



CSAC Monographs 14

Power and Institutional Change

in

Post-Communist Eastern Europe

Edited by Birgit Müller

**Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing
University of Kent at Canterbury**

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2. The Nomenklatura of the former German Democratic Republic: A Report on a Study in Progress¹

Y. Michal Bodemann

In 1992, when I first proposed a study on the situation of the East German *Nomenklatura*, I argued to my granting agency, the SSHRC, approximately as follows – I am quoting here from the summary.

- a. Cases of suicides of members of the former GDR elite on one hand, and instances on the other where former local SED party secretaries reemerged, shortly after the revolution in the GDR, as heads of branches of major West German banks, as representatives of Western firms in the East or in important political positions raise the question how the East German elite overall is adjusting to its fall from privilege and power. It is suggested here, informed by classical elite theorists, notably Gaetano Mosca, that the downfall of elites is rarely complete and that, even where *individuals* are disgraced, their *kin* may well succeed holding on to privilege and power. This is not, however, a question of the 'will' of the old *nomenklatura* alone. They dispose over cultural, social and economic resources that may be most useful to the 'new masters' from the West the Western elite may therefore be interested in setting up elements of the *nomenklatura* as (part of) the new elite in east Germany. The life history type, in-depth interviews, frequently conducted over more than one session, will attempt to address this question.
- b. In more general terms, we must ask, what contributions could or will the old elite make to the slowly fusing two societies in Germany. The project will therefore attempt to identify what economic, social and cultural capital is at the disposal of the old elite, what roles the old elite neighbourhoods, and exclusive social contacts in other spheres of life are still playing today and how family and wider-kin ties are being mobilised and redefined today. Like all elites, the GDR *nomenklatura* was the bearer of state ideology. While ideological hegemony has passed to the West German establishment, are there ways in which the old *nomenklatura* was/is able to transfer into the world of their political opponents some of its prominently articulated old values such as 'solidarity,' different attitudes to social inequality/class, leisure, etc?
- c. Like most elites, the old socialist elite was by no means homogeneous. This project attempts to identify some of the principal factions in the elite and will try to find out whether the adaptation processes within these different groups have varied; i.e., which elite elements have

greater chances of preserving elite status in the new German state, and which have experienced the greatest fall from privilege and power.

- d. Only a few years after the collapse of the Wall, rudiments of new leadership are beginning to evolve, albeit very slowly indeed; the present leadership vacuum is responsible for arbitrary bureaucratic measures at the local level, withdrawal of many into the private sphere, and in part for widespread anomie among the youth. This was visibly expressed in the brutal pogroms directed against asylum seekers and the rise of authoritarian right-wing parties especially in the East. To study the behaviour and the prospects of the old elite is therefore a particularly urgent and important task: with very few – usually prominent – exceptions we know very little about the behaviour of the old elite and there are virtually no research results available on this question so far.

From this summary of the grant proposal, let me briefly address some important aspects that are referred to within.

- a. I referred to the survival of the old elites. It was seemingly apparent, and we heard about it at length in newspaper reports how the old elite lived well in the past, in exclusive resorts, and also that, excepting its most prominent figures, that it had survived well into the new age, not in the least, by accumulating property. Economics minister Günter Mittag was said to have received the finest electronics equipment for his use from West Germany, and there was the case of Harry Tisch, the erstwhile leader of the FDGB, the GDR's trade union federation, who was accused of having diverted substantial Federation funds to finance the reconstruction of his cottage; there were reports after the Wende about high officials of the Central Committee of the SED or SED party secretaries in the country who very early on had been given high managerial positions with large banks such as the Dresdner or Deutsche Bank, and the case of former high ranking officials who were now in posts in the insurance business has become virtually proverbial. It was also apparent that elites would not only survive by shifting to the economy, they might on occasion even survive in politics as well, such as in the case of Gregor Gysi, son of a prominent member of the old SED Politburo who became leader of the newly formed PDS, the successor to the SED and that party's vast assets, not in the least in terms of its membership. Or the case of Premier Stolpe of the land of Brandenburg, formerly the Protestant church's major negotiator with the East German authorities who was held by them in great esteem; Stolpe had just been re-elected by an astonishingly high margin in the recent Land elections.
- b. these observations are confirmed by the classical literature in elite theory, especially Gaetano Mosca. With Mosca, I asked (1) how after the revolution in the GDR – the devolution of power away from the old elites – how the old elites would be treated and how they would behave in the sociopolitical system of their former opponents – and to what

extent they could again achieve elite positions. According to Mosca (Mosca, 1939:53), elites are characterised first of all by their wealth and their 'moral and intellectual' capacities.

