

Translated excerpt

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Unity Without Equality
Why the East is Still Different

Translated by David Burnett



Introduction

The discourse about eastern Germany is complicated, and tends to go around in circles. The big anniversaries—30 years since the peaceful revolution and then, a year later, since reunification—did little to change this. There even seems to be a kind of competition to nail down eastern Germany and the East Germans with some kind of explanatory concept. Some say they haven't overcome their “inner Hitler” (and the “double dictatorship” of fascism and communism),¹ or that they're a notoriously “dissatisfied people”² who like to play the victim. Others come to their defense, saying they need to be understood as an “undervalued” populace,³ if not as underdogs, an overlooked group fighting for recognition in a West German society based on the principle of dominance.⁴ Then there are the voices that say it's time for a new history of the GDR, one that goes beyond the narrative of dictatorship and that showcases the good sides of life before 1989.⁵ Angela Merkel, in one of her last major

¹ Ines Geipel, cited in Antje Hildebrandt, “‘Meine Generation hat den inneren Hitler in sich konserviert,’ Interview mit Ines Geipel,” *Cicero* (April 23, 2019), online at: {[https:// www.cicero.de/innenpolitik/ines-geipel-ddr-nationalsozialismus-sed-diktatur-mauer-rechtsextremismus-afd/plus](https://www.cicero.de/innenpolitik/ines-geipel-ddr-nationalsozialismus-sed-diktatur-mauer-rechtsextremismus-afd/plus)} (alle URL Stand April 2024); see also Ines Geipel, *Umkämpfte Zone. Mein Bruder, der Osten und der Hass* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2019).

² Detlef Pollack, *Das unzufriedene Volk. Protest und Ressentiment in Ostdeutschland von der friedlichen Revolution bis heute* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020).

³ Cerstin Gammelin, *Die Unterschätzten. Wie der Osten die deutsche Politik bestimmt* (Berlin: Econ, 2021).

⁴ Naika Foroutan and Jana Hensel, *Die Gesellschaft der Anderen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2020).

⁵ Katja Hoyer, *Beyond the Wall: East Germany, 1949–1990* (Allen Lane, London: 2023).

speeches as Federal Chancellor, vehemently rejected the notion that her East German past was a kind of “baggage” and that, in the eyes of some people, she had merely “learned to be West German” and “learned to be a European.”⁶ Still others say with deepest conviction that the East is just an invention of the West, skillfully deployed to keep the East Germans down and boost their own egos.⁷ And finally there are those who simply can’t contain themselves and feel the need to disparage the lives lived in East Germany⁸ or who berate the “Easterners” (*Ossis*) in private chats, claiming they’re all “either communists or fascists.”⁹

So what’s the deal? The confusion is just as great as before, and many of these hypotheses and assertions only seem to rile people up. Journalist Cornelius Pollmer once described the debate about “(L)east Germany” as such: “That’s the way it always goes. Somebody says something about the East, then there’s a ‘debate,’ and in the end, when all the pundits have had their say, everyone feels a little bit more estranged. [Then] for a while, nothing happens at all. Then it starts all over again.”¹⁰

Be that as it may, any talk about eastern Germany is still bound to be accompanied by reproaches, insecurities and misunderstandings. Collective scolding of East Germans in the media is met with bitter defiance, whereas criticism of the unification process is countered by

⁶ Angela Merkel, Rede der Bundeskanzlerin beim Festakt zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit 2021 am 3. Oktober 2021 in Halle/Saale, online at: {<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-196628>}.

⁷ Dirk Oschmann, *Der Osten: Eine westdeutsche Erfindung* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2023).

⁸ In a “political Ash Wednesday” speech in 2024, the governor of Bavaria, Markus Söder (CSU), referred to Federal Minister of the Environment Steffi Lemke (Alliance 90 / The Greens) as a “Green Margot Honecker,” a reference to the former First Lady of the GDR; see, anon., “Söder vergleicht Lemke mit Margot Honecker,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (February 14, 2024), online at: {<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/parteien-passau-soeder-vergleicht-lemke-mit-margot-honecker-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-240214-99-98~672>}.

