

DETLEF POLLACK

*Support for Democracy  
in Eastern and Western Germany:  
an Attempt to Explain the Differences*

1. *Introduction*

THE PROCESS of German reunification in 1989/90 was accompanied by high expectations from the East Germans. Many East Germans expected not only a considerable improvement in their living conditions, but also more political freedom, more democracy, and the guarantee of human and civil rights. Almost 15 years later we may ask to what extent the East Germans now support the political system they were so keen to adopt 15 years ago. Without a doubt, the transfer of political, legal, and administrative institutions from West to East was successfully completed within a short period of time. But what about the attitudes and value orientations of the East Germans who have had to adapt to the Western institutional system? Have people who lived for decades under authoritarian conditions been able to develop a democratic culture? Or are their mind-sets and attitudes still influenced by the effects of GDR socialization with its socialist values and ideals?

The question as to what extent the East Germans support the political system in which they live is important, since, as political culture research assumes, a political system is stable to the extent that its political culture is congruent with its political structure. Political institutions need to be supported by the population or they will not function properly. And it takes time before democratic institutions become culturally engrained. Thus the question arises: are East Germans already adjusted to the democratic system or do they still adhere to the socialist values of the past?

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Obviously, support for Western institutions among the East German population is very low. Trust in institutions lies below the Western level (1). Many Easterners feel that they are neither protected by the legal system, nor treated very fairly by it (2). East Germans are more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy than West Germans (3), and even the market economy is no longer very highly appreciated. The market economy and democracy enjoyed the greatest support among East Germans immediately after the collapse of communism. In 1990, 77 per cent of the Easterners had a positive opinion of the FRG economic system; ten years later that share has declined to 31 per cent (see graph 1) (4). The same is true concerning the acceptance of democracy. In 1990, almost 60 per cent were satisfied with the functioning of democracy. In the meantime, this percentage has also declined (see graph 2).

We should not overstate these figures, however. When asked if they prefer a planned or a market economy, East Germans vote in favor of the market economy (5). We also have to be careful regarding their dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy. This dissatisfaction does not mean that East Germans reject democracy per se. On the contrary, democratic values like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to engage in demonstrations, or party competition are valued as highly in the East as in the West (see table 1) (6). Eastern dissatisfaction focuses on the operationalization of democracy, not on democratic ideals and values as such.

(1) Gert PICKEL, *Jugend und Politikverdrossenheit: Zwei politische Kulturen im Deutschland nach der Vereinigung?* (Opladen, 2002, p. 131).

(2) Elisabeth NOELLE-NEUMANN, "Kein Schutz, keine Gleichheit, keine Gerechtigkeit", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 8 1995, p. 5.

(3) STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, ed., *Datenreport 2002: Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn 2002, p. 608); Dieter FUCHS, "Welche Demokratie wollen die Deutschen? Einstellungen zur Demokratie im vereinigten Deutschland", in O.W. GABRIEL, ed., *Politische Orientierungen und Verhaltensweisen im vereinigten Deutschland* (Opladen 1997, esp. 109-110).

(4) Elisabeth NOELLE-NEUMANN and Renate KÖCHER, eds, *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 1993-1997* (München, 1997, p. 670). The Institute in Allensbach has informed the author that no newer data beyond 2000 are available on this question.

(5) NOELLE-NEUMANN and KÖCHER, eds, *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 1993-1997* (München, 1997, p. 677).

(6) Detlef POLLACK, "Das geteilte Bewußtsein. Einstellungen zur sozialen Ungleichheit und zur Demokratie in Ost- und Westdeutschland 1990-1998", in R. Czada and H. Wollmann, eds, *Von der Bonner zur Berliner Republik. 10 Jahre deutsche Einheit* (Opladen, 1999, pp. 281-307, esp. 292-294).

