

# IS EAST GOING WEST – OR IS THE WEST MOVING EAST? Renegotiating the East–West Boundary in Unified Germany

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This article discusses how the East–West boundary is renegotiated in today's unified Germany. By analyzing biographical interviews with persons born in the GDR in the 1970s, the author shows how the “East” and the “West” are given different situated meanings. The interviewees are positioned by and articulate intersecting and antagonistic discourses, thereby reifying but also challenging existing categorizations and stereotypes. Their subject positioning is an ambivalent process in which the East is described as an anachronistic but authentic “Other”, and the West is defined as a superficial consumer society or as a colonizer. The hierarchical relationship, which marks the East, but leaves the West unmarked, is thus alternately reconfirmed and questioned.

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The former German Democratic Republic holds an exceptional position in the post-socialist world. The end of the SED regime brought about not only an economical and political shift but also GDR's inclusion in the Federal Republic of Germany. In the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War led to an increase in the number of states; only in Germany did it cause a state to disappear. Here, as elsewhere, the process of incorporation was legitimized by ethnic arguments. On October 3rd 1990, the German people, who had been divided into two states in their turn separated by what could be termed one of the world's most rigorous borders, were to be reunified in one state. Nonetheless, 17 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there seems to still be a “wall in our minds”. If and how this alleged mental boundary between East and West Germans can be overcome is a major topic in German public debate.

For my doctoral thesis on (East) German identity-formation in today's unified Germany, I have conducted biographic interviews with persons who were born and grew up in the GDR and who now live in unified Germany. Between 2005 and 2007 I conducted 25 interviews with people born in the GRD in the 1970s and who now live in Berlin, Dresden and in the countryside in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. My interviewees consist of 15 women and 10 men, with different levels of education. They belong to the last generation that was socialised in the GDR, but are young enough to have experienced the adjustments entailed by the dissolution of the GDR and the unification of Germany before being quite grown-up (see Förster 2007: 17). Since they did not experience the GDR as adults, one assumes that they cannot be held to be and do not themselves feel responsible for the SED dictatorship. My research focuses on the po-

sitions members of this generation are being hailed into, and the positions they articulate, today. All of my interviewees were, it should be noted, aware of my research interests. The interview situations were, further, influenced by the fact that I am a Swedish interviewer and researcher. This means that I am not personally involved in the renegotiation of unified German identity, but can be positioned as a Westerner who lacks personal experience of “actually existing socialism”.

In this article I focus on what the interviews show concerning the renegotiation of the concept of the East and the West – that is, when and how the boundary is reproduced and when other identifications are articulated as transcending the East-West boundary. Stuart Hall has defined identity formation as a two-sided process:

The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is “hailed”, but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process (Hall 1996: 6).

Regarding identity as a subject position, the result of a continuous process organized across difference, means that the situated subject articulates its position in relation to the *Other* that is representing the opposite pole. Firstly, I examine how the East and the West are constructed, respectively, as the Other when the interviewees position themselves. But the (East) German identity formation is more complicated, since East Germans are not only seen as Others, but are also accepted as Germans. I therefore use the terms “marked” and “unmarked” as they have been defined by Ernesto Laclau:

Derrida has shown how an identity’s constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles – form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, etc. In linguistics a distinction is made between “marked” and “unmarked” terms. The latter convey the principal

meaning of a term, while marked terms add a supplement or mark to it. [---] What is peculiar to the second term is thus reduced to the function of accident, as opposed to the essentiality of the first. It is the same with the black-white relationship, in which “white”, of course, is equivalent to “human being”. “Woman” and “black” are thus “marks” in contrast to the unmarked terms of “man” and “white” (Laclau 1990: 32f).

The unmarked term includes the marked one, but is also defined through the exclusion of the latter. It is through the definition of the marked that the unmarked receives its alleged essentiality. The terms can be used to describe the relationship regarding the Federal Republic of Germany. Before 1990, the Federal Republic was identical with West Germany; after the unification, it extends over East Germany, as well. The essentiality of the FRG as democratic and economically developed would then be a result of the conceptualisation of the East as totalitarian and backward (see Schneider 2001: 191). Secondly, I examine how the interviewees take on a marked position through self-exoticization as well as how they try to occupy an unmarked position through “talking back”. Finally, I show how the East–West boundary is transcended for the benefit of other identifications. By examining how the marked position is (re-)produced, questioned and exceeded, I intend to show how the unmarked position is upheld and renegotiated in the definition and demarcation of its constitutive outside (Hall 1996: 4).

### The Anachronistic East

The most striking thing in the interviewees’ picture of the Eastern parts of Germany is their general description of a society falling into decay. Contradictory to the hopes invested in the program *Aufbau Ost* (Re-Build the East), which has invested enormous amounts in the New Federal Republics’ infrastructure and buildings, the interviewees seem, rather, to describe an *Abbau Ost* (Dismantling the East). My interviewees’ narrations include an othering of big parts of Eastern Germany, as a place in which it is impossible or undesirable to live. This perception is

confirmed by social scientist Peter Förster (2007), who observed that young people from Saxony tend to see their chances of living a good life in the Eastern parts of Germany as very restricted. One way that interviewees pinpoint the striking decline is by comparing the number of inhabitants in their home town before and after unification. Andrea, who grew up in a small town in Brandenburg, but moved to Berlin when she was 18, describes her home town like this:

The migration is huge, like in many towns in Brandenburg too, such small towns, many things are closed down. From me you will receive this typical picture, this typical negative small-town picture, with the development of my home town. It always breaks my heart, when you travel around in the countryside on the weekends, in the most beautiful scenery, and then you come to these small towns, where everything, it's a dead loss, it's absolutely nothing going on there.

