

## **Cautious Occupiers and Restraint Bureaucrats: Schwarzwohnen in the German Democratic Republic. Somewhat Different from Squatting**

### **Abstract**

*Throughout the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), thousands of East Germans lived in flats occupied without state permission. What factors enabled and what practices shaped both the emergence and the persistence of informal housing in an Eastern European dictatorship? The socialist authorities did not tolerate informality, but contrary to the totalitarian rhetoric of state and party officials, local bureaucrats endeavoured to transform the grey zone of unauthorised housing dubbed 'Schwarzwohnen' into black (illegal) or white (legal). The high frequency of legalisation highlights the relative autonomy of these 'social gatekeepers'. A partial identity of interests between informal occupiers of flats (Schwarzwohner) and the state led to the blurring of boundaries between formal and informal practices. A substantial proportion of Schwarzwohner, however, had little or no contact with authorities, which is indicative of a partly dysfunctional dictatorship. At the same time, Schwarzwohnen developed several unique features different from the squatting of buildings in the Global North-West and from informal settlements in the Global South, most notably a far-reaching compliance with the law which sometimes included unsolicited rent payments. In addition, Schwarzwohner used specific tactics to achieve legalisation, such as 'consentful contention'. The effect of the informality was ambiguous, as it undermined the state's authority but alleviated the housing shortage and thus (unintentionally) stabilised the state at the same time. Schwarzwohnen vanished with the GDR but has been partly revitalised by the 'Guardian House' scheme in several East German cities.*

Key words: informal housing, unauthorised housing, self-help housing, squatting, Germany

## 1. The emergence of a grey zone: What factors made Schwarzwohnen possible?

The East German state that existed between 1949 and 1990 was a dictatorship which claimed the sole right to allocate living space. There was no free housing market; before being able to establish a tenancy agreement, a would-be tenant needed housing allocation. Any unauthorised occupation of flats was considered an offence. At the same time, the state was unable to alleviate the persistent scarcity of housing. In light of this, bureaucrats prioritised those social groups with the greatest needs, as well as those which were urgently needed by the state, such as professionals or security personnel. By contrast, single citizens, particularly students and apprentices, but also couples without children, divorcees and pensioners had little chance of obtaining a flat. A prominent example is that of the current chancellor, Angela Merkel, who occupied a flat informally after her divorce in 1981 (Boysen, 2001: 55).

The East German version of unauthorised housing, dubbed 'Schwarzwohnen' (literally 'black living', similar to 'Schwarzarbeit', 'work on the side') or 'Wohnungsbesetzung' (literally 'occupation of a flat') emerged by the end of the 1960s at the same time as the construction of large estates of prefabricated houses at the periphery of socialist cities (Grashoff, 2011). As a side effect of the availability of newly built living space, old flats became vacant. These flats were often in need of repair, but this was neither affordable nor viable. A rent freeze implemented in Nazi Germany in 1936, which continued until 1990, as well as restrictions caused by the planned economy, which prevented owners from procuring building materials legally, made restoration of buildings almost impossible. In this way, the state unintentionally created the possibility space for Schwarzwohnen. As the housing construction programme progressed, more and more older flats became abandoned. By 1990, approximately 400,000 flats were empty (Pfeiffer et al., 2000). Scattered statistics from East Berlin suggest parallel trends of vacancy and covert occupation. This is notable, as these figures were produced during administrative attempts to eradicate unauthorised housing. There is reason to believe that immediately after these campaigns only a few informally occupied flats remained in

the districts concerned. However, within less than a decade the number of occupied flats had again more than doubled, despite administrative efforts to handle the problem. Schwarzwohnen occurred in various East German towns such as Dresden, Jena, Leipzig and Rostock, and persisted until 1990.

During the last years of the GDR, the exodus of tens of thousands of East Germans increased the number of vacant flats even further, and provided opportunities for Schwarzwohner to move from substandard accommodation to good middle-class housing. And in the end, the collapse of the GDR brought a final and unprecedented rise in squatting. It is important to note, however, that Schwarzwohnen did not directly contribute to the GDR's decline. It is better viewed as an opportunistic act by citizens taking advantage of the progressing internal destabilisation of the communist regime.

