

# Conspiracy, history, and therapy at a Berlin *Stammtisch*

## ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze conspiratorial knowledge in discussions of East German politics and history around a Berlin *Stammtisch* (regulars' table). The *Stammtisch* is a venerable, mostly masculine institution of German political culture that defines an intimate fraternal space within which social knowledge and political judgments are articulated, negotiated, and contested. Here, I am particularly interested in how talk of the "covert agencies" and "hidden relations" operating behind the scenes of political life in East Germany merged with more general and contemporary concerns about the relationship of Germanness to history. Whereas other anthropologists have emphasized the importance of conspiratorial knowledge as a mode of revealing otherwise obscure social and historical forces, I show how, in this context, conspiratorial knowledge operates in a different way to displace, dampen, or interrupt associations of contemporary Germanness with an imagined cultural inheritance of authoritarianism. [*politics of memory, knowledge, conspiracy theories, rumor, therapy*]

In a moving article written in the aftermath of a cholera epidemic in eastern Venezuela, Charles Briggs (2004:182–183) turns to the conspiracy theories that circulated in the epidemic's wake as his mode of reflection on the discursive boundaries and relations that mark legitimate, public expertise, both scientific and anthropological, in the modern world. In doing so, Briggs builds on recent work in anthropology that has focused on conspiracy theory as a key mode of cultural knowledge that seeks to reveal and to make locally intelligible the hidden forces and estranging dynamics of modern social experience. Yet, for Briggs, the key question in the Delta Amacuro and other places where people's voices are typically occluded within modern discursive economies is "not simply what people can understand but what they can get publicly acknowledged for understanding" (2004:182; see also p. 167). Although I am certain that Briggs would not want to deny the cultural importance of the revelatory capacity of conspiratorial knowledge any more than I would, he is more interested in tracing it as an index of, and metacommentary on, political and economic erasure than as an object for anthropological inquiry.

Similarly, I seek in this article to draw attention to another kind of indexing work that conspiracy theory performs in a different part of the world. Writing in the ethnographic and historical context of postwar Germany, I outline below how practices of conspiratorial knowing reflect a sense of the lingering entanglement of contemporary German selfhood with the cultural legacy of an authoritarian past and how they also offer narratives that displace and interrupt historical associations, at least on a personal level. Conspiratorial knowledge is an apt epistemic mode for this work less because of its revelatory capacity for constituting truth at the margins of power than because of its parallel capacity to muddy narratives of truth that seem otherwise self-evident. In this case, I argue that the key narrative of truth in question is the very public sense of a German cultural accountability for the Third Reich and Nazism, an accountability sedimented through postwar processes and institutions of cultural memory that sometimes appears to

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imbricate contemporary German citizens with a cultural legacy of authoritarianism. Conspiracy theory under these conditions, I argue, becomes a therapeutic mode of sheltering a positive sense of selfhood in the shadow of a dread historical burden.

I begin my analysis with an ethnographic glimpse into contemporary conspiratorial knowledge at a *Stammtisch* (regulars' table) in Berlin and move then to broader discussions of conspiracy theory in this context and in the context of contemporary anthropological knowledge.

### Stranger things happened

The hour is late enough that the flurry of arguments and counterarguments has subsided. The pub is almost empty. The electronic gaming machine across from us blinks at no one in particular. At another table, a group of sports journalists continues to erupt with laughter every so often. But the ever-present British pop music has been turned down and the lights dimmed, and the waitresses are leaning on the bar, chatting with the bartender. Gregor, Harold, and I listen to Karl as he explains to us the intricacies of power in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Harold is thoughtfully smoking his pipe, elbows on the table, chin down, nodding as Karl speaks. Gregor squints, head cocked, smoking a cigarette he has just stolen out of my pack. He is inclined forward in his seat, hanging intently on Karl's narrative, his normally crisp white shirt by now a bit wrinkled.

The thematic rhythm of the evening is typical. In the first couple of hours at the *Stammtisch*, Karl likes to talk business and politics, to make jokes, to plan vacations, and so on. But, late at night, after the urgency of the contemporary has abated somewhat, Karl begins to talk passionately about East German history, to lecture us all in the truth of a country that had allowed good socialist principles to become gradually corrupted by the communist party (Socialist Unity Party, or SED) into a mechanistic and monstrous *System* (system) of *Macht* (power). The thread of commentary this evening centers on former GDR spymaster Markus Wolf, a figure of great fascination both inside Germany and out (see Wolf 1997). I have just mentioned having met Wolf a few days before at a public discussion sponsored by the former SED central daily newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. In response, Karl, relighting his cigarillo, straightens himself in his seat and addresses all of us.

Karl: Here's an interesting story about Wolf. You know that he was involved with a certain Russian-supported faction in the GDR political elite who supported Gorbachev and his reforms. And, you see, they concocted a plan in the 1980s to take over the government of the GDR, get Honecker [Erich Honecker, general secretary of the SED party and head of state in the GDR (1971–89)] out of there, and then Wolf was in line for one of the leader-

ship positions in the new government. You see, Wolf was a Gorbachev-supporter, there were quite a few of them in the government, and when Honecker denied Gorbachev's reforms he angered a lot of people even in the government, and in 1986 I think it was, Wolf gave a public speech that was very pro-Gorbachev and then Honecker got together with Mielke and Hager [Erich Mielke, head of the GDR Ministry for State Security, or, colloquially, "Stasi" (1957–89), and Dr. Kurt Hager, SED chief ideologue, were both long-serving members of the SED Politburo, with reputations as political hardliners.] and said, "What are we going to do with this guy? He's not following the line," and they decided to offer him retirement, which is exactly what Wolf wanted because then he was out of it all and didn't have to worry about Mielke putting poison in his coffee in the canteen one day.

Dominic: That could have happened to someone like Wolf?

