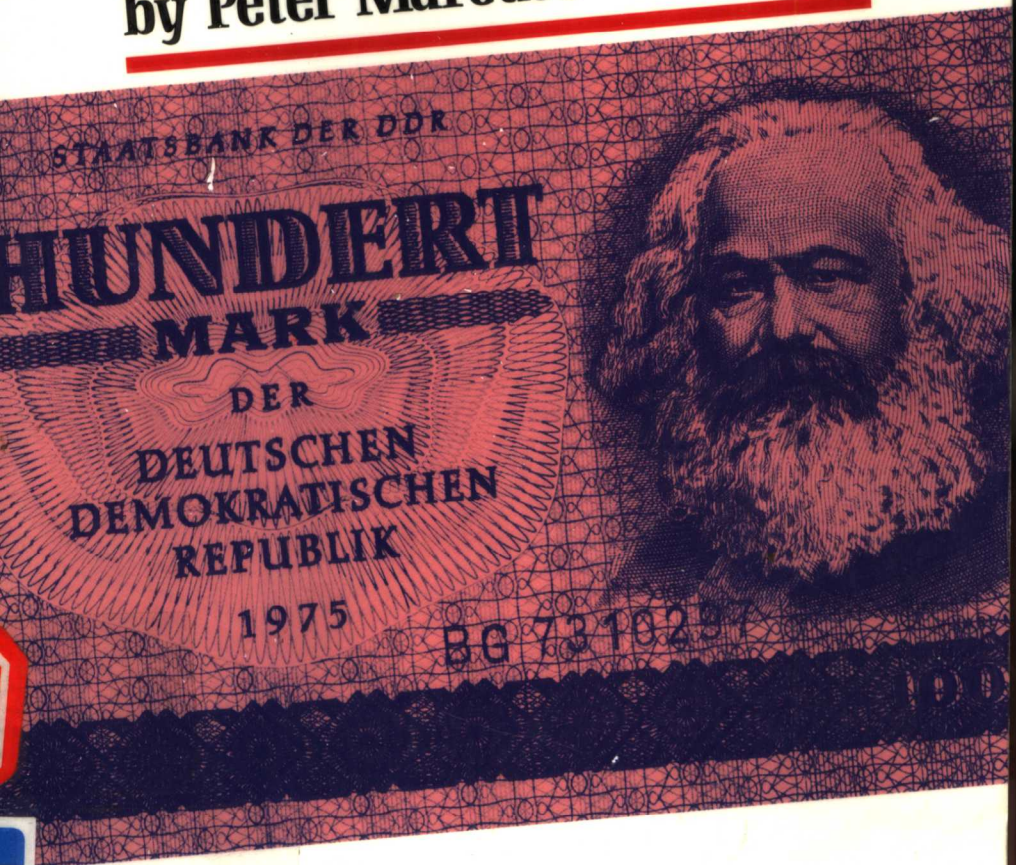


MISSING MARX

A Personal and Political Journal
of a Year in East Germany, 1989–1990

by Peter Marcuse



missing marx

A PERSONAL AND POLITICAL
JOURNAL OF A YEAR IN
EAST GERMANY, 1989 - 1990

PETER MARCUSE



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For Bernd Grönwald—
who tried to work positively within a
contradictory system, supporting its structure
but encouraging its reform, and, finally,
succumbing to its demise

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pre face

Events in East Germany in 1989 and 1990 were part of—and in some cases triggered—a wave of revolutions in state power in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, now perhaps even Albania. It is a period of deep change such as one rarely encounters in a lifetime; a period in which what is happening at the level of a whole nation is so integrally connected with people's individual lives that individuals feel themselves part of history. And not just as victims, subordinated and carried away on tides not subject to their influence, but rather as actors, active participants, as when people feel that they are themselves making history, themselves influencing the circumstances that determine their own lives. We were lucky to have been in East Germany during the crucial eleven months from the first successful public break-out from the old system to the transaction with West Germany that effectively represented its end. This book is an account of what we saw, heard, thought, and felt during that time. We have also included some reflections on those experiences, some attempt to generalize, to analyze, to draw conclusions. We have called these reflections "Excurs," and there is one on how everyday life in East Germany differed from that in West Germany; one on whether "state" and "market" were appropriate descriptions of the differences between them; one on how the differences were manifested in city

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living in the East, and whether the differences had to do with socialism; one on what brought about the change from "socialism" that we witnessed; one on how that change might be expected to influence the future of the city of Berlin (and what that future, in our view, should be); and then, in a summing up, a discussion of why it all happened and what the implications for the future might be.