Informal housing has left few traces behind. In addition to scattered archival evidence, the present research gains many of its insights from interviews (with 32 occupiers and one former member of staff), a few published reports and interviews, and private documents. Several interrelated factors that generated the grey zone of informal housing will be discussed in the first section of this article. While systematic neglect of old housing stock created the possibility space for Schwarzwohnen, it was a certain myopia on the part of the state that facilitated Schwarzwohnen practices. A lack of administrative coordination and lax handling of notices of departure resulted in long periods of vacancy and gaps in knowledge regarding occupancy. An increasing proportion of vacant flats were not registered. In Halle (Saale), for instance, local authorities hired one assistant to review the occupancy of dozens of flats with indeterminate status. In Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district, the housing department put a team of five employees together to verify more than a thousand unresolved occupancies. Both actions took place in the late 1980s. And in both cases, these campaigns failed to eliminate informal housing. In other towns, systematic inspection of the housing stock hardly ever took place. A comprehensive inspection in East Berlin in 1978 was an exception (Grashoff, 2011: 17). If Schwarzwohner were traced, in most cases it was by accident. Authorities did not have the capacity to control and monitor

the housing stock effectively. This was mainly a result of structural deficiencies (Mitchell, 2017: 292). Often, employees were poorly trained and struggled to cope with the extent of the housing shortage. They worked hard in order to sort out at least the worst problems, but even so hundreds of frustrated people lined the corridors of the housing offices. Due to the unattractive nature of the job there was a high turnover of staff. In this situation, the bureaucrats' zeal to trace informal occupants was limited.

But the grey zone of unauthorised housing was also the result of an adjustment in the behaviour of the actors involved. The appearance of Schwarzwohnen was unobtrusive from the very beginning. Often, occupations began inconspicuously so as to keep up a pretence of normality. Some would-be occupants disguised themselves as workmen when opening apartment doors. Others put nameplates on the door and waited for two weeks or so in order to make sure that the flat was indeed empty. When other tenants approached, the occupants pretended to have state permission.

Schwarzwohner commonly camouflaged themselves with façades of normality. Unlike West European squatting, where some occupants went as far as living under aliases, Schwarzwohner complied with the registration law in order to avoid criminal prosecution. Registering with the local residents' registration office and signing the housebook was mandatory in the GDR (even if the latter was not always reinforced). Again, it was the dysfunction of the dictatorship that enabled Schwarzwohner to deal with this. The lack of routine coordination of information between housing authorities and the police often made it possible for Schwarzwohner to have new addresses registered to their identity cards. To be on the safe side, some occupants presented a sublease they had made with a friend. Police officers refused registration only in rare cases, for instance if the house was listed as 'closed due to dilapidation'. Similarly, there was no routine communication between the person in charge of the housebook and the housing authorities or the police. Although those in charge of the housebook were often rigorous and law-abiding neighbours who might ask inconvenient questions, it was often possible to dissipate their doubts.

Another factor that facilitated informal housing was its diffuse nature. As a result of occupying flats as opposed to houses, Schwarzwohnen was embedded in the urban context, in contrast to the Global South where many informals are socially stigmatised, exploited or culturally excluded (Bayat, 2000: 539; Perlman, 2004). Informal housing in East Germany had no separate spatial dimension, placing it outside the conceptualisation of 'gray spaces' as 'peripheral, weakened and marginalized spaces' (Yiftachel, 2009: 243). Even in the quarters destined for demolition that became springboards for unauthorised housing in cities such as Leipzig and Halle, Schwarzwohner lived in close contact with regular tenants. They were fully integrated into the urban community, not only in the technical respects of registration, provision of electricity and gas, mail delivery and public transport, but also in terms of professional activity and education.

Most Schwarzwohner did not separate themselves conceptually from their urban context and did not develop a squatter identity. There was no squatting as protest, nor were there public campaigns, nor banners or slogans on façades. There was also no spectacularisation of deviancy. Correspondingly, the permanent stress of surveillance and intimidation that characterises the experience of more politicised squatters in West European cities such as Amsterdam (Owens, 2009; Kadir, 2016) was virtually absent in the GDR. The infamous secret police, the Stasi, and the People's Police monitored Schwarzwohner only occasionally, if at all. They correctly assumed that most informal occupants had no political motivations. Schwarzwohnen was neither organised by groups nor defended in public, in sharp contrast to Western squatters who claimed the 'right to inhabit' as a universal right and mobilised public support in its name.

