

***Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany**

Dominic Boyer

There was a time, not so long ago, when the former East Germany seemed ripe for so many futures. Sometimes giddy, sometimes anxious discussions sketched the potential of the East to grow in several different directions in the wake of German unification: perhaps into an extension of the political and social order of the West, perhaps into a more humanitarian socialism, perhaps into the embodiment of some third way ideal. At the same time, from the forums of public culture to the practice of everyday life, eastern Germany was experienced by native and visitor alike as a space of dizzying revolution, of abundant presence, of rapid becoming (Boyer 2001a). Like the rattling of construction equipment that filled the air, the future seemed to vibrate in every moment, always begging the question: What will come next?

What is striking to me about eastern Germany today is not only how this sense of futurity has been dampened but how it has, in fact, been turned inside out. In political and cultural discussions of the East, talk of transformation and futurity has been rendered into tropes of stasis and pastness. In January 2004, for example, *New York Times* journalist Richard Bernstein described the “strange mood of nostalgia” in eastern Germany: “People wear ‘born-in-the G.D.R.’ T-shirts, or they collect Trabants, the rattling two-cylinder cars that East Germans waited years to buy, or they go online to be contestants on the ‘Ossi-Quiz,’ all questions relating to East German pop culture” (2004; also see Williamson 2003). Perhaps spurred on by such news features, or by a viewing of the recent film *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003), people unfamiliar with Germany always ask the same questions upon learning that I work in the East. They want to know about the *Ostalgie* phenomenon: this nostalgia they have heard East Germans now feel for the GDR (German Democratic Republic). There is something equally comic and unsettling for them in the fact that Stalinist totalitarianism now seems preferable to West

German social democracy for people who have experienced both. This mix of sentiments (humor, irony, concern, *schadenfreude*) is immediately reminiscent of Slavoj Žižek's recent discussion of "postmodern 'radical' politics" fascination with totalitarianism—a symptom, he says, of what has been repressed by "global capitalist multiculturalist tolerance" (2001: 244).

I can only agree that *Ostalgie* is a symptom, but in my opinion it is not—as it is most often interpreted to be—the symptom of an eastern longing for a return to the GDR or for the *jouissance* of authoritarian rule. The work of this essay is to offer an alternative analysis of *Ostalgie*, one that takes neither its easternness nor its pastness (nor, for that matter, its status as phenomenon) at face value. Instead, this essay locates the discourse and identification of *Ostalgie* within an ethnological politics of memory and an allochronic politics of the future, whose conjuncture produces the effect of the past-fixation of East Germans. In a word, my strategy is to use *Ostalgie* as a lens through which to examine the problem of the future in eastern Germany, a future that has by no means been dampened beyond recognition. Rather, a certain social knowledge of eastern pastness has become its medium.

The essay has three parts. In the first, I explore the term *nostalgia* itself and note how this seventeenth-century German medical neologism—intended to be roughly synonymous with, if technically superior to, the vernacular term *Heimweh* (homesickness)—originally signaled a malady of spatial and national displacement. The term *nostalgia*, as has often been observed, is a compound of two Greek words, *nostos* (the return home) and *algos* (grief, pain, or sorrow). One may recall that the *Algea* of Greek myth were the children of *Eris* (strife) and the siblings of *Lethe* (oblivion), *Limos* (starvation), *Ponos* (toil), and many other misfortunes. I focus my comments on the historicity and sociology of the neologism, arguing ultimately that nostalgia represents an important moment in the embodiment of nation. I also argue that the relationship of *algos* to nation is the key dynamic we must decipher in thinking through the presence of nostalgia in contemporary Germany.

The second part of the essay develops historical and psychoanalytic framings for nostalgia in postwar Germany. Here I focus on the grief and pain of the memory of the Third Reich, a grief that has codified history—and pastness more generally—in postwar Germany as burden (*Belastung*), fabricating it as a powerful ethnological inheritance and presence that calls into question any German future. In analyzing the burden of Germanness, I observe how the externally imposed division and occupation of Germany from 1945 to 1990 became a rather providential means for deferring confrontation with the ethnology of the Holo-

caust. This deferral was accomplished in both Germanys by claiming that the “more German Germans” lived on the other side of the Berlin Wall. But the fragility of this strategy of dealing with history was revealed in the events of 1989. After 1990 there is again the one Germany, the one history, the one burden. But East/West distinction remains a powerful axis of social imagination, a residue of the Cold War politics of memory and identity. This, I argue, is the context within which we must understand contemporary East-West relations in Germany and the everyday dispositions that have been codified as *Ostalgie*.

The third part of the essay explores, in an admittedly selective and partial way, the cultural terrain and political logic of *Ostalgie* in Germany today. Looking at widely publicized *Ostalgie* phenomena like the mass-market magazine *Super Illu* and the movie *Goodbye Lenin!* alongside the less well-known but more important (from an East German perspective) work of the journalist and novelist Alexander Osang, I pay special attention here to the semiotics of East German pastness in cultural representation. I argue, in essence, that *Ostalgie* is not what it seems to be—it is a symptom less of East German nostalgia than of West German utopia. I mean *utopia* in the sense that it is a naturalizing fantasy that creates an *irrealis* space, literally a “no-place,” in which East Germans’ neurotic entanglement with authoritarian pastness allows those Germans gendered western to claim a future free from the burden of history. The very powerful and diverse *Ostalgie* industry of unified Germany reflects the desire of its West German owners and operators to achieve an unburdened future via the repetitive signaling of the past-obsession of East Germans. But this incessant signaling is itself symptomatic of West Germans’ own past-orientation. In the end, the therapy of East/West distinction cannot really resolve or dissolve what Freud might have termed the pathogenic nucleus of the Holocaust in all postwar German memory. Nevertheless such therapy exerts tremendous effects upon the lives and self-knowledge of eastern German citizens.