East Germany was considered dull, gray, and monotonous by most people when my wife Frances and I decided to go there for a year's study and lecturing, to see what "real existing socialism" was like. We arrived in August 1989, six weeks before anyone in the country had even begun to think that radical change was possible. We left in August 1990, after those unthinkable changes had taken place. We were ourselves caught up in those changes, and, although we tried to understand "objectively" what was going on, no description of such events (not even the type of bare-bones chronology that we have added as an appendix) can pretend to objectivity under such circumstances. Thus this is both a political and a personal journal.

My background, and Fran's, of course influenced what we saw. For both of us, the events we lived through evoked echoes of the past. I was born in Berlin in 1928, to parents who emigrated to Switzerland, one step ahead of the Nazis, then France, then the United States (in 1933). My father, Herbert Marcuse, was a philosopher in the Marxist tradition, who achieved an international reputation in the late 1960s as the "father of the New Left" (which he regularly denied being). He was an active participant in the efforts to radically change society that swept through Europe in 1968. My wife, Frances, was born in the United States in 1930, to parents who had left their village in southern Germany in 1926, one step after the great inflation and one step ahead of the Great Depression. Frances was Catholic, went to parochial school as a child, stopped believing in her teens; my parents were Jewish atheists; we raised our children as (secular) Jews.

I practiced law in Waterbury, Connecticut, and was active in Democratic Party politics for twenty years before getting a Ph.D. in city planning, and now teach it as a professor of urban planning at Columbia University in New York. Frances began teaching school in Waterbury the same year I began practicing law, teaching first elementary school and then science in high school, until her retirement

the year we left for Germany. While this is clearly my journal, we have shared so much during almost forty years of living together, and experienced almost everything that was happening in East Germany after our arrival together, that it is hard for me to separate my reactions from Fran's, and I notice I tend to use "I" and "we" almost interchangeably in this journal. Frances has corrected it wherever it does not reflect the facts!

We came to East Germany in the expectation that the economic system there might have something to teach us in the United States about certain fields—particularly housing and urban development, my own area of work—but expecting to encounter severe limitations in the political system and to have many questions about the functioning of the economic system as well. Our initial experience, after our arrival in mid-August (three months before the opening of the Berlin Wall), suggested a schizophrenic society: no one we spoke to defended the political structure, yet almost everyone professed a continued commitment to socialism and took the prevailing political and social structure for granted, expecting, at best, small incremental changes here and there. Yet within three months that political structure had been radically changed and our initial questions took on an entirely new cast: our questions became not only at what the DDR had produced in its forty years, but also at how the transition from that product would go, and where it was likely to end.

On January 11, 1990, we received a letter from Andrée Fischer, a senior editor at Dietz Verlag in Berlin, asking us to consider writing an account of our stay in the German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, or DDR) for publication that fall. We debated it and agreed that the journal form was the only way a coherent and yet personal account could be prepared within the short time-frame she wanted for publication. We had kept some notes on our day-to-day doings up until then, and had collected lots of material; we were in any event interested in recording our observations and thoughts in more detail, as a way of understanding what was going on, of working out for ourselves what it meant. So we agreed to do it. The German edition was published in October 1990, under the title: *A German Way of Revolution: DDR-Tagebuch eines Amerikaners, September 1989 bis Juli 1990*. (Why that title was chosen is discussed below.)

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This English edition has been reworked to expand those areas not familiar to non-German readers, to delete those that explain things well known to them, and to include the six Excurs. The introductory section to each of the two parts gives an overview of the political events of the entire year, with brief historical background and some highlighting of the main themes.

