

Günter Gaus, Niche Society (1983)

Abstract

Günter Gaus, the former head of the West German mission in East Berlin, describes the private niches into which East Germans withdrew to escape the conformity pressure of the party. He concludes that this safety valve helped stabilize the SED regime.

Source

So: The East German niche society. Only when you succeed in describing it can you make West Germans understand the inner, hidden, essential realities of the GDR. According to the SED's biased view of the state it rules, these realities do not exist, the private niches in which the Saxons and the Mecklenburgers, the Brandenburgers and Thuringians have established themselves. The ever-rising material and cultural living standard of GDR citizens proclaimed by official propaganda is, according to the very same propaganda, embedded in the reality and consciousness of a developed socialist society on the long path to communism. Leaving aside the future for now, the SED's take on this is by no means false: various aspects of private life in East Germany are incorporated into the societal conditions established by the communist state party. The niches do not exist on the outside; rather, they exist within the socialism of the GDR.

This distinction is important: niche dwellers don't always realize how many facts, ideas, and measures of "real existing socialism" have established themselves in the recesses of private life over the course of decades. It is the word—niche—that is disconcerting to the SED comrades and that darkens their world view. What the word conveys—and this is completely applicable to the situation in the GDR, which I thus characterize accordingly—is a withdrawal into the private sphere, the fulfillment of individualistic needs, which are not adequately met by collectivism. The private realms of life, designed as deep niches, are areas free from the prevailing doctrine. In no way does this also make them basic pockets of resistance. On the contrary: they function as pressure valves. It is practically a defining characteristic of East German niches that their occupants, their residents, have come to terms with their state's regime through the possibility of the niche, of individualistic happiness in the niche. Whoever has a falling out with the regime steps out of the niche.

The anguish of the faithful SED comrades—some merely feign their faith for the sake of the West German interlocutor—revolves around the sad, bitter realization (for them) that a niche dweller is a far cry from the "new man." In the private cave lives the aforementioned Old Adam with his kin; he is smart enough to demonstrate just the right amount of the required, approved engagement expected by the party and the state for withdrawal into the private to be an option for him. The arrangement between him and the regime is—how could it be otherwise—a tacit one. I believe that security-conscious comrades without illusions find useful the general easing of pressure that is transferred from the niche existence to the public sphere. But the more idealistically minded ones do not want to acknowledge the free spaces; they deny the existence of the niches. Only cynics can delight in their nagging doubts about whether they might not exist after all.

[...]

So: what is a niche within GDR society? It is the preferred space of the people over there; the place where they leave behind the politicians, planners, propagandists, the collective, the grand objective, the cultural legacy—the place where they leave it all behind and, with family and among friends, water their

potted plants, wash their cars, play cards, talk, celebrate. And where they think about how, and with whose help, they could procure and organize what's still needed to make the niche even homier. As I've already said, nothing special, the same thing that we do here at home, if we replace thinking about how something could be procured with calculating which additional instalment payments might still be possible. This realization takes us beyond our clichés about the other German state. Contrary to the notions that totalitarian anti-communism—no, more than that: that the irrational fear of leftist ideas in general—have created in our majority bourgeois mindset, contrary to these ideas, the private niche existence is the predominant form of life in the GDR. The Western agitation that is feeding our fears has led us to believe that the—always depressing, often evil and catastrophic—exceptions are the rule in East Germany. The great number of exceptions, the terribly great number, makes it easier to do so.

The origins of those exceptions—that is, those existences that push out, fall out, or are forced out of the niches—cannot be explained singularly. Most assuredly, the exceptions do not result solely from the conditions of the system. Much misfortune, sometimes tragedy, is produced by the collision between individual realities (diverse, internal as well as external) and the opinion of the powerful, who, depending on the source of conflict, sometimes also have the majority in the niches on their side when it comes to what—under certain circumstances—is no longer tolerable. I ask myself how many exceptions, how many exclusions we could come to know in our system if, through force of circumstance, the powerful and their majority no longer saw deviations from the behavioral norm as tolerable in the Federal Republic. In the first chapter of the present book, I explained my skepticism toward my own nest—incidentally, that skepticism is among the very branches that support it. Should certain exacerbations of West German conditions occur in the coming years, which I would not dare to rule out entirely, the sole result would be that the number of exceptions would increase: after all, we were never entirely without exclusions from the West German niches. No, I am not speaking of terrorists. I mean, for example, teachers who give offence; people who perform alternative civilian service in the social environment of the normal West German citizenry; apprentices who act up. Well, now the crucial difference should be how we deal with our exceptions from the majority rule and how the GDR deals with its. Is that not a difference that only those affected are allowed to gauge?