Nostalgia and Nation

Nostalgia, it has widely been noted, was a term coined by a medical student, Johannes Hofer, in his dissertation for the University of Basel in 1688. Hofer’s dissertation is a remarkable text, one that is often cited but rarely explored in its nuances, so I would like to linger on it. The text begins with the timeless dissertational ritual of effusive thanks to the academic powers that be. Thereafter Hofer moves immediately to offering and defining the curious term *nostalgia*. He is almost apologetic at burdening the reader with this neologism, given that the

term *das Heimweh* (homesickness) is already so well known in the vernacular. But Hofer explains that *Heimweh* lacks the medical specificity and seriousness to describe adequately some of the fatal and near-fatal cases of homesickness that he documents in his dissertation.

Hofer emphasizes that he is not wedded to the particular term *nostalgia*. The more important point for him is that the affliction be recognized as a truly physiological disorder. Hofer writes:

Nor in truth, deliberating on a name, did a more suitable one occur to me, defining the thing to be explained, more concisely than the word *Nostalgias*, Greek in origin and indeed composed of two sounds, the one of which is *Nostos*, return to the native land; the other *Algos*, signifies suffering or grief; so that thus far it is possible from the force of the sound *Nostalgia* to define the sad mood originating from the desire to return to one's native land. (1934: 380–81)

Interestingly, Hofer also offers two alternative neologisms, neither of which history has treated quite so kindly as nostalgia. “If nostomania or the name philopatridomania is more pleasing to anyone,” Hofer writes, “in truth denoting a spirit perturbed against holding fast to their native land from any cause whatsoever (denoting) return, it will be entirely approved by me” (381).

Hofer then provides two case studies of delirium and mania that typify the particular pathology he associates with the extended stays of “principally young people and adolescents” sent to “foreign lands with alien customs” (1934: 383). He describes first a young student from Bern who, while studying in Basel, was afflicted with a burning fever that could not be addressed with any medical pharmacopoeia and that subsided only when he was returned to his native land (this “foreign land” was only some fifty kilometers away, giving one a sense of the scalar intuition of *Heimat* [home or place of belonging] at this historical moment). The return to one's home, Hofer emphasizes, is the only cure for nostalgia. Hofer's second case study is a country girl with delirium (likely working as a servant in a foreign town), who shouts only “Ich will Heim!” (“I want to go home!”), until she is deemed incurable by local doctors. Yet, on the verge of death, she is returned to her place of birth; and Hofer testifies that “within a few days she got wholly well, entirely without the aid of medicine” (383).

In his essay “The Idea of Nostalgia,” Jean Starobinski has noted the subtlety of Hofer's epidemiology and expressed admiration for Hofer's consideration of social estrangement and desire for nurture as factors conditioning nostalgic affliction (1966). Indeed, it is striking how Hofer anticipates Breuer and Freud's much

later discussion of another mania—hysteria (1895). Writing some two centuries before Jean-Martin Charcot's studies of railway accident survivors reconfigured the diagnosis of hysteria as a complex of trauma and repression, Hofer paints a wonderfully resonant portrait of object-cathexis and neurosis and of the abreactive treatment of making the patient return to the repressed—in this case, by returning the afflicted to the place and clime of “home.”

Although observant of the social and psychological dimensions of nostalgia, Hofer's interest is still in speculating on the physiological basis of its characteristic delirium or mania. Here, his thesis offers a discussion of “animal spirits” and sites of “continuous vibration” in the brain that refract ideas of the Fatherland, a discussion that eventually folds into a climactic and humoral theory of “the disposition of the blood” and breath in foreign climates.

Hofer's diagnostics of nostalgia are quite striking. He writes that we may suspect an imminent nostalgia if we observe youths who “frequently wander about sad, [who] scorn foreign manners, [who] are seized by a distaste of strange conversations . . . [who] frequently make a show of delights of the Fatherland and prefer them to all foreign things” (1934: 386). In short, the symptomology of imminent nostalgia for Hofer is more or less what we might call nationalism. This association becomes clearer when one thinks again of his alternative proposition of “nostomania,” which emphasizes not so much the grief and sorrow at the delayed return home but rather the obsessive madness to pursue that return. In either case, the madness is driven by the physiological consequences of leaving one's place and one's nation. Indeed, the terms *Heim* (home) and *Nation* (nation) come to function interchangeably with one another in Hofer's dissertation as he binds them into an ecology of social belonging to which the individual is physiologically beholden.

This speaks to the historicity of diagnosis. In its contemporary usage, *nostalgia* is a relatively light word, one that is apportioned rather carelessly. “Waxing nostalgic” is a literary trope, and usually an ironic one at that. The term certainly lacks a sense of physiological danger. But, for many of Hofer's contemporaries, the dangers of extended travel and the affliction of longing to return home were considered both real and serious. Long before Hofer's dissertation, aspects of the affliction had been noted by doctors treating soldiers and refugees during the Thirty Years' War. The term *nostalgia* gained great salience and resonance in eighteenth-century epidemiology before joining terms like *melancholia* in their migration back to humanistic and literary discourse once humoral theory in medicine was finally displaced by cellular theory and bacteriology. As late as the American Civil War, over five thousand cases of nostalgia were medically

documented among soldiers. In Bruno Latour's terms, Hofer thus seems to have served as a spokesman for a broader shift in epidemiological paradigms (1988). Yet, Hofer's science is also clearly reacting to sociological transformations in Europe in the seventeenth century.