K: Sure, sure, things like that were easily arranged. There were all sorts of internal politics going on at the top of the GDR in the 1980s. I'm just reminded of another case that I've been researching now for several years and which I plan to write a novel about sometime soon. Another thing which they'll never find the files on is how a certain faction of the GDR government along with the Stasi knew the end of the GDR was coming and entered into secret negotiations with the West German government and business interests to guarantee that they would get what they wanted in the *Wende* [lit. turn or change; a colloquial term for the collapse of the SED regime in the fall of 1989] as long as these people did too. Of course the West Germans have done everything they can to cover their tracks now. . . . But there is a place in the Thuringian Forest that I've visited where I've heard that these people came across to do the negotiations. But no one down there saw a thing [sarcastically], or they say, "I'm not tired of living yet thank you very much." Right at the border there was a special squad of border troops and there was a small pottery factory there too. I interviewed the director of the factory and his secretary back in 1991 and they told me the whole story. They helped to smuggle the people back and forth [and] the secretary even showed me a list of the people who came across. In the meantime, both he and the secretary died.

Harold: [chuckling] Under mysterious circumstances no doubt?

K: [earnestly] Yes, quite, it's obvious that he had become too dangerous for someone to leave running around. He simply knew too much. But this place is where all those people like Wolf came over to do their negotiations, and on the western side there was Kohl [former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) Chancellor Helmut Kohl], the head of Siemens, which had a lot of interest in the GDR, and then the head of Deutsche Bank, and they all agreed in principle to this arrangement. And the Stasi had been planting people in the civil rights' movement and in the Church and so on for some time. So when the *Wende* came these

people would all make sure that everything happened just like it was supposed to. But Kohl, none of these people would ever, *ever* admit to any knowledge of this now, it's completely taboo. So they've been covering their tracks. They had it all arranged for certain western interests to take whatever they wanted and then that all went perfectly until a certain head of the Treuhand balked, Rohwedder, and so then he was conveniently assassinated too [Detlev Rohwedder, head of the Treuhandanstalt, the agency responsible for privatizing the state-owned property of the GDR, was assassinated by a sniper in his Düsseldorf home on April 1, 1991. The West German terrorist organization Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF) immediately claimed responsibility for the killing, but popular conspiracy theories have claimed that a wide range of other interests were using the RAF as a front organization.]. [looks at Dominic significantly] How dangerous was Rohwedder to the RAF? Not at all! Not at all! They had nothing to gain from shooting him, but a lot of other people had a lot to gain, assuming he had been trying to think for himself . . .

Gregor: [definitively] It's a great story and you're probably right, Karl, stranger things happened. But the problem is that you need facts to write the story, otherwise it's hard to differentiate *Verschwörung* [conspiracy] from *Realität* [reality].

K: True, but in this case there are enough facts to make the conspiracy look a lot like reality [standing up, slapping Gregor on the back].

### Conspiratorial knowledge at a *Stammtisch*

Karl has not yet written his novel about the secret border crossing in the Thuringian Forest, although he returned to this story, and to others like it, almost every week that we sat together in 1996 and 1997 at a *Stammtisch* in a restaurant called "Sternchen," nestled among the socialist-era apartment blocks of the Mitte district of (former East) Berlin. The *Stammtisch* is a long-standing political institution in Germany in which a group of *gleichgesinnte* (like-minded) persons, usually exclusively men, gather on the same evening every week to talk work and politics, processing the events of professional and public life. I have described the history and social and linguistic conventions of the *Stammtisch* at greater length elsewhere (Boyer 2005:242–270). In short, the *Stammtisch* is a communicative space in which the more rigorous and formal expectations of intellectual culture are inverted—humor, polemicism, and irony are common. Yet the intellectual work of the *Stammtisch* is also a matter of great seriousness and concentrated attention—it is here that the truths of politics, society, and history are subject to their most intimate operations and determinations. The stakes of the conversation define the communicative practices of the *Stammtisch*. The ebb and flow of talk and debate focuses the gathering, whereas the "outside" of the table (including the rest of the restaurant and its patrons, ambient music, etc.)

is virtually never acknowledged. Most often, the interpretive and narrational work of one member of the group holds the respectful attention of the rest at any given time. Side conversations, metacommentaries, and full-blown counterinterpretations are common, however, and although the tone of debate is normally friendly, it can also be fierce and, occasionally, openly agonistic (see Boyer 2001b). The communicative, cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997) of the *Stammtisch* is paralleled in the sense of fraternity that it entails. Even the occasional outsider to the table will be addressed with the informal *Du* and, if all goes well, by the end of the night, will be called "my dear so-and-so." *Stammtisch* regulars are *Kumpel*, a relation that, like British mateship, signals masculine intimacy and interreliance (cf. Festa 2005; Herzfeld 1985).

I have also described in greater detail elsewhere the specific social and interpersonal dynamics of this *Stammtisch* (Boyer 2001b, 2005), particularly in terms of how Karl's and Gregor's uneasy friendship with one another steered the conversational dynamics of most evenings and epitomized East–West relations in postunification Germany, more broadly. Karl and Gregor were the dominant personalities of the *Stammtisch*, and their arguments and stories fueled the discussion most evenings. Karl asserted a certain ownership over the *Stammtisch* as one of its founding members over 20 years ago. Karl had been a high-ranking journalist at the East German central news agency, Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst (ADN). He had also worked for several years as a member of SED General Secretary Erich Honecker's media entourage when Honecker traveled as head of state. Gregor, meanwhile, was the only West German regular at the *Stammtisch*. He had grown up in a small town in Bavaria and was in his early twenties in 1989. As the SED regime crumbled, he dropped out of university and headed for Berlin. There, he became involved in a series of start-up media projects in the West, eventually landing a job as a reporter for the Burda Verlag's highly successful magazine, *Super Illu*. Gregor and Karl had met when Karl helped Burda arrange to lease some of ADN's office space in Berlin. In turn, Burda had given Karl a tenured job at *Super Illu* that lasted until his retirement several years later.

In addition to Karl and Gregor, who were, as will become apparent below, an often-contentious pair of *Kumpel*, Harold, Walter, Matthias, and I rounded out the group. Harold is a former ADN journalist who now works as a freelance writer and translator; he is quiet and thoughtful, often speaking so softly over his ever-present pipe that he can scarcely be heard. Walter, meanwhile, was a professional photographer in the GDR before losing his job for political reasons and eventually joining the nascent civil-rights movement in the GDR. He works now as a freelance journalist and editor on projects related to the movement to bring those complicit with SED terror to justice. He and Karl are

friends from long ago but often differ greatly in their interpretation of GDR history and politics. Matthias was the only nonjournalist in the group; yet, he had also been part of Honecker's entourage as a chef, and, together, he and Karl have been involved in several projects, including publishing a cookbook and designing a restaurant. I was more incidental to the primary dynamics of the group, occupying more of a discretionary "honored guest" status as one of Karl's and, later, Gregor's Kumpel. Still, all of the Stammtisch regulars were intrigued by my research about former GDR journalists and offered frequent memories of and commentary on the GDR media for my benefit and apparently, as Karl commented on one occasion, to "educate me in the truth of the GDR" so that I would not fall victim to ideologists or historical revisionists.

