"Where were you on November 9, 1989, when the Wall fell?" Outside of Germany, I have been asked no other question more often than this one in the last ten years. If I were to divide all the events in which I have participated on the basis of this question, there would be only a few at which it did not come up.

This question is a phenomenon. What is most striking about this phenomenon is that it is no longer surprising. For no other question seems to suggest itself more naturally concerning East Germans over the age of forty than this one. In an unpretentious way, this question links world events to personal life, and perhaps it might even generate a story. The question assumes that those asked remember what they were doing and thinking on that evening, that night, the next morning, as well as where they were and who they were with. And it is also a question that allows inquirers to demonstrate a certain basic knowledge and, at the same time, to demonstrate kindness: after all, it offers Germans the rare opportunity to speak light-heartedly — indeed, joyfully and proudly — about their own history.

I would argue, however, that the question also reflects a particular historical understanding of the Fall of the Berlin Wall. And this understanding seems to be a paradox. On the one hand, there is hardly anyone who does not think of this date as a rupture. In the consciousness of Europeans and probably almost all nations, the Fall of the Wall marked the end of the Cold War. November 9, 1989, spelled the end of an era that had been defined by the end of the Second World War. On the other hand, the Fall of the Wall is degraded to an episode, to a pleasant experience that affected Eastern Europe and brought the countries behind the Iron Curtain back into the civilized world — a good story that has nothing, or very little, to do with the Here and Now.

To put it another way: It is best to illustrate a presentation on the fall of 1989 and its consequences with Trabi cars, debris from the Wall, German flags, or bananas rather than with Lehmann Brothers, African refugees or the Occupy Movement. I speak of the fall of 1989 because
October 3, 1990, the date of German unification, does not stir much in me — and possibly not just in me. And this is not only because no one ever asked me where I was on October 3, 1990. I remember that we stayed up until midnight. There was a sort of New Year’s Eve atmosphere, just more subdued. And when the clock struck midnight, I knew even less than on New Year’s Eve how I was supposed to feel. The category of the “national” had not played a role in my life up to that point. No, that’s not true, it had played a dubious role. I found it strange and suspicious. Moreover, in the fall of 1989, I had wanted, had longed for something other than the old Federal Republic.

There is only one reason why October 3, 1990, was selected as the day of the German Democratic Republic’s accession to the Federal Republic: it was the last Saturday before the October 7, the national holiday of the GDR on which the country that was surrendering its sovereignty would have become 41 years old. And this birthday needed to be avoided. If the decision-makers had had the courage to wait another six days until the following Friday, they could have declared October 9 the Day of German Unity. And that would have been splendid — a sign of a new Germany.

In answer to the question of what I did on November 9, 1989, I usually say, “Please ask me what I did on the October 9, 1989.” This often provokes puzzlement, even in Germany. And when I say, “October 9 was more important than November 9,” the audience starts to grow restless. November 9, 1989, was one of the very few days on which I managed to go to bed early — and when I got up the next day, the Wall was gone. I could add that, when I saw the long line of people in front of the police station who were there to get the necessary stamp to leave the country, I was worried that everyone was going to the West and that no one would come to the demonstrations anymore. Now you will be thinking: “Aha! He has no story to tell. He slept through the most important historical moment in his lifetime. He’s ashamed but won’t admit it and would rather talk about another day.”

October 9, 1989, was a Monday. At that time, there had been demonstrations in Leipzig for several weeks that later went down in history as the “Monday Demonstrations.” From the beginning of the 1980s, people — mostly youth — had gathered in the Nicolai Church in Leipzig to share their experiences concerning their conscientious objection to serving in the military. They called their meetings “peace prayers.” These gatherings were a thorn in the side of the state, but also of some church people. Nonetheless, they managed to continue
their “peace prayers.” In some years, hardly even ten or twenty people came together. At the end of the 1980s, mostly during the Leipzig trade fair, these meetings evolved into the first demonstrations. The majority of demonstrators hoped to speed up their departure for the West by participating. Around the middle of September 1989, after Hungary had opened its border to the West and some GDR citizens had founded the “New Forum” movement, the idea behind the demonstrations ceased to be “We want out!” and became instead “We’re staying here!” If the representatives of the state thought the chant “We want out!” had been blasphemy, they had to perceive “We’re staying here!” as a declaration of war.

