

Preface

Two threads of argument entwine each other in this book. First, a theoretical strand offers sustained meditations on the dialectical relationship between the development of peoples' understandings of the social world as formed and transformed in everyday experiences and the rise and decline of political institutions created and recreated by their actions. More, it lays out in detail the dynamics through which this dialectic operates. Its particular claim is that processes of validation—that is, the interconnection of events certifying understandings across time—play a central role in these dynamics. Consequently, the book argues for a focus on processes of validation as an analytic angle from which the dynamics of institutions can be comprehended. Second, an historical strand of argument offers a reinterpretation of East German state socialism by analyzing it as an unacknowledged attempt to perform a revolutionary self-fulfilling prophecy. This perspective also enables an account of socialism's failure, which focuses on the GDR elites' failure to produce understandings of the everyday operations of socialism adequate to the maintenance of its institutions through timely reforms. I will speak in this sense of an epistemic explanation of the failure of socialism in contrast to the currently prevalent variants of economic and political systems accounts. My point is not that these are altogether wrong. They do provide valuable pieces for an answer to the puzzle of socialism's failure by guiding our attention to perverse incentive schemes and to institutional rigidities. Rather, I would like to argue that there is a dimension to socialism's demise that has so far not been properly addressed, that is, the generation and certification of knowledge about social life orienting the making and remaking of socialist institutions.

To see why knowledge is central it is helpful to remember that as an utterly modernist phenomenon, the very success of socialism was predicated on the promise of its superior reflexivity. Socialism claimed better insights into the social and economic conditions of our time that were supposed to afford reliable guidance for political action resulting in a humane social order. However, as socialism was economically and technologically falling

ever more visibly behind its capitalist rival (something particularly obvious to East Germans), as socialism appeared ever less capable to manage its own affairs (palpable in persistent shortages and a crumbling infrastructure), the claims to superior insight lost their credibility at an accelerating pace during the 1980s. The unfulfilled promise to know better played a significant role in socialism's demise. Knowledge is important for my argument in yet another way. Individuals living within socialism—party functionaries included—were quite aware of the problems economic and political systems accounts of socialism's failure point to. Some of the very best analyses of systemic inadequacies were produced from within socialist officialdom—if in their mature version only at a distance from it.¹ And yet, typically, socialist officials could not do much with their locally produced insights. The institutional arrangements making up the party state systematically undercut both the deepening of locally produced knowledge and its systematic integration into an overarching analysis of socialism within a larger social world. Not that the party state did not possess a systematic understanding of itself. With what it called “Marxism-Leninism” it had a model of which it was only too sure, hastily condemning as puny, ungrateful, misguided, or even as inimical locally produced insights that questioned the central model. Accordingly, the issue at hand is to analyze how the party state failed to come to a genuinely *useful* understanding of itself at its center—one that would have enabled it to steer through its crisis more successfully. If we speak of reform failure in the context of socialism, therefore, we need to see it in light of socialism's political epistemics, the ways in which it produced and certified knowledge about itself. The move toward the epistemic in explanations of socialism's failure is, thus, not so much an attempt to direct our attention merely to a different area of social life as if the epistemic would be different from the economic or the political. Instead, I will undertake in this book a shift in perspective to the very principles underpinning the production and reproduction of social life. And there, I shall argue, the epistemic (in a wider discursive, emotive, and kinesthetic meaning) plays a central role. The account offered here is in this sense orthogonal to the two more established modes of explaining socialism's demise.

The shift in perspective to an analysis of processes of co-constitution between understandings and institutions entails changes in the general framework of how socialism is analyzed. The prevalent economic and po-

1. To name but the best known the list includes such illustrious contributions as (in order of the time of their original writing) Koestler 1968; Milosz 1990; Djilas 1983; Leonhard 1955; Havemann 1964; Voslensky 1984; Kolakowski 2008; Bahro 1977; Konrád and Szelenyi 1979; Kornai 1992; Heinrich 1989.

litical accounts are typically couched in the ancient language of comparative systems analysis, methodically juxtaposing encompassing forms of social order. With respect to the Soviet world this has always meant explicitly or implicitly playing off a liberal-democratic market economy against a state-socialist planned economy. A variant of systems analysis has identified socialism with fascism under the rubric of totalitarianism while again juxtaposing this supposedly new form to liberal-democratic market economies. I see especially two problems with this analytic procedure. On the one hand, it compares highly idealized images of these forms that are often inadequate to understand people's experiences on the ground. The history and the ethnography of everyday life as it emerged with regard to socialism since the 1980s has shown this time and again.² On the other hand, explaining the troubles of one form has in this tradition little direct bearing on the analysis of the other. Worse, since the forms are typically imagined as mutually exclusive alternatives, problems identified in one are read all too often as validating the other. In extreme cases, the comparison leads to self-congratulatory explanations that attribute the failure of one form to the fact that it was in relevant aspects not like the other. In this sense socialism is said to have failed because it was not a liberal democracy, not a market economy.

The analysis I am undertaking in this book is, by contrast, self-consciously lodged at the level of institution-forming process dynamics. Even if the ones I will foreground in this study were more central or widespread in socialism, they still may be found to have a significant place in many other institutional arrangements, which rarely are the logical, internally coherent worlds that comparative systems perspectives have imagined them to be. Instead, social arrangements are better understood as more or less well-integrated thickets of processes, a number of which are typically shared between what comparativists have juxtaposed as distinct systems. In fact, the reason why I found socialism such a fascinating subject of inquiry is precisely that it brings to the fore, perhaps more clearly, certain process dynamics that are more widely shared among contemporary, highly complex and heterogeneous institutional arrangements. Connected to this shift of emphasis from forms to process dynamics constituting these arrangements is the hope that it will enable us to learn from the experience of socialism. I am indeed hope-

2. Following the pioneering work of ethnographers exploring everyday life still *during* socialism especially in the Balkans (Verdery 1983 and 2003; Kligman 1988 and 1998; Szelenyi 1988; Baranov and Lukacs 1997; Lampland 1995; Creed 1998) the better access to archives after the fall of socialism has allowed historians to make enormous progress in recovering the experience of everyday life under socialism (e.g., Kotkin 1995; Fitzpatrick 1999; Merkel 1999; Markovits 1995 and 2005; Füllbrook 2005; Hellbeck 2006).

ful that this book will afford its readers a fair number of déjà vu experiences, which may enable them to recognize social dynamics in their environment in the mirror of socialism.

