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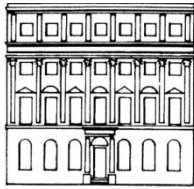
BULLETIN

RESPONSE TO THOMAS LINDENBERGER

Mary Fulbrook

What is 'normal'? Clearly there is no absolute standard of 'normality' in the social, cultural, and political world: any historian is interested precisely in variation and change.

So why does use of the term 'normalisation' as an analytic concept throw so many otherwise intelligent academics into such a state of confusion? Many simply think of the word 'normal', and apply this as though historians and those whom they study should understand the word in exactly the same way; they then start to protest that there is no way that life in the enclosed GDR, part of a divided nation, could conceivably be viewed as in any sense 'normal'. Of course this is not the way I intended use of the analytic concept of 'normalisation', as I thought I had repeatedly made clear. But now even Thomas Lindenberger, whose contributions I always value—perceptive, inquiring, stimulating—seems also to have at least partially misunderstood the way I propose using this term. Let me briefly recap.

Like so many other words that historians use in a specialist sense, the concept of 'normalisation' also has 'ordinary language' usages, varying in diverse settings. Thus for example many West Germans—'Aryans' who saw themselves as victims of air raids, as refugees and expellees, as former soldiers who had suffered in prisoner of war camps, as a community of the bereaved and the occupied—spoke of a 'return to normality' in the 1950s; a sense that could not be shared by traumatized survivors of Nazi persecution now scattered across the world. Soviet leaders also used the notion of 'normalisation', but from a very different social and political perspective: following periodic upheavals in eastern Europe in 1956 (Hungary, Poland), 1968 (Czechoslovakia), 1970 and 1980–1 (Poland), it related to the re-imposition of Soviet control and the 'social pacification' of unruly populations through what widely became known as 'goulash communism'.

It has even been used in reference to far more short-lived and by any standards extreme circumstances: as, for example, the brief period of somewhat under two years, from the spring of 1940 to the win-

ter of 1941–2, when Jews under Nazi occupation in Eastern Upper Silesia had got through the first weeks of terror following the German invasion, and settled into new routines under civilian administration. Thinking that the new system of expropriation, exploitation, segregation, forced labour, and reduced rations was as bad as it would get, many sought to devise means of 'normalising' the situation and living through it—only to find that questions of survival were to mean something radically different once the 'final solution' displaced colonial racism in the Nazi hierarchy of ideologically driven priorities.[1] This is a brief and horrendous moment: but the point is the comparison with a 'before' and an 'after'.

I use these examples *not*, as Lindenberger has misunderstood it, to show that there was a 'third variant' in the GDR in the 1960s and 1970s, but rather precisely to highlight how these and many other cases could be viewed against a concept defined in more abstract terms at three levels: a stabilization of social and political conditions following a period of challenges, upheaval, and potentially radical change; a sense that routine was once again setting in, that the future was relatively predictable (whether or not mistakenly); and an imposition of a framework of dominant norms (to which one could conform or against which one could rebel, but with predictable sanctions and consequences in each case). Thus, I sought to devise a Weberian 'ideal type' that does not remain at the anthropological level of contemporary discourse, nor at the political science level of structures and institutions, but seeks to highlight the interconnectedness of structures and patterns of subjectivity.

In a general theoretical sense, 'normalisation' is no different in principle from concepts such as 'revolution', allowing us to select cases to compare and contrast—for example, 1789, 1917, 1989—without collapsing or equating these instances of radical challenges and rapid changes in the social and political order. I do not, incidentally, accept Lindenberger's rather reductive representation of Weber's notion of ideal types; nor do I entirely accept Weber's methodology in any event, though to head off down that particular theoretical avenue would not be in place here.

To repeat what I have written so many times: there is, in principle, no such thing as 'a normal state', or a 'perfectly normal life'; there

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[1] Discussed further in my book, *Ordinary Nazis: Reflections on Memory, Terror and a Small Town in Poland* (Oxford, forthcoming 2012).

are, rather, constructions of these, by contemporaries in different positions both at the time and in retrospect. A significant task for historians is not (or not only) to redescribe the world in contemporaries' terms, but to understand how subjective perceptions and lived experiences were not only possible within certain historical circumstances, but indeed also variously sustained, reproduced, and challenged such circumstances and hence contributed to historical change.

