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Available online: 19 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Nitzan Shoshan (2012): Time at a Standstill: Loss, Accumulation, and the Past Conditional in an East Berlin Neighborhood, Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology, 77:1, 24-49

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2011.580358
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Time at a Standstill: Loss, Accumulation, and the Past Conditional in an East Berlin Neighborhood

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Abstract This article reconsiders the question of nostalgic consumption in East Germany as embedded not within a national or a regional (post-socialist) politics of time, as much literature has done, but rather within a global post-Fordist reconfiguration of the relation between time, consumption, and politics. Examining an underclass East Berlin neighborhood that has come to epitomize ‘pastness’, I show the salience of material prosperity – or its lack – in shaping the senses of time of its inhabitants. Especially for the younger generation, nostalgic commodities mediate the growing abyss between loss and accumulation, futures and pasts, nostalgic longings and unrealistic aspirations. I argue that the nexus of time, politics, and consumption has been transformed with the fading away of what has been called the future perfect (the political temporality of utopian projects) and its metamorphosis into what I term here the past conditional, the temporality of lost futures, irredeemable opportunities, and vanquished political imaginaries.

Keywords East Germany, temporality, nostalgia, consumption, post-Fordism

The Kugel forms a small semi-circular square strategically positioned at one of the main entrances to the ‘Getto’ (German for ‘Ghetto’), a communist-era high-rise residential quarter on the southeast outskirts of Berlin. Dubbed after a gray cement orb that stands at its center and tucked between the parking lot of the local discount supermarket and the imposing dimensions of a faceless elderly home, the Kugel (ball, sphere) overlooks a poorly maintained park flanked by rows of colorless buildings that extends into the heart of the neighborhood. An arc of wooden benches along its rim sits under a roofless
skeletal frame whose beige brick columns are decked with scribbles: numbers, names, ‘X loves Y’, racist slurs, or the acronym of Germany’s most prominent far-right political party, the NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands). Barring exceptionally inclement weather a few middle-aged men rest on the benches, chatting intermittently among scattered empty beer bottles, and across from them a small crowd of young persons congregates, beer bottles and cigarettes at hand. Many among the younger group carry jewelry pieces and clothing items coveted in extreme right wing circles: earrings or pendants with Gothic designs, T-shirts featuring Nordic mythological symbols, or black, white, and red jackets with such inscriptions as ‘Berlin – Reichshauptstadt’ (‘Berlin – the Reich’s capital’). Their conversation touches on sundry topics and their stories seem to repeat themselves: an unfaithful girlfriend, visits to the welfare office or the courthouse, a recent collection letter, soccer results, weekend parties, or family quarrels.

During my fieldwork I visited the Getto frequently. Often, when I would ask the youths who populated the benches at the Kugel about their doings, they would wryly respond, ‘being bored’ or ‘same as always’. The repetitiveness of their conversations and the dullness of their daily routines paint a still image of a stagnant social landscape that echoes stereo-typified renderings of the post-reunification East as a past-oriented space of immutability and neo-Nazis. And yet this seemingly static freeze of a post-industrial underclass existence without prospects belies the vast transformations that the Getto has witnessed since its construction was completed, shortly after the Berlin Wall came down.

Capturing this temporal shift from movement into slumber, Dominic Boyer has written of ‘a time, not so long ago, when the former East Germany seemed ripe for so many futures’, and of a starkly different present moment in which ‘talk of transformation and futurity has been rendered into tropes of stasis and pastness’ (Boyer 2006). Scholars have described how, in the aftermath of reunification, a victorious West Germany has inscribed upon both tangible landscapes and discourses of memory its hegemonic narrative of time (Borne-man 1993; De Soto 1997; Binder 2000; Shoshan 2008). During the cold war, each Germany constructed its own future-oriented place in history by displacing the burden of pastness onto its rival. But the collapse of cold war binary distinctions ruptured dominant temporal narratives, and the triumphant Federal Republic has sought – with considerable success – to preserve its place in the future by fabricating new associations between Eastness and pastness. As the other nation became the national other, former East
Germans have been relegated to a national space of nostalgia and past-oriented traditionalism as consumers and collectors of West-manufactured commodities that carry the signature of GDR (German Democratic Republic) material life, as the endangered specimen of authentic German traditions long corrupted in the West, and as today’s putative epicenter of National-Socialist political sympathies. Commodified nostalgia, then, would seem to subordinate the East to a hegemonic West German futurity by binding material consumption with pastness.

Yet beyond the crowning of the Federal Republic as the victorious author of history, the Wall’s demise reverberated across the globe as the foremost symbol of the downfall of the entire Soviet bloc. In this proclaimed ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992), as ‘dreamworlds and catastrophes’ (Buck-Morss 2000) alike shattered into dust, time as if imploded into a ‘postpolitical’ (Žižek 2006) here-and-now of consumer desire and immediate gratification, leaving a debris of possible futures and pasts scattered around the towering figure of the commodity. In socialist Romania, as Verdery (1996) noted, the state’s encroachment upon the temporal deployment of individual bodies (the ‘etatization of time’) found in consumption a particularly vital site for seizing upon the activities of its citizens. Meanwhile, anthropologists of post-socialist countries have shown how the nexus of time, politics, and consumption has endured the shift to capitalism, but they have also noted how it has witnessed certain fundamental reconfigurations. Especially the commodification of nostalgic affect has been exposed as a process highly invested with political significations (Berdahl 1999; Fehérváry 2009; Klumbyte 2010). Post-socialist subjects have engaged not only in nostalgic consumerism not only to index redeemable pasts, but also as a critique of the present. If, under state socialism, the special status of Western goods owed to their capacity to evoke an alternative world, today’s nostalgic commodities similarly accrue their value from their ability to conjure a there-and-then that would contrast with the here-and-now, even while reaffirming it.

In this article, however, I want to consider the pastness of today’s East Germany not only against the temporal politics of post-socialism but equally as emblematic of the de-industrialized landscapes of post-Fordist economies the world over. The global triumph of capitalism coincided historically with an overhaul of the political economy of capitalist societies themselves, and with concomitant transmutations in consumption practices, political discourses, and senses of time. Such worldwide shifts pose certain vital questions for post-reunification and post-socialist scholarship. How, for example, might we
approach the stillness and nostalgia that we find in today’s East Germany not only as set against a particular national or regional politics of time but also as bespeaking the worldwide reign of capitalist accumulation? What might our understanding of the passage from futurity to pastness gain as we embed our story within a global post-Fordist present? And what could this temporal shift reveal about the relation between time, politics, and the commodity at this historical moment?