In terms of more contemporary theory, we can define elites as groups of individuals that dispose over exceptional resources in terms of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in a given society. The social and the cultural types of capital are particularly interesting to us here: social capital represents the entirety of resources that are derived from social ties and mutual recognition, ties which define who belongs to the group and who does not (Bourdieu 1984:114 f); in the area of cultural capital, we are interested in the forms of *objectified* and of *incorporated* cultural capital: the objectified form as the way in which cultural production has been materialised, and incorporated capital as the cultural dispositions and competencies that have been internalised by elite individuals in the course of socialisation.

But Mosca takes us to a number of further questions: (2) *Can the old nomenklatura still maintain a degree of internal solidarity today?* Did elite kinship networks develop in the past—I was thinking here of occasional media reports concerning Margot Honecker's clan—and what is happening to these networks now? What roles do old neighbourhood ties play both in the old elite residential neighbourhoods and in summer cottage colonies? Which associations (e.g., hunting clubs) continue to be, or are coming to be their meeting points? (3) *Does the objectified cultural and social capital of the old elite, then, continue to be efficacious today?* The elite category includes high incomes in the technical/economic sphere—for example, former leadership posts in the industrial *Kombinate* that are now converted into capitalist management positions. It also includes special and sought-after qualifications characteristic of the GDR such as language skills uncommon in the West (e.g., Russian, Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese), old contacts in the former East Bloc and certain developing countries. Apart from these aspects, actual economic resources of the old elite, primarily real estate, must also be considered as an important asset in the new system.

Concerning Bourdieu's 'incorporated cultural capital', we should ask more generally, (4) *to what extent do the cultural and social skills acquired under socialism support survival of some old elites in the new all-German and particularly the new East German elite?* These skills – again very much a concern of Mosca – are largely transmitted through the family context (Mosca 1939: 423f): (a) the elite personal habitus – the 'view from up high,' an elite self image and collective self confi-

dence; higher expectations set upon oneself and upon one's children, (b) the ability to mobilise resources by means of networks based upon kinship or quasi-kin ties, particularly of the type shaped by patron-clientage in real-existing socialism.

A noteworthy element in Mosca's elite theory, reminiscent of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, is that of the 'political formula': every ruling class articulates its own 'moral and political principle' (e.g., Mosca, 39: 62). Clearly, the *nomenklatura* has lost its hegemony, but elements of its 'political formula' will have survived: (5) *Are fragments of state socialist ideology, its values and practices, becoming integrated into the new societal framework?* Such values include 'solidarity', 'considerateness,' women's stronger roles in employment, different conceptions about class and social equality, particular attitudes towards technology, other bureaucratic practices, etc.) Numerous examples from the Eastern Länder, and a distinctly 'Eastern' flair, visible especially in Brandenburg, suggest this is indeed the case. If this can be shown in our research, it would lend greater strength to Mosca's thesis that at the ideological level as well, parts of the old elites tend to 'creep into' (Mosca, 1939: 414) the new sociopolitical system. Clearly, it is a fallacy to assume that only the East of Germany is undergoing change; West Germany is changing as well, and the question is, to what extent do the old Eastern elites play a role in these transformations.