Eastern European socialisms are a particularly rewarding subject for the exploration of the dynamic interplay between understandings and institutions. For one, socialism is now a clearly circumscribed historical epoch with a beginning and an end. Both bookends are clearly marked by the introduction and the dissolution, respectively, of a characteristic set of institutions. These, moreover, were rationally planned and legitimated on the basis of a sophisticated ideology, thus directly foregrounding the link under investigation here. Contrary to Marx's theory of how social formations come about in a naturalistic process of continuous transformations, Eastern Europe's socialisms were thoroughly intentional projects. They proceeded on the basis of Soviet blueprints. And in this sense, they were the result of politics in its purest form. The German Democratic Republic (also known by its acronym GDR or, more popularly, as East Germany) recommends itself among its brethren, because its complete dissolution as a state has created a rather unique research situation characterized by open archives and the accessibility of former state employees.

Both the theoretical and the historical lines of argument emerged from the investigation of one particular social arena: the efforts of the secret police of the GDR, the Stasi, to control the peace and civil rights movements in East Berlin during the last decade of the country's existence. Spelling it out with such brevity may immediately raise the question, how one could aspire to make arguments as encompassing as the ones just set forth from such a limited domain of social interaction. No doubt, such a move involves a certain conceit, albeit, I hope, a productive one. In its defense I should point out that I did not start this project with an agenda quite as broadly scoped. Instead, I began research in 2001 with the question, how dictatorial political regimes draw and maintain the support of wider strata of the population. Modern states are highly complex institutional arrangements that cannot operate properly without such support. Furthermore, I was interested in how the exercise of dictatorial state power influences state agents' understandings of their own work within a larger political context. And what would be better as a research site for such questions, I thought, than to focus on those members of the Stasi who had actively participated in suppressing dissident activities. After all, the Stasi archives were at least in principle open, and the officers could potentially be interviewed. These more limited questions have not disappeared from this book, but they have become embedded in the wider framework just outlined, as I woke up to what appeared to me as the sociological potential of this particular research "site." It quickly dawned on me that what was at stake in both the efforts of the Stasi officers as they and the party state saw it and in

the emerging opposition's efforts to create what they called a "parallel society" was nothing less than the understandings of socialism in its particular institutional form at a particular moment in time and the feedback of these understandings on socialism's institutional fabric. That question was only highlighted by socialism's demise, in which both the Stasi and the opposition played a much more passive role than one might have thought. Of course, the fact remains that I *am* deriving my argument from the investigation of one particular social arena, while generalizing it to GDR socialism as a whole and even with hopes of applicability to Eastern European socialisms more generally. My readings about the social life in other politicized domains of social life in the GDR (both primary and secondary) give me the confidence that this move has merit. This interpretation is further plausibilized by the highly centralized character of socialist governance that, tolerance for some local variations notwithstanding, asserted certain principles across domains of interaction (and the more politically relevant they were deemed to be the more so). Where the boundaries of the usefulness of my argument lie in the end can—given the detail knowledge required—only be ascertained in a wider discussion of comparisons that no scholar can produce alone.

Five Intertwined Empirical Perspectives on Understandings and Institutions

Throughout the research and writing process for this book, the historical and the theoretical lines of argument were developed together, moving constantly from one to the other. Thus theory became a method of fact finding and fact integration for the development of a historical narrative; narration in turn became the testing ground for theory, revealing gaps and overzealous reductions. This generative movement between theoretization and narration was further fueled by the fact that the social arena under consideration here, the Stasi's efforts to control the opposition in the GDR, could be seen as closely intertwining five different perspectives, each raising the question of understandings and institutions from a different angle and yet in complementary ways. These five perspectives lend structure to the book. From the first perspective (part I of the book), I inquire how the ruling party in East Germany thought about and set to work on developing and maintaining a socialist order. The first chapter spans a wide historical arch, wondering how the adherence to ideology (after all, largely an epiphenomenon for Marx) could come to be considered a, if not *the*, linchpin of the party state. I will show that anxious about the "unity and purity" of its ideology, the party aimed at engineering a monolithic intentionality that would bring about socialism in what can analytically only be understood as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Given this exalted role of ideology, this chapter also asks

how the party determined the correct interpretation of Marxism-Leninism for a given historical situation. The second chapter follows suit by raising the question, how the party went about its proselytizing business. I will discuss both the positive (persuading) and the negative (restricting) side of this missionary effort. The first was instituted as a giant propaganda apparatus aiming to form socialist human beings. But what if these efforts failed to bear the fruit the state desired? I will show in this chapter that propaganda failure was one of the key domains of the secret police. I will emphasize that propaganda and secret police work were but two sides of the same coin.

The second perspective on the relationship between understandings and political institutions is provided by what one might want to call the epistemic careers of the Stasi officers. Chapter 5, the first in part III of the book, follows the officers on their path from childhood experiences to their employment by the Stasi to learn how their initial attunement to socialism came about. It also investigates how their understandings were shaped subsequently by different kinds of work experiences, marking different phases in the historical development of the GDR. By necessity this involves an inquiry into how particular historical events such as the building of the Wall in 1961 and the Warsaw Pact's smothering of the Prague Spring in 1968 has shaped their views of socialism and their role in it. Chapter 6 complements this picture by inquiring about the discursive culture of the Stasi with a particular emphasis on three questions. How did employees acquire authority in a state socialist bureaucracy? How did the networks of authorized others develop for Stasi officers in the course of time? And what could they talk about, with whom, in what terms about matters political?

The third perspective is provided by the development of the political understandings of peace and civil rights movement activists—the topic of part IV of the book. Chapter 7 traces their biographical trajectory from the emergence of government critical feelings and thoughts to their integration into a protest milieu. Chapter 8 continues this trajectory into the formation of a veritable—if small—parallel civil society from the foundation of politically active groups and countrywide networks of activists to the publication of nationally circulated samizdat. One emphasis of these two chapters lies, as in the case of the Stasi officers, in the *development* of political understandings as the result of a sequence of events. Another is the importance of emotions and the sensuous experience of moving bodies through concrete spaces for the development of political understandings. A perhaps surprising insight of these two chapters concerns the epistemic importance of intimate relationships. We shall see in these chapters, perhaps even more clearly than in the chapters on the Stasi officers, that spatial arrangements, the co-location of people and their interweaving through meeting spots can have profound epistemic consequences.

The fourth perspective is given by the very techniques the party state employed to induce men and women with government critical ideas to reverse their opinions or at least to abstain from further government critical action. What is interesting about these techniques is that they too were aimed at the formation of understandings of self and other. That does not mean that these techniques were in any way less violent. Systematic disinformation was used to disorient people and to destroy personal relationships. And yet, the success of these techniques was rather variable; and precisely this fact is theoretically interesting. It raises the question, under what conditions particular techniques of manipulating people's understandings work, or fail to work. This will also shed further light on the epistemic qualities of intimate relations.

