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Book Review:
Marcel Thomas, *Local Lives, Parallel Histories:
Villagers and Everyday Life in the Divided Germany*.

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Abstract

The article is a presentation of the newest book of Marcel Thomas. It is devoted to the question of how villagers in the postwar Germany use the past to construct their own interpretations of the social change.

Keywords: Germany, local history, Marcel Thomas.

Since 1990s, historians have discussed the question of how large-scale processes played out on a local scale, and in particular places and lived spaces, arguing in part that localities were co-productive of these processes rather than just a passive bedrock. Many of these questions, which have been subsumed under the rubric of the 'local turn', have recently re-appeared in a debate that concerns relations between global vs. micro history. Furthermore, some historians urged us to decenter our

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perspective. It is not just the major cities, core regions, or epicenters that help us comprehend major developments in history; rather, attention should turn to smaller, peripheral and remote places. It is this avenue that Marcel Thomas took in his comparative study of two German villages, or small towns, in the postwar Germany. Taking Neukirch (Saxony) and Ebersbach (Baden-Württemberg) as two examples, the book explores how the broader social change has been experienced – and co-created – in two small and relatively peripheral places on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The major thread that runs through the book is the response of the villagers to social change. That said, Thomas makes a decisive step beyond a simple model of fixed and closed communities resisting any change. Nor does he trace local adaptations to the changing context, or – seen from the opposite side – follows how the large processes materialized on a local scale, though the book has much to say about transformation of both localities in the second half of the twentieth century. The study ventures mainly into the question of how the inhabitants of both villages gave ‘local meanings’ to the processes of transformation, both discursively and through their everyday lives.

While principally a historical study, the book makes a contribution to urban and rural sociology and ethnology, from which it borrows concepts and approaches. Next to a range of published and archival sources of local provenience, Thomas exploits a sample of forty interviews with local residents across different generations, while also building upon his intimate knowledge of both places. Contradictions in narrators’ stories, as well as tension between memory and retrospective narrativization of past activities, provide particularly revealing insights into the complexity of villagers’ strategies in coping with the social change, and the author makes his best out of them.

The major question is pursued through six thematic chapters, which proceed mostly chronologically, while switching between the studied localities. The first chapter looks into how the local meanings of urbanity and rurality have changed over the period, with decisively pro-urban fever, underpinned by the modernization zeal of the 1950s and 1960s, turning into a more positive re-evaluation of rurality and the agrarian past after the turn of the 1970s. While the changing context, from the post-war prosperity and ethos of high modernism to oil shock and economic crisis, played its role in the shifting meanings of the urban and the rural, Thomas brings another factor in the game, which is the transitional character of the settlements. Both Ebersbach and Neukirch are places that oscillate between the village and the small town, with a sizable industry, morphological traits and amenities pushing them more to the urban side of the spectrum.

Two subsequent chapters deal with the community aspect. The second chapter focuses on how the ‘community’ was experienced and remembered, and how its progressive disappearance has been lamented. The major finding that the chapter uncovers is a certain ambivalence in the inhabitants’ attitude to the community, as well as their active part in its gradual dissolution, as the dream of the privatized life won over the communal life on both sides of the Iron Curtain. That said, the author also reveals a longer lasting practice of communalism in the East, motivated by the shortage economy and pragmatic need for mutual cooperation. The third chapter addresses the community aspect from a different angle. It explores how the locals perceived strangers, who came to both villages in several waves, from resettled Germans after the World War II, to ethnically different ‘Gastarbeiters’ during the era of economic growth, and settlers from the bigger cities. The picture that Thomas paints is far from rosy: the strangers were mostly seen as a burden or threat to the community, and the villagers on both sides of the Iron Curtain deployed a range of discursive means to keep them at the margin of the imagined communities, even after they were no more kept at the edge of the physical spaces.

The fourth chapter goes arguably farthest to the wider frames of big politics, as it ventures into the perceptions of ‘the other Germany’ in the respective localities, and on a broader plane, of local understandings of the Germany’s division. As the author rightly claims, it is precisely the focus on two villages lying relatively far away from the epicenters of the Cold War division, such as the mutual border or divided Berlin, that brings fresh perspective to the study of divided Germany. The fifth chapter continues with the small place vs. big politics theme, but turns its focus to the changing relations between the states and the local societies in terms of civic participation. Using several examples, such as the building of a new resort in Neukirch on a voluntary basis, or a grassroots campaign to establish a youth center in Ebersbach, the chapter demonstrates that since the 1960s, citizens in both places became more engaged in the matters of local development, which in turn gave them some power vis a vis the institutionalized political structures.

The sixth chapter nicely crowns the analysis, and for readers like me, who have been dealing with the uses of the local past, brings a truly joyful reading. Under the telling title “Beyond Nostalgia”, Thomas explores in the chapter various local history texts and practices, not as nostalgic longing for a better past, but as a means, deployed by locals, to make sense of social change, as well as to control it and help navigate the future. The author thus delves into still under-researched field of (mostly amateur) local history as a socially productive activity, imbued with functions far beyond a mere

amusement or curiosity. Furthermore, Thomas convincingly demonstrates that local history can serve as an excellent clue for understanding self-reflection and cultural reproduction of a place.

The book is organized as a comparative study that analyzes local responses to common challenges in two different sociopolitical and ideological contexts. It is clear from the outset that the author puts emphasis on parallels and fundamentally similar responses of the villagers; these are explained by common concerns, such as pursuing a good life, improving the local environment to meet citizens' needs, guarding 'their communities' from erosion, or making sense of past activities in respective contexts. In this sense, the author makes out of his German-German comparison a case for deconstruction of the preconceived stereotype about radically different and incommensurable experiences in the two Cold War blocs. Yet the analysis reveals some notable differences as well, conditioned by different sociopolitical frameworks, as well as by diverging trajectories of the settlements, with Ebersbach witnessing growth and upgrade to the official status of a town, while Neukirch facing decay. For the latter case, the breakdown of socialism, followed by further economic decline as well as by de-legitimization of the socialist past, has posed additional challenge, unparalleled in the West, that clearly echoed in the ways the citizens' pre-1989 activism and the local past have been narrated after the reunification.

The book by Marcel Thomas is a rigorous, theoretically founded, and intellectually stimulating piece of historical scholarship that weaves together many important themes, such as the shifting meanings of urbanity, the role of local history, or state-society relations in the late capitalist and late socialist systems. Furthermore, it contributes significantly to the recent methodological debates about the scales in historical research, and about connecting local and global, or micro and macro, perspectives. As such, it deserves to be widely read far beyond its immediate context of the postwar German history.

References

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Článek představuje novou knihu Marcela Thomase. Kniha se věnuje otázce, jak vesničané v poválečném Německu využívají minulost ke konstrukci vlastních interpretací společenské změny.

Klíčová slova: Německo, lokální historie, Marcel Thomas.

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Artykuł jest prezentacją najnowszej książki Marcela Thomasa, która jest poświęcona kwestii wykorzystania przeszłości w procesie konstruowania własnych interpretacji procesów zmiany społecznej w powojennych Niemczech.

Słowa kluczowe: Niemcy, historia lokalna, Marcel Thomas.

Przekład z języka czeskiego
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