The “journal” part of the book remains, however, essentially a record of how we saw things at the time each entry was written. We have tried to keep out afterthoughts; where subsequent events so directly related to earlier occurrences, we have occasionally inserted a later comment or reference in square brackets. We have also inserted a number of political jokes in the journal, even if we heard some of them earlier or later, because jokes were in fact one of the ways those living in the DDR dealt with the contradictory realities of their lives. I suppose the same might be said for people everywhere, but it was particularly true in the DDR, where the contradictions were particularly obvious, but could not be addressed directly. There are even jokes about jokes:

In the DDR, jokes are invented by The Class Enemy, passed on by word-of-mouth from comrade to comrade until they reach the Politburo, and are then put into effect.

There must be, within the Politburo, a section for jokes; otherwise how could they be so prevalent in a socialist society?

We need to thank a handful of people in the DDR who became our close friends during the year, who provided us with much of the basis on which we came to understand and feel many of the events described in the book, and whom we consider among the salt of the earth. Bruno Flierl and Lili Leder in Berlin, and Fred and Ushi Staufenbiel in Berlin and Weimar, were among the closest to us, but there were many, many others. Since they appear in this book, we will not thank them by name here—they know who they are, and in any event they may well disagree with some of what we have written in these pages. But their friendship, and that of many other warm, decent, and courageous people in the DDR, was one of the permanent benefits of our year. We wish them the kind of peaceful, democratic, and prosperous future they have richly earned.

And we need to thank Susan Lowes, Director of Monthly Review Press, for innumerable helpful comments and suggestions, and Renee Pendergrass for her work on the book's interior design. *Monthly Review* and Monthly Review Press are unique institutions, not only as publishers but also as centers of critical intellectual activity and engagement on the major issues of our times. We are proud to have them as our publishers.

—June 1991



part 1

THE WENDE—MISSING MARX?

Introduction: The Three Phases of the *Wende*

To put our daily journal in perspective, an overview of the major events of the year may be helpful. The chronology at the end of the book gives the exact dates; here I want to present the big picture.

The big picture has two quite separate parts, quite separate story lines. The first has to do with the attempts, at the beginning to reform, then to change from the bottom up, the forty-year-old system of the DDR. The second has to do with the attempts, politically to begin with, then economically, to integrate the territory of the DDR into the national systems of West Germany, from the top down.

In the first part, the questions centered around Marx. Was he there at all, in the old DDR, or was he missing? If he was missing, was he missed? The second part has to do with money or currency—specifically, with the mark—the West German mark, as a generally available hard currency that could buy whatever people wanted, was certainly missing in the DDR. Was it because people missed it so much that unification went so rapidly? In the end, as we shall see, both those who missed Marx and those who missed the West German mark

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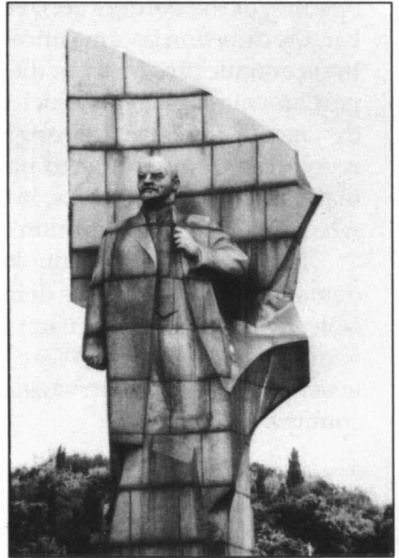
missed the mark if they hoped to get what they missed through their actions during the year.

Wende is the term used in East Germany to describe the events between October 1989 and the spring of 1990. The literal translation is "turn," or "change," and it can mean a bend in the road as well as a complete turn-around. Just what it was that changed, how big the change was, whether there was not in fact more than one change—one newspaper headlined its summary of the second 100 days since the fall of Honecker as "The *Wende* in the *Wende*"—and why the changes came about, were all hotly debated questions at the inception of the Turn. Later, the results seemed the product of unstoppable forces. But certainly many imagined, in the midst of events, that there were alternatives to the final surrender to the West. What was imagined, how, by whom, and with what basis—these form part of the story told here. The events are relatively clear; the interpretation less so.

