

A Western Observer on East German Passive Resistance (1982)

Abstract

A Western observer describes the apparent lack of a work ethic in the GDR, where there were absolutely no performance incentives. The citizenry's disinterest in work not only damaged the East German economy, but also functioned as an expression of silent protest against a system that was rotten to the core and in which personal engagement did not pay off.

Source

At the entrance to the restaurant a sign reads: "Please wait, you will be seated." In front of the sign are the customers, who are disciplined about forming a line. Behind the sign lies a completely empty restaurant. Nobody comes along to seat the customers. No guest dares to sit down at a table; he wouldn't be served. For years this has been the custom in the GDR. When the signs were recently removed, the customers remained standing at the entrance, feeling uncertain and waiting for a sign from the staff. A well-worn habit. The citizen knows that he can't force another worker to provide a service. He himself would not be prepared to do this. The prevailing unwritten law is that it's not the customer but the working man who is king. In the preamble to the Labor Law Code, it says: "Out of the burden of unfree labor for parasitic exploiters emerged the free labor of workers for themselves and for society." This is taken at its word. Free labor is first for myself, second for society. Although many are unfamiliar with the text of this law, everybody acts according to this interpretation.

The waiter lets the tables stay empty, places (for no reason at all) a "reserved" sign on some of them, serves slowly and sullenly. The next day he's attending briskly to the customers, serving them obligingly and cheerfully. In the first instance he's not in the mood for customers. He finds it more important to chat with the girl from the kitchen staff, go over the latest soccer results with his colleagues, or read the paper. In the second instance the waiter is in the mood for customers. It pleases him to demonstrate how well he has mastered his craft. His personal well-being is more important to him than tips.

The case of the waiter is exemplary. It applies to the entire country. At the vegetable co-op there's a sign saying "closed for receiving goods"—the salesladies have gone to get hold of some boots at Salamander^[1]. The line is getting longer at the supermarket cash register—the saleslady is discussing her favorite song with her girlfriend. At the housing office, all office doors are locked during official visiting hours; there is resounding laughter behind one of the doors, a colleague's birthday is being celebrated. Everywhere the motto is "what's private comes before catastrophe." When a customer complains, there are rarely consequences for those who've been criticized. The angry citizen is assured that the authorities have "evaluated his criticism in the collective." Normally, the evaluation is limited to a single sentence: "Don't push it, Wilhelm!" No boss is going to pick a fight with a member of his staff over trifles like this. If he dares to do so, he can be sure that the admonished worker will give notice right away. When a customer complains, there are usually consequences for himself. He had better not be seen around that place, because he's tried "to make mincemeat out of" one of his own kind. This is a grave insult, for which the punishment is contempt. In a bicycle shop in Halle, for years a saleslady refused on principle to sell anything from the storage room. She didn't feel like going back there, where she might have even had to climb a ladder. If items weren't on hand in the sales room, then they weren't available. This hardly astonished the customers; they're accustomed to not getting the simplest things. After two years, it dawned on HO-Zentral^[2] that inventories were excessive and sales low. The saleslady

was fired on the spot—a rare occurrence in the GDR.

The GDR citizen's sense of time has a special quality. The Russian expression “wsjo budget”—it'll be all right—has developed into a mentality. The American “time is money” doesn't occur to anybody. Longstanding experience teaches that, in centrally managed economies, it is completely pointless to “bend over backwards” at work. If you work fast, materials are quickly used up, deliveries stop, and waiting periods are the result. If you finish your allotted task ahead of time, you still have to sit out the rest of the workday. Using every second doesn't make much of a difference to anyone. That's why it has become customary to stockpile work at first; in this way, it becomes easier to deal with it. Version one: excessively accumulated work is completed on time; this proves how efficient you are and a bonus is dangled in front of you. Version two: excessively accumulated work is finished by working overtime and on special shifts; this brings extra pay and bonuses. Version three: excessively accumulated work is not finished at all; there's a call for temporary workers or additional permanent positions—in other words, more manpower. All three versions of how to deal with work are advantageous to the worker. To finish everything quickly and then sit around, or to have waiting periods at a time when you can't use them for something personal, contradicts “the socialist course.” The first thing apprentices learn when they enter a practice is: “Here everything takes its socialist course.” Pretty much the same as “wsjo budget,” it'll be all right—Russia is large and the Czar is far away.

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NOTES

[1] Salamander: a West German shoe store chain—trans.

[2] *Handelsorganisation-Zentral*: the headquarters of “trade organization,” the state-run retail store—trans.

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