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German Unification and the Involuntary Marginalisation of Eastern Germans

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The article is based on an oral history project and explores various types and degrees of marginalisation of three east Germans, one man and two women, in unified Germany after 1990. The attempts by all three to run their own business failed dramatically. The main reason for this was less an inability to adapt to the new system, but rather the brutal economic conditions during the first years of German unification that were beyond their control. A whole number of east Germans share this fate and have endured traumatic experiences of bankruptcy and unemployment. The price for this has been extremely high: The lives of some of the most energetic people in east Germany were ruined, and their initial valuable support of the current system has turned into deep-rooted alienation.

1. Introduction

When one East German, who had involuntarily lived in West Germany for one year, was asked why he had found it difficult to adapt to that society, he explained:

Ich meinte damit in erster Linie die politischen Verhältnisse in einem Land, das mir sehr fremd ist; einer Gesellschaftsordnung, die ich nicht kenne; und die ihre ganz besonderen Schwierigkeiten hat; Schwierigkeiten, auf die ich nicht gut eingeübt bin; die mich ängstigen; denen ich mich nicht so leicht gewachsen fühle; denn, die Schwierigkeiten, die es in der DDR gibt und die ja weiß Gott nicht unerheblich sind, sind aber immerhin Schwierigkeiten, an die ich mich gewöhnt habe; wo ich gelernt habe, mich zu wehren. Hier ist alles sehr viel anders und ich habe es nicht so leicht, mich hier zurechtzufinden.

(FRAGE: HABEN SIE SICH DENN MITTLERWEISE EINGELEBT?) Nein, habe ich nicht, denn ich komme ja von zu weit her. (Biermann 2001)

Of course these observations stemmed from Wolf Biermann, and are from late 1977. His comments describe alienation and shock. Adjustment did not come quickly or easily.

When 13 years later the two Germanies unified, many east Germans had similar experiences. The enormous scale, impact and significance of this upheaval, however, have hardly been understood in the West. (Zoll 1999: 10; Simon 2000: 9-26) Not everyone moved to West Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but the West and its system, rules and regulations came to them, to the East. Whilst politicians have described the development with the term “growing together” (*Zusammenwachsen*), in

reality a westernisation has been taking place. The “Modell DDR” was replaced by the “Modell *Bundesrepublik*”, with all its advantages and disadvantages.

If one visits the new *Länder* today, 14 years after unification, these issues still play a prominent role in the media and in people’s conversations and lives. The recent cuts in welfare provisions, including new regulations for the unemployed, changes in public works and retraining measures for the unemployed (*Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen*) and the new health reform (Worauf Arbeitslose seit Januar besonders achten müssen 2004), have made life even more difficult for those who are struggling to make ends meet. Furthermore, a comprehensive long-term study of 14-to-30-year olds in Saxony has just concluded that the majority of this age group, whilst they have no sympathies for the former GDR, remains critical of the existing system. Crucial reasons explaining these attitudes are unemployment and the general insecurity at the work place. These economic threats have serious political repercussions, as well as leading to psychological and physical problems, including anxieties and depression, amongst many young people. This age group – and this is the other major complaint voiced – does not experience democracy as a political system that allows participation, but as a system that is unfair to them and in which west Germans treat them as “second-class citizens”. (Förster 2004: 42)

2. The State of German Unification: Interpretations

My investigation deals with east Germans who have been marginalised by the process of German unification. What is meant by marginalisation? To answer this, let me start by referring to how the European Council defines poverty:

Einzelpersonen, Familien oder Personengruppen, die über so geringe (materielle, kulturelle und soziale) Mittel verfügen, dass sie von der Lebensweise ausgeschlossen sind, die in dem Mitgliedsstaat, in dem sie leben, als Minimum annehmbar ist. (Geißler 2000 Armut: 1)

I see marginalisation as very similar to this. Unlike poverty, however, marginalisation is not necessarily rooted in economic-materialistic aspects. It can also be a social, cultural and psychological phenomenon. The stress is on exclusion: the failure of generally accepted chances in life in essential areas of the human existence, with extensive exclusion from participation in economic, social, political and cultural life. (Geißler 2000 Armut: 1) My focus is not on people who have chosen to be marginalised – those who have made a conscious decision to opt out. My focus is on people to whom this has

happened against their will, who are victims of marginalisation. First, I want to establish a general background by providing brief overviews of interpretations of the state of unification and types of marginalisation. Second, I will look at several case studies from Leipzig.