In its focus on what I might call the phenomenology of dislocatedness, Hofer's epidemiology of nostalgia evokes the social phenomenon of translocation in Europe. The massive refugeeism that beset Central Europe during the Thirty Years' War had subsided by the time of Hofer's studies in Basel, but the devastating dislocations of war were well remembered. Social life in Central Europe was, at least in terms of its prior feudalist localism, never again the same. Several historians have noted that the late seventeenth century was indeed a time of increasing, albeit selective, translocality throughout Central Europe. Mack Walker's social history of German towns during this approximate period emphasizes, for example, a tension in social life between locality and translocality, between locally minded and locally invested *Bürger* (citizens) and what Walker terms the "movers and doers," an expanding assortment of migrant populations including "bureaucrats, peddlers, professors, merchants, wage laborers and dispossessed peasants" (1971: 108–42).

Hofer leaves us an interesting clue to his context sensitivity when he mentions that nostalgia afflicts youths, particularly those of age to travel as students, servants, or soldiers far away from their native climates. We might remind ourselves that Hofer was himself a student at this time, studying in Basel, some one hundred kilometers away from his native Mühlhausen. He offers many hints in his dissertation that he is himself intimately acquainted with the symptoms of nostalgia, particularly when he—an ethnic German from an area recently occupied by France—bristles at the Swiss claim that *Heimweh* is their unique national affliction, proving some special dearness of the Swiss fatherland.

Bourgeois students like Hofer were strung between locally invested origins and the translocal necessities of their education. They often traveled far from home to attend university and might have attended several universities in different cities by the time they completed their studies. The normative ideal for most students was not to continue traveling but rather to return to their hometown to occupy a position of status in the local professions: at a local university or in local administration. To the best of my knowledge, few social historians have commented upon the psychological and phenomenological consequences of translocation for students and how their peregrinations around Europe were equally a source of pride and of anxiety. Yet is this not precisely Hofer's testimony? Just as for young soldiers and servants, a student's return home was never certain.

Underemployment and unemployment were frequent companions of intellectual life in Central Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, since universities routinely produced more graduates than could be locally employed (McClelland 1980). There was therefore a good chance that leaving one's hometown to study would mean decades of absence from family, friends, and loved ones. Yet, without attending university, the middle-class ambition to secure a position of local social prominence could never be adequately fulfilled, particularly in the eighteenth century as university education became increasingly a rite of passage to social prominence among both nobility and the affluent middle classes.

As I have argued at length elsewhere (Boyer 2005: 46–75), the translocal networks of educated middle-class people like Hofer were also a crucible for the evolution of languages of translocal national identity and belonging in German-speaking Central Europe. Students, scholars, and literati came to imagine a German nation in terms foreign to the nobility, to the peasantry, and even to the locally invested middle classes. In a social space still typified by a high degree of localism, the educated middle classes (or *Gebildeten*, as they termed themselves) were free to construe the translocal tissue of the nation based largely on their own communicative networks. In doing so, the virtues of the German nation as they were articulated in the eighteenth century (*Geist*, *Bildung*, *Kultur*, to name a few) came to resemble strikingly the caste identity of the *Gebildeten*. The university, as the key site of social reproduction for the educated middle classes, likewise became an institutional locus of nationalism. A student like Hofer would likely have encountered both the language and the mania of nations regularly. One of the forerunners of the modern usage of the term nation were the linguistic and territorial corporations of foreign students at European universities. By the late seventeenth century, some of these so-called *Nationes* were evolving into fiercely unruly and zealously patriotic clubs that beset a number of universities with nationalist strife.

My central point is that the category of “nation” would have been a relatively intimate and charged one for Hofer in the time and the place in which he sought medical recognition for nostalgia. It is possible to think of Hofer's dissertation as just an epiphenomenal moment in, or symptom of, the rise of nationalism in Europe—perhaps an early recognition of the manias of nation that were to plague Europe during the three hundred years from the Peace of Westphalia to the end of the Second World War. But I would argue instead that Hofer's dissertation on nostalgia was a significantly generative and coordinative moment in its own right. Through his neological intervention, Hofer manufactured an apt and authoritative expression for the desires and sorrows of the nation, one that, above all, stressed

the corporeality and mortal danger of grief for the return home. Hofer thus helped to craft a language within which the health of home and nation is contrasted against the afflictions of migration and translocation. In this way, Hofer naturalized nationalism as a physiological state, making *mania* interchangeable with *algos*. It is an equation that has had broad consequences in European nationalism ever since.

Vergangenheitsbelastung and Nostalgie in Germany

If one agrees that Hofer's nostalgia is intertwined with the shaping of the phenomenology of the nation in Central Europe, then what should we make of the contemporary status of nostalgia in Germany, a place that has, in the twentieth century, been made to symbolize equally the depth, the passion, and the terror of the nation? It has often seemed to me that the relationship between *nostos* (return to the native land) and *algos* (suffering or grief) is more complicated in postwar Germany than anyplace else in Europe. As a consequence of the connection between Germanness and the Third Reich in public memory, the nation is not always or even often a source of comfort. Indeed, in Germany the nation more often serves as a source of anxiety, of concern that the many good works of social democracy may simply be a veneer obscuring some deep authoritarian drive. A good friend of mine from Berlin once confessed to me on a walk around the Havelsee that he felt as if every German had a little Hitler in him. I asked him if he was sure it was only every German. Laughing, he replied that I might have something there, and added later: "But, Dominic, what you have to remember is that the real neurotic cannot be cured." One may encounter, in Germany and elsewhere, a neurotic concern with what has been called *die deutsche Krankheit* (the German sickness) of authoritarianism, aggression, intolerance, and so on. It is the sense that this is somehow a specifically German sickness that I wish to highlight. The return to such a home is not always desirable. If *nostos* is accompanied by mania in Germany, it may more often be an obsession to avoid the return, to repress the return rather than a yearning for it.

