening "German People, German Work" at Kaiserdamm in Berlin, April 1934. Photographer: Georg Pahl, holdings of: Aktuelle-Bilder-Centrale, Georg Pahl – Bildbestand (R 102), Source: Wikimedia Commons/Bundesarchiv Bild 102-15750 (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE).

symbolic outreach to workers was combined with brute force against the few resisting workers, and this quite blatantly and demonstratively.

And yet it would be misleading to understand the word *Eigen-Sinn* as a collective term to explain the behavior of conformists, fellow travelers and opportunists. The concept is also not a reference to a neutral either-or, somewhere in between the extremes of unconditional support (= +1) and uncompromising resistance (= -1). From an outside perspective, the attitudes and orientations that best deserve the label *eigen-sinnig* are the ones that elude this question, whether posed in the actual historical context or nowadays by historians. The desire to know something about the attitude and stance of individuals towards the system of rule they live under always contains the implicit imperative to "Tell me where you stand!" The observer perspective explicit in the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* takes into account that this question cannot or cannot always be answered so easily. Or to put it in the perspective of the actual protagonists: "The most important thing was this: in trying to be themselves [*bei sich sein*] while at the same time trying to be with the others [*bei den anderen sein*], individuals ignored the type of calculations that were aiming at the bigger picture."<sup>[25]</sup>

The precept of *Eigen-Sinn* to make distinctions and be more nuanced proceeds from the basic assumption that any form of rule never quite works the way the rulers imagine it, that ideas and concepts of total rule in reality never or rarely become total. From the point of view of its reproduction, *Eigen-Sinn* thus stands for the frictional losses more or less intrinsic to the "operation" of any form of domination as well as for the moderation in demands that rulers are forced to accept – because exercising authority is not possible in the long term without the independent (*eigen*) and willful (*eigensinnig*) cooperation of the ruled. The *Eigen-Sinn* of the ruled is necessary to maintain the operation of an industrial enterprise. If workers did not adopt and "appropriate" the immediate social relations they are placed in, the complex social entity of a factory or an office simply wouldn't work. At the same time, however, this appropriation – from the perspective of everyone involved – is likewise an inevitable source of friction, malfunctions and frictional losses.

### **Eigen-Sinn and domination**

Given its epistemic foundations, the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* lends itself to areas and problems beyond Alf Lüdtke's original historical target group: industrial workers in Germany during the high period of industrialization, and workers in Nazi Germany. The concept has thus been applied in a variety of historical subdisciplines, especially those defining themselves as "historical anthropology." It is now considered a standard tool in social histories of the Early Modern period.<sup>[26]</sup> In the following we will take a look at how this concept has been a source of inspiration and innovation in recent contemporary history.

The end of communist dictatorships, the rapid opening of their archives, and the broad public consensus in reunified Germany that a thorough and comprehensive historical reappraisal of the GDR was necessary – all of this prompted a group of East and West German historians at the Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam to adopt the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, incorporating it in a research program whose theoretical approach was explicitly focused on domination and dictatorship. This prompting was more of a provocation given the sudden return of totalitarianism theory in the day-to-day language of politics. The highly official linkage of parliamentary debate, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering the past), and scholarly expertise had an immediate impact on academic discourse, effectively curtailing its freedom of

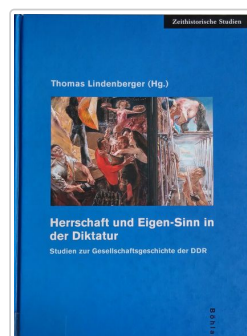


expression.<sup>[27]</sup> Practitioners of social history, not to mention the history of everyday life, suddenly found themselves on the defensive again when faced with the unquestioned top-down perspective inherent to totalitarianism theory with its focus on institutions and political elites. Any attempt to make "East German society" the center of attention in the early to mid-1990s would inevitably arouse suspicions of wanting to downplay or disguise the dictatorial character of the *SED-Unrechtsstaat* – the "unlawful state" of a one-party system.<sup>[28]</sup>