Anyone approaching the question whether full integration between the east and the west is making headway since this process started in 1989 enters a minefield full of contradictions, divided opinions and positive and negative assessments. (Ertman 2000: 1-11). One group of optimistic observers maintains that the full integration of the east into an enlarged Federal Republic is well underway. For example, they point to statistics comparing income and living conditions and argue that the quality of life in the east has nearly reached western standards. However, they acknowledge that progress has been slower and more uneven than first anticipated. A more pessimistic assessment is provided by those who claim that if the present pattern of development continues, the east will remain in a position of permanent structural weakness vis-à-vis the west in a way similar to that of Italy's *Mezzogiorno*. The main argument here is that differences unfavourable to east Germans continue to exist, and – more significantly – new differences and gaps have opened up.

In fact, measured against the initial expectations in 1989, one could be inclined to develop a scenario of catastrophe (Pollack 2000: 13). The replacement of the planned economy with the market economy – instead of creating thriving regions – has led to a de-industrialisation of eastern Germany and an economic collapse that continues to require the inflow of billions of euros from the west (currently around 85 billion euros per year (Schmid 2004: 27). By mid-1991, the GDP of the region had fallen by more than two-fifths. This is a completely unique experience for any modern industrial society.

And whilst the economy grew significantly between 1992 and 1994, thereafter economic growth slowed down considerably. In fact, from 1997 economic growth fell below 1.5 percent and thus below growth rates in the west.¹ In other words, since then the gap between east and west has been increasing again. The topic of the paralysed *Aufbau Ost* has not gone away, something the government in Bonn could do without. (Schmid 2004, 27). Today, labour productivity has only reached 65 % of the west German level. Most importantly, however, since 1991 unemployment in eastern Germany has risen far above

¹ In fact, whilst politicians have described it as a slowing down of the *Aufschwung Ost*, it can be described as economic stagnation. See Mühlberg 2001: 35; Roesler 2003: 95.

the west German level and is meanwhile twice as high. If one includes hidden unemployment, nearly 30% of the working population was unemployed in 2002 (officially 17%). Around half of all east Germans between the ages of 18 and 60 have had experience of unemployment.

It is therefore not surprising that Rainer Geißler, a leading expert in the field, concluded recently:

Man könnte versucht sein, das vereinte Deutschland als Zwei-Klassen-Gesellschaft, die Ost-West-Kluft als einen *historisch-regional verankerten Klassengegensatz* zwischen einer dominanten „Westklasse“ und eine subordinierten „Ostklasse“ zu begreifen. Allerdings existieren auch *innerhalb* dieser neuen *Regionalklassen* krasse soziale Ungleichheiten sowie die traditionellen vertikalen Konfliktlinien ... (Geißler 2002: 373).

How have east Germans reacted to the process of unification? Whilst it is quite clear that most people in the east are better off compared to 14 years ago and are also more satisfied with their own situation, there is no euphoria and there are no feelings of pride about what has been achieved. (Pollack 2000: 13)

Many east Germans are unable to identify their success with their own work, because they feel that it is largely based on western money. (Pollack 2000: 21) Additionally, east Germans, compared to west Germans, are generally more pessimistic and anxious about the future. (Braehler & Richter 1999, 24-31) There is a feeling of distrust, and awareness that they do not possess the same chances, and face higher risks of unemployment and longer working hours.