To what extent do they in fact play a role in any of these transformations? I must confess, while my two East German colleagues were duly impressed by my grant proposal – they also very subtly, very silently, but very stubbornly seemed to be somewhat sceptical and unhappy with it – and perhaps even surprised about my naiveté. I could not figure out why. I started the project in earnest in 1993 – the grant had not been awarded as yet, but I tried to gather and transcribe interviews as best as I could with limited resources. We almost always conducted the interviews with two of us present, typically myself and an Eastern interviewer, then. The questions the two of us asked were rather different: Their questions tended to go in the direction of what it was like in the pre-Wende days – often these questions turned into mutual reminiscences by my collaborators and the interviewees. My colleagues also tended to be more interested in the overall question: how did things function, what went so wrong, or the differences between East and West, then and now? And I wondered sometimes quietly whether their questions were pertinent to our project. I on the other hand asked them about the evolution of their

career, their family and kin ties, their social life, neighbourly relations at the cottage and at the main residence, their parents' social background, their children's career, and the like. How did they socialise with other members of the *politbüro*, of the ZK, the upper echelons of the party in general, and what was life like in Wandlitz, where the privileged elite used to live, hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world.

The answers I received puzzled me. They did not fit my expectations and the SSHRCC proposal at all. This became clear already with the very first interview, with EH., a philosopher at the Academy of Sciences, and member of the Central Committee of the SED. I asked him about his informal social contacts to other members of the *nomenklatura*, and it became apparent that these contacts were virtually nonexistent. Even though they were addressing each other as comrades and using the familiar *Du*, there was very little familiarity in these contacts to begin with, they were extremely formal instead, even when they met each other at one of the central committee's secluded resorts on the island of Rügen or elsewhere. It was evidently impossible to start friendships on these occasions, especially outside one's own sphere of work and below or above one's rank. KK., an economic adviser to Günter Mittag, responsible for the economy, told us how he worked closely for over 25 years with Mittag, seeing him on an almost daily basis, and yet never being invited, or inviting him, to his home. Sociability, such as the proverbial and important birthday parties, were normally held at the office, during working hours, and even where this was outside the sphere of the office in an environment where basic formalities were effectively maintained. The absence of informal channels of communication, especially across levels of hierarchy, is also responsible for the inability of the system to convey direct personal experiences about a host of problems from one level in the hierarchy to the other. WL., a high official in the Ministry of Finances, never a party member, with training in capitalist banking who later worked for the Treuhand, mentioned how with colleagues at his own rank, he could speak critically about the GDR's financial crisis, but that it would have been out of the question – although they would see each other often – to convey his critical views to his superior, a state secretary, not to speak of conveying it to that man's superior, the finance minister himself.

As far as easy socialising is concerned, the *nomenklatura* clearly was an utter desert. T.H., who spent part of his youth in Wandlitz and as son of one of the most important figures of the regime, put it as follows:

I left home in 1962, at the age of 17. I must say, I always got along well with my parents... I sensed that as a child, I could not bear any longer this privileged existence... this was connected with the feeling, I had to get out of there [TH applied to continue his schooling at the Arbeiter-und Bauernfakultät in Halle] Because at that time, I already lived for three years in Wandlitz, and I never felt at home there. It was unpleasant to live there... I had to get up very early to drive down with my mother to the school in Berlin centre, it took 45 minutes... But of course the isolation out there was unpleasant as well, also the fact that I could not invite anyone there... Q: weren't there kids your age? A: There were kids my age. We were friends. But that was only one girl, my age then. We were friends because we both wanted to get out of there. But she went to another school. No, I did not have any friends there.

It emerged from interview after interview, then, and much to my surprise, that the GDR elite clearly lacked what elite theory considers to be an important characteristic of any ruling caste: the presence of dense communicative networks and internal solidarities that go beyond mere declarations of loyalty to given political principles. Here, we had no ruling caste, but rather a narrowly functional elite, a stratum of high functionaries that largely lacked an organic context. Siegfried Lorenz, member of the Politburo as well as First secretary of the SED for the district of Karl-Marx-Stadt, and interviewed elsewhere described his contacts to his immediate superior, Erich Honecker, this way:

Before becoming member of the Politburo, I would not get to see my immediate superior, Erich Honecker, for months. For the Bezirke (districts) he had his commissioners for 'instruction and control'... Later on, I saw Erich Honecker every week for the session at the Politburo. There was rarely any occasion for longer personal talks, and it became the custom to use the written form in order to convey [to him] a request or a problem. The response usually came immediately. (Lorenz, 145)

There is no question that such highly formalised types of communication would never produce a flexible, responsive, internally communicative and coherent elite. Symbolic for this is how the upper elite sealed itself off from the population in the residential compound in Wandlitz. The failure of the system to encourage communicative networks not only has much to do with the downfall of the system because it lacked knowledge about itself; it also explains in part why the elite disintegrated so thoroughly: After the Wende and the collapse of the formal structures in which it was housed, this elite had lost all of its embedding

structures and it lacked effective internal networks. This is especially apparent in relation to the question of an luxurious and privileged life style because the point of such a life style is always that it is shared with others and that it therefore creates the appropriate social milieu.