The fifth and final perspective (conclusion) zeros in on the question, why the socialist project failed. Why did the call for reforms in the hot fall of 1989 not end like the Prague Spring in 1968, or the Hungarian uprising in 1956, or the East German protests of 1953, that is, in armed intervention on behalf of the existing order? Put differently, why did the secret police officers, who had sworn to defend socialism to the last drop of their blood, not even fire a single shot in its defense when its very existence came under threat? As the answer to the last question will be found in an increasing disorientation of party state functionaries caused by an accelerating discrepancy between lived experience and official party descriptions of life in the GDR, the central question becomes why the party state was unable to develop more successful action guiding understandings of itself in a wider social world.

The perspective that is most obviously missing is that of what one might want to call “common people,” that is, GDR citizens who were neither seriously committed to socialism nor directly opposed to it. This seems problematic because in the fall of 1989 common people become important historical actors both in fueling a new refugee wave and in taking to the streets lending force to the groundswell of demonstrations. The reasons for this omission are mostly practical and therefore I do not want to make an attempt to justify it intellectually. Nevertheless, from all I know about my readings on everyday life in the GDR, the dynamics I am describing in this book about the development of understandings among Stasi officers and dissidents are those of common people too, albeit in different admixtures, differently distributed across time. Moreover, their action, and their performed understandings are present indirectly through the reactions of officers and dissidents. This is not ideal, but I think it is workable.

Hermeneutic Institutionalism

The details of the theoretical model as I will develop them in the introductory chapter as well as in the two chapters of part II of the book is the result of

a careful comparison between these perspectives. And yet, the fundamental analytical framework of this study stands in a long tradition of hermeneutic social thought dating back to the eighteenth-century writings of Vico (1968; 1988) and Herder (1953; 2002). It found its way into the germinating social sciences in Germany via scholars such as Dilthey (1970), Weber (1980), and Simmel (1992), but also, mediated by Hegel, through the works of American pragmatists (e.g., Dewey 1925; 1997). Max Weber (1980) even qualified his own way of practicing sociology as “hermeneutic” (*verstehend*, literally: “understanding”). The hallmark of hermeneutic social thought is not only (as often foregrounded) the employment of interpretative techniques as a primary research method. Even more important is the prominence it affords to interpretation and communication as the central linchpin of human social life. Says Vico, this being a version of his famous “*verum factum principle*” (1968, 96), “the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.” With “civil society” Vico means our social institutions. What he calls here “modifications of mind” is further analyzed by him as a thoroughly social and historical process of forming understandings about the world. If this is so, then understanding is also the method of choice to study processes of institution-formation because the ways in which we understand the social world is constitutive of the institutional arrangements in and through which we live. Our understandings shape our actions while our actions in concatenation with those of others call into being, maintain, and transform institutions. In practice this means, for example, that the ways in which we think, talk, feel, and habitually comport ourselves with respect to the law, the government, parties, elections, the mass media, nongovernmental organizations, constitutes them as the institutions that make up our political order. If this holds, then studying the transformation of understandings should be an apposite way of investigating the transformation of political institutions, including revolutions.

Given our currently prevalent social imaginaries, the links this framework establishes between understandings, actions, and institutions appear far too neat, however. We are only too well aware of the difficulties involved in changing established institutions even when their detrimental effects are well known and seemingly universally decried. We seem to understand what’s wrong, and yet nothing happens. Alluding merely to power differentials in sorting out whose understandings do and whose do not matter is no solution here. Indeed, we find it obvious today that the institutional order in which we live conforms to nobody’s understandings in particular. People who still believe in the powers of a social demiurge (and be it a secular one such as a class or a ruling elite), whose intentions we would only need to decipher to unravel the mysteries of society, would inevitably appear as naive conspiracy

theorists. Instead, we tend to assume a bewildering plurality of competing understandings in operation. Worse, as we understand the world today this plurality is not only one among different people, but we imagine every single person to harbor a plurality of possibly contradictory understandings. Freud has taught us to be wary of the link between our manifest intentions and our actions. We largely accept his notion of the unconscious. In fact, we assume today that we are making sense of the world simultaneously through a plurality of means possibly yielding ambiguous or even contradictory understandings, some of which we are aware of while others operate silently in the background. And just to complicate this complex picture even further, already Vico and Herder pointed out that our understandings are as much the product of institutional arrangements as they are their source. Consequently, linear causal models will have to give way to some form of iterative, reflexive causation. And so the basic framework of hermeneutic social thought as laid out in the last paragraph seems to lose its marvelous coherence and simplicity as quickly as a pointillist painting viewed up close.

Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, a great number of social scientists, and in particular those who label themselves (neo-)institutionalists of the one variety or the other, have for some time now abandoned the notion of understanding as a central focus of their analysis. Instead, many of them have looked to market models with the price mechanism as central decentralized arbiter, as a way to make sense of social orders that seem to emerge from chaotic individual actions.³ And with this perspective they have adopted a rational choice framework as a universal and all-encompassing model of human behavior. Thus, they bypass the very notion of qualitatively differentiated, historically and culturally specific processes of understanding. This situation is not fundamentally altered by the many critics of the use of extreme neoclassical models.⁴ Even though they take into account that choices may be constrained, and that rationality may be bounded, they still work with an optimizing choice model as their basis. Yet others have favored approaches relying on patterns of relationships to comprehend institutions.⁵ And even though their emphasis on relationality is very fruitful

3. The literature is vast, especially among economists, economic historians, and political scientists. Paradigmatically, I should mention here as canonized ancestors Coase 1937 and Hayek (e.g., 1988) as well as among the currently most-noted practitioners: Chandler and Daems 1980; Nelson and Winter 1982; Williamson 1985; Elster 1989; North 1990; and Greif 2006.

4. Among them are neoinstitutionalists in political science, for example, March and Olsen (1989) and Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth (1992). The newer interest in heuristics (Gigerenzer 2000; Kahneman and Tversky 1982) and/or evolutionary psychology, for example by North (2005), simply substitutes one set of seemingly hard-wired psychological mechanisms with another.

5. The signal words here are *embeddedness* and *networks*. Notable exemplars are: Granovetter 1973, 1985; Bearman 1993; Burt 1995; and White 2003.