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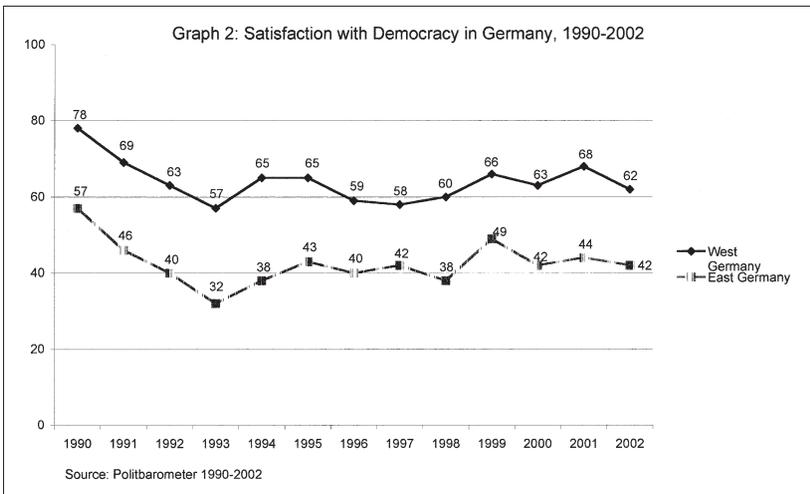
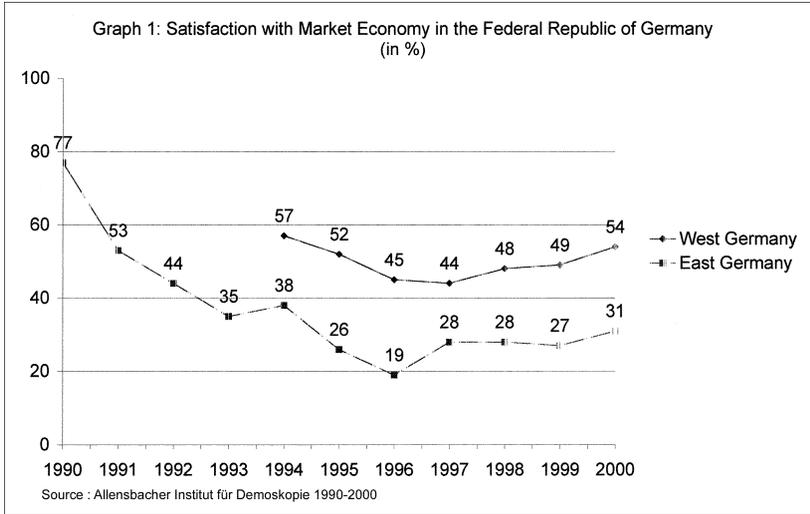


TABLE I — Agreement with Democratic Principles (in %)

	West		East	
	1991	1995	1991	1995
Everybody should have the right to stand up for his or her own opinion even if the majority holds a different opinion	97	90	97	96
Every citizen has the right to demonstrate for his or her convictions on the street	94	90	96	94
A viable democracy cannot be conceived without political opposition	95	91	96	96
Each democratic party should in principle have the possibility of taking over governmental responsibility	92	84	94	90

Source: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Renate Köcher, eds, *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 1993-1997* (München, 1993, pp. 546, 558); KSPW-Bus 1995

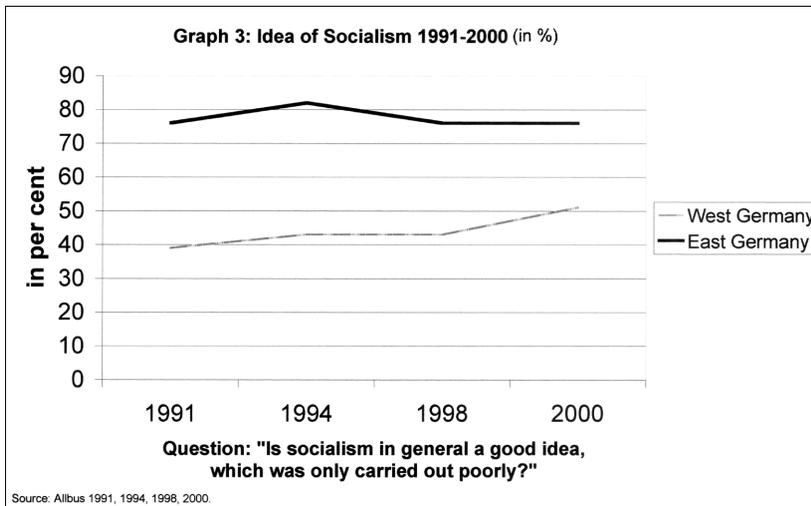
Nevertheless, there is a gap between the East and West in terms of levels of acceptance vis-à-vis Western institutions. Here we will explain why East Germans are more dissatisfied with democracy than Westerners. Does this have to do with the socialist legacy in East Germany (2.1.) or with the divergent living conditions between East and West (2.2.)? The relatively high dissatisfaction with democracy in Eastern Germany could also be attributed to the feeling of many East Germans that they are not recognized as Easterners. Is it possible that they transform the feeling of being despised into a rejection of that order which deprives them of recognition in the first place (2.3.)? Likewise, we could form the hypothesis that lower satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the East correlates with social inequalities between East and West (2.4.). Perhaps it can also be explained by the Easterners' impression that the Western system is not efficient nor productive (2.5.).

