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Nature as Resource: Everyday life and socialisation during the twofold transition in east Germany in the late 20th century.

Ethnological perspectives on the conflict around sustainable methods of production.

In this paper I would like to draw the attention to a living environment that has virtually been declared dead. Despite the obituaries in the German media as well as in the German scienceworld actually, it is a lively sphere of activity for individuals and groups within current restructuring, which is named globalisation. This has relatively direct effects on regional living conditions, lifestyles, everyday practices as well as mentalities in different places of the world. If we consider the European societies after World War Two. Both systems, the western countries and the eastern countries shared similar experiences in regards to working conditions and social insurance.

The neoliberal economy, which has been establishing itself for the last 20 years, is throwing whole aspects of individuals' fundamental life experience into question. This was due to the drastic change in balance of political power and economic power. (Lord) Ralf Dahrendorf described this difference between knowledge and actual event as a "core contradiction of the post-industrial society" and regards it as essential task that "the discrepancy between justice and efficiency has to be overcome or at least alleviated".(Dahrendorf 2000, Die Bürgergesellschaft).

As a result of wanting to observe patterns in change situations in the field and their consequent related, this then led me and a number of student project groups to explore a small number of different villages in Brandenburg.

Brandenburg is by area one of the largest of the German counties covered almost entirely by villages and small and medium-sized towns, with only a few urban agglomerations.

One of these villages is Brodowin, which is home to a 1250(twelf hundred and fifty) hectare organic farm, one of the largest in Germany. Situated about eighty kilometres north-east of Berlin in the Uckermark region, Brodowin is surrounded by a scenic landscape of lakes and hills. It was here in 1907 that Brandenburg's first nature reserve was designated, the Plagefenn, a fenland. Looking at these natural riches from an agricultural perspective, however, they appear much more modest. In terms of soil quality, it is a poor soil. The majority of the soil are sands: the proverbial „Märkische Streusandbüchse“, Brandenburg tin of grit.

The title of my research project was: “Between Economy and Ecology. Problems of economic, social and cultural sustainability in agriculture”. To be absolutely clear, since the fall of the Wall the term “Wende” denotes the turn of the political system in east Germany. The research project addressed the paradoxical question: How did a village and an agricultural business manage to develop contrary to the official scenario of dying villages and businesses throughout Brandenburg? Our main interest focused on the question of whether the idyllic picture of the successful “Wende” in the countryside, coupled with ecological claims, does in fact reflect the reality of the “ecovillage” Brodowin and whether elements of this can be used for the development of other places in rural areas.

Within the framework of my research agenda I have tried to answer the following 3 key questions:

1. How did the outlook on life, everyday life and socialisation change in the

process of the twofold transition, which has developed a singular dynamic in Brodowin: a) as transition from means of production that were collective-cooperative to those of the private economy and b) as transition from a purely industrial, market-based approach to a future society-nature-cycle.

2. What long-term effects do previous events, the so-called “old events” have on today’s patterns of behaviour, thought and action of one group of people in one location?
3. Do the forms of labour in the organic-agricultural business have any effects on the place?

The main employer during the past decades, in the GDR, was the agricultural cooperative the LPG. In the wake of intensification and specialisation of GDR agriculture, from 1976 onwards Brodowin specialised exclusively in livestock breeding and procured the feed from a neighbouring cooperative specialising in crop cultivation. In an ecologically sensitive environment two major problems were identified:

1. Spreading of liquid manure.
2. High quantities of chemical fertilizer were used in the fields. These problems were ignored by politicians and bureaucrats. A group of environmentalists was set up to address environmental issues. And it was against this backdrop that the political “Wende”, or turn, reached Brodowin. Following the introduction of the amendment act only 1 year after 1989, the GDR cooperative, the LPG, was dissolved and transferred into a legal form of organisation within private industry.

In this situation, one group of people decided to use this opportunity as a reason for change. These are people who have worked in agriculture in the former GDR and were familiar with the problems in technological oriented farming. Now their aim was to use the local natural conditions in a sustainable way.

Sustainability draws on at least four different spheres: ecology – natural

environment, as well as from the social, economic and political spheres. European Ethnology as the science of humankind within its culture is particularly interested in issues of everyday thought and action. Within this process, Brodowin became a place in which the transformations of the past fifteen years became visible in a very specific way, analogous to a convex mirror.