Of course, a blindness for domination and a lack of interest in critiquing it were basically the last thing a then still young history of everyday life wanted to be accused of or, indeed, had any need to be accused of, even though communist dictatorship in Germany was completely new ground for these historians. As early as 1994, Alf Lüdtke had formulated in his essay on the "disgruntled loyalty of industrial workers in the GDR" the central tenets of an approach to East German reality that was saturated with the history of experience and that started from the assumption of a basic continuity from Nazi Germany to communist East Germany in the way workers dealt with the demands, both reasonable and unreasonable, placed on them by their social environment and their rulers. "Interpretations in which obligations towards coworkers, neighbors and relatives, but also towards the 'big picture,' were balanced out with individual distance towards everyone and everything, i.e., with *Eigensinn*, did not disappear with the defeat of the fascist regime in 1945. On the contrary, they enabled these individuals to 'get by' on a day-to-day basis, especially in the first months and years of the new social and political order."<sup>[29]</sup> Following this lead, the Potsdam project group, critically received but amply supported by a German Research Foundation (DFG) commission, investigated the notion of "domination and *Eigen-Sinn* in dictatorship." The project combined Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn* with Max Weber's sociology of domination and Pierre Bourdieu's praxeology with the aim of researching various aspects of everyday life in the history of the GDR.<sup>[30]</sup>

Lüdtke's pathbreaking essay "Domination as a Social Practice" had laid the groundwork for the project's basic understanding of domination.<sup>[31]</sup> The focus was now on taking the shift in perspective demanded by the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* and making it the starting point of a new research strategy that enabled investigating the social space of communist dictatorship left unexplored by totalitarianism theory, especially in its static, politics-centered variant with its tendency to catalog distinctive features. The starting point here was Sigrid Meuschel's theory – hotly debated by social historians – of society under state socialism having been "shut down" (*stillgelegt*) or "died off" (*abgestorben*) as a result of the forceful repression of processes of social self-organization through politically mandated transformation and construction processes.<sup>[32]</sup> Thus, the communist promise of utopia pursued a specific "design" that entailed the "homogenization" (*Entdifferenzierung*) of relatively independent subsystems and the fusion of collective protagonists in the identitarian constructions of party, state and society.

The "Domination and *Eigen-Sinn* in Dictatorship" project, by contrast, demanded first of all that historians take into account the interactive character of every practice of domination as a permanent asymmetrical power relationship, thus preventing historians from reducing dictatorial rule under state socialism to the mere giving and following of orders. *Eigen-Sinn* seemed like the ideal concept to explore the social practice of concrete



relationships of domination under East German socialism in terms of their meaning and meaningfulness to individuals. According to the underlying theory, this concept enabled historians to imagine the parallel, cooperative and interlocking nature of conformity with regime expectations and individually practiced detachment from system expectations as the norm of daily life under really existing socialism.

Cover: Thomas Lindenberger (Hrsg.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, Köln u.a.: Böhlau 1999 ©

The introduction to the 1999 project volume *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur* contained a description of the concept underlying the various "studies of social history in the GDR" collected in the volume, which can be summarized here as follows: *Eigen-Sinn* designates the ability and the need of an individual in a relationship of domination to perceive and appropriate reality as well as to act. The term thus points to the interpretive and meaning-producing effect of this ability. The term *Eigen-Sinn* therefore includes potentially varied attitudes and behaviors. The spectrum of behaviors motivated by *Eigen-sinn* is hence quite broad and self-contradictory. It ranges from the zeal of glowing idealists or the egoistic exploitation of the possibilities of active participation, to outwardly loyal but inwardly distant behaviors, to passive forms of noncompliance or open dissidence and resistance to the claims made by higher authorities.