The problem of the truth of the GDR and its legacy never left the table and often surfaced within the currents of talk about professional life and politics. Seeking analogies or causalities for the contemporary state of eastern Germany, the regulars spent many hours relating memories and testing often-contentious analyses of the micropolitics of the SED regime in the GDR. As in the Markus Wolf story related above, I found it striking how narratives of intrigue in the GDR then managed (conspiratorially, as it were) to escape the parameters of historical narrative and slip into the shadows of the contemporary, raising questions about how the unification process had been planned and managed, about how many of the true *Täter* (perpetrators) in the GDR had been able to escape justice or to make new lives for themselves in unified Germany, and so on. The boundaries between fact and theory, between public knowledge and personal experience, were difficult to define and always invited further labors of interpretation and contest.

All of the regulars seemed endlessly fascinated by the conspiratorial relations within the GDR and in GDR-FRG relations before 1989—these topics often provoked our most energetic and intense debates. So, for example, we spent much time discussing the secret works and plans of the Stasi, especially the ministry's invisible hand in guiding life in the GDR and the unification process. But we spent nearly as much time on intrigues and hidden scandals at the Treuhandanstalt (see Jürigs 1997), the giant holding company charged after 1990 with privatizing GDR state property, and on the work of the so-called CoCo-Empire, a network of more than 150 companies and factories directed by Alexander Schalck-Golodowski, who was responsible for "commercial coordination" in the GDR, which involved, among other things, managing the secret acquisition of Western currencies and goods. Karl and Harold were particularly concerned with the secret plans of the German government for eastern Germany; Gregor and Walter were more obsessed with uncovering the truth about the secret Stasi involvement of leading East German political figures, public personalities, and so on.

## Conspiratorial knowledge in anthropology

At the Stammtisch, such stories were the lifeblood of the group, and they were spun with great virtuosity into highly complex and persuasive narratives, dialogically subject to revision and elaboration as debates went on. But what is one to make of such stories and theories anthropologically? Ethnographers have long concerned themselves with identifying and interpreting informal social knowledge like gossip and rumor. Perhaps some readers recall the spirited discussions inside and outside the pages of the journal *Man* in the late 1960s and early 1970s concerning the anthropological interpretation of gossip, debates that revisited a series of earlier ethnographic encounters (e.g., Colson 1953; Evans-Pritchard 1937; Herskovits 1937) to examine whether gossip served principally to mediate social solidarity (Gluckman 1963, 1968) or to advance individual projects of social and informational management (Cox 1970; Paine 1967) or perhaps to do both simultaneously (Hannerz 1967; Szwed 1966). This debate was subsequently revisited and exceeded by several anthropologists who provided greater ethnographic and theoretical attention to the contextual and linguistic nuances of gossip and rumor (Brenneis 1984; Brison 1992; Haviland 1977; Herzfeld 1985; Pesmen 2000; Ries 1997).

More recently, anthropological attention to discourses of conspiracy and transparency (e.g., Briggs 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Faier 2005; Marcus 1999; Morris 2004; Rafael 2000; West and Sanders 2003) has focused on the relationship of rumor to modernity and social knowledge at the turn of the millennium. These studies have demonstrated how modes of conspiratorial knowing have become central to contemporary ontologies across the world and across social strata, running the gamut from full-blown eschatologies to more or less formal knowledge of secret government agendas, rogue criminal forces, international corporate conspiracies, alien presences, and so on to everyday hermeneutics and talk of shadowy powers at the boundaries of familiarity. According to Harry West and Todd Sanders, contemporary conspiracy theory manages the relationship of the visible and the invisible, the knowable and the unknowable:

Conspiracy theories may express profound suspicions of power. Through them, ordinary people may articulate their concerns that others, in possession of extraordinary powers, see and act decisively in realms normally concealed from view. They may suggest that, in a world where varied institutions claim to give structure to the "rational" and "transparent" operation of power, power continues in reality to work in unpredictable and capricious ways. [2003:7; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Humphrey 2003]

Such theories are clearly not only analytic weapons of the weak mustered by the disenfranchised against a

world of powers that encompass and target them (Briggs 2004:182). Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart describe more widespread senses of anxiety and “epistemophilia” that wreathe both elites and subalterns. They describe contemporary interest in conspiracy in the United States, for example, as “an embodied anxiety that articulates the stresses, contradictions, and dreams of redemption of a subject under the influence of diffuse and haunting social, political and discursive force fields” (Harding and Stewart 2003:264). Indeed, “revealed” in this way, something about conspiracy theory seems quite mundane, a point that Max Gluckman (1963:314) stressed about gossip as well: Who among us academics could fail to notice that our own professional workplaces are just as fertile grounds as any other for conspiratorial imagination, especially as faculty, administrators, students, and staff regard each other individually and collectively and ascertain one another’s covert agencies and suspected cabals on a day-to-day basis? As modern subjects, George Marcus concludes, “the paranoid style and conspiracy theories [are] an eminently reasonable tendency of thought for social actors to embrace” (1999:2).

Generally speaking, what has been argued in this literature is that both conspiratorial and transparent modes of knowledge exhibit what Karl Marx so long ago identified as “fetishism,” the epistemic companion to the widespread alienation of human productive activity (Marx and Engels 1978:70–81). Indeed, this characterization seems even more apt when one recalls that, for Marx, *Entfremdung* (alienation) is not actually an invasive force exerted on human subjects “from without” but, rather, an aspect of self-realizing human powers within a division of labor that generates the impression of invasive forces from without. In the Hegelian–Marxian tradition, human productive powers tend to realize themselves in objective forms that are lost to the subjective experience of their creators as they enter the complex fields of exchange characteristic of the social specialization of labor. Conversely, the many products people receive and use that are not of our own creation take on an estranged status because we understand intuitively that human labor has gone into them but we have little subjective understanding of how or by whom these useful things have been created. With this absence of intimate knowledge comes mystification, which in turn naturalizes the social subordination of human beings to valuable objects, their powers, and those who command, or who appear to command, them.

