

“EAST” BERLIN: LESBIAN AND GAY NARRATIVES
ON EVERYDAY LIFE, SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE,
AND PAST AND PRESENT

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Seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin wall, it seems odd to speak of a sociological article concerning gay and lesbian everyday life in East Berlin.¹ For many in Berlin, speaking of the Eastern and Western parts of the city no longer makes sense. For others, being gay or lesbian rather than straight has become a *non-issue* here. However, East Berlin constitutes an interesting case to look at in considering continuity and change in everyday lives at several levels of identity construction. In the context of this book, Eastern Germany shares the historical heritage of the post-war Eastern Block. The Soviet past with its range of social and political experiences continues to carry some meaning when today we refer to Central and Eastern European countries. The East German case is different in many respects, most and foremost in that, as early as 1990, it was politically absorbed into the West and ceased to be a political unit altogether. This specificity has also affected the development of lesbian and gay culture and the conditions for lesbian and gay everyday life in a way that differs from those of other Central and Eastern European countries. Commentators have pointed to the East German gay and lesbian culture having been quickly absorbed by the West German 1990s culture, a period that coincided with an increasing acceptance of homosexuality in West German society, politics, media and law (Holy 2001, 61). After reunification, debates on homosexuality and society, and same-sex marriage in particular, have to a large extent been dominated by West German media and politicians. Lesbians and gays in the Eastern part of Berlin have lived these changes in reference to the national level, but have equally experienced the melting of East and West Berlin's les-

¹ For comments on the draft I am grateful to Johan Andersson and Kevin Inston. Special thanks to numerous friends in Berlin for their support. I am deeply indebted to those who kindly agreed to participate in my interviews. Most of the material used in this article is part of a larger sociological research project on the recognition of same-sex partnership in France, Germany, Italy and the UK, for which over 50 interviews have been conducted on lesbian and gay views on legal and social change concerning homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

bian and gay cultures which today are only rarely distinguished in those terms. However, in the East, a historically strong presence of lesbian and gay culture and meeting places has persisted in specific neighbourhoods such as in Prenzlauer Berg. In this sense, social change and a strong local lesbian and gay culture have marked the everyday lives of lesbian and gays in the Eastern part of Berlin in the past two decades.

In this chapter, no attempt will be made to reconstruct historical change in gay and lesbian culture in Berlin. Neither will the work of associations and political developments concerning LGBT themes be addressed in any satisfactory way. Instead, the everyday life of gays and lesbians is the central concern here. Lesbian and gay narratives will be based on a select number of interviews conducted in the Eastern part of Berlin. The respondents have all been approached in gay and lesbian bars in East Berlin between 2003 and 2006 and in one way or another, all identify with an “Eastern” life experience.² Their discourses are not to be seen as representative of the lesbian and gay bar scene of East Berlin, let alone of lesbians and gays more generally. Neither are the respondents’ historical or social observations to be seen as factual information on events or trends. Instead, their narratives and experiences will be used to address specific themes related to questions of homosexual identity, acceptance and social change. First, the context of East Berlin, East Germany, and Berlin today will be addressed. In section two, the ways in which gay and lesbian identities are constructed and managed in everyday social settings will be explored. Finally, section three will return to the question of past and present in the respondents’ narratives on history and change.

THE CONTEXT: EAST BERLIN, EAST GERMANY, BERLIN

East and West Germany had parallel developments in matters of homosexuality that cannot easily be read as black and white. In the legal context, during the post-war period, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had at least nominally been more progressive in decriminalizing homosexuality: the discriminatory §175 and §175a on homosexual acts were abolished through consecutive reforms in 1950, 1957, 1968 and

² Seven respondents were contacted in the East Berlin borough of Prenzlauer Berg, four women and three men aged between 20 and 71, at the bars Stiller Don, Schall und Rauch, and Amsterdam in 2003 and 2006. They were approached according to criteria ensuring age and gender diversity, and in the case of two interviews conducted in 2006 also according to their GDR-origin. Beyond these categories, they were approached on a random basis, i.e. they were people who happened to be there. The interviews were semi-structured, tape recorded, all conducted by the author, and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes.

1988.³ In West Germany, in contrast, the highly repressive form of the paragraph introduced in the period of National Socialism had been left untouched until as late as 1969.⁴ Thereafter, scrapping the remaining weaker form of §175, which stipulated an older age of consent for homosexual acts than for heterosexual ones, constituted a continuous aim of gay and lesbian movements and was achieved only after reunification, in 1994.⁵

Culturally, however, the lesbian and gay scene of East Germany mostly appeared less vibrant, to say the least. There was nothing there comparable to the bars and discotheques that became fundamental experiences in lesbian and gay lives in Hamburg, Cologne or West Berlin. According to commentators, the absence of a commercial homosexual subculture is what characterized its main difference from the West.⁶ As one of the respondents, who worked as a protestant priest in the GDR, remembers:

I think it has become very much alike. . . . There is a considerable difference, I think, to the gay life in those days in the GDR, which worked on a purely private basis and through friendships, without associations and advertisement. You simply met in private groups, or there was someone who knew someone else, and that was it. It was new to us that gay life, in whatever way, could be commercially based, or even exclusively work commercially (Thorsten, 71).⁷

Very few homosexual bars existed, such as the Schoppenstube in Prenzlauer Berg. Instead, private circles and homosexual associations tolerated within the structures of the Protestant church constituted a large part of the East German "homosexual scene" (Holy 2001, 60; Herrn 1999).

³ The decision in 1950 to return to the Weimar Republic version of §175 implied a lower maximum penalty (6 months and 5 years respectively). In 1957, the possibility of non-prosecution was introduced if the homosexual act did not represent "a danger to the socialist society," which in practical terms ended the prosecution of homosexual acts between consenting adults. In 1968, the new penal code of the GDR mentions only a higher age of consent (18) for both male and female homosexual acts, namely 18 years. After a judgement of the Higher Court in 1987, the GDR parliament finally abolished this specific law concerning the age of consent for homosexual acts (Stümke 1989; and overview at <www.juraforum.de/jura/specials/special/id/15965/> (5 December 2006)).