On the one hand, the development of the small towns of Brandenburg breaks Andrea's heart. On the other hand, she tells me that she can no longer identify with her home town, because this town today has nothing to do with the town in which she grew up. Many of the interviewees describe the Eastern parts of Germany, with the exception of some bigger cities, as desolate and depressing. Unemployment has already forced young people out, leaving the elderly and the unenterprising behind. Shops, cafés and public institutions have closed, and the houses are empty or demolished. Franz, who has lived most of his life in Berlin, states that "Everyone who thinks through things, logically, goes away". Karl, who is now living in Dresden, says that he would like to go back to Mecklenburg where he was born because he loves the countryside, but that he cannot because it would unavoidably mean a decline in professional status. Indeed, people now living in Berlin or Dresden often describe those remaining in declining cities or in the countryside as more narrow-minded, conformist, and cut out from outside influences. Wolanik Boström (2005) has found the same kind

of dichotomisation when interviewing young, well-educated Poles. By reproducing the hierarchical relationship between center and periphery, in which the latter is described as more Eastern and more backward, otherness is ascribed to those (still) living in the periphery. This ascription, however, is challenged by interviewees living in the countryside. In the statement that "Only those who don't know what to do go to Berlin", Jürgen, who left Mecklenburg to go to Berlin, but returned to his home village after some of years, defines those leaving the countryside as unenterprising. Whereas descriptions of the declining cities and regions are often, like Andrea's, filled with sorrow and compassion, some interviewees show little sympathy for people who (supposedly) sit and wait for someone else to solve their problems. Elisabeth, who has lived most of her life in Dresden, but also some years in north-west Germany, gets upset when she talks about what she calls "real Easterners":

Some people of my age who grew up here and who have become unemployed still wait and wait. I always ask myself: What are they waiting for? [---] Well some sit here and wait, the last fifteen years they have been waiting for a job to appear from nowhere. It simply doesn't work that way. Then you simply have to say: Well I go there where the jobs are. And such people, they are really *Ossis* to me, I'm sorry to say, but I'm sick and tired of them. [---] Well, then I have this feeling that some people stand still.

There is nothing exceptional about Elisabeth's irritation towards people who allegedly expect the state to care for them, and who do not take their lives into their own hands. The same kind of attitudes is expressed in other countries as well (e.g., Sweden). The interesting thing is that Elisabeth uses the colloquial term for Eastern Germans, *Ossis*, in a depreciatory sense. A real Easterner, thus, is someone who has been unable to adapt to new circumstances and make the best out of them. Elisabeth is thus reproducing a common discourse which terms East Germans *Jammer-Ossi* (whining Easterner), a sort of

ungrateful, passive person (Jürgs & Elis 2006: 101). Through “internal othering” (Volčič 2005: 166), that is, through differentiating groups of people as more Eastern than herself, she shows that she does not fall into this category herself. When the East Germans are understood as an “other within” (Boyer 2001: 10), this is not in the sense of a fixed group of people, but rather as a particular position with which even those who were formerly GDR citizens can dissociate themselves, not least by stressing their relative Westernness. It seems to be possible to escape a marked position by ascribing it to someone else. Still, in contrast to those in the unmarked (West) German position, which is Western *per se*, those born and bred in the GDR have to articulate this position explicitly.

Paradoxically, in the narrations of the interviewees, the East is both described as something that exists – a place, a group of people, a mentality or a set of material things – and as something that is in the past, that is, that no longer exists. Therefore, a real *Ossi* is somewhat of an anachronism, or as Elisabeth puts it, someone who “stands still”. Material things deriving from the GDR are often described as anachronisms. This, however, has positive connotations. Steffi works with design and decoration in Berlin. She tells me that she belongs to these people who enjoy old Eastern things.

One likes it, to see something on the second-hand market, I do anyway, and many of my friends too, lamps from the East for example. One says: “Oh, totally Eastern!” [---] Because there were simply, when you went to an ice-cream parlour, you knew exactly in what kind of cups you would get it served. They had them here and they had them in the next ice-cream parlour too. Or such egg-cups, they always had a hen or so. There were always some *specials* [she uses the English word], which nowadays are rarities that you simply can’t get any longer. It’s just the same when it comes to furniture. That is *Ostalgie*. “Completely Eastern”, you say when you visit people who don’t care much about decoration and so. (Laughing) It’s like travelling back in time when you visit them and sit down there.

To Steffi, the things that you can find on the second-hand market are not only connected to the East, they are “totally Eastern”. She associates them with past times, with a society that no longer exists. Visiting people who haven’t changed their furniture since the GDR era is like “travelling back in time”. But, as Daphne Berdahl (1999a) has shown, since things receive new meanings in new contexts, the so-called East-German things symbolise something else in today’s post-socialist society than they did in the context in which they were produced. To ascribe things a certain Easternness is, then, not necessarily a celebration of the GDR, but rather a confirmation of the fact that this society no longer exists other than as a projection screen. The accentuation of the East can therefore be seen as resistance to the new hegemonic order, but also as its affirmation (1999a: 193), since it confirms the marked position of the East. Steffi describes her experience of Poland with the words: “It’s like travelling back in time! I feel like I’m in the East!” Of course, in a geographical sense, you could argue that you are in the East when you travel from Germany to Poland, but that is not Steffi’s point. To her, the term is synonymous with back then, with her life in the GDR. The East is thus something that you can find East of the Oder-Neisse Line or on the second-hand market, but not in your ordinary German life. Thereby, it is constructed as peripheral and anachronistic, and compared to an essentially modern West (Jozwiak & Mermann 2006).

In today’s Germany, the nostalgia that is associated with the GDR has been given a name of its own – *Ostalgie* (Ahbe 2005; Berdahl 1999a; Cooke 2005: 8). When the “n” is left off, the word is unmistakably connected to the German word *Ost* (East). The term is ambiguous and signifies both a passion for old GDR objects and a more general longing for “good old times”. In the national discourse of the Federal Republic of Germany, virtually the only significance attached to the GDR and its history is that of representing the “Other”, that is, what Germany is not: undemocratic, authoritarian, backward (Jarausch & Geyer 2003; Cooke 2005). To be “ostalgic” is thus very different from looking back in time, in general. It is usually applied to memories of un-(desirable)

German history. It is therefore hardly surprising that most of the interviewees dissociate with those who devote themselves to what can be defined as *Ostalgie*. Inge, a student of psychology from Dresden, is one of them:

To me, *Ostalgie* is to be stuck with the past without reflecting, simply just to say cross the board: “That was nice! That was good!” or so. I find that somewhat, well I have to think which words to use, behind-the-times, somehow inappropriate, unadjusted or improper, an improper way to deal with it. I find it good when you remember and I also find it good when you say what was good or what you liked, but not across the board: “Yes, it was good only because it comes from this period” or so. That’s bilge!

Inge does not say that everything was bad in the GDR. On the contrary, she likes it when people mention what was good. What she criticises is the lack of reflexivity that makes people stick to their past in an improper manner. Again, the term “East”, combined, here, with nostalgia, is connected to being maladapted and behind-the-times. Just like the *Jammer-Ossis*, the *ostalgic* people are constructed as an anachronism. Petra, who grew up outside Berlin and who was eleven years old at the time of the *Wende*, is more unambiguous in her attitude towards *Ostalgie*.