⁹ E.g., Mathias Döpfner, the chief executive of Axel Springer SE, according to a report in the weekly *Die Zeit*; see Cathrin Gilbert and Holger Stark, “‘Aber das ist dennoch die einzige Chance, um den endgültigen Niedergang des Landes zu vermeiden,’” *Die Zeit* (April 13, 2023), online at: {<https://www.zeit.de/2023/16/mathias-doeppfner-axel-springer-interne-dokumente>}.

¹⁰ Cornelius Pollmer, “Los Wochos in Lostdeutschland,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (March 1, 2023), online at: {<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/oschmann-ost-west-debatte-sachbuch-1.5759991?reduced=true>}.

pointing out that there were no real alternatives to the decisions and measures ultimately taken. The afflictions of the East are measured against the price tag borne by the West, whereas the experience of being a second-class citizen leads to calls to recognize East Germans' lifetime achievements. The one side feels colonized, the other exploited by an ungrateful population at the receiving end. It should therefore come as no surprise that many well-meaning individuals have since dropped out of the perennial discussions. On the West German side, a sense of exasperation has set in.

In the East, on the other hand, there's a widespread impression that the Western view predominates every discussion, painting a picture of doom and gloom and suggesting, for instance, that Easterners are "backward and unfit for democracy."¹¹ Many of them can only roll their eyes at the ever-new collective qualities routinely being attributed to them, effectively turning them into the "Other." Retrospective takes on the GDR likewise tend to be different in the East. While the terms "dictatorship" and "unjust state" might not be as controversial as they once were twenty years ago, conflicts are the norm when it comes to memorial culture. The historico-political interpretation of the GDR is still a hot topic. German unity and the subsequent transformation process, after all, are quite different things depending on your perspective. The Treuhand agency, for instance, responsible for the restructuring and sale of state-run East German enterprises after reunification still has the image of a ruthless and destructive institution in the East, whereas the West saw it as a necessary evil. Many problems that seem obvious from an eastern perspective are only partly acknowledged by the West. Westerners cling to the narratives of freedom and successful integration, with little patience for the social scars and cultural devaluation many Easterners bemoan even now. Some observers have the latter in mind when they talk about a certain

¹¹ Anon., "Drei Viertel finden, der Westen prägt den Blick auf den Osten," *MDR* (March 17, 2023), online at: {<https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/umfrage-meinung-ost-west-oschmann-100.html>}.

“communicative disingenuousness in post-reunification society,”¹² which has led to the formation of two distinct interpretive cultures or, at present, a “new alienation.”¹³

This modest book is an attempt to provide an overview of this thorny East-West debate, in which any attempt to assign the blame to one side or the other is bound to fail. Kitchen-sink psychology that relies on popular myths about certain group characteristics or that conflates run-of-the-mill theories with reality is likewise unproductive. We are dealing, after all, with social formations and historical processes resulting from a relatively complex cluster of causes. My aim is to extricate the topic of eastern Germany from the dusty corner of conceit and self-congratulation that both sides have relegated it to. I will ask why so much misunderstanding and discord has accumulated in post-reunification society and where the many East-West distortions derive from. Shouldn't the reunification process have long since come to an end, all the old problems and grievances be overcome by now? Why have the frictions of adjustment lasted so long? Why do we still differentiate between East and West at all, when it's getting harder and harder to put unambiguous labels on anyone?

The present book takes as its starting point an important recent insight: The initial expectation that the East would converge with or be assimilated into the West has, in light of recent developments, proved to be a chimera. The idea that East Germans should have somehow “arrived” by now is equally misplaced. The “imitation phase” is over,¹⁴ and yet the East has not simply disappeared but is still discernible in many ways. The still rampant

¹² Thomas Lindenberger, “Wahrheitsregime und Unbehagen an der Vergangenheit. Ein Versuch über die Unaufrichtigkeiten beim deutsch-deutschen Zusammenwachsen,” in *Jahrbuch Deutsche Einheit 2020*, eds. Marcus Böick, Constanin Goschler and Ralph Jessen (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2020), 73-94, 92.

¹³ Jessy Wellmer, *Die neue Entfremdung. Warum Ost- und Westdeutschland auseinanderdriften und was wir dagegen tun können*, (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2024).