(and will be emulated in this study), practitioners in this line of work are more typically than not in the thrall of purely structural models as well as of formal modeling and thus an imaginary that sees human action as optimizing choice behavior. Where in this vast literature cognates of understanding play a role (as “beliefs,” “norms,” or “ideology”), they are typically treated as environmental conditions distributing rewards and punishments or as constraints on choice behavior. In other words, current mainstream (neo-) institutionalism has little space for *understandings* in the sense in which the hermeneutic tradition has used that term. I take this to be a fundamental shortcoming of the current literature on institutions. In the face of the admittedly serious challenges to the hermeneutic approach I have just outlined, most newer forms of institutionalism have drained the baby with the bathwater as it were, practicing a social science that has shed what is quintessentially human about life in society. While acknowledging the problems I have just enumerated, I will make a case with this book for a renewed focus on understandings albeit on the basis of an updated model.

Political Epistemology

En route to such a model, I will return to fundamentals, asking the following questions: What is understanding; what does it do; and how does it operate? Are there different modes in which we understand, and if so, how do these interact? Clearly, we have to think again about the relationship between discourse and body. Then, how does understanding take shape in the course of time, how is it influenced by the successes and failures of our own actions, by our memory, our conversations with others, and thus with the different social networks within which we move? What would give us a handle on sorting understandings that matter from those that do not? We will in particular need a way to think through how the understandings of many people shape one another—for the ability to interweave myriad transactions into an encompassing whole is precisely the strength of the price mechanism. How does the process of understanding congeal into something more stable, a form transposable from one context to another, thus enabling learning. Consequently, also: How do such understandings as forms dissolve? Why and under what kinds of circumstances do they lose their operability? How does an understanding “shape” (or “inform,” “structure,” or perhaps even better, “orient”) action, especially if we make room for the fact that we are working with a plurality of possibly contradictory, ambiguous, or insufficient understandings? Then, what is an institution, what does it have to do with actions and their concatenation across time, locations, and possibly large numbers of people? How do institutions stabilize? And turning the tables: How do these institutions possibly shape understandings, creating

the possibility of feedback loops and self-reinforcing dynamics? What about power differentials both in the sense of whose understandings matter or who has the capacity to translate understandings into action? Finally, once a way to reason through this muddle is found in such a way that it could become a method for empirical research, the question still remains, which and whose understandings, which and whose actions, and which institutions can thus be linked?

I see in such questions, as they pertain to our understandings of the social and political world, the outlines of a field of inquiry that may be called political epistemology. Although both components forming this term are rather familiar, their conjunction is uncommon and therefore merits further comment. Unlike the classical philosophical discipline from which it borrows the latter half of its name, political epistemology does not inquire abstractly into the conditions for the possibility of objectively true knowledge. Instead, it investigates how, in an effort to orient themselves in the world, historically, socially, and culturally situated people actually form and interrogate what to them *appears* as valid understanding (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Framing the objective of political epistemology in this way instantaneously reveals its proximity to three principal directions in the social sciences: the various ancestral traditions in the sociology of knowledge (“Marxian” [e.g., 1958a], “Durkheimian” [e.g., 1995], “Mannheimian” [e.g., 1995]); the acronym branded post-Mertonian waves in the sociology of science (i.e., “SSK” [Bloor 1991; Collins 1992], “STS” [e.g., MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999], “ANT” [e.g., Latour 2005]); and Foucault’s and Foucauldian “archaeologies” (Foucault 1972a) and “genealogies” of knowledge (e.g., Foucault 1995, 1978; also Hacking 1995). All three directions can be addressed as variants of “social epistemology” (in contradistinction to the philosophical discipline [Fuller 2002]). Political epistemology draws considerable inspiration from all three, and it is in fact a particular form of social epistemology addressing understandings of the social and political world. Thematically, therefore, it is closest to Mannheim and Foucault with their interest in political knowledges; methodologically, it is closest to the sociology of science with its focus on the ethnography and historical reconstruction of everyday interactions in specific kinds of contexts. Theoretically, it draws freely on all three with further inspiration from Marx, Weber, and Elias’s “classical” institutionalism refracted by Meadian and Wittgensteinian pragmatism and speech act theory. Thus it develops a distinctive, process-oriented analytic focusing on the generation, maintenance, and transformation of peoples’ understandings and their dialectical relations to political institutions. The main thrust of political epistemology is positive, that is, concerned with description and analysis of the real world. Yet this is undertaken at least with the hope that political epistemology would, like its philosophical namesake,

offer normative insights into better ways to institute political knowledge-making.

The “political” in political epistemology indicates in the first instance simply the particular kind of object of knowledge formation. In other words, it indicates that the understandings investigated in this book are developed in relation to those processes, which are commonly designated as political. This includes the regulation of common affairs, especially the more or less contentious articulation of collective intentions and the division of labor in their execution. Put more narrowly, these are matters of governance and state-citizen relationships. However, social epistemologists have repeatedly pointed out that knowledge is political in a much more fundamental sense. If processes of generating and especially of stabilizing understandings always involve other people and institutions, they necessarily take place within webs of power relations. Conversely, understandings are political also because they are, acknowledged or not, constitutive of power-distributing institutions. Foucault (1978; 1980; 1995) has pointedly expressed the conjunction of both directions of influence in his popular “power/knowledge” formula. Yet, closer attention to the processes connecting power and knowledge quickly shows that this relationship is fraught with ironies (Glaeser 2003). Power and knowledge are neither solely the autonomous Socratic antipodes allowing knowledge to speak truth to power, nor are they simply Foucauldian bedfellows augmenting each other. As will become apparent through this study, power holders need to restrain their desire to manipulate the validation of knowledge that is the very source of their might. Their ability to demand and receive recognition of understandings as true knowledge and their possibilities to arrange for corroborating outcomes of situations testing understandings may quickly lead to a detachment between world and understandings. And, against their own instincts, knowledge producers need to become unscrupulous, and ready to act on the basis of always less than perfect concepts and methods, lest their desire to constantly refine and qualify knowledge suffocate any possibility to renew knowledge experientially.

To deal constructively with these ironies I propose, at the end of the introductory chapter, a concept of the political as a particular perspective on the social training its gaze on the nexus between actions and institutions, and of politics as intentional effort to form, maintain, or transform institutions of whatever kind, scale, or scope. Seen in this light, the formation of understandings of the social world for political purposes is common practice. We are all involved in politics, big or small. And its successful pursuit requires us to employ some understandings of the social world in which we live. One could define political epistemology, therefore, as the academic field studying the historically specific political-oriented knowledge-making practices of people and their consequences.

A Sociology of Understanding

This book endeavors to make contributions to the field of political epistemology on two different levels. On the one hand, it argues the fruitfulness of the field and its questions through a set of interrelated empirical case studies as I have outlined them further above. On the other, it develops a theoretical framework, a method to practice it. Picking up on the hermeneutic tradition, the theory resulting from this exercise centers on the term *understanding* rather than *knowledge*, and it might therefore best be called a “sociology of understanding.” Three reasons motivate this shift in terminology.