I find that all those *Ostalgie*-people, they repress a lot of things. They refuse to see the other side of the coin, that is, that many things for sure were good in the East, but that just as many things went totally amiss. I find you can’t see one thing without the other. I find this glorification terrible.

Petra’s critical stance appears in her formulation: “all those *Ostalgie*-people”. Whereas Inge argues that you must separate the good things from the bad, Petra believes that also the good things must be seen in the light of that which went wrong. In both cases, though, the “*Ostalgie*-people” are constructed as an internal Other, from whom the interviewees differentiate themselves. Franz dissociates himself

from those who find that “everything was better back then”.

They pick out what they like and say: “Secure employment in the East, that I take from the GDR.” But then like: “The big flat-screen TV, that I take from the West.” When it comes to employment, then I say that I want the East, but I also want to keep my big TV. Then the West is good enough so to say. But that you can’t separate the one thing from the other, that is so to say the next step in thinking, and there it ends. I’m being bad, aren’t I? (Laughing)

To prefer the old times and yet still to enjoy consumer society is, according to Franz, inconsistent. Whether or not desirable things existed in the GDR is, Franz argues, not a question of debate, but rather a question of logical thinking. Those who want both Eastern secure employment and the West’s flat-screen TV have not yet understood that it is impossible to combine these two things. Franz comes to the conclusion that those who are *ostalgic* are incapable of drawing logical conclusions, thereby positioning himself among the people who think.

The interviewees criticize those who are *ostalgic* for focusing solely the good things in the GDR but not seeing the whole system – that is, the problematic, repressive side of the GDR – or the advantages of the shift to capitalism. A national identity presupposes a common history, where some events have been chosen as representative for the nation (Eriksen 1993). That a nostalgic interpretation of the past is selective is not surprising. In fact, the term nostalgia itself indicates a choice, among things of the past, of those things which are positive from a contemporary point of view, while ignoring what is seen as negative. Wolfgang Kaschuba has pointed out that the writing of national history is a way of legitimizing the present, both in the sense that the past is being reinterpreted in accordance with the contemporary social order, thereby producing continuity, but also in the sense that the act of reinterpretation symbolizes the new order, thereby producing discontinuity (Kaschuba 2001: 33). When *Ostalgie* is separated

from a more general nostalgia, every articulation of a memory of the GDR-time becomes a potential contribution to the debate on how the GDR system is to be interpreted and what part it shall play in the history of the unified Germany. Since the concept marks the remembering of the GDR in relation to an unmarked set of memories, it can be used to escape this marked position when it is ascribed to other East Germans. As I have shown, the interviewees define these others differently. Whereas some take a moderate stance, propagating that one needs to separate the good things from the bad, others articulate a prevalent discourse in which every positive recollection of the GDR is understood as a denial of its bad sides – e.g., its repression or backwardness (Jarausch et al. 1997). Irrespective of where the line is drawn, the ascribed characteristics symbolize the undesired continuity, whereas the ascribing act symbolizes the wished-for discontinuity.

### The Colonizing West

When the interviewees talk about their first experiences of the West, be it the West German uncle visiting his relatives in pre-1989 GDR, or the first trip to West Germany, the West appears as some kind of Promised Land. The day after the border was opened, Marcus and his family took their new caravan, for which they had waited six years, and crossed the border to West Germany.

It was as different as chalk and cheese when you came from the East to the West. You experienced the East as grey and dull and then you arrived in the West: the meadows were greener, the houses were whiter, the air was cleaner. You had expected it to be totally different, and these expectations were proved true when you saw it.

The West is described as different in a physical, very tangible sense. Marcus is not the only one who says that even the meadows were experienced as greener than in the East. The West is also described as flooded with fragrances, compared to a rather odourless East. Especially overwhelming was the West in its capacity as consumer society. The interviewees por-

tray themselves as standing in the Western stores with their mouths wide open; Elisabeth even depicts her first visit to a Western department store as so overwhelming that she had had to flee the place. These descriptions of the first impressions of the West are rather transient, soon giving place to statements in which the West is more or less outlined as a colonizer. Although fairly none of the informants question the unification of Germany as such, almost everyone is critical towards the way in which it took place. This is Karl's interpretation of the process:

I think that this country was downright annexed by West Germany, by capital. Well, people have made big investments, they had money, they could buy very cheap land, buy real estate. Well and in the process a lot of injustices took place, and possibly are still taking place.

This portrayal of a GDR – a state, according to Karl, of “petty bourgeois” – as annexed by a stronger and above all richer West Germany is not exceptional among the interviewees. Many of them can tell stories about how parents, relatives, neighbours or friends have been exploited by West Germans, who offered them low quality goods at high prices, bought up their undervalued real estate, or in other ways exploited their hunger for consumer goods, naivety and inexperience in a capitalist economy. These narratives fit into a critical discourse about the unification process which is upheld by several academics and intellectuals (see for example Dahn 1996; Dümke & Vilmar 1995). The West is also described as an illegitimate judge, using its fortunate outside position to belittle and condemn the lives of those who lived East of the German–German border. This is how Inge puts it:

When you really have lived a normal life for forty years, and you might find it correct or you might not, but you live your life, and then someone comes and says: (in a patronising tone) “Well, you might just as well forget that. It was worth nothing. Now we will show you how it is to be done.” That is an approach, well then you don't have to

wonder that it takes so long before people don't define themselves as East Germans any longer.

Inge here illustrates what in the German discourse goes under the name *Besser-Wessi*, which of course alludes to the term *Besserwisser*, a term denoting a person who not only knows best, but tells everybody so (Berdahl 1999b: 168). In both quotations the West, be it in form of the capitalist or the know-it-all, is described as coming from the outside. The interviewees do not argue that the unification and the change from socialism to capitalism were illegitimate. Rather, they took place under unfair terms. Some interviewees contrast the German process with that of Hungary, the Czech Republic or Poland, where the transformations allegedly took place from the inside. Almost all of the interviewed note, with more or less indignation, that practically all leading positions in the Eastern part of Germany (not to mention the Western part) are held by West Germans. The interviews relate stories about how the mayor of their home town is from the West, as were the professors at the university, the local employers, etc. These leaders are not described as being bad *per se*, but they do lack insight and experience in local conditions, which again positions the Westerner as an outsider. The interviewees are questioning the assumption that a West German is always a better or more legitimate leader than an East German. This ranks particularly when it is felt that those West Germans who come East are not necessarily those best merited. Irrespective of whether the leaders are apprehended as good or bad as such, defining them as coming from the West contributes to the othering of the West in its capacity of a colonial power (see Cooke 2005). The East–West dichotomy is upheld, but transformed into a matter of class rather than nationality.