My aim, then, is to interrogate the triangulation of temporal orientations, political investments, and material accumulation in today’s East Berlin as a reflection of contemporary processes that exceed German or post-socialist boundaries. Material accumulation, we shall see, crucially mediates historical time, shaping how the Getto’s inhabitants experience, imagine, and pass verdict upon it. Of course, as indexes of historical progress or decline, material prosperity and consumer goods have long served to orient temporal senses in socialist and capitalist countries alike (Sennett 1998; Ten Dyke 2001). And yet the political meanings with which material consumption invests time have not remained the same. Understanding the changing role of the commodity in the articulation of political futures and pasts may help us see better why nostalgic desire today appears so often to incarnate itself in tangible merchandize. And it may explain, too, why nostalgic commodities come not only in the form of endearing GDR-era souvenirs, but also of socially censured (and often legally banned) allusions to the Third Reich.

Particularly, I will argue that such an analysis confronts us with the fate of what has been called the future perfect (Žižek 2004; Povinelli 2009) in the post-Fordist, post-cold war world. This future perfect, the will have been ‘redeemed end of a perfected social field’ (thus Povinelli), spells at once the potentially violent tyranny of the future over the present and the possibility of imagining utopian temporalities and radical futurities. It thus legitimizes the present and silences its discontents in the name of a perfect future, but it also allows the elaboration of emancipatory political projects in the face of oppressive realities. The present article traces the metamorphosis of this future perfect into what I shall call here the ‘past conditional’: displaced into the past, the will-have-been of political futurities has turned into the would-have-been of nostalgic affect and squandered opportunities. In exploring how the redeeming end of the present has become its irredeemable past, I hope to show how the post-socialist case unravels into a more general contemporary moment, whose contours it perhaps crystallizes and betrays in an especially palpable form.
Following Boyer (2006), I use the terms pastness and futurity to refer to certain experiences and perceptions of the present, respectively, as a condition of stasis encumbered by history and laden with nostalgia or as a space of activity and of becoming bursting with potentialities. But I also draw on Munn’s (1992) description of pastness and futurity as spatio-temporal formulations that inflect certain geographical regions as past-oriented (e.g. the rural, or in our case, the East) and others as future-oriented (e.g. the urban or the West). For Munn, the future and the past manifest themselves in the present both in the quotidian projects of people and in their sedimentation into landscapes. Pastness, she suggests, appears in the here-and-now as the presencing of temporal distance, and especially of certain ‘historico-mythic pasts’. For the young people at the Getto, as we shall see, the past incarnates itself in the historico-mythic horizons of both the Third Reich and the GDR. Here as elsewhere, the creeping consolidation of its hold over the present seems to go hand in hand with its progressive commercialization (Huysssen 2003). Such historico-mythic pasts offer themselves up today as exchange values in innumerable forms of commodified memory, in which pastness increasingly appears as the object of consumer desire.

Most of the ethnographic material that I analyze in this article comes from fieldwork with young right extremist street milieus in East Berlin, conducted between August 2004 and December 2005. Throughout this period, I accompanied a team of street social workers who served these groups and facilitated my access to them. While I gradually spent more time with these groups on my own, the social workers remained an important presence throughout my research and were often at my side, as is evident in some of the episodes I discuss below. The young groups at the Kugel included some of their most hapless clients and I therefore became closely familiar with their members.

My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I introduce the young people at the Getto and sketch out the history of the neighborhood, an instance in the broader historical narrative of GDR residential environments. I consider the metamorphosis wrecked upon it in the aftermath of reunification, in the course of which what was once a utopian promise – a future perfect – became a paradigmatic relic of failure and a chronotope of historical regression. I then turn to examine how the temporality of material accumulation inflects modes of rendering time meaningful and of assessing historical trajectories among older inhabitants of the Getto, even as their judgments on the passage of time may radically diverge. Finally, I return to the young groups at the Kugel and to the commodities that they consume. For this younger generation,
which represents an emergent post-industrial class not only in Germany (Holmes 2000), the nostalgic commodity permits the recuperation of a certain meaningful sense of historical time. In allowing for the material accumulation of loss, I argue, nostalgic commodities mediate between a futurity dislodged into the past and a future that appears to hold nothing but pastness.

The Rise and Fall of Plattenbauten Neighborhoods

Their age notwithstanding, the young people at the Kugel have been central to the politics of time in Germany. Their sociological backgrounds range between underclass destitution and solid working class households and virtually all come from East German families, where adults may have been unemployed for the better part of the past two decades. Violence, alcoholism, and delinquency are endemic within their milieus, and many boast convictions for a wide array of petty (and not-so-petty) offenses: theft and shoplifting, physical assault and damage to property, arson and trespassing, possession of illegal weapons and debt evasion, or transgressions against legal bans on right extremist ‘things’. A select few make their way into government-funded vocational training programs, but their prospects of securing salaried employment seem bleak. Work for the most part appears to them as a government imposed condition for access to welfare benefits – often in janitorial or maintenance positions that require little actual effort – rather than as a possible path for increased material prosperity, not to mention as a meaningful vocation. Their political consciousness could be best described as rudimentary. Only a mere handful had ever partaken in organized political activities, and they too rather infrequently and unsteadily. Racism and xenophobic nationalism run deep and wide among them, with immigrants commonly invoked as the root-cause of pretty much all that is wrong with today’s Germany. For many among them, their hangouts provide an escape from domestic violence and alcohol abuse: the lawn behind the elderly home, where they sometimes linger idly underneath the anonymous stare of countless windows, the local Turkish restaurant-bar where – when they can afford it – they relieve themselves of small change at the slot machines, the apartments of friends, decorated with Second and Third Reich flags, where entertainment includes illegal neo-Nazi music and films, or their habitual spot at the Kugel.

