
'Auto, Auto, über alles': The Politics of Cars in East, West and United Germany, 1989–1991

Andrea M. Humphreys

Abstract

This paper discusses the place of the private automobile—as object, as metaphor, and as a vehicle for the expression of social, economic and political discontent and desire—in the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the process of German unification, focusing on the transport policies of the West German Greens and Eastern environmental and civil rights groups in 1989–1991. The discussion serves to highlight the centrality of the private car to state and society in both Germanys, as well as the car's particular connection to notions of democracy and freedom, and to explore the tension between social and ecological impulses in various strands of the German Left.

This paper explores the myriad roles that private automobiles played during the momentous events of 1989–1991 in East, West and united Germany, as the collapse of the German Democratic Republic led to rapid German unification. This story, a snapshot of a fascinating moment in the history of car cultures, provides a way of thinking both about the transformation of the postindustrial German Left since the 1970s, as it wrestled with questions of capitalism, technology and ecology, and about the peculiarities of cars as a form of technology in general, and those of German car culture in particular. The paper focuses on the politics of cars in the West German Greens and Eastern environmental and dissident groups during the reunification period, as revealed in literature produced by these groups at the time and in the key press source for the West German Left, the Berlin-based daily newspaper *die tageszeitung (taz)*. Aiming more to tease out the questions raised by a closer examination of the place of cars at this point in history than to present a detailed account of

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the German Left and their transport policies, this snapshot forms part of a broader examination of the place of the private automobile in the philosophy and policy of the German post-war red (Social Democratic) and green Left.

The private automobile (and the mobility it brings) features in these three crucial years of German history as object, as metaphor, and as a vehicle for the expression of social, economic and political discontent and desire. Cars were a powerful symbol of the gulf between the two Germanys, and the lack of cars and poor quality of local cars in the GDR was a highly significant factor in East German consumer dissatisfaction, which fed into general political dissatisfaction. Cars were connected in a literal sense to the question of freedom of travel which provided momentum to East Germans' protests against the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1989, and East German Trabants, or Trabis, figured as a key image of the celebrations and chaos which overtook both states after the November opening of the Berlin Wall. However, from the summer of 1989 onwards, cars—specifically the highly polluting Trabis—were the focus of some of the first West German resistance to the influx of Easterners into the Federal Republic. In 1990–1991, the death toll on Eastern roads became a metaphor for the difficulties of unification and a focus for West German expressions of superiority, while the Trabi began to feature in nostalgia for some aspects of the GDR.

As protests against the East German regime increased throughout 1989, Western and Eastern green and dissident groups shared a portrayal, as part of a call for the GDR to be reformed along democratic, socialist and ecological lines, of mass private automobility as an example of the runaway Western consumption which East Germans had the chance to avoid. When reunification seemed inevitable, many members of these groups bitterly derided what they perceived as the materialism—symbolised again as lust for West German cars—of Easterners, who had squandered an opportunity for genuine reform, choosing German unity instead. In the December 1990 all-German election campaign (following unification in October), the Western Greens opposed the conservative emphasis on economic growth and campaigned—with disastrous results—not on German unity but on the climate change caused, to a significant extent, by private car use.

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This discussion of the place of private cars in the context of German reunification reveals many themes already familiar to historians of German car culture. In particular, the car culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s was reminiscent of that which emerged during the Federal Republic's post-war economic miracle. Both periods were characterised by a concept of car ownership, and of the motorisation of society, as not just simultaneous with processes of economic recovery, Westernisation and democratisation, but as mutually reinforcing these (Höfig 1999, 156). Reunification also saw a resurgence of the link between liberty and consumption identified by historians of the economic miracle—often specifically portrayed as a particularly German, literal connection between freedom and driving fast (Glaser 1986; Höfig 1999, 163; Markovits & Silvia 1997, 59). The displacement of German national identity through an economic identity in the post-war Federal Republic also had echoes in the 'economic nationalism' identified by members of the German Left in the lead-up to reunification (Habermas 1992).