The important point for this discussion is that this condition of mystification, fetishism, is not simply a state of “false consciousness.” It is, rather, a signal that self-realizing powers of labor are always also self-recognizing, however partially (see also Lukács 1971:83–110). According to Marx, because the social dimension of value centers on humans’ recognition of their capacity to transform the world and themselves according to their interests, commodities only

possess a mystique to the extent that people recognize the traces of human labor in them (see Graeber 2001).<sup>1</sup> Such self-recognition also creates the prospect of a critical–rational transcendence of fetishism that becomes the basis of dialectical intervention in Hegelian–Marxian theory. Even so, given the ubiquity of alienation, fully realized critical analysis is scarce, whereas epistemic displacement remains common. This ubiquity feeds the abundance of intermediary “ideological” or “magical” modes of partial reason—including “value” (Wert) in Marx’s terms—that saturate social knowledge in every society, albeit differentially, including modern society, despite its pretensions of overcoming partial reason through science, enterprise, and enlightenment (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Coronil 1997). And so, the dynamic of the dialectical anthropology of conspiratorial or “spectral” knowledge often takes the form of a process of exposition of ideological reason by critical reason, a process that seeks to validate the former’s basic rationality even while asserting the latter’s powers of rational correction or perfection.

I should emphasize that I find this approach helpful for analyzing certain kinds of cultural knowledge. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere (Boyer 2001a) that contemporary modes of cultural essentialism and mobilization, like those found in eastern Germany, for example, can be interpreted along similar lines. Narratives of conspiracy and transparency assert, if nothing else, that the unknowable is knowable and that what is knowable is subject to individual or collective projects of intervention. The often-revelatory character of both kinds of narrative defines a mode of knowing the social whose economies of certainty and causality, however well concealed, confirm the agency of human interpretive and analytical capacities over the world at large. In this way, these narratives’ hermeneutic virtuosity signals nothing less than the extraordinary capacities of analytical bricolage to engage, probe, and explain the unprecedented scale and depth of mediation in contemporary social experience, in which translocal matrices of influence so often exceed the parameters of immediate knowledge (Appadurai 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Tropes of opacity and lucidity may be nothing new to social knowledge (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:288), but they are remarkably seminal features of social knowledge in contemporary moments, spurring semiosis, shaping epistemic forms, making culture at a thrilling rate. Theory, whether conspiratorial or academic, becomes “therapeutic” in the effort to assert epistemic certainty over the mediational quality of contemporary social experience (Boyer 2003; Harding and Stewart 2003).

What troubles me ethnographically, however, is that the therapeutic qualities of conspiracy theory at this *Stammtisch* cannot be reduced to a local epistemic response to a global condition of estrangement. To put it plainly, this is a situation, as I explain below, in which the source of anxiety is not too little knowledge but too much, in which the haunting

is a matter of the unforgettable as opposed to the unknowable. At the Stammtisch, conspiracy theory signaled not only the dialectics of modernity (although it did that, too) but also the politics of memory in Germany and the deeply conflicted status of Germanness as a social identification enduringly associated with the legacy of Nazism and the Holocaust (Boyer 2006). Conspiratorial knowledge sought not only to reveal, to assert intellectual agency, but equivalently to disrupt knowledge, to cultivate doubt and uncertainty around a logic of historical inheritance already familiar to all. It set epistemic limits on the possibility of individual agency that were vitally important for emancipating subjectivity, however temporarily, from an ethnologic of authoritarian Germanness. What was therapeutic about Stammtisch conspiracy theory was principally its power to mask, dull, and distract attention from an ungovernable presence of history that demanded a constant self-interrogation of the character of one's "Germanness."<sup>2</sup>

So, if I ultimately agree with the engagements of conspiracy theory advanced elsewhere in recent anthropological literature, my modest agenda in this article is to offer the German case as an interesting exception that does two things. First, it confirms the general rule outlined above that posits conspiratorial and transparential knowledge as creative epistemic responses to social estrangement. Second, it underlines the importance of deepening an anthropological awareness of the situatedness and historicity of particular modes of estrangement and practices of conspiratorial knowing. In the sections that follow, I analyze two dialogues that merged conspiratorial knowledge with projects of self-identification designed to exceed the alleged cultural inheritance of authoritarianism. These representations of the hidden intrigues and secret agencies of Stasi and party confirmed, to be sure, an agency of knowing the "epistemic black hole" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:287) of state power in the GDR. But, they also served as strategies for disentangling selfhood from the presence of history and its ethnological legacies.

### Humanity in the heart of the Politburo

For Karl, more so than for the rest of the Stammtisch regulars, discussing the intricacy of power in the GDR was a matter of narrating his own memories of intimacy and estrangement within the upper echelons of SED party culture. Karl preferred to describe himself as *ein kleiner Mann* (a small man) in the GDR, as a *Spielzeug* (plaything) of the true *Machthaber* (powers that be) in the party political elite. All of the other eastern regulars had strategies for signaling that they felt Karl was the most "complicit" of all of them with the SED party-state and, thus, that he had enjoyed singular advantages because of his high-ranking position as a party journalist. Harold would simply raise his eyebrows and wink at me knowingly when Karl described himself as "ein ganz

normaler Mensch" (just a normal person) in the GDR. Gregor was more bluntly confrontational and jocular, occasionally referring to Karl as the "OM" at the table and occasionally referring to party elites like Honecker and Walter Ulbricht as Karl's "buddies" (Kumpel).<sup>3</sup> Speaking on the topic of GDR media, Walter once irked Karl by taking it on himself to explain to me the truth about GDR journalism.

Walter: [to Dominic] What you need to know is that GDR journalists basically wrote what the Politburo told them without any kind of critical reflection on it whatsoever.

K: [interrupting] That's such shit that you're telling him!

W: Not at all. Let me finish, the point is that the GDR journalists didn't act upon what the party gave to them, they just passed it on uncritically . . .