I lived not far from Leipzig in the small town of Altenburg and took part in a Leipzig Monday demonstration for the first time on October 2, 1989. On that day, the demonstration still ended at the police line at the ring road around the downtown area. On that day, the slogan “We are the people!” was born because when the Volkspolizei (the GDR’s “People’s Police”) demanded through a megaphone that everyone clear the street, someone called back: “We are the people and you are only our police; we are the people!” The demonstration ended with the Volkspolizei starting to club the people. The demonstrations five days later ended much worse when the GDR tried to celebrate its 40th anniversary on October 7. In Dresden and Berlin, but also in Leipzig and other cities, the police treated the demonstrators with great brutality. There were mass arrests, and the treatment of many of those arrested can only be described as torture.

Two days later, that is, on Monday, October 9, was the day of decision. The official state guests had departed; after the violence, there was great fear; the Leipzig Volkszeitung published open threats against the demonstrators. The memory of the massacre in Tiananmen Square in Beijing just four months earlier was still present in everyone’s mind; the East German government’s approbation of the Chinese comrades still rang in our ears. Then, the miracle happened. Suddenly, seventy thousand people gathered in downtown Leipzig and advanced toward the so-called Leipzig Ring. They demanded that the “New Forum” be allowed to register; they taunted the state security personnel; they called for Gorbachev and sang the left-wing anthem, the “Internationale.” The most common chants were “No violence!” and “We are the people!” The demonstration was about freedom and democracy, about free elections and self-determination. Although we had all had to learn the “Internationale” in school, the song typically...
died down after the refrain. None of the demonstrators had thought it possible that we would ever voluntarily sing the “Internationale.” On this 9th of October, the demonstrators walked all the way around the downtown ring road of Leipzig. There was not a policeman to be seen. One must respect those who were in charge in Leipzig. They were intelligent and conscientious enough to dispense with the use of violence. Had it been otherwise, there would most certainly have been a catastrophe.

This 9th of October opened the floodgates. From then on, it really turned into a peaceful revolution. The whole country breathed a sigh of relief. And suddenly everything seemed possible, like a logical sequence of events, even the Fall of the Wall. Already on October 2, a poster had popped up with the demand: “Visafrei bis Shanghai!” (Visa-free to Shanghai!) The Wall was torn down almost as an afterthought; this was about the whole world and, not least, also about solidarity with the Chinese demonstrators. Now it seemed as though a “socialism with a human face” — along the lines envisioned by the Czechoslovakian reformers such as Alexander Dubček during the Prague Spring — could actually be realized. Indeed, it seemed inexorable. Civil rights activists like Bärbel Bohley or ostracized writers like Stefan Heym spoke at the beginning of November in front of a million people on the Alexanderplatz in Berlin, and their speeches were broadcast live on GDR television. In companies, universities, and publishing houses, people began to elect new bosses. I even bought myself an additional radio so that I would not miss the latest news when I went to the bathroom. And then the Wall came down. And everyone could see that the government was no longer in charge of what was happening in the country.

