



CSAC Monographs 14

Power and Institutional Change

in

Post-Communist Eastern Europe

Edited by Birgit Müller

**Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing
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4. For the People or with the People? The Difficulties of Communal Democracy in a small town in Saxony

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My paper on the continuities and discontinuities in the local politics of a small town in Eastern Germany is based on a wider-ranging field study. The study stands in the tradition of the 'daily-life-approach' (Schütz 1971). My general goal is to analyse the changes in a typical small town in the former GDR after the fall of the wall. I use a qualitative approach in my monograph reconstructing two levels of social reality and combining them: a) the objective structure of the life-worlds in a small town and its transformation in the course of history and b) the perception and interpretation of the social reality by the actors themselves. How did the inhabitants of Wurzen experience their past and how do they integrate the present social transformation into their personal biographies?

In the course of the field study, I conducted approximately 200 qualitative, biographically-based interviews with the residents of Wurzen. The interviews are supplemented with information from other sources like local newspapers, regional historical material, expert interviews and photos. I lived for over a year in the town and I still visit there often.

One of the characteristics of research focusing on the changes in Eastern Germany is that it has concentrated, with only a few exceptions, on the social and political movements of the time in the urban areas of Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden and the general economic, social and political developments in the GDR leading up to the fall of the wall. However, the emphasis on global, general developments tends to distract from the fact that there were very different regional developments leading to the political changes in the GDR, and the resulting forms of social conflict on the local level were also regionally quite differentiated. Further, in the course of the local political reorganization a number of regional differences appeared. Observing processes of local change requires a method that takes into account the history of events and the regional comparison. This is important in light of two factors: studies now indicate that the political changes in the GDR were a) spontaneous and unplanned and b)

decentralized 'from below', driven by manifold local initiatives covering a wide range of very heterogeneous social, professional and political interests. I intend to set the results of my local case study on the process and structure of the political transformation in a small town in Saxony into a comparative frame. The community study shows that Wurzen has certain structural elements and context in common with other small towns in East Germany. (Bonß 1982:115)

The site of the study is Wurzen, one of the oldest towns in Saxony, located 30 km east of Leipzig. Wurzen was a district capital from the time of the GDR district boundary reform in 1952 until the end of July 1994. Wurzen had 19,000 residents and the district of the same name had a population of approximately 50,000 as of the end of 1989. The district is characterized by a mix of agriculture, medium-sized industry, and smaller companies which played an important role in the local economy in the GDR.

It has become a truism to point out that the ruling system in the GDR had premodern, paternalistic structures in many areas and was characterized by a dense network of informal connections. Although great emphasis is placed on their role in stabilizing GDR society, few empirical studies exist which demonstrate how these social networks functioned in reality. The analysis of the current transformation process in East Germany often neglects the fact that certain traditional elements and informal structures also play a significant role in market-economic systems. I want to show using this community as an example that problems of municipal self-administration in East Germany are not simply the result of difficult economic conditions and time pressure.

1. I maintain, and this is my first assumption, that the creation of new political and administrative institutions is not automatically accompanied by new traditions, routines, expectations and qualifications. Set patterns of behaviour and mentalities cannot simply be changed or suspended by an act of will or a declaration. (Lepensky 1992; Offe 1991)
2. My second thesis is that certain, very specific local traits made the democratization process in Wurzen especially difficult.
3. Thirdly, continuity in local politics since the GDR era should not be dismissed as temporary. Instead former patterns of political behaviour may harmonize with elements of a political culture that could also be considered typical of West German towns. (See also Neckel 1992; Berking 1995)
4. Fourthly the parliamentary system in West Germany is increasingly criticized. I argue, that these same problems will occur even more frequently in the East. All in all, the local political relations in Wurzen

after the system change display a remarkable balance between continuity and change. Thus Wurzen reflects general as well as regional characteristics of the current situation in East German municipalities.

I would first like to roughly describe the municipal relations in Wurzen before the fall of the Wall. There is a saying in Wurzen which goes: 'Wurzen starts with a 'W' and is thus at the end of the alphabet. This must have had some effect when the authorities were distributing funds.' The 1952 GDR district reform made Wurzen into the district capital. The administrative reform led ironically to a significant restriction in municipal administrative power. Not only Wurzen, but the municipalities in general became more dependent on state funds. The distribution of state funds to the individual districts however depended to a large degree on whether these districts had so-called 'Kombinate'. Although the district was relatively important with regard to its contribution of industrial and consumer goods to the economy, the central authorities which were responsible for the SED economic policy considered the district to be relatively unattractive. The reason was that Wurzen had neither a dominant industry nor one that would be typical for this district like lignite mining or chemicals nor was it the headquarters of a *Kombinat*. Thus, Wurzen was always praised but still received less state funding than district capitals possessing these characteristics.