K: [interrupting again] That's not true, there were also good papers in the GDR, like *Eulenspiegel* and *Die Wochenpost*.

W: [still to Dominic]: . . . and because of this the people were not well informed.

K: [looking away, somewhat bitterly] Well, you seem to be pretty well informed, which newspapers were you reading, I wonder?

W and G: I/He was watching western TV!

K: [abruptly] The point is that journalists did what they could. There were limits on what we could do.

W: [now to Karl] That's *exactly* my point, so in the Wende suddenly there was this great release and the journalists were able to all of a sudden do what they wanted to.

Such exchanges exhibited both Karl's sensitivity regarding his past practice and his desire to remind all of us that GDR journalism (and, more importantly, GDR journalists) could not be reduced to a simple caricature of unthinking servants of power. Memories of the exercise and intrigue of state power in the GDR often transitioned rather seamlessly into opportunities for asserting the unassimilable powers of creativity that some individuals retained in the GDR. Representations of the depth and complexity of power in the GDR often operated in a kind of "set up" role for discussions of the poesies that continued to thrive even near the center of state power.

One evening, the topic of Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* (1991) came up. Karl asked me if I had seen it and what Americans thought about its assassination thesis, one that he said he found "somewhat persuasive." I told him honestly that I found it difficult to determine the line between truth and paranoia in the JFK case but that it had certainly captured the popular imagination in the United States. I asked the others in the group whether there had been any similar event in the GDR, and both Karl and Gregor immediately responded by citing the death of Werner Lamberz, a rising star in the GDR

Politburo who had died in 1978 in a helicopter crash in Libya. Gregor suggested that Honecker likely wanted Lamberz out of the way, but Karl shook his head and corrected him, saying that “it would have been Mielke, not Honecker. Lamberz had come to achieve a certain status in the Politburo that was threatening to some of the other major players. Honecker liked Lamberz up until the end, as far as I could tell. Mielke, on the other hand, would have regarded Lamberz as a threat, maybe even as a replacement for him one day.” After the others had joined in with their own reflections on the hidden political alliances that arranged Lamberz’s doom, Karl mused softly about his personal memories of the man.

K: [sighing] Lamberz, Lamberz . . . I knew him quite well personally, I talked to him quite a number of times, accompanied him to various kinds of events and he was a real Kumpel, a guy you could really *talk to*. He wasn’t like all the others of them, you could approach him and talk to him. [suddenly guffawing] He was such a Kumpel that you could even talk with him about whores at state dinners. [laughing even louder] And he was already in the Politburo then, can you imagine that? A Politburo member talking about whores?! It seems impossible!

In this exchange, the mystery surrounding Lamberz’s death also reveals his humanity; it reveals the presence of a Kumpel even within the heart of the GDR’s *Machtapparat*, the Politburo itself. In the same conversation, Karl explained how Lamberz had once helped him get out of a bind with his boss at ADN when Karl made an error when writing up his description of a state dinner. This moment of intimacy and complicity with Lamberz against his boss, and, by extension, the political apparatus of the party, evinced Karl’s own assertion of humanity by association. Of course, Karl also noted the “impossibility” of this situation, in a sense interpreting the inevitability of Lamberz’s death as that of someone too *menschlich* (human) to survive in the long run within the Politburo. This story underlined, according to Karl’s self-understanding, the impossibility of his own situation with the GDR, as well, as a decent, normal man in close proximity to the center of power yet, at the same time, deeply estranged from it. On other occasions, Karl explained to me his sense that his entire life in the GDR had been an effort to resist the corruption of his creativity, decency, and “humanity” by the Macht of party journalism. Some evenings, Karl gestured to his unimpeded creativity and to his many side projects, like his books, a line of erotic soaps, and an ill-fated venture to organize a vertical blind-cleaning franchise, among other things, as evidence of his self-preservational success. On other evenings, he was more somber about the residue of his work in the GDR, more doubtful that the logic of Macht had not ensnared and corrupted him.

### Manfred Stolpe is a dirty asshole

For Gregor, conspiratorial knowledge announced a dialectics of estrangement and redemption of a somewhat different kind. Gregor had a deep investment in GDR history and sought earnestly, so far as I could tell, to learn as much about the political intricacies and intrigues of the GDR as he could from the other *Stammtisch* members, especially from Karl. His historical interest, however, was deeply informed by his vocation as an investigative journalist working to reveal the pasts of former Stasi informants who had been able to have careers in public life since unification. Gregor’s work, according to both him and Karl, was only ambivalently supported by *Super Illu*, which was concerned about alienating its core eastern German audience through too much critical coverage of the GDR. Investigative journalism was, instead, a personal mission for Gregor, one that he saw as essential to the health of unified Germany. He spoke routinely of a need to “cleanse” the *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere) of the malign presence of spies and informers.

During my months at the *Stammtisch*, Gregor declared a personal vendetta against Manfred Stolpe, (now former) minister president of the federal state of Brandenburg (Social Democratic Party), an exceedingly popular eastern German politician with a professional background as the consistatorial president of the GDR Protestant Church and with strongly suspected, yet inconclusively proven, ties to the Stasi. Gregor, clearly frustrated with his own inability to find any conclusive evidence of Stasi connections, characterized Stolpe as the personification of the duplicity and corruption of the GDR. Although Karl also believed Stolpe was lying about his past and said that he, too, would not mind seeing him go, he was uncomfortable with the self-righteous character of Gregor’s hunt for Stasi evidence. One evening, Gregor set Karl on edge when he shouted to the table,

That dirty asshole Stolpe, he’s lied and lied and lied. Lied his way right up to the top, pretending he’s this great democrat when in the GDR he was a spy and an informer. He was completely an ally of the SED the whole time, and now he plays the role of this great churchman and this great democrat. It pisses me off that this guy snaked his way into a legitimate party and then into the government. . . . It drives me crazy to think I have to live in the same place as that asshole and that liar playing the great democrat when in reality he was completely supporting the GDR regime. I think it’s horrible that someone like him could become Minister President of somewhere I have to live.

As Gregor turned away to talk to Walter, I asked Karl to explain to me what evidence they would likely find against Stolpe if a file were to turn up. But shaking his head impatiently and waving a finger at Gregor, Karl dismissed the idea

that such Stasi files could adequately reveal the true political relations of the GDR.

