

# Reflections of gender and sexuality in the eastern German magazine *Superillu*

Eva Schäffler

University of Salzburg

## ABSTRACT

*The paper offers a historical analysis of the discourse on eastern German gender and sexuality in the 1990s. As a primary source, it uses Superillu Magazine, which has existed from 1990 until today and explicitly targets an eastern German audience. First, Superillu's reflections of gender and sexuality can be described as an example of how certain attitudes in this field (e.g. towards liberal sexual behaviour or towards working women) have continued to exist beyond socialism. Second, a comparison of Superillu's reflections of gender and sexuality in the 1990s with the results of contemporary sociological research in this field shows that these discourses did only partly correspond to each other. Altogether, the (comparative) analysis of Superillu opens up new vistas on discourses on gender and sexuality in the 1990s and thus helps to historicize one aspect of eastern Germany's very recent past.*

## KEYWORDS

*East(ern) Germany – family formation – female employment – gender – German reunification – Hypersexualisation – partner orientated sexuality – popular press/magazines – self-confidence – sexuality*

## 1. Introduction

The paper deals with reflections of gender and sexuality in the eastern German<sup>1</sup> magazine *Superillu*. *Superillu* was founded in 1990 a few months before the German reunification and is – until today – the most read magazine in eastern Germany (Burkhardt, 2010: 597). With its focus on readers from eastern Germany it has a unique status in the German media landscape, as there is no such magazine explicitly designed for western Germans. This is due to the fact that in the 1990s, former West German magazines were perceived and sold as “all German” magazines, even though no changes were made concerning the magazines' concepts or contents in order to particularly cater to eastern German interests or tastes.

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<sup>1</sup> By the terms “eastern Germany”, “eastern German”, etc. the author refers to those parts of Germany that used to form the GDR. By the terms “East Germany”, “East German”, etc. the author refers to the GDR. By the terms “West Germany” and “Federal Republic” the author refers to the Federal Republic of Germany before 1990. The terms “western Germany”, “western German” etc. are used to refer to the western part of Germany after 1990.

In contrast to that, *Superillu* not only covers a range of popular topics (e.g. eastern German celebrities), but also takes a decidedly “eastern German perspective” (e.g. when looking at the “Wende” and its consequences). The magazine draws a positive picture of eastern Germans and eastern Germany (and sometimes also of certain aspects of the GDR). Nevertheless, it cannot be described as “(n)ostalgic” in a sense that it seems to be affected by a selective memory loss seeing the GDR exclusively or mostly through rose-tinted glasses (this definition of nostalgia is given by Cooke, 2005: 104).

This paper first makes a few basic notes on its theoretical fundament and on the state of research concerning eastern German gender roles and sexuality. Second, the most significant reflections of gender and sexuality in one of *Superillu*’s sections *Girl der Woche* [“Girl of the Week”]) are analysed and (at least partly) traced back to imprints from socialist part. Third, based on this analysis, the paper addresses whether the reflections on gender and sexuality in *Superillu* correspond to results of sociological research conducted in the 1990s. Fourth, it comes to a conclusion including some general remarks on the challenge of historicizing eastern Germany’s most recent history.

## 2. Theoretical fundament and state of research

Based on the idea that gender roles include (gendered) expectations and social rules for sexual behaviour, which is one of the fundamental findings of psychological studies on social and cultural aspects of human sexuality (e.g. Allgeier and McCormick, 1983), the paper analyses both the reflections of gender and the reflections of sexuality in *Superillu*. It takes a decidedly transformational perspective, which means that the year 1989 is not considered as a “watershed” that entirely changed eastern German gender roles and sexuality; however, it is indeed seen as a point in time when a complex mixture of continuities and discontinuities began to influence eastern German gender roles and sexuality (and the discourse on it).

From a sociological point of view, Diewald et al. (1995) and Huinink and Wagner (1995) (as well as other authors) have analysed these continuations of cultural and social imprints for the case of eastern Germany. From a historical perspective, such continuations can be also described under the term “(historical) path dependencies”, which is, as a general concept, described by scholars such as Mahoney (2000) and Ackermann (2001). In order to identify these “path dependencies” or continuities (and discontinuities), it is necessary to refer to the phase of late socialism and its particularities regarding sexuality and subjacent gender roles.