⁴ Until the legal reform of 1969, about 50,000 men were condemned on the basis of §175 in the Federal Republic of Germany. The 1935 law was confirmed by the West German Constitutional Court in 1957. *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* In 1969 the age of consent for consenting homosexual acts was at 21, brought down to 18 in 1973.

⁶ As the gay activist Rudolf Klimmer noted in 1968: "Despite this progressive legislation homosexual life in the GDR has not changed . . . few forms of visibility, no magazines and clubs" (Holy 2001, 58f). All translations by the author.

⁷ All names are changed. Age at time of interview.

So did cruising areas. As Matthias Kittlitz, an East German gay activist, puts it: “As a gay man, you knew where you could go . . . to meet people” (Grau 2001, 73). Beyond looking for sex, cruising places arguably had larger social functions, in contrast to those in the West.⁸ But for many, the existence of a colourful and very visible lesbian and gay culture on the other side of the wall equally constituted a particular reference point in forging gay identities within East Germany. As another gay activist says: “A GDR-citizen, in his walled-in situation, was simultaneously always living with a real Utopia . . . namely the one beyond the wall.”⁹

Beyond the legally comparatively progressive stance there had also been a significant cultural development towards the integration of homosexual perspectives into GDR culture, at least during the 1980s. In the very last years before the fall of the Wall, this development was symbolized by the production of the GDR film *Coming Out*, which was a state sanctioned critical review of a young gay teacher’s life in East Berlin.¹⁰ Incidentally, the film “premiered on the very evening that the Wall was breached” (Kersten 1993, 227) and the East German debate on cultural inclusion of homosexuality was overtaken by the macro-events.

For young respondents, such as Daniel, a 25 year-old student, the social change and the open presence of gay culture was an event of the 1990s, with the opening of bars and clubs:

D: I have only experienced Berlin in the 90s, after the Wende.¹¹ Well, I’m from the GDR, so I might perhaps have a different background. You notice it here in the neighbourhood in Prenzlauer Berg, you’ve got bars opening. Those are all developments that took place in the 90s. Before that it was somewhat in a sleazy corner.¹² Well, I don’t personally know so, but I have talked about it with many people. I would say that [now] there is a lot on offer. . . . Maybe not in the outskirts of Berlin, but if it is part of the cityscape that there are couples holding hands in the streets, then after a while it doesn’t bother anyone any more. I mean, somewhere in the province in Brandenburg¹³ it would still be bad, but not here. Not here.

FJ: Do you think that the 90s, or rather, that the Wende was the crunch [in this development]?

D: Yes, for the East of course, yes. But I think the development was there also before, in the West, it developed in parallel ways, so to speak. In the East you just noticed it more suddenly then, perhaps (Daniel, 25).

⁸ Jan Feddersen in group interview (Grau 2001, 80).

⁹ Olaf Brühl in group interview (Grau 2001, 72).

¹⁰ Heiner Carow, *Coming Out*, GDR, 1989.

¹¹ Collapse of the Communist system.

¹² *Schmuddel-Ecke* in the original.

¹³ Eastern German region adjacent to Berlin.

For Daniel, the presence of gay bars since the 1990s has equally brought greater acceptance overall. And for him, this presence and the "coming out" of the "sleazy corner" is largely limited to the capital, and even to specific areas within it, particularly Prenzlauer Berg. This reference to a borough that before 1989 had equally been known for its artists', intellectuals' and gay and lesbian subcultures, stands for a local continuity despite the macro-change of the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the GDR.

On the one hand, the younger respondents repeatedly referred to "GDR times" as the dark ages concerning gay and lesbian life, as goes for anything that did not match with social norms. As one other younger respondent, Andreas, 28, states: "In GDR times, anything that didn't conform to the norm was suspicious to start with." On the other hand, East Berlin, and Prenzlauer Berg in particular, through its limited number of bars and its intellectual and artist circles was known as an active gay scene at least since the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Not all, but quite a lot of the present gay and lesbian life in East Berlin has remained in the same location as before 1989, showing patterns of both East-West integration and cultural resistance and "East" localism.

In general terms, our immediate social environment has an important function in people's lives. Often, families or long term friends, but also neighbours and local culture, have not necessarily changed in their attitude towards homosexuality. Alongside the radical social, political and legal overhaul of the *Wende*, this continuity forms an equally important reference for lesbians' and gays' public identities and life constructions. But there is no doubt that macro-change has been particularly relevant in the case of East Berlin, with the succession of a complete change of system, the imposition of West German national culture (media, politics, television, advertising etc., all portraying sexualities in a particular way) on the East, and the simultaneous transformation of the representation of homosexuality within that new national framework.

NO LONGER "EAST" OR "WEST" BERLIN: GAY BERLIN?