The themes of social and economic differentiation, prominent in the reunification period, can also be seen throughout the history of German (and international) car culture. Cars were a pronounced indicator of social status in East and West Germany. Historians of the car culture in the Federal Republic, where mass private car ownership was established later than in the United States, have pointed to clear class differences between car owners and non-owners, and between the drivers of different cars, for instance a Mercedes as opposed what was seen as a trashy Opel Manta (Höfig 1999, 173); as Carolyn Höfig points out, a later development saw fuel efficiency and low emissions as indicators 'on an alternative scale of automotive identity' (Höfig 1999, 171). As outlined below, the link between cars and social status was all the more rigid in the GDR (Zatlin 1997). German history had also previously seen a link between perceived driving ability and social exclusion, most prominently in the Nazi exclusion of Jews, gypsies and several other groups from the driving community as 'unable' to handle German cars on German roads (Höfig 1999, 158–159). Further elements of the discourses around cars witnessed in 1989–1991 which were reminiscent in a way of Nazi car culture, the moment in German automotive history most thoroughly examined by historians, included the notion of mass ownership of affordable cars and major road-building projects (e.g. Zeller 2002).

As well as fitting into a broader history of German car culture, this story raises long-standing questions in regard to environmental politics, as it so clearly underscores the tension between environmentalism and the 'old politics' issues of economic security (Müller-Rommel 1989). The debate over Trabant emissions, in particular, forces observers to consider the elitist element to environmental politics, but also the matter of the political instrumentalisation of environmentalism for other ends. The rhetoric and policies on transport stemming from green and dissident groups during the period from 1989–1991 also echo the perennial dilemma of the Left—reform or revolution? A number of the groups considered here presented their goals in terms of an ecological 'transport revolution' (*Verkehrswende*), a truly groundbreaking change in German car culture away from the mass use of the private automobile, and they perceived the collapse of the GDR, where the private car was not yet so thoroughly 'embedded' in society (Rosen & Rappert 1999), as a unique opportunity to achieve this. In the end, these groups were able to bring about neither their revolutionary nor their reformist aims (such as lower speed limits) in the field of transport, though as several observers have pointed out, the reunification period did witness a transport revolution in the mass motorisation of the Eastern German states, where 539,000 new cars were registered in the first half of 1991 alone (*taz* 06.11.1990, 16.11.91).

This study also highlights the often contradictory nature of the attitudes to mass private automobility seen in the various strands of the German Left (East and West). These contradictions resulted from the interplay of competing philosophical and practical imperatives. Jonathan Zatlin traces such interplay in his discussion of both state policy and popular attitudes towards cars in the GDR, in which he argues that the shortage of cars was, in its own right, a highly significant factor in the state's collapse (Zatlin 1997; see also Slater 1997). To this end, Zatlin quotes a June 1989 report by the GDR's Ministry for State Security which noted an increasing tendency to link economic performance to political legitimacy and specifically warned that the country's political stability risked becoming dependent upon the availability of cars (Zatlin 1997, 358).

The SED had theoretical and practical reasons not to manufacture a large number of cars. While there is a Marxist tradition of the celebration

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of technology, individual automobile ownership seemed to contradict the Marxist interpretation of private cars as not a 'real' but a 'false' need, generated by capitalist societies in response to worker alienation (Zatlin 1997). In addition, a lack of resources and a desire to contain the population also contributed to SED restraint. At the same time, the East German regime did manufacture and promote its own cars, as part of a vision of East German modernity, and in a policy of consumer socialism aimed at winning the support of the population by catering to some material desire. To this end, some Western brands such as Mazda and Volkswagen (VW) were also sold in the East—to those with access to Western currency. Social stratification in this supposedly classless society, where top officials were chauffeured in Volvos, was only intensified by cars (Zatlin 1997, 360–361).