The psychic crisis of what is sometimes termed *Vergangenheitsbelastung* (the burden of the past) should not be underestimated, especially for younger Germans, who do not feel guilt for acts committed as much as dread that the past will repeat in the future. Of course, many Germans have developed strategies for managing or denying this dread. Yet it can never be entirely displaced, since it is continuously resignified in encounters with stereotypes of authoritarian, intolerant Germanness. As one woman told me during my field research, "I always was

most aware of being German when I traveled. There one constantly faced the stereotypes.”

In postwar narratives emerging from both inside and outside Germany, the Holocaust became a German event incommensurable with other genocides in its historical and cultural singularity. This emphasis on incommensurability immeasurably strengthened the associative connection between Germanness, authoritarianism, and history. Given the solvent character of associative logic, once authoritarianism became somehow ethnotypically German, soon every German citizen, regardless of age or political disposition, could equivalently be implicated in the moral collapse and genocidal behaviors of the Final Solution. This remains a highly unstable, even raw settlement of knowledge in Germany, as we witnessed in the furor surrounding Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996) and its provocations about the Germanness of anti-Semitism. But its recognition and presence are widespread.

To take a step back, if the division of the nation-state after 1945 contributed in part to this ethnologization of authoritarianism, it also provided a providential opportunity to cope with an alleged “Hitler within” via the mediating presence of another Germany. Anthropologist John Borneman has written extensively of the narrational strategies that the two postwar German states used after 1949 to “define, regularize, institutionalize, and normalize the domestic practices of the self” (1992: 75). Borneman notes that these strategies always defined the two German states in opposition to one another, narrating a break with the Nazi past on one side of the Berlin Wall and continuity with it on the other.

Psychotherapist Hans-Joachim Maaz has written insightfully of how the partition allowed, from the very beginning, the opportunity for the suppression of guilt and the constitution of new “external enemies.” Maaz writes, “We were able to give up the Jew as a common enemy, at least pro forma—the new external enemies now were called Bolsheviks and Communists on the one side, and capitalists, militarists, revanchists, and Nazis on the other” (1995: 187). The existence of two Germanys provided a scale through which degrees of Germanness could be measured and calibrated. Positive and negative poles of cultural Germanness were distilled on both sides of the Wall and then ethnotypical traits were apportioned selectively to the East and the West. In the West, the GDR could become an instantiation of German “authoritarian traditions” that threatened a return of dictatorial terror to Germany. Meanwhile, in the East, the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) represented German cultural qualities of aggression and intolerance honed by the imperialist imperative of international capitalism. The citizenry of each Germany was depicted by the opposing state alternately as being “more

German” in their authoritarian proclivities and as being relatively innocent victims of a criminal regime. In both cases, the “truly” forward-looking Germany defined itself in opposition to the backward glance of the other Germany. For each Germany, the other represented the national-cultural past against which its ideal national futurity could be measured. Neither Germany, in the end, made sense without the other.

Complicating the work to determine which Germany was “more German” in its political and social profiles was the manifest desire of both German states (and of many German citizens) to explore postnational identifications as a means of escaping the burden of history. The GDR, as Borneman notes, came to identify itself as part of an international socialist constellation centered on the Soviet Union and emphasized in much of its public discourse the international kinship and fraternity among all socialist states and citizens. The FRG likewise sought to foreground its Westernness and Europeanness over its Germanness through an unshakable adherence to the liberal-democratic ideals associated with the Western occupation forces.

On this point, I will offer a personal anecdote. In July 1997, I had the opportunity, as part of a small group of fellows of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, to meet for two hours with then-German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Kohl, one of the great architects of Europeanization, offered us a well-rehearsed but also quite emotional discussion of the trials of postwar German reconstruction and explained his administration’s emphasis on European unity and European integration as, and I quote him, “the only possible solution to German history.” Kohl’s point was that the question of the return of German authoritarianism could be permanently deferred only by dissolving Germany into Europe. I was struck that only in Germany could one find a head of state so committed to pursuing a postnational politics. To be sure, Kohl knew he was speaking, in this context, to an American audience and perhaps was even playing on well-known American fears of *die deutsche Krankheit*. At other times, especially during those months leading up to German unification, Kohl demonstrated that he was versatily accomplished in a primordialist language of national belonging as well. But Kohl’s narrative of the relationship of Germany to Europe also underscores how deep the dread of *nostos* is in Germany and how far some Germans would be willing to go, even to the point of dissolving the German nation-state once and for all, in order to escape *Vergangenheitsbelastung*.

The year 1989, according to Kohl, caught everyone in the West German political establishment by surprise. There had been no real preparation or “therapy” (my term, not his) for the unification of the two German states. Indeed, this uni-

fication provoked an unexpected crisis as the relatively stable Cold War exchange system of associating the burden of history with the other Germany and its more German Germans suddenly lost its political architecture. To be sure, more informal strategies of identifying and interpreting East/West difference persisted largely unabated in Germany. But the “other Germany” had been forever lost.

There was real trauma in this loss, since the other Germany had come to function, in essence, as a “prosthesis” (in Derrida’s sense [1998]) of identification and origin. Although by no means a cure to the burden of national history, it stabilized a Germanness that held a worse Germanness at bay. With the one *Deutschland*, on the other hand, came again the one history, the one burden. The quick reversal of sentiment in 1989, from the ecstasy of the collapsing Wall to the (almost guilty) retreat back to East/West difference, underlines, I would argue, the psychic cost of Germanness. An East German satirist once told me a joke he heard in early 1990 that captures this retreat perfectly: “The East German says to the West German, ‘*Wir sind ein Volk*’ [‘We are one people’]. The West German replies, ‘*Wir auch*’ [‘Us too’].” He explained to me that hearing this joke was the moment when he thought to himself, “Life is normal again.”