Contrary to the attempts by the media to depict a luxurious elite life style, it became quite apparent from the interviews, that such a life style did not exist, with the exception perhaps of a minute number of people at the very top. Moreover, the mentality associated with privileged class status was absent. It was striking to see that our interview partners invariably lived in modest apartments with the rest of the population. The furnishings of their apartments looked little different from those of anyone else in the middle class, certainly far more modest than that of most carpenters and plumbers in the GDR. The only privileges they enjoyed were the use of special resorts, of the government clinic in Buch, modestly higher salaries, and in some cases government supplied automobiles. EH put it like this:

... Here I would be very cautious. Well, for example, not even the support of Kurt Hager got me a telephone. Where we lived, 20 m had to be dug [for the telephone cable]. And [his superior] Kurt Hager, I don't know how long, may be for 10 years, could not overcome this hurdle. [privileges existed connected to the position in the institution] But not to the function. I don't want to glorify myself now, but as a member of the central committee I had a fraction of such opportunities compared to an ordinary employee of the ZK, a fraction. I could not—and that bothered me terribly—get my car repaired in the repair shop of the ZK, because the Academy of Social Sciences did not belong to the apparatus of the ZK. My membership did not help me there at all.

The consequence of the fact that luxurious milieus, milieus of privilege did *not* develop is on the one hand that it further discouraged elite networks, and on the other, that it made it very difficult to accumulate economic resources which would have been perhaps not an essential, but surely an important variable for maintaining an elite position after the Wende.

But elite theory also focuses not on individuals alone, but on the larger family context. Would the children of the elite, who lacked the political blemish of their parents, not have had the chance to move into elite positions themselves after the Wende? Here once again we have found very little evidence to support this contention. Since an elite milieu never came to be elaborated, the children of the *nomenklatura*

could not be socialised into it. First of all, typically, the elite status of a 'cadre of the *nomenklatura*' was a distinctly personal one; other relatives did not normally partake of this. Our interviews show this clearly, and it is borne out elsewhere as well. Gerhard Schürer, for 24 years the head of the national planning commission in the GDR, an extremely important position, put it this way:

I really have to start there with my family. No one in my family had been functionaries. My sister, my brother and my brother-in-law were metal workers in Karl Marx Stadt, that is, today Chemnitz and in Zwickau. My children are car mechanic, Driver, printer and physio-therapist, that is people who lead completely normal lives. And also my friends are by and large ordinary people... (Zimmermann and Schütt, 183)

These children, like all others evidently lived in an intensive network of non-elite peers and left the parental house as soon as they could, normally, by getting married and receiving housing on the basis of their new status. There was therefore very little opportunity for them to get more closely connected to the parental environment, and the other relatives with ordinary careers, as we have seen, also do not provide elite models that could be emulated. The case of T.H., mentioned above, showed this clearly: he left the local Berlin school to join, with his girl friend, the worker-peasant faculty in Halle, and from thereon, pursued his very own career as a natural scientist. It was widely noted in the upper echelons – E.H. pointed this out to us – how children of upper elite parents especially tended to pursue careers as natural scientists. Middle class positions, in other words, that were distinctly apolitical.

In sum, the GDR failed to constitute its *nomenklatura* in any way as a stable, self-perpetuating elite; this explains not only the almost instantaneous disappearance of the *nomenklatura*, but also the extremely rapid collapse of all major party and many state institutions sometimes within days or weeks after 9 November. Even the politburo dissolved within a month of the collapse of the Wall.