The way in which the real-existing GDR came to an end is rare in history. That such a highly armed apparatus, seemingly prepared for all eventualities, in the end allowed itself to be pushed aside, without going on a shooting spree, is a stroke of luck. However, by dropping the state like a hot potato, the GDR authorities, even in departing, did a disservice to democracy and self-determination. Helmut Kohl’s coup was embracing the GDR’s CDU, one of several Blockparteien, who had slavishly followed the lead of the SED. This fraternization with known opportunists should have been unthinkable. If the East German CDU played any role in the fall of 1989, it was an unpleasant one. The GDR’s CDU was a sycophantic servant of the system, stabbing various attempts at resistance in the back, for example, at the Kirchentage (annual conventions of the Protestant Church). Since
Kohl had no scruples to make the two CDU’s agreement in the name amount to agreement in substance, there was suddenly, from one day to the next, a trace of syrupy sweetness from East to West. The message was: “If you elect them, you’re electing me.” Thus, in just a few days, Kohl determined the outcome of the first free election in the GDR on March 18, 1990. The promise of “prosperity for all,” made overnight, could not be opposed. And this strategy paid off. The freely elected East German representatives handed over their newly obtained power to the officials in Bonn. These officials, in turn, made loans dependent on East Germany relinquishing its sovereignty. Even if the names of government bureaucrats who implement the plans of politicians are typically irrelevant, let them be named in this case: The state secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance tasked by Finance Minister Theo Waigel with preparing a monetary union already at the beginning of January 1990 was Horst Köhler. And the department head who led a working group from the end of January to “put the offer of a monetary union in concrete terms as fast as possible” was Thilo Sarrazin. “Actually, the federal government offered the D-Mark to the GDR before people on the street in East German expressly demanded it.”¹ “We are paying for everything, so we’ll decide everything” — this is how Sarrazin described Bonn’s attitude, a quote that can be found in his contribution to Theo Waigel and Manfred Schnell’s volume *Tage, die Deutschland und die Welt veränderten.*² The era of a democracy in which money and property had hardly played a role and in which it had been possible in companies, schools, universities, and theaters to elect the people whom one wished to have as one’s bosses (even though not easily, and even though this was often blocked) was over.

The introduction of the West German Deutsch-Mark in East Germany on July 1, 1990, spelled the end of East German industry. In July, companies were supposed to pay the same wages in D-Mark that they had paid in East German marks in June. The economic collapse was pre-programmed. Almost all factories were on the brink of ruin — and this at the very moment when the entire East German economy was being offered for sale on the market. But it is too euphemistic to speak of the market. The most lucrative parts of the East German economy were sold off underhandedly; undesirable competition was not allowed into the country; and attempts to proceed independently in the East were hamstrung by administrative measures. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at the history of Treuhand. German model enterprises such as the Deutsche Bank, Allianz or Lufthansa — the list of names is long and considerable — made billions at the expense

of East Germans — and, in the end, at the expense of all German taxpayers. East Germans did not receive a cent of their national assets. What was left behind was a region that was 70-80 percent deindustrialized. We are still paying the price for this today.

Instead of a unification of the two German states, the East joined the West. That meant: Forget everything that was; learn everything that is. Nonetheless, the hope for a better world was great and justified. The end of the confrontation of East and West, the end of the Cold War and of the arms race, it was hoped, would free up money and energy for the real problems of this world: for clean water and for combating hunger, disease, and the destruction of the environment. There would be no more proxy wars. Gradually, prosperity and education would spread across the world. What would stand in the way of this now? And wasn’t this more than a hope? Wasn’t it downright necessary? Or was I deluding myself?

Those who saw the televised images of the Fall of the Wall or the scenes of GDR citizens climbing over the fence of the West German embassy in Prague, those who heard the outcry of the refugees waiting there in the yard, did not even think of asking which system was better. That was self-evident; it was an obvious truth. The results of GDR citizens voting with their feet were clear.