¹⁴ Wolfgang Thierse, “Trotz allem im Zeitplan. Nachdenken über Wege aus der Missmutgemeinschaft Ost,” in *(Ost)Deutschlands Weg. 35 weitere Studien, Prognosen & Interviews, Teil II: Gegenwart und Zukunft*, eds. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Frank Ebert und Holger Kulick (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2021), 483-490, 490.

fiction of political unity blinds us to some deeply entrenched differences. By turning the West into the norm, we are tempted to conceive of the East as an aberration rather than seeing what makes it unique. Despite the many unification success stories, there is evidence for the *continued existence of two subsocieties* which, though having merged and converged in many regards, still stand out from each other in myriad ways. Of course, there are numerous problems that cut across the East-West divide, just as the East is characterized by considerable regional and social heterogeneity alongside a range of commonalities. East and West are more than two points on a compass if we take a closer look at social structures, mentalities and forms of political awareness. Even in unity differences can coexist.

I would like to show first of all how a combination of factors—social structure, demographics, political culture—continues to have an effect, as well as how historical inflection points have informed later developments. This approach will help us understand certain phenomena that routinely raise eyebrows, e.g., a tendency to overlook the fact that the GDR was a dictatorship, or, say, the emergence of a particularly strong eastern identity under young people in particular. I will go in search of past milestones still relevant for political culture in the East. I'm interested in finding out where there are lasting differences and what causes them. What constitutes them and what do they mean for inner-German coexistence and cooperation?

The hypothesis that the East will remain different in the long term implies that we will have to get used to certain things—that these differences will become the norm and at some point be taken as regional peculiarities. But it also means that certain admittedly problematic tendencies are not due to a failure to adapt or to backwardness, but that the East has its own development path. Now that the long transformation process is over, we can see more clearly than ever that East and West are still unequal, and that it is likely to stay that way for a while. *A consolidation of fundamental cultural and social forms* has taken place. This is evident in

social structures, identities, as well as in political cultures. Only when we recognize and acknowledge these fundamental differences can we make appropriate political decisions and look for new solutions.

By taking this approach I consciously distance myself from the rather one-sided claim that the East Germans were a “product” of the West, first and foremost of a West German policy of belittlement and identity ascription.¹⁵ While the question of “discursive disdain” is by no means irrelevant,¹⁶ it can hardly serve as a master explanation for developments in the East. We have to look beneath the surface if we want to understand what’s going on and what’s really preoccupying East German society.

Of course, this approach entails certain risks. If we talk about the East in the singular, we are effectively counteracting the efforts to debunk preconceived notions about the East and render visible the region’s rich diversity. These efforts for their part, however, run the risk of obscuring still existent and ever-more entrenched differences. At the end of the day both aspects are true: The inner diversity of eastern Germany is much greater than is often suggested, but East and West still differ nonetheless and it is unwise to sweep these discrepancies under the rug. In this sense, an idiosyncratic East has long since become a part of post-reunification normalcy, a problematic and enriching situation at once.

At a time when the far-right populist and Euroskeptic “Alternative for Germany” party (AfD) stands to be the winner in three upcoming state-parliament elections in eastern Germany, the need for social self-enlightenment is considerable. Why does an avowedly right-wing party enjoy such popularity, and which factors have facilitated its rise to power?

¹⁵ This, in a nutshell, is the popular theory presented by Dirk Oschmann in *Der Osten: Eine westdeutsche Erfindung*.

¹⁶ Raj Kollmorgen, “Diskursive Missachtung. Zur Subalternisierung ostdeutscher Soziokulturen,” *Deutschland Archiv* 40/3 (2007): 481-491.

The reasons for the AfD's success in the East have been analyzed often and in great detail.¹⁷ But the party is currently neither a purely eastern German phenomenon nor does analyzing it get us very far if we want to understand the overall political dynamics in the East. Ultimately the topic is broader: What particular conflicts and challenges to democracy exist in eastern Germany and how can they be explained?

The present volume offers neither a new historical survey of the GDR nor a fundamentally different approach to the history of German reunification and transformation. Instead, it attempts to analyze certain conflicts and problems. Starting with a broad outline of the present state of German unity, I offer a counter-hypothesis to the process of assimilation initially expected to unfold after reunification, asserting that there has in fact been a notable *consolidation of differences* between East and West over the years. I will spell out this hypothesis in the following, addressing social structure and demographics but also, and predominantly, questions of democracy, historical policy and East German identity. I will touch on current issues that cannot be adequately understood without reference to certain political and historical factors and the dynamics they give rise to.