In recent years, Germany has become a country with a relatively high acceptance of homosexuality; it is indeed amongst the most tolerant worldwide, together with a range of other European countries.¹⁴ The coming

¹⁴ In the Pew Global Attitudes Project 2003, Germany comes top of a list of 41 countries surveyed for the study, with 83% of respondents saying that "homosexuality should be accepted by society." It shares this result with the Czech Republic. See <<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/185.pdf>> (5 December 2006). Neither Scandinavian countries nor the Netherlands are included in this study. According to the 1999 findings of the World



out of national politicians and other prominent public personalities and the introduction of Registered Partnership for same-sex couples in 2000 created a decade of public debate in which a cultural East-West divide had no significance.¹⁵ It is striking that indeed various surveys indicate no difference between West and East Germany overall in acceptance of homosexuality.¹⁶ Instead, a city-country divide can be observed in both West and East Germany.¹⁷

Looking at East Berlin, many gays and lesbians see the East-West divide as irrelevant to their everyday lives, suggesting that a cultural heritage of the East and different traditions in how the homosexual subculture was organized no longer matter. One of the respondents, Andreas, who is 28 years old, judges this to be a matter of age, and finds East and West Berlin indistinguishable today, both generally and for gay and lesbian culture in particular:

It has mixed very well and you find exactly the same bars in West Berlin as in East Berlin. Whatever you need or you are looking for. Visually there is no difference, and you don't notice from the people there whether you are in the East or in the West . . . I think what has opened up in the East has relatively quickly adapted to the West . . . I think it's a question of age. If you asked someone who is forty or fifty years old, he could probably point to a development and tell you that there are significant differences. But I can't detect any, and not in the least between East and West (Andreas, 28).

Values Survey 6.1% of Swedish, 6.2% of Dutch, 8.0% of Danish, 11.3% of East-German, 11.8% of West-German, 15.6% of French, 16.4% of Spanish, and 17.4% of Belgian respondents mentioned that they would not like to have homosexuals as neighbours. See <<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>> (5 December 2006).

¹⁵ Gay public personalities became particularly debated after the controversial *Outing* of various politicians and TV presenters by the film-maker and gay activist Rosa von Praunheim in 1991 in the TV-show *Explosiv – der heiße Stuhl* (Explosive—the hot seat), RTL 10/12/1991.

¹⁶ See *Datenreport 2004*, Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, Berlin, pp. 471ff. For 2002, the report finds that East and West Germans have an equal proportion of respondents judging homosexuality to be “bad” or “rather bad,” namely 24%. Interestingly, the number is up from 17% in the East in 2000, up from 21% in the West, thus showing a negative trend for both. On other contentious topics, such as abortion, a difference between East and West is instead significant, arguably because of the more pro-abortion regime in the GDR: it is “bad” for 35% in the East compared to 53% in the West, with a declining gap since 2000. On East and West Germans' opinions on homosexuality see also Emnid survey 2001 (see e.g. *Tagesspiegel* 20/02/2001).

¹⁷ Two regions with a high proportion of rural populations or absence of major cities, Rheinland-Pfalz and Sachsen-Anhalt, come last in the nation-wide survey Emnid 2001 (see e.g. *Tagesspiegel* 20/02/2001).



And more generally speaking he notes:

In Berlin you can't distinguish between the boroughs anymore. That's no longer possible at all (Andreas, 28).

Andreas had grown up in Eastern Germany and had lived in Berlin and West Germany before settling in Berlin again. He underlines the East-West dichotomy as being meaningless in the everyday life of the capital, both for gays and lesbians and in general terms. On the one hand, according to his narrative, this is due to the "mixing" of the populations. On the other hand, it is the consequence of the East having "adapted" to the West, where he points to gay bars and the appearances of the people frequenting them. Where he states that he "can't detect any" differences, but where older people might be able to "point to" them, in his words the East-West divide is more a matter of archaeology than a socially relevant distinction.

Indeed, when I recruited respondents in gay and lesbian bars in East Berlin, it immediately turned out the crowds were very mixed, with people originally being from East or West Berlin or from yet elsewhere.¹⁸ While it has become difficult to speak of East and West Berlin, and particularly so concerning lesbians and gays, who form a highly mobile section of the population and many of whom have come to Berlin from elsewhere, one can more easily point to Berlin's specificities on the whole. Berlin appears as a particularly tolerant city within Germany as far as homosexuality is concerned. In a quantitative survey, Berlin is reported to be the most accepting of German regions with regards to homosexuality.¹⁹ The election of the openly gay mayor Klaus Wowereit had been a novelty in German politics in 2001, and has added to the gay-friendly image of the German capital. His enigmatic statement "Ich bin schwul und das ist auch gut so"²⁰ during his endorsement speech as a candidate for the City hall probably became one of the most famous slogans by a politician in the city since JFK's "Ich bin ein Berliner." Various lesbian and gay events, such as the gay parade *Christopher-Street-Day* or the street festival *Straßenfest* have become integrated into the city's popular culture, and local politicians of all hues are eager to show themselves on the occasion.

¹⁸ For the interviews used in this article, in addition being contacted in East Berlin bars, their origin was a selection criterion. Not all live in East Berlin, but all were born in the East (six in the GDR, one in Poland) and all are familiar with the East Berlin gay and lesbian scene.

¹⁹ 76.4% of respondents in Berlin say homosexuality is no longer viewed as a problem according to Emnid 2001.

²⁰ "I'm gay and that's a good thing."



MANAGING IDENTITY

The acceptance of gay and lesbian lifestyles has a great influence on how lesbian and gay identities are lived. According to the respondents, most gays and lesbians in Berlin embrace open and public gay and lesbian identities and see society as on the whole open to homosexual lifestyles. Many don't think of problems or conflicts when addressing their homosexuality to friends, family, at work, or when showing affection to a partner in public. The narratives the respondents give on how they live their everyday lives partly reflect the general observations made above. Daniel for example, in speaking of being *out* to one's family, sees it as the only option, and argues that potential problems would generally be overcome:

You just have to make them change their ideas about it . . . and tell them, OK, that doesn't work, and that's the way it is. Parental love won't suffer then, at least I don't think it will (Daniel, 25).

In his view, being openly gay or lesbian has become more frequent. His narrative fits in with an often encountered narrative of progress, arguing that homosexuality has become far more accepted today than in the past. Daniel notes both that many more are publicly gay today than before and that they "come out" at a younger age:

FJ: Are there specific reasons why people, or some people you know have changed their views?

D: Yes, because many more people have come out I think. That's my feeling. It has become a greater number, simply because they were encouraged by developments that have taken place. . . . You also notice it, I would maybe add here, in that people who come out are getting younger and younger (Daniel, 25).