What distinguishes Brodowin today is the organic-agriculture limited company, to which I will refer to as the “Agrar-GmbH” in the rest of my presentation. This business draws its workforce from the village of Brodowin as well as from a few neighbouring villages. As a result, the unemployment rate in the vicinity of the cooperative is as low as 7.2% (seven point two percent) compared with a regional rate of 17.2 %. Whole county of Brandenburg is classified as structurally weak, or poor. It is therefore surprising that there are not only differences in opinion but even tangible conflicts between discrete groups of the population concerning the development goals for the community. Employing qualitative methods in conjunction with the appropriate theoretical underpinnings we approached the situation in Brodowin in order to be able to understand it.

It is crucial to be aware of a series of historico-spatial conditions, or rather challenges: In 1940 a family owned a certain area of arable land as their base for farming and their social and economic position in the village was dependent on that. In 1945 to 1946 Land Reform meant any land ownership of more than 100 hectares was expropriated, no matter of the quality of the soil. The period of collectivisation from 1955 until about 1960 is characterised by voluntary or forced joining of the LPG by the 59 family-run farms. In 1991, that is 30 years later, the LPG is dissolved. Some of the farmers are now trying to start their own private business. The majority, however, are joining the Agrar-GmbH.

How, then, do such changes move these families? Are they able to find and assert an identity in spite of conditions which have been changing over a period lasting several decades? How do those affected react and behave, and what transformations or continuities can be grasped? Is there a new form of life developing for the rural community? In order to start approaching such questions brought up by the empirical material, two theoretical models appeared suitable: Firstly, Bourdieu's theory of the different forms of capital. Secondly, the social process model of figuration developed by Elias in his two-volume study on "The Civilizing Process". Elias argues that people are involved in interconnected social webs with an increasing, ever more complex mutual dependency (chains of interdependence). In this scenario every participant of a figuration appears as a being with many values, akin with loose bindings in search of a deep connection to other people (Elias 1970: 146f).

The perspective of the Elias' figuration model, with its stress on open values and the diversity of human relationships, lends itself particularly well to the structuring of the processes of change in the village of Brodowin. It accounts for the myriad of historic influences, attitudes and perceptions which the people of each period bring into their web of social relationships. It is impossible to regard as ever being completed. In order to ascertain the currently existing web of social relationships as objectively as possible, we continued to analyse existing literature, documents and files and also we engaged in participant observation at various meetings on issues concerning the village development. As a result of this and the interviews with our participants the basic structure of social groups, as sketched out earlier, was initially confirmed: According to this, in the village there seemed to be only "Ökos" or "Greens", or "non-Ökos". Comments such as the "Ökos ... want to live like in the middle ages and other people don't want that", were heard

at one residents' meeting about the development of the road network for cars, bicycles and pedestrians.

This very rough grid of specific people with their own experiences and beliefs can be further specified in order to determine smaller, yet significant, groups.

Elias uses his figuration model to examine the relationship between the established and the outsiders within an English working-class community (Elias / Scotson, 1993). In my research two different historical periods are playing a crucial role: Firstly, the mid-1980s in the GDR and, secondly, the early 1990s. In the 1980s, the following four groups could be classified:

1. The *village community* with a mayor who hails from a neighbouring village of the region. – Indicators of a functioning village community are many joint activities such as installing a central water supply on their own initiative, the work in various societies, numerous festivities as well as the development of a village design concept in 1986.
2. The Agricultural Production Cooperative which employed the majority of the inhabitants.
3. The writers, artists, film people *and conservationists*, who had their second homes mainly in Brodowin or were regular campers or holiday makers on a near-natural campsite and,
4. the group around the very committed *pastor*, who established social networks beyond the village borders. – He was, jointly with the writers and conservationists, responsible for initiating the “Brodowin Discussions” in 1981, which took place once a year in different places until the end of the GDR.

Using Elias' figurations example it becomes clear that these groups were situated in different relationships to power and influence within the village community and society. If you then put a different template over these groups you can make out an additional classification of established and outsiders.

Thus, it was possible to consolidate the apparently vast reality of multiple relationships within and between the groups into another recognizable grid. One which explains why, for instance, so many Brodowin residents are represented in both of the first groups while others from the latter groups can equally be attributed to the village community. However, significant consideration must be applied to different lengths of time of residence in the village community as well as the land owned by families before and after 1945 are also of significance for the figurations model.

Agrarian income today reflects on ownership rules that were in force before 1945.

Because this is from where the varying incomes are resulting today – for example in the form of lease income from the Agrar-GmbH.