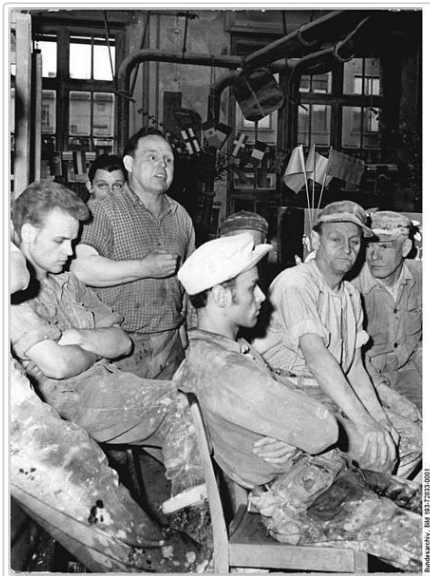
*Eigen-Sinn* enables the following distinction to be made. Systems of order, forced behaviors, and prohibitions – intended as such by those in authority and usually expressed ideologically – are one thing. The actual and specific meaning that individuals invest in them by virtue of their collaborating in these orders and behaviors is another, one that exists in parallel. Even though external appearances might at first suggest the congruence of ideological meaning and the individual attribution of meaning, they are not identical. A constant process of mediation is taking place between them, the result of which can never be final. *Eigen-Sinn* can indeed result in resistance to cooptation and attempted activation "from above" both in daily affairs and in high politics. But *Eigen-Sinn* can also be observed in the targeted use and hence reproduction of conformist behaviors, because certain individuals might see a different – perhaps additional – "meaning" in them than that of official ideology.<sup>[33]</sup>

Translated into empirical terms, this means focusing on microhistorical reconstructions of day-to-day collusion and conflict, but also of alienation and dissent between party rule and the working people. Using archives and autobiographical narrative interviews, historians have shown how workers refunctioned the forced community of a "socialist work brigade" into decidedly "unpolitical" leisure activities; how individual farmers in Lower Lusatia bowed to forced collectivization of their lands in 1960 yet retained their say in the new agricultural cooperatives; how a village policeman in the Mark Brandenburg engaging in farming on the side conformed to his rural clientele so much that his superiors in the district capital seriously questioned his class reliability; how female poultry farmers and textile spinners working at large, state-owned enterprises mastered the multiple burden of shift work, plan fulfilment pressures, and childcare; but also how the editor at a nationwide satirical magazine subject to state censors used literary-documentary facts and fiction to tackle the subject of notoriously shoddy work on prefab apartment blocks.<sup>[34]</sup>

The conceptual foundations and results of this project have added to the existing literature on *Eigen-Sinn* in other areas and given it a place in the historical literature about the GDR.<sup>[35]</sup> The number of studies and dissertations that refer to this concept in their titles or introductions is meanwhile hard to keep track of, not to mention offering an overall assessment of them. An in-depth appreciation of this primarily German reception would go beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, the adoption of the *Eigen-Sinn* concept by the international scholarly community ever since Lüdtkke's publications of the 1980s has been a success in qualitative terms. A renewed French interest in the GDR as of 1990 with its critique-of-power perspective – presented in 1999 in French in a special issue of *Annales*<sup>[36]</sup> – led the way in adopting Lüdtkke and Lindenberger's concept. Studies on everyday life in state-owned enterprises,<sup>[37]</sup> the state allocation of housing,<sup>[38]</sup> the educational system,<sup>[39]</sup> or on the inner life of the ruling state party, the SED,<sup>[40]</sup> have shown that this praxeological approach at the microlevel is fruitful for *socio-histoire du politique*.<sup>[41]</sup> In the extensive Anglo-Saxon literature on the GDR too the terms "domination as a social practice" and *Eigen-Sinn* have been frequently used and discussed in overviews.<sup>[42]</sup> Independent elaborations of the concept worthy of particular note here are Jan Palmowski's study of the socialist *Heimat* culture of the GDR<sup>[43]</sup> and Andrew Port's discussion of the "dark sides" of *Eigen-Sinn* in East German working-class culture.<sup>[44]</sup> Moreover, *Eigen-Sinn* is repeatedly mentioned in the forewords and introductory chapters of German and international publications, so much so, in fact, that citing the word *Eigen-Sinn* has sometimes become a mere convention before going on to describe domination and daily life from a rather conventional perspective. This might also be attributed to its popularity in university teaching. It has not really gained a foothold, though, in research on other communist dictatorships.