The apolitical attitude of Schwarzwohner and their caution and restraint might have reflected the repressive potential of the dictatorship. With the failed 1953 uprising prominent in their minds, East Germans knew that forceful public and collective critique of the state would most certainly provoke hard-line repression leading to imprisonment and, in many cases, exile to West Germany later on. However, it is striking that most Schwarzwohner did not feel intimidated by the state and did not shy away from

informal occupation of flats, if in a fragmented and clandestine way. This kind of 'cautious courage' can be argued to have made the East German revolution of 1989 a peaceful one.

The caution and camouflage of informal occupants was matched by restraint on the part of the state. There was little interest in escalating confrontation. This is further corroborated by the following discussion of state-Schwarzwohner interactions.

## 2. Transforming informality: Discretion and limited assertiveness of state intervention

The scarcity of living space was not caused by market forces but by state mismanagement. Accordingly, the dispute was about administrative rights, not about property. Schwarzwohnen was not about *affordable* housing, but the right to housing itself. Distinctly unlike the informal practices in capitalist countries often associated with rent strikes or tax evasion (Corr, 1999), the monetary aspect was irrelevant in the GDR. Rent was cheap, and East German tenants spent less than ten per cent of their income for housing.

In general, socialist authorities considered unauthorised housing to be an attempt to undermine state control. Party officials repeatedly urged local bureaucrats to enforce the law. According to the legislation governing the distribution of housing (Wohnraumlennkungsverordnung), bypassing the state allocation of flats was an administrative offence. When caught, unlicensed occupants had to pay fines, and the housing office would try to have the flat vacated quickly and issue an eviction notice.

However, forced evictions were scarce in the GDR. Scholars who conceptualise the GDR as a totalitarian regime might have expected the state to seek to eradicate Schwarzwohnen with merciless police interventions and fast evictions followed by the arrest of transgressors. Why reality did not match these expectations can be understood using an urban managerialist perspective, focusing on the points of contact between individuals and the state (Pahl, 1975). Much like other street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010), the housing departments of the boroughs had some degree of discretion. The

lynchpin of their dealing with Schwarzwohnen was an assessment of need. Bureaucrats intervened vehemently if the occupied flat was considered too large for one person. In these cases, they would argue that illegal occupation 'blocked' flats urgently needed for families with children, and involved employers and functionaries from mass organisations in adopting a threatening position. More often than not, the mere demonstration of power was sufficient and the police were not urged to put it into practice. In the late 1980s when Schwarzwohnen became more frequent, the state implemented harsher penalties to reinforce the law. If occupants refused to move out, fines of up to 4000 marks were imposed, together with a forced eviction that would be executed with the help of a removal firm and the police.

Principally, however, it was not open confrontation but rather individual negotiation that characterised the regularisation of informal housing. Unlike West European squatting, encounters took place neither in courtrooms nor through media mediation, but exclusively in administrative offices behind closed doors. The fact that the settlement was taking place in low profile areas provided bureaucrats with wide discretion. Random samples reveal that 50 to 83 per cent of Schwarzwohner ultimately obtained the right to stay in the flats they occupied (Grashoff, 2017: 30).

The extent of this legalisation highlights the contradictory nature of the East German 'welfare dictatorship' (Jaraus, 1999). In many cases, the element of 'care' proved to be more important than the element of 'total control'. Notably, the positive outcome of many negotiations was neither a result of official ignorance, nor of intentional toleration of informal housing as practised by authorities in countries such as Egypt (Alsayyad, 1993) and Hong Kong (Smart, 2003). In addition, there was no option of playing different laws against each other as in Beirut (Fawaz, 2016). Governance in the East German dictatorship offered only the alternatives of repression and legalisation.