These are some of the internal reasons for the almost complete disappearance of the old elite, but the external reasons are of the greatest relevance as well. Even if we grant that the GDR elite was a highly atomised elite of functionaries, the question remains why they fell from power completely and why they did not reassume leading positions in the united Germany. They unquestionably did possess skills and knowledge and many did have the clear interest and desire – as was again

apparent from the interviews – to participate in rebuilding the East, even as part of a united Germany.

The answer is simple: As Rosemary Will from the faculty of law at Humboldt University has put it, the old political elite has been summarily criminalised mostly by the powers in Bonn, with the assistance, however, of some of the dissidents from the short democratisation period of the GDR. This criminalisation has taken a number of directions. Best known is the criterion of *Stasi* association. What would have been inconceivable with Nazi organisations in West Germany is being practised on members of the *Stasi* and other GDR institutions: the mere membership in these organisations stamps one as guilty, irrespective of the possible pressures that might have lead someone to join, and irrespective of the illegal acts someone might or actually might not have committed. In the end, the mere *Staatsnähe*, proximity to the GDR state, considered a state of injustice (*Unrechtsregime*), was sufficient to drastically cut pensions and permit firings, including the summary dismissal of the entire diplomatic staff even in those cases where sympathies to the West were well known and appreciated even before the *Wende*. In the economy, on the other hand, where the political argument could as a rule not be applied, the directors of the old *Kombinate* and other leading personnel were usually let go because the firms themselves were taken over by Western companies and then often shut down. Indeed, the elimination of the elite and of a broader spectrum of highly trained personnel was pursued with all possible means, especially where political arguments would have been difficult to establish. As Claus Offe has put it aptly,

Chapter 19, section III of the appendix to the Unification treaty contains an ingenious mixture of 'political' (personal) and 'technical' (institutional) justifications for disqualifying someone from his/her job...[it] hides the process of a political purge of the staff pool behind the argument of 'technical' incompetence and declares the political unacceptability of a person to be only secondary. In the German case, the 'technical' argument is particularly far reaching because the professional skills of entire categories of employees (for example in the legal field, public administration, in the social and liberal arts of the universities) have largely been made obsolete by virtue of the fundamental restructuring of the politics, society and culture of the GDR. For this reason, a clearly political purge of the personnel in the public sector is less visible and less controversial than in other Eastern European countries. (Offe 1994:208f)

In short, the *nomenklatura* mostly on blatantly political grounds, and much of the highly educated labour force in the public sector for, as they claimed, reasons of reorganisation was eliminated from its positions in

the East and replaced by Westerners. The Eastern elite, on the other hand, due to its internal weaknesses as a narrow functional elite, was unable to mobilise and represent its interests effectively. In the interviews, when we asked how they organised their lives today and how they related to the new political system that was imposed upon the East, we found basically two reactions. One reaction was that of complete rejection of the political domain and of any political commitment altogether: The other, more frequent reaction we found was where our interviewees had begun to associate and meet regularly in circles of acquaintances or with former colleagues, or where they sought to create a sphere of sociability for themselves by participating in local PDS meetings, or with the committees for justice that sprung up three years ago in the milieu around the PDS. All these milieus clearly present an outlet for the frustrations, the sense of alienation from the new Germany and anger against the 'western colonisers'.

Indeed, this deposed elite has long begun to create a 'culture of resentment' which is also reflected in the strong showing of the PDS in recent elections. As Rosemary Will concludes, they are from a generation which has not only borne the burden of the German division, but which now, as the lost generation, has to 'bear the cost of German unification.' As long as this generation and the elite that stems from it is being excluded from all political, social and cultural participation, they will increasingly find themselves as the mouthpiece of Eastern discontent.

Egon Bahr, the moving force and brain behind the *Ostverträge* and Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* has put the finger on the problem in a comparison with the West after 1945. Bahr argued, no matter how morally problematic we might find it, it was Adenauer's greatest accomplishment that he managed to incorporate the massive membership of the Nazi Party and much of its lower-level leadership into the new democratic Germany; it was his accomplishment that he succeeded in reconciling the various fractions with each other. Such a reconciliation, he contends, and I concur, has not been achieved with the elites of the former GDR, with grave possible consequences for a continuing, and deepening division inside Germany for years to come. Our interviews and the deep anger and resentment they convey clearly points in that direction.

Notes

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