## II. *Different factors for explaining the differences*

### 2.1. *The legacy of socialism*

The most common explanation for the lower degree of satisfaction with democracy in East Germany compared to the West is to attribute it to the effects of socialist socialization (7). In order to evaluate the effects of

(7) Ursula FEIST, "Zur politischen Akkulturation der vereinten Deutschen: Eine Analyse aus Anlass der ersten gesamtdeutschen Bundestagswahl", *Aus Politik und Zeitges-*



GDR-socialization, we use one question very often raised in representative opinion polls as an indicator of internalized socialist values: *Is socialism a good idea, in principle, which was only poorly put into practice?* Agreement with this statement has been consistently very high in East Germany over the last 15 years. During this time, agreement with this statement has stood roughly 35 percentage points higher in the Eastern than in the Western states (see graph 3). We should not overemphasize this high level of agreement, however, since it expresses a defense of the GDR past that is currently being discredited. Asked how satisfied they were with the "realities" of socialism in the GDR, only a little more than 40 per cent answered positively (8). Only 22 per cent regard socialism as a good form of government, compared with 92 per cent who view democracy as such (9).

*chichte*, 11-12, 1991, pp. 21-31; M. Rainer Lepsius, "Das Legat zweier Diktaturen für die demokratische Kultur im vereinigten Deutschland", in Everhard Holtmann and Heinz Sahner, eds, *Aufhebung der Bipolarität: Veränderungen im Osten, Rückwirkungen im Westen* (Opladen 1995, pp. 25-39); Dieter Fuchs (see note 3).

(8) Statements are based on the *Political*

*Culture in Europe* data set (PCE), a survey coordinated by the *Frankfurt Institute for Transformation Studies* and conducted in autumn 2000 in Eastern Germany and other former Communist countries in Eastern Europe. The fieldwork was coordinated by INRA-Germany.

(9) See note 8.

## 2.2. *The personal economic situation*

Personal economic circumstances can also have an important influence on citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Individual living standards in East Germany have increased dramatically over the last fifteen years. Household property and assets have tripled in this time period. Household incomes have also risen. But they are still lower than in West Germany. Whereas in East Germany 27 per cent of households have over € 2,000 at their disposal, 39 per cent of Western households have reached that level of disposable income (10). In 1990, the real incomes of East Germans only amounted to 55 per cent of West incomes; today their incomes have surpassed 80 per cent of West Germans' level (11). Thus their personal financial circumstances have clearly improved but still lag behind those of West Germans. Likewise, if we look at housing or household acquisition of durable consumer goods, like freezers, video cameras, phones or cars, we find significant improvements (12).

It is no coincidence that these improvements are reflected in increased expressions of personal happiness. In 1990 the share of the population who felt their own living conditions were better than before was not much larger than the percentage who claimed their situation had worsened (13). In 1998, by contrast, 59 per cent agreed that they enjoyed better living conditions, while only 16 per cent said they had deteriorated, and 25 per cent thought they were about the same (14).

The greatest problem, without a doubt, rests with mass unemployment. Following the 1989 collapse of the GDR, almost 3 million people lost their jobs. In 1989, some 9.2 million East Germans held a job; today the number of employed persons amounts to 6.5 million (15). Women have been especially affected by unemployment. Every second Easterner has personally experienced some form of unemployment (16). Today the official jobless rate for East Germans stands at 18 per cent; in West

(10) STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, ed., *Datenreport 2002. Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn, 2002, p. 113).

(11) Hans-Werner SINN, Germany's economic unification: An assessment after ten years, *Review of International Economics*, 10, 2002, pp. 113-128.