The limited assertiveness of the administration was partly a consequence of a permanently overburdened bureaucracy unable to meet all needs, but the crucial factor was the presence of legal inconsistencies that tied the authorities' hands. The administrative law and the practice of its enforcement were characterised by

authoritarianism, and the authorities pushed for fast evictions, but the civil code (Zivilgesetzbuch) made enforcement difficult: the communist leaders considered homelessness to be incompatible with socialism. As such, the civil code stated that flats could only be vacated when other living space was available to the occupant.

But the bureaucrats' willingness to make concessions was also indicative of a partial merging of interests between Schwarzwohner and the state. More often than not, legalisation was actually in the authorities' interests where run-down flats could not be allocated and no means to refurbish them were available. Most interesting in this regard is that some housing departments even took semi-legal measures to regularise unauthorised housing. The shortage of staff and resources, and the fact that unauthorised occupation was against the law but to some extent justifiable, led to ad hoc decisions and scattergun approaches. In East Berlin, for instance, some housing departments handled it in a systematic way without any negotiation at all. They sent letters to informal occupants of flats demanding the payment of a moderate fine and offering legalisation at the same time (Grashoff, 2011: 84).

Moreover, some East German housing departments attempted to tap into the informal practices of the Schwarzwohner for their own purposes. Official guidelines allowed for preferential treatment of those who managed to identify vacant flats that could be added to the stock register. This form of cooperation did not always run smoothly, however, as the following example of a family forced to live in a gloomy and damp flat in Halle shows. The family had a child with respiratory problems, and believed that his condition was being aggravated or perhaps caused by the damp conditions of the flat. In order to escape the situation, the young mother identified two empty flats and reported them to the housing office, with disappointing results. One flat was purportedly in a very bad state, and the other was soon given to different people. Four months later, a clerk of the housing office inspected the flat and promised to allocate different accommodation. Unfortunately, the clerk then left her job and her successor was ignorant of the case. Still not discouraged, the mother located a third empty flat and initiated negotiations. After four months, it was decided that this flat could not be



allocated either. As a result, the family then squatted a flat. Half a year later, the mother filed a petition asking for legalisation. Again, this was rejected, but the housing office allocated the family another flat immediately (Grashoff, 2011: 56). This story is on the one hand a vivid example of people in need who turned to informal practices after being repeatedly disappointed by the state. On the other hand, this case also illustrates the fluidity of boundaries between informal and formal practices.

### 3. Strategies of readjustment

The piecemeal fashion of the described decision-making implies that informal housing was entirely managed by the state. But it would be one-sided to construe the regularisation of informality only as a state intervention. Many Schwarzwohner were both willing and determined to legalise the flats in which they lived, and employed a variety of strategies to do so. Frequently, they supported their cause by finding something to offer, and the high number of successful legalisations is indicative of how informal occupants were able to build their negotiation strategies on reciprocity rather than fixed rules. Some referred to sometimes extensive repairs made on their own initiative. A few Schwarzwohner gained the staff's goodwill by giving small gifts. Most notably, many paid rent unsolicitedly. Some occupants gleaned the appropriate amount to pay from payment requests still sent to the address, or from neighbours. Others simply paid an estimate. In many cases the rent was transferred anonymously, which caused huge problems with accounting. In 1985, in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district, the state administration of housing ('Kommunale Wohnungsverwaltung') had to deal with the transferral of more than 30,000 marks of unknown origin (Grashoff, 2011). This corresponded to approximately a thousand rent payments. There was a widespread rumour that a rental contract would come about after tacit rent payments for at least three months. Although this belief was incorrect, as examples of evictions show, it proved to be persistent and reduced the Schwarzwohner's fears to a remarkable extent (Felsmann/Groeschner, 1999: 81).