For broad publics in Germany, milieus such as theirs have come to crystallize the anguish of the East: economic stagnation, lingering unemployment, and a supposed failure to adapt to market capitalism; a putatively atavistic, authoritarian, intolerant, and anti-democratic political culture; and the inexorable
persistence of GDR-era social pathologies well into the neoliberal FRG present and across generational divides. Standing at once for social parasites, irredeemable Easterners, and bigoted neo-Nazis, precisely as the first post-GDR generation they incarnate all the more emblematically the spirit of the past conditional. And they often appear bound up not only with a temporal figure, but also – and inseparably – with a spatial one: the communist-era high-rise residential neighborhood, today’s dominant chronotope (Bakhtin 1998) for pastness and stasis throughout Germany, of which the Getto forms one of Berlin’s finest examples.

Built in the late 1980s, the Getto marked the conclusion of a prolonged utopian project of immense dimensions, which aimed to resolve once and for all severe housing shortages that dated as far back as the nineteenth century. Housing became an especially acute problem in the wake of World War II (Sebald 1999) and emerged as a key measure for assessing the relative merit of the two nascent German states. In 1971, the GDR initiated an ambitious 20-year plan to address the problem entirely through the erection of vast residential neighborhoods (Großsiedlungen) with mass-produced high-rises (Plattenbauten, literally ‘plate-buildings’). For many families, the Großsiedlungen provided real and immediate relief from the crowded and deteriorated conditions of inner city buildings that had suffered from poor maintenance for decades. Their special amenities included additional rooms, centralized heating, hot water, private bathrooms and kitchens, and a modernized electricity infrastructure. Beyond convenient commutes, proximity between new neighborhoods and production centers (Hannemann 2005) meant that workplace social networks extended into residential ones, allowing for strong community structures. Demand for apartments in the Großsiedlungen was high and their tenants came from the middle to upper echelons of the GDR (Häußermann & Kapphan 2002).

At the same time, the new neighborhoods also fulfilled an important ideological function. They were represented – and, at least by some, also perceived – as the physical incarnation of a socialist vision, at once a grand statement of a utopian promise and the imposing materiality of its ostensible realization in the present. Their architectural design asserted the possibility of creating new kinds of subjects and a new type of society. The improved living conditions they offered their residents stood for the promise of a future of universal material prosperity. They answered the political logic of the future perfect, in which a utopian horizon legitimates large scale hegemonic projects as acts to be redeemed retroactively.
There is surely some irony in the fact that the conclusion of the housing plan coincided with the end of the GDR. The arrival of a capitalist market economy fundamentally impacted urban space in general and Großsiedlungen in particular. The rapid collapse of virtually all East German industry left many neighborhoods cut-off from centers of economic activity, disrupting the social continuity between production and residence and rendering them into mammoths of anonymous forms of dwelling (Häußermann & Kapphan 2002). While the fate of particular neighborhood has varied greatly, especially on the outskirts of cities they have often become resignified as working-class peripheries. Their formerly exclusive amenities were quickly dwarfed by new scales of luxury. And their physical landscape became reinterpreted as oppressively monotonous under the architectural-aesthetic order of the West, where Plattenbauten buildings have been historically coterminous with public housing projects and underclass ghettos. What was earlier envisioned as the material promise of human progress turned into a quintessential symbol of colossal failure and reckless inhumanity, an enduring, ineffaceable scar inscribed in the landscape of the former East as both a warning and a condemnation.

Many Großsiedlungen found themselves at the losing end of widening social polarization. By and large, it was those who coped less well with the transition to capitalism – Wendeverlierer (transition losers) in local parlance – who remained behind, while the vacant apartments of those who benefited were soon taken over by low-income households and welfare recipients. The scene at the Kugel, then, bears testament to this recent metamorphosis of Plattenbauten neighborhoods. Many of the young people who gather there arrived at the neighborhood as newborns whose parents counted among those fortunate enough to win highly prized apartments in the new Großsiedlung. Today, young growing families continue to arrive in search of additional living space, but they come for the cheap rents that meet their limited – and almost invariably state-supplemented – budgets. Lars, a member of the clique at the Kugel, relocated to the Getto with his girlfriend so that their toddler son could have a room of his own. ‘[The Getto] is a socially deprived area’, he says, ‘mostly there is just unemployment there, and there is no place for young people to go, it’s a typical Platte’. Twenty-one-year-old Uta is a former regular at the Kugel who has recently rented an apartment in another area of the district with her new boyfriend. Her parents counted among the Getto’s first residents and brought her to the neighborhood as a toddler following the birth of her younger sister. Uta narrates the changes that the neighborhood has witnessed as follows:
Well, in the beginning, as far back as I can still remember, it was a very very very quiet area. It was mostly families that moved in, [people] who thought 'ok, let’s start something new here'. Really quite a lot of families with children my age or my sister's age ... and one still felt comfortable walking around. People greeted each other. Even in an 11 story building the neighbors knew each other and got along with each other. And then quite suddenly it started. Some people moved out because they didn't feel comfortable there. Because really, only the riffraff was moving in ... after a while so many people moved in that it was sometimes really quite nasty. The bums loitered there ... it just kept getting worse ... but earlier it was pretty quiet. People knew each other and parents didn’t need to be worried [about their children]. My mother let me walk on my own to school because she had no reason to be afraid. But after a while you didn’t feel that comfortable there anymore. The buildings kept deteriorating.

If Plattenbauten neighborhoods have surfaced as the archetypal metaphors for the East’s discontents, the Getto in particular has taken this role in Berlin. Time and again it wins public exposure within the terse lines of newspaper notices on racist or violent events: vandalism at the Italian Café, a brutal assault on a resident, or anti-Semitic incidents at local league soccer games (Geyer 2006). Of late it has come into the limelight following the 2006 municipal elections, in which the extreme right NPD scored unprecedented success, harvesting its strongest support at a polling station not far from the Kugel. Media reports about the Getto in the wake of the elections painted it as a place ‘at the margins of society’ where history has come to a halt, tying together poverty and extreme right sympathies, social marginalization and political resentment (Köhler 2006; Stengel 2006). In such representations, the material deterioration of tangible landscapes proceeds hand in hand with the dissipation of forms of sociability, the loss of status, and the resurgence of an unsavory past in the figure of young neo-Nazis. As a chronotope of temporal reversal, the Getto contests the historical narrative of democratization, of the movement from violence and totalitarianism to peace and freedom.