The West is not only ascribed certain positions, but also certain types of characters, though most of the interviewees are careful to point out that these are stereotypes, that they do not apply to everyone. The typically West German characteristics are often closely connected to a capitalist way of life: wanting to make big money fast, greediness and superficial-

ity. Many of the interviewees dissociate themselves from what they call *schickie-mickie*, a negative term for the snobbist *nouveau riche*. An East German can be *schickie-mickie* too, but the character type is seen as peculiarly Western. According to Steffi, newly rich people from the East are sometimes called *Neu-Wessis* (new Westerners) by other East Germans. Often certain areas, particularly Munich and Stuttgart, are mentioned as particularly Western in this particular way. This is how Stephan, who grew up in Karl-Marx-Stadt/Chemnitz, and now lives in Berlin, depicts Munich, which he calls “super West German”:

That is exactly what I don't want. It is posing, it is appearance, it is possessing. Therefore in Munich it is simply really great when you have [a lot], when you can do things, when you accomplish, when you can afford things, when you buy something new to wear before you go out on Saturday night, when you drive up to the club in your expensive car, when you are proud that they let you in at the club. I simply find it disastrous. It is unbelievable. I find it really weak, dishonest, it is inhuman.

According to Stephan, Munich is the stronghold of superficiality. There, you always have to be aware of how other people look at you, you have to be successful or at least pretend to be. This behaviour, Stephan believes, displaces the more preferable traits of honesty and humanity. Dishonesty as a characteristic of Western society is a frequent theme in some interviews. This does not mean that West Germans are characterized as liars, but rather as being *mehr Schein als Sein* (more appearance than reality). Karl describes his disappointment when he realised that today's system is not a meritocracy, in which people are judged by their abilities. What counts, rather, is “personal connections, selling and marketing, talking big. There doesn't have to be anything behind it; you just have to stop people from questioning” one's appearance. Although very well aware of and often referring to the fact that these images of the West Germans are stereotypes, the interviewees use them to emphasize what they themselves are not. Stereotypes can serve the purpose of organizing a compli-

cated society, but also of justifying asymmetric power relations or as a means of handling powerlessness (Eriksen 1993). Given the rapid transformation of all levels of society that the former GDR has undergone since 1990, stereotypes can function as a means of negotiating one's way in a post-socialist, unified Germany. The stereotypes can, as in the quotations above, be used to grasp new forms of powerlessness inherent in capitalist society. To pinpoint these asymmetric power relations, the interviewees often, in fact, reproduce a Cold War discourse, in which capitalism is ascribed to the West and contrasted to a socialist East (see Volčič 2005: 156).

The West is described as being in a powerful position, and is associated with capitalist lifestyles and values. But although the former GDR had been part of the Federal Republic of Germany and of the capitalist world for a decade and a half when the interviews were done, many interviewees continued to locate the West spatially separate from a preferable East. Marco, who grew up outside of Berlin, and now lives in the east-central part of town, tells me that he can tell from how people are driving, the appearance of the houses, the mentality and not at least from the number of foreigners, especially "Turks and Arabs", whether he is on the Western or Eastern side of the former Berlin Wall.

In some way I feel happy when I have been in the West, let's say in Kudamm [Kurfürstendamm] or by the Radio Tower over there, and then I have come back to Alex[anderplatz]. To me these are familiar surroundings, I don't know. The others are too far away, and maybe I have been there too rarely too, that's why it appears as somewhat apart.

The emphasis with which Marco delineates his different feelings towards the East and the West is perhaps not typical of the interviewees. It is not unusual, though, that they describe the Western areas as in some respect foreign; one interviewee even compared travelling to the former West Germany with going abroad. Most informants say that if they could chose, they would prefer staying in the East, where

they feel more comfortable and at home, to moving to the West. The arguments in favour of remaining vary: Some say that they don't like the landscape or the architecture in the West, some state that the mentality is different – for example, there is lower acceptance of professional women and a lower standard of children's day care than in the former GDR. One interviewee simply notes, "I haven't got anything to do with them." In all these cases, the Western part of Germany is inscribed with a more or less diffuse foreignness, in contrast to the more well-known and home-like East. Valentine Meunier (2002) has shown that the former border between the two Germanies, although gone in a physical sense, is still present as a concept which influences the organization of acting and speaking on "both sides". In Berlin, the maintenance of the border can be found in everyday utterances such as: "This is the best ice-cream parlour in East Berlin", which presupposes a separated West Berlin, with its own hierarchical organization of ice-cream parlours. This means that the Cold War relationship between the two Berlins and the two Germanies, which John Borneman (1992: 3) has depicted as "a matching, *asymmetrical* dual classification of the universe", has not disappeared with unification, but is taking on new forms as people renegotiate the new Germany (see Berdahl 1999b).

### **"To Make Gold out of Shit"**

In the first two sections, I have shown how the interviewees use the concept of the East and the West to define what they are not. In this section, I will discuss how the interviewees identify themselves in their capacity as East Germans, that is, what kinds of self-exoticizations are to be found in the interviews. Only a few interviewees identify themselves explicitly as East Germans, while even fewer entirely reject this identification. Most take an ambiguous stance. Practically all interviewees state that they have been marked by growing up in the GDR, which is often, as shown in the below quote of Andrea's, meant in a positive sense.

To speak my mind I could actually say that I am happy that I was brought up in the GDR because



I think that that has allowed me to acquire a lot of social, emotional capacity. For sure, there are a lot of egoists from the GDR as well, but through this education I have gained a lot of, well simply social skills, a sense of justice. And actually I am also a person who dislikes hierarchies, and these hierarchies did not exist in that way in the GDR. Of course, there were those up there who ruled, they were just as distant as nowadays, but among people there were hardly any hierarchies. It didn't matter if you were the child of a doctor or of a marginalised person. Everyone had to behave reasonably to each other and those who were weak in school had someone who was good [at school] who had to help them in their spare time.