(12) STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT (see note 10, pp. 128-132).

(13) *Spiegel spezial*, 1, 1991, p. 22.

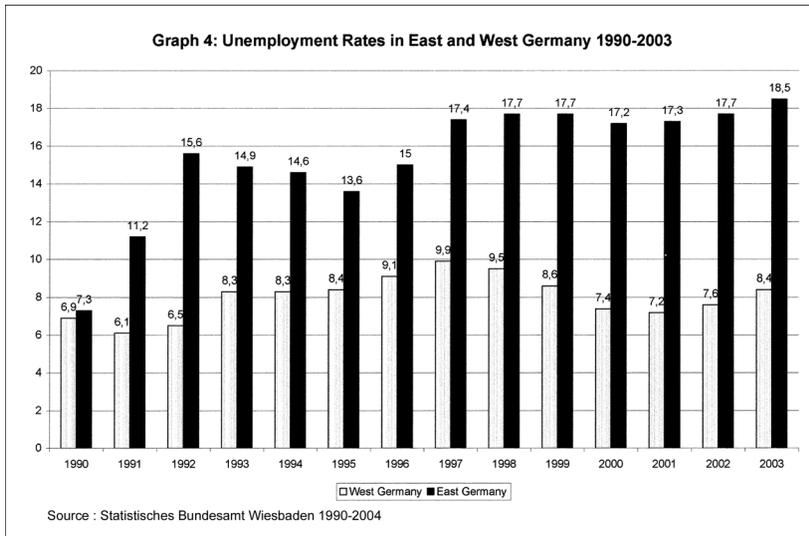
(14) STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, ed., *Datenreport 1999. Zahlen und Fakten über die*

*Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn, 2000, p. 428).

(15) Michael MÜNTER and Roland STURM, "Economic consequences of German unification", *German Politics*, 11, 2002, pp. 179-195.

(16) Gunnar WINKLER, "Zur sozialen Situation und deren subjektiven Reflexionen in den neuen Bundesländern", in Sozial-wissenschaftliches Forschungszentrum Berlin-Brandenburg, ed., *Sozialreport 1996, Sonderheft 1+2*, p. 24.

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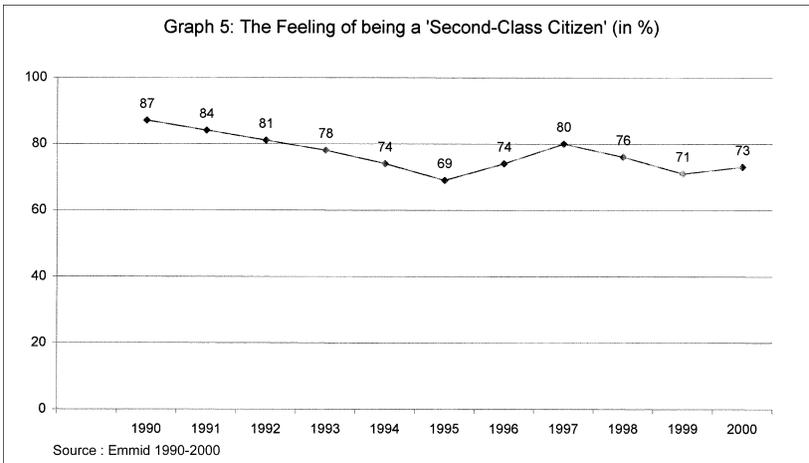
Germany it is only 8 per cent (see graph 4). If we include Easterners who retire early or are enrolled in job-requalification measures, the figure rises to almost 30 per cent.

To summarize developments regarding personal living conditions, it is clear that quality of life has greatly improved in the East. However, despite these positive changes, some differences remain compared with West Germany.

### 2.3. Problems of recognition of East Germans

It is often said that East Germans perceive themselves to be *second-class citizens*. According to surveys conducted by emnid—an opinion research institute in Bielefeld—about 70 or 80 per cent of East Germans have tended to view themselves as second-class citizens over the last decade (see graph 5) (17). When we take a closer look at the wording of the question, however, we see that the way the question is posed in many public surveys already presumes certain Eastern attitudes. The question reads: *Do you think that East Germans will remain second-class citizens in the longer run?* It is taken for granted that Easterners are second-class citizens. If people are asked directly—and I have done this in a representative poll—if they *feel really like second-class citizens simply because*

(17) Once again, no newer data beyond 2000 are available regarding this question.