East/West distinction survives in contemporary Germany as a means of constructing Germanness that shifts the ethnological burden of the past to an eastern or western other. It is telling that there is endless talk of what precisely the differences are between East Germans and West Germans, but the fact of difference itself is largely unchallenged and even sacrosanct; it is also widely publicized and recursively sedimented in public knowledge through the technical instruments of mass media and academic and governmental *Wissenschaft* (science). Hundreds of academic studies have been produced over the past fifteen years to specify and to explain East/West German difference (see, for example, Landua 1993, Staab 1998, and Strohschneider 1996).

Good science, like a good symptom, repeats itself. And the science of East/West difference repeatedly fulfills the political purpose of naturalizing what I would describe as the perduring psychic necessity of East/West difference. Both eastern and western Germans continue to rely on the other Germany for their own strategies of social identification. West Germans need the figure of the cryptoauthoritarian, introverted *Jammerossi* (whiny Eastie) to legitimate their claims to a more cosmopolitan Germanness. East Germans likewise need the cryptoauthoritarian, extroverted *Besserwessi* (arrogant Westie) to legitimate their own sense of themselves as gentler, kinder Germans.

What I will emphasize in the next section is that although East Germans participate in East/West distinction as often and as eagerly as West Germans do, this

Public Culture

is not a balanced reciprocity. Given the domination of West Germans and FRG social institutions over all domains of life in eastern Germany, the FRG Cold War social imagination has become the inheritance of unified German public culture. Mass media in Germany are almost exclusively owned and managed by West Germans and continuously project eastern Germany as “the other Germany” within, depicting East Germans in variously subtle and overt ways as culturally “more German Germans” with inclinations toward xenophobic intolerance and authoritarian obedience. It has not been lost on East Germans that such public cultural representations position them to bear the burdens of Germanness and German history into the future. Many say that their alleged “pastness” is precisely correlated to West Germans’ own unwillingness or inability to honestly engage their own history. At a public event hosted by the *Berliner Zeitung* in May 1997 on the future of the East/West divide in Germany, Lothar Bisky—then a congressional representative for the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)—received thundering applause when he said, “I am looking forward to the day when *the West Germans* have a history too.”

The Mediation of *Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future

This at long last leads us back to the question of contemporary *Ostalgie*, to the “Born in the G.D.R.” T-shirts, and to the cult of the Trabant. I will be a bit provocative and say that, contrary to much popular wisdom, I do not think that *Ostalgie* exists. That is to say, I know few East Germans who have the relationship to the GDR implied by the accusation or celebration of *Ostalgie*. Let me briefly make three points based upon my ethnographic field research in eastern Germany: first, former citizens of the GDR, like other human beings, do indeed fantasize both pasts and futures free of the compromises and trials of contemporary life. After all, Kant himself wrote that *Heimweh* is a yearning not for home but for our own youth. And, in this sense, many East Germans doubtless feel nostalgic from time to time. Second, many former GDR citizens, especially in the older generations, did experience the end of the GDR with a sense of loss and even grief. I would emphasize, however, that this was more often grief at the foreclosure of the utopian and humanitarian fantasy of socialism than grief at the end of the GDR per se. In hundreds of interviews with former GDR citizens, I have not once heard an East German of any age fantasize the return of the GDR. Finally, on the subject of consumer cults that have grown up around GDR-era commodities, their transformation into tokens of identity has little to do, I believe, with nostalgia. This evolution is more properly viewed as a response to the uncompromising campaign

since 1990 to erase public symbols and signs of the GDR from the lived environment of the new federal states of eastern Germany. As this campaign has been successful in its severe challenge to East German social memory, certain residual classes of objects like consumer goods (sometimes now manufactured by western German firms) have been seized upon and hypostasized as prosthetics of memory and identification (see also Berdahl 1999).

So while I acknowledge (and how could I not?) that such symptoms of past-fixation exist, I resist their codification under the term *Ostalgie* with its connotations of *nostos* and *mania*, the obsession with the return home. Rather, my argument would be that the discourse on *Ostalgie* is itself symptomatic of a postunification West German utopia of East Germans' natural affinity to the past, thus indicating, in the still animate logic of Cold War identification, that West Germans have a natural affinity to the future. Sociologist Andreas Glaeser has observed, for example, in his fascinating study of the everyday professional interactions between eastern and western Berlin police officers after the *Wende* (change/turn of 1989), how West Germans tend to allochronize their encounters with East Germans and eastern Germany (2000: 148–53). What he means by allochronism is that West Germans commonly narrate the East through temporal displacement, as though entering an eastern space meant stepping backward in time. By extension, East Germans are frequently depicted by their western colleagues as creatures of the past, as people trapped in old habits, and as individuals frightened by change and the future. This social imagination of easternness, according to Glaeser, licenses West Germans to serve as paternal benefactors for East Germans and to manage the future of Germany on their behalf.

I recognized similar dynamics during my own field research in eastern German media organizations in 1996 and 1997. These organizations are now entirely owned and largely managed by West Germans who tend to treat eastern employees as lesser professionals, at best as regional specialists with an intimate knowledge of regional history and culture. But East German journalists are not often invited to speak to or about Germany as a nation—this is instead the implicit role of their western colleagues. Indeed, I found that it was precisely when East Germans dared to transgress a past-oriented regional identity that they were disciplined as “nostalgists” for the GDR (see also Boyer 2000). Several journalists told me that speaking critically of unified German society was something they were loath to do because such criticism was immediately taken by their western colleagues as a lack of commitment to democracy and as a yearning for a return of the GDR. One journalist from Berlin in her late thirties told me:

Public Culture

The only time I think being East German works negatively against you is when you express opinions that perhaps this bourgeois-democratic system does not represent the end of history. And, when you suggest that something may come after it. Because, like any system, it's going to come to an end sooner or later, maybe in fifty, maybe in a hundred years, and then one has to think about what will come after it and what kind of a society that should be. But that's completely taboo to talk about the end of this system, because the moment they hear you say something like that they think, "Oh, she wants the GDR back," which isn't the point at all. . . . The West Germans have no problem asking us how we could have lived in the GDR, but I don't think they've ever thought about how they would answer an outsider's question fifty years from now who would ask them, "How could *you* have lived in the Federal Republic of Germany with its unemployment, with hunger—well, not much hunger, but with homelessness definitely?"