Daniel thus sees the two developments as clearly interlinked. The fact that more people live their homosexuality openly constitutes for him a reason for greater acceptance throughout society, and in turn, the development towards a more accepting society has encouraged more to be "out." More visibility: more acceptance. More acceptance: more visibility. The construction of Daniel's answer provides a circular argument in explaining the reasons of *progress*, but it is one that few respondents would contradict.

Dependent on the sector of employment, the workplace traditionally represents a challenging setting for gay and lesbian identities. Whether a woman or a man wants to present her- or himself as lesbian or gay, or whether to keep it a secret, often depends on the risks that it potentially poses to their career. Here again, Andreas for example, who works in



public administration, encounters a high degree of acceptance; he tells of his straight colleagues coming along to the gay parade:

A: Let's say that I went to the CSD with my colleagues last weekend.²¹ They then usually come along.

FJ: Also if they are not themselves gay you mean?

A: Correct.

FJ: So, no problem at all?

A: Not at all. . . . In Berlin by now that really isn't a problem at all. Most gays are unhappy that they are the only gay one at their workplace or that they have only one other gay colleague or things like that, but that's it (Andreas, 28).

CASE-TO-CASE MANAGEMENT

But this is not universally the case. For many others, unlike Andreas or Daniel, specific social settings require a case-to-case management of their identities.²² Gay or lesbian identities can be lived publicly in one setting and not in another. The way they choose to live their identity in each setting is often based on an experienced or imagined risk. Acceptance is not experienced throughout; for many difficulties remain. As Katharina, who is 22, notes: "In large parts of society it is still not seen as normal when two women or two men are together. . . . It will last quite a while until it really gets through to all layers of society, I think." For Katharina, here, the intolerant sections of society will resist acceptance, at least for a while.

So what are these specific settings in which constraints on public identities are felt? For many respondents, these constraints not rarely translate into specific persons in their social environments, such as their parents, or more abstractly into specific groups of society that are being judged as being rather intolerant towards homosexuality. Hence, the observed general trend towards greater acceptance does not change the fact that for a number of respondents, managing homosexual identities remains the result of a subtle case-to-case judgement. In general terms, public identities can then be constructed according to experienced, expected or imagined risk. In some of the interviews, specific social settings such as the family, the workplace or specific cultural groups are singled out. In certain places, or among certain groups of people, some refrain from addressing their homosexuality. Daniel points to suburban areas in East Berlin (see above), and refers to adolescents, right-wingers and the elderly as potentially insulting gays in the street:

²¹ *Christopher-Street-Day*, gay parade.

²² On the management of stigma and identity, compare Goffman (1963, ch. 2).



MAPPING THE SCENES

Maybe sometimes you get some nasty comment or something like that, like from adolescent teenagers, right-wingers or so, who don't have any experience with it yet, none with their own lives either, or perhaps from the elderly, who still have the old scheme of things in their heads (Daniel, 25).

Avoiding certain areas or certain groups of people may or may not be felt as a constraint, but often, the area or the group of people in the immediate vicinity has an impact on showing affection in public for instance, such as in Daniel's mention of "right-wingers." Abstract references to social groups can imply a careful approach to being *out* as much as personal experiences with specific persons. In relation to their parents for example, both Katharina and her friend Jenny, who is 20 years old were born in a small town in the GDR before moving to Berlin, have experienced negative comments about homosexuality and in reaction remain secretive about it. Imagined risks concerning groups of society can have a very concrete impact on personal everyday choices in managing identity. Jenny's narrative can serve as an example as to how the abstract and the personal interact, where she explains her attitude towards a Muslim friend:

Well, I have had positive experiences, and I think that at the end of the day my Muslim friends wouldn't have a problem with it either. But I don't really insist, because there's always a bit the fear that, you know, that they would somehow distance themselves, I don't know. Because I don't know how they would. I even have the suspicion that one friend of mine, she's Muslim too, that she wouldn't be against it herself, but I don't really mention the subject, because she's never had a relationship, neither with a man, nor with a woman. No idea, but somehow I also think that, I just have the feeling, I don't know why, but it's a feeling I have. And she doesn't, I think she wouldn't be able to cope with it (Jenny, 20).

Jenny acts according to her cultural assumptions; she assumes that the girl would have difficulties to accept her homosexuality and refrains from addressing it, keeping her lesbian identity as a private matter towards her. Jenny's "fear" that "they would somehow distance themselves" thus illustrates this imagined risk. While she thinks that "at the end of the day . . . they wouldn't have a problem with it," her risk evaluation is clearly linked to her repeated reference to religion.²³

DON'T-ASK-DON'T-TELL

Jenny equally tells of the generally private approach most gays and lesbian nurses have at her place of work, a Catholic hospital, as far as

²³ On homosexuality and Muslims in Germany, see Bochow and Marbach (2003).



superiors are concerned. She reports of some employees "hiding" their homosexuality "very much":

Yes, I have to say I work in a Catholic hospital [laughs]. But among ourselves we know who is and who is not, and they have [and] I have so far not had any problems. And many know, and there are no problems with the younger ones. Most of them are [gay or lesbian] themselves, and I have to say that some of them hide it very much. Of course, in a Catholic hospital, I won't go to the nursing sister and say: Hello, I'm lesbian! Well, I don't do that. But I have had positive experiences in the hospital, no negative ones. But I wouldn't go on about it, honestly. Those who have to know, they know. But I don't wear a sign around my neck saying I'm lesbian (Jenny, 20).