Such temporal reversals inundate a variety of local media as well. We find them, for example, in the Treptow Transition Chronicle (Treptower Wende-Chronik), a booklet published by the municipal district in 2000 on the decennial of reunification (Teske 2000). A particularly rich though by no means unique artifact, the booklet recollects the era between the fall of the wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the GDR in 1990 through personal testimonies and archival images and documents. It portrays the GDR as a static society characterized by stagnation (Stagnation) and passivity (Passivität), its landscape decaying (verrotete) and neglected (ungepflegt).
This is what it looked like in 1989: rotten water pipes, gas pipes, and partly also electricity lines, patched streets, hardly a fraction of the retail area of 1999 – and that too in bad repair –, unkempt children’s playgrounds and extremely run-down school toilets and gymnasiums. (p. 50)

This is a backward-bent time, its sluggish flow marked by the steady deterioration of a society and its objects, by unattended wear-and-tear, and by historical motionlessness. The testimonies in the booklet create a temporal rift between this long slumber and the awakening (Aufbruch) of the transition, narrated with forward-looking, high-tempo tropes. Here, they conjure a sense of effective, fast-paced, future-oriented action through verbs that indicate advancement and progress: begin (beginnen), start (anfangen), build (aufbauen), renovate (sanieren), and so forth. Their narratives recall the foundation (Gründung) of organizations, the development (Entwicklung) of infrastructure, or the renewal (Erneuerung) of public space.

My time at the municipality was fascinating: the steps for closing the gaps between streets and rail lines across the internal German border followed each other in a breathtaking tempo. The railroad across the border and the domestic air traffic were organized. The privatization of commercial transport and the taxi trade as well as the municipalization and privatization of public transport had begun. Already in 1990 street renovation had commenced. (p. 23)

And

The new district mayor could not complain about a scarcity of work... New administrative structures had to be built, regulations had to be revised, fields of responsibility had to be rearranged, documents had to be retrieved... juridical questions had to be clarified, and most of all, every decision had to be grounded in and in accordance with the laws. (p. 44)

And yet, enveloping this shift from the pastness of the GDR to the futurity of the transition is yet a third sense of time, not explicitly voiced but amply present. The booklet’s reminiscences about a lost moment of regeneration evoke a longing for a time in which the past was not the object of longing. Their construction of a temporal break between the GDR and the transition entails, too, a certain present on which they scarcely comment. Neither the long sleep of the GDR nor the euphoric awakening of its unraveling, that present remains amorphous, its contours betrayed only by the nostalgic impetus of the booklet itself.
The present receives flesh and blood on the pages of a monthly neighborhood newsletter (Unverfehrt 2005). A black-and-white photograph of the Investruine, a dilapidated architectural eyesore that has dominated the Getto’s modest area of consumption venues for over a decade and a half, illustrates its April 2005 cover page. Lack of commercial interest still delays the ruin’s long-awaited demolition. The cover story reports on the proceedings of a town hall meeting. The already delayed completion of a new road has been postponed once again. An adjacent elementary school faces the threat of closure. The vacant land bordering the Getto, designated for residential development, has so far failed to attract any investors.

What is to happen with the buildings of the kindergartens after they are shut down? The district municipality has no answer to this at the moment. So far no subsequent uses for them are planned . . .

The grounds of the former garden plots remains stagnant. The area belongs to the state and subsequently to the Treuhand. For their part, they have undertaken no actions to use or modify these grounds in any way.

The present appears here inflected with the pastness of unfinished projects, abandoned kindergartens, derelict landscapes, and economic stagnation. Its language is one of ‘closure’ (Schließung), ‘cancelled’ (gestrichen), or ‘with no results’ (ohne Ergebnisse). On the newsletter’s subsequent page, we find a biographical portrait of a local resident that paints a picturesque GDR childhood landscape of open fields, where the family garden provided sufficient playground for the two young children and homegrown fruits and vegetables guaranteed a healthful nutrition. Not only were the street names legendary – Siegfried, Gunter, Rheingold and Nibelungen – of legendary beauty was also the surrounding landscape of swaying cornfields. . . (Ernst 2005)

A celebrated architect, the resident depicted in the portrait eventually held responsibility for all high residential construction in the GDR. In 1986, he received the City of Berlin’s Architecture prize. In Thälmann Park he can still see and show today ‘his works’, for which he was responsible. The well known ‘maple leaf’ in the housing complex on Fischerinsel, in the construction of which he participated intensively, had to give way to a bland post-reunification cement block. That still hurts today.

His GDR past emerges through figures of ‘building’ (bauen), ‘studying’ (studieren), ‘leading’ (leiten), or ‘working’ (tätigen sein). Against a present at a standstill,
that past contrasts itself in the newsletter as an era of movement, production, and creativity.

**Decline and Longing**

But in what politics of time (Rutz 1992) does such a reversal partake? And what is the fate of a totalizing futurity that becomes relegated into the past? What are the means by which those who inhabit the *Getto* make sense of it? And how do they reconcile the growing abyss between a futurity located in the past and a pastness located in the future? We find a helpful starting point for pursuing these questions at the small youth club in the *Getto*, where the street social workers and I occasionally stop to chat with Anna, the youth worker in charge. The youth club sits in a long, two-storied building that houses as well a public library, an elderly community center, and a few other public services and venues. Few seem to take advantage of its offerings: several couches, a small kitchenette, a TV, a CD player, and a foosball table. In her late thirties, Anna lives in an adjacent neighborhood, where she was born and raised, and spends the better part of her days at the club servicing the younger residents of the *Getto*. Fully employed, she counts herself (and would no doubt be counted by others) as a beneficiary of the transition, even if, as we shall presently see, her relation to it is ambivalent.