### The "stubbornness" of *Eigen-Sinn*

I have consciously chosen to undertake a genealogy of the term *Eigen-Sinn* in order to show its content, aims and scope to date. This approach seemed logical, as we are not defining an object of study with specific characteristics in need of verification, but are using a reflective approach to observe the experiences and behaviors of concrete individuals, an approach that was first developed using the written records of such observations (Garve, Göhre). Understanding *Eigen-Sinn* as the result of a certain method of observation does have two consequences, however. First, establishing the existence of *Eigen-Sinn* in an empirical field of research is not the end but only the beginning of



VEB Elektrokeramik Berlin, "Tenth Anniversary of the GDR" Brigade, May 4, 1960. Even though the original ADN (East German state news agency) caption read, "Members of the 'Tenth Anniversary of the GDR' Brigade at VEB Elektrokeramik Berlin-Pankow not only discuss production problems during their brigade meeting, they talk about current political affairs as well," the photo itself would seem to suggest that their participation meant something different to each of them. Photographer: Eva Brüggmann, Collection: Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst - Zentralbild (Bild 183), Source: Wikimedia Commons/Bundesarchiv Bild 183-72833-0001 (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE).

explanation. Observing *eigensinnig* behaviors in certain protagonists is just the first step in the historian's work, who still has many questions to ask. Which function does this *Eigen-Sinn* have in the specific configuration of individuals and institutions with respect to the maintenance or erosion of power, to the belief in the legitimacy of existing orders, to the coexistence of "higher" and "lower"? The concept itself does not provide the answer. It has therefore been particularly fruitful in combination with other concepts, especially those of social anthropology, such as the "hidden transcripts" of James Scott or Victor Turner's performance theory.<sup>[45]</sup> Jan Palmowski's study of the emergence and transformation of a national identity in the GDR is one exemplary case.

Second, the development of the concept described here, arising as it did in a very specific historical period and situation, means that transferring the concept to other areas of investigation and other research settings requires redefining the phenomena to be isolated and described by it. Hence, there will always be something provisional and cumbersome about the concept. *Eigen-Sinn* is the opposite of a universal key, and hardly a patent recipe for "solving" the riddles that remain after analyzing attitudes and behaviors. On the contrary, the discreet undermining of a priori definitions and terms, in particular the self-certainties of researchers that are manifest in them, is an essential part of this concept. *Eigen-Sinn* always demands from those wanting to "work" with it the effort of a constant and independent – if not to say "stubborn" – reworking in terms of the concrete field of investigation and the historical protagonists involved. This is also to say that it is fundamentally applicable to every object of investigation that includes a social component. The fact that it was primarily developed to study the workers and "working people" in dictatorships in twentieth-century Germany is by no means an obstacle to its being applied to other classes, political systems, countries or eras.<sup>[46]</sup> And it is worth pointing out explicitly that even when it comes to reconstructing and understanding the behaviors and attitudes of individuals in democratic, constitutional polities, the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* opens up the possibility of developing new questions and sharpening our perception of the unknown.