Like everywhere else, the East German niches are very diverse in form. They are—having greatly proliferated in recent years—the desire to own a car; little rag dolls on the mirror, loudspeakers edged in crochet work, the occasional decorative pillow with embroidered sayings on the back seat; once I saw a sticker on the rear window of a Trabant, the smallest car over there: “Never again Mercedes.” Or the niches take the form of regular immersion in music-making at home; carried out according to the same ritual: the dry Hungarian white wine “Grauer Mönch” and canapés to start, a routine that might lead the guest to assume that they had been doing this on a monthly basis for thirty years. The odds-on favorite among the private nooks is the allotment garden—with a summerhouse, whenever possible. (Especially on the outskirts of Berlin, this type of wooden shack, which embodies the joy of the private, has been so popular for nearly a hundred years that back in 1974, when we set up the West German mission in the GDR, my colleagues dubbed our secure room the “Summerhouse”). At harvest time, the pathways through the summerhouse colonies—old yearnings in their names: *Daheim* [At Home], *Eintracht* [Harmony], *Sonnenland* [Land of Sunshine] —are the favorite promenades for those without their own garden: flowers, fruits, and vegetables are piled high in buckets and baskets at the garden gates and are privately traded.

[...]

Back to the niches in the GDR. One's own car, amateur music, the allotment garden with a summerhouse and a summer party. Boats, too, are niches: canoes, sailboats, motor boats, which can be surprisingly large among those with better connections; out and about especially in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg, favored by the natural conditions, but also, upstream and down, on the Elbe near Dresden. Associations for folk songs, playing the accordion, the study of local history and geography—these are private spaces.

In the agricultural production cooperatives, more people go hunting or horseback riding than we think possible on this side of the Wall, especially when it comes to these particular activities. Niches are apartments where old furniture and other antiques are collected; the acquisition of such meant that people had to beat out the hard-currency hungry official antiques trade.

One of the loveliest niches is one's own *Datsche*, the way the Russian word *dacha* is usually pronounced, with an "e" at the end: the evolution of the garden shed into a summerhouse at the edge of the forest or the shore of a lake, winterized as much as possible. At first, West German visitors think that their East German hosts are being ironic when they call their weekend cottage a *Datsche*, until they realize that this has become an entirely natural usage. Some West Germans then remember that they have done something entirely similar in their part of the formerly united Fatherland: without hesitation, they speak of their bungalows. The most recent loaned words of a divided people, both entirely Germanized, say just as much about the current state of world history as the menus on either side of the Elbe: whereas hot dogs at West German sausage stands mark the outermost limit of our hegemony, Soljanka, a Ukrainian peasant soup, which is now the "soup of the day" in village taverns from Rügen to the Vogtland, serves the same purpose in the GDR.

Circles of friends and the conversations carried on within them constitute one especially important, deep niche—a rock in the landscape of niches. At first glance, the conviviality in a small circle seems to have two sides to it. On the one hand, this conviviality does not yet approximate the apparent casualness of just-stopping-by-for-a-quick-drink sociability, which the West German middle class has already, with the help of commercial products, turned into the latest fuss. If invitations are extended over there, it's for coffee and cake or supper, elaborate events that take place within traditional bourgeois forms. On the other hand, however, it is common to just drop by to stretch one's legs and to sit together for a drink of vodka.

Eventually one figures out that it is exactly this—sitting together, exchanging ideas, talking—that is the main point of the formal invitation. The festive meal, a much greater effort for the—mostly—working housewife than it is here, merely underscores, merely celebrates the concentration, the importance that one invests in getting together, that one accords to it. There is less small talk but also fewer intellectual perturbations, which among us here can cause a question to turn into the contentious, heated topic of the evening, how many angels fit on the head of a pin (an interchangeable example). Compared with that, a conversation among GDR intellectuals can be called more substantial, always also less playful. They are not embarrassed by talking seriously about problems, their own and in general; they are barely aware of fashionable concerns about abandoning the chic role of understatement; they do justice to their reasons for taking their problems seriously; there is a lot less showing off in conversation. They take more time over there, are more long-winded, so to speak, less distracted, calmer in fashioning relationships, friendships, get-togethers. A bit of dawdling, an official misdeed, pervades all niches. Even though the so-called traffic caused by private cars has increased dramatically in recent years, it is still a common sight, not only in small towns, for people to stand together on corners to talk, to observe from their windows (with a pillow propped under their elbows) what's happening in the neighborhood—for now, such scenes are still more characteristic of the streets and the squares than the traffic rolling by.

The East Germans' great capacity for perseverance is evidenced as much by external things as their mental attitudes. For the most part, people dress in decent suits and elegant (often long) dresses not only when they attend the Unter den Linden opera in the capital, but also when they go to the provincial theater. Some customs and fashions are adopted from the West five to ten years after the fact: only in recent years has there been, emanating from young people, an increase in the number people who attend an operetta or tragic opera without a tie, in a sweater and jeans.