The phase of late socialism began with Erich Honecker’s rise to power in 1971 and the subsequent reframing of East German social and family policy objectives and measures. It ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification in 1989 and 1990. The reframing of social policy during late socialism resulted in a change of values and behaviours concerning family formation and gender roles – partly intended and partly unintended by the regime (a deep and extensive analysis of these reforms and their results can be found in Bouvier, 2002; Boyer and Skyba, 2008a, 2008b). In some regards, these changes outlasted the downfall of state socialism: for

instance, the reframing of social policy in the 1970s and 1980s led to a drop of marriage age, which was still detectable when comparing marriage ages in western and eastern Germany in the 1990s. At the same time, it unintentionally provoked a tendency towards living together without a marriage certificate but with children, a tendency that grew even stronger after the end of socialism.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, one can conclude that specific East German partnership and family models continued to exist *and* further evolve also after 1989/90. Considering such path dependencies, the thesis that there would be a transfer of partnership and family models from West to East (e.g. Mau 1995) turned out to be mostly wrong. However, one must bear in mind that continuities from late socialism did not remain unchanged. Of course, they were modified in the course of German reunification and the following years, for instance by the adoption of Federal German laws (e.g. divorce law, abortion law) and by economic changes (e.g. the massive rise in unemployment) (see e.g. Dorbritz, 1997; Häder and Häder, 1995; Schenk, 1995).

### 3. Analysis of reflections of gender and sexuality in the eastern German magazine *Superillu*: examples from the section *Girl der Woche*

With the findings of the 1990s' sociologists in mind, the paper analyses *Superillu*'s reflections of gender and sexuality and – in the following chapter – seeks to explore whether the abovementioned sociological findings on the situation of eastern German gender roles and sexual behaviour correspond with the reflections of gender and sexuality presented in the magazine. The historical analysis of *Superillu* is based on the years from 1990 to 1997. On average, 15 issues per year have been used as primary source being examined for evidence on sexuality and gender roles.

The historical analysis shows that *Superillu*'s reflections on eastern German sexuality and gender roles formed a small sphere of popular culture in which specific eastern German attitudes and behaviours were depicted in an affirmative way. The section *Girl der Woche* [“Girl of the Week”] is a striking example for this affirmative depiction. Every week this section displayed a young eastern German woman (approximately between 18 and 25 years), including nude photos, an interview and some basic information about the woman (usually body measurements, eye and hair colour, education/profession, marital status and hobbies).

Generally, the depiction of nudity and sexuality in *Superillu* was, at least at first sight, not different from similar sections in western German popular magazines and newspapers (such as *Neue Revue* or *Bild*). It was restricted to the female sex, which suggests that the composition of the magazine was influenced by the (assumed) pre-

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<sup>2</sup> In 1970, 13.3 % and in 1980 22.8 % of the children born in East Germany were “illegitimate”. After the reunification this tendency continued and in 1990 35.0 %, in 2000 51.5 % and in 2004 57.8 % of the children born in eastern Germany were “illegitimate”. In contrast, in 1970 5.5 % and in 1980 7.6 % of the children born in the Federal Republic were “illegitimate”. The rate went up after the reunification, but has remained significantly lower than in eastern Germany. In 1990 10.5 %, in 2000 18.6 % and in 2004 22.0 % of the children born in western Germany were “illegitimate” (Huinink and Konietzka, 2007: 86).

ferences of the (male) reader. This is quite contradictory, considering the fact that *Superilla* had probably more female than male readers, as other topics covered by the magazine such as (eastern German) celebrities and everyday-life stories catered more to stereotypical “female” interests. At second sight, however, the depiction of nudity and sexuality in *Superilla* shows certain eastern German particularities.

### 3.1 Working women, married women and mothers as attractive women

The displayed women were often married and/or had children (they were nevertheless called “girls”). This suggests that getting married and having children at a relatively young age compared to western German standards was widespread and accepted in eastern Germany, continuing a tendency that had already started in the 1970s. At that time, the socialist party had implemented several social policy measures in order to increase birth rates (for a deeper analysis of this pronatalist policy see for example Gerhard, 1994; Merkel, 1994 or Schwarz, 2005). These policies hardly met their original objective, but still caused a profound change of family formation patterns, which outlasted, at least to a certain extent, the years of 1989/90.