*Translated from the German by David Burnett.*

## Footnotes

1. ↑ Glossary, in: Alf Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, Princeton 1995, pp. 313-314.
2. ↑ Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1989.
3. ↑ Alf Lüdtke, "Cash, Coffee-Breaks, Horseplay: Eigensinn and Politics among Factory Workers in Germany circa 1900," in: Michael Hanagan/Charles Stephenson (eds.), *Confrontation. Class Consciousness, and the Labor Process. Studies in Proletarian Class Formation*, New York 1986, pp. 65-95. Alf Lüdtke was not the first to use this term in a historical context. The honor goes to Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt. Their 1981 reader *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, however, uses the term merely as an associational aid for some rather vague historico-philosophical ruminations on the link between labor capacity and war in human history, see Oskar Negt/Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn. geschichtliche Organisation der Arbeitsvermögen; Deutschland als Produktionsöffentlichkeit; Gewalt des Zusammenhangs*, Frankfurt a.M. 1981.
4. ↑ The different meanings inherent to writing it in different ways are interpreted in more detail below.
5. ↑ See, e.g., the website "Eigen-Sinn. Für hochbegabte Kinder mit ADS," <http://www.eigen-sinn.homepage.t-online.de>.
6. ↑ For example, the "industrial gothic rock" Band "Eigensinn," see <http://www.eigensinn.net>
7. ↑ See, e.g., the website "Eigensinn Freie Kunstschule," <http://www.kunstschule-eigensinn.de>, which is representative of many others.
8. ↑ See Thomas Lindenberger, "Geschichtsschreibung in der Zweiten Moderne," in: Ulrich Beck/Martin Mulrow (eds.), *Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Moderne*, Frankfurt a.M. 2014, pp. 365-399.
9. ↑ See Stefan Berger, *Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany*, London/New York 2000, p. 178.