The particular visit I discuss here happened on a rainy afternoon in June but resonated with many similar interactions I observed while in the field. Almost immediately upon our arrival at the youth club, the conversation turned to the theme of right extremism, touching upon a newly formed neighborhood workgroup to combat right extremist trends, the district-wide coalition against racism and intolerance, and preparations for an upcoming ‘Festival for Democracy’ at a train station infamous for ultra-nationalist violence. Suddenly, Anna remarked on how harsh and authoritarian parents in the area had become toward their children, restricting their social activities and their movement. It was different before, she continued. In the GDR, parents were more tolerant and children could always count on the help of neighbors. Fortunate households equipped with phone lines stood open for those who lacked such a luxury, residents knew each other well and shared their belongings generously, and families would organize street festivals, carrying chairs from their homes, preparing food together, and playing music through open windows. Things have changed completely, she observed. People have become isolated: they rarely interact with or even know each other, they no longer offer mutual help as they did before, and children cannot simply knock on a neighbor’s

*ETHNOS*, VOL. 77:1, MARCH 2012 (PP. 24–49)
door and expect assistance. In Anna’s narrative, the unraveling of the GDR appears as a temporal partition, itself devoid of time, not an era as in the Transition Chronicle. With its back to the socialist past and its face to the capitalist future, it marks an event of rupture that spells for her the shift from tolerant to authoritarian parenting, from communal openness to private isolation, from approachable, familiar neighbors to the locked doors of strangers. Flowing from the permissive to the restrictive, from the wide open to the carefully shut, from spontaneity to regulated conduct, the passing of time seems to signal the confinement of activities, the dilution of relationships, and the foreclosing of possibilities.

As she emerged from her nostalgic critique of the present, however, Anna soon changed her tone and comforted herself, stating that not everything had become worse and that one should not overlook those aspects of life that have improved. She pointed out that the chronic material scarcity of the GDR had disappeared. Material prosperity, she explained, might in fact be inseparable from the impoverishment of social relations: it is because everyone now owns phones and cars that people share less. Against the loss of open places, of mutual solidarity, and of a sense of community, the present legitimates itself for Anna through the inventory of privately owned commodities, through the enhanced access to means of communication and transportation, and through increased material convenience. Time has been displaced from the disintegrating spheres of family relations and neighborhood sociability to the domain of consumption where, today, its progress can be measured. It is notable – though not unordinary – that Anna made no mention of other domains in which historical movement could be assessed positively, and especially of what might be described as the narrowly defined, formally political dimensions of change (e.g. the lifting of restrictions on movement, speech, occupation, residence, and other proclaimed emancipations that accompanied the arrival of liberal democracy). Instead, it is heightened prosperity that appears as a discursive operator for recuperating time, for reconstituting the meaningful flow of history, for domesticating a lost past and, with it, a lost future. For Anna, a gainfully employed member of the middle class, the availability of material accumulation as a rehabilitative term defines the possibility of return, of resurgence from nostalgic longing. But what other forms of time might emerge where material consumption falls short of compensating for a sense of loss?

In order to address this question, allow me at this point to return to the Kugel, where Helmuth – one of the street social workers – and I arrived on a pleasant
early May afternoon. The previous night was *Herrentag*, a holiday celebrated throughout northern Germany with immoderate alcohol consumption. This perhaps explained why none of the younger regulars were present yet. Six men in their forties and fifties rested on two benches amidst mostly empty beer and schnapps bottles. We asked about morning news reports on violent clashes in the neighborhood last night. They had noticed nothing of the sort, they said. A few of them remarked that the turnout at bars in the neighborhood had plummeted from previous years. One of them suggested that higher beer prices might stand behind the decline in the number of partygoers. The others nodded in agreement, noting that beer had become too expensive for most people to afford, especially in bars. Another blamed the Euro for the hike in prices, he too winning broad consent from the small crowd. His remark sparked a collective recollection of how cheap various goods had been prior to the introduction of the Euro. ‘Not to mention before the transition’, one of the men added, and the rest proceeded to reminisce about the low cost of beer in the GDR.

Reproducing an interactional script that I had witnessed enacted many times during my research, Helmuth interrupted their chatter to remind them that while beer may have been far cheaper before reunification, shops were chronically empty. With this, he signaled the moment of exit from this all-too-familiar genre of nostalgic remembrance. But while the men concurred with him, his comment failed to impact the evolving direction of their talk. One of them proceeded to explain that people today have less money because they have many new expenses: cars, for example, which few owned previously but which in the meantime have become indispensable, and which cost their owners gas, maintenance, and taxes. ‘And many other things as well’, added one of his peers. They shifted to reminisce about how things were ‘before’, in the GDR. While in many respects life in East Germany was bad, they all approved, there were at least strong social networks and real social welfare. No one feared for the prospects of young persons finishing their professional training and searching for jobs, and no one was unemployed. The Federal Republic should have retained some of those good aspects of the GDR, they concluded; it was a shame that they were now lost forever.

Out of their conversation a different face of commodity time emerges. The chronometer of capital may sound the rhythm of material accumulation for some, but for others it comes to life in the beat of prices. Unemployed since the massive shutdowns that followed reunification, the men at the *Kugel* have lost virtually any prospect of re-entering the workforce. To them, the passage
of time incarnates itself in progressive cuts to social welfare on the one hand, and on the other hand, as evident in the narrative that they string together, in the stubbornly rising cost of commodities. Against Helmuth’s remark about the scarcity of goods in the past they posit the scarcity of money in the present. Neither the pleasure of consumer gratification nor an expanding relation of property ownership, the temporality of material accumulation appears here as the mounting burden of expenses. Nostalgic remembrances of social networks and material security carry the day.

**Accumulating Pasts**

Anna’s nostalgic impulse, we have seen, emerges momentarily only to become discursively subordinated to a dominant temporality of increased material prosperity, while for the men at the Kugel the re-articulation of loss as gain appears more difficult. From their standpoint, and employing the same material standards, history appears to move ‘backwards’. From their benches at the Kugel the men overlook the square’s globular centerpiece. On its top, a black, white, and red NPD sticker that features an image from a political rally declares ‘Hier ist Deutschland!’ (here [it] is Germany!). Rising above the orb and the NPD sticker, the men’s gaze meets the white and brown façade of the elderly home. Whether or not they see their own future mirrored in this eight story tall and more than seventy meters wide screen of innumerable windows, they themselves hold out the warning of a possible future to the gazes of the young people who soon gather only a few benches away.