It is not surprising then that many east Germans regard unification as exclusion and economic, social, cultural and political degradation. In 2000 around 80 per cent of east Germans had the feeling of being “second-class citizens”, i.e., not being treated equally to their west German counterparts. (Ertmann 2000: 1-11)

According to Rainer Geißler, however, east Germans react increasingly positively towards their belated modernisation – despite all the problems, signs of crises, and shocks that are connected with the radical upheaval since the late 1980s. The proportion of east Germans whose living conditions had improved according to their own assessment, rose from 48 to 59 percent between 1993 and 1998. Simultaneously, the proportion of the so-called *Vereinigungsgeschädigte*, whose living conditions had deteriorated, declined from 23 to 16 per cent. (Geißler 2000 *Modernisierung*: 1) There are obvious problems with

these kinds of statistics, however. Real life cannot be measured in percentages, is never clear cut and more complicated.

3. Types of marginalisation experienced in east Germany after 1989

East Germans were used to being looked after. State regulations and public welfare were important tools in this process. After 1989 the same people were suddenly exposed to extraordinarily high levels of social insecurity, including the threat of unemployment as well as risks of poverty, lack of housing and high levels of criminality.² Four problem groups – the so-called “losers of the delayed modernisation process” – have been particularly affected by these new insecurities: First, uneducated and semi-skilled workers have often been pushed out of the employment market. They seem paralysed, immobile, worried and anxious. Second, the rural population has been hit particularly hard by the fact that around 80 per cent of all employment in east Germany’s agricultural sector has disappeared since 1989. Historically this is a unique collapse. (Geißler 2000 *Entwicklungen*: 9). These losses go together with a pronounced lack of alternative employment in the structurally weak agricultural regions. And last, but not least, female agricultural workers have been hit especially hard by these bottlenecks. A third problem group is the generation of the late middle aged: workers who were roughly between 45 and 55 years old in 1989. For this generation the upheaval came simultaneously too early, because they were not old enough to profit from the new situation – like the pensioners (Schwitzer 1999: 32-39) –, and too late, because they were not young enough to survive successfully in the competition for scarce employment.³ Finally, new problem groups have emerged because the west German pattern of poverty has spread to the east. The risk of poverty is particularly pronounced amongst groups who either did not exist, or only existed on the margins during the GDR: the long-term unemployed, single mothers (women in general have been particularly affected by unification),⁴ families with many children and – linked with this – children and juveniles.

² For this section see Geißler: 6f. On specific aspects of unemployment in eastern Germany, see Mayring et al. 2000; Puhmann 1998; Hahn & Schön 1996.

³ Geulen 1993: 43. It is telling that 33.8 per cent of men and 44.8 per cent of women amongst 55 olds in Saxony-Anhalt were unemployed in 1999. See also Kistler & Hilpert 2001: 10.

⁴ For many women a deterioration of gender specific inequalities, i.e. a de-modernisation, has taken place: the gender factor as a determinant of social inequalities has – in contrast to the

Generally speaking, the income levelling in the GDR has been replaced by a process of social differentiation and a polarisation in terms of income, (Geißler 2000 *Materielle Lebensbedingungen*: 9f.) leading to risks of poverty, unemployment, sleeping rough, and a lack of housing.⁵ Of course foreigners also belong to the high risk group. Unfortunately for many of them, they were marginalised during the GDR and continue to be so in unified Germany. (Herbert 2001; Panayi 2000; Harnisch et al. 1998; Bade 1987)

One could list many more examples of marginalisation. Let me just mention three more areas to emphasise that we are also dealing with deep-rooted structures and traditions that will be difficult to overcome.