First, the term *understanding* signals an attempt to move beyond the narrow confines of conscious thought. In the introductory chapter I will therefore conceptualize understanding as a process of orientation that can take place simultaneously in a number of different modes. Each of these produces orientation in a different way. I will distinguish between discursive, emotive, and kinesthetic understandings. This differentiation of various modes of understanding helps us to investigate how they amplify or undermine one another in their orientational capacities, for example, when people feel the world in one way but think about it in another, or how our regular movements through a cityscape support or undermine our opinions.

Second, knowledge is very unlike an object. It cannot be stored away to be retrieved selfsame at a later moment in time. And in whatever way one endeavors to bound a “piece” of it, it never has an existence independent of other such “pieces.” Instead, knowledge is much rather a knowing, an ongoing process of orientation in the world. Even where knowledge pertains to particular facts, for example, that the German verb *verstehen* is typically rendered in English as “to understand,” each time this knowledge is used for a project of translation it stands in a different context, bearing different associations. In ongoing practice the link between the English and the German word becomes ever more qualified, enriched with stories of good uses and bad. But this is to say that it is known differently. If this is so, then knowledge somehow carries with it the traces of its own historicity. More, to possess knowledge means to have the ability to reproduce it in the course of time. The history of its use is the condition for the possibility to remember it in the long run. In chapter 3 I will explore the reasons why this is so in reference to Wittgenstein’s private language argument. The grammatical form of “understanding” as a continuous and a gerund highlights these concerns with processual dynamics. It emphasizes the fact that knowledge is continuously made and remade through repeated use in successive encounters with the world, that is, in action and interaction.

The third reason for the terminological shift from knowledge to understanding is an acute interest in the various degrees to which particular per-

sons “own” or better “inhabit” particular understandings by corresponding to the certainty they carry. “Knowledge” in common parlance indicates in this sense a more specific degree of certainty and at least implied ownership. Yet, I am particularly interested in the movements between various degrees of certainty, for example, from “hunches” to “hypothesis” to “knowledge,” or from implicit background assumption to “pangs of doubt” to “error.” These shifts in the degrees of certainty have serious consequences for the readiness with which people act on the basis of particular understandings and therefore for the stability of the institutions. The erosion of the certainty among party and state functionaries that the GDR’s political leadership knew what they were doing has much to do with the particular trajectory of the events of the fall of 1989.

Finally, the sociology of knowledge has never really made good of the full Vico-Herderian idea to explore the co-constitution between institutions and understandings. For it, knowledge has by and large remained something to be explained by linking it to “social factors.” To be sure, there has been no shortage of critiques pointing to the problems with this unidirectional causal account. Most notably “cultural Marxists” (Althusser 1971; Williams 1977; Castoriadis 1987) have all pointed to the constitutive role of ideology. The attempted revival of the sociology of knowledge on the basis of a synthesis between phenomenology and pragmatism by Berger and Luckmann (1966) has even formulated a dialectical model based on the metabolistic imagery of “externalization” and “internalization.” For the studies of scientific knowledge, Lynch (e.g., 1997) and Latour (1999) have offered fundamental criticisms of this objectivist framework. Accordingly, I will in the course of this study draw on these authors. And yet, the sociology of knowledge, its internal critics included, has been weak in specifying process dynamics through which this dialectic actually does its constituting work. The shift to the term understandings signals in this sense a return to the original promise inherent in the Vico-Herderian initiation of hermeneutic social thought.

Central to my account of what happens in remaking knowledge as well as in changing its degree of certainty and thus its ability to guide action are processes of validation. I will distinguish in the next chapter between a number of different forms of validation, which I will discuss in greater depth in chapter 3. Indeed, I will argue that by setting the stage for action, institutions feed back on understandings via validations. And thus we will have the process dynamics in hand to trace the dialectical relationship between understandings and other kinds of institutions. Even at the cost of sounding opaque at this early stage of the text, here is a full gyration of the dialectical screw: Understandings where certain shape actions that in concatenation with the reaction of others become institutions in repetition. In form of social relationships, and by shaping the likelihood that certain kinds of ac-

tions will fail or succeed, as well as by triggering or suppressing memories, institutions in turn create the environment in which understandings are validated positively or negatively. The understandings thus reproduced with an accrual or diminishment of certainty and possible changes of meaning will make renewed action more or less likely and possibly different. I will explore this dialectic in particular in the second part of chapter 4. That is also where I will investigate in detail the possibilities for this dialectic to descend into circularity and thus eventually producing understandings failing to provide us with meaningful traction for action.

The focus on validations also offers a number of other advantages. In particular it will allow us to comprehend why, especially in the realm of understandings about social life, we are frequently so beholden to the understandings of others. By investigating the difficulty to find simple practical corroborations for complex political understandings, it will become clear why it is hard for us to resist following crowds, and why we tend to regress with our opinions to some standard maintained within the networks of authority figures we respect. Conversely, paying attention to the ways in which the flow of validations is generated will also allow us to identify the conditions for resisting dominant opinion. These insights have clear implications for the kinds of institutions we should cultivate, and those we should be wary of, if we really care about a democratic, open society.

Political epistemology conducted in the mode of the sociology of understanding developed here will also allow me to integrate several different recent perspectives on the deeply cultural processes of state formation (Steinmetz 2002a): Foucault’s interest in the historical emergence and transformation of ideologies and discourses of what governance is, what it is supposed to accomplish, and how it is to be conducted that is what he has called “governmentality” (1991); George Steinmetz’s attention to the understandings of historically situated and career-bound bureaucrats about their work and their role in the formation of different German colonial regimes (2007), and the neo-Foucauldian (e.g., Said 1979; Scott 1998) and science studies concerns (Porter 1996; Carroll 2006) with states’ technologies and practices of knowledge making. What helps in this respect is not only the focus of this study on the secret police officers who are as bureaucrats producers of knowledge, crafting and wielding knowledge machineries, while they are at the same time subject to the educational efforts of a proselytizing state. What allows this integration to succeed is precisely the focus of the theoretical framework of this book on understandings and their formation in different kinds of contexts through various forms of validation. More it is this theoretical framework that allows me to link these three strands of scholarship with recent studies on the transformation of theoretical knowledge into institutional arrangements that is on performativity (MacKenzie

2006; MacKenzie, Munesia, and Siu 2008), which is well understood, of course, but a contemporary strand of hermeneutic social analysis.