Most Schwarzwohner considered their informality a minor offence, if a violation of the law at all. There were several reasons for their limited sense of wrongdoing. First of all, there were the abovementioned rent payments. Secondly, the mildness of the punishment supported the interpretation of Schwarzwohnen as a minor offence. The maximum fine of 500 marks was a moderate sum, less than the average monthly net income. In many cases the fine was even lower. Thirdly, the fact that a renovation contract ('Ausbauvertrag') was arranged in some cases blurred the boundaries between informal and formal action. By agreeing to this contract, the employer of the Schwarzwohner committed himself or herself to providing material resources for the refurbishment of the flat, and the informal occupation thus became legal. With the provision of a renovation contract, authorities tacitly condoned informal occupation. Additional justification for Schwarzwohnen could be derived from the perceived gap between propagated social policy and reality in the GDR. Article 26 in the 1949 constitution guaranteed every citizen healthy lodgings that catered for his or her needs. More than two decades later, these promised lodgings had not materialised. Although the Socialist Unity Party (SED) invested great effort and announced that it would solve the housing shortage 'as a social problem' by 1990 (Junker, 1973), the reality was that a housing shortage remained. The constitutional principle was realised only slowly, if at all, but it contributed to the social acceptance of self-help housing. Several Schwarzwohner appealed to the state's commitment to welfare and made the authorities aware of their unacceptable living conditions. In the case of a shift worker in Leipzig, his need proved to be his strongest argument. The man occupied a flat informally because he could no longer bear living in a two-room flat with his former wife and three children after their divorce. The housing office imposed only a small fine and agreed to legalise the flat (Grashoff, 2011: 56).

Often, Schwarzwohner made profitable use of the partial overlap between their and the state's goals using a tactic dubbed 'the arts of consentful contention' (Straughn, 2005). Through petitions, they attempted to exploit the state's commitment to providing housing. Since the 1950s, the resolution of conflicts via an extensive petitioning system

had been an important factor in the inner stabilisation of the GDR. East Germans submitted hundreds of thousands of petitions per year, with complaints about housing the most frequent issue (Betts, 2010: 175). A petition in a dictatorship had to, first and foremost, avoid a direct confrontation with state power. In contrast to squatters in Western democracies who strived to rally as many supporters as possible and to provide strong, politically impactful arguments, and also different to the similar but noisy, aggressive and often collective practice of Chinese peasants dubbed 'rightful resistance' (O'Brien, 1996), in the GDR a cautious, individualised request was always more promising than a resolute collective one. Linking grievances with endorsement of official policy reflected the asymmetric power relations in the dictatorship and allowed the state to act in a paternalistic way, as the following example illustrates.

In autumn 1981, two young couples squatted a flat in the old town centre of Halle (Saale), which had been empty for a long time. Eight weeks later they approached the housing office and asked for legalisation, but to no avail. The fact that this contact did not trigger legal action against the informal occupation is illustrative of the ineffective, at times overburdened nature of the state authority. During the next ten weeks nothing happened. Presumably no action would have been taken at all, were it not for one of the young people becoming involved in an argument with state authorities regarding his employment. During the dispute, his unauthorised dwelling place was discovered. Now, in stark contrast to their previous negligence, the authorities took drastic measures. Staff from the housing administration, together with a policeman, forced the occupiers to leave the flat and sealed the door. It is highly probable that it was the insubordination of the young man rather than the fact of informal action per se that triggered this act. Notably, this was not the end of the story but the beginning of negotiations. The very next day, the couples moved in again and wrote a petition to the mayor of the town. This letter provides a typical example of 'consentful contention': 'We can't imagine that it could be possible in our socialist country to cast young people adrift only because they are using a flat that was empty for years.' (Grashoff, 2017: 27) In order to enforce their argument, the young adults combined the blunt description of their situation with

quotes from party officials suggesting a partial identity of interests. This tactic achieved some success. The housing department in Halle considered parts of the petition to be 'constructive criticism'. Instead of further enforcing the law, the administration applied differentiated criteria to assess the degree of the young adults' need. The older of the two couples obtained permission to renovate a different run-down flat. The other couple, however, had to return to their parents' flats.

Consentful contention is only one example of the ambivalence of Schwarzwohnen, a practice in which subversive and supportive aspects were inextricably linked with each other. Obviously, unauthorised occupation of flats did undermine the authority of the state and challenge its power. But widespread willingness by Schwarzwohner to conform to the law, to pay rent and to renovate their flats at their own expense contributed to the improvement of the housing situation in the long run, ensuring that scarce resources could be used more efficiently. Even if it was unintended, unauthorised action thus helped stabilise the socialist economy to a certain degree. This is an effect which Schwarzwohnen has in common with many other informal practices of the socialist shadow economy (Ledeneva et.al., 2017).