K: Stasi files . . . [waving his hand in disdain] You're never going to find a file that explains what Stolpe is. Stolpe is a SED-man through and through, one who was sent to represent the SED in the church.

D: You mean he was recruited then?

K: Yes, he was recruited, but by the SED, not by the Stasi. Let me explain something. The SED never left anything to chance. What they did was select certain people very young, when they were in the FDJ [Free German Youth] cadre and they would groom them to go on and take leading roles in the "opposition" parties or in the church. They were there, you know, to keep an eye on things and just to attempt to steer things in the SED direction or to make sure that at least no one strayed too far. . . . Even though they already had all the power in the GDR, the SED *never* left anything to chance. But you see there are no records of this, no files, it has nothing to do with the Stasi, it went higher than them. The SED was the ruling party and the Stasi were subordinate to them. The SED was the authority. Everything was taken care of orally, or with a handshake after a brief discussion, so you're never going to find evidential proof of it. They left no paper trail. . . . Sometime in the 1950s there was a conversation between Stolpe and Honecker when Honecker was the head of the FDJ, we know that much, but there is no file in the world where it is written down what happened at that meeting. But I'll tell you what probably happened. Honecker said to Stolpe "We think you're a fine loyal young man, and we need someone like you in the Church, to be our man in the Church" and that was it. They shook hands and that was it. That was the decisive moment for Stolpe because once you were in, you were in. Once you were a SED-man, then you were a SED-man for life. That explains Stolpe to me, he was a consummate SED-man. And if you were a powerful SED-man already then of course the Stasi didn't or couldn't have anything to do with you. You went above the Stasi, you went right to the top, you were insulated from the Stasi really. They couldn't touch someone who was a real SED-man. But the West Germans [pointing to Gregor] keep on with their Stasi files, they keep thinking they're going to find a file somewhere that proves Stolpe was one of them. He was one of them, but they'll never find that file and the West Germans simply can't accept that. It's always the Stasi, always the files with them, over and over again, but they don't understand how the system worked. I remember I was in the Central Committee building once in the 1980s and who did I see coming down the stairs from the Central Committee chamber but Stolpe. He was definitely one of them, but there'll never be concrete proof of that.

Gregor and Walter had slowly begun to listen in as Karl presented his alternative analytics of power in the GDR. Taking a rather different point than Karl had intended,

Gregor immediately challenged Karl—if Karl really believed that Stolpe was "one of them"—to support him in editorial meetings and to help him persuade their indifferent colleagues of the importance of his mission. Karl repeated his belief that no documentary evidence existed of Stolpe's assignment in the GDR and, therefore, no "facts" on which to base his case. Annoyed but also now laughing, Gregor thumped his fist on the table and spluttered, "It's war! It's war! It's time to get serious about fighting this asshole! Who needs facts? This is war!" while Karl paternally remonstrated with him for his "coarse journalism" and then left the table to go to the bathroom, thus, dissolving the argument for the moment.

His frustration unwound into laughter, Gregor refused to be chastened by Karl's reminder of professional standards. This was a familiar pattern in their exchanges. Gregor was well versed in GDR politics and history, far more so than most of my West German interlocutors, but he nevertheless demonstrated a genuine inability to conceptualize life in the GDR as "normal" in any sense. Gregor's drunken, playful shouts of "It's war! It's war!" reflected a more serious, sober, and fundamental apprehension of the GDR as a place of total authoritarian perversion, representing the worst traits of German culture and history. For Gregor, the GDR was pure "pastness," incomparable in every respect to western democratic Germany and, thus, he found it truly "horrible" to conceive of someone like Stolpe holding legitimate public office in the contemporary democratic system. At one level, Stolpe's political success collapsed Gregor's ideal categories of "democracy" and "tyranny." But, more to the point, Stolpe symbolized the contaminating authoritarian presence in German history, the "filth" of history that Gregor's journalistic work was committed to exposing and cleansing.

When, in such exchanges, Karl became annoyed about the righteous tone of Gregor's investigative pursuit of East Germans, Gregor responded firmly that, if "history were not to repeat itself," Germany had to be ruthless in its pursuit of the perpetrators of the SED regime. Gregor defined the "work of his generation" as making certain that unified Germany would not repeat the sins of the previous unified Germany. Walter egged Gregor on at such moments, expressing much sympathy for his work on behalf of "the victims" of the GDR. Karl and I often reminded Gregor that West Germany had not done such a complete job of "cleansing" its social elite after 1945 either, allowing many active Nazis to play leading roles in rebuilding West Germany. On one such occasion, Gregor responded,

I reject that argument because just because there were problems with what happened back then is no excuse not to do anything now. Besides that, that was a different generation back then who had to handle things in 1945. The generation who has to deal with this now is

much different, with different views, a different history, the situation is totally different. I don't think you can compare the two.

Radical difference always colored Gregor's interpretation of the contemporary and the past. And, yet, within the past itself, the differences between the GDR and the Third Reich tended to be swallowed into an undifferentiated authoritarian tradition.

For Karl, meanwhile, the only way to know the past, journalistically or not, was to concentrate on its intricacies and subtleties. The point was to understand "how power really worked" in the GDR, and this involved reconstructing and extrapolating from his own memories of the secret relations and dynamics within party and state in the GDR. Karl, thus, made himself into an analytical witness of state power in the GDR rather than into a coparticipant in that power—in his self-image, he had been just "a normal man" in these circles, simply an observer of the political drama surrounding him.

The point I would like to emphasize is that, despite their conflicts with one another, Karl's and Gregor's strategies for engaging the past are strikingly parallel. Both demonstrate a concern with interrupting the identification of self with history. Both effect this interruption through a certain displacement of attention to the legacy of the GDR and through the revelation of its complicities and intrigues. Most importantly, both conceal, albeit unevenly, their strategies of interruption and, thus, occlude the presence of the past in social knowledge of the contemporary. It is this presence that needs some further explanation if one is to understand fully the therapeutic character of conspiratorial knowledge at the *Stammtisch*.