What happened in Eastern Europe, and especially in East Germany, functioned as a beacon for the whole world. The German experience served and still serves as the quintessential example of the end of the Cold War. For even among the competing events in Eastern Europe, the images of the Fall of the Wall trump everything else, be it Gorbachev, the Polish Round Table, the Hungarian reforms, or the dark images of the early Monday Demonstrations. The political implosion of the Eastern Bloc changed the power relations of the world. No country was unaffected by it. Privatization and free enterprise displaced socialist models and non-private ownership structures around the world. Thus, countries like South Africa or Namibia would, most likely, have forged different constitutions were it not for the collapse of the Eastern Bloc — and their property relations would, likewise, have turned out differently. Even China and India changed course.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the titles of two books reflected a widespread sentiment that also found official favor: One of these was Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, which breathed new life into the phrase “the end of history”
and declared that it had arrived in the present. Whereas Hegel had regarded the end of history as arriving with the triumph of the ideas of the French Revolution in the Battle of Jena, Fukuyama interpreted the Hegelian idea (with Kojève and Marcuse) as a sort of final synthesis in which, after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the liberal, Christian bourgeoisie — the West — became the determining force. In this worldview, “real-existing socialism” as well as the idea of communism — to which Fukuyama’s idea, ironically, is structurally related in its expectation of a linear path to salvation — becomes an accident whose effects have been remedied, a sickness that has finally run its course. Humanity, in a sort of higher natural state, can find peace; paradise is within its grasp. In The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996) Samuel Huntington seemed to argue the opposite. After the end of the Cold War, it was not Western hegemony that had arrived, in his opinion, but an era in which the West, by necessity, would come into conflict with Islamic countries and China. Both books, however, have one thing in common: They view the West as a single unified entity. The West is the West. Its opponents have disappeared or been removed.

As someone from East Germany, I actually felt as though I was “back from the future.” Now the present was all that remained. In the GDR, the future was, of necessity, officially cast in a positive light. But even I, like most others, had expectations of the future that were linked to hopes for a better society. In 1990, we lost this concept of the future. Now, we could only think of the future as a gradually improved today; we could no longer think of it as something else. We had just arrived in the best of all possible worlds. The battle had been decided; the “victors of history” had been determined. What the West had done was right; what the East had done was wrong. From now on, people would do only what was right.

The trends already on the rise under Reagan and Thatcher — the privatization and commodification of practically all areas of life, but also a foreign policy that no longer had qualms about the use of military force — had always met with opposition and resistance and run up against limits. With the Fall of the Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, these limits disappeared and opposition — let alone resistance — in Western countries dried up in an almost eerie way. From now on, all political decisions were to be directed towards the aim of economic growth. As soon as a suggestion — or a mere thought — was suspected of curbing growth, it was finished, not only

in the political sphere but also in social conversation. Politics existed for the purpose of spurring growth. The best way to generate growth was supposed to be the privatization of just about everything. Less state, more market. The more freedom, the more prosperity. Hardly anyone asked: Freedom for whom? Freedom from what? Prosperity for whom? Words like capitalism, class struggle, profit maximization and even exploitation were dismissed as outdated and avoided. Asking who earned money from what, who benefited from this or that, or who was disadvantaged by this or that was considered impolite and an expression of vulgar thinking. Thus, a whole group of words and questions disappeared at the very moment when they became more necessary than ever for describing the old new reality. One can discern these changes most easily in language. What is more natural to us than our mother tongue?

The old new ideology consists of giving facts the appearance of being about something given, something found in the laws of nature that we simply have to accept. This use of language draws us away from the political, social, economic, and historical contexts and questions and leads us into a realm where the status quo cannot be called into question, where all constraints are factual constraints, and conflicting interests only exist on the surface — a language that turns history into nature, a nature that we are powerless to change, that we have to come to terms with, that we have to get used to. The new rules of the game were supposed to be the only ones worth striving for and were made absolute; those who fail to accept them exclude themselves from the conversation. The people allowed to participate in the conversation call profit “shareholder value,” those who sell their labor Arbeitnehmer (employees; literally: “work takers”) and those who buy labor Arbeitgeber (employers; literally: “work givers”). Tax cuts for enterprises and entrepreneurs are called “relief for investors”; the reduction in social security benefits becomes “benefit reduction for those unwilling to work,” burdening the poor is known as taking “personal responsibility,” cuts in unemployment benefits amount to “stimulating growth,” lowering the minimum wage is characterized as “global competitiveness” or “employment practices in line with market conditions,” unions that advocate for collective wage agreements become “wage cartels” and a “drag” on the economy, and so forth.4 Recently, I heard someone say in a radio interview: “We need to finally clean out our social system!” Unfortunately, the interviewer failed to ask what cleaning out the social system would entail.