Being a child and growing up in the GDR have provided Andrea with empathy, helpfulness, a sense of justice and a dislike of hierarchy, traits that are frequently mentioned by the interviewees as typically East German. Marco, for example, relates how he has read that marriages between West German women and East German men are more stable than those between East German women and West German men. He interprets this to mean that East German men tend to talk more with their wives, and care less about appearance and superficial things. Life in the GDR, which came to an end 16 years ago, is thus described as influencing the behaviour and social relations of those who experienced it even if only children at the time. Andrea, who is self-employed, says that she still finds it difficult to demand the same payment from a poor customer as she does from a wealthy one, despite the fact that her business scarcely supports her. Even Karl, who dissociates himself strongly from the GDR and who talks about his childhood and youth as a burden, turns the traits that he feels he owes to the GDR into something positive, at least compared to Western characteristics:

You are always rather reserved. You learn to be reserved and shy, or somewhat careful. And a person like that never becomes a *Putzklopper*, I say *Putzklopper* meaning people who boast, who can make

a fuss about performances of which they are actually incapable. [---] So, we can't do that, I think. Someone who really grew up in the East, this marketing and selling without any substance behind it, we can't do that. We can't even do marketing and selling when the substance exists. That's the problem. That's our problem. But what can one do, it's better than the opposite.

Karl talks about the East Germans as "we" who are unable to sell ourselves, even when we really do have something to offer. Generally, and hardly surprisingly, the East German character is depicted as the opposite of what is understood as typically West German. While Westernness is strongly connected to capitalist values, the East German qualities appear as disadvantageous in a capitalist society, a fact of which the interviewees are well aware. They often describe themselves as naive and blue-eyed, especially when it comes to financial matters. The inability to charge both rich and poor the same prices and to sell oneself is, however, seen as morally superior. Sometimes, Easternness can be described as an advantage even in a consumer society. Andrea states that East Germans tend to be more individualistic when buying and wearing clothes, whereas the West Germans simply buy what is being marketed at the moment. She explains this by referring to the conformity and shortage of clothes in the GDR, which has provided its former citizens with a need to express themselves. The disadvantages and shortages of the GDR system have allegedly imbued East Germans with desirable characteristics, described by Marco as an ability "to make gold out of shit".

Zala Volčič (2005) has observed the same kind of self-exoticization among young intellectuals in Serbia, who use Western stereotypes of the East and of the Balkans as positive sources of identity. But whereas her interviewees describe the Serbs as essentially different from the West, the Easternness of my interviewees is understood as closely connected to the GDR as a political system. Socialization in the GDR, not their own essential being, is what makes them different from the West Germans. In the interviewees' narratives, the GDR is constructed as a

community whose former citizens share a common background. Andrea describes what it feels like to look through a book of plates with GDR products:

“Oh yes, I know that one!” and “This one I had too.” “We had them too, but in orange.” I mean there weren’t many different kinds of china or plastic cups. Actually everyone that grew up in the GDR knows these plastic egg-cups with hens, or the oval ones. Everyone knows them and everyone says: “We had them.” And the other one says: “No, we had that one.” I mean, an FRG-person can actually never imagine that everyone had almost the same things in their kitchen cupboards.

Easternness is here not first and foremost synonymous with stagnation, but with exclusivity. Ordinary things such as china and egg-cups, which you could find in exactly the same edition everywhere in the GDR, become “rarities” when they are transferred to a consumer society (Ahbe 2005; Berdahl 1999a). The fact that everyone in the GDR had practically “the same things in their cupboards” and that these things more or less have disappeared today, offers a possible connecting link between persons deriving from the GDR. A Westerner can read the book, but he or she can never experience what Andrea describes as recognition and togetherness. The nation as an imagined community, where people who never meet seem to have something in common, whereas differences are left out, is here being constructed after the disappearance of the GDR as a state. The West Germans on the other hand are being constructed as the “Others”, who not only lack the experience of GDR life, but who “can actually never imagine” what it was like. The East German community receives its meaning in a post-socialist, unified context, since the shared past only exists in relation to a non-socialist past. This kind of exclusivity can also be attributed to the repression in the GDR. Karl points out before, during and after the interview that it is impossible for someone who has not experienced a totalitarian system to even imagine what it was like. He hesitated before he decided to take part in the interview because, usually, he does not talk about his experiences

with those who do not share them. He mentions this as an argument for not moving from the Eastern to the Western part of Germany. Several interviewees describe that there is a relaxedness between former GDR citizens that stems from not having to explain what it was like back then.

As already mentioned, most of the interviewees are ambivalent in their identification as East Germans. To say “I’m proud to be East German” is described as impossible or improper. But even those who reject an Eastern identification often state that they are proud or happy to have had the opportunity to experience two different social orders. Franz is one of them:

When I was twenty-five, I could already say, I have experienced two systems. I have lived in the dictatorship; I grew up in a dictatorship, a dictatorship of the proletariat, which many people forget, grown up in the dictatorship and now in the democracy. And I’m superior to every stone-throwing punk in that I have experienced bare anarchy, bare chaos, that no police, no rule was valid. For four to eight weeks, people simply did what they wanted. [---] It was this transitional period in which every rule and every law was out of force, between the GDR and the Federal Republic. And who can say that of himself? I find it exciting.

The GDR background is, in this quote, made a qualification, which even the most radical West Germans can not boast about. Whereas it is improper to be proud of the background as such, it is described as legitimate or even as an advantage to use it as a foil against which contemporary circumstances can be compared. In their capacity of having experienced such historical social changes, the East Germans are thus understood as potentially more critical and reflexive than their Western compatriots.

Because the East German identity is to a high degree built on experiences in a state that no longer exists, one might suppose that it will vanish with those who have had these experiences. It should be kept in mind though, that practically all national identities are founded on an alleged common history, to which

the members of the nation have no direct reference. Whether the East German heritage will be carried on to generations to come should therefore be left open here. The interviewees often refer to themselves as the last GDR generation, stating that they do not bother to discuss what the GDR was like with younger generations that were born in the Eastern part of Germany shortly before or after the GDR came to an end. Inge, though, says that she tries to teach her children to give more than they take, as already mentioned a “typically Eastern” characteristic, and that it is easier to carry this through in the Eastern parts of Germany, where more people share her view. Steffi talks about Eastern characteristics as something that does not necessarily have to be socialised, but can be inherited. Her ex-boyfriend, who was West German, mysteriously behaved like an East German, which finally got its explanation:

“You would make the best *Ossi*. No one believes that you’re a *Wessi*!” You really couldn’t imagine that. He was really chary and a little bit shy too, to some extent (laughing) uptight. “You, from Mannheim, no one really believes that!” And he said: “Well, my grandmother is Polish. That must be the reason.”