### The neurosis of ethnological inheritance

As these *Stammtisch* narratives suggest, the past is a wounding presence in Germany. Within Germany, the term *die Vergangenheit* (the past) is inevitably, if never exclusively, associated with the Third Reich and Nazism, for this is "the past" with whose significance and legacy German states and citizens have struggled to cope since 1945. If nothing else, the division of the nation-state in 1945 as a "price" for the Third Reich strengthened the equation of Germanness and Nazi terror. And, the lingering "German question" of Cold War politics continuously resignified the potential threat to Europe of a unified Germany. Although such concerns were clearly secondary to the geopolitics of East–West alliances, each German state responded to them by promising "the better Germany," a Germany whose future could exceed both the past and the other Germany. The pastness of the other Germany helped alleviate identification with the past on both sides of the Berlin Wall and permitted the exploration of postnational identities with "the West" and with "international socialism" (Borneman 1992; Boyer 2005; Glaeser

2000). And, yet, the deferral of the nation-state for four decades continued to cultivate an ethnological association between the essence of Germanness and the Third Reich. This association heightened anxiety in both Germanys as to whether it would ever be possible for Germanness to entirely escape the past, an anxiety that pointed, in turn, toward the possibility that the many good works of social democracy were simply papering over a deeper authoritarian drive.

It is, thus, possible to speak of the anxiety at ethnological inheritance from the past as a kind of "neurosis," both in Sigmund Freud's technical sense of repetitive object fixation (see his theorization of hysterical symptoms in Breuer and Freud 1955) and in Frantz Fanon's sense of a broader cultural "overdetermination from without" (1967:116) that creates a neurotic state through the continuous signaling of alterity and deficiency. This neurosis should not be underestimated, especially for postwar generations of German citizens who confront no guilt for past acts committed or uncommitted so much as a dread of the repetition of the past in the future. Given the solvent character of associative logic, once authoritarianism became construed as somehow ethnotypically German, every German citizen, regardless of age or political disposition, could equivalently be implicated in the moral collapse and genocidal behaviors of the "Final Solution." A stranger I met in a Berlin archive one day narrated in great detail to me his experience of reading the Nazi newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, trembling as he told me of how sick he became "when I realized how German this was," how the newspaper was typical of "this country of so many little Hitlers." Of course, many, perhaps most Germans have developed strategies for managing or denying such dread associations with the past. And, yet, they can never be entirely displaced because ethnotypes of authoritarian, intolerant Germanness abound outside of Germany as well as within. The global association of Germanness with authoritarianism is surely one of the most durable and pervasive semiotic legacies of World War II. When a stand-up comedian in the United States imitates a German accent, it is almost always to signal the "little Hitler." Think even of recent press coverage of Pope Benedict XVI, whose recent and future politics were immediately associated, even by his supporters, with his brief stint in the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth). When I heard the news of Benedict's election, I was out to dinner with colleagues, and the first joke at the table was, "So they finally found a way to make the Church more reactionary. I mean, a German?"

As Fanon observed of race neurosis, the neurosis of ethnological inheritance is scarcely unconscious because of its repetitive signaling in public culture. Indeed, the symptomatology of the "little Hitler" within the German nation is well known and produces a range of popular epistemic displacements, many of which gesture with remarkable circularity toward an essential German past-fixity and, indeed, neurosis. Consider, for example, a 1997 issue of the German

news magazine *Focus* whose theme was the so-called *deutsche Krankheit* (German sickness) of traditionalism, asking whether Germans were culturally capable of adapting to the new demands of globalization. The framing of the question itself and the phrasing *deutsche Krankheit* immediately signal something more than economic traditionalism, a more diffuse but also more dangerous obligation to history.

This continuing presence of the past makes more sense if one considers how central the association of authoritarianism with Germanness became to postwar processes of social identification and distinction in Germany, especially those relating to nationalism. An association of nation with terror is a terrible essence, to be sure, but it is, in fact, an essence, a grounding for selfhood, not to mention one that is widely recognized. It offers, as Freud would have it, a perverse pleasure of identification and recognition despite the horror of its content. I do not mean to suggest that concern with national history in Germany is somehow cynical but, rather, to emphasize that it has a perverse core that is also inextricable from the (re)production of national identity in contemporary Germany. That the ethnology of authoritarianism remains a deeply conflicted, even raw settlement of knowledge in Germany was evinced by the furor surrounding Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) book on the Germanness of anti-Semitism. But, as Slavoj Žižek once put it, "liberation hurts" (Rasmussen 2004:83)—to abandon entirely the dominating feature of such an ethnological "inheritance" also involves a sense of loss. The knotting of identification, ethnology, and history helps to explain the depth and consistency of the neurosis of past-fixation. And, although perhaps incurable, neurosis invites therapy.

### Therapy and conspiracy theory

Returning to Harding and Stewart's (2003:264) perceptive connection between theory and therapy, it is worth recalling that therapy for Freud was no less a matter of the creative imagination than fetishism was for Marx. Recall Freud's remarkable declaration in his earliest discussion of analytic therapy in the *Studies on Hysteria* that "the procedure is not applicable at all below a certain level of intelligence, and it is made very much more difficult by any trace of feebleness of mind" (Breuer and Freud 1955:265). Therapy was an intellectual's enterprise on both sides of the couch, so to speak, for the very reason that the analyst relied—dilemmas of transference and countertransference inclusive—on the analysand's own associative capabilities in locating the nucleus of trauma within the psyche. The very semiotic virtuosity of the symptom was exploited in therapy to provide the analytics of traumatic origin.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, it is no great leap from Freud's model of the therapeutic revelation of the "ramifying system" of symptoms to the conspiratorial analytics that have been of interest to this article and to recent anthropological research,

more generally. Indeed, conspiratorial knowledge could be understood as a channeling of semiotic-epistemic virtuosity toward the outside world to probe its symptoms, forms, and forces. This is the same kind of virtuosity that, when directed inward in self-reflection, produces the symptomatic-therapeutic complex at the center of psychoanalysis. Such a model would confirm Harding and Stewart's (and others') characterization of conspiracy theory as a kind of therapy for modernity, for the unknowable mediated excess of the outside that so neatly parallels the semiotic depth of the psychical "within."