This passage shows that in this specific setting, for Jenny, a private and careful approach to her lesbian identity has implied "not to have problems." "I don't wear a sign around my neck saying I'm lesbian" underlines the specific strategy employed here; Jenny has adapted to the collegial tradition within the hospital, to a norm of keeping the personal private, at least to a certain extent.²⁴

In a comprehensive study on the social history of homosexuality, George Chauncey has analysed the construction of double lives by homosexual men in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century (Chauncey 1994). The combination of constraints and available space for homosexual life made the *double life* the most common element of gay identity: "The complexity of the city's social and spatial organization made it possible for gay men to construct the multiple public identities necessary for them to participate in the gay world without losing the privileges of the straight: assuming one identity at work, another in leisure; one identity before biological kin, another with gay friends" (Chauncey 1994, 133).

This necessity of multiple identities and double lives seems to be the exception in Berlin today. But the concept of a case-to-case management of public identity is not entirely absent in the interviews conducted here. This includes careful approaches to being publicly gay or lesbian with certain people, in certain institutions or in certain areas. Social identities still depend on social constraints and possibilities, and on values that the individual includes in her or his choices in constructing identity.

²⁴ The constraint imposed by the Catholic Church as an employer is all but fictional: the public registration of a same-sex partnership formally constitutes a reason for terminating the employment even in state-financed institutions if they are administered by the Catholic Church in Germany. This includes a vast number of schools, hospitals and charities. See High Court judgment BVerfGE 70, 138, <<http://typo3.lsvd.de/194.0.html#778>> (5 December 2006).



CHOOSING PUBLIC OR SECRET IDENTITIES

As has been argued, don't-ask-don't-tell identities often reflect social risks and the experience of intolerance as constraints. But at the same time, in constructing a public identity, the individual also embraces a certain ideology, choosing how she or he wants to live and be perceived, at work, by friends or in the family. At times, private or secret identities are accompanied by a discourse of choice. Secrecy and privacy can be embraced as positive elements of identity construction as much as openness and being public. However, in such cases both discourses are often combined, telling of intolerant social settings on the one hand, and of willingly choosing to keep homosexuality a secret or private matter on the other.

In the following section, a more detailed example shows the link between choice and constraint. It equally illustrates the socio-geographical difference between Berlin and a provincial town close to Berlin. In the interview with Petra, 42, and Renate, 38, who are sisters, the alternatives become apparent of an openly lesbian life on the one hand and a secret, hidden one on the other. Different elements are relevant to their choices. Both grew up in the GDR in a small village in Brandenburg, relatively close to Berlin. While both initially got married, two marriages from which they each have a child, Renate very soon falls in love with a woman. She causes a big scandal in her town and her family, and leaves her husband and child—she is socially if not formally denied the right to keep her son—to live in (then) East Berlin. There, she had several lesbian long term relationships. With her current girlfriend, she is planning to move to a village in the North-West of Germany to live in a countryside house.

Petra eventually divorced from her husband, kept the custody of her daughter and later had an amorous relationship with a younger woman who simultaneously had a boyfriend. Petra describes herself as bisexual. Only a very restricted number of people know about her lesbian relationship, and she encourages her daughter to keep it a secret even before her closest friends. Her public identity is primarily that of a divorced mother, an identity she judges to be the most suitable for herself and for her daughter in the small town where they live. She describes the town environment as generally “conservative” in an oppressive way.

Oh well, I know those children. And I also know what kind of opinions there are, from the parents' reunions and also from what the children say. Well, then you can just about estimate how conservative some things turn out to be. And then I just tell myself, they don't need to know. Then it's better to keep the silence. Well, you don't have to [talk about it] (Petra, 42).



Petra's relationship is fundamentally based on secrecy. It is, however, a secrecy she embraces as her own choice after all. In the following passage, Petra and Renate's work environment serves as an example here concerning their identity construction. Both are working as a hospital nurse, and while Renate is openly lesbian to her colleagues, Petra keeps both her private life and her opinions to herself:

P: Yes, that's how it is. I mean, at work it's like that as well, yes, they always keep away from such a topic, or if not then it's totally condemned as something bad. So what do you want to add to it then? Nothing any more. You got your own thoughts about it and that's it.

R: I then always say something provocative.

P: Well, I can't do that, because nobody should know about me, nor do they need to. . . . Also, I don't necessarily want to. . . .

R: I would somehow.

P: No. I have my opinion . . . about it and stick to it, and I don't say everything, because I think they won't understand anyhow, and they don't want to understand either, and they don't want to be confronted with it either, you know. Let's say, if they knew that I am now also [lesbian], they would say: Oh my God, we would have never expected that of you!

R: So what?

P: Whether they would still want to be around me at all, yes, whether they would still see this human being in me, how I really am, that of course is the question, because you then get a stamp put on. . . . Well, you do have to weigh these things. Whom you can talk to, or whom you can tell what, or what you cannot say. Not all of them want to know about it anyhow, and then you do it that way: OK, you don't have to talk about it (Petra, 42; Renate, 38).

Petra's choice in constructing her public identity at work is clearly linked to the constraints she sees herself confronted with. Due to the opinions she hears on homosexuality in her town, including her work place, she keeps her lesbian love story to herself. However, as we can see in this passage, while she suffers from the closed-mindedness of her social environment, she also draws some satisfaction from being able to conduct a more exciting undercover life than what she conveys to others. While she says that she "can't" she immediately adds "I don't necessarily want to." In stating that "you don't have to" tell them, she underlines the choice element in the managing of her secret love life. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how Petra here relates being *out* to a distortion of her *real self*: If her colleagues knew about it, she thinks she would risk that they would see her differently from "how I really am." According to this, in carrying a lesbian "stamp," her "real" identity would be lost rather than revealed. Her lesbian identity is essentially a hidden one, and the



secrecy of her love life a constituent part of it. At least towards her sister, it is her vindicated difference from the environment of her town that is more central to her identity than a potential public recognition within it.