In the 1950s, the East German state began producing the Trabant, which changed very little over the following decades. It had a two-stroke engine, a distinctive sound, smell and blue exhaust from the mixture of oil and petrol it burnt, a maximum speed of around 104km/h, and a body of plastic and compressed fibrous waste, including paper in earlier models (Kirchberg 1991; Zatlin 1997). The number of private cars surpassed the number of motorcycles in 1957 in the Federal Republic, but not until 1973 in the GDR. By the late 1980s, around 70% of Western households and (according to official GDR figures) 50% of Eastern households owned a car—Zatlin estimates the true figure to be under 40% (Zatlin 1997, 361–362). Each East German citizen was able to register for a car, and buy one after an average wait of 15 years, though waiting times blew out even further as the East German economy failed; Zatlin quotes a party official's estimate from May 1989 that people ordering cars that year would receive them 40 years later (Zatlin 1997, 379). Furthermore, there were constant shortages of both fuel and spare parts. At the same time as immense consumer dissatisfaction, however, the Trabant also embodied values of resourcefulness and freedom, and was the site of unofficial consumer behaviour amongst East German citizens, who, for example, sold older and hence more desirable registration forms, or listed their cars amongst their personal qualities in newspaper lonely hearts columns (Zatlin 1997, 370–373). Soon after reunification, a nostalgic fixation on the Trabi, as part of a broader wave of nostalgia for certain aspects of the GDR, emerged (Berdahl 2000; Moran 2004).

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The West German Left's attitudes to cars also reflected contradictory impulses. On one hand, there was a leftist history of critique of the social divisions and cruel modernity represented by cars, seen, for instance, in novels such as Heinrich Böll's *Ende einer Dienstfahrt* (End of a Mission); the post-1968 New Left also adopted the Marxist concept of false needs and the Frankfurt School's critique of consumer culture (Horkheimer & Adorno 1973). Then again, there was a leftist tradition of faith in the liberating, progressive, democratic possibility of technology—the post-war Social Democratic Party (SPD) had, for example, seen great virtue in Fordism and new technologies such as nuclear power, and had promoted economic growth as the way to ensure employment for all. The car industry was the showpiece of the West German economic miracle and the *Modell Deutschland* (German model) of a modern industrial society, and the assembly line worker at the Wolfsburg VW factory was understood as the arbiter of leftist politics (Ely 1993; King 1995, 50; Markovits & Silvia 1997; Winner 1986).

Yet these 'old politics' views, supported by the SPD's traditional working-class constituency, were challenged by the growing green movement, which, in the wake of the Club of Rome report and the 1973 oil crisis, questioned the ecological limits to economic growth (Meadows et al. 1972). By the late 1980s, under the competing influence of the appeal of 'new politics' or 'postmaterialist' issues such as ecology (Inglehart 1977), the SPD had reformulated its basic programme to consider the limits to growth; to this end it advocated transport reform, both by ameliorating the environmental impact of private cars and by moving away from mass reliance on them (Padgett 1993; SPD 1989; 1990). This development took place in a West German political culture in which explicit disregard for environmental concern had, by the late 1980s, been rendered unacceptable—except, as Andrei Markovits and Stephen Silvia have suggested, when it comes to 'the right of free citizens' to (as the car club slogan puts it) 'freely drive' their cars without speed limits on the autobahn (*Freie Fahrt für freie Bürger*) (Markovits & Silvia 1997, 59).

Many of the environmental groups which emerged in the Federal Republic in the 1970s fed into the fledgling Green party, founded at the national level in 1980. For members of the new party—typically children

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of West German post-war affluence, who expressed Marxist, moral, and ecological critiques of capitalism (Die Grünen 1983)—the car became a potent symbol of all that was wrong with Western consumer society; Green transport policy was made within a framework which portrayed ecological crisis as an expression of the fundamental failure of modernisation, and which called for a complete restructure of industrial society (Die Grünen 1986; Ely 1993).

Protest against the East German regime had been growing since early 1989, largely under the umbrella of church-based peace and environmental groups, which were relatively safe places from which to articulate a critique of the government (Goeckel 1990; Jarausch 1994). As the year progressed, prominent dissidents were joined by increasing numbers of East German citizens in growing demonstrations of opposition to the regime, which was put under further pressure by the thousands of East Germans seeking to emigrate to the West through the Hungarian-Austrian border and West German embassies in Eastern Europe. As summer turned into autumn, opposition crystallised around demands for freedom of movement, and mass protests culminated in the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and the dissolution of the GDR in 1990 (Jarausch 1994).