The private economy in the new *Bundesländer* is predominantly in the hands of west German investors.⁶ Furthermore, there is a geographic-regional marginalisation. The inefficient economic and social policy of the GDR led to massive regional structural weaknesses, including widespread regional mono-structures. After 1989 some regions were in a better position to respond to the market economy, or have shown greater adaptability, than others. (Kujath 1999 15-25)

So-called *Leuchttürme*, such as Dresden, are often surrounded by a sea of economically weak regions. As backwards regions apparently need 35 years to halve the gap, it is not surprising that two experts in *Die Zeit* bluntly advised those who were seeking a quicker way out: “*umziehen*”. (Tenbrock & Uchatius 2001). People in Saxony-Anhalt, an area that has suffered some of the worst economic problems since 1990, have been doing

historic trend – increased in the new *Länder*. Women in eastern Germany have faced greater difficulties in the crisis-ridden labour market than men. This has enhanced the gender specific hierarchies at the work place. The closing of nurseries and state aid for working women has worsened the situation additionally. Furthermore, the problems at the work place have had an impact on the responsibilities at home and have enhanced the gender division. See Geißler 2000 *Ungleichheit*: 1-10; Badur 1999: 27-33.

⁵ Because these are new phenomena in the east, they also pose particular problems there. For example: Whilst the number of people without a home has been declining in the west since 1996, in the east it increased steadily from 23,000 in 1992, to 76,000 in 1998. Or, only 30 percent of east Germans who were entitled to income support in 1995 actually received it (west: 51 percent). See Geißler 2000 *Armut*: 3.

⁶ 40 per cent of the top positions in the new *Bundesländer* were occupied by west Germans in 1995. West Germans have transferred particularly into top jobs in the military, administration, and the judiciary, but also the media and science. This has led to a widespread feeling of *Überfremdung* and *Kolonialisierung* amongst east Germans. At the same time, east Germans are comparatively poorly represented in top positions at the national level in the government, administration, judiciary, organisations, trade unions, military and the media. And not least, the private economy is predominantly in the hands of west German investors. See Geißler 2000 *Rolle der Eliten*: 6. See also Roesler 2003: 96.

precisely this: 85 citizens left the state every day in 2002. (Bartsch 2002: 3) Furthermore, economic marginalisation has resulted in extraordinary and worrying election results in the last six years.⁷

Finally, Olaf Georg Klein has recently explained the ongoing divisions between *Ossis* and *Wessis* with a different tradition of communication, the west German style being influenced by the USA and laying great emphasis on a confident, positive, sometimes even aggressive appearance in the business world. This sharply contrasts with an eastern culture of communication, where one prefers to invite the other to talk, avoids confrontation, does not try to impress, prefers to understate, does not pay that much attention to the way someone is dressed, and attempts to seek a feeling of community and a consensus. (Klein 2001: 49) As German society is dominated by west Germans, their norms and standards, it is inevitable that east Germans face disadvantages if they communicate differently.

4. Case Studies: Three people from Leipzig

When discussing and analysing the effects of German unification on east Germans it is important to remember that this is of course not only a statistical exercise about how many east Germans own a CD-player as compared to west Germans. We are dealing with millions of people – individuals, all with a particular story – many of whom have experienced high levels of shock, anxiety, loss of identity, and much more in their private and public life over the last 15 years. (Klein 1994)

My case studies focus on one man and two women who have lived in the city of Leipzig all their lives: Wolfgang O., Gertrud M. and Birgit S.⁸ The former two ran their own

⁷ In fact, in the last six years Saxony-Anhalt set two new records in the history of elections in Germany since 1945. In both cases, either voters were alienated by the parties they had previously voted for and switched to other parties, or voters were so fed up by politics that they stayed at home during elections (percentage of those who voted: 1998: 71.5%, 2002: 56.6%). In the 1998 state elections the DVU (German People's Union) won 12.9% and gained the highest percentage of votes any party on the extreme right had ever polled in state or national elections in post-war Germany (although the party had hardly more than 30 members in the state). The state elections in April 2002 saw the largest change of the two large parties, SPD and CDU, ever experienced in elections in the Federal Republic of Germany. The CDU won 15.4 percent of the vote (to 37.4%), whilst the SPD lost 16 per cent of the vote (to 19.9%). See Geprägt von Frust und Enttäuschung 2002.

successful flower shops during the GDR. This allowed them relative freedom and independence compared to the negative experience they had made working within the strict confines of the state sector. None of them were members of the SED. Whilst Birgit S., who had studied agronomy, seemed not interested in politics before 1989, Wolfgang O. and Gertrud M. had come into conflict with the regime on several occasions and were critical towards it.