Given the less than sanguine prospect of “more of the same,” I will conclude by making the rather risky proposal of experimenting with new forms of democracy in eastern Germany as well as looking for new ways to get people back into the political process and expand their participatory power. At the heart of this is a plea for expanding the possibilities of grassroots democratic participation, for example, in the form of citizens' assemblies, a movement that is steadily gaining traction. Without a revitalization of democracy, relying on

¹⁷ Philip Manow and Hanna Schwander, “Eine differenzierte Erklärung für den Erfolg der AfD in West- und Ostdeutschland,” in *Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland. Wahlverhalten in Zeiten politischer Polarisierung*, eds. Heinz Ulrich Brinkmann and Karl-Heinz Reuband (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), 163-191; Maria Pesthy, Matthias Mader and Harald Schoen, “Why is the AfD so successful in Eastern Germany? An analysis of the ideational foundations of the AfD vote in the 2017 federal election,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 62/1 (2021): 69-91; Manès Weisskircher, “The strength of far-right AfD in Eastern Germany: The East-West divide and the multiple causes behind ‘populism,’” *The Political Quarterly* 91/3 (2020): 614-622.

party politics and parliaments instead, I fear that eastern Germany could wind up slipping even further down a perilous path, resulting in successive new waves of AfD deputies in state governments—and with it a culture of resentment taking even deeper root.

A note to readers of “Trigger Points,”¹⁸ a book authored by Thomas Lux, Linus Westheuser and myself: Originally we had planned to deal with the East-West issue as one more group-specific expression of inequality following the us/them paradigm. By focusing on identity politics, we expected to see a common denominator in their various struggles for recognition that are less about distributing economic goods and more about perceived or real disparagement and marginalization, usually on the basis of ascribed characteristics such as origin, skin color or sexual orientation. It has since become apparent, however, that the East-West conflict has a different dynamic and requires more historical depth in its analysis, especially as structural inequalities are combined here with questions of cultural recognition. In this respect the present book can be understood as a follow-up to the previous work, albeit with a different intent and substance, a different form and structure: a small political treatise on society, politics and democracy in eastern Germany.

¹⁸ Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023).

1. Ossification rather than convergence

The German federal government publishes with admirable regularity a “Report on the State of German Unity” containing all sorts of interesting information on the “harmonization of the social, economic, political and cultural living conditions of people in unified Germany.”¹ A key objective of German politics since reunification has been to help the East catch up with the West developmentally, and these documents are an attempt to offer a detailed assessment of this process. The preamble to the most recent report is quite upfront, however, in claiming that this is easier said than done:

Even thirty-three years after reunification, the vestiges of German division are still visible. To be sure, the structural differences between East and West have diminished, in some cases vanishing outright. And yet many East and West Germans assess the country’s state of affairs differently. This can be seen in the recurrent, heated debates about the East and its place in unified Germany. The consequences of reunification are still very much on many people’s minds.²

The quote makes abundantly clear that, while integration might be making steady progress, the East’s “place” in the new Germany is still contentious.

Modernization theory³—which was undergoing a revival around the time of reunification and was highly influential in the social sciences and elsewhere—predicted in the 1990s that eastern Germany would develop and converge with western Germany over the medium term, coming to resemble the West more and more after an initial transition phase. Its “modernization deficit,” in other words, would eventually be overcome. In economics, there was talk of a “race to catch up” (*Aufholjagd*) and “rebuilding the East” (*Aufbau Ost*).

¹ Der Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Ostdeutschland, *Zum Stand der Deutschen Einheit. Bericht der Bundesregierung 2023* (September 27, 2023), online at: {<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/publikationen/deutsche-einheit-2023-2226088>}.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Wolfgang Zapf, *Modernisierung, Wohlfahrtsentwicklung und Transformation. Soziologische Aufsätze 1987 bis 1994* (Berlin: Edition Sigma, 1994).

The same went more or less for institutions, but also social structures, mentalities and cultural orientations. While the catching-up process of a society in transformation was bound to be accompanied by certain frictions, ultimately the development process would boil down to the adoption of a western (or rather: West German) paradigm. The survival of idiosyncratically eastern social structures or cultural forms seemed unlikely.