The first signs of a mass movement of East Germans into West Germany elicited criticism of East German cars from across the political spectrum in the Federal Republic. After Hungary opened part of its border with Austria in August 1989, West German newspapers reported on the masses of unsafe and unsound Trabis approaching the Federal Republic (*taz* 04.09.89, 12.09.89), reporting that 7,000–8,000 Trabis (not people) were in Hungary waiting to cross the border (*taz* 13.09.89). A letter to the editor of the *taz* assured those Easterners moving to the West that they were completely welcome, but asked them to please leave their Trabis in Hungary, as 'The golden West already stinks badly enough' (*taz* 08.09.1989). On Thursday, 9 November, the Berlin Wall was opened in an almost accidental SED concession to demands for freedom of movement. Trabis played a huge role in the euphoria and chaos of that first weekend. Easterners drove into West Berlin through crowds of people who clapped and cheered the sight of each Trabi, thumping the cars enthusiastically on the roof, a practice which was even given a name—'*Trabiklopfen*' (*taz* 11.11.1989).

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Berlin transport systems broke down, major streets turned into pedestrian zones, and traffic violations were forgiven in the celebrations as cars parked everywhere (*taz* 20.11.1989). The standard media images of these first, heady days are of lines of Trabis, honking and flashing their lights, massive traffic jams, and the stink of auto emissions. Headlines spoke of a 'Trabi-Invasion', a 'Trabi-avalanche', and of the whole of Berlin as a cloud, or as a literally 'breath-taking' city (*taz* 13.11.1989, 18.11.1989).

More fundamentally, the private automobile—old-fashioned Trabants chugging along the autobahns, or East Germans looking in amazement at Western car showrooms—were immediately used to describe the gulf between the political and economic systems of the Federal Republic and the GDR (e.g. *New York Times* 10.11.89, 13.11.89, 14.11.89, 26.11.89). As a columnist in the major weekly West German newspaper *Die Zeit* expressed it: 'The Trabi seems to be evidence of the luck we had in our economic system. Socialism [...] is a sputtering loser. We have nothing to fear from this socialism—we can laugh at it, buy it and overtake it at any time' (Schmemmann 1989). As Raymond Stokes writes, the famous picture of a Trabi in a dumpster—many East Germans simply abandoned their Trabis when they switched to Western cars—has often been used to suggest that 'the car, like the system that had produced it, had been consigned to the dustbin of history' (Stokes 2000, 1).

Western unease at developments in the GDR was soon visible. In a perverse reflection of the way environmentalism served as a vehicle for criticism of the SED in the East, Western objections to the influx of Easterners were often expressed as an objection to pollution. For instance a sign seen hanging from a West Berlin balcony on 12 November, 1989, urged Walter Momper, the mayor of West Berlin, to: 'think of our children. They're suffocating!' (*taz* 13.11.89). Another slogan simply stated: 'People yes, Trabis no' (*taz* 14.11.89). The first West German citizens' initiative against Trabi emissions was reported in Lübeck in December, where a group attempted to halt construction of a parking lot intended to accommodate Eastern visitors (*taz* 11.12.1989).

As noted above, the Trabant's two-stroke engine generated particularly serious emissions. However, West German attempts to control Trabi emissions were highly problematic, as they were inseparable from the subject

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of East German travel to the West. Although the Berlin Alternative List (AL)—part of the Western Greens—had pursued a policy of the ‘concrete utopia of the car-free city’ since 1985 (Alternative Liste, AL Fraktion im Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin 1990; Fraktion der Grünen / Alternativen Liste im Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin 1990, 22), the actions of the red-green coalition which governed West Berlin at the time of gathering protests against the SED-regime provide a particularly stark illustration of the possible conflict between social and environmental policy. In mid-1989, in response to the growing momentum around the issue of freedom to travel out of the GDR, the coalition discussed a new smog law for West Berlin (which would both redefine various stages of a smog alarm in terms of the atmospheric concentration of certain compounds, and set out activities to be restricted during these stages), taking Trabis into account. The new law, announced in the *taz* by the AL two days after the Berlin Wall was opened, was passed by the Berlin Senate on 28 November and was to come into effect in January 1991. The new definition of smog would bring West Berlin into line with other West German states, and the duration of a smog alarm was increased. It came to be known as the ‘Trabi law’ (*Lex Trabi*), as its ban on two-stroke motors and cars without catalytic converters entering West Berlin during periods of smog would effectively serve to exclude Trabis at these times; smog alarms were expected to be frequent and long-lasting throughout the winter. Senators portrayed the law as fair in that the same restrictions had been placed on Western motorbikes, which likewise had a two-stroke motor, yet this was seen as largely symbolic as motorbikes were not heavily used in winter. Newspapers proclaimed: ‘Drivers from East Berlin, Potsdam and Frankfurt / Oder have to walk in West Berlin’ (*taz* 06.12.1989).