To return to my main line of argument, even this characterization of conspiracy theory does not tell the entire story. At the *Stammtisch*, conspiratorial analytics are certainly therapeutic but less immediately in terms of translating the complex forces of modernity into knowable schemata. Instead, the pressing agenda of conspiratorial knowledge in this case consists in containing and limiting the association of a known schema (the ethnology of authoritarianism) with one's self. In this respect, it is the temporary interruption of association rather than the revelation of association that is the key to therapeutic practice. As in other modes of therapy, memory and displacement are at issue, but, in the German case, it is the figure of "the past" that is the overdetermining agent and the contagion of past into present selfhood that is the source of dread. This contagion cannot be entirely dispelled because a sense of historical burden has become a pillar of national identity and memory in Germany. But it can be interrupted, its flow diverted, and a refuge created, for example, through sober hermeneutics (or raucous arguments) concerning the hidden forms and forces of power at a *Stammtisch*. As in other ethnographies of conspiracy theory, revelatory knowledge is surely present at the *Stammtisch*; I argue, like Briggs, that such knowledge is not an end in itself but, rather, also an index of something else, in this case of an urgent need to shelter, to emancipate one's sense of self, however fleetingly, from history and identity.

### Conclusion: The library and the castle

When I returned to Berlin in the summer of 2002, I was sorry to hear from Karl that the *Stammtisch* had ceased meeting. Karl had retired to a house he had built in the suburbs of Berlin and could not make it into the city on a regular basis anymore. He suggested, however, that we all get together for a beer in honor of my return, and so we reconvened the *Stammtisch* one July evening. Before anyone else arrived, I asked Karl whether he had ever finished writing his spy novel about the Thuringian Forest. Somewhat dismissively, he waved his hand and said that he would get to it eventually. Instead, he began telling me with great enthusiasm and in much detail about what he described as a "Kinderbuch" (children's book) that he had just

completed. Later on, I told him that the story sounded a bit scary for kids. Karl laughed and admitted that he had written it mostly for his own amusement. Karl explained to me that the story explored the boundary between dream and reality.

As the story opens, the protagonist goes to a library looking for books on a topic he needs to write a book about. But he discovers that all the books in the library, although they are wonderfully bound and have fascinating titles, have blank pages. A librarian explains that in this library all of the books are by famous writers who imagined wonderful titles but then never trusted themselves to write books worthy of the titles. The protagonist does not know what to do, so he starts exploring the surrounding forest and eventually discovers a castle guarded by a series of traps and creatures. After many attempts, he gets inside, and there he discovers all the characters from the famous fairy tales (Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks, etc.) imprisoned under somewhat gruesome conditions. The protagonist soon finds out that, in this castle, the traditionally good characters are evil and vice versa. He finds out from the (good) Wicked Witch that these characters are alter egos imprisoned by the “big publishers” so that they will not disrupt the fairy-tale simplicity in which good and evil are clearly distinct and embodied by different persons. The witch tells him, “He who believes everything has already been lost to the truth” and hands him a cigarette lighter, which, she explains, will carry him back to the real world when he clicks it. He reaches for the lighter and clicks it, and, suddenly, the scene shifts and the real protagonist awakes from what turns out to have been a dream. He immediately decides to use the dream as the story for the children’s book he has been contracted to write. Rushing to his publisher’s office, he begins to tell his editor about the dream in great detail and with great animation. At the climactic moment, as the protagonist leans over the editor’s desk to show how he clicked the witch’s lighter, the same lighter (or one just like it?) slips out of his breast pocket and falls on the desktop. The story ends there.

As Gregor walked up to the table, I asked Karl whether his children’s book had a moral. “No, no moral, no message, just a story,” he replied with a smile and shook Gregor’s hand, patting him on the shoulder and gesturing for him to join us. We sat down to the business of politics and history, but Karl’s story lingered with me for the rest of the evening, especially the witch’s caution “He who believes everything has already been lost to the truth.” It summed up, after all, what I had always been taught at the *Stammtisch*. Now, at the conclusion of my story, one that has similarly thematized what is revealed, what is hidden away, and, most importantly, how one trusts oneself, I still cannot shake the sense that Karl’s *Kinderbuch* encapsulates and unravels my entire analysis. Perhaps this is the likely enough end to a tale in which one mode of conspiracy and transparency—ethnography—has sought to reveal another.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* This article benefited enormously from presentations and subsequent discussions at the New School University Department of Anthropology and in the Anthropology of Europe Workshop at the University of Chicago. Also, my deep thanks to Lieba Faier, Virginia Dominguez, Linda Forman, and to two external reviewers for *AE* for their patience and editorial wisdom. But, most of all, I would like to acknowledge the care and good humor with which the participants of the *Sternchen Stammtisch* educated me in the truths of GDR history. They remain one of the liveliest intellectual communities with which I have ever been associated.

1. This invites a broader discussion of how Marx theorizes the two dimensions of value, *Gebrauchswert* and *Wert*, which are usually translated as “use value” and “exchange value,” respectively, in his social theory. My portrait here is just a bare outline of the cultural significance of “exchange value”—for more extensive discussions of Marx’s theory of value, see Postone 1993 and Graeber 2001.

2. Moreover, at this particular *Stammtisch*, conspiracy theory mapped interestingly across the investigative procedures that these journalists routinely cultivate professionally, as is evinced by Gregor’s reminder to Karl of the professional standards of evidence required to separate a representation of “reality” from the realm of “conspiracy.” Here, conspiracy theory also reflected journalists’ intellectual practices of continuously sifting, analyzing, and negotiating “background” information parallel to their practices of professional writing (see Peterson 2001).

3. *OM* is shorthand for *Offizieller Mitarbeiter* (official employee of the state). Gregor is playing on the terminology for Stasi informants, who are labeled *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter (IM)*, or “unofficial” employees of the state security apparatus.

4. In his essay “The Psychotherapy of Hysteria,” Freud offers analogies from chess and Chinese puzzles to explain the logic of therapeutic practice but then rejects these as oversimplifying the complexity of psychical organization:

The logical chain [of the symptom] corresponds not only to a zig-zag, twisted line, but rather to a ramifying system of lines and more particularly to a converging one. It contains nodal points at which two or more threads meet, and thereafter proceed as one; and as a rule several threads which run independently, or which are connected at various points by side-paths, debouch into the nucleus. [Breuer and Freud 1955:290]

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*accepted December 21, 2005*

*final version submitted January 1, 2006*

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