For example, the average age at which women had their first child remained quite low in the GDR, while it significantly increased in the Federal Republic. In the GDR in 1970, the average age was 23.3 years, in 1980 23.5 years and in 1990 24.6 years. In the Federal Republic in 1970, the average age was 24.2 years, in 1980 25.5 years and in 1990 27.0 years (Konietzka and Huinink, 2007: 83). Furthermore, the rate of women in the GDR who remained childless was much lower (5-10 %) than in the Federal Republic (up to 20 %) (Huinink and Kreyenfeld, 2006: 170). After the reunification, the average age at which women had their first child in eastern Germany increased by 3.5 years within five years (in the context of a general dramatic drop in the birth rate), but was still lower than in western Germany (Dorbritz, 1997: 244).

Apart from statistically detectable trends, the social reforms in late socialism also influenced attitudes in society, particularly the notion that being married and/or being a mother did not lower the sexual attraction of a woman. The fact that the *Girls der Woche* were obviously chosen irrespective of their marital/family status suggests that this notion was still relevant in the 1990s. Furthermore, the displayed women often did not work in “typically female” jobs, e.g. as a panel operator or automation engineer, and were hardly ever described as “housewives”. This illustrates the fact that eastern German women, as long as they were not affected by the mass layoffs following the German reunification, often continued to work full-time and in “typically male” jobs.

This had already been common in the GDR, while in the West this was significantly less common. In the GDR, female labour force participations rates were 52 % in 1950, 70 % in 1962, 82 % in 1970 and 91 % in 1989 (Merkel, 1994: 381; Steiner, 2004: 172). In the Federal Republic, the female labour force participation rate only increased from 43 % in 1950 to 56 % in 1989 (Klammer et al., 2000: 53). Thus, the section *Girl der Woche* can serve as proof that working women were considered to be the norm, also beyond 1989/90. Furthermore, the fact that the “girls” were chosen irrespective of their profession points to the fact that having a “typically male” profession was not perceived as “unfemale” or “unerotic” in eastern Germany.

Apart from that, the information on the women's professions reflected the overall socioeconomic situation.

First, the information on the profession sometimes included the salary of the depicted "Girl". This might attest to a general interest in the financial situation of other people, which had not been as relevant during GDR times due to a higher level of economic equality.

Second, some of the "girls" worked in other professions than those they were originally trained for and some of them were unemployed. This corresponded with the social reality. In fact, female unemployment in eastern Germany was even more frequent than male unemployment. In 1994, for example, the female unemployment rate was 21.5 %, while the male unemployment rate was 10.9 % and in 1995 76.7 % of all unemployed persons were female (Ritter, 2007: 117 et sq.).

Third, there were hardly any "girls" who described themselves as housewives. The fact that the "girls" described themselves as "unemployed" and not as "housewives" points to a widespread attitude among eastern German women who considered being employed as an important part of their identity, irrespective of whether or not they had a job at the moment. This attitude has been described under the hardly translatable German term "*hohe Erwerbsneigung*" (a translation might be "high tendency towards employment"), e.g. by Kreckel (1995: 491) and Ritter (2007: 117 et sq.). It is obvious that this female self-confidence regarding employment had its roots in socialist times when having a job was a matter of course for almost every woman. These roots were so strong that even mass layoffs hardly changed the affirmative and optimistic attitude towards female employment both among women themselves and among society as a whole.

### 3.2 "Natural" and sexually liberal women (within a relationship) as attractive women

The *Girls der Woche* were often described as normal, naturally beautiful "girls from next door" (e.g. Superillu 1991, issue 48, p. 72). It was emphasized, also by the "girls" themselves<sup>3</sup>, that their nudity must not be seen as something offensive or dirty, but as something natural and aesthetic:

"Why shouldn't I show myself naked?" (Superillu 1991, issue 21, p. 46)

"When I'm naked, I feel most comfortable with myself." (Superillu 1992, issue 27, p. 16)

Furthermore the "girls" were depicted as sexually liberal. Their answers range from statements on how important sexuality is to them in general to statements on certain aspects of their sexual life:

<sup>3</sup> The authenticity of the statements of the "girls" must be doubted. The statements almost certainly were modified by the editors and probably some of them were even completely faked. Therefore, the interviews may not be interpreted like a conventional oral history source but as reflections of a discourse on sexuality and gender roles which was conducted in eastern German popular media.