Headlines such as ‘Trabis stink nine times more’ greeted the December release of environmental analyses which revealed that a Trabi produced as many hydrocarbons as nine Western cars with 4-stroke motors and no catalytic converter, as much carbon monoxide as five such Western cars, and as much as 100 Western cars with catalytic converters. Trabis also produced significant amounts of lead (*taz* 19.12.89, 06.2.1990). The West Berlin Senate’s response to initial reports of Trabi emissions was to consider an even tighter law which would also exclude Trabis from West Berlin during the warning phase before a smog alarm (*taz* 06.12.1989).

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Reactions to the Senate's action varied amongst environmental groups in both German states. The newly formed East Berlin Green Party protested against the law as a one-sided ban on Trabis which created yet another privilege for Westerners, especially as a catalytic converter for a two-stroke engine had not been invented. In response, West Berlin Environment Senator Michaela Schreyer (AL) insisted that she did not wish to create an ecological barrier where the Wall had been. Schreyer claimed she had sought a less asymmetrical solution which would also have prevented Westerners driving into East Berlin during smog periods, but that this had not been possible. Nor did Schreyer want a situation unfair to Westerners, she explained, whereby Trabis were exempt but Western cars with no catalytic converter were banned. The SPD State Secretary in the Environment Ministry displayed little sympathy for notions of social exclusion, describing it as the GDR's own fault that it had not managed to build a cleaner motor in forty years (*taz* 29.11.1989). Schreyer's spokesperson also defended the Senate's decision, pointing out that the stink from the East German two-stroke motors was already creating unease in the West, and that many of West Berlin's residents had complained of headaches and nausea (*taz* 14.11.1989). Other Western environmental groups exhibited more reticence in complaining about Trabis, given that there were no clean cars in the East (*taz* 18.11.89).

Eastern environmental groups, on the other hand, often made more radical proposals (*taz* 18.11.1989). In December 1989, East German dissident groups arguing for the reform of the GDR faced an exodus of East German citizens voting with their feet for the West. One chapter of New Forum, a key dissident group which later joined *Bündnis 90* (Alliance 90), the alliance of Eastern environmental and civil rights group which eventually merged with the (West) German Greens, issued a list of ten demands for the government of the GDR. These included an 'immediate halt to the production of the two-stroke car'. The group also appealed to East Germans not to travel to West Germany in their Trabants, so as not to burden the environment in the West and to avoid a negative reaction from citizens of the Federal Republic (Neues Forum Kühlungsborn 1989).

Another point at which the potential for conflict between social and environmental priorities—and the instrumentalisation of these notions

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for political ends—can be observed was the question of the resale of Trabis, which was prohibited under West Berlin's environmental regulations. The Federal Republic's Transport Minister, Friedrich Zimmermann of the right-wing Christian Social Union (CSU), attacked the red-green coalition over this issue, describing the ban as socially unjust even though it had initially been introduced by a West Berlin Senate led by the CSU's counterpart, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Zimmermann presented an exemption for Trabis (allowing their resale) as 'a duty of humanity and togetherness'; it was, moreover, too much to ask citizens of the GDR to retrofit expensive converters to their cars, as 'our countrymen are starting with nothing' (*taz* 13.09.1989). West Berlin's SPD Transport Senator and the AL's Schreyer both supported such an exemption for Trabis so as not to be unjust, and Schreyer explained her position with reference to the Eastern car's few strong points—the Trabant's low maximum speed was 'ecologically appropriate', and Trabis emitted less nitric oxide than Western cars (*taz* 14.09.1989). Trabis similarly violated safety standards in West and then united Germany: they had no crumple zone, the steering wheel and gearbox were dangerously placed, and collisions at even very low speeds could result in serious damage. Yet the Federal Republic's Transport Ministry recognised that it could not simply take away three million cars; in the lead-up to the 1990 elections, moreover, Trabi drivers reportedly felt assured that they would not be treated too harshly, as three million Trabis equalled approximately five million voters. The Ministry's Eastern counterpart acknowledged the research which had shown Trabants to be unsafe, but pointed out that Easterners had been driving the cars for 30 years without becoming extinct (*taz* 08.08.1990).