*they are East Germans*, only 42 per cent provide a positive answer (18). If they are asked whether they *personally* feel like second-class citizens, only 24 per cent answered affirmatively. The percentage of Easterners rises to 68 per cent, however, if they are asked whether they are treated as second class citizens (19). The answers concerning the feeling of being a second class citizen depend to a large extent on the wording of the question. Three-quarters of East Germans qualify themselves as *having been recognized as Easterners*, and only one quarter does not. This is a considerable percentage, but a much smaller proportion than very often suggested in the public sphere. In the public debate we are confronted with the image of Easterners as underestimated, underprivileged, and otherwise despised. The feeling of social acceptance among East Germans, however, appears to be much more wide spread than is seen publicly.

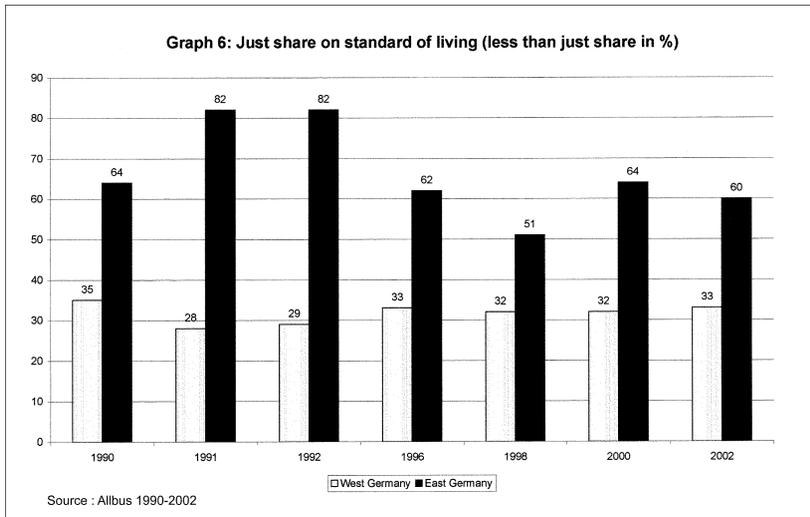
#### 2.4. The assessment of social inequality

The assessment of social inequalities in Germany is determined to a great deal by the perception of East/West-differences. Three-quarters of

(18) Detlef POLLACK and Gert PICKEL, *Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in Ostdeutschland* — a survey carried through in 1998 by Emmid, Bielefeld on behalf of the chair of

comparative sociology of culture at the European University Frankfurt (Oder).

(19) See note 8.



East Germans think that *equality between East and West Germany* has not yet been reached (20). In order to measure the feeling of the individual with respect to social justice, different opinion polls have asked residents whether or not they think that, *compared with how others live in Germany, each gets the fair share he or she deserves*. In the first half of the 1990s the difference between East and West totaled more than 50 percentage points (see graph 6). Currently, the difference has dropped to 30 percentage points. Almost two-thirds of East Germans still feel that they are treated unjustly. But the number of people who hold these feelings has clearly declined in the last years. Undoubtedly, this has a lot to do with the approximation of living conditions in East Germany relative to the standards seen in the West.

### 2.5. Changes in assessments of the general economic situation

The assessment of the economic situation in Germany has, in general, changed dramatically over the last fifteen years. Whereas in 1991 a majority evaluated the performance of the economic system in Germany positively, in 1994 the majority had a skeptical relationship towards the general economic situation (see table 2). This assessment remained stable over the next eight years.

(20) Pollack and Pickel (see note 18).

TABLE 2 — Assessment of the General Economic Situation in Germany

	1991	1994	1996	1998	2002
West Germany	+64	-27	-24	-12	-15
East Germany	+48	-18	-26	-23	-33

Source: Allbus 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2002 (n=1500 for West and 1000 for East each survey).  
 The figures listed above represent the difference between the positive answers (very good and good) minus the negative answers (bad and very bad).

If we distinguish between East and West Germany, we can see that the situation in the West is assessed positively, and negatively in the East (see table 3). This means that the negative assessment of the economic situation in Germany as a whole depends upon the problems of economic growth in East Germany (21). The personal economic situation is, however, seen positively in both the West and the East (22).