‘We don’t want to end up like these guys’, the young people say, nodding their heads in the direction of the older men across from them. And yet the uncertain future that they face is unlikely to satisfy their desires. Tropes of material accumulation – of increased property and improved consumption possibilities – shape their imaginations of their future and their elaboration of meaningful measures of the motion of time. Thus, even Gino, a multiple-time convicted violent offender and an aficionado of weapons and Third Reich memorabilia who, when not in prison, was invariable on some probationary parole, summed up his imagination of his life to come with ‘a nice house’, ‘a car’, and ‘a steady job with a good salary’. Most of his peers at the Kugel entertain hardly distinguishable aspirations. Together, they dream loudly about traveling abroad, their lists of destinations drawing its inspiration from, on the one hand, popular southern European discount beach resorts, and on the other, Hollywood movies; they weave schemes for saving up enough money to obtain a driver’s license, an expense well beyond their means; or they compare and
admire the latest leading cellular phone models on the market. Alternatively, they take stock of their latest acquisitions: Gino struts about flaunting his brand new sneakers, funding for which he secured through his parole officer, sparking a debate about the latest in footwear fashion; his friend Sebastian, an emaciated NPD enthusiast, appears with a recently bought mp3 player that momentarily becomes the center of conversation as members of the clique pass it around; and Danny, a short baby-faced skinhead who invariably wears an illegal neo-Nazi shirt, wins compliments for his fresh blond-dyed hairdo.

Almost furtively, two spheres of commodities and modalities of consumption are inextricably interwoven here. Gino’s acquisitions at times consist of Nike sneakers, but as frequently of illegal weapons such as baseball bats decorated with Third Reich symbolism, air guns, or knuckles, or alternatively of neo-Nazi jewelry, ranging from Iron Cross rings to Thor’s Hammer pendants. Sebastian obtained his mp3 player at the nearest shopping mall, yet some of the music it carries is legally banned and came his way through clandestine networks. It features Heavy Metal tracks and rock ballads by such popular neo-Nazi bands as Spreegeschwader, Landser, Sleipnir, Leitwolf, or Blood & Honor, with lyrics glorifying the sacrifice of the Wehrmacht’s soldiers, extolling the heroism of Rudolph Hess or Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, inciting hatred against ethnic minorities, or anticipating the triumph of the white cause. And Danny’s new hairstyle remains an ornamental element within a larger aesthetic composition that includes, too, his illegal shirt (banned for the similarity that its black, white, and red logo – an upward pointing arrow crossed by a zigzag shape at its middle – was deemed to exhibit to National Socialist symbols) and his overall skinhead appearance (the combined effect of his blue bomber jacket, light jeans, neo-Nazi rings and earrings, and New Balance sneakers, which have of late become popular among rightist skinheads).

Thus, side by side with the array of status and style indicators that circulate globally and in the formal economy, and in variegated modes of articulation with them, we find a second arena of material accumulation whose symbolic economy invokes and refers to the National Socialist, Monarchic, or GDR past. Much has been written about commodified Ostalgie, the marketing and consumption of nostalgic GDR commodities following reunification. But the production, circulation, and amassing of legal and illegal extreme right commodities constitutes a formidable niche-market of objectified nostalgia in its own right: miniature bronze busts of Adolf Hitler, clothing insignia that replicate SS symbols, pendants and rings decorated with the iron cross or other National Socialist emblems, black–white–red flags of the Second and Third
German Reichs, banned neo-Nazi music CDs, and a plethora of other articles are bought, exchanged, accumulated, displayed, and admired. Tangible collectibles (flags, posters, jewelry, DVDs, etc.) are conveniently available in street markets across the Polish border, through online catalogues, at specialized shops, or from acquaintances. Gino and his friends participate in a lively barter economy in which they trade weapons for banners, statuettes for framed pictures, or bracelets for books. Individuals often sell particular belongings when in financial straits or when owning them becomes too risky, as was Gino’s case during his legal probation. Few of the items that circulate in this illicit economy claim historical authenticity, the handful of exceptions comprising of uniforms or propaganda items allegedly inherited from grandparents. For the most part, prices for individual items hover around ten or twenty Euros, making them at least occasionally affordable even for the young people at the Kugel.

To be sure, the distinction between this illicit realm of consumption and the realm of globally circulating brand names and status symbols is a blurry and porous one, and their intertwinements are varied. At times they appear in a functional relation within the same consumption activity, as in the mp3 player and the banned songs that it stores; or in a metonymic relation within a commodified ensemble, as the case of Danny’s hairdo and shirt shows; or they may also figure as substitutable equivalents, as when Gino parades a recent purchase. Often, however, the distinction collapses entirely. Many commodities belong at once to a right extremist niche market and to the formal economy of goods (for example, legal fashion items that answer contemporary global trends but that, in today’s Germany, suggest a neo-Nazi consumer identification).

Nevertheless, if precariously delimited, we find at the Kugel two reciprocally imbricated spheres of commodities that roughly correspond to distinct temporal horizons. The first refers to a type of consumption that signals participation in – and status within – broad new markets and symbolic economies. It references a temporality that tells time through the social activities of consumption, and in which futurity is reduced to the logic of the present as its mere extension in the form of (ideally) progressive material accumulation. The latest sneakers, mp3 players, and cell phone models just as much as the nice house, the nice car, and the well-paying job in the more remote, imagined future belong with this ideology of commodity time. The second modality of consumption signals, whether overtly or covertly, participation in culturally tabooed and often illegal markets. While it too involves the circulation of
exchange values and thus hinges upon a temporality of consumption, it simulta-
neously gestures nostalgically to a lost past. Its temporal compass therefore
contrasts with the commodified future of the former sphere of consumption.
Its material artifacts bear a nostalgic orientation, but one which – to borrow
on Svetlana Boym’s distinction (Boym 2001) – is neither restorative nor quite
reflective: we find within it neither political aspirations for restoring a vanished
past nor a critical, ironic reflection on the memory of loss.\(^{16}\) No doubt, Gino and
his friends enunciate the typical ideologemes of a xenophobic European
politics: some would like to see the curbing of immigration or the wholesale
deporation of ‘foreigners’, others fantasize about the rebuilding of the Berlin
wall or about full employment. But virtually all concede that, from immigration
to employment, ‘it’s all lost’, or as Gino puts it, ‘it’s too mixed’ to be set right.
Their consumption of nostalgic commodities thus marks a restorative – roman-
tic, essentializing, nationalist, atavistic – relation to the past, but one bereft of
any restorative project in the present, in which it remains purely reflexive and
subordinate to the temporality of the commodity.