Cars also figured prominently in discussions of the motives of Easterners who moved to the West. In particular, they were used by various members of the Left, West and East, to evoke an image of material greed. For example in August 1989, the West Berlin AL caused a scandal when it proposed that citizens of the GDR be treated as foreigners from non-European Union states, with no automatic right to West German citizenship. Peter Lohaus from the party executive explained this decision—the AL did not want to prevent the victims of political persecution obtaining West German citizenship, but 'for those who don't want to drive a Trabi anymore, but

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would rather drive a better car, this would mean that they can't move here anymore' (*taz* 19.08.1989). Responses from various parts of the German Left varied. Klaus Hartung, for example, found it hateful to claim that East Germans were merely 'fleeing from a Trabi to an Audi', and was outraged that people with political grievances were being depicted as 'frustrated Trabant drivers' (*taz* 09.11.1989). Some addressed the genuine hardship of a 15-year wait for a car, while others disliked the AL's 'stay away' message but agreed that those who really only wanted to swap their Trabi for a shiny Mercedes were suspicious (*taz* 29.08.1989).

As noted above, a significant amount of Eastern dissident activity had initially been organised around environmental questions. These included transport issues (Petschow, Meyerhoff & Thomasberger 1990, 54). When environmental dissident groups fared poorly in the first free East German elections in March 1990, some turned to what they perceived as their fellow citizens' materialism—illustrated by a desire for Western cars—to explain the outcome. For example Wolfgang Hübner from the central dissident group Democracy Now expressed his disappointment that citizens of the GDR clearly wanted a 'VW instead of a Third Way' (*taz* 21.11.1989), and the peak Eastern environmental group *Grüne Liga* was similarly discouraged to discover that Trabant drivers were more interested in the 'prices on the Federal Republic's used car market' than in ecology (*taz* 28.05.1990). Thomas Klein from the far-left *Vereinigte Linke* (VL), which went on to work with the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the reformed SED, wrote of his disgust that the conservative parties assembled in *Allianz für Deutschland* had won with a promise of money and Western standards of living. Klein summarised what he saw the decisive factor in the East German vote thus: 'After 40 years of waiting for a Trabant, finally a [...] Golf' (*taz* 24.03.1990).

Such disappointment, expressed by members of the Left in both Germanys, was in part a reaction to the betrayal of the green-left's hope that mass opposition to the East German regime meant an opportunity to directly integrate ecological ideas into a reformed East German economy (Lankowski 1990; Markovits 1993; Markovits & Silvia 1997; Raschke 1993, 921). The policy of *Verkehrswende*—a transport revolution which would see the massive expansion of public transport and bicycle

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use, and in its full form even the end of the mass use of private cars—was part of this broad vision for economic reorganisation. While this policy remained current in the Greens after reunification (Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen im Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin 1995; Die Grünen im Landtag von Baden-Württemberg 1992; Die Grünen NRW 1991), it was fuelled at that time both by exciting events, such as the spontaneous conversion of West Berlin's main street, the Kurfürstendamm, into a pedestrian zone on 9–11 November and the opening of the German-German border for bicycle traffic (*taz* 14.11.1989), and by the built environment of the GDR. To various green groups, the GDR's lack of cars, less extensive road network and lower accident rates, combined with the fact that East German towns were not all built to the scale of the car and that 79% of freight was moved by rail and about 40% of private trips took place on the public transport network, all pointed to a chance for the GDR to do things differently to the car-mad Westerners (Die Grünen im Bundestag 1991; Petschow, Meyerhoff & Thomasberger 1990, 50–64; Wolf 1990). However, an ecological transport revolution did not spread from East to West; instead, a combination of policy, desire, and economic interests saw the universalisation of West German car culture and laws, in a microcosm of the broader process by which the GDR was effectively swallowed by the Federal Republic.