In 1989 the three were in their early to late thirties and experienced similar misfortunes when their respective flower shops went bankrupt within a few years of unification. Since then all of them have experienced periods of unemployment. In fact, Wolfgang O. has been long-term unemployed for many years. Considering that German society is still a 'working society' in which the satisfaction of material, cultural and social needs is decisively determined by the participation in the system of work, one cannot overestimate the negative impact of unemployment on people's orientation in life. (Hahn & Schön: 9-31, esp. 12) Wolfgang O., Gertrud M. and Birgit S. were traumatised by all these experiences and are still affected by them today.

What happened? Wolfgang O., like many GDR businessmen and women, welcomed the November 1989 Revolution and German Unification in 1990 and hoped to be able to increase his economic fortune:

Also, wir haben uns gefreut auf die Wende. Haben uns gefreut auf die Möglichkeiten, die es dann vom Handel her geben würde – ohne weitere Repressalien. ... Schöner kann es doch gar nicht kommen. (Wolfgang O, Interview 8.9.2001)

Unfortunately for him, the reality turned out to be rather different and a chain of events – slump of sales after the *Währungsunion* (currency union) in July 1990, competition from mobile traders, the need for expensive re-equipment, the dramatic increase in rent and insurance, building works in his street and smashed shop windows – led him to bankruptcy by 1993. Additionally, people had moved away from the area where his shop was because the large flats there were too expensive to heat and their rent had shot up. Most other shops nearby were forced to close one by one and the whole economic infrastructure disintegrated. All attempts by Wolfgang O. to increase and diversify his product range were unsuccessful and the final nail in the coffin for his business was the introduction of new phone numbers whilst old numbers were simply cut off: overnight

⁸ The names have been changed for reasons of anonymity. The findings are based on interviews made in September 2001 and 2002 (Wolfgang O.), and March 2004 (Gertrud M. and Birgit S.). A few words of the quotations have been edited linguistically to allow for greater clarity.

he lost his prime spot in the Yellow Pages as Fleurop florist. Henceforth the phone stayed quiet and with it the last sizeable source of income also disappeared. Soon afterwards he found himself spending a night in prison for bankruptcy. The law stipulated then that he was not allowed to run a business for 20 years, and that everything he earned above DM 1000 would be taken away to pay off his debts.

The reasons for Gertrud M.'s and Birgit S.'s bankruptcy were similar. Most importantly, like Wolfgang O. they had also signed up to 10-year rental agreements in the early 1990s that would haunt them within a short period.⁹ My focus is on the devastating consequences of bankruptcy and how this has affected their attitudes towards the system they live in today.

If we join Wolfgang O.'s situation in 2000 again, we see that the legal consequences of bankruptcy forced him professionally into semi-illegality: On the one hand he was registered unemployed, and had a 100-hour-a-month-job with a retail florist. At the same time he was operating on the black market: working cash-in-hand for another florist; supplying a network of around 30 shops – florists, newspaper shops, off-licence shops, restaurants, clubhouses etc. – with flowers, drinks, and other items such as cheap packs of spaghetti. Many of these products were “back of the lorry” goods (à la Peckham's Del Boy from “Fools and Horses”¹⁰); running two “flower corners” in supermarkets with two employees each – registered under different names; and doing all kind of other things as well, including organising barbeques for social evenings.