In addition, I found that West Germans working in and around eastern German media organizations were sometimes equally, if not more, obsessed with the GDR than East Germans were alleged to be. For example, during the course of my research I met several professional Stasi hunters (who gather information about, and seek to expose, former informants of the GDR ministry for state security), all West Germans, who shared their convictions with me that the sanctity and future of the unified nation absolutely depended upon a full determination of accountability for the GDR. Investigating and unveiling Stasi informants had become their lives' work, a work they consistently paralleled with the postwar practice of de-Nazification. Yet, in their feverish efforts to identify *Täter* (perpetrators), and thus, they said, to bring justice to the East in the name of the "free and democratic society of the West," I detected a certain mania to atone for crimes they had never committed. This mania, I would emphasize, is simply an extreme form of the much more mundane dread of *nostos* I have outlined above. One of my Stasi hunter friends often speculated in dramatic terms about what he and I would have done if we had lived in the GDR, whether we would have sacrificed our lives for our principles or whether we would have been satisfied with a typical life of marginal complicity. This invitation to self-interrogation is familiar enough in Germany but seems oddly foreign to the citizen of a state that has never asserted collective, let alone ethnological, accountability for any of the genocides with which it has been involved or complicit.

In short, I have come to feel that what is named *Ostalgie* is also a West German transference. It is worth noting that two of the best known *Ostalgie* hits over

the past ten years, the magazine *Super Illu* and the film *Goodbye Lenin!*, were conceptualized and engineered by West Germans. *Super Illu* is the product of the Bavarian publishing house Burda Verlag and evolved out of publisher Hubert Burda's plan to produce an integrated brand-marketing campaign for eastern Germany. Burda has explained in interviews that he developed *Super Illu* to help ease East Germans' transition to their life in a new Germany through a respectful yet forward-looking celebration of their cultural heritage in the GDR (Boyer 2001b: 18–22). What Burda means by "cultural heritage" is, however, actually mostly an advertisement-oriented consumer heritage, since he focuses his comments extensively on the emotional resonance that East Germans have with GDR product brands and stars. What Burda's imagination of an "East German culture" erases is the fact that East Germans' memories of the GDR tend to focus much less on brands and consumption (let alone on pop stars) than on the various kinds of creative and canny bricolage and networking in which they engaged daily in order to make do in a society plagued by material shortages. Burda's East German is no creative *bricoleur* or impresario, however, she or he is rather simply a frustrated Fordist consumer, one who gladly embraces West German consumerism so long as their beloved GDR brands and icons are also made available to them as a niche market. My research inside the *Super Illu* offices taught me that the magazine remains largely a West German enterprise: the management is mostly Bavarian, and former GDR citizens are employed only in more marginal positions to craft the authenticity and ambience of the features.

Super Illu, of course, as a regional publication, has not had nearly as global a reach as the recent film *Goodbye Lenin!* Like *Super Illu*, *Goodbye Lenin!* is a project conceptualized and produced mostly by West Germans (for example, writer/director Wolfgang Becker and cowriter Bernd Lichtenberg are from Westfalen and Köln, respectively). And, like *Super Illu*, the film's farce is beautifully designed to erase this fact, although the film's opening with revolution and Stasi brutality—the Stasi being front and center in every West German fantasy of the GDR but much more marginal to East Germans' own social memory—is already a clue to its historical imagination.

Nevertheless, at the surface level of the film's dialogue one finds plenty of evidence to contradict my argument that this is more a West German utopia film than an East German nostalgia film. There are, for example, numerous salvos against West German consumerism. Yet beneath these salvos one finds again echoes of *Super Illu*'s vision of East Germans as consumer subjects (think of the protagonist Alex's obsession with brand labels, his sister's desire to get rid of all

material reminders of the GDR as soon as possible, and his mother's joy at acquiring a Trabant all as evidence of this subtle reframing of easternness).

The consumerist visions vary, however, insofar as *Super Illu* lingers on the emotional resonance of GDR products while *Goodbye Lenin!* makes their low quality and ad hoc character its deepest and richest vein of humor. One of its best jokes, repeated periodically, is that Alex's West German friend Denis can imitate the most advanced media product of the GDR (the nightly news program *aktuelle kamera*) inside a garage, using a bucket of paint, a cheap video camera, and a bad polyester suit, while the East German "true believer," Alex's mother, remains none the wiser. In general, the film treats artifacts of the GDR as pure residue, fit to be accumulated into piles of trash, even when they serve as reservoirs of equally worthless GDR currency.

But by far the most telling dimension of *Goodbye Lenin!* is its performance of what many West Germans understand as the oedipal dynamic of the East, the struggle with the sadistic father, the party-state, who is killed only to have his authoritarianism inherited by the GDR's many sons. In the course of the film, Alex at first desires to kill the authoritarian father, the father who has castrated his own biological father. Then, through the extended farce, Alex is seen seeking to tame the sadistic father and to rebuild him as a righteous patriarch. But the denouement of the film allows Alex himself to gradually become an authoritarian maniac, one who will keep his image of the GDR erected at all costs. As his mother looks warmly on, Alex becomes a kind of Erich Honecker figure, and she seems touched that her son would go to such lengths to paternalistically deny "reality" on her behalf. Alex's transformation drives home the message that the perverse socialist state cultivated a little *Parteisekretär* (communist party secretary) in every East German boy, a sadistic father within that maps so effectively across "the Hitler within," the routine transference to the other Germany.