TABLE 3 — Attitudes vis-à-vis the General Economic and the Individual Situation in East and West Germany

	West Germany	East Germany
Assessment of the economic situation in West Germany	+26.6	+44.1
Assessment of the economic situation in East Germany	-24.1	-47.5
Assessment of the personal economic situation	+58.8	+39.5

Source: Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in Ost—und Westdeutschland 1998.  
 The figures listed above represent the difference between the positive answers (very good and good) minus the negative answers (bad and very bad).

### III. *Explaining satisfaction with democracy*

In order to explain the level of satisfaction with democracy in East Germany we make use of a so-called regression analysis. This method is

(21) It is interesting to note that Easterners not only assess the economic situation in the West more positively than Westerners but also the economic situation in the East more negatively than West Germans. Perhaps they tend to overstate the differences between West and East in order to present themselves as underprivileged whereas West Germans are prone to minimizing the differences

perhaps in order to avoid the image of being privileged.

(22) The difference in the assessment of the personal and the general economic situation is a well known fact in the polling research. See Jürgen MAIER and Hans RATTINGER, "Economic Conditions and the 1994 and 1998 Federal Elections", *German Politics*, 8 (2), 1999, pp. 33-47.

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able to measure the influence of independent variables on dependant variables. Satisfaction with democracy is our dependent variable. All other indicators we have used serve as independent variables.

TABLE 4 — Determinants of Satisfaction with Democracy in East Germany

Variables	1998		2000	
	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Significance (p)	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Significance (p)
Idea of socialism is good	-.05	.322	-.05	.210
Was satisfied with the really existing socialism	-.03	.487	-.03	.466
Household income	.06	.189	.07	.057
Experience with unemployment	-.07	.095	-.02	.659
The life situation since 1989 has changed in a positive direction	n.a.	n.a.	.23	.000
As East German citizen of a second class	-.07	.135	-.10	.011
As East German acknowledged	.16	.001	n.a.	n.a.
Receive just share	.11c	.011	.13	.001
No equality between East and West Germany	-.09	.033	n.a.	n.a.
Economic situation West good	.18	.000	.08	.030
Economic situation East good	.19	.000	.17	.000
R-Quadrat	.19		.27	

Source: Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in Ost—und Westdeutschland 1998. Political Culture in Central and Eastern Europe 2000. Significant are only values which are  $p < .050$ . (n.a.=question not asked).

As can be seen in table 4, the assessment of the idea of socialism and the satisfaction with socialism as it actually existed in the GDR are not significant in determining one's satisfaction with democracy. The widespread thesis that socialization in the former GDR is responsible for the lower degree of satisfaction with democracy can be refuted. Astonishingly, the economic situation of households measured by household incomes and personal experiences with unemployment has no influence on satisfaction with democracy. The lower degree of East German satisfaction with democracy, therefore, cannot be attributed to the socialist past or to the individual's economic situation. But as is shown in table 4 when East Germans regard their life situation in

comparison with the time before 1989 their actual economic status has a great impact on their overall satisfaction with democracy (Beta =.23). When points of comparison come into play the judgment of how democracy works is dependent upon how much progress in their life situations has been made. The objective situation as such is not important but rather the individuals' subjective assessments of it.

Also important are aspects of recognition in the process of re-unification. The question as to whether East Germans enjoy a degree of recognition within united German society has a considerable impact on their overall satisfaction with democracy (1998: as East German acknowledged, Beta =.16; 2000: as East German citizen of second class, Beta=-.10). As regards social inequality, responses to the question of whether or not they believe they are getting the share of social "goods" they deserve (1998: Beta =.11; 2000: Beta =.13) and whether there is equality between East and West Germany also have an essential explanatory power (1998: Beta =-.09). The way one judges the economic situation in the East and West in general (1998: Beta =.18 respectively.19; 2000: Beta =.08 respectively.17) remains even more important for the degree of satisfaction with democracy as compared with most of the other variables. The more negative the terms in which East Germans evaluate this situation, the more dissatisfied they tend to be with the functioning of democracy per se. Satisfaction with democracy depends a great extent upon how people judge the outcome of the political and economic system.