Wolfgang admitted openly: “Ich betrüge jetzt den Staat”, but added that he disliked doing this. (Wolfgang O, Interview 8.9.2001) He elaborated:

Was nützt es mir, wenn ich jetzt offiziell arbeite, verdiene 3000 Mark netto und mir werden 2000 Mark gepfändet. Da habe ich für die Arbeit, die ich geleistet habe, 1000 Mark, und andere haben für die gleiche Arbeit 3000 Mark. Ja, also fehlt die Motivation. Da suche ich mir natürlich Wege, wie ich es jetzt eben mache. Wir haben jetzt zwar keine Riesengeschäfte, aber ich kann mir mit ruhigem – halbwegs ruhigem – Gewissen sagen: Du machst doch keine Riesensauerei. ... Aber für mich bringt es doch mehr als demjenigen, der jetzt seine Sozialhilfe, oder sein Arbeitslosengeld oder seine Arbeitslosenhilfe kriegt und sich eben in die Ecke setzt und wartet bis der liebe Gott ihm irgendetwas bringt. (Wolfgang O, Interview 5.9.2000)

Doing all this, Wolfgang tapped into an old network that had partly already existed during the GDR, and was partly formed by those who had experienced similar problems

⁹ After German unification in 1990 banks demanded 10-year rent agreements before they agreed to give credit to business people in eastern Germany.

¹⁰ A famous British sitcom.

after 1989. People in this network trade in a semi-legal/illegal environment, do each other favours, and share similar gloomy views about what has happened to east Germans since 1989. These people operate – to a significant extent – on the margins of society. Wolfgang stated:

Ich bin an den Rand gedrängt, aber ich kann niemandem dafür einen Vorwurf machen. ... Wir haben gewusst, dass die Gesellschaftsordnung so ist, ökonomisch. Das haben wir ja gelernt, wer aufgepasst hat. ... Dass dann natürlich kein Kunde mehr kommt, das hat niemand gedacht. ... Damit hat keiner gerechnet. (Wolfgang O, Interview 8.9.2001)

He reiterated:

Dass mir das persönlich passiert ist, kann ich dem Staat nicht vorwerfen. Aber wie dann mit dem umgegangen wird, das ist nicht die feine englische Art. Da gäbe es andere Möglichkeiten, wenn die nicht zu faul wären, darüber nachzudenken. (Wolfgang O, Interview 8.9.2001)

Wolfgang's frustration stems from not getting a second chance. He describes the system as inhuman and cold, and exposes contradictions that do not seem to make sense and that prevent him from resuming his "normal" life as a businessman and shop owner. Existence and survival only seem possible because victims of unification help each other. Asked about his opinion of the state he lives in, he responds:

Ich gehe seit den letzten Wahlen nicht mehr wählen. Habe einfach keine Meinung mehr. (Wolfgang O, Interview 8.9.2001) ... Beim größten Teil der Leute die ich kenne (herrscht) Politikverdrossenheit. Im Prinzip haben wir mittlerweile mit fast allen Parteien, die in irgendeiner Art und Weise auf uns Einfluss gehabt haben – SPD, CDU, FDP –, die gleiche Erfahrung gemacht: ... Wahlzeiten sind die Zeiten der großen Versprechungen und des positiven Herauskehrens von diesem und jenem. Und danach ist der Alltag wieder da, mit genau umgedrehtem Vorzeichen. ... Und deswegen sagen alle, oder ein Grossteil der Leute, mit denen ich Umgang habe: „Dieser Staat ist doch noch schlimmer als früher.“ ... Früher, zu DDR-Zeiten, hattest du immer bei irgendeinem Belang irgendwo einen Ansprechpartner. Die haben dir eine Antwort geben müssen – egal wie die auch immer ausfiel. Aber du hast eine Antwort bekommen ..., egal ob die negativ oder positiv war. Aber jetzt kannst du hingehen wohin du willst: Einer schickt dich zum anderen, die Schreiben verschwinden, Fragen werden nie geklärt und nächsten Monat ist sowieso ein anderer da, der wieder etwas anderes sagt. Ja, politisch und ökonomisch wirst du hier viel mehr verschaukelt und hingehalten als es bei uns früher der Fall war. (Wolfgang O, Interview September 2001)