The contrast drawn between these consumptive activities of the present
replicates and brings into relief the temporal dissonance that hovered over
the period of reunification, and which did not escape critical observers at the
time (Grass 1991; Habermas 1991; Heym 1991). On the one hand, and starting
already well before the fall of the Wall on 9 November 1989, the unraveling
of the GDR saw the mobilization of mass protest movements, the emergence
of various political imaginaries, the elaboration of both reformist and radical
agendas, and the opening up of a transcendent futurity that exceeded the
logic of the past. Some of these, for example Bohrer’s (1991) conservative case
for recuperating the legacy of Prussian history and for a culturally defined
national identity within a (re-)unified Germany, arguably answered Boym’s
notion of restorative nostalgia. Others put forward different ideas for radically
revising the political systems in both West and East Germany, for novel articu-
lations of democracy and socialism, and even for continuing national division.
Such temporalities took the form of transformative, when not revolutionary
social projects, of new (formal or substantive) freedoms, and of innovative pol-
itical visions. In doing so, they both posited and presupposed the conjectural
logic of the future perfect tense, of changes that ‘will have been’ born out in
the future (Žižek 2004; Povinelli 2009).

Yet at the same time, and inseparably, the so-called period of transition
(Wendezeit) appeared to stubbornly follow – and to excite – the ineluctable
call of the commodity and the seemingly unstoppable thrust of consumer
desires as at once the engines and the ends of imaginable futures. There seems to be little disagreement that the slogan ‘prosperity for all’ (Wohlstand für alle) did at least as much – if not far more – to bring about the eventual implosion of the GDR as aspirations for more political freedoms and a more democratic society (not to mention for radical alternatives or nationalist visions). In fact, precisely at the period of transition the promise of material prosperity and that of political freedom became aligned within the single futurity of free market capitalism and liberal democracy. It is this precarious alignment that had come undone in the post-reunification years, as the disjunction between political and material futurities became progressively palpable. In the process, the temporality of utopian possibilities and of political alternatives has turned its gaze away from the future, or viewed differently, it has been banished from its realm. The future perfect has become a past conditional, relegated to nostalgic pastness, while the temporality of surplus value has consolidated its grip on the future; the will have been has metamorphosed into a would have been.

At the Getto, we saw, the sway of this temporal disjuncture has been broad and deep. For Anna, gainfully employed and comfortably middle class, it is less the gains in political and individual freedoms and more the yardstick of material accumulation that appears to counterbalance her nostalgic remembrances of the GDR. Less fortunate than Anna, the old men pass judgment over the post-reunification era largely with the very same yardstick, even as their appraisals contrast sharply with hers. One would look in vain for a future perfect tense here. Instead we seem only to find that past conditional, with its melancholic, reflective relation to the past: the FRG should have adopted some of the good aspects of the GDR; it is a shame that they are now lost forever.

For the young people at the Kugel, embodying as they do the emergent contours of a post-industrial underclass, this gap between pastness and futurity becomes ever harder to bridge. And it is precisely this temporal distance that the nostalgic commodity mediates. Crowded around their benches, with their backs to the elderly home and their faces to the seated men, their intermediate position in space conjures a metaphorical image of their temporal suspension between two nostalgic horizons. The first comes to life in the figure of the men across from them, whose recitations of longing for the GDR invoke a past of which they themselves are too young to have retained any significant first-hand memories. Still, the depictions of a lost world of full employment, cheap goods, and virtually no immigrants speak to them and capture their
imaginations, complementing similar narratives that they absorb in family settings or from older acquaintances. Whether they spend their days attending government-funded training programs or welfare-for-work part-time jobs, they view their employment prospects with great pessimism and hold fast to the belief that, in this respect, their generation has fared worse than previous ones. Many among them sustain that ‘before [reunification] almost everything was better... if everybody says so, there must be truth in it’. And, counterintuitive as it may sound, especially those who profess ultra-nationalist sympathies and Third Reich identifications often proclaim that they would welcome the reconstruction of the Berlin Wall.

The elderly home behind them embodies the second nostalgic horizon that shapes their sense of the past. Here, as well as in other encounters with aging veterans of National-Socialism, they may collect tales of brotherhood, heroism, and sacrifice that stretch back to the years of World War II. Gino explains:

There were also some [at the elderly home] that... you could see it in their eyes, all the things they’ve done... I went in there on my own, because I wanted to simply ask them... I did not become a nationalist for nothing... that’s why I had to listen to what they said. [interview by author, 12 March 2005]

Gino’s and his friends’ place at the Kugel appears as if wedged between these two narratives of (be)longing. Their here-and-now of unemployment and welfare, of poverty and delinquency, and of violence and insecurity gives on to and becomes constituted through these imagined pasts on the one hand, and a future of bleak material prospects on the other. In this dialectical image (Benjamin 2002), the time of longing and the time of the commodity articulate together in their daily lives through the material accumulation of nostalgia: the magic of the nostalgic commodity binds together the temporality of decline with that of consumption. Theirs is not a nostalgic desire for the accessible commodity, as in the affordable beer of the GDR or of pre-Euro Germany; nor do they rely on the commodity to chase away the ghosts of a lost past and to reclaim futurity. Instead, their sense of time materializes in the nostalgic commodity itself, in which the longed-for past – a blurry fantasy of employment and prosperity – comes with a price tag, and where extreme right subjectivity appears as a particular niche market for which the very narrative of decline becomes the object of consumer desire. Time still answers to the commodity, but – precisely through the acquisition of commodities – its flow binds together pastness and futurity, loss and accumulation.
Conclusion

There is of course much about the Getto and its people that would seem particularly German. The nostalgic longings and temporal experiences that we find in it reveal the historical sediments of a deeply traumatic century, burdened with acute ruptures and violent catastrophes, and the hegemonic politics of memory that has reigned over the post-socialist East ever since reunification. Much like many other Plattenbauten neighborhoods in the former East, the Getto too has taken on a spectral presence in the post-reunification landscape as an iconic representation of a disavowed past. And no doubt, the material aspirations that it harbors reflect a certain history of economic prosperity and would not necessarily be available elsewhere.

And yet even at the Getto, at that most clichéd figure of East German pastness, the temporalities that emerge in situated narratives answer less to a national re-sequencing of history and more to a certain articulation between time and the commodity. For people at the Getto, the flow of time seems to receive its form not so much from the lifting of repressive restrictions or from the expansion of freedoms as from variations in beer prices, in inventories of domestic appliances, or in tallies of private vehicles. The story that I have examined here, then, exceeds the boundaries of an exceptional national history and its politics of memory. And it exceeds, too, the broader story of post-socialism. It bespeaks a particular historical moment in which, across the world, precisely such imagined futurities of material accumulation as we have encountered at the Getto appear to possess a rapidly diminishing hold upon concrete social relations. While they are still available as temporal narratives – indeed, while they seem to have only further consolidated their grip on the future – they have become increasingly disharmonious with the new economic realities of a neoliberal age. In this, they reflect recent worldwide processes whose impact on the experience of time has been felt far beyond Germany.