If we compare these results with the positive assessments we detected at the personal level (see table 3), we obtain a rather curious picture: East Germans feel that personally they are doing well, although the general economic situation in the East really does not provide any real basis for this — even in the judgment of the Easterners themselves (see assessment of the economic situation in East Germany in table 3). The improvement in personal living conditions is not merely the result of economic efforts undertaken by East Germans themselves but also owes a great deal to major financial transfers from West to East. The source of their own well-being appears to rest primarily on the continuing strength of the West German economy. The fact that they are doing well as individuals depends above all on the enormous economic support that the East has been receiving directly from the West, along with transfer payments, Western development of infrastructure (renovating the railroads, improving the highways, restructuring of buildings, for example), new social policy measures and the mass import of western consumer goods to the East. About € 75 billion have been transferred

every year from the West to the East (23). Consumption in the East is nearly 50 per cent higher than GDP for that region. This means that every third Euro spent in the East has come from the West (24).

Germany is not a united nation. But the important point here is not the “wall in people’s heads” about which so many pundits talk and write. The latter is only a reflection of the real economic conditions, which could not be any more disparate than they are. On the one side, we have a highly modern, extremely productive and potent economic system that is still rather efficient. On the other side, we find an economic system highly dependent upon the West. The East is participating in a game of catching-up with a more potent partner, a race that it has already lost, and from here on in, the gap between the two parts of Germany is growing rather than decreasing (25). This becomes clear if we look at the growth of the East German GDP after the fall of communism.

Immediately following the introduction of the *Deutsch-Mark* in July 1990, three months before legal unification, eastern industrial production fell by 70 per cent (26). Within two years the Gross Domestic Product in the new states had decreased by more than one-third (see graph 7). This is a singularity in the development of industrialized societies. In the other transformation states of Central and Eastern Europe, the GDP declined by only 20 to 30 per cent.

Between 1992 and 1994, the growth rate of the Gross Domestic Product was high, though it slowed again after 1994 (see graph 7). Since 1997 the Eastern growth rate has been lower than that of West Germany; the same is true of growth in productivity (27). This means that the distance between East and West German levels of economic development is not shrinking but widening. Although many enterprises have invested in the Eastern economy, the new states have

(23) The bulk of that money was poured into social security payments. Only a small share, 17 per cent, went toward investments (Ulrich BUSCH, “Sieben fette Jahre? Kritische Bemerkungen zu Charakter und Umfang der Transfers“, *Berliner Debatte INITIAL*, 9 (2/3), 1998, pp. 89-103.

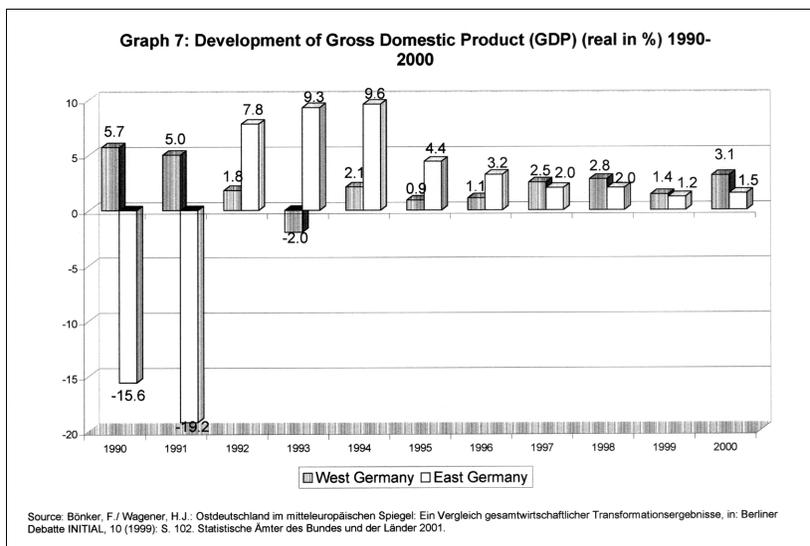
(24) Sinn (see note 11, p. 116).

(25) Of course, there are differences within East Germany (south vs. north, urban vs. rural, higher educated vs. lower educated, older vs. younger etc.) but the differences in the economic situation between the East and the West supersede internal disparities. Though it would be scientifically interesting to analyze

these internal disparities in order to uncover those factors that influence the specific political attitudes of East Germans, this article focuses on the surmounting differences between East and West.