This logic of modernization and convergence also guided policymakers. While the original target of “uniform living conditions” was modified in the Basic Law in 1994 to reflect a more moderate aim, the “creation of equivalent living conditions,” the guiding principle was still the reduction of inner-German disparities. What exactly this constitutional norm implies is for legal scholars to interpret, but in terms of social policy it is often understood as the East becoming more like the West. In light of this objective, any still existing differences were interpreted as transitional or adjustment problems of the East which needed to be solved.

A glance at a few key statistical indicators shows that the East has developed fairly well in recent years. The demographic hemorrhaging stopped in 2017, with slightly more people now moving from West to East than vice versa. The wide gap in the unemployment rate had narrowed, the subjective sense of life satisfaction has converged, and in recent years economic growth in the East has even surpassed the overall German growth rate. News of extensive private and public investment and the establishment of technology-intensive industries—from battery manufacturing to chip production to electromobility—offer hope that, in the medium term, the productivity gap might narrow as well. The fact that prestigious global companies have been choosing eastern Germany as a business location has many people dreaming of an economic boom. Industrial parks, assembly plants and an expanding broadband network are to their mind the new “flourishing landscapes” originally promised to East Germans upon reunification. Carsten Schneider, the Federal Commissioner for Eastern

Germany, talks about the East as a “region of opportunity” in an effort to convey a spirit of optimism.

In terms of “inner unity,” the news looks good as well. The integration of East and West is very much a lived experience that is meanwhile taken for granted. There are manifold social forms and forms of solidarity (families, friendship networks, clubs and associations) in which regional identities are all but irrelevant. Mobility and inner-German migration have led to such a mixing of East and West that, like yolk and egg white in a scrambled egg, you can’t take it apart again. And, all in all, the relationship is not so bad—no one is contemplating a divorce, a renewed division of Germany.

But this is only one side of the coin, obscuring persistent and sometimes intractable differences. Examining a host of various factors—household furnishings, employment rates, church membership, the number of clubs and associations, the amount of people with migrant backgrounds, expenditures on research and development, the export orientation of the economy, trust in institutions, patent applications, the headquarters of major companies, productivity, estate-tax revenue, the number of tennis courts, the number of young people, the concentration of mosques, the life expectancy of men, average farm size, political-party membership, purchasing power, the value of real estate, the size of the low-wage sector—invariably leads to the same conclusion: there is a phantom border running through a unified country. A color-coded map of the 294 rural districts and 106 independent towns in Germany based on each of these statistics reveals that the old Federal Republic and eastern Germany are still drastically different; more than three decades after reunification, the outline of the GDR is clearly discernable.

In many of these cases there is no indication that the differences are equalizing, thus belying some of the basic premises of the convergence discourse. It is true, of course, that eastern Germany is an increasingly diverse landscape that can hardly be understood as

monolithic (just as it is true that certain structurally weak regions in western Germany have shared the same fate as similar regions in the East, effectively being left behind). And yet there are still some overarching patterns that render an East-West comparison meaningful. It is also worth pointing out that certain differences—cultural, socioeconomic, political—have consolidated and reproduced themselves despite our expectations.

A persistent disparity seems to have taken hold, which makes one wonder what politicians mean when they adhere to the objective of “*finalizing* inner unity socially and economically” (as it says in the last coalition agreement, emphasis mine).⁴ Though we still follow the logic of convergence, the underlying assumptions are becoming ever more brittle. Of course, it is easy to reach an agreement when it comes to the equalization of economic living conditions. In other cases things are more complicated. In which instances do we really wish for the differences to disappear and for the East to converge with the West? Pensions and incomes, yes, but please not rents, the quality of schools or the gender pay gap. Productivity, good-paying jobs and assets, yes, but not the employment rate of women, access to preschools, apartments with district heating, or the number of theaters per capita—all of which are higher in the East. The hope for equality (or the expectation that differences will be eliminated) is hardly sustainable as a norm when it doesn’t get into specifics. We don’t, after all, expect Bavaria or Saarland, two wildly different federal states in former West Germany, to somehow align with the rest of Germany. Not to mention the obvious fact that the western parts of the Federal Republic are a moving target, in a constant state of flux themselves.