#### 4. Informality beyond state intervention

The willingness of informal occupants to adjust to the state's conditions sat alongside the limited zeal of the housing authorities to enforce the law. A partial identity of interests and a political context conducive to socially acceptable solutions made for relatively good chances for unauthorised housing to become legalised. However, the range of interactions with the state was limited. Quite a few Schwarzwohner never came into conflict with any state authority at all despite living in flats without state permission for years. Occupied flats that did not exist officially (as they were not registered) constituted a parallel universe. The neglect of old building stock offered many chances to shape living space on an individual basis. Rooms were not only used

for living but as rehearsal rooms for bands, artists' studios, unofficial galleries, party rooms or spaces for meditation. Some inhabitants even ran illegal bars and cafés, particularly in the last three years of the GDR's existence. This was also the period of other informal practices of urban youth such as hitchhiking, nudism and wild camping, or, more specific to the urban space, 'Schwarz taxis' (unlicensed taxis). To some extent, informally occupied flats became the breeding grounds of alternative urban milieus (Felsmann/Groeschner, 1999).

Schwarzwohnen provided room for independent initiative in many ways. For example, in 1979 a young couple occupied an 18<sup>th</sup> century building in Halle (Grashoff, 2017: 29). It took two years of tough bargaining to legalise the occupation and a great deal of improvisation to make the house habitable. Friends and relatives lent a hand with building work and the procurement of construction materials usually not available for purchase. A ceiling that came down during the renovation demonstrated that the whole undertaking was not without hazard. But gradually the house revealed its particular charm. The young people discovered parquet flooring, stucco and ceiling paintings and used them in the renovation. Later on, the rear house was reconstructed as well, and four friends moved in. This was only one of the cases, which can be categorised as conservational squatting (Pruit, 2013), in which Schwarzwohner developed communities and assumed an owner's responsibilities. They carried out repairs, established communal spaces and allocated empty flats to like-minded people. This informal appropriation of so-called 'people's property' highlights the remarkable scope of action in an environment characterised by neglect of property and ideologically motivated disdain for private entrepreneurship. At the same time, even in these enclaves of cultural opposition there was rarely an intention to provoke the regime, which would have endangered the occupied space.

Overall, there was no squatting movement in the GDR. This is not to say that there were no informal networks. There was word-of-mouth recommendation disseminated within Christian student congregations, and among artists and friends. Successful occupations attracted workmates and fellow students, who looked for empty flats in the

neighbourhood, identifiable by the absence of curtains. Accordingly, there was a concentration of occupied flats in certain streets. Frequent gatherings at the kitchen table, joint cultural activities and parties created a kind of shared identity in some places. But apart from a few episodes of communal life, Schwarzwohnen was mainly about having a place in which to live independently.

## 5. Conclusion

What can a historical analysis of an informal practice in Eastern Europe offer scholars of urban informality today? First of all, it adds an East-West axis to the North-South dichotomy in informal housing research (Aguilera/Smart, 2016). Schwarzwohnen is akin to Western European squatting of existing buildings; it emerged behind the Iron Curtain almost at the same time as 'Kraken' in the Netherlands and it coincided with the heyday of squatting in London. However, to conceive of informal housing in the East largely as a variant of Western squatting risks underappreciating its singularity and relative independence, and exaggerating its links to urban subcultures. Given the atomisation, unsolicited rent payments and cooperation with housing authorities, and the fact that many Schwarzwohner considered their actions to be something different from squatting, I deem it advisable to assess it as a form of Western squatting only with caution. 'Non-ideological' occupiers in Leningrad, for instance, described themselves as 'not real squatters' (Golova, 2016: 57). In Lithuania, squatting 'was built around an "apolitical" identity', too (Aidukaite, 2016: 78).

The emergence of Western-style squatting in several Eastern European countries after 1989 is indicative of the potential of Schwarzwohnen to be transformed into 'real squatting', as is the fact that some covertly occupied places in East Germany became squatted houses during reunification in 1990. But there can be no doubt that the context of a communist dictatorship made Schwarzwohnen a unique informal practice, one which only partly matches the Western notion of squatting.