Political epistemology analyzes the development of understandings of all participants in a historical process with the help of the same analytic lens. It is as interested in people who in retrospect appear to have had it right as in those who seem to have erred.⁶ After all, even if people in the latter group conceded *today* that they were wrong, they probably believed *then* that they were right. Consequently, the question is rather—for the present as much as for the past—how the various participants came to feel justified, and what precisely it was that might have led some of them to reconsider their understandings. This includes questions about why participants may have ignored signs that might have been identifiable as “early warnings.” Right or wrong, as W. I. Thomas (1928, 572) has reminded us, actual understandings have consequence for actions and thus for the constitution of institutions, or, as he put it with much greater economy (hence known as the “Thomas theorem”): “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

The principle of analytical symmetry must extend into the domain of the moral. Consequently, I do not ask the question, how the Stasi officers may have become “victimizers” and the opposition members their “victims.” Posing the question thus would be ahistorical, because, perverse cases notwithstanding, people who inflict suffering on others, the Stasi officers included, rarely perceive themselves as “victimizers.” Instead, they typically feel that the suffering they have inflicted was fully justified either in the interest of preventing greater harm or as fair punishment. The question that political epistemology must pose is how all participants could come to their respective moral self-evaluations and other evaluations in their own terms, at their time. Accordingly, this study accounts for the ways in which Stasi officers became and remained socialist believers with the help of the same sociology of understanding by which it accounts for the path of the members of the peace and civil rights movement into the opposition. By recurring to the same principles it explains why both sides felt morally justified, even compelled, to do what they did. It will thus become clear what different understandings have to do with travel through different social, cultural, and experiential terrains. The question of who ended up on which side of the political conflict becomes, then, less an issue of character or of static demographic variables and more one of the contingent trajectories through institutional fabrics that are maintained and altered through these journeys.

6. Here I am building on the principle of “symmetry” characterizing the “strong programme” in the sociology of scientific knowledge (Bloor 1991, 7)

PART I

Socialism as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy—The Party's Project

The following two chapters address the project of the party state to establish, maintain, and develop socialism in the GDR. Chapter 1, "From Marx to Conscious Social Transformation," takes a longer historical perspective. It goes back to the very roots of the state socialist project in the writings of those men the party state has self-consciously adopted as "classics": Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. The central narrative line of this chapter follows the historical unfolding of something of a paradox. In spite of Marx's base-superstructure model that analyzes consciousness as an epiphenomenon, the actually existing socialisms of Eastern Europe have attributed central importance to ideology for the formation of socialist institutions. At least for the GDR I can show that the efforts to construct and maintain a socialist consciousness assumed ever-greater importance as a tool of politics. Once it became clear that the rearrangement of ownership structures (i.e., socialization) and work flow (the introduction of collectives), which both combine a politics of articulation with a politics of incentives, did not work as planned, a politics of education moved to the foreground. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the party's understanding of its own project increasingly boiled down to the hope that if only everybody would internalize the teachings of Marxism-Leninism, while sincerely acting in accordance with them, socialism would realize itself in an ever more perfect way because Marxism-Leninism was the only true science of the social that has ever existed. What was required, then, of politics was to make a heroic effort to create a countrywide monolithic intentionality, which meant strengthening the one organization that could actually bring that change about (the party) while enabling it to bring everybody else on board through a systematic program of proselytization. This was seen as all the more important because socialism saw itself entangled in a mortal battle with capitalism. From these self-understandings followed logically, first, a particular kind of ethics that was supposed to compel everybody into relentless self-objectification vis-à-vis that goal of the party state, and

second, a specific form of accounting for errors that carries all the marks of a theodicy. The longer historical breath of this chapter serves also another purpose. It reveals the historical and theoretical roots of central notions of actually existing socialism's self-understanding that have left deep traces in its institutional structure. Once it has become clear what assumptions the party made about the social world, it will also become much more transparent why it wagered its very own survival on the production and policing of monolithic intentionality.

The second chapter, "Aporias of Producing Right Consciousness," provides an overview of the institutional means by which the party state aimed to implement its consciousness-driven model of social transformation. I will in particular point to three prongs of the institutional fabric of the GDR that are important here. There were first the organizational principle of democratic centralism and central planning that operated like fractals through all contexts of organized socialist life. These principles were meant to create for the party the conditions for the possibility of central control while at the same time mobilizing and rallying the population behind its project. From here the party followed basically two strategies of creating a monolithic intentionality. It pursued a politics of education actively proselytizing for the truth of Marxism-Leninism through a wide-ranging, steadily increasing propaganda apparatus. However, the party state understood that for a host of reasons, the machinations of the class enemy abroad being the most important one, propaganda could also fail. More, as the key instrument of politics, propaganda was thought to be especially vulnerable to the ideological attacks of the enemy. Hence an agency was necessary that could address both the consequence of propaganda failure and that could also secure the smooth operation of propaganda itself. That did in fact become one of the central tasks of the secret police (Stasi), especially after fighting espionage became less demanding in practice after the building of the Wall. Moreover, the party institutionalized a comprehensive web of prohibitions of contact with ideas and people and thus again a politics of (dis-)articulation that was meant to buttress its own efforts of forming socialist consciousness. Among the web of prohibitions were travel restrictions, censorship, and the prohibition to form groups or organizations that were independent of the party. The forms of validation I introduced in the last chapter will serve as a handy way to think systematically through the intended effects of these policies.

One important message of chapter 2 is that the secret police was an entirely integral, within its own logic, consequent, and necessary part of the socialist project as it existed in Eastern Europe. Even though the Stasi was the institutional anchor for the aforementioned tasks, which carried with them a particular kind of habitus, it would be easy to show that this habitus, this secret police way of doing things, was in fact permeating all socialist or-

ganizations, just as propaganda and democratic centralism were constitutive parts of the Stasi as an organization. Rather than being an aberration of history, ideological policing was an integral part of the Soviet socialist project. After all, the first socialist secret police, the Bolsheviki's Cheka, was founded within weeks of Red October and quickly began to play a central role in institutionalizing socialism. In many ways, the prevalence of secret policing as a political tool is a consequence of an array of interacting political understandings. A second major intention of this chapter is to isolate aporias of socialist politics, that is, to provide an analysis of how the single-minded pursuit of the goals of the party created unintended consequences that threatened to undermine the attainment of these goals. These aporias pertain especially to the aforementioned key tools of politics of the party: central planning, proselytization, and prohibitions. Each posed a conundrum that the party within its established institutional means could not solve.