Birgit S.'s marriage fell apart when she and her husband – they also had three young children – were facing an uphill struggle to build up a living as florists during the early 1990s. She has faced enormous psychological difficulties coming to terms with what happened and has been taking anti-depressants over the last two years. Although she has been working for one company since the late 1990s, her insecurity remains: Every year she is presented with a new contract – on a take-it-or-leave-it basis – that includes lower

pay, longer working-hours and deteriorating working conditions. In early 2004 she expressed problems with adapting to a situation that is in constant flux, and was longing for stability and a safe job. She reflects:

Im Großteil der Bevölkerung sind die Sorgen und die täglichen Kämpfe ums Überleben und Existieren so massiv geworden, dass die Freude und die Zuversicht über die Wiedervereinigung und über die neuen Möglichkeiten, die das neue System für uns ja auch an positiven Effekten gebracht hat oder bringt, einfach in den Hintergrund treten und verblassen. Nicht nur weil man sie nicht nutzen kann, sondern weil man auch gar keinen Blick mehr dafür hat. ...

Ich sehe ... voller Erschrecken, wie viele Mitbetroffene es gibt und wie viele Leute sich auf Grund des Systems und der Lebensbedingungen nicht zu helfen wissen und in etwas hereingezogen werden, wo sie nicht wissen, wie sie wieder herauskommen. Dabei bräuchten sie Hilfe. ... Es ist deprimierend. Es gibt viele, die inzwischen wieder auf die Strasse gehen wollen und eigentlich hoffen, oder darauf warten, dass irgend jemand die Initiative ergreift und anfängt etwas zu organisieren und sich zu verbünden, um wieder eine Masse zu werden und nicht bloß einzeln den Frust mit sich herum zu schleppen. Es können ja nun nicht alle auswandern. Es kann ja auch nicht die ganze Jugend in den Westen gehen. ...

Irgendwo ist [auch] das Vertrauen und die Offenheit der ehemaligen DDR-Bürger, was dem Neuen entgegengebracht worden ist, dermaßen missbraucht worden, dass eigentlich jeder bloß noch zumacht und auch niemandem mehr traut und sich zurückzieht. ... Ich denke, dass empfinden ganz viele so. (FRAGE: FÜHLST DU DICH AN DEN RAND GEDRÄNGT?) Ja. Irgendwie überfahren und überrollt. Klar habe ich eigene Fehler gemacht. ... Auch aufgrund der schnellen Veränderung. Allerdings würde ich heute nicht wieder einen 10-Jahresvertrag so gutgläubig unterschreiben. Und trotzdem bin ich an dem Vertrag nicht alleine Schuld. Der Vertrag ist mir vorgelegt worden. Der ist mir aufgedrängt worden. Gleich nach der Wende gab es vielleicht nur ganz wenige, die mich hätten beraten können. Die meisten wussten selber noch nicht, wie sich das alles entwickeln würde. (Birgit S., Interview 27.3.2004)

Back in 1989 Gertrud M. and her husband had also hoped that their business would flourish in the new Germany. After a few good years, however, they too started to struggle. It proved fatal that they had put all their private assets into ambitious expansions, even mortgaging their house. In the end, they lost everything to the banks. Their marriage could not sustain the pressures and they split up. For several years Gertrud M. lived in poverty, was without health insurance and unemployment money before she recently found a job selling ceramic accessories to florists. She also longs for stability and is worried about the future:

Was mir jetzt fehlt, ist irgend eine Absicherung, die zu DDR-Zeiten immer da war. Man muss jetzt immer sehen, dass man selber klar kommt und die Situation wird immer schwieriger. ... Rentenversicherung und Rentenversorgung sind Probleme, die mir jetzt im Nacken sitzen. Wo ich noch nicht weiß, wie das weitergeht. Die Rente, die ich

irgendwann einmal kriege, wird nicht zum Leben reichen. Mit Sicherheit nicht. Und das sind Dinge ... wo wir wirklich das Nachsehen haben. (Gertrud M., Interview 24.3.2004)

Tears come from her eyes while she reflects on her life. She insists, however, on being positive and not being bitter about the past:

Die Bitterkeit, die nützt mir nichts. Abends im Bett, da kommt sie allerdings schon manchmal durch. Aber am Tag sollte man sie weglassen [lachen]. (Gertrud M., Interview 24.3.2004)

5. Conclusions

The attempts by Wolfgang O., Gertrud M. and Birgit S. in unified Germany to expand their shops or, in the latter case, build up her first own business, failed dramatically. The main reason for this was less an inability to adapt to the new system, but rather the brutal economic conditions during the first years of German unification that were beyond their control. One mistake in the Federal Republic – signing a 10-year rent agreement that would lead directly to bankruptcy – was irredeemable. None of them will get a second chance to be a shop-owner; nor will any of them ever be in a position to earn decent money legally or to enjoy an acceptable pension.

A whole number of east Germans share this fate. They have shown features that one normally associates with success in a capitalist system – they embraced the opportunities and challenges, were flexible, enterprising, and extremely hard working – but in the special situation following 1989, their individual set-up was literally doomed to failure. No one with power – neither the federal government nor banks – have shown noteworthy initiatives, legislative or economic flexibility, not to mention humanity, to respond to the fate of those who were caught in these special circumstances. The price for this has been extremely high: the lives of some of the most energetic people in east Germany were ruined, and their initial valuable support of the current system has turned into deep-rooted alienation.¹¹

¹¹ This paper takes issue with the first conclusion, but confirms the second conclusion, of a study on the course of unemployment in eastern Germany from the mid-1990s: “1. Persönliches Erleben des Übergangs in Arbeitslosigkeit und auch die Erfahrung jeweiligen weiteren Arbeitslosigkeitsverlaufs sind unter den Einflussfaktoren, die für die politische Bewertung der neuen Gesellschaftsverhältnisse, für die Haltung zu Parteien, für Auffassungen über Ursachen und Bekämpfung der Arbeitslosigkeit relevant sind, von nachrangiger Bedeutung. Entscheidend sind Bildung, Qualifikation und berufliche Entwicklung vor der Wende, aber auch das

Highlighting the contrasts between the past during the GDR and the present in the FRG seems a typical phenomenon amongst those who have suffered economic misfortune and unemployment (Puhmann 1998: 10). Wolfgang O.'s striking description of the GDR system as far more flexible and transparent compared to the de-humanised bureaucracy of unified Germany contains some truths. However, it is, of course, also an admission of not being able to cope with a system that operates differently and where he is suddenly an outsider. Furthermore, these comparisons contain a degree of *Ostalgia* that brushes over negative features during the GDR.

Considering the dramatic trauma all three have experienced – and one can assume that this was aggravated by their economic success prior to 1989 – they have shown great energy and courage in mastering the upheaval in their lives. Like others, it has had a paralysing effect, but it did not end in alcoholism, sleeping rough, and – with the exception of Wolfgang O. – long-term unemployment. The latter, however, has been as positive and active in still trying to make something happen in his life as the two women. In the end, however, they have involuntarily been pushed into the margins of society.

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Lebensalter. 2. Für die Art der persönlichen Wahrnehmung des Systemumbruchs in seiner Relevanz für die eigene Lebensqualität hat dagegen der Erwerbsverlauf seit der Wende, hat die Tatsache, ob und wie anhaltend man selbst, aber auch der/die Lebenspartner/in von Arbeitslosigkeit betroffen wurden, erstrangige Bedeutung." (Hahn & Schön 1996: 161)

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Biodata

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