The irony here is that, side by side with its increasingly hollow promise, the encroaching monopolization of the future by the temporality of material accumulation has meant the relegation of utopian imaginaries into the irredeemably lost past. Thus the global transformations in the politics of time and in the temporality of politics that emerged with the transition to neoliberalism and the conclusion of the cold war have witnessed the slippage of the future perfect into the past conditional, the transmutation of the ‘will have been’ into the ‘would have been’. It is within that widening abyss between pastness and futurity, between relinquished dreamworlds and frustrated consumer
desires, that the nostalgic commodity finds its place as the temporal mediation of loss and accumulation in our post-political world.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the University of Chicago, the Social Science Research Council, the Hannah Holborn Gray Mellon Fellowship, and the Josephine De Kármán Fellowship for their generous support of the research on which this article is based. I would also like to thank Greg Beckett, Alejandra Leal, Noa Vaisman, and participants in the Anthropology of Europe Workshop and in the Social Structures and Processes in the Urban Space Workshop at the University of Chicago for their helpful comments on the previous drafts of this article. Finally, I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions.

Notes

1. The term *Getto* evokes a series of determinate associations, all of which (re)present ethnicized configurations of urban spaces: earlier Jewish ghettos, today’s ‘immigrant ghettos’ in European cities, and the American inner-city ghetto. In our case, it was commonly employed to refer to the neighborhood and referenced commercially mediated images of the American namesake. Young residents used the term to index moral virtues (camaraderie, masculinity, being ‘cool’), while outsiders attached to it a less flattering valence. I follow local usage here not in order to suggest a sociological analogy between the *Getto* and contemporary forms of ‘advanced marginality’ (Wacquant 2007) elsewhere, but rather to capture how globally circulating representations of the American Inner City Ghetto shape residents’ perception of their neighborhood.

2. The black–white–red colors hark back to the Second and Third Reichs, marking a far-right anti-Republicanism.

3. No doubt, groups of bored young people are a likely feature of many world regions today. Michael Ralph, for example, has described similar images of young Senegalese who spend their days drinking tea outdoors (Ralph 2008). And yet, as Ralph explains, in Senegal such scenes bespeak the ways in which the state contains youth following the disappearance of jobs. The scene at the Kugel similarly exposes a particular historical moment. When they were young, the parents of the young people that gather there spent their days at the workplace or in vocational training programs that were virtually certain to lead to employment. Their children’s boredom, in turn, references a post-Fordist disengagement from processes of production and marginalization with respect to activities of consumption.

4. Several writers have insisted that the end of the cold war transformed both East and West (Buck-Morss 2000). Scribner (2003) has argued that the post-socialist East simply reveals in more pronounced forms certain processes that have simultaneously been reshaping the post-Fordist West, and in this sense, the former would appear to represent the future of the latter.

5. For example, several of them could not name Germany’s Chancellor.

6. The plan encompassed the construction of some three million apartments. According to current estimates, about 20% of East Germany’s population resides in such *Großsiedlungen* (Hannemann 2005:155).
Indeed, material consumption and luxury seem to have been as central to the imagination of the future (and to the assessment of the present) in socialist societies as they have been in capitalist ones. Ironically, the socialist state contributed to its own undoing by inciting precisely such imaginations among its citizens (Feher 2009).

For more on how post-Fordist capitalism impacted cities in the post-socialist world and beyond, see e.g. (Andrusz et al. 1996; Oswalt 2005).

To be sure, similar processes have been analyzed elsewhere (Davis 1992; Harvey 2001; Brenner & Theodore 2002). Yet unlike other locations progressively transformed by the shifting geographies of capitalism, the Getto has morphed out of a radical discontinuity in the dominant order.

Similarly alarming representations of post-reunification Plattenbauten neighborhoods as violent places terrorized by young skinheads have become commonplace in the mass media, in academic contexts, in political debates, and in literary works (Schröder 1997; ZDK 1998; Grass 2002; Staud 2005).

I use the term chronotope in the Bakhtinian sense of a fusion between word, place, and time as the organizing principle of narrative genres (Bakhtin 1998).

The term Wende (lit. turn, here translated as transition) roughly designates in Germany the period that opened with the fall of the wall and concluded with reunification.

The Treuhand was the agency entrusted with the management and privatization of all East German public property after reunification. It was shut down in 1994. Here the reference is to one of its successor agencies, which took over from it the management of public real estate in the cities.

Scholars have amply demonstrated the political significances of consumption in socialist and post-socialist contexts alike (Verdery 1992; Ten Dyke 2001; Feher 2009; Klumbyte 2010). The contrast drawn here is not meant to evacuate consumption from such political significance, but rather to consider the recurring absences that mark local narratives about the transition from socialism. The narrowly defined political sphere of formal liberal democratic freedoms, a dimension of historical change that could potentially allow for a positive valuation of the transition even for those who have not benefited from it economically, was virtually absent from my informants’ reflections. In contrast, the measures that Anna applies to evaluate historical change hinge upon material prosperity and are therefore unevenly distributed, making themselves available to Anna as a result of her socio-economic trajectory while remaining unavailable for others.

No doubt, through collective longing, unemployment itself may become a form of sociability, and hence generative of that which it proclaims as lost (Ralph 2008). But it does this partially at best, recuperating a mere fragment of a lifeworld that included as well the social meanings attached to waged employment (Muehlebach 2011) and to biographical trajectories of material accumulation (Sennett 1998).

For Boym, ‘restorative nostalgia . . . proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps’. Its practitioners ‘do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth’. Restorative nostalgia ‘characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world . . . ’. In contrast, ‘reflective nostalgia dwells in . . . longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance’ (Boym 2001).
17. That prices in the GDR were anything but cheap (in terms of real purchasing power) or that the country hosted many foreigners (as temporary laborers, vocational trainees, or academic students) makes little difference for the images that the young generation acquires through these narratives.

References