In debating whether their respective teenage children should talk to friends about their mothers' lesbian relationships, the two sisters disagree heavily. Where Renate sees her sister as essentially unfree, Petra yet again underlines her freedom in successfully managing a double life in which she succeeds in avoiding conflicts with others both for her own and her daughter's sake:

P: I do that anyway. I decide for myself. I do what is good for me. And I also live what is good for me. I don't need anyone else for that, to tell me: "that's bad" or something like that. You just have to try things out.

R: But you contradict yourself!

P: What?

R: Because if you say you don't want to live a lesbian relationship openly in your small town, then you are not free. You don't live freely then, with your views.

P: But I do it undercover. That doesn't matter.

R: No.

P: But for me it's still this kind of being free. Do you understand?

R: No, not really, because you are deluding yourself. Either you are free and really live that way—well of course you always have some norms you should comply with, whether it's with the neighbours or whatever, you don't have to annoy everyone with your way of life, independent of which country you come from, I mean, everyone has different rituals and is loud or quiet or whatever. But I think that you are not really free, because you say, for example, that you . . .

P: At home I'm free.

R: . . . would have worries that people, what they say, [your daughter's] friend's parents, what they would say. . . . Either you are free and you say: either they like me, and see me as a person, or they should just stay away (Petra, 42; Renate, 38).

The different social contexts of Berlin and Petra's provincial town appear to imply sharp contrasts in value judgements. For Renate, freedom implies being openly lesbian, but Petra bluntly states that she is free "undercover," "still," "kind of" and free "at home." While in this passage, Petra is saying "I do what is good for me" and underlines her freedom in doing so, she subsequently refers to the city-province divide in pointing to constraints. Here, Petra nuances the element of choice she had in other passages pictured as strength, and secrecy is described as a norm she cannot just leave aside:

Perhaps I haven't had that for that long that I would think like [Renate]. But I would say it's quite a good thing that everything has kind of become more open. But I cannot for example deal with it in the way [Renate] does, because I'm from a much smaller town,



a very narrow-minded town, where everyone knows one another and, for God's sake, that's why we do all that in a more hidden way. Of course it's also more difficult to handle it. Yes, apart from that, a lot still needs to be done, I would say (Petra, 42).

Petra here argues that "a lot still needs to be done." Some would probably argue that the construction of a secret gay or lesbian identity is bound to be linked to discrimination and homophobia, if not a directly experienced one then a form of internalized homophobia. They would then tend to disqualify this sort of double life as either forced by ambivalent discrimination or as hypocritical in the absence of social constraints.

But it is this sort of judgement that exemplifies the value shift from a taboo of homosexuality to a norm of endorsing public lesbian and gay identities. This shift in turn influences the construction of identities, where the concept of homosexuality itself moves from sexual activity to public partnership, for instance. Hidden homosexual identities seem hard to justify in the context of Berlin, as exemplified in Renate's reaction to Petra's secrecy.

A NEW NORM OF BEING PUBLICLY LESBIAN OR GAY?

With growing social acceptance and greater visibility in Berlin, the official support of gay and lesbian events by the City hall and local town halls, openly gay and lesbian public figures and legal recognition of same-sex partnership since 2000, living gay and lesbian identities publicly today constitutes the norm rather than a transgression. The following extract tells of Katharina's experience at work, where her careful "private" approach to her sexuality was seen as inappropriate. She was asked by her boss to explain her sexual orientation—a non-conflictual event that illustrates the trend from secrecy and privacy to the expectation of openly expressing your sexual orientation:

K: I work only with men, in a technical sector, and therefore, at the beginning, I had many scruples. . . . At some stage, when you get to know each other and talks get into more personal things, because you spend eight or ten hours a day together after all, there were always some questions coming up. "So, do you have a boyfriend?"—"Err, nope, I don't." You know, that kind of thing. People don't necessarily get my sexual preferences from my looks. Especially guys don't, I would say. [laughs] . . . So I also had them see me with my girlfriend, my former girlfriend. It was kind of seen by my boss, as it were. And at the end it went the way that in front of various other colleagues, I was directly asked about it [by my boss]. And that was, well, it came across as quite funny, you know. I was breathless, because [laughs] I was not prepared for that, for such directness. But, well, I would never have thought that they are all so easy going,



MAPPING THE SCENES

and it was totally OK. They just wanted to know, along those lines, because they couldn't really classify me. But it's quite funny.

FJ: So what did you answer then?

K: Yes, I simply said [laughs]: I like women. Men as well; I make exceptions sometimes. [laughs] And then it was OK, the thing was dealt with, because before that I had seen that questions were coming up behind my back, and they didn't really dare to ask me. But my boss was more resolute—definitely. . . . By now it came out that two of my colleagues also go for men as well, and it's all easy-going (Katharina, 22).

It seems like Katharina did not have a chance to stay private about her love life and is forced to talk about her sexual orientation. For her, this turn of events was a positive one, according to the “scruples” she initially had, and her subsequent description of her work place as one where “it's all easy-going.” But rather than being choice-driven, it seems that Katharina adapts to the norm she is confronted with in her work environment. She is faced with the norm of public homosexual identity, which she is somewhat surprised to find in her field. In sum, in this metropolitan setting, it seems that secrecy, privacy, and taboo have given way to public sexual identities.²⁵

PAST AND PRESENT

Most respondents contacted in East Berlin describe gay and lesbian lives as easier today, with the growth of acceptance and the stronger cultural presence of homosexuality. The 1990s, the ten years after the fall of the Wall, are often seen as the period of dramatic change in this respect, as has already become apparent in some interview abstracts cited above. As we have seen, the notions of East and West hardly seem to affect gay and lesbian everyday life. The former Geo-political border of the city now seems meaningless in this respect. Nevertheless, the references that are being made to the past and to the GDR in particular, are interesting to look at. Accounts of the GDR are made, sometimes as side-remarks, in ways that can differ greatly, as in some of the following interview extracts. How is the past represented in the narratives of the respondents we have looked at so far? How is the social change described in relation to the Communist period? While the narratives that we will look at here do not constitute a significant sample for an analysis of the social memory of the GDR, in a rather light way they nevertheless appear as insightful on the construction of such views on the past concerning gay and lesbian life.