PART II

Contingencies and Dynamics of Understanding—The Theory

In the second part of the introduction, I argued that understandings enable agency by providing orientation, direction, coordination, explanation, justification, and legitimation for actions. Since institutions exist in the regularization of flows of interconnected action-reaction sequences I have furthermore argued that studying the stabilization of understandings across all three modes offers a key to analyze the formation, maintenance, and disintegration of institutions. In the introduction I could only hint at the fact that understandings are poorly understood as something like a “base” of institutions, because this way of looking at the social world would overlook the fact that understanding as something we do, and more, something we do in regular ways, means that understandings are institutions themselves. In the following two chapters I will explore the contingent character of understandings as institutions, especially the ways in which they come about in regularized action-reaction effect flows. This will lead us to a set of simple, but I believe powerful, ways to think through the dynamics of understandings and ultimately the dynamics of political institutions.

Chapter 3, “Constituting Understandings through Validations” begins with a *reductio ad absurdum* of individualistic theories of belief as they are manifest, for example, in much of opinion research and social psychology, by revealing their unrealistic ontological presuppositions. Instead I argue that understandings are better analyzed through their constitution within three intersecting contexts. First, because understanding is indissolubly social it must always be analyzed from within the interactions with other persons. In particular the stability of understandings will be shown here in reference to Wittgenstein’s late philosophy as the result of interactions within networks of authority. Second, because particular differentiations and integrations are always building on other understandings they must be analyzed in relationship to these. Emphasis will be placed especially on the fact that these relationships are highly differentiated, qualitatively and quantitatively. Third, since understandings characteristically respond to orientational needs in

the real world, they must be seen in relation to its experience, and even more precisely through the experience of understandings in use. The constituting link is formed for each of these three contexts by one of the three forms of validation I have already briefly discussed in the introduction. Accordingly, most of the chapter will be dedicated to an in-depth phenomenological exploration of recognitions, resonances, and corroborations.

Chapter 4 begins with a synthetic image that will serve as a guiding metaphor for analysis I am about to undertake in parts III, IV, V, and in the conclusion. I will imagine the three forms of validation as constituting a field within which understandings emerge and become actualized. Looking at this field in temporal succession will yield a space that gives rise to the personality of a particular human being. Since this space is open vis-à-vis others, larger social wholes can be imagined as hyperspaces co-constituting each other. The second part of chapter 4 is dedicated to a systematic exploration of the dynamics of validation. The particular goal of this part is the generation of an analytical framework that can be used to track the development of the political understandings of a particular person in the course of time, while remaining expandable to the analysis of the formation of understandings in larger social wholes. I will show in this section how validation feeds back on the conditions of its own production, thus adding to a dialectical way of thinking through the dynamics of social change that I have begun in the introductory chapter with the dialectics between the various modes of understanding. This is a very important step because it allows for an analysis of the ways in which knowledge formation can become circular, with the possibility that there are understandings that feel well validated while they do in fact have no bearing on the world for which they are supposed to offer us orientation and guidance. The question that will be raised at the end is how knowledge making in society ought to be organized to prevent such circularities, which are, as I will argue in the conclusions of this book, a central piece in the puzzle of catastrophic failures of institutional arrangements.

PART III

Becoming Socialist Men— The Stasi Officers

The following two chapters make an attempt to show how men, through the interaction of their experiences, their memories, and the discourses of the people around them, came to adopt socialist understandings.¹ I will show how they came to imagine themselves as communists ready to dedicate their lives to the party's project. The theoretical subtext of both chapters, their emplotment scheme, is formed by the validation space model I presented in the last chapter. At first it may appear hopeless to reconstruct the development of people's political understandings because validations are so much woven into the minutiae of the everyday, often operating below the threshold of consciousness. And yet, combining people's stories with an effort to reconstruct the institutionalized forms of validations they have been subjected to in their work and leisure environments offers a good enough means to reconstruct the development of their political understandings. For the analysis of institutionalized forms of validation it is important to draw on the interviews of several people who have gone through a similar socialization process while also utilizing historical studies, novels, newspapers, films, and virtually anything that promises to convey a glimpse at relevant mundane experiences at a particular moment in time.

Since most of what I will have to say in the following two chapters is based on interviews taken more than a decade after the officers' last day

1. These two chapters in no way aspire to provide a comprehensive history of the Ministry of State Security and its regional and local branches in the GDR. The most complete description of the Stasi in the breadth of its activities is provided by Suckut et al. (1993-). Very helpful is Jens Gieseke's (2000) overview of the full-time staff of the Stasi and its development. Equally useful is Wilfriede Otto's (2000) biography of Erich Mielke, which sheds much light on the Stasi through the lens of its long-term head. An insider's account is provided by a collection of essays about the Stasi's various branches written by former officers themselves (Grimmer et al. 2002b). English-language introductions are provided by Childs and Popplewell (1996) and Koehler (2002).

at work, I will begin chapter 5 with considerations about the historicity of memory and its implications for a historical ethnography such as this one. It will turn out that the validation space model offers useful means to think through perpetually reconstructed memories. The main body of the chapter is then dedicated to a reconstruction of the development of the officers' political understandings and their validation. I will trace their wartime experiences, their postwar schooling in an emergent Cold War context, their involvement in communist youth organizations, their hiring by the secret police, and their work during the late 1950s, '60s, and '70s. I will in particular pay attention to the question of how these various experiences are building on each other in an amplifying or relativizing manner. This narrative tells of boring sleuthing assignments and veritable spy-catcher episodes, of the usual military hazing rituals and the particular socialist twists they have; it reports on the officers' constant worry about people fleeing the GDR and their concomitant relief when finally the Wall went up; and it tells of a completely new set of tasks emerging slowly in the shadow of that Wall: their assignment to control oppositional activities. As a narrative strategy for this chapter I have chosen to allegorize general periods of development through the life story of one individual officer whose biography brings more clearly to the fore what appears important to me. The narrative flow will be broken in regular intervals by episodes from other people's lives to show more of the diversity of experiences.

While chapter 5 unfolds as a straightforward historical-biographical narrative, chapter 6 proceeds along an analytical logic, exploring how the officers' validation spaces came to be structured by the organization and culture of the Stasi. Three main themes will find particular consideration in this context. I will first investigate the meta-understandings that shaped the officers' attribution of authority. Three sources of authority are particularly prevalent in the officer's stories: antifascist credentials, self-objectification toward the party's goals, as well as professional expertise. In reference to a concrete case study, I will show that in cases of conflict, self-objectification dominated the other two. The development of the officers' networks of authority is the second important theme of the chapter. I will show that they became ever more narrowly focused on people who were, like them, dedicated to the socialist project and even more narrowly on other members of the secret police. Security restrictions on contact, long work hours, and the distribution of apartments and vacation spots through work are chiefly responsible for a situation in which the Stasi reproduced itself. The chapter aspires to make plausible why, in 1989, the vast majority of the new class entering the secret police academy came from Stasi families. The third main theme of the chapter is the discursive culture of Stasi, both in its formal and informal dimensions. This

includes an analysis of bureaucratic strategies of communication as well as an inquiry about to whom the officers could talk about problems, issues, and questions they had. I am particularly interested in the principles that separated the sayable from the unsayable and ultimately the thinkable from the unthinkable.