4 See Ivan Nagel, Falschwörterbuch (Berlin, 2004).
“One tends to understand Schiller’s distich on a ‘cultivated language which writes and thinks for you’ in purely aesthetic and, as it were, harmless terms,” Victor Klemperer wrote in his famous book on the language of the Third Reich.5 “But language does not simply write and think for me, it also increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it.”

The words that I use in the language that I speak and write already begin to shape the way I feel, think, and act. The image I have of myself and the world depends on the words I choose, on which meanings I give these words as an individual and which meanings society as a whole gives them. But today there are once again words that — to borrow Günter Gaus’s lovely simile — are used like the Gessler hat in the story of William Tell, that is, for the purpose of forcing people to conform to a certain way of thinking. Woe to whoever fails to greet the hat; woe to whoever fails to say the word. Unrechtsstaat — literally “unjust state,” the opposite of the Rechtsstaat (state under the rule of law) — has become such a word. Woe to the person who refuses to call the GDR an Unrechtsstaat. In 1990, this word passed my lips with ease. Although I had never had anything to do with the GDR justice system, I nonetheless knew that, as soon as something was even remotely related to politics, arbitrariness reigned. The actions that qualified as criminal offenses — from Republikflucht (“fleeing the Republic”) to foreign-currency offenses — only served to show that it was the state that was perpetrating injustice.

Today, though, I would be cautious with this phrase. Not because I have changed my mind about what I just said, on the contrary. But in the current political context and twenty-two years after the end of the GDR, Unrechtsstaat is too undifferentiated a description. Today, the term means above all: “We don’t even need to talk about an Unrechtsstaat — that has been dealt with!” Characterizing the GDR as an Unrechtsstaat discredits and dismisses everything that was ever done or tried there. Although the lifetime achievements of the East German “sisters and brothers” are acknowledged, it is strongly implied that their work was really a wasted labor of love and that their dream of a better world was just overblown ideology.

Yet some things were actually better and more reasonable than they are today — ranging from a uniform labor code and the right to work to a more modern family law and free healthcare, with

5 Victor Klemperer, LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen (first ed. 1947; 24th, revised edition with commentary, Stuttgart, 2010), chap. 1, 25-26; translated into English as Language of the Third Reich (London, 2006). LTI was Klemperer’s private code for Lingua Tertii Imperii, i.e. the language of the Third Reich.
exemplary cancer statistics, to childcare and youth welfare. The administrative costs of the single-payer social insurance system amounted to 0.35 percent; today they amount to 7 percent. Mentioning these things also means asking: Why do doctors have to think like businessmen? Is it not immoral; does it not endanger the medical ethos? And is it not also uneconomical for society? Can a private insurance company that is per se obligated to make a profit even be in the interest of the insured at all? Such questions cause one to bump up against the limits of our system. Such questions are not discussed.

What today’s prevailing opinion cannot forgive the East is its different property relations. These gave the individual the experience of living in a society where money was not everything. To say this without promptly relativizing and qualifying it immediately gives me a bad conscience because now I ought to list all the GDR’s injustices as though I had never done that before. But in the very attempt to pull myself out of my submissive stance, I notice how much I have internalized the bad conscience. This bad conscience reveals itself in things that seem to be trivial: For example, I am relieved that the book about the Treuhand that I cited earlier was not written by an East German but by an author who was born in Hamburg in 1974. When I relate critical remarks made by others, I like to add (as do several of my colleagues) that the person in question is certainly not suspected of being a communist or a leftist. Once when I quoted a colleague, I added, without being asked to do so, that she moved to the West in 1988 and therefore cannot be considered a supporter of the GDR. As if by magic, the word “ehemalig” (former) slips into the conversation when one is talking about the GDR, as if this addition were necessary to banish it to the past. No one would dream of talking about the former Third Reich or the former Weimar Republic.

But let’s go back to the beginning of the 1990s. In its official self-understanding, the West no longer knows any political or social alternative; we had arrived in a world without alternatives. Democracy, freedom, social justice, and prosperity seemed only to be possible in a market economy where the means of production were privately owned. Even today, Joachim Gauck can write in a speech on the subject “Freedom”: “And there is therefore no reason to make the old-new attempt to bring a new version of anti-capitalism into the debate.”