10. ↑ Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings*, vol 2, trans. Ben Fowkes and Paul Jackson, Harmondsworth (1973): p. 146; online (in German) unter <https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/marx-engels/1852/brumaire/kapitel1.htm>.
11. ↑ This was the SED's standard propaganda line as of the 1950s, see Otto Grotewohl, *Die Deutsche Demokratische Republik – der erste Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat in der deutschen Geschichte. Vorlesung gehalten am 21. Januar 1955 vor dem Kollektiv der Parteihochschule „Karl Marx“ beim ZK der SED*, Kleinmachnow: Parteihochschule „Karl Marx“ beim ZK der SED, 1955.
12. ↑ Headword "Eigensinn," in: DWB = *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, 16 Parts in 32 Volumes, Leipzig 1854-1961, list of primary sources Leipzig 1971, quoted in: [http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui\\_py?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&hitlist=&patternlist=&lemid=GE01222](http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&hitlist=&patternlist=&lemid=GE01222).
13. ↑ "Eigensinn, das hartnäckige Beharren bei einer Meinung oder einem Streben, trotzdem, daß durch einleuchtende Gründe das Irrige und Verkehrte derselben nachgewiesen ist, aus keinem andern Grund, als weil es die oder das eigne ist," in: *Meyers Konversationslexikon*, 4th edition, Leipzig/Vienna 1885-1892, Vol. 5, p. 374, quoted in: retro bib.
14. ↑ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Frankfurt a.M. 1982, quoted in: Spiegel online, Projekt Gutenberg-DE.
15. ↑ Christian Garve, "Ueber den Charakter der Bauern und ihre Verhältniß gegen die Gutsherrn und gegen die Regierung," in: idem., *Popularphilosophische Schriften über literarische, ästhetische und gesellschaftliche Gegenstände*. Im Faksimiledruck herausgegeben von Kurt Wölfel, Stuttgart 1974 [1790], pp. 799-998.
16. ↑ Garve, *Popularphilosophische Schriften*, p. 860 (in the original p. 62), as translated in Lüttke, Cash, Coffee-breaks, Horseplay, p. 91f., fn. 28.
17. ↑ Garve, *Popularphilosophische Schriften*, p. 860 (in the original p. 62).
18. ↑ Alf Lüttke, "Einleitung," in: idem., *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik*, pp. 9-22, here pp. 19f. The use of *Eigensinn* without a hyphen by Lüttke and other authors is not meant to signal a modified understanding of this concept, however.
19. ↑ Garve, *Popularphilosophische Schriften*, pp. 855f. (in the original pp. 57f.); see Lüttke's comment on this passage in: Alf Lüttke, "Arbeit, Arbeitserfahrungen und Arbeiterpolitik. Zum Perspektivenwechsel in der historischen Forschung," in: idem., *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik* pp. 351-440, here p. 379.
20. ↑ Ibid., p. 378.
21. ↑ Paul Göhre, *Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche: eine praktische Studie*, Leipzig 1891.
22. ↑ Lüttke, "Cash, coffee-breaks, horseplay", p. 79.
23. ↑ Cited in Alf Lüttke, "What Happened to the 'Fiery Red Glow'? Workers' Experience and German Fascism" in: idem., *The History of Everyday Life*, pp.198-251, here p. 198, cf. the German original in: Alf Lüttke (ed.), *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1989, pp. 224-282, repr. in idem., *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik*, pp. 221-282.
24. ↑ See Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, *Zerschlagung der Gewerkschaften 1933. Zerstörte Vielfalt*. With the collaboration of Dieter Pougín and Martina Hesse, online at <http://www.zerschlagung-gewerkschaften1933.de>; Marc Buggeln/Michael Wildt (eds.), *Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus*, Munich 2014.
25. ↑ Lüttke, "Arbeit, Arbeitserfahrungen und Arbeiterpolitik," p. 380, see also Alf Lüttke, "Geschichte und Eigensinn," in: Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (ed.), *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte. Zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte*, Münster 1994, pp. 139-153, here pp. 146f.: "Eigensinn turns out to be a third behavior, one that does not follow the either-or logic of domination or resistance."
26. ↑ One representative example is collaborative research center 804 at the Dresden University of Technology, "Transcendence and Community Spirit," subproject "Gottlosigkeit and Eigensinn. Religious Deviance in Early Modern Period" <http://www.sfb804.de/forschung/teilprojekte/teilprojekteuebersicht/teilprojekt-f.html>; Beatrix Bastl, *Tugend, Liebe, Ehre: Die adelige Frau in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Vienna et al. 2000; Richard van Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag in der Frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 2: *Dorf und Stadt, 16.-18. Jahrhundert*, Munich 2005, as well as the history of historiography of Jaana Eichhorn, *Geschichtswissenschaft zwischen Tradition und Innovation: Diskurse, Institutionen und Machtstrukturen der bundesdeutschen Frühneuezeitforschung*, Göttingen 2006.
27. ↑ See Andrew Beattie, *Playing Politics with History. The Bundestag Inquiries into East Germany*, New York 2008.
28. ↑ See Klaus Schroeder/Jochen Staadt, "Zeitgeschichte in Deutschland vor und nach 1989," in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* B26/1997, pp. 15-29, here p. 28.
29. ↑ Alf Lüttke, "'Helden der Arbeit' – Mühen beim Arbeiten. Zur missmutigen Loyalität von Industriearbeitern in der DDR," in: Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Kocka/Hartmut Zwahr (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 188-213, here p. 189.
30. ↑ Thomas Lindenberger, "Projektskizze: Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte in Berlin-Brandenburg, 1945-1990," in: *Potsdamer Bulletin für Zeithistorische Studien* December 1995, 5, pp. 37-52, [http://www.zzf-pdm.de/Portals/\\_Rainbow/images/publikationen/Lindenberger\\_05.pdf](http://www.zzf-pdm.de/Portals/_Rainbow/images/publikationen/Lindenberger_05.pdf).
31. ↑ Alf Lüttke, "Einleitung: Herrschaft als soziale Praxis," in: idem. (ed.), *Herrschaft als soziale Praxis. Historische und sozial-anthropologische Studien* (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 91), Göttingen 1991, pp. 9-63.
32. ↑ Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft. Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR 1945-1989*, Frankfurt a.M. 1993.
33. ↑ See identical formulations in an earlier publications: Thomas Lindenberger, "Die Diktatur der Grenzen. Zur Einleitung," in: idem. (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, Cologne et al. 1999, pp. 13-44, here pp. 23f.; and in a revised version, idem. "SED-Herrschaft als soziale Praxis, Herrschaft und 'Eigen-Sinn': Problemstellung und