The end of the GDR saw the Eastern German states move rapidly towards mass private automobility on the Western scale. This meant both a boom in the Western used (and new) car market, especially after currency union in mid-1990, and a waste problem, as many Trabi owners abandoned their old car. The Berlin City Council, which employed extra staff to log unwanted Trabis, registered 600 of them in January 1991 alone (*taz* 05.02.1991). Along with the West German model of car ownership, the East German states adopted the much higher West German speed limits and permitted blood alcohol level for drivers. The explicit link between personal liberty and the freedom to drive fast, noted above as a product of the West German economic miracle in particular, emerged as a central concept. West German newspapers reported that in November 1989, Eastern visitors described this—'*Vollgas fahren!*' (Full acceleration!)—as the first thing they wanted to do with their newfound freedom. Trans-

port Minister Zimmermann, who rejected any possibility of learning from the GDR, approved. Against the advice of West German car clubs, normally the staunchest defenders of speed, Zimmermann discredited the GDR's speed limit of 100km/h as a 'relic of socialist morality' and 'socialist oppression'; freedom, he said, was the 'freedom to sometimes drive at 160km/h'. Zimmermann similarly described the GDR's zero blood alcohol limit for drivers as a further example of socialist oppression, in comparison to the 'proven' West German limit of 0.8 blood alcohol concentration (mg/g). These comments lent official and moral legitimacy to what was emerging as a wild situation on the roads, especially as Zimmermann was addressing a population coming to view every law made by the SED as wrong (*taz* 24.02.1990, 03.03.90, 03.10.90).

In early 1990, the Berlin Institute for Ecological Economic Research released a report on the potential for an eco-social market economy to develop in the East. With regard to transport, the authors noted great opportunities in the GDR as a society which was not yet completely motorised. Yet they also perceived a major obstacle to transport reform, in that for citizens of the GDR, the private car was connected to a decisive moment of the revolution: freedom to travel. In this situation, the report concluded, the car truly had an emancipatory character as the symbol of newly won freedom (Petschow, Meyerhoff & Thomasberger 1990, 62; *taz* 10.03.1990). Freedom to travel, however, had its price, when road deaths in the Eastern states increased by 75% in 1990—the Federal Republic's Federal Bureau of Statistics pointed out that the number of traffic deaths that year was 40 times higher than the total number of victims of the Berlin Wall. In Brandenburg alone, in 1990, police were called to accidents 40,000 times, more than 10,000 people were injured, and 704 died on the state's roads (*taz* 08.01.91). Police East and West agreed on the factors behind this: speeding; alcohol; increased traffic; a diminished police presence; general lawlessness; Eastern drivers overestimating themselves and their brakes, and underestimating their speed in new, powerful Western cars; Western drivers who did not understand Eastern roads; unsafe Eastern cars; and the universalisation of a 'more aggressive' Western driving style. Headlines such as 'East German drivers are a danger to traffic', and 'Trabant drivers are potential organ donors', stemmed just as often from Eastern police as

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Western, but there was also a certain arrogance in the observations of many Westerners who described Easterners as unable to handle Western cars (*taz* 20.07.90, 02.08.90).

In the middle of this traffic chaos came the first all-German elections in December 1990. Following unification in October, the major parties officially merged their Eastern and Western counterparts, while the Western Greens only formed an electoral alliance with the Green party of the GDR and the *Bündnis 90* collection of dissident groups. The two Green parties formally merged one day after the December elections, but *Bündnis 90* and the Greens did not join together as one party until 1993. The broad German Left was deeply ambivalent about German unification, and the campaigns of both the Greens and the SPD engaged inadequately with the core issue of unity, focusing heavily on environmental issues instead. In the all-German elections, the SPD gained about half a million votes from the Greens, enough to keep the West German Greens out of parliament for four years, but lost about one million working-class voters to the Right (Poguntke 1998).

Traffic policy formed a major part of the environmental campaigns of the Western Greens, Eastern Greens, and *Bündnis 90*. The West German Greens' slogan was later seen as famously inappropriate because of its avoidance of the question of Germany: 'Everyone's talking about Germany. We're talking about the weather' (*Alle reden von Deutschland. Wir reden vom Wetter*). This was accompanied by a major transport campaign: 'Mobile without cars' (*Obne Auto mobil*) (Aktion 'MOA' 1990; Die Grünen, Bundesvorstand und BAG Verkehr 1990; Die Grünen im Bundestag 1990b). The danger of worldwide climate catastrophe was portrayed as very near and only comparable to the threat posed by nuclear war, and the Greens both quantified the role of cars in this climate change and used the automotive society in their images of apocalypse. The West German Greens' election programme labelled cars 'environmental destroyer no. 1' (*Umweltzerstörer Nr. 1*), and explained that the Greens sought an end to 'the car as a means of transit'. The world's circa 400 million cars and trucks were said to be responsible for 20% of the carbon dioxide emissions causing global warming; in Germany, cars produced 70% of the carbon monoxide and 50% of the nitric oxide destroying the landscape. The Greens demanded