Although Steffi’s story about her ex-boyfriend is filled with humour, it points at the possibility to see Easternness as something that, like an ethnic categorisation, is understood as hereditary (see Howard 1995).

### “Talking Back”

The interviewees react on pictures of East Germans in the media, on statements from West Germans concerning the East or on a more diffuse underlying discourse about the East. They sometimes react with defiance to me and to some of my questions. Since I do not share their experience of the GDR, I am positioned as an outsider, a Westerner, who potentially put them in undesirable positions. With postcolonial terms, I call these articulations where the interviewees react to being hailed into positions with which they can not identify, “talking back” (Cooke 2005).

One such position, against which many of the interviewees defend themselves, is that of being a right-wing extremist. The problem of rightist violence and flourishing sympathies for neo-fascist values in the Eastern parts of Germany have been discussed in German media ever since the early 1990s, when migrants were attacked by young rightists in the Eastern parts of Germany (Schneider 2001). At the time of the interviews, the nationalist party *NPD* had recently been successful in the elections of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Most of the interviewees are careful to point out that they dissociate themselves from neo-fascist values. They seem to be aware of the assumption that this would not be the case. Some of them have experienced such accusations or insinuations themselves. Elisabeth describes the reaction from a colleague in the Western part of Germany when she heard about Elisabeth’s Eastern origin:

There was this woman, she said to me (in a dismissive tone): “Oh well, from the East, anyway, that’s where all the right-wing extremists come from.” And I was only eighteen. I didn’t answer her because why should I mess with her? I found it so stupid! She was really like: “Well you from the East, you are right-wing anyway.” As if all the right-wing extremists would come from the East.

Elisabeth is apparently upset when she revives this situation. She does not question that there are right-wing extremists in the Eastern parts of Germany, but her colleague’s statement that all of them would come from the East, as if the West would not have such problems. During the interview, that is, several years after the accusation took place, she defends herself against the insinuation that she herself would automatically be a rightist, simply because she derives from the East. Stephan takes an even more critical stance against people who claim that neo-fascism would be an Eastern problem. A couple of years ago, he read an article that explained the growing right-wing movement in the Eastern parts of Germany with the authoritarian education in the GDR, e.g. having all children in the day-care centre going to the potty at the same time, which made him

so angry he could hardly breathe. Stephan strongly questions this kind of explanations:

That would mean that all of them who grew up later would become really tolerant people. But they are not. Far from it! There is far more right-wing radicalism than in my generation, far, far more. And what scares me is that what you see today is exactly what we learned back then: these shattered families because everyone has to fight, that's exactly what makes you an alcoholic, a radical, that you get violent, that you become blind for other people.

According to Stephan, right-wing extremism is far more widespread in the younger generation, which was socialised in the Western society. The radicalism and violence can thus not be explained by the GDR background, by Stephan defined as a "happy childhood", but by the capitalist society, in which people have to fight for themselves. He does not only question the assumption that all East Germans are right-wing extremists, or that all right-wing extremists come from Eastern Germany, but also that this development has anything to do with the GDR. To Stephan, the fact that capitalism leads to social exclusion and radicalism is an obvious truth, which he learned already in the GDR, although taught in a polemic way. Today, these truths are not met with sympathy because they come from the East, and not from the West, he states wearily. As discussed above, negative stereotypes about the East are often turned into something preferable or even superior by the interviewees. When it comes to the stereotype that the East Germans are right wing per se, they are unable or unwilling to turn it into something desirable. Instead, they question the connection between this position and that of being an East German. Both strategies can be seen as an attempt to resist Western discursive practices (Volčič 2005).

Some of the interviewees say that they sometimes try to avoid showing their Eastern origin by for example changing their dialect because they do not want to be associated with alleged Eastern characteristics such as stupidity, not being self-confident, passivity

and whining. This can be understood as a way to escape a stigmatised identity by undercommunicating one's origin whereas overcommunicating one's command of the dominant culture (Eriksen 1993: 29). Especially the position of being lament, as already mentioned established in the German discourse as *Jammer-Ossi*, seems to be both undesirable and easy to fall into. George, a successful self-employee from Berlin, who does not mince matters when it comes to criticizing the contemporary social order, suddenly stops himself in the middle of a sentence, saying: "I'm not embittered or anything. That's not the point here." To deliver critique over capitalism, or to point at advantages in the socialist system involves the risk of being accused of whining or unable to adapt to the new circumstances, a position that the interviewees often try to avoid by, as in George's case, stating the opposite. Rather often, my questions unintentionally seem to put the interviewees into this position. When I ask Inge how her father has managed *die Wende*, since she has told me that he believed in the socialist idea, she quickly defends him:

Afterwards, my father has always said that it struck him or that it affected him, but he is certainly glad that it happened and he also soon realised that it also meant improvements. [...] And my grandfather, he lives with us, and he always says: "Well, back then, the bread only cost thirty cents, or thirty *Pfennig*." And then my father says loudly that you really can't make that comparison. And I think he is realistic and well adapted and that he also has seen that it also brings something good, although he still finds the basic idea of communism good or so. And I think that in his heart, he is more of a leftist than a liberal. But he is realistic enough to see that the world is what it is and that you have to find your way in this world. So, he is no dreamer or anything.

Although my question was not meant as an accusation, Inge seems to interpret it like one. Her father is no unadapted dreamer, she explains. Although he still believes in the idea of communism, he defends the contemporary society when her grandfa-

ther complains that bread was cheaper in the GDR, clearly stating that the systems are not to be compared. Inge seems to feel called upon to declare that her father's political ideals neither make him unrealistic nor unable to cope with the new circumstances. To defend oneself against the positioning of the East Germans as lament, nostalgic dreamers means to declare one's acceptance of and adaptation to capitalist circumstances, also when it implies a political act of balance.

Several interviewees criticize with emphasis what they define as the "commercialisation" or "exploitation" of the GDR, meaning an ever-growing amount of articles which are being marketed as Eastern products, since they derive from the GDR (Ahbe 2005; Berdahl 1999a). Inge finds it acceptable to produce and sell products that were also made in the GDR if people want to buy them, but she clearly dissociates with using the GDR past as a marketing strategy:

But when they morbidly look for things, with which you can create an artificial market in East Germany in that you display and polish some objects from the past and then: "Look here, that's still yours! However, it was so and so..." and sell it in that way, that I find beneath contempt. To me that is irreverent. It's like exploitation: What themes can you find, which you still so many years later can foist upon people and make some money?

