

Barbara Grüning

Andreas Glaeser, "Political Epistemics. The Secret Police, the Opposition and the End of East Germany". Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011, 606 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/77057)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2014

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book Review

Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics. The Secret Police, the Opposition and the End of East Germany*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011, 606 pp.

doi: 10.2383/77057

In *Divided in Unity* (2000) Andreas Glaeser focused on the identity formation processes of Eastern and Western police officers in Berlin during the cold war. The aim of the analysis was to reflect upon one of the main cultural problem of reunified Germany: the lacking of a shared collective memory between East and West Germans. In *Political Epistemics*, the object of investigation is the narratives of secret agents (Stasi officers) and of dissident groups in the last years of the German democratic Republic (GDR). Glaeser's goal could seem just to expand his previous research. However, here questions of identity and memory shift in the background. The interest in narratives is not directed to reconstruct a memory conflict about the GDR-past, rather to give an epistemic explanation of the failure of GDR-socialism. Therefore narratives are understood as display of knowledge processes rather than memory acts which form past representations.

The epistemic explanation of GDR-failure represents then a novelty with respect to the currently prevalent variants of political and economics system accounts. The economical and political dimensions are not neglected, but they are mediated by what the author calls "the understanding operations" of the GDR-social actors in their everyday life.

According to Glaeser, "understandings processes" are crucial because of the central role GDR-leaders attributed to socialism in organizing the everyday-life of the GDR-society and in maintaining and reproducing its institutions. The thesis of the author is therefore that the crisis of the GDR in the last decade of its existence depended on the incapacity of party leaders (SED, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) to renew political institutions in front of social changes and the economic crisis because of their dogmatic interpretation and application of socialist ideas. In brief the understanding of socialism by party leaders became over time more and more distant from the everyday experiences of GDR-citizens. Thus, on a one hand the GDR-elites refused alternative ways of understanding the reality, by labeling them as "anti-socialist," and on the other hand they were unable to solve social and economic problems since that implied a transformation of the political institutions. As a consequence their understanding of socialism produced fetishized institutions which could maintain themselves only within the prescriptive track of Marxist-leninist ideology.

The book is basically structured in four parts: the first one is devoted to the theoretical explanation of political epistemics, the second to the understanding of socialism by GDR-elites, and the other two focus on the narratives of ex-Stasi officers and dissident groups.

In the theoretical part Glaeser presents his *sociology of understanding* by distinguishing it from a "sociology of knowledge" (Marxian, Durkhemian and Mannheimian), from a post-mertonian "sociology of science" [see Collins 1992, *Changing Order: Repli-*

cation and Induction in Scientific Practice] and from a “genealogy of knowledge” [see Foucault 1972, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*]. According to the author, these three directions can be considered variants of a “social epistemology.” A sociology of understanding is instead related to a political epistemology, which focuses both on people’s understanding of the real world and on their dialectical relation to political institutions, that is on the inter-subjective interdependence between actions and reactions. Furthermore a political epistemology is methodologically interested in the ethnographic and historical reconstruction of everyday interactions and it is theoretically oriented towards pragmatism and speech act theory.

Analyzing understanding means for the author examining the “institution forming process dynamics” instead of “objectified knowledge.” Even if this idea is not original the first ‘benefit’ of this perspective shift is to avoid an inappropriate interpretation of “ideology” as something generated outside social and historical contexts. Ideology is instead produced by social agents within an environment. If it is intentionally constructed, its effects are however partially unpredictable. Furthermore this perspective shift advances the distinction among three modes of understandings - discursive, emotive and kinesthetic - and the use of a spatial metaphor to explain how processes of validation emerge within a social collectivity. The importance given to the kinesthetic understanding is here related to the peculiar spatial construction of the GDR-state. The ideological interpretation of how a socialism community should be and live influenced indeed not only the political control on space boundaries but also the political organization of city spaces. The actualization of socialist understandings in space (as well as in discourses and rituals) was therefore the main way for organizing every-day life and mediating a socialist ethic, in order also to validate GDR-institutions.

The spatial metaphor of validation is therefore useful to analyze figuratively the dialectics among social, doxic and referential environments of understandings. The validation space of the GDR leaders resulted indeed by the interwoven of three intersubjective and cognitive processes: the *resonance* of their “socialist” understandings of the world with that of “common people”; the *corroboration* (efficacy) of their actions in the everyday life; and the *recognition* of their authority. However the dogmatic interpretation of socialism and its rigid translation in political and cultural precepts, which should rule the collective life of GDR-citizenships, brought in the 1980s to the collapse of this space of validation and the credibility of GDR leaders.

In the part devoted on political institutions Glaeser illustrates three main aporias created by party-leaders in implementing a right socialist consciousness by GDR-citizens and in pursuing a socialist model of social transformations: the central planning of social politics; the proselytization activities; and the web of prohibitions controlled by the Stasi.