So the ideal type is a template against which the history of any place, any period, can potentially be examined. In applying it to the GDR, it rapidly becomes evident that, compared with the 1950s or, indeed, any time since 1914, the two decades of the 1960s and 1970s were relatively stable: one needs only mention détente, *Ostpolitik* and international recognition, and a modest sense of the possibility of socio-economic improvements, to recognize the distinctiveness of this period in contrast to what had come before, and in contrast to the economic and environmental decline, the domestic political challenges, and the renewed Cold War tensions of the 1980s. Nor was there the rapid and unpredictable turnover of personnel, as far as both the economy and the functionary system of rule were concerned, so characteristic of the period before the construction of the Berlin Wall; or the rising sense of frustration with the Honecker gerontocracy and growing desire even among formerly committed SED members to explore change during the Gorbachev era. My characterization of relative stabilization and routinization in the middle decades of the GDR is thus not, as Lindenberger suggests, predicated on research on functionaries in other Eastern European states, interesting though such comparisons may prove to be; it is rooted in a view of twentieth-century Germany as a whole, in which people had lived through what Hobsbawm dubbed an 'age of extremes'; in this perspective, the 1960s and 1970s do indeed stand out as at least somewhat different. So far, so obvious (or at least so I had thought).

Through what other conceptual lenses could one view this period? There are many different ways, and different potential periodizations, depending on the focus of interest. But the abstract notion of 'normalisation'—which is, I repeat, not an empirical description but rather a theoretical construction—precisely asks us to explore the links, in different areas, between external parameters, domestic arrangements, and people's subjective views and assumptions, bear-

ing in mind the differences in experience and frameworks of perception of people from different backgrounds and generations. The significance of the Wall and the West, the introduction of conscription, or the increasing involvement of women in the workplace, for example, were not the same for people born in 1929 as for those born in 1949.

The real difficulties come with exploring different facets in detail. I am glad Lindenberger awards high marks to at least some of the contributors to my edited volume for wrestling explicitly with the questions suggested by this concept. And of course, as Lindenberger also points out, a *Sammelband* based on a conference is not necessarily the place to find contributions all running towards similar conclusions: indeed, this volume was precisely designed to stimulate debate and elicit a diversity of responses.

Given that Lindenberger devotes some time to it, I should perhaps add that I never intended my own modest substantive contribution to this volume, summarizing the results of a small survey, to displace the more comprehensive research that would be required for a fuller exploration.[2] I even explicitly highlighted the methodological limitations (pp. 284–5, n.12), although I do not agree that hybrid interview methods are intrinsically characterized by 'inherent weaknesses'; they do have their uses. The survey specifically phrased questions in terms of concepts emerging from a pilot study, including not only the claim to have lived 'a perfectly normal life' but also, for example, comments about 'warm interpersonal relationships', precisely to gain some sense of the relative prevalence and resonance of such catchphrases among people of different backgrounds (hardly a populist agenda; equally, I think it important to hear the self-representations not only of 'victims' but also of 'perpetrators', and all the ambiguous shades between, when exploring Nazi Germany). For all its limitations, I do think the patterns revealed by this survey are suggestive; certainly worthy of further exploration. Hence my decision to report on it—but I certainly never considered it a comprehensive 'practical application of the concept' of normalization, as Lindenberger suggests.

Lindenberger goes on to agree with Rubin's critique of what the latter dubs the 'Fulbrookians' (though not all those whom Rubin

[2] Although not centrally concerned with normalization, I touch further on these issues in my book, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford, 2011).