This political-economic disadvantage however resulted in an amazingly high amount of municipal self-help and inspired original ideas in other areas, for instance the town's cultural life. 'You sometimes have to bribe the state in order to help it', was a commonly heard comment. Often unplanned projects turned out to work better than extensively planned ones. It is remarkable how close the local elite clung together in the sense of 'territorial rationalization' to form a dense network of informal, personal relations spanning all levels of society and the entire political spectrum. In this manner, the district was able to build housing blocks, cultural centers and a swimming pool and to sponsor town festivals. In retrospect former authorities emphasized that their actions moved between three poles: 1. Their real informal influence; 2. their powerlessness in the face of district orders and 3. a feeling of being unable to respond adequately to the demands of the citizens. One can characterize the local leadership style as strict yet well-intentioned. Local politics was dependent to a large degree on the assistance of the local state-owned companies. The municipal political leaders wanted to govern for the people but not with them. After all it was the state bureaucracy and not a democratic process which determined the needs of the

people. Particular interests were not satisfied. Conflict resolution committees or the so-called 'appeal system' (*Eingabewesen*) which were organized from above and weak intermediary structures did not hide the lack of legality and the lack of a controlling role of public opinion. The citizen was subjected to personal dependency in which unpredictable, arbitrary decisions made by individuals predominated. Politics, law and the administration were not separated but concentrated together to form a single power unit. Instead of rule of law and administrative responsibility the GDR was characterized by party organs dominating at all administrative levels. Nevertheless, one should not overestimate the role of these structures nor disqualify all civil servants as incompetent and ignorant. The GDR was also dependent on expert knowledge even if ideological aspects always threatened to dominate the formal-rational elements. (See also Meuschel 1993) Moreover, increasing economic pressure led to a new law, which starting in 1985, granted local authorities more independence (e.g., in finances).

The state monopoly in the economy meant both rigid social control and patronization of the citizen but also relief from and elimination of personal responsibility. Social policy was a major component of the political peace. Its role was to assure political loyalty and legitimacy. Thus maintaining the quality of the municipal infrastructure also became the duty of local leaders. The linkage of state welfare to political legitimacy undercut the possibility to sanction people and made state authorities subject to blackmail. (See also Hanf 1992) In a conversation with me, the former Mayor complained: 'We were the clowns, the state did everything for the citizens, anyone could come and make demands.' This led to a situation where despite many violations of regulations, the state made little use of legal sanctions. This resulted in a significant contradiction: the coercive nature of the law was especially used where so-called fundamentals of the socialist social and political order were threatened. However, in everyday life, law as a coercive element was hardly applied. (Bernet 1991). The high degree of personalization of power structures made it easier for citizens to make demands directly by appealing personally to those responsible. This would seem to indicate that state welfare was not always the best instrument for ruling. The local office holders complained that many people who availed themselves of state services were often ungrateful or apathetic. Yet it was not only citizens but also state employees who profited from this situation and included it in their power strategies. As the lowest link in the chain, the state

employees had to try to eliminate dissatisfaction in the population in order to secure their own power position and thus, like the local companies, to retain their labourers. At the same time, they profited themselves from the privilege-based economy resulting from the informal supply and distribution networks. One can summarize the system-related distortionalities as not only allowing informal self-help activities, especially at the local level, but also encouraging a 'free rider' mentality in all sectors of the population. (See also Huinink 1995)

The obvious election fraud in May 1989 led to a serious loss of legitimacy for the state institutions in the GDR. But which changes did the citizens of Wurzen hope for from the introduction of West German municipal law? According to the local town historian the people had certain idealistic conceptions of democracy. These conceptions included grassroots democracy, especially after the revolution, a wide spectrum of political press and public opinion and the separation of powers, i.e., an efficient, politically independent administration. Most of my interviewees maintained they could contribute to local politics in the future. Former Communist bureaucrats were confident they would be needed, at least for their expertise. Church members pointed to their long-practiced denominational democracy. A county representative claimed he had learned democracy in the local poultry club. FDP members claimed to possess liberal democratic traditions due to their bourgeois education. On the other hand, many now admit that there was more euphoria about the prospects than true knowledge of what democracy meant. In fact, many people who were active in the democracy movement at that time now believe that the democratic experiment has failed. But what was the situation in Wurzen to begin with? First of all, the development of the new administration in East Germany took place from the top down. The municipalities, in contrast to the districts, remained intact as the lowest administrative level and thus represented an important element of continuity in the transformation process (Wollmann 1991). The town charter approved by the GDR in May 1989 initiated the decentralization of the administrative structures. All municipal employees I interviewed were of the opinion that the range of municipal tasks and the bureaucracy increased significantly. The cities were assigned a number of new responsibilities previously taken care of by the District Council or local companies.