“In bed I’m the one who is seducing.” (Superillu 1991, issue 28, p. 38)

“Not enough sex was the reason why I got divorced.” (Superillu 1991, issue 38, p. 44)

“A week without sex makes me get sick.” (Superillu 1993, issue 44, p. 55)

Looking at these quotes it becomes obvious that the “girls” attitudes towards sex were liberal. However, their displayed sexual behaviour did not exceed certain moral or stereotypical limits and expectations (e.g. the “girls” wanted to have sex on the beach, they liked wearing sexy lingerie, etc.) and, over all, it was more or less restricted to heterosexual, steady relationships. Eastern German women were displayed as “sexpots” but only as long as they had sex with their boyfriends or husbands.

“I like to do crazy things, for example sex in a thermal bath. Very exciting! But of course only with my boyfriend.” (Superillu 1993, issue 51, p. 54)

“For me only sex with a steady boyfriend is exciting.” (Superillu 1999, issue 33, p. 67)

Indeed most of the “girls” stated that they either were or wanted to be in a relationship. Emotions associated with relationships were almost exclusively positive such as “security”, “warmth” and “tenderness”. Moreover, expectations associated with relationships were almost exclusively conservative:

“I’d like to get married when I’m 30 and then I want to have children.” (Superillu 1994, issue 42, p. 68)

“My life’s dream: A happy family with children and a beautiful little house on the countryside.” (Superillu 1995, issue 9, p. 70)

“One day I want to marry all in white. And I want to have children – two cheeky kids are my dream.” (Superillu 1996, issue 14, p. 78)

Only few women showed a negative or sceptical attitude towards living in a conventional relationship. One woman who decided to not get married to the father of her child and to also not move in with him was cited as follows:

“My child, my dog and some reliable friends – that is perfectly enough for me. And being successful at work, of course.” (Superillu 1997, issue 31, p. 68)

However, most interviewees not only wanted to live in conventional relationships, but were also in favour of conventional relationship values. Most frequently, the value “faithfulness” was mentioned. Many of the women considered faithfulness to be an essential feature of a relationship and cheating as an absolute reason to end a relationship:

“When a guy cheats on me, I dump him.” (Superillu 1991, issue 25, p. 34)

“I don’t accept unfaithfulness at all.” (Superillu 1996, issue 14, p. 78)

“There is no love without faithfulness for me.” (Superillu 1997, issue 4, p. 70)

Other women had a slightly more “liberal” attitude concerning faithfulness, but still considered cheating, in the sense of having sexual intercourse with someone, as taboo:

“There should be free space for both partners, but one should not misuse it.” (Superillu 1992, issue 21, p. 46)

“Flirts should be allowed. It is an ego booster when other men find me attractive as well.” (Superillu 1993, issue 44, p. 55)

“I’m absolutely convinced that a functioning relationship needs freedom. However, I don’t think freedom and faithfulness cancel each other out.” (Superillu 1997, issue 31, p. 68).

A third group of women considered faithfulness to be important, but stated that they would accept a one-time case of cheating:

“Faithfulness is important. But everyone can make a mistake.” (Superillu 1991, issue 44, p. 50)

“You can’t demand faithfulness forevermore. If a man cheats on me, I get really angry. And then I generously forgive him.” (Superillu 1996, issue 4, p. 56)

“Flirts are okay, I’m not an insanely furious wife. More than a flirt would hurt me. But I would not necessarily end the relationship – after all we have a sweet 4-year-old daughter.” (Superillu 1996, issue 35, p. 70)

Looking at all the quotes cited above, both the more “strict” and the more “liberal” ones, it turns out that faithfulness was generally seen as a value in a relationship, while unfaithfulness was rated more or less negatively. Another proof for the widely conventional attitudes of the *Girls der Woche* were their statements on one night stands.