(26) DIW, IfW, IWH, *Gesamtwirtschaftliche und unternehmerische Anpassungsfortschritte in Ostdeutschland*. 19. Bericht (Halle, 1999, pp. 10-11).

(27) Frank BÖNKER and Hans-Jürgen WAGENER, “Ostdeutschland im mittelosteuropäischen Spiegel. Ein Vergleich gesamtwirtschaftlicher Transformationsergebnisse“, *Berliner Debatte INITIAL*, 10 (4/5), 1999, pp. 98-110, esp. 105.



not yet experienced an upswing that is independent and self-sustaining.

Given this situation it is quite clear why the Easterners would not be satisfied with the situation in Germany, despite the improvements in their personal circumstances since 1990. Eastern Germans have few reasons to be proud of their own accomplishments. Generally speaking, they are doing much better materially than their Central and East European neighbors. However, in contrast to their neighbors, they also know that the positive changes in their own country are not the result of their own hard work but were tantamount to a gift.

East Germans have perhaps accomplished much over the last several years. However, this is not sufficient to allow them to reach Western levels of development. Naturally, it is difficult to blame themselves for this and it probably does not even make sense to ask who is to blame in the first place. But one thing is clear: it takes a special kind of self-deception to praise a system to whose competent functioning one has personally contributed so little. This is true especially among a people whose lives used to center around the concept of productive labor. Therefore one real source of the limited Eastern acceptance of the Federal Republic's institutions lies in the noteworthy lack of any proportionate Eastern contribution to the success of German unification. People, we must understand, can only identify with the successful completion of something they themselves have helped to build. In those

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economic places and political spaces where they are not needed in order to reconstruct the whole, they will not be able to embrace the whole product as their own.

Dating back to the 1950s and the 1960s, West Germans enjoyed the feeling that they had created a success story all their own. They have been very proud of having achieved an economic miracle after the destruction of World War II and of once again having achieved an important standing on the world stage, even if as a rule they tend to overestimate their personal roles in bringing about this success. East Germans, by contrast, are sooner inclined to attribute the circumstances in which they now find themselves to external forces and actors — and there are good reasons for this. Already during the communist era East Germans were not allowed to make decisions about their own destinies. East Germans did not even perceive unification as a process in which they could determine their own roles and contributions (although ironically, if it had not been for all of their self-mobilization in 1989 in bringing down the Wall, unification would not have occurred).

In this regard, however, all of the good deeds of the West are turning back against it, producing a boomerang effect. As long as Easterners do not have an adequate list of their own accomplishments to line up next to these Western good deeds, it would seem that they are giving up on themselves if they were to express gratitude for them. No, gratitude does not constitute a fitting reaction to these Western good deeds. As they perceive it, East Germans are entitled to the good things they are now receiving, and they have been entitled to them for a long time — were they not, after all, the ones who had to hang on for 40 years on the shadowy side of life, on the other side of the Wall? Are the West Germans to blame for the reality that things have gone so well for them all these years? Of course not. The higher standards of living they have enjoyed since 1949 were the result of an accident of their birth place. Does that make it the East Germans' own fault that their lives were so much harder over a period of 40 years? Certainly not. Consequently they now think that they need a kind of redistributive justice to balance out past privileges and hardships, and it is regrettable that Westerners cannot comprehend this. People have to complain, otherwise they would have to admit their own failings; others are to blame, not themselves. Therefore one can also place demands on the others.

It is no coincidence that East Germans tend to revalue the old system they used to have and to devalue the Western system they have today; there is a psychological need to idealize aspects of GDR life and to look

for bad features within the Federal Republic. Even the tendency to consider themselves better with the passage of time and to morally discredit the competitive superiority of the West Germans, amounts to an obvious attempt at self-exoneration. This process is necessary in order for Eastern Germans not to lose their self-respect. However, it cannot conceal for the fact that the citizens of the Eastern states cannot feel very happy about the progress that has been made in German-German re-unification. All of the unquestionable successes that this process has brought about are simply not the result of, and have too little to do with their own accomplishments. Eastern Germans will grow more satisfied with the political, social and economic institutions of the Federal Republic when they finally have a reason to become proud of themselves.