- Begriffe," in Jens Gieseke (ed.), *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, Göttingen 2007, pp. 23-47, here pp. 32f.
34. † See the contributions of Thomas Reichel, Dagmar Langenhan, Thomas Lindenberger, Patrice Poutrus, Leonore Ansorg und Sylvia Klötzer in Lindenberger (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur*.
  35. † In the German-language literature, e.g.: Andreas Ludwig, *Fortschritt, Norm und Eigensinn. Erkundungen im Alltag der DDR*, Berlin 1999; Marc-Dietrich Ohse, *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau. Anpassung, Protest und Eigensinn (DDR 1961-1974)*, Berlin 2003; Sebastian Richter, *Norm und Eigensinn. Die Selbstlegitimation politischen Protests in der DDR 1985-1989*, Berlin 2007; Annegret Schüle, "Die Spinne." *Die Erfahrungsgeschichte weiblicher Industriearbeit im VEB Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei*, Leipzig 2001; Hans Joachim Teichler (ed.), *Sport in der DDR. Eigensinn, Konflikte, Trends*, Cologne 2003; Margarete Meggle, *Zwischen Altbau und Platte: Erfahrungsgeschichte(n) vom Wohnen. Alltagskonstruktion in der Spätzeit der DDR, am Beispiel der sächsischen Kleinstadt Reichenbach im Vogtland*, Dissertation Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena 2004. Available online at <http://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-4131/diss-meggle.pdf>.
  36. † *Histoire de la RDA, Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 53 (1998), No. 1.
  37. † Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'État dans la société est-allemande*, Paris: Belin 2001; Engl. transl.: idem, *Communism day-to-day: State Enterprises in East German Society*, Ann Arbor 2014.
  38. † Jay Rowell, *Le totalitarisme au concret: les politiques du logement en RDA*, Paris 2006.
  39. † Emmanuel Droit, *Vers un homme nouveau? L'éducation socialiste en RDA (1949-1989)*, Rennes 2009; in German, idem., *Vorwärts zum neuen Menschen? Die sozialistische Erziehung in der DDR (1949-1989)*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2014 (Zeithistorische Studien; vol. 54).
  40. † Michel Christian, *Parti et Société en RDA et en Tchécoslovaquie. Une histoire comparée des partis communistes au pouvoir du début des années 1950 à la fin des années 1970*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Genève 2011.
  41. † Y. Déloye/B. Voutat (eds.), *Faire de la science politique. Pour une socio-histoire du politique*, Paris 2002.
  42. † Cf. Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR*, London/New York 2002.
  43. † Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-1990*, Cambridge 2009.
  44. † Andrew Port, "The Dark Side of Eigensinn: East German Workers and Destructive Shopfloor Practices," in: Hartmut Berghoff/Uta Balbier (eds.), *Falling Behind or Catching Up? The East German Economy, 1945-2010*, Cambridge 2013, pp. 111-128.
  45. † See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven 1990; Victor Witter Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York 1986.
  46. † See the contributions in Belinda Davis/Thomas Lindenberger/Michael Wildt (eds.), *Alltag, Erfahrung, Eigensinn. Historisch-anthropologische Erkundungen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008.

## Recommended Reading

- Lindenberger, Thomas, *SED-Herrschaft als soziale Praxis, Herrschaft und "Eigen-Sinn": Problemstellung und Begriffe*, Göttingen 2007: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
- Lüdtke, Alf, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*, Hamburg 1993: Ergebnisse
- Lüdtke, Alf, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, in: Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (Hrsg.), *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte. Zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte*, Münster 1994: Greenwood Press
- Palmowski, Jan, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945 - 1990*, 2009, Cambridge Univ. Press