When it comes to descriptions of the private sphere, the more that familiar, self-evident subjects enter into the West German consciousness, the closer the object of description comes to East German realities.

So, niches, like everywhere else—but invariably, again like everywhere else, are imaginatively and materially furnished by the general political and economic conditions of their respective state and social environments. For the German Democratic Republic this means, to address the material aspect first, that the private nooks depend strongly on supply shortages as well as restrictive administrative regulations: and the ability, which the East Germans have cultivated for decades now, to manage shortages and skirt regulations. A dense web of relationships, which enable barter transactions involving three or more parties, until the desired object has gotten to the right place, pervades private life (and, occasionally, connects one enterprise to another, also to the planned economy). The possession of D-Marks and access—direct or mediated, to after-hours brigades that work off the books—allow for the beautification of apartments and the fortification of dachas against the cold season. There is one last security that is still traded in the GDR by convoluted means: the certificate of entitlement to a passenger car; clandestinely acquiring the certificate in due course shortens the multi-year delivery time. Gratuities on a scale that makes it hard to differentiate them from bribes—people say: let a pound grow—speed up installations and repairs.

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The whiff of remembrance that emanates over there from the familiar interplay of matching houses and streets, from the unscathed village perimeter with the narrow, unpaved paths leading out into the fields—this whiff of remembrance is often more persistent than the signs of decay. Is the GDR, then, a German outdoor museum that evokes nostalgia? Certainly not, even if for the West German traveler, whose memory includes a few prewar images, certain tree-lined roads in Brandenburg and sections of the Elbe in Saxony are also bathed in nostalgia. But to the people over there, the land, whose condition sometimes reminds visitors of *unnamed days of old*, is, of course, the stage, the living space of their *present*: not a preserve for artificially retained things of yesterday. However: being plays a part in shaping consciousness. Thus, have the East Germans, consciously and unconsciously, appropriated some of the socialist realities of the GDR? And have they—apart from, between, and behind these realities, in their cities and villages, which have changed less than ours, having become merely older and shabbier—handed down more of the traditional customs and notions than we in West Germany have done?

Having remained *German*: what is that, what is that supposed to be? If one defines it first of all as merely a stronger power of perseverance, with which someone clings to the familiar and thus blocks out what is new to the greatest extent possible, then it turns out that the majority of Germans both west and east of the Elbe (who are understood to represent the Federal Republic and the GDR not geographically, but figuratively), developed their differences in this regard almost immediately after the end of the war, at any rate, years before the two states were created: the spirit of persistence increased enormously over there, while it quickly and mostly evaporated over here. For me, what the East Germans preserved is most clearly expressed by what the West Germans relinquished. Initially, in 1945 and the years immediately following, it was not yet a surrender, but rather an opening, which, in my mind, is among the best of which the defeated Germans have been capable of since then: anyone who was not obstinate, opened himself in the three Western occupation zones—almost feverishly, ablaze with curiosity, no: with desire—also to what the victors brought with them besides Nescafé, chewing gum, and *commercial* cigarettes (not rolled from butts). Jean-Paul Sartre; Thornton Wilder; the robust offshoot of the British Broadcasting System: the Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk. In recapitulation, the Zero Hour of back then resonates again. Fruitful illusions of the loveliest kind, utopias came alive, which migrated from Wilder's *Our Town* via the stage ramp to the audience in the theater: no more and no less than manageably good neighborliness, which also holds up in adversity; a normal human scale; life fulfilled without histrionic overexertion.

It did not remain this way for long, which should come as no surprise: for what we were opening

ourselves up to was, naturally, the world that we had not known, the way in which it revealed itself to us at first, detached from the realities; it was—and that's the point—utopian, quixotic, impractical. This is meant in the same non-ironic way as the remark that this—on the mental level, in the filling of head and heart—corresponded to what was going on at the same time on the other side of the Elbe, where communist ideals were being offered up. Over the years, people came back down to earth on both sides of the river, which, at that time, became the border in Germany. With the restoration, the opening to the West in the Federal Republic became more concrete, more practical, and, in the plainest sense, political: in it, the West German majority satisfied the superstructural needs of the economic explosion.

To a large extent, the opening became an *exchange of identity*. Since the 1950s, with the prevailing ideals of industrious types and the laws of the market, some—many—West Germans have become—in their consumption habits, too—more American, as it were, than the Americans—a phenomenon often encountered among converts. Of course, it was less Wilder's America of *Our Town* than that of "Babbitt," the country over which President Reagan is presiding today: the land of boundless opportunity, with the gigantic happiness lottery, which has a kind of constitutional status over there, and for which everyone has a ticket, with the losing ones being determined by God. To be sure, the West Germans cushioned the full application of such ideals of freedom with a practiced social democracy (whoever was in power, as long as it could be financed), but the value standards and mentalities of the U.S., as the majority here understood them, were copied virtually without restraint.

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