Facilitated by an unintentional blindness from the state, Schwarzwohnen was a diffuse and individualised action. It was largely apolitical. Its financial aspects were irrelevant. Disputes with authorities were not over property but administrative rights. The confrontation was not antagonistic but restrained, with consentful contention a typical practice. Whereas Western European squatting was and is often framed as a social movement and as protest against capitalism, at least by social activists and researchers (Cattaneo/Lopez, 2014; Vasudevan 2015), informal housing in the GDR did not have any public representation and appeared almost exclusively as a practical measure for tackling the housing shortage. Unlike squatting in other authoritarian contexts such as Franco's Spain (Ofer, 2016), Schwarzwohnen was not an act of resistance at all. Informal occupants of flats in the GDR did not frame their actions as criticism of the socialist housing policy, despite the obvious mismanagement of flats leading to a high vacancy rate, and the concurrent continuation of the housing shortage. Schwarzwohnen was characterised by a high degree of rule-following and willingness to formalise. Many Schwarzwohner considered the formal to be not the opposite of the informal but the end goal they envisioned. While this latter statement is true for many squatters in the Global South as well (Klaufus/Ouweneel, 2015), the willingness of many East Germans to comply with the law shortly after occupation is unusual for informals. The law-abiding attitude of many Schwarzwohner is a pronounced example of 'nomotropism' (Chiodelli/Moroni, 2014), a notion which conceptualises the dynamic aspect of unauthorised action aimed at compliance. By analogy with the geotropism of plants, which characterises growth in terms of response to the force of gravity, the concept of nomotropism highlights the orientation of informality towards conformity with the law. Particularly in its initial stages, the atomised and silent action of Schwarzwohner resembled 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary' observed in another authoritarian context in the Middle East (Bayat, 2000). However, there are fundamental differences. Where in the Middle East informals occasionally engaged in collective action in the public space in defence of their gains, this was impossible in the East German dictatorship. Schwarzwohnen was more embedded and more prone to conformity.

Moreover, it did not come at any cost to the state or to private owners, and removed hardly any resources from the socialist economy. Rather, it created new living space that had previously been unavailable.

Three additional aspects might be worth considering. Firstly, Schwarzwohnen was a positive experience for many East Germans. Although several interviewees compared their living in dilapidated houses with slums and favelas, they still proudly remembered it as an experience of self-empowerment. Their occupation of living space in old buildings was a tacit refusal of the state leaders' modernist planning, as characterised by the destruction and neglect of older housing stock. Occupation saved many older residential houses from decay. This historical East German example highlights the positive aspects of informality, such as freedom of action and sustainability of self-help. Self-sustained development of informal settlements might be considered a more humane solution than demolition and resettlement in apartment blocks in other contexts as well.

Secondly, the partial identity of interests between housing authorities and covert occupants is not restricted to communist dictatorships but exists around the globe. The constitutional right to adequate housing, for example, is not a unique feature of communist states but can be found in various countries including Ecuador, France, Iran, Portugal, Mexico, Russia and South Africa (UN-Habitat, 2002: 37). Schwarzwohnen provides an example showing that abstention from total enforcement of the letter of the law and acceptance of semi-legal deals can be beneficial to both conflicting parties. The pragmatism that evolved in the context of contradictory regulations underlines Gilbert's statement that 'informalization is not always a problematic development'. Similar to what he observed in the Global South, those involved in Schwarzwohnen would be living in 'worse housing were it not for that informality' (Gilbert, 2004: 41).

Finally, although Schwarzwohnen disappeared in 1990, it has a legacy. After the collapse of the GDR, it was either transformed into Western-style squatting or eradicated by police action protecting property rights in the new capitalist context. But this was not the absolute end. Since 2004, dozens of run-down houses have been declared



'Waechterhaeuser' (Guardian Houses) in several East German towns (Garcia-Zamor, 2014: 10). It is no coincidence that this new form of licensed squatting was created in Leipzig, a former stronghold of Schwarzwohnen. The pragmatic cooperation of East German municipalities and the 'Haushalten' registered association keeps the spirit of this informal practice alive in the face of a changing political context.

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