6 Joachim Gauck, Freiheit: Ein Plädoyer (Munich, 2012), 58; the book is based on a January 2011 lecture.
Yet one ought to have been allowed to wonder why the implosion of the East banished every alternative to the existing system from social consciousness. For the ossified shape of real-existing socialism was never understood as an alternative — at least not by the majority of those who had to live in it. It was a custodial state, not a democracy; and freedom and democracy were precisely the demands of the fall of 1989. There was no poster, no slogan, no chanting for privatization, no demand to abolish the right to work. Why shouldn’t it be possible to have freedom and democracy alongside public ownership of the means of production? This was an obvious question to ask. Because precisely in those cases where things were not privatized come hell or high water, larger companies, such as Zeiss-Jena, did manage to survive. But back then, only a few people asked this question. Nobody in the free and democratic mainstream media paid it any attention. There is no article in the Basic Law that mentions the private ownership of the means of production. In 1947, even the newly founded CDU perceived large-scale industry and enterprises as a threat to freedom and democracy. In the party program that was agreed on in Ahlen in 1947, the CDU stated:

The capitalist economic system has not served the state and social interests of the German people. The horrible political, economic, and social collapse brought on by a criminal kind of power politics must lead to a fundamentally new social order. The content and aim of this social and economic new order can no longer be the capitalist striving for profit and power but the well-being of our people.

The observation that profits are being privatized and losses are being socialized could be the headline for the past twenty years. Never before has private wealth been so great; never before has public debt been so high. Today, according to the German Taxpayers’ Association, Germany’s national debt amounts to about 2 trillion Euros, that is about €24,700 per capita. The Taxpayers’ Association has tried to make this debt easier to comprehend with an example:

If, from today, no more debt was taken on, and if the public purse was legally obligated to pay off one billion Euro of its debt each month in addition to all its expenditures on personnel, investments, social benefits, interest, and so forth, this process would have to continue for 169 years in order to completely pay off the mountain of debt.
Every eighth Euro that comes in goes solely to paying interest on the national debt.

Again and again, the spending habits of the states are regarded as the cause of the crisis because, so the argument goes, countries with solid state finances would not even give speculators a chance to corner them. This is a strange way of thinking. Oddly, people seem always to focus their criticism on state expenditures that either directly or indirectly benefit society as a whole — unless we need a couple billions to save the banks. It is strange that our system is set up in such a way that after we, the polity, have saved the banks, we allow them to dictate the interest rates at which we borrow the money needed for the bank bailout. Everyone who overdraws his account has to pay overdraft fees and interest that average 12 to 13 percent. Wouldn’t it be fair for the polity to charge the banks similar interest for their overdrawn accounts?

Why don’t we ask whether it is insufficient state revenues, rather than excessive expenditures, that are increasing the public debt and causing the current crisis? The German state has been and continues to be systematically run into the ground because its democratically elected representatives have been robbing it of its revenues. The Schröder administration lowered the top tax rate in Germany from 53 to 42 percent; tax rates for companies (commercial tax and corporate tax) dropped by almost half between 1997 and 2009, from 57.5 to 29.4 percent. The capital gains tax dropped to 25 percent. Even estate taxes were reduced in some respects.

If the public coffers are empty, so the mantra goes, more state property has to be privatized at favorable terms for the buyer; public-sector positions need to be cut and public services privatized; sponsors have to be found; swimming pools and libraries have to be shut down; the fees for the music school have to raised, and so on. Such measures affect especially those who have to watch how they spend every Euro.