In addition, there is the influence on the Agrar-GmbH via the areas being leased to the company. Thus, the chances of a leaseholder to find employment in the company are much higher than those of a worker without land property. Further to my own research on the conditions for integration and assimilation of displaced persons from the former German territories in the rural areas of Brandenburg after World War 2. I would argue that these are important spheres which are of significance for current conflicts and differences about acceptance and rejection of hierarchy and power, and thereby for the current relationship of humans and the environment in the “ecovillage” Brodowin (Scholze-Irrnitz 1996: 135–149).

Another important period is the beginning of the 1990s in Brodowin. At that time a new and significant group was added to the figurations already mentioned: In February 1990 a “round table” group was set up in Brodowin. The minority of members were drawn from the “established” group of long-time inhabitants, with the remainder being “outsiders”. These “outsiders” consisted of a group of intellectuals and conservationists, together with the pastor. This group were represented and became key characters of this phase.

And on December 31st, 1990 the agricultural amendment act for east Germany came into effect. It envisaged dissolving the agricultural production cooperatives, the LPGs, and transferring them into new juridical forms. Under the pressure of unfolding events, the LPG adopted the constitution of the Agrar-GmbH, a joint decision by all its members. This process was also attended by external experts as advisers at the “round table”. Part of these came from east Germany, among them were the Environment Minister of the last GDR government under Lothar de Maiziere, Michael Succow, who was responsible for the creation of the national parks and biosphere reserves. Other experts involved came from west Germany, among them a member of staff of the Agriculture Ministry at the time, two organic farmers with experience on large estates as well as a possible investor.

By transferring into the Agrar-GmbH a far-reaching decision was taken for the development of Brodowin under the new economic, legal and social conditions. Setting the new course for organic farming was a unanimous decision taken with the involvement of the “round table” as a new group and more or less. A ballot was held on this in 1990 at an assembly of the agricultural cooperative and the inhabitants. A large part of the village inhabitants, about 50 people joined the eco-society (Öko-Verein), which had been set up earlier (Rau 2000: 144). This strengthened a dynamic, which met a lot of support in the village until 1994 /95. However, concomitant to this decision making process was the surfacing of a conflict, which superficially conveyed the impression of a dispute between the supporters and the opponents of the ecological path, referred to earlier in my presentation. In order to get to the roots of the conflict let us look at the actions of particular individuals and groups in a historic-comparative analysis. Two factors are important for this:

firstly, the respective length of residence in the village of those concerned (old settlers, new settlers 1945-1950, incomers during the 1960s to 1980s, incomers after 1990) and

secondly, the respective property situation (before 1945, before joining the LPG and after 1990). Further questions concern:

- positions and functions in the village (up to 1990, 1995 and up to 2007);
- material resources to secure one's livelihood (professions, jobs) in the GDR and in the present;
- memberships in societies then and now;
- kinship relations as well as
- experiences of work- and leisure-times.

I will now present a short summary of the outlined research: Inquiring into the correlation of historical processes of transition and regional spaces of activity means to also recognise figurations, which contain conflict potential for the acting individuals and groups. What appears, on the surface, as minor differences – for example the colour scheme of houses and shutters – can, as the case may be, have deeper roots and sweeping effects on the local community: “The immigrants on their part quite innocently behaved in their new place of residence in the manner which appeared natural to them. They were not aware of the existence of an established order with its power differentials and entrenched position of the core group of the leading families in the older part”, is what Elias wrote about Winston Parva (Elias / Scotson 1994:156). To understand in more detail the structure of the working life and everyday life in transforming east Germany between continuity and transition, between micro- and macro-levels, is really only fruitful when applying qualitative methods. Then it will be clearer whether approaches of modernization theory can at all enhance knowledge gain. The term transformation, as used here, suggests, however, that it would be the aim to

copy the model of the experiences of west European development of the past decades, or to simply fill in this tried and trusted form. An approach via the concept of modernity should, however, transcend the old dichotomy of “Anciens et moderns”. In fact, this theory starts from the notion that minimal institutional change is enough to give new form to the economies of these countries, as Martha Lampland explains in her excellent study of cooperative farm managers in the post-socialist economy. “For ‘big bang’ theorists, what preceded the transition is irrelevant. More accurately, the past is anathema and must be eradicated. The tendency to dismiss the consequences of local socialist history is problematic, and arises from two misconceptions. The first is a general point about why history matters, or what otherwise might be called the constitutive power of social action” (Lampland 2002: 32).

I will end my presentation on this point. My research findings show that environment declared dead by the German media is in fact well alive.