The “necessity” of a central planning was justified by the Leninist interpretation of Marxian thought: on this basis, the party should guide a collectivity towards the fulfillment of a socialist state. This “credo” legitimated the party’s interpretation of socialism, so that alternative visions were considered anti-socialist. Educational and propaganda politics were necessary for reinforcing a “socialist consciousness” by creating a socialist ethic that concerned not only the field of political ideas but every cultural matters. The socialist ethic was based on an “idealized” and objectified representation of the workers’ lifestyle. However since the 1970s the social changes in consumer politics, the influence

of western media and the increasing contacts between eastern and western Germans progressively led to ways of perceiving and understanding lived experiences more and more distant from socialist party's understanding. In the 1980s the economic crisis and the political transformations in Soviet Union opened the way to alternative understandings of socialism and socialist politics. Thus on the one hand the party proved to be unable to correct the guideline of economical politics to face the crisis by continuing to follow a central planning. On the other hand, also the measures of control adopted to prevent and oppress the protests revealed their inefficacy as the controllers were incapable to individuate the true causes of citizens' discontent. Indeed, the fidelity to the socialist theodicy imposed them to resort as an explanation the dichotomized representation between internal socialist friends and external capitalist enemies.

According to Glaeser, this last point is particularly evident in the interviews with ex-Stasi officers. What emerges indeed is not that they believed in the existence of external enemies, but that they couldn't operate otherwise without rejecting the socialist understanding through which political institutions reproduced themselves. Thus, the reification of a dogmatic view of socialism in political institutions was the consequence of a circular validation processes that yet caused the decline of East Germans socialism.

The analysis of ex-Stasi officers' and dissidents' narratives can be considered specular. Following the key concepts of relational sociology [e.g. Crossley 2011, *Towards Relational Sociology*], the analysis is grounded on the idea that social and cultural networks are co-constitutive. Hence on the one hand social networks offers a condition of intersubjectivity that is the premise for generating new ways of understandings, especially when the usual way of interpreting the social world disrupts. On the other hand new ways of understanding can incentivize new social practices and the construction of new social networks that have a different symbolical dimension from the existing, normed and codified social structure. Furthermore, the resonance among similar understandings process makes possible to mobilize an increasing number of persons, that is to amplify and diversify social networks. According to Sewell's concepts of structure [2005, *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation*], what finally results is a chain of culturally articulated micro-events, which sets the stage for a "new" social, political and cultural entity and for what is usually understood as "a historical event." In the case of the GDR-state the dissent of small groups that was originated in private or semi-private spaces (like the churches) flowed into a mass protest through resonance processes. Hence, even if the involved social groups collected different attitudes towards socialism and socialist life, they yet shared the same mistrust towards the GDR-elites, their politics and understanding of socialism.

The comparison between the two kind of narratives illustrates then two different ways of interlacing cultural and social networks. With respect to the dissident movements the analysis highlights a subjectivation process in forming alternative networks of authority, alternative dynamics of recognition and sense of belonging, whereas with respect to ex Stasi officers self-objectivation processes were at work. These processes not only reified the understandings of socialism over time, but also their social relationships, based primarily on the respect of the established socialist ethic. As a main consequence of this double reification of cultural and social networks Stasi officers' actions against dissident groups resulted ineffective.

If this epistemic explanation of the GDR-failure is convincing as it offer a deep analysis of the institutional functioning of the GDR, two aspects remain unclear.

The first one regards the resonance of socialist understandings between party leaderships and GDR-citizens from the foundation of the GDR-State until to the end of the 1960s. Glaeser recalls some crucial episodes in the GDR-history that testify the fallacy of official socialist understanding in front of social and economic problems (1953) and of disrupting events (1956). Aside from these examples, however, the author does not face the matter of a “negotiated” understandings of socialist model and ethic before the 1970s, especially for those who did not belong to the worker class and milieu [see Kleßman 1991, *Die Beharrungskraft traditioneller Milieus in der DDR*].

The second unclear aspect regards the exclusion of socio-demographic factors in the analysis of narratives. The claim that they are not influential seems here to depend on a representation of the GDR-society in the light of a traditional social classes-structure and of traditional social trajectories. In several passages Glaeser stresses that since the 1970s cultural changes in the GDR were chiefly determined by cultural practices of distinction. However he does not pay attention either to the formation of subcultures and subsocieties or to the ways in which the access to different cultural and subcultural capitals was determined by different socio-cultural conditions which also produced different socio-cultural spaces. Dissident groups were stronger in the larger student cities of the GDR and involved mainly the younger generations. Thus, since the 1970s, new consumer practices not only changed the way of perceiving everyday life but they also recreated a “social-structure” different from the traditional social-class structure which was also assumed and ideologized by the GDR-regime. It is then possible to argue that the gap with the socialist dogma of GDR-elites depended both on a different understanding of lived experiences and on a different understanding of the ways in which GDR-citizens positioned themselves in the society and, not least, of how they constructed their social and cultural identity by constructing alternative social networks.

Barbara Grüning
University of Bologna