

Part II

The Wende

In the final years of GDR rule, as the debates showed in the party groups at Stanex, the developments in the neighbouring countries were accurately perceived. They were not discussed openly but provided material for arguments privately and at work. In particular, the Gorbachev reforms in the Soviet Union were fiercely debated. In all three enterprises the Society for German–Soviet Friendship received a new lease of life, while members of the SED left the party in droves during the exchange of the membership books in 1989. Veit Kater was among those leaving the party in September 1989. Open political resistance remained absent until autumn 1989, but a noticeable retreat from organised ‘social’ life was evident.

The ‘possibility to travel’ (*Reisen-können*) was an important subject of conversations in the enterprise. The right to leave a country is, as John Locke expressed it, a particularly significant right for only if this right can be exercised can conformity with a regime or system become a matter of choice (Lukes 1990: 30). For some of the people I talked to, a failed application for travel to the West was the catalyst for renouncing all official functions that could be taken to be political support for the SED regime. Since he was not granted permission to travel to West Berlin for the birthday celebration of a relative, the engineer Born renounced his function as shop steward, quit the Society for German–Soviet Friendship, left the Chamber of Technology (*Kammer für Technologie*) and refused to volunteer any longer on the board of the Housing Community. In the written explanation he submitted for his resignation, he wrote that as he was not trusted to return from a journey to the West, he could no longer hold such positions of responsibility. Other colleagues developed an increasingly critical discourse towards the state. As Fröhlich reported, during the shop stewards’ general meeting shortly before the Wende, members stood up and protested that in this country they were left ‘to stew in their own juice’ and could

not achieve anything, because they were kept ignorant of 'what was going on in the world' (Fröhlich, skilled worker, Stanex, 16 June 1991).

For forty years the social reality had been interpreted, defended or criticized from the perspective of the isolation of GDR society. The normative principles, which the opposing factions in the three enterprises used as the basis for their arguments and ideological clashes within the enterprises in autumn 1989, were a product of the planned economy and of the socialist order of society. The principles were diverse, highly moralistic and above all scarcely oriented towards concrete strategies for action. As long as the controversies stayed private, the possibilities for real changes remained small.

Not until summer 1989, when people saw the possibility of emigrating, did they gain the confidence to consider other options, such as reacting to an intolerable situation not by moving away, but by attempting to transform it through dissent (Hirschman 1992: 344). The motto that was frequently proclaimed in autumn 1989: 'We are staying here!' became an ambivalent but effective threat to the GDR authorities because it proved that the tacit acceptance of the social conditions was now over.

For a short period in autumn 1989, hopes were pinned on the trade union with Harry Tisch at its head because it seemed to form the only alternative force to counter the Socialist Unity Party. On 20 October 1989, the shop stewards and trade union leaders for the section assembly automation at Stanex wrote a letter to Harry Tisch to voice their support for a public letter, which the trade union members of Bergmann-Borsig had aimed on 29 September 1989 at the trade union directors. The trade union members demanded a public enquiry into the floods of GDR citizens pouring into the West and a discussion of the real reasons behind their emigration. While avoiding questioning socialism as an ideal of society, they insisted: 'We have to offer people new perspectives which enable the further development of what has already been achieved on the basis of real individual exertion of influence.' Hardly two weeks later, the man they had 'pinned their hopes on' had to resign from his post of FDGB chairman and one month later was accused of having grossly abused his position.

When the wall fell, the old regime not only collapsed, but discourses that were critical of the regime also became rapidly disoriented. Most of the people I talked to in the enterprises stressed that in 1989 they did not want to do away with 'socialism' as a social ideal and moral order, but that they defended themselves against the political and social patronizing that accompanied it, as well as against the irrationalities of a

centrally planned economy. The plea for individual liberty, freedom of expression and democracy was overtaken by rapid political and economic developments, which were not brought along by any organized revolutionary opposition, but were managed by the old party elite. There were 'no counter-elite, no theory, no organization, no movement, no design or project according to whose visions, instructions and perceptions the breakdown evolved' (Elster et al. 1998: 11). Elster and his colleagues label the dissolution process of the old system strangely 'subjectless' and the process of setting up the new system 'vegetative', hence extremely passive (1998: 15), because they could not discern any social agents, and above all any social elite, who would have driven the process forward towards specific goals and intentions.

While in most postsocialist societies the power relations within institutions remained unclear after the collapse, in East Germany institutions of the Federal German State filled the empty space. Through Federal German law and institutions, the members of East German society received a new legal framework, which on the one hand placed limits on arbitrariness, but on the other hand was not founded on their own initiative. The process whereby institutions were transferred from West to East is sometimes erroneously termed 'colonization' (Stark and Bruszt 1998: 175), which, despite certain limits to its democratic character, does not do justice to German unification and serves to play down the violent subjugation and exploitation of large parts of the world by colonial powers. West German society, which was no longer seen by GDR citizens as merely an ideal model to follow or as a frightening polar opposite, took the place of a social alternative and grew into the dominant and domineering model.

East Germany saw its future being shaped by West German politicians, who had infinite trust in the all-encompassing market principle and confidence in the powerful Federal German State, but who were, however, sceptical towards East German society (Stark and Bruszt 1998:102). Also the privatization trust *Treuhand*, which was created by the Modrow government in spring 1990, at first left privatization to the market and sold off East German enterprises without restructuring them beforehand. Yet, in 1990 it was not investment capital that flowed from West German firms over to East Germany, but goods, which quickly stifled East German products and resulted in a 'market shock' (Stark and Bruszt 1998: 138). The East German enterprises lacked managerial experience, access to markets, new technology and moreover could not compete due to rising wages. As a result of this, 4.5 million jobs were lost between 1989 and 1992. From

the first six months of 1990 to the first six months of 1991, industrial production sank to half its original level, and a year later it continued to fall to a third of the level in 1989. The Treuhand did not begin to change its approach until 1991 and only then did it assume responsibility for everything the 'invisible hand of the market' was unable to achieve: safeguarding jobs, preventing deindustrialization, securing the ability of private firms to survive and so on. The active economic restructuring of East Germany and the transfer payments from social insurance turned into astronomical costs for the citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. Stark and Bruszt (1998: 140) talk of payments being twelve times more than the Marshall Plan.

Many citizens in West Germany felt the economic and political consequences, in particular the costs of the state debt and tax increases, to be a considerable burden and an involuntary tribute towards unification. Furthermore, the relations between East and West Germans, and especially East and West Berliners, were moulded by intimate bonds, which gave the political and economic relationships a personal, emotional dimension.

In this transformation process, the employees in the three enterprises pursued individual strategies and various moral and economic goals. Every single one fell back on knowledge acquired in the planned economy, formal and informal relationships with colleagues, superiors and customers, recollections of past wrongs and loyalties. All the same, people did not remain the same while the institutional order collapsed around them, but they changed, experimented or opposed and contributed in some measure to the society that arose during this period. Nonetheless, the outcome did not necessarily correspond to the original intentions. The *Wende* in the three enterprises is also a story of objectives that were never fulfilled. Why that was so, I will show in the two enterprises Taghell and Stanex, which tried to survive in the market economy without being bought up by Western firms. What I find particularly interesting here is the view of the market economy, which the employees developed, their conceptions of right and wrong and the instrumentalization of money and ownership in the new power relationships.