Another way of weakening the polity — almost identical to the invectives against its spending — is the call for a leaner government. Leaner is better! Who would not want a de-bureaucratized state, that is, a state that is as lean as it is elegant? The neoliberal propaganda outfits like the Bertelsmann Foundation or the Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (New Social Market Economy Initiative) were able to successfully sell this beauty ideal of the lean state to the public because, like any half-truth, it contains some legitimate criticisms. Bureaucracy, too, can make democracy impossible. But
what is not mentioned is that the weakening of the state leads to a loss of competence. The public administration can hardly afford qualified experts anymore; there is not enough money. Amazingly, though, help is already waiting impatiently at the door. In Germany’s federal ministries alone, there are more than one hundred so-called Leihbeamte (“borrowed officials”). They are the employees of private companies and trade associations, and are paid by them, but work in the ministries in the capacity of government officials. They participate in the formulation of laws and regulations that are supposed to regulate their own companies. Do an internet search for “lobbyists in ministries” or read the book Der gekaufte Staat (The Bought State), and you can find out which firms have placed their people in which ministries. If a lobbying organization paid a government official to influence laws and ordinances in its favor, this would be considered corruption and would be punished. But when a lobbyist is seconded to a ministry and granted civil servant status, at least temporarily, this is part of an official initiative called Seitenwechsel (Changing Sides), which is one element of the Red/Green government program “Modern state — modern administration.” Despite its name, the program cannot be described as an exchange. Whereas “more than a hundred representatives of companies have spent sometimes years at desks in federal ministries, no more than twelve civil servants have taken educational excursions into the private economy.”

Hardly any sphere is protected from privatization and thus from profit-seeking. This is especially bitter in healthcare and education. The new “self-evident truths” (Selbstverständlichkeiten) that began to dominate discourse at the beginning of the 1990s continue to prevail unchanged today. Not even the financial crisis prompted the rules to change or us to become aware of these false truths and to alter them. It is therefore not surprising that a world without alternatives has resulted in a kind of politics that propagates the logical nonsense of “no-choice

7 Sascha Adamek and Kim Otto, Der gekaufte Staat: Wie Konzerne ihrem Ministerien selbst Gesetze schreiben (Cologne, 2008)
8 Adamek and Otto, Der gekaufte Staat, 15.
10 Adamek and Otto, Der gekaufte Staat, 21-40.
decisions.” How is it that we accept as self-evident that governments have to “calm the markets” or “win back the markets’ trust”? In such phrases, the term “markets” refers to the stock exchanges and financial markets, in other words to actors who speculate, either on their own account or as agents for others, in order to maximize profits. Aren’t these the people who deprived the public coffers of billions? Our highest representatives are supposed to vie to win their trust?

We should be grateful that Angela Merkel let slip the phrase “markt-konforme Demokratie,” that is, a democracy that operates in line with the markets. Because by saying this she got to the heart of the current form of our democracy. Had the big media been paying better attention, they might have asked the chancellor to explain this phrase. But nobody demanded an explanation. Markt-konforme Demokratie is the loveliest of our new self-evident truths, which, to my knowledge, no one has yet publicly criticized. It is regarded as natural that democracy is being turned on its head. Should not the actors on the stock markets be trying to win back the public trust? Instead of marktkonforme Demokratie we should be calling for demokratiekonforme Märkte, that is, markets that conform to democracy! Such markets would be ones in which not everything that generates money would be allowed, from dubious financial products to speculating in foodstuffs. Conforming to democracy would mean demanding that the economy meet social, moral, and ecological standards. But for this to become possible we would need a politics that does not subordinate all decisions to economic growth. Yet calling for such democracy-oriented markets is a matter of life and death. For our daily life is shaped by a murderous duplicity, a duplicity that hides the consequences of our decisions and our economic activities. The actions that lead to poverty, lack of freedom, disease, discrimination, and marginalization here at home cost lives elsewhere, by the millions.