The election results in May 1990 gave the CDU an overwhelming majority and confirmed what most observers considered obvious. The

citizens movements had lost their base in the Wurzen District and some members had joined other political parties. The comfortable victory for the CDU led it to form a 'grand coalition' with other smaller parties (except with the PDS and at the city level excluding the Greens). This step was justified economically by the challenge of the new start and the fear that old political forces could reemerge. In addition the victory for the CDU and the coalition gave the party significant influence in appointing people to positions in the administration. Not surprisingly, they preferred to appoint party members and sympathizers. Most of them came from the management of industrial companies and agricultural cooperatives or were teachers, academics or scientists. In addition, the CDU as electoral victor appointed the District Commissioner and the Mayor. However, this power put the CDU in a dilemma. In the past, the party had been an integral part of the Communist power structure and now had to sack former members. While most of the former Communist bureaucrats in leading positions were dismissed, many were not. In addition the lower and middle levels of the district and town administration were scarcely changed at all. Here it becomes clear that the decisive factor was not a person's political past but personal antipathies or former conflicts between members of the Communist party and the representatives of the Block Parties. One might also assume that there are still employees in the administration who could pressure the members of the CDU with their past. The CDU thus experienced significant problems of legitimacy. The CDU justified its personnel decisions by pointing to the general lack of qualified personnel at the time. In addition, they made a moral distinction between the CDU leadership and the party-base. The past is not the fault of the grassroots members.

I now want to mention three additional basic characteristics of current local politics: 1. the lack of conflict in daily local politics, 2. the continuing authoritarian style of politics, which differentiates itself from the former paternalistic leadership style in that it is less concerned with social welfare aspects and 3. the lack of a critical public including citizen participation and media.

The 'grand coalition' did not last for long. The SPD and the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen left the coalition after a short time. However, together they do not form a cohesive political opposition. The PDS which still receives a large number of votes and has many supporters, also hardly plays a role in local politics. The attitude of those responsible is that the political, economic and social transformation requires a joint effort by

all political actors independent of their party political affiliation. This attitude strengthens the style of politics that avoids conflicts and it hinders the ability of parties to present themselves as representatives of the interests of particular social groups. In other words, local politicians still consider themselves to be organs of state power which rule for the people and do not consider themselves to be practising democracy. Their conception of holding office is still characterized by charismatic power and policies implemented from above. On the other hand, the District Commissioner and the Mayor now feel less responsible for the well-being of the citizens. In a democracy the citizens have to take care of their own interests. This is the argument used by the mayor to wash his hands of responsibility for resolving conflicts between right and left-wing groups in Wurzen. However, the ability to influence policies and the amount of power resting in the hands of the citizens is still completely unclear.

The few people who desire open political conflicts, criticism and control in the District and Town parliament claim to run a high personal risk in pursuing these goals. They remain lonely fighters for justice or are considered to be troublemakers. In a small town like Wurzen it is obviously not advisable to fight the strongest political party which dominates many local decisions and employment policies. Before the revolution the administrative personnel were politically highly organized and it is remarkable how many of the new personnel belong to the strongest political party now. The old strategy of hiding information inhibits a proper factual dispute among representatives. Thus documents concerning important decisions are often only distributed shortly before votes. This leads one to suspect that, despite claims to the contrary, in Wurzen the preservation of political power and thus financial advantage is more important than finding competent solutions to policy questions. In any case the administration in Wurzen was recently in the headlines for being suspected of drawing excessive salaries.

Political decisions and conflicts, when they happen, still take place behind the scenes. The political coverage in the local newspaper is limited to reports of policy successes or politics is left out entirely. Thus, for many citizens little has changed. On the contrary, politics and the administration are now less informal and more distant. They are considered to be more anonymous, rigid and bureaucratic. The often drawn-out decision making process, legal uncertainties in the new administration and retention of previously employed personnel reinforces the apathy typical

of many citizens. The hope that the transformation process would offer the chance not to simply adopt the organizational structures of West Germany but to change these for the better was not fulfilled. The opposite is the case: local political relations in Wurzen clearly demonstrate that simply introducing democratic institutions and regulations does not necessarily lead to a democratization process. The special conditions of the transformation process tend to increase the defects recognized in the West. The fact that the municipalities are still dependent to a high degree on transfer payments from the West does not contribute to rational and responsible reflection on the possibilities of local self-government. Here I want to emphasize the point that revolutions often end not with a change of power but with a reformation of the power elite. The power relations are rearranged without losing their authoritarian nature. (Zapf 1966, Müller 1991) I want to add that in this case elements of the former paternalistic leadership style in the GDR have been combined with the typical political culture found in small towns in Western Germany. (See also Neckel 1992 and Berking 1995) The old, authoritarian attitudes were easily transformed into an exaggerated concept of municipal independence: Their motto seems to be 'Now the town can decide everything itself'. Perhaps this is why the administrative assistance from the West was only reluctantly accepted. In this context the most recent territorial reforms of administrative units in Eastern Germany perhaps represents a certain sobering experience. Wurzen has lost the status of a district and has thus experienced a loss of its newly won municipal competence and regional centrality.