“I tried it once, but I felt so bad after it. I don’t want to feel like that never again.” (Superillu 1991, issue 44, p. 50)

“Sex without feelings or a quick adventure is not a choice for me.” (Superillu 1991, issue 36, p. 18)

“A quick adventure for one night does not appeal to me at all. Having a little fun does not compensate the bad conscience the next day.” (Superillu 1992, issue 7, p. 66)

#### 4. Comparative analysis: discourse on sexuality and gender roles in *Superillu*, in western German press and in sociological research literature in the 1990s

What is noticeable is that the idea that being faithful was particularly important in eastern Germany was also promoted by western German popular press. For instance, *Neue Revue* Magazine (quoted by Weller 1991: 11) pointed out that faithfulness was a “big thing” in eastern Germany and an important aspect of the “cultivated sex à la GDR”. This was “proven” by a (not representative) survey conducted among 1,167 eastern Germans between 16 and 60 years, according to which 87 % of the eastern Germans found it “easy” to be faithful to their partners. It is thus evident that not only eastern German popular media, but also western German popular media created an image of eastern German sexuality that did not necessarily correspond with sexual practice in the New Laender.

Moreover, this image of eastern German sexuality was strongly connected to an often distorted and biased but generally positive image of sexuality in the GDR (as the example of *Neue Revue* also shows). This image mainly consisted of the idea that sexuality was more important in the GDR and that people in the GDR had more and/or better sex than people in West Germany because they had too few other options for leisure activities. In contrast, it was sometimes stated that sexual life in the GDR was full of prudery and taboos and that there was no open discourse on sexuality (Beilfuß, 1991: 128–132).

However, the way the “girls” in *Superillu* talk about relationships in general, about faithfulness and about one-night stands cannot be seen as sign of prudery but rather as reflection of a phenomenon called “partner orientated sexuality” [“partner-schaftlich orientierte Sexualität”] (Weller, 1991: 31). This term is based on the idea that sexuality in the GDR was discussed and performed mainly in the context of (heterosexual) relationships. Of course, a high significance of a “partner orientated sexuality” can be observed in the Federal Republic as well, but it was contested by an extensive discourse on individualism and independency (e.g. by the hippie movement and its promotion of free love, by the women’s movement and its critical perspective on power relations in relationships between men and women and by the yuppie generation and its focus on personal success).

Considering the dominance of statements in the section *Girl der Woche* pointing to a “partner orientated sexuality” (also after the end of the GDR), the contemporary sociological thesis of the eastern German “hypersexualization” (mentioned for example by Weller, 1991: 16) can be seriously contested. This thesis predicted the rise of a new sexual “freedom” in eastern Germany (concerning pornography, phone sex, strip clubs and sex shops), which was both identified as a threat to the shelter function of relationships and as factor which put pressure on gender roles in relationship (e.g. by displaying financial and sexual power as essential male characteristics and good looks and sexual availability as essential female characteristics).

However, it seems that “hypersexualization” was a lot more imagined (i.e. it took place in some people’s heads) than real (i.e. it took place in people’s actual lives). Therefore, “hypersexualization” is certainly not an adequate term for describing the development of eastern German sexuality as a whole. Another aspect of the “hyper-

sexualization” thesis for which the analysis of the *Girl der Woche* can only partly serve as proof is the idea that eastern German sexuality was strongly influenced by western German sexuality. It turns out that this influence was only rarely explicitly addressed in the interviews conducted with the *Girls der Woche*. However, if the *Girls der Woche* referred to the West, then usually in the sense that due to the western influence general attitudes towards sexuality had become more liberal (in a positive sense) and not in the sense that their own actual sexual life had (negatively) changed because of this influence:

“In GDR times it would have been beyond imagination to have such sexy photos taken for a magazine. But today we are more free.” (Superillu 1992, issue 7, p. 66)

“I think the reunification is the most exciting thing which could have happened to us. An open-air striptease, this would not have been possible in the past.” (Superillu 1991, issue 35, p. 24)<sup>4</sup>

Altogether, the comparative analysis of the section *Girl der Woche* leads to the result that patterns of a “partner orientated sexuality” were highly relevant both in the GDR and in the eastern German context and that these patterns of a “partner orientated sexuality” were also different from partnership models in the Federal Republic and in western Germany. This was already emphasized by Weller (1991: 31) in the early 1990s by pointing out that having a partner and starting a family was an essential element of individual life plans in the GDR, while being single or being undecided on whether having a partner and starting a family was the right choice for life was more usual in the Federal Republic.

The situation in the GDR may be ascribed to the fact that life in the GDR was comparatively “safe” from a socioeconomic point of view. This was particularly the case from the 1970s on when the SED started to implement extensive social policy measures. As a result, a relatively high level of social security was reached. However, life in the GDR in general and love and family life in particular were also formed by certain socioeconomic constraints which did not exist in the Federal Republic (e.g. in the GDR getting an apartment was very problematic for an unmarried couple). Therefore, it is not surprising that getting married was a much more fixed step in people’s life in the GDR than it was in the Federal Republic.