After the government leaders of the Euro-zone states made 1.7 trillion Euros available to breathe new life into the banks’ lending activities in October 2008, these same countries made massive cuts in their aid to humanitarian organizations and loans to the poorest countries. The UN’s Feed the World Program, entrusted with helping in cases of famine, had had a budget of $6 billion, but in 2011, this had been reduced to only $3 billion. Among other things, this meant that school meals for one million undernourished children in Bangladesh had to be cut. The 300,000 Somalian refugees now get a daily ration of 1500 calories instead of the subsistence minimum of 2200 calories.
Before the real estate crisis, about $13 to $18 billion was invested in so-called renewable raw materials, but in 2011 it was $600 billion. For years now, the speculation in foodstuffs — in which all the big German banks, including the savings and loans, participate — has been causing food prices to rise drastically. For some items, prices have doubled within one year. One of the main causes of hunger in Africa are the agricultural subsidies of the industrialized nations. In 2008, EU agricultural subsidies amounted to €55 billion, leading vegetables and meat from Europe to be 25 to 33 percent cheaper than the products of local African producers. This precipitated the ruin of local agriculture and its known consequences.

While one hand donates money and helps developing nations, the other hand shamelessly seeks a profit. Despite all assurances to the contrary, there is a double standard — a sort of schizophrenia — and it has a long tradition. Among the authors of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America of July 4, 1776, in which general human rights were laid out for the first time, were Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. When Jefferson died in 1826, in addition to large estates in Virginia, he also left his heirs full ownership rights to more than 200 slaves. The Declaration of Independence embarks on its explanation of “the causes which impel” the separation from Britain with the famous sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Jean Ziegler, the Swiss sociologist and social critic, who was the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food for several years, refers to the so-called Millennium Development Goals that UN member nations drew up in the year 2000: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality rates, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, to ensure environmental sustainability, and to develop a global partnership for development between the West and the South. The record of what has been achieved is pitiful. The number of seriously malnourished people has increased, according to UN statistics, from 785 million in 2000 to 854 million in 2008. Subsequently both the financial crisis and the speculation in foodstuffs exacerbated the situation, so that we may assume that the number of the malnourished rose to about one billion in 2009. Just a few more statistics: in 2008, 500,000 women in sub-Saharan
Africa died in childbirth. Because Africa cannot afford effective AIDS medications, 12 million children were orphans in 2003; in 2010, there were 18 million orphans. I could continue with Ziegler’s examples, but I will just add one more: It is highly probable that the computer that I am using to write these lines and the cell phone that I carry in my pocket are made with tantalum, a rare metallic element mined under the most atrocious conditions in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Extraction in the Congo is so cheap that it beats all competition. It is also pretty certain that these devices were assembled by workers who can only dream of a 60-hour week.

Jean Ziegler asks: “Why this blindness? Why this unmoved arrogance while hundreds of millions of people indignantly condemn this duplicity and deny the West the right to moral hegemony?” Ziegler answers cautiously, as though he himself recoils at the insight: “I will formulate a hypothesis,” he writes,

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the discrediting of the communist idea, have created a black hole. The (naturally necessary) Fall of the Berlin Wall buried all prospects for emancipation and even banished any thought of protest. … Since the Fall of the Wall, the idea of a different world order, a different memory, a different will, has fallen into disrepute.¹¹

Some might want to call this insight paradoxical; others might want to call it logical or a truism. The self-liberation of the East, the adoption of capitalistic modes of production, and the resulting globalization of the economy unleashed a pursuit of profit that, thus far, has remained without a commensurate political counterweight. Commensurate would have to mean: at least as internationalized as the corporations and at least as powerful, self-confident and decisive as they are.

Of course, the Fall of the Wall is a conditio sine qua non and a day of celebration. But the 9th of November did not mark the dawning of a new age in the world. We need to see it as a day on which, for the time being, the alternatives to the Western status quo fell into oblivion. We need to expand this day to include the tradition of the 9th of October. Those who do not wish to accept a marktkonforme Demokratie and instead demand demokratiekonforme Märkte, markets in line with democracy, stand in the tradition of that peaceful revolution.

¹¹ Jean Ziegler, Der Hass auf den Westen: Wie sich die armen Völker gegen den wirtschaftlichen Weltkrieg wehren (Munich, 2011), 15f.
of the Fall of 1989. We must not allow the chant “We are the people!” to become a museum relic.

Translated by Patricia Casey Sutcliffe