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fuel efficiency of 100km/4 litres of petrol in all cars by 1995, a three-way catalytic converter, and speed limits of 100 km/h on the autobahns, 80km/h on roadways and 30 km/h in cities, to be achieved through higher fines, the manufacture of cars with reduced capabilities, and petrol taxes set to reach 5 DM/litre by 2000 (Die Grünen 1990, 10–11). In a statement which belied the experiences of many citizens of the new German states, ‘cars had long been transformed’, claimed the Greens, ‘from a “symbol of freedom” to an instrument of destruction’.

The car was used by Greens in the West as a symbol of destructive behaviour, of a German (and Western) society ‘racing, without breaks, into the climate catastrophe, ignoring all warning signals [...]. Thus [...] confirming that first the forest and then the people will die’ (Die Grünen im Bundestag 1990a). The car-fixated society was said to be near total collapse: ‘Despite thousands of dead and seriously injured on the roads, the irrationality and aggressiveness conquer any sense, daily the normalised war takes place. Instead of a heart for the environment, there is a monstrous and massive automotive model’ (Die Grünen im Bundestag 1989). Environmental groups did not necessarily appreciate the Greens’ 1990 election campaign. For example the *Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland* (BUND), a peak German environmental organisation, later reflected that while the Greens’ policies had been sound, this campaign had represented the crude political instrumentalisation of environmental protection: a necessary reminder of the dangers of climate catastrophe should not have been made to serve as an alternative to Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s unification policy (Zahrnt 2000).

The East German green milieu was strictly anti-nationalistic, anti-Leninist and anti-capitalist, and advocated the reformation of the GDR into a ‘Third Way’ style state which combined the humanising promise of socialism and the rejection of Western-style over-consumption (Markovits & Gorski 1993, 250). In their writings, the car became a potent symbol of an unfree, capitalist West driven by consumption. In the joint 1990 election programme of the Western Greens, Eastern Greens and *Bündnis 90*, these groups described the GDR as already having suffered incredible ecological damage from ‘real existing socialism’. With overly speedy reunification, the Eastern states had taken on all the ecological mistakes of

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Western consumer society, too; reunification had also 'forced an increase in traffic'. Combining notions of economic nationalism and ecological disaster, and rejecting technocratic repair measures such as compulsory catalytic converters as insufficient, the joint programme asked Germans to vote against Kohl's chauvinistic focus on economic growth, and to pursue instead an economic and transport revolution:

'Wachstum, Wachstum (growth) über alles!' is once again the slogan in East Germany, except that this time it comes packaged not as a command economy but as a profit economy, which means avalanches of cars, toxic-waste mountains, nuclear power you can bet your life on, and open season on Mother Nature (Die Grünen / Bündnis 90 1990, 2–4).

Green Member of the Bundestag Michael Weiß made a similar link. In stark contrast to Zimmermann, who associated restrictions on free automobile with socialist oppression, Weiß portrayed the Greens' campaign against motorised transport as a positive contribution to German unity. Instead of the 'new national anthem' of *'Auto, Auto, über alles'*, Weiß argued that the Federal Republic would be well advised to adopt the 'exemplary' traffic regulations (the maximum speed limit of 100km/h and the 0.0 blood alcohol limit) of the GDR (Hartwig 1990).

This introduction to the history of car culture at the time of the East German revolution is a story of opportunities and obstacles to environmental revolution and reform, as the green milieu in East, West and united Germany unsuccessfully presented this period as a chance for the fundamental transformation of industrial society in general and German car culture in particular. It is also, and a fuller exploration of this moment in history could profitably focus on this concept, a story of contradictions—from the conflicting attitudes towards technology found within German leftist traditions, to the essentially converse connections made by various groups of the Left and Right between notions of mass private car use and freedom, democracy and the West.

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