

***On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany.* By Daphne Berdahl. *New Anthropologies of Europe.* Eds. Michael Herzfeld and Matti Bunzl. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xiii, 166 pp. Introduction. Forward. Index. \$17.95, Paperback.**

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The first time I spoke with Daphne Berdahl was over the phone before I decided to do my PhD with her at the University of Minnesota. Talking with her was like reading one of her works – she was passionate, knowledgeable and intermingled the smallest details of her experiences into the points she was making. Her last book, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism*, reflects Berdahl's characteristics in a compendium of essays on memory and consumption in Washington DC, in Kella, and in Leipzig. This posthumous collection consists of previously published and unpublished works that Berdahl completed before her death in 2007 and includes a forward by Michael Herzfeld and an introduction by Matti Bunzl.

Berdahl's book is divided into three sections with each focusing on a specific place: Washington DC's Vietnam War Memorial, Kella and Leipzig. The DC section, based on Berdahl's Master's degree work, is clearly distinct from the last two sections, but has themes that still reverberate through the remainder of the book. While the last two sections are discrete from the first section, these two last parts often echo each other.

By focusing on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, the first section provides an unusual start for this book on post-socialist Germany and creates an ironic beginning for the reader. Berdahl's description of the memorial examines the way that people negotiate personal, political and national narratives and memories at the "Wall." While reading this section, one is reminded of the interactions that visitors to the wall have with the etched names and becomes absorbed in the role of the reader interpreting and engaging Berdahl's text itself. This article, while not focused in Germany or postsocialist Europe, reveals some key themes that flow through Berdahl's writing. Not only does she examine people's acceptances, rejections, and revisions to hegemonic historic discourses, but she also describes the ways that taboo histories and identities

become reimagined through time. The parallels between this first essay and her later ones are quite visible, particularly with the theme of a “Wall” as both a real and symbolic method of division and union.

The second portion of the book is based on Berdahl’s fieldwork in Kella, a small German border town of the GDR. The first three essays overlap and focus on the ways that people in Kella (and other former GDR citizens) view, use and change their consumption habits. Berdahl notes the manner in which people experience the change in regime through more of an economic component rather than a political one. These essays particularly examine how goods are reinterpreted through time. Berdahl devotes one essay to illustrating these changes through the example of the Trabi. The Trabi was the small East German fiberglass car, which Berdahl uses to exemplify the different phases of adoration (right after the fall of the Berlin wall), rejection, re-acceptance, and then appropriation as “camp.” These three essays also accentuate how people in the former GDR are forced to negotiate and learn their positions in a capitalist society.

Tucked into the “Kella” section is a haunting essay entitled “Mixed Devotions: Religion, Friendship, and Fieldwork in Postsocialist East Germany.” Of all the essays in this collection, “Mixed Devotions” overlaps the least with the other essays. In this work, Berdahl discusses her role as a fieldworker and a westerner in coping with the illness of a friend and informant from Kella. The informed reader cannot help but recognize an implied subtext here, as Berdahl is shown as a fieldworker personally grappling with the terminal illness of a close friend as well as her own mother’s breast cancer. Throughout the piece, Berdahl’s own struggle with a terminal illness remains unwritten, yet clearly present. Like her informants, who try to reconcile their GDR histories and experiences with the FGR present, Berdahl expresses her own difficulties trying to understand her positions as academic, friend, confidant, researcher, westerner, and advocate.

The final section in the book is titled “Leipzig,” but like the section on Kella, it strays far from that locale with parts and examples often intersecting with those from the previous section. The first essay is a revisiting of many of the ideas (and even examples) from the previous section, but the last three essays – while still targeting her main themes of memory and consumption – are case studies. The essay titled “Local Hero, National Crook” focuses on the experiences of a man, who depending on one’s prospective, may be interpreted as either a swindler or a kind of “Robin Hood.” Berdahl notes that Schneider, who borrowed money from Western banks to pay for the

renovation of Leipzig's downtown, has acquired a cult like status. She links this to "Ostalgie" and the reverence some have developed for the GDR. Berdahl's second case study examines how the GDR has been interpreted in museum displays. Through the analysis of two different museums, Berdahl's work shows the way that political and everyday; west and east become represented in museum exhibits. In the last essay, Berdahl uses the film *Goodbye Lenin!* as a lens for further understanding Ostalgie and re-imaginings of the GDR.

In many ways, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism* is an appendix to Berdahl's ethnography *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (1997) that, while bringing new updates and interpretations, is clearly a continuation of her previous work. Because it is a collection of works, and not necessarily written to be published together, some of Berdahl's lively examples and parts of essays that are initially invigorating become dampened by repetition, thereby losing their original luster. Of course, this reflects the editorial selections rather than Berdahl's crafting of the essays. As exemplified by this collection, her work reinforces the importance of European ethnography and acts as a critical resource on the study of borders, cultural change and social belonging. As with her previous ethnography, Berdahl's essays are well crafted, infused with feeling, dotted with specific examples, and evoke larger theoretical questions, not just about Eastern Germany, but about understandings of self, memory and belonging. Her writing manages to capture fleeting moments and movements in postsocialist Germany, and the book is both informative and a joy to read.