



Interview with Thomas Fleischman

James Skidmore: My name is