²⁵ On the decline of the *don't-ask-don't-tell* identity see e.g. Broqua and de Brusscher (2003, 26ff).



Often, discourses about the past reflect both changes in the respondents' personal lives and observed changes on the level of society more generally. Renate for instance says that things have become "freer" in the past five or ten years, while the past experience in the GDR is linked to her "coming out" and people's negative reactions in her home town at the time:

In the past five years you can definitely say, well, as I live in Berlin now anyway, that everything [has become] somewhat freer. I kind of see the past ten year [as those] in which [accentuated:] a lot has happened. Well, as I'm from the East, and had my coming out in the East, I experienced all those things that still happen today everywhere across the country if you are not in a big city, that people avoid you, and people start to look away or speak to other people instead. . . . But within the last years a lot has improved. . . . Today I live openly and they all know it, and in that way it changed towards the better. . . . And I think that in the last years, a lot has [come] through the media . . . and it then becomes more socially accepted. Suddenly everyone must have tried it, and in that sense I think the media has played a major role. . . . It was never made a topic at all in the East (Renate, 38).

Such progress narratives are very common in the fieldwork that has been conducted within this study. Often, accounts link personal experiences with observations of developments in society on the whole. In Renate's biographical account, her coming out, her moving from a provincial East German town to the capital, the collapse of the Soviet regime, her experiences in the street and the perceived media representation of homosexuality together constitute a narrative of progress, liberation and acceptance.²⁶ That experience often results in the feeling of things having changed for the better, and that being lesbian or gay in Berlin today is "easy," "trendy," "cool" or a "not at all" a problem. In the GDR, it seems, the lack of a cultural presence such as in Western commercial or political gay and lesbian culture, or yet again in the mainstream media, is what Renate connotes negatively with the regime itself. It is on that cultural level that she insists "a lot has improved." Concerning her personal experience in her home town, she stresses that reactions would be the same today in other provincial towns "across the country,"²⁷ thereby explicitly limiting both the GDR factor and the time factor in evaluating her own experience. While Renate interlinks the different personal and societal discourses, she analyses past and present with some subtle dis-

²⁶ On the *coming out narrative* see e.g. Plummer (1995, 50-61).

²⁷ *Bundesweit* in the original, which necessarily includes the West. For an extensive qualitative study on provincial gay life in Western Germany, analysing reasons of difficult coming out processes, see Bochow (1998b).



tinctions and counter-hypotheses to different interpretations, providing a nuanced and not necessarily linear discourse on social change.

In some other accounts, a discourse of progress is even more pronounced, describing an unquestionable form of social progress and painting a darker picture of what the past had been like. Jenny for example outlines a trend towards greater acceptance of homosexuality in more sweeping and quite general, but forceful terms:

The young ones, they find it absolutely cool to be gay or lesbian. And then they also want to be it themselves. . . . Well, because today, it's simply more in the spotlight, it's more present in the public debate, in the media. The mayor [of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit] as well for example. These are all things that fifteen years ago, nobody would have imagined. They would all be burnt at the stake, those who were gay. Plenty of things have changed, for sure. I would not have wanted to be public or to be outed ten or fifteen years ago. I'm glad it's now and not ten years ago. I think that would have been much more difficult for me (Jenny, 20).

The contrast between past and present, in Jenny's account, is one between a medieval set-up on the one hand, and a very open society today, in which homosexuality is "in the spotlight," on the other. In the metaphorical description of all gays being "burnt at the stake" fifteen years ago, and the observation that "the young ones . . . find it absolutely cool," we see that for her, there are worlds between the period before the 1990s and today. The GDR past, without being explicitly named, here belongs to some dark ages. In the last sentence, the view that it "would have been much more difficult for me" underlines this image of the past, but also links her general interpretation of society to her own imagined life at the time.

A MATTER OF GENERATIONS

Daniel gives a similar account as Jenny, in the sense that he sees the gay past in East Germany as extremely limited, but nuances his observations taking account of the lack of homosexuality in the public sphere and to the lack of a more pro-active gay culture:

I would say that it's more difficult for East Berlin, or rather for people from East Berlin or East Germans. I mean liberalism was there much earlier in West Germany and West Berlin. That had been lived for years and there had also been other minorities. . . . [In the East] that just didn't exist, never, neither in the public sphere, nor [anywhere else]. Or at least I can't remember it. Well, maybe it existed somewhere, but not in a pro-active way, at least compared to what it was like in the West. That was unthinkable. There were some niches; I would not negate that, yes, in art or things like that, but not in everyday life. There you would have stayed ignorant for all your life. . . . It's a ques-



tion of generations, so to say, until the next generation has grown up. Those who were born in the 90s will see it completely differently, I'm sure (Daniel, 25).

A generational effect, as in Daniel's terms, clearly matters in narrating gay and lesbian everyday life in the GDR. In Jenny's case, for example, an imagined account of the GDR is given, being only six years old at the time of the regime change. Daniel himself was eleven in 1989. As a matter of fact, for Thorsten, two generations older than Jenny, things are very different. Thorsten was born in the 1930s, and the GDR times stand for most of his life as a gay man. His narrative is one of happiness and absence of difficulty concerning his homosexuality. In describing his love life and personal life, no sharp break is included between pre-1989 and post-GDR, apart from the fact that he moved to Berlin after job-cuts. In the village community where he used to work, his gay life and partnership was tolerated and accepted, as he says:

In [a Protestant convent in a rural setting] . . . I had been with a man for fourteen years. That was completely official. . . . It was a rural parish. . . . Either people didn't get it or it's just that nobody ever asked about it. Or it was just natural to them, what do I know. When I . . . got invited for dinner, I was told: "you are bringing [Robert] with you, aren't you?" And so it was a natural gesture. That way, you know. I never had any problems in that respect. . . . Well, there had never been any problems (Thorsten, 71).