The demarcation between what is to be defined as exploitation and what can be seen as "normal" marketing of products such as the "East German" cereals *Knusperflakes* is fluid and negotiable. In this negotiation, Inge, and other interviewees as well, defend their right to their own memories of their past. No one should come from the outside and tell the East Germans what it was like back then just to make money. But she also criticizes that the East Germans are constructed as a group with common memories, which can be used to sell certain products that would not appeal to the West German consumers. The interviewees thereby often find themselves in a situation where they on the one hand defend their right to their own memory, but on the other hand reject the

conceptualisation of these memories as something outstanding. Stephan claims the right to normality concerning the East German past explicitly:

On the one hand, this nostalgic feeling has to do with what I explained earlier, that you practically consider everything that belongs to the past and that took place in Eastern Germany as a GDR-Museum, also from a West German point of view. And that you simply don't accept it as memories of the past, just as every West German remembers his or her parental home and grandmother or trips to Italy in the seventies or so. We have exactly the same memories of our grandmother, of our home, our school, our working place or spare-time occupations, which of course are different from them that take place nowadays. Or a trip to Czechoslovakia, which for a Westerner is not worth speaking of, but to us it's ours. This phenomenon *Ostalgie* would not be so pronounced today if we were just as natural, and that this is also German identity and not East German identity and not GDR-identity.

Stephan does not question that the East Germans' memories differ from those of the West Germans. On the contrary, he brings out these differences when he talks about *our* grandmother, *our* school and so on, whereas the West German remembers *his* or *her* parental home. But it's not the shared memories as such that give rise to *Ostalgie*, according to Stephan, but the fact that these memories are not acknowledged to the same extent as West German memories, or rather, that they are not accepted as German memories. From this point of view, it is not the East Germans themselves who uphold an East German identity, but they are hailed into this position because they are simply not accepted as Germans (Boyer 2006). East Germanness is then always marked in relation to an alleged essential Germanness. Paradoxically, challenging the discourse of the East German history as non-German (see Jarausch & Geyer 2003), and thereby stressing the normality of the East Germans, Stephan is reproducing the East Germans as different. The questioning of the

hierarchical relationship between the East and the West, in postcolonial terms an act of “talking back”, simultaneously gives rise to a kind of “identity of defiance” (Cooke 2005: 61ff), which inevitably confirms the hegemonic position of the West as well as the marked position of the East.

### Transcending the East–West Boundary

The East–West boundary is not only reified, but also transcended by the interviewees. This is articulated both implicitly, in that the interviewees stress other identifications, and explicitly, in that the dichotomisation is described as irrelevant or outdated.

Most interviewees identify with a *Heimat*, a geographical place as small as a district or big as a town or a region, which not necessarily is connected to an East–West dichotomy, but can be filled with other contents as well (Schneider 2001: 139ff). The identification with a region or a town can be described as superior to the East–West identification, as is the case with Karl. He does not identify himself as East German, nor as German, but as *Mecklenburger*.

If you are *Mecklenburger* and work for example in Stuttgart, then you are absolutely foreign. You don't know what's going on inside of people, I mean, those people have a totally different moral concept, a different view on life than you have. And you really don't know how they tick, how they function mentally. And of course, the other way around it's just the same.

Karl's statement, that someone from Mecklenburg is necessarily foreign in Stuttgart in the sense that he or she does not understand what goes on *inside* of people, implies that this is not the case among people from Mecklenburg, or from Stuttgart for that matter. Thereby, Mecklenburg is constructed as an essential category, in which people share ideals and automatically understand each other. Whereas the dichotomisation of East and West Germans is upheld by distinct stereotypes, the differences between Mecklenburg and Stuttgart remain diffuse. This is also the case with George. He strongly identifies with Berlin, where he has lived since he was one year old,

and dissociates with those who think they can become *Berliner*.

I meet a lot of people here; they try to speak the Berlin dialect with their Swabian accent. Then I ask them: “Why are you pushing yourself?” That's what I ask first of all: “Why are you pushing yourself? You're a Swabe and you will remain so. No matter what you do, even if you are twenty years old now, you will remain so, and you will never be a *Berliner*.” That's what I tell him first of all.

To come from Berlin is described as an essential category, which an outsider cannot enter. George has nothing against people from other parts of Germany living in Berlin, but they should not try to pretend that they are indigenous because being a Swabe is an essential category too, which you cannot avoid or leave behind. What separates the two categories from each other, besides the dialect, is unclear. Most of the interviewees now living in Berlin identify themselves with the city, mostly because of what they describe as its openness, rawness and charm. Berlin is then not only a geographical place, but also a way of living, which is contrasted with the narrow-minded life in the countryside or the superficial life in other cities. As described earlier, both of these contrasts can be associated with the East and the West respectively, but the special aura of Berlin can also be described as something extraordinary, transcending this dichotomisation. Even when the interviewees identify themselves with one district, this identification is often described as independent of the former border.

But I think they interpret a lot of things in the statistics when they examine: “Where do people move? How many move from the East to the West? How many move from the West to the East?” Me too, I always move within this district. But that's because you have lived in this district for some time and this has nothing to do with whether it's in the East or in the West, I think. [---] So, that is not East–West, it's simply my neighbourhood or not my neighbourhood.

Franz questions the picture of Berlin as a still divided town. According to him, the statistics that allegedly prove that people do not move over the former border are misinterpreted. The identification with a certain district has nothing to do with the former East–West border, but with being rooted in a certain area. This view is shared by several of the interviewees. That those districts, in which most of them live and with which they identify, happen to be located in the former Eastern part of Berlin is described as a coincidence.

Class is another identification, which can both be associated with an East–West boundary and described as transcending it. In its capacity of a colonizer, the West is described as the authorities, to which the East Germans fall a victim. On the individual level though, several of the interviewees describe themselves as belonging to the well educated, distancing themselves from ordinary people. According to Stephan, being a critical person or not is no longer a question of being Eastern or Western, but of belonging to a certain social class.

Someone who grows up nowadays, he learns to be critical and to scrutinize everything and not to accept everything as the case may be, but of course not in every social class. When I consider what *Bild-Zeitung* [a tabloid] and *RTL 2* [a TV channel], well I think the bulk of the people grow up with these media, and there is no one who questions it either. You accept it and when there was a scandal report or a false report or when something was absolutely exaggeratedly depicted, the next day it doesn't make any difference.