However, it was not as crucial as in West Germany that marriages lasted a whole lifetime. It was more common and socially more accepted in the GDR to have two or more marriage partners during one’s life. This is also reflected by the higher divorce rate. The total divorce rate in the GDR was 0.19 in 1970 and 0.32 in 1980 while in the Federal Republic the total divorce rate was 0.15 in 1970 and 0.23 in 1980 (Huinink and Konietzka, 2007: 81). Despite high divorce rates, the relevance of

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<sup>4</sup> This statement is a bit confusing when thinking about the fact that FKK (nude bathing) and thus getting naked in the open air was very popular and normal in the GDR. However, the “girl” rather points to the fact of nude photos being taken in public and for commercial purposes.

a “partnership orientated sexuality” in the GDR was generally high and it remained high after 1989/90 as well.

This becomes evident through the analysis of the section *Girl der Woche*, but also through surveys that were conducted in the early 1990s and compared the attitudes of western and eastern Germans. One of these surveys (cited in Habermehl, 1991: 34 et sq.) shows, for instance, that eastern German young people had a more liberal attitude towards sexuality, but were more conservative regarding their future life plans and more orientated towards partnership and family.

To the question “What would be your ideal way of life?” 84 % of the eastern German interviewees answered that they would like to live in an apartment with their partner, 9 % answered that they would like to have a partner but their own apartment and 8 % answered that they did not want to have a partner at all. In contrast, 64 % of the western German interviewees answered that they would like to live in an apartment with their partner, 22 % answered that they would like to have a partner but their own apartment and 14 % answered that they did not want to have a partner at all. These numbers support the idea that the wish to spend life with a steady partner was more popular among eastern German young people (93 %) than among western German young people (86 %).

What is even more significant is the fact that actually living together with a partner was more considered to be an essential part of a relationship by eastern German young people (84 %) than by western German young people (64 %). In this context, it is also interesting that young men from the western part of Germany were clearly less in favour of living together with their partner (55 %) than young women from the western part of Germany (73 %), while this ratio was much more balanced in the eastern part of Germany (young men 82 %, young women 86 %).

Indeed, a trend towards voluntary and permanent “living apart together” is clearly detectable from the 1970s on in West but not in East Germany. In the GDR, “living apart together” usually only occurred when the man was absent due to military service or when partners who were not married were assigned jobs in different cities. After the reunification, “living apart together” continued to be a lot less common in eastern than in western Germany (for further explanations/data regarding reunited Germany see Peuckert, 2012: 120 et sq). Scheller (2005: 183) points out that in the early 2000s, there were only half as many couples “living apart together” in the eastern Germany as there were in western Germany and that in eastern Germany “living apart together” is still rarely considered an option for a permanent relationship, while in western Germany it is quite frequently.

## 5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the section *Girl der Woche* shows that path dependencies from state socialism were reflected in eastern German media discourse, while an adaption towards western German “standards” played a rather subordinate role. For instance, positive attitudes towards female employment were presented in *Superillu*. Furthermore, the notion of being independent and behaving sexually liberally within a relationship can be clearly detected in the section *Girl der Woche*, which leads to the

conclusion that a “partner orientated sexuality” was not only relevant during GDR times, but also after 1989/90. In contrast, a tendency towards “hypersexualization”, which was sometimes predicted by contemporary sociological literature, can hardly be found in the section *Girl der Woche*. Overall, one can conclude that *Superillu*’s reflections on gender and sexuality serve as a proof in favour of the “path dependency/continuity-thesis” while they rather disprove the “adaption-thesis”. Therefore, a perspective that analyses path dependencies from state socialism and to what extent these path dependencies were modified after the reunification promises to be very helpful for historicizing the 1990s in eastern Germany – a task mostly still ahead of us.

**Eva Schäffler** studied European Studies and History in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Spain. Her dissertation in History was on “Love relationships in the late GDR and in eastern Germany”. She teaches at the Department of History at the University of Salzburg. Her research focus is on social and gender history of contemporary Central East Europe, particularly of the GDR/eastern Germany and of the ČSSR/Czech Republic.  
eva.schaeffler@gmail.com

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