Thorsten's experience may not be a typical one. The point here is not to persuade the readers of the quality of life during East German Communism. The negative connotations, which many people link to the GDR regime, are framed by a range of reasons that are not necessarily connected to matters of homosexuality. Jan Feddersen for example recalls his surprise when noting that various gays from East Germany "wanted to be away from the GDR for all kind of reasons, but not for gay reasons at all."²⁸ However, there is no scope for an analysis of the social reality in the GDR in general here. Thorsten's experience was particularly positive in contrast to Renate's. The fact that much depended on personal "friendships" surely was a difficulty for many who did not have those friends at hand. What matters here instead is that accounts of everyday life in the past are greatly linked to personal experiences in which specific phases of life can have extremely positive connotations. In contrasting accounts such as Renate's, Jenny's and Thorsten's, what can be observed is that the construction of a more generalised notion of the past and of social change into which personal experiences are built, is highly dependent

²⁸ Jan Feddersen in group interview (Grau 2001, 79).



on the generational and socio-geographical background. Memory in gay and lesbian history has particularities, as homosexual heritage is only to a very limited degree constructed across the generations, compared to other cultural communities. Individual life phases therefore become particularly important in gay and lesbian narratives about the past. Thorsten for instance refers to the feeling of nostalgia when remembering gay life in the GDR days with his friends, a feeling he himself points out as being “strange”:

I notice, it's very strange, a number of friends from [Sachsen-Anhalt] live here in Berlin, around this area, and we meet every now and then, here and there, what do I know, on the Straßenfest or we celebrate a birthday together, and then there is still this, there is this nostalgia coming up, or this kind of feeling: “Oh yes, wasn't it so good back then,” or “better.” Yes. Now, everything is possible, and everything is open, and everything, well, what do I know what kind of things you can do now, or, I don't know, things you should want to be able to do. Yes. And myself, well, I go to some bars, and here and there, but I mean to go to a disco at 71, you'd get odd looks now (Thorsten, 71).

The “nostalgia” towards the past is linked to a contradiction of the Western gay life: everything is “possible” and “open,” but certain gay spaces, such as discotheques, are socially restricted to a certain, particularly younger, public. Thorsten's reference to “odd looks” implies such an implicit norm. (See e.g. Bochow 1998a, 223f; also Bochow 2005) But at the same time, he equally sees benefits in new forms of gay culture, such as those offered on the internet:

FJ: And with your new partner, where did you meet?

T: On the Internet. Gayromeo.²⁹ Every now and then you get to talk there. That can go on for some days or weeks, until a discussion ends. . . . Yes, that really is an improvement. Well, in the past, we didn't even have a telephone, I mean not everyone. That's true, that's obviously quite essential (Thorsten, 71).

Interestingly, for Thorsten, the Internet platform appears as a more open form of gay culture, being more inclusive than discotheques. It is described as being “really an improvement” and “quite essential.” Thorsten's discourse on past and present, however, is not structured quite as much along the lines of “progress” as other discourses we have looked at. Instead, self-critical references to nostalgia and a differentiated view on advantages and disadvantages of various elements of change are what characterises his narrative. His account therefore appears as somewhat different to the view of the “East” expressed in the other nar-

²⁹ A Germany-based non-commercial gay Internet platform, <www.gayromeo.com>.



ratives as those of Daniel or Jenny. In the latter, the experience of social change and greater acceptance that occurred parallel with the change of regime and during the 1990s is not very different compared to those encountered in West Berlin or in other West European cities. Thereby, GDR memory melts with a more general picture of the past, in which things were "worse."

The narratives on past and present that we have looked at in this section are neither a reconstruction of what lesbian and gay life was like in the GDR, nor are they representative of views about the past among lesbians and gays in East Berlin. Instead, what we have seen, through a rather light and eclectic look at the accounts of social change in this small sample, is how narratives on the past reflect biographies, different life phases and personal experiences as much as general observations and transmitted knowledge about recent social history.

CONCLUSION

Today, rather than speaking of East and West, for the respondents here, Berlin is lived as an entity that is judged as being exceptional in its acceptance of homosexual lifestyles. Instead of East-West differences, the respondents focused on regional differences, on specific neighbourhoods, particularly in the periphery, or on a general city-country divide. In the construction of lesbian and gay identities, being open or public is often described as very unproblematic. Quite on the contrary, in certain settings, openness is the norm, and privacy on matters of sexual orientation can come across as odd or inappropriate, as in Katharina's case or in Renate's judgement of her sister's secrecy. However, a case-to-case management of public identities still applies for some—either in specific environments at work or in the family, or in geographically defined areas, such as in certain outskirts of the city, where they perceive constraints on how to act in public.

In the accounts of past and present, the picture given of lesbian and gay everyday life in the GDR is mostly interlinked with personal biographies. Progress during the 1990s is often juxtaposed with a prior dark period, the GDR times, in which there was little cultural space for lesbians and gays. However, as Thorsten's account shows, this general observation might be at odds with individual biographical narratives, depending on various factors such as generation, life phase and the direct social environment of the individual respondent. A "dark past" on the one hand and "nostalgia" on the other can thus in turn be constructed in the discourses on homosexuality in East Germany and East Berlin.



Hence, in examining lesbian and gay identities in East Berlin, a plurality of factors needs to be addressed, including generational and ideological ones. As some examples here have shown, the East-West dichotomy often constitutes an interesting element in discourses on social change, but it does not by itself play a determining role. Instead, lesbian and gay everyday life in the Eastern part of the city today reflects the high degree of visibility and acceptance in the city as a whole.

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