It should also be noted that the film is structured as an East German family drama, while the West German presence in the conceptualization and production of the film is neutralized. The two West German characters in the film, for example, seem entirely tangential to its oedipal struggle. Denis is the friendly, canny technician and Rainier is the bumbling libertine with a little extra cash to help out the family. Both appear as more or less well-meaning enablers of East German desire. The effect is thus produced that the restoration of the GDR in Alex's apartment is entirely an eastern affair, a normal and natural struggle of East Germans with their socialization by an absurd but also criminal regime. Their therapy is rebuilding the authoritarian state on what is meant to be their own terms, then cathartically dismantling it and, finally, with hope and courage, acquiescing to the

western future. It is easy to imagine that the writers of *Goodbye Lenin!* believe that they are doing East Germans a favor in producing a film so sensitive to the dilemma of being East German, that is, to the dilemma of struggling with one's past. Does no West German feel equivalent entanglement with his or her past? Indeed, Hubert Burda proudly says as much about *Super Illu*, whose therapeutic role he connects to the "demand" of East Germans to find "emotional bridges to their own past" (Boyer 2001b: 19).

One might well ask: if this reading is right, if a film like *Goodbye Lenin!* is really a West German utopia film, then how can one explain its success (and that of the other utopia, *Super Illu*) among former GDR citizens? Here I would suggest that these films are embraced because they represent a new moment or "second stage" in the process of postsocialist normalization in eastern Germany. The first stage every former GDR citizen knows all too well—it was the wholesale public discrediting of the social, cultural, and political legacies of state socialism as criminal, totalitarian, and destructive of human integrity. Andreas Glaeser and I have each noted in our ethnography that West Germans are often unable to imagine the GDR as normal life in any respect, and their imagery for the GDR tends to revolve around enclosure, privation, and bareness. The GDR becomes "the Zone"—a space with curious but logical associations to the concentration camps of the Third Reich. In this space, East German life is construed in terms akin to what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life" (1998). As one of my East German friends put it, "you get a strong feeling when you listen to how West Germans interpret our history that it was all shit back then. Therefore, by extension, you are covered in this shit as well. Moreover, it doesn't even fit with your own knowledge of your past—there are good and bad things about any society; it was a complete life in the GDR. The psychic cost of enduring this constant criticism, though, is tremendous."

Indeed, many of my East German interlocutors reported to me that what I am terming the first stage of postsocialist normalization was highly traumatic for them. Let me stress this point: the greater trauma was not the collapse of the GDR and its lifeworld but, rather, the discovery that postunification public narratives reduced the GDR to the prison camp of a criminal regime and reduced them to this camp's abject inmates. The collapse had been profoundly disorienting, but the dominant political narratives of unification added the experience of intense dehumanization since they foreclosed most of the subjective nuances of life in the GDR—thus interrupting East Germans' own tendencies and strategies of memory and identity—and, worse yet, cast doubts over the capacity of former GDR citizens to effect future, self-directed change. In the worst cases, East Germans

felt themselves isolated as beings wallowing in the filth of history or as beings deprived of all history and agency, living a bare present life.

The dissolution in the early 1990s of East Germans as historical subjects, that is, as agentive human beings capable of making history, paved the way for the second, contemporary stage of postsocialist normalization. The essential social form of the second stage is a gift from the paternal West German to the now abject East German of a particular mode of rehistoricization. The gift comes in many forms, and in popular culture I have singled out two brilliantly packaged and brilliantly marketed cases with *Super Illu* and *Goodbye Lenin!* But as Marcel Mauss taught us so long ago, the social character of any gift enjoins both complicity and reciprocation. I would highlight two obligations that East Germans are now expected to fulfill in order to regain their historical subjectivity. The first is that East Germans coordinate their own knowledge of the past with the western utopia or “no-place” of the GDR. The second, and more important, obligation is that East Germans make the past into a powerful object of identity and desire, one that will allow those gendered western to then point to *Ostalgie* as a natural effect of the allochronic character of the East. When these obligations are fulfilled, the gift, and with it the mediating agency of West Germans, cancels out of the equation. In the end, East Germans are said to have the relationship to the past that they have simply as a function of the cruel legacy of their authoritarian socialization and not perhaps because the politics of identification and memory in unified Germany cannot allow them to have a future.

One might also wonder what *Super Illu* and *Goodbye Lenin!* would have looked like if they had actually been produced by East Germans. For those interested in better understanding the complexity of East Germans’ own relationship to past and future, I would suggest the writings of Alexander Osang (1996, 2002). This suggestion stems from the reaction of many of my eastern interlocutors, who immediately deferred to Osang when I asked them if they could explain to me how they felt about their pasts. Osang, now a foreign correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, was trained as a journalist in the GDR and has spent much of his professional life (since 1989) writing short essays and portraits of East Germans’ *Ankunft im Westen* (arrival in the West).

Osang’s first novel, *Die Nachrichten* (2002), chronicles a young East German journalist, Jan Landers, who has moved from Berlin to Hamburg to become the only East German newsreader for the news program *Die Tagesschau*. Landers is drawn to the West for reasons he does not entirely understand. Yet he is quickly seduced by its luxury and vitality and comes gradually to see East Germany as a dark place in opposition to the bright thrills of the West. Having given up his life

in East Berlin (his aging parents, an estranged wife and child), Landers acquires a national reputation in Hamburg, along with a beautiful loft, a luxury car, and a trophy girlfriend. But he never really “arrives” in the West, remaining painfully aware at every turn of his foreignness (his last name itself suggests this rather bluntly: “Landers” plays on *anderes Land* or “other country”).