The DDR (we will call East Germany, as it existed until October 1990, what the people there themselves called it, however ironically: the German Democratic Republic, or, in German, the Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR) was *the* bastion of orthodoxy and leading model of a Stalinist "Marxist-Leninist" society after *perestroika* began in the Soviet Union. (Photo on facing page shows statue of Lenin in Lenin Square, East Berlin.) It had, during its forty years, always had the highest standard of living of any socialist state in the world; it had only required direct Soviet intervention to maintain party rule once in its history, in the workers' uprising of 1953, and the party had maintained an absolute control over almost all aspects of life, with a security apparatus involving over 2 million people in its orbit (in a country of 16 to 17 million), exiling and occasionally imprisoning all dissidents, co-opting the social democratic party, the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands—SPD) within its Communist Party-dominated Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland—SED), and bringing all other legal parties within the SED-dominated National Front. The only openings in this closed society lay in what people said and thought in the privacy of their own homes—East German humor produced some of the most biting sarcasm around, as many of the stories we heard in the course of our stay, and repeat below, illustrate, and in what people heard and

saw from West German television, which could not be blacked out. The church was also given a little leeway, but in return for a basic commitment to support the regime. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the sealing of all borders with the West, the rigid censorship of the media, the ceaseless propaganda, the pervasive influence of the party, all contributed to creating what looked like an impregnable structure of rule by the party hierarchy. Yet it all collapsed, without any force being used on either side, within three months. So what happened?

If there are those who predicted the change, they have not surfaced. With hindsight, the process seems almost inevitable and its "causes" easy to list: a basic instability in the functioning of bureaucratic centralized command economies, the exorbitant price of competition with the West, a decision by the ruling strata in the Soviet Union to both change its system and abandon its enforcement of derivative systems in other countries, the discontent of people seeing promises betrayed by a steadily declining standard of living and increasing restrictions on personal and civil liberties. But no one, in



1988, thought that the East German regime was on the verge of collapse, that with a gentle push from the people and a hard yank from the West the entire leadership of the ruling party would resign, all borders would be opened, all state-owned enterprises put on the block, Marxism-Leninism publicly rejected and evicted from all educational institutions, the East German mark replaced by the West German mark as the unit of currency, and Karl Marx replaced by the new German mark as the ideological touchstone of value.

Before the *Wende*, in the summer and early fall of 1989, while there were some signs that could later be understood as harbingers of change, everyday life went on very much as usual; a little more

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complaining, a little feeling that times had been better, but no striking difference. Economic and political protest was visible, but limited: economic protest as escape from the system to new opportunities across the partly opened borders to Hungary, and political protest as small groups forming and demonstrations of at most a few hundred people on the streets of Leipzig and other cities.

The first phase of the *Wende* began in earnest with the really large demonstrations in Leipzig in October. In the second phase, after the opening of the borders between East and West Germany in November, the direction became uncertain, as the appeals of nationalism and the economic prosperity of the West made themselves felt. In the new parliamentarianism on which almost all agreed in the third phase, at the end of the year, the original hopes of the early makers of the revolution were smothered under a blanket of West German manipulation. After the elections, in March 1990, the only question became what the terms of annexation by West Germany would be.

The three phases of the *Wende* in East Germany can be readily demarcated. The first, the democratic breakthrough, was made possible by Hungary's decision to open its borders to DDR citizens wanting to leave for the West. The exodus across the border was seen everywhere as a hemorrhage, a symptom of the state of affairs in the country:

A party member is called in by the party secretary and asked why he had made an application for a visa to leave the country.

"Well, I was afraid that if things changed here, we might be the first to be blamed for the old ways and would be punished."

"Oh, don't worry," said the party secretary, "things around here won't change so quickly."

"That's the other reason I want to leave!"

At the same time, small opposition groups—New Forum (Neues Forum), the Initiative for Human Rights and Peace (Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte), Democracy Now (Demokratie Jetzt), Democratic Opening (Demokratischer Aufbruch)—already or newly formed, struggled for legality, their members hounded, activities suppressed. The critical moment came on the weekend of October 7, the fortieth anniversary celebration of the founding of the DDR, when Gorbachev, in his visit, asked to comment on the absence of *perestroika*