PART IV

Disenchantment, Disengagement, Opposition—The Dissidents

I have to introduce this part of the book with a caveat. Just as the last two chapters have not aspired to present a comprehensive history of the GDR's Ministry of State Security, so the following two chapters make no pretense of telling an encompassing history of the peace and civil rights movements in the GDR, or even in the more limited space of Berlin. Such an endeavor would explode the possibilities and the intentions of this book.¹ Instead, I will allegorize in individual life stories the dynamics of the political understandings of GDR citizens, who have come to oppose the state, providing initial guidance and inspiration for the citizen movements (*Bürgerbewegungen*) in the fall of 1989. For the ensuing narrative I needed to focus on a few groups in Berlin (albeit some of the most prominent ones), and even within them I needed to focus on a handful of individuals. Moreover, resistance to the state comes in many shades and gradations, ranging from the refusal to attend to the party state's propaganda, the sourcing of information from non-state-sponsored sources, or the avoidance of participation in large propaganda events, to the casting of an invalid ballot at election time, the spraying of a party-critical slogan at a wall, and the participation in actions of a civil rights group. And even though the focus of the analysis in this book is on movement activists, that is, on people who have gone much further in their resistance than the vast majority of the citizens of the GDR would have ever been ready to go, the dynamics of their trajectory can tell us something about a broad variety of resistance behavior, because they did not become sponsors of samizdat publications over night. Instead, it was what the movement members have consistently called "a slow process" that led some people to go

1. For overview studies, see Torpey (1995), Joppke (1995), Choi (1999), and most comprehensively, Neubert (1998). Wolfgang Rüdtenklau's early account of the Berlin scene is still very worthwhile reading (1992). Useful collections of individual perspectives are provided by Deutscher Bundestag (1995); Poppe, Eckert, and Kowalcuk (1995); Gehrke and Rüdtenklau (1999); and Neubert and Eisenfeld (2001).

ever further, while others stalled or changed course. The logic of that trajectory, if analyzed with the help of validation space model, reveals the coemergence of political understandings of networks of authority and of events. Following this trajectory shows how dissidence is only poorly understood as a rational clash of preexisting opinions or even ideologies. Rather than being a cause of dissident action, well-articulated dissident understandings are the result of a journey that often takes its departure from deeply embodied experiences, from emerging kinesthetic and emotive understandings rather than from discursive ones.

Analyzing how such a trajectory crystallizes out of the contingent mess of history within the institutional fabric of GDR society is also important because GDR dissidents come from the most diverse backgrounds, stretching the full gamut from families fully dedicated to the socialist project to others that have always kept their distance to SED rule, nurturing a spirit of opposition at least within the perimeter of their home. What they share primarily is not a range of values over some demographic variables that, locked into a model, could together "explain" the variance of a "dependent variable" called "dissidence." Instead, what is common to them is the dynamics of understanding that propelled them through a long series of events in the context of changing networks of authority from diverse starting points into the same direction.

Chapter 7 focuses on the earlier parts of these trajectories from school experiences up to the moment when people began to form discussion circles while trying to organize critically engaging programming in official performance venues—that is, the so-called cultural opposition. Chapter 8 continues this thread with the formation of peace groups, their cooperation with church parishes, and therefore their access to vital resources of the Protestant church. These resources included assembly halls, duplication equipment, and organizational capacities that enabled at first more regional but then ever more encompassing countrywide intergroup networks. Finally, it accounts for the groups' growing attention to civil rights issues and the foundation of samizdat publications reaching a larger, more geographically dispersed audience. I will show in the end how the group's life, its oscillation between the politics of public action and the self-politics of group and network formation, led to the emergence of a small but active civil society. This also sheds light on the usefulness of the validation space model to analyze the emergence (and by the same token the dissolution) of public spheres.

PART V

Policing Understandings— Reproducing Misunderstandings

The following chapter describes and analyzes the means used by the secret police to control the formation of dissident groups and their activities. In keeping within the questions posed by political epistemology while using the methods provided by the sociology of understanding, I will interpret these efforts of the Stasi as a particular form of politics undertaken with the intention to prevent, hinder, or undo the formation of party-critical institutions. These efforts were oriented and directed by the party state's political understandings about how dissident activities come about. Taken together, these understandings form a theory that sees dissidence as an elaborate scheme of the class enemy in the West to undermine the GDR. In keeping with its major component parts marked by the Stasi's own acronyms I will refer to this body of understandings as "PID/PUT/'opposition'" theory. The first part of the chapter is devoted to the exploration of this theory and its institutionalization in rules and regulations as well as in actual practices. I will then explore how this theory acquired credibility among party officials and Stasi officers within the international context in which it was developed and the first cases to which it was applied.

In the second major section of the chapter I will investigate the methods of intervention inspired by this theory to control dissident thought and action. These methods formed part of a repertoire available to the Stasi for their bureaucratic "case work." I will discuss the rules and regulations governing the circumstances under which cases could be opened, how they were supposed to be conducted, and how they could be closed. I will pay particular attention to the method of "decomposition" that aimed to prevent the formation of dissidence by altering the self and other perceptions of activists, by "organizing failures," by spreading rumors to sow distrust among groups or individual movement participants, and so on. The sociology of understanding will prove useful to evaluate under which circumstances the method of decomposition had greater or lesser chances to succeed.

The final main section of the chapter will address the fact that the Stasi

perceived and acted upon the world predominantly with the help of part-time secret informants specially recruited for this purpose. Not surprisingly this created a host of principal-agent problems. The full-time agents of the secret police had to find, motivate, and instruct suitable part-timers to gather the information needed while inducing them to engage only in actions the Stasi deemed acceptable. Analyzing the relationship between the Stasi's guidance officers and their informants will finally lead back to the fundamental issue of this book, the question of how socialism produced knowledge about itself and how this knowledge informed actions to maintain its institutional order, that is, in the language of political epistemology, to engage in self-politics. Building on chapters 7 and 8 I will show in particular how the application of PID/PUT/"opposition" theory systematically misconstrued the phenomenon of dissidence, thus depriving the party of insights into its failed policies.