includes are, in fact, former students of mine, and not all students of mine are listed, or, indeed, follow my own approach). Here again, I have to enter some reservations. Flattering though the general label is, Rubin will have to revise the details: I do not recognize my own approach in the 'Fulbrookian' straw man he constructs (*Synthetic Socialism,* 'Introduction'). Curiously, despite footnoting a couple of my books (*Anatomy of a Dictatorship* and *The People's State*), Rubin does not actually refer to my own work in his selective pastiche of 'Fulbrookians'. So in the interests of clarity, let me reiterate: contra Rubin's caricature, I do not posit some '"normal" society' (*SS*, p. 6, also p. 8); I do not restrict my research materials to 'internal party memos and other government sources' thus allegedly replicating 'the kind of top-down analyses' that I 'claim to reject' (*SS*, p. 6); there is absolutely no way that I 'would have us believe' that East German society was 'autonomous' (*SS*, p. 7, also p. 9); and, indeed, had Rubin actually engaged with my own books and articles, he would know that my notions of a 'participatory dictatorship' and a 'honeycomb state' were designed precisely to overcome this kind of dichotomous approach, which I have long critiqued; finally, I have never sought to argue that East German society was in some unexamined sense 'normal' (*SS*, p. 8). Rubin is thus simply wrong in his portrayal of my concept of normalization, my selection of sources, and my wider understanding of social and political processes in the GDR, where I explicitly argue against notions implying a strict separation of 'state and society'. So I am sorry that Lindenberger aligns himself with Rubin's critique, since the latter is so wide of the mark and so far below the intellectual standards of Lindenberger's own more perceptive comments. We have indeed travelled a long way beyond Rubin's simplistic representation of the theoretical landscape—although his own substantive interpretation of the significance of plastics, in fact, ironically builds on precisely the kinds of recent approach, including my own, that he decries, and uses similar materials (including *Eingaben*) that I have myself been using for many years.[3]

Like all ideal types, then, the notion of 'normalisation' is a concept designed for heuristic purposes. It is not intended to summarize the GDR in the 1960s and 1970s, let alone the whole of GDR history (as frequently misunderstood). 'Normalisation' is an inherently relative

[3] This is the more positive aspect of Rubin's work which I chose to highlight in my review in the *American Historical Review* (Dec. 2010), 1549–50.

concept embodying a sense of process and change. It compares in the light of a disruptive 'before', focusing on an always precarious and inherently transient attainment of relative stability. It directs attention to ways of 'coming to terms with the present', and to norms which may appear as 'second nature', or may be self-evidently new and imposed, but in terms of which people have to negotiate their conduct. These may be dominant 'on the ground' (hegemonic postwar West German discourses) or among ruling political elites (hegemonic post-upheaval Soviet discourses); they may be passing, tragically mistaken, among oppressed groups (Jews of Eastern Upper Silesia, 1940–1) or relatively long-lived and rooted in a sense of gradual and ordered change (Britain since the 1950s?). The concept also prompts queries as to how such norms may be internalized, such that, for some people most of the time, and for most people some of the time, the world thus ordered may begin to appear 'normal': think here, for example, of the radical changes in assumptions about gender roles over the period since the Second World War; or of whether it is a clear sign of 'abnormality' for a bourgeois German male to walk around Berlin without wearing a hat (the case before the First World War).[4]

All of this is not just a parochial spat: it is, indeed, only interesting in virtue of the wider issues it raises about the uses of abstract concepts, and its significance for interpretations of GDR history. We have (mostly) moved beyond the politically entrenched theoretical alternatives of the early 1990s towards widespread recognition of the complexity of people's simultaneous involvement in and self-distancing from the circumstances and structures which inevitably constrain and partially constitute their lives. I am no more committed to the ideal type of 'normalisation' than to any other historical concept; if based on plausible premises and highlighting significant issues, concepts are useful insofar as they suggest interesting questions, prompt us to look at things from different perspectives, and stimulate productive debate and fruitful research. In this, I believe the notion of 'normalisation'—for all the misunderstandings along the way—has succeeded. I am glad, then, that Lindenberger ultimately

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[4] This is not far-fetched: I refer here to a 1917 court case against Hans Paasche, in which not wearing a hat provided useful evidence for his alleged 'insanity', as did wearing shorts and sandals, or turning up to a dinner party on a bicycle; discussed further in *Dissonant Lives*.

deems it a 'risky conceptual proposition', and this 'in the best sense of the term'. I do not myself think the substantive questions have as yet been satisfactorily resolved; nor have the last theoretical words yet been said. Whether Lindenberger's appeal to Goffman and Foucault—about both of whom I have reservations—could be any more helpful than pointing to Bourdieu, or, indeed, anyone else remains a moot point. But the current state of the GDR historiographical landscape is certainly a great deal more interesting and productive than it might have been had we stayed on the previously well-beaten tracks of totalitarianism and repression theories.

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