Rather than hoping for convergence, it would be more expedient, in my view, to assume that the *peculiarities of eastern Germany will persist*. Eastern Germany should be

⁴ “Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021-2025 zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (SPD), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und den Freien Demokraten (FDP)” (December 7, 2021), online at, e.g.,: {https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf}, 5.

understood as structurally unique, its social fabric and mentalities having been marked by the experience of the GDR, reunification and transformation, and the special developmental path this entailed. Shedding or leaving behind differences or a simple process of catching up become more unlikely the more time passes since reunification, and in many areas it is clear that convergence will no longer take place. Instead we see limited stabilizing tendencies caused by historical discontinuities as well attachment effects of sociocultures and mentalities. Some of these phenomena—and I suggested this in my book “Lütten Klein: Life in East German Transformation Society”⁵—can be understood as the result of fractures with a long-term effect on social cohesion. Cracks are often invisible on the surface, but their impact—in this case on the mobility, adaptability and flexibility of societies—can be considerable, and is sometimes only felt much later. These fractures are not solely attributable to the GDR nor the reunification and transformation process, but result from both in combination. Historical factors predating the existence of the GDR also play a role, whether in the area of culture (e.g., church affiliation), demographics, or socioeconomic structures (e.g., the relative size of the working-class population).⁶ Ultimately it’s a platitude: The present always carries the burden of the past, everyone has been influenced, no one exists without their experiences. For that reason alone, you shouldn’t expect others to be like you. Taking the fracture metaphor one step further—though, mind you, this is just a thought experiment!—we can borrow the medical term *ossification*. The term is fairly open to interpretation, referring as it does to both the (in some cases pathological) hardening of tissue as well as to the regenerative process after a break, the building of scar tissue.

⁵ Steffen Mau, *Lütten Klein. Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

⁶ Sebastian Klüsener and Joshua R. Goldstein, “A long-standing demographic East-West divide in Germany,” *Population, Space and Place* 22/1 (2016), 5-22; Sascha O. Becker, Lukas Mergele and Ludger Woessmann, “The separation and reunification of Germany: Rethinking a natural experiment interpretation of the enduring effects of Communism,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34/2 (2020), 143-171.

In line with the consolidation theory outlined above, the following will address the ossification of specific elements in the subsociety of eastern Germany. The latter, though ever-changing, will long remain a recognizable social structure. We would therefore do well not to view the East solely in reference to the West but to see it as uniquely constituted, a phenomenon in its own right. The analytical and potential political benefits of this, i.e., the assumption of persistent and potentially irradicable differences, is that it suggests a different explanation for social imbalances and hence gives rise to different solutions. It enables us to spell out more clearly which development gaps can be addressed through politics (e.g., unequal opportunities), which might be normalized as regional particularities (e.g., social and cultural identities), and which are perhaps cause for alarm (e.g., developments in political culture and voting behavior).

To understand the ossification that has taken place in eastern Germany, it is necessary to bear in mind that German unity was a misalliance of two very unequally matched partners.⁷ While all the political fanfare with its talk of “compatriots” and “brothers and sisters” in the East bore witness to a belief in an almost ethnic sense of belonging, two very different societies had formed during the decades of division. This was true not only of economic and political systems, but also social structures, cultural mentalities and forms of political consciousness. The notion that what belongs together would necessarily grow together obscured the differences that would continue to exist after the demise of state socialism. The asymmetrical preconditions of reunification have led to persistent inequalities.

⁷ There are now some historical works that endeavor to offer parallel histories of East and West, thus overcoming the limitations of a historical approach written solely from a West German or Federal German perspective. They show the simultaneity of substantial differences, but also the entanglements that emerged during decades of German division; see, e.g., Petra Weber, *Getrennt und doch vereint. Deutsch-deutsche Geschichte 1945-1989/90* (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2020); Ursula Weidenfeld, *Das doppelte Deutschland. Eine Parallelgeschichte, 1949-1990* (Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin, 2024).

The experience of upheaval and transformation shock did their part in generating even more differences.

I would like to briefly outline a number of aspects in order to back up my argument that the expectation of convergence or imitation can no longer be a realistic development scenario and that we have to assume that many differences will effectively be long-lasting. My focus will be on social structure, demographics and culture. This is necessarily selective, but it is these areas that best serve to illustrate my hypothesis, though some aspects of political culture and mentalities will also be explored in greater detail as the book progresses.