The drama of the book is the rumor that circulates that Landers may have worked as an informant for the Stasi. No one can believe him when he says he cannot remember whether or not he might have once had a conversation with a Stasi officer. He is peremptorily suspended from his job, and he returns to Berlin to interview his family and former friends in order to determine what kind of a person he had been in the GDR. I will not spoil the ending of the novel for you, and it is beside the point of this essay. Landers’s reservoir of memories of the East is relatively shallow; he exists in a mostly liminal state, identifying himself neither as East German nor as West German. In this he differs from the other characters in the book, all of whom are refracted through Landers’s perception toward caricatures of easternness or westernness. In one sense, Osang’s novel is a generational tale, where Landers reflects the strong desire of many younger East Germans for a third social category that is neither eastern nor western. In another sense, Osang’s novel is an East German tale insofar as it revolves around Landers’s sense of estrangement from both the GDR and unified Germany and around his anxious search to stabilize a meaningful relationship to the past that does not circumscribe and distort his present life. At some level, all that Osang’s East German protagonist wishes in the end is to have some sense of mastery over both his past and future. But Landers, like many of my eastern interlocutors, finds that the contemporary politics of the future in Germany make it difficult to escape the role of embodied pastness he and they have been assigned.

Nostomania, or *Westalgie*

I would like to suggest that we would do better to think and to talk about *Westalgie* in Germany rather than *Ostalgie*.

Returning to Helmut Kohl’s impassioned narrative, will Germany’s recognition as part of the West ever not be clouded by Nazism and the Holocaust? Despite decades, centuries even, of seeking to build a German *Kulturstaat* (cultured state) on the model of nation-states like Britain and France, all this honest work at Westernization was displaced in one fell swoop by the horrors of the Third Reich. The effects of this loss continue to ripple on, stirred elsewhere by nations and states only too glad to be able to single out someone else as embodying ethno-

logically several legacies of modern evil: eugenics, xenophobia, raciology, death camps, total war. Worldwide, the word *German*, or even the sound of a German accent, continues to stand metonymically for the authoritarian fringe of civilization. Recall how quickly public rumination seized on Pope Benedict XVI's Germanness. The first joke I heard was, "So they finally found a way to make the Church more reactionary. I mean, *a German*?"

Is not this loss of the West the real grief, the real sorrow around which I have written? Who in Germany, East or West, does not repeatedly wish to go back to 1933 and to change history? Who does not wish that recognition of their west-ernness did not always somehow seem probationary? Who does not wish that the future question of *die deutsche Krankheit* could be settled once and for all? Such sentiments are indeed signs of *algos* and also invitations to *mania*, the grief of an ethnological burden of history that is cathected into the repetition of an unchangeable past in the name of a nonrepeating future. Next to the lightness and the kitschiness of *Ostalgie*, *Westalgie* is true sorrow, the true desire for the return. Like Hofer, I ask forgiveness for another neologism, since, after all, *das Heimweh* is already so well known in the vernacular. But diagnosis has, I hope, its cathartic and coelaborative potentials. The true neurotic may indeed be incurable. Yet I suspect that there must be a more effective and humane therapy than sacrificing so many East German futures to the neurosis of national past and national burden.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Berdahl, Daphne. 1999. "(N)Ostalgie" for the present: Memory, longing, and East German things. *Ethnos* 64: 192–211.
- Bernstein, Richard. 2004. Warm, fuzzy feelings for East Germany's gray old days. *New York Times*, January 13.
- Borneman, John. 1992. *Belonging in the two Berlins: Kin, state, nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyer, Dominic. 2000. On the sedimentation and accreditation of social knowledges of difference: Mass media, journalism and the reproduction of East/West alterities in unified Germany. *Cultural Anthropology* 15: 459–91.
- . 2001a. Yellow sand of Berlin. *Ethnography* 2: 421–39.
- . 2001b. Media markets, mediating labors, and the branding of East German culture at *Super Illu*. *Social Text* 19, no. 3: 9–33.

- . 2005. *Spirit and system: Media, intellectuals and the dialectic in modern German culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Breuer, Josef, and Sigmund Freud. 1895. *Studien über hysterie (Studies on hysteria)*. Leipzig: Deuticke.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Monolingualism of the other; or, The prosthesis of origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Glaeser, Andreas. 2000. *Divided in unity: Identity, Germany, and the Berlin police*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldhagen, Daniel. 1996. *Hitler's willing executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Hofer, Johannes. 1934. Medical dissertation on nostalgia, translated by C. K. Ansprach. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2: 376–91.
- Landua, Detlef. 1993. The social aspects of German reunification. In *The economics of German unification*, edited by A. Ghanie Ghaussy and Wolf Schäfer. New York: Routledge.
- Latour, Bruno. 1988. *The pasteurization of France*, translated by Alan Sheridan and John Law. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Maaz, Hans-Joachim. 1995. *Behind the wall: The inner life of Communist Germany*, translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo. New York: W. W. Norton.
- McClelland, Charles E. 1980. *State, society and university in Germany, 1700–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Osang, Alexander. 1996. *Das Buch der Versuchungen. 20 Porträts und eine Selbstbeichtigung (The book of temptations: Twenty portraits and one self-accusation)*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag.
- . 2002. *Die nachrichten (The news)*. Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Staab, Andreas. 1998. *National identity in eastern Germany: Inner unification or continued separation?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Starobinski, Jean. 1966. The idea of nostalgia. *Diogenes* 54: 81–103.
- Strohschneider, Stefan. 1996. *Denken in Deutschland: Vergleichende Untersuchungen in Ost und West (Thinking in Germany: Comparative studies in East and West)*. Bern: Verlag Hans Huber.
- Walker, Mack. 1971. *German home towns: Community, state, and general estate, 1648–1817*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Williamson, Hugh. 2003. Realists fight back against the tide of nostalgia for old East Germany. *Financial Times*, October 3.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2001. *Did somebody say totalitarianism? Five interventions in the (mis)use of a notion*. London: Verso.