The naivety, once characteristic of the East Germans, is here ascribed to the big parts of the population that read and believe in the tabloids, implicitly referring to the working class in general. In Stephan's notion of today's society, the differences between the East and the West have given way to a social stratification where some people uncritically consume what they are offered, whereas others learn to take a more critical stance. Franz also frequently describes himself as a thinking, reflexive person. He belongs to the well-

educated part of the population in which people, according to him, should speak High German:

I wouldn't like it when a colleague would speak to me with Berlin dialect or when I hear a lecture at the university on Franz Kafka. It would bother me just as much when he would speak Bavarian or Low German or Saxon or something else that I don't understand. People from Berlin I can understand, but I think that from a certain level, one should speak High German with one another. That has nothing to do with East or West.

Franz classifies people into different levels that “has nothing to do with East and West”, but with being well educated or not. To bring your dialect into the university is improper, irrespective of whether this dialect is associated with the East or with the West. The dialect, or rather the lack of it, since High German is not considered a dialect but rather proper German, thus becomes a marker of class, with which you can distance yourself from ordinary people. Whereas the dissociation with the uneducated or unthinking mass form some interviews, other interviewees frequently describe themselves as working (class) persons. In contrast to the well educated, who are no good except when it comes to signing papers, they describe themselves as accomplishing “real work”. When I ask George, who is one of them who strongly emphasise their belonging to the working part of the population, whether he defines himself as an East German, he gives a paradoxical answer:

Definitely, one hundred per cent, but I don't know what the difference is. In the end, we are fooled all the same. It's like that, we are all affected you know, now that we are a common people.

No other interviewee states his or her identification as East German with such conviction – “one hundred per cent” – as George. But he quickly questions this statement in that he declares it irrelevant since “we are fooled all the same”. To him, being a common people means being united in a subordinate position, in which someone up there leads you by the

nose. Contrary to those who raise themselves over the mass, pointing to their reflexivity or refinement, George identifies with the mass and its underdog position.

On the one hand, the interviewees use the concepts of East and West to stand out as independent individuals, more reflexive than the real *Ossis*, who cling to their past, but also different from the superficial *Wessis*, who have only experienced one social order. On the other hand, they describe themselves as independent and reflexive in that they are able to transcend the East–West dichotomy, emphasizing that a person’s character is far more important than his or her origin. Like Steffi, most of them state that there are good and bad people “here” and “there”:

I’m open. Like I said, there are weird people here and there. Where would one make the cut? I mean Poland, the border is open, what would you say, what’s that then? Even more *Ossis* or what? It’s foolishness!

If the former GDR citizens are *Ossis*, then the Poles would be even more so, a thought that Steffi dismisses as “foolishness”. She points at the absurdity of dividing people into Easterners and Westerners in a Europe without borders, thus stressing a European identity in which the East–West division is antiquated. Sometimes the West Germans are described as “no different from us”, but more often the dichotomy is transcended in the other direction, that is: we are no different from them. Inge says that she can no longer separate an East German from a West German:

When you observe people, what they think and what they do, then I would say that there are no big differences anymore. When I meet someone today, I can no longer say whether this person comes from the East or from the West. [...] Directly after the *Wende* it was much easier, and also during my studies, but now I can’t say anymore. Thus I find that in their way of thinking, the East Germans have adapted highly to that of the West Germans.

The reason for the disappearance of the differences is, according to Inge, that the East Germans have adapted to Western mentality. As discussed earlier, most of the interviewees see the unification of Germany as an asymmetric process, in which the West German conditions were taken over by the East without any compromise. In Inge’s description, these changes have now been internalised by the East Germans to an extent that makes them interchangeable with their Western compatriots. But whereas the Germanness of a West German is unquestionable in its essentiality, the Germanness of the East German is marked, since it is a question of adaptation. Laurence McFalls has argued somewhat polemically that the East Germans, without anyone noticing it, after the *Wende* has realized the GDR slogan: *den Westen zu überholen, ohne ihn einzuholen* (McFalls 2001: 24). Whereas the First Secretary of the SED Walter Ulbricht, who formulated the slogan, meant that the socialist GDR would outdistance the West economically without experiencing its disadvantages, McFalls stresses that the East Germans are more adapted to late capitalism than the West Germans are. Because of the shock therapy during the unification of the two German states, they have been forced to adapt to a global economy faster than others. According to McFalls, building on the Gramscian principal of hegemony, this was fulfilled by the East Germans’ demarcation against what they apprehend to be Western ideals: commercialism, individualism, competition etc. By dissociating from the West, they have internalized its hegemony.

## Conclusions

I have shown how the interviewed persons, who grew up in the GDR and live their adult lives in a unified Germany, use several strategies to handle or escape from a marked position. One such strategy is to conceptualise the East as the Other by dissociating with people, places and phenomena that are positioned as “too Eastern”, thereby reproducing stereotypes about the East while ascribing them to someone else. Another strategy is to reverse such stereotypes by othering the West, which is then described as a colonizer of the East. Both strategies reproduce the



East and the West as separate categories, but they also confirm Western hegemony, to which some East Germans have not (yet) adapted or to which the East Germans fall victim. I have described that the marked position is sometimes accepted and turned into something positive through self-exoticization, thereby depicting the East as authentic and socially warm compared to a hypocritical and individualistic West. The interviewees also question stereotypes about the East explicitly. By articulating defiance, the marked position is unintentionally confirmed. Finally, the interviewed persons to a greater or lesser extent undercommunicate or declare the East German identification as irrelevant for the benefit of identifications such as region or class.

I do not state that these strategies *only* confirm Western hegemony, thus wiping out every possibility of resistance. But I would like to stress that the renegotiation of the German East–West boundary, irrespective of stance, contributes to the confirmation of the definition of the West as capitalist and democratic, as well as to the image of Germany as one community, since calling attention to the differences between the East and the West implies an interpretation of these differences as unnatural compared to an imagined essential Germanness. It should be kept in mind that all these strategies are intertwined and overlapping, which means that the interviewees articulate several positions during one interview. Their subject positions are fragmented and articulated through discourses that are intersecting and even contradictory. Renegotiating the East–West boundary is thus an ambivalent and reflexive process in which the categories are both essentialised, in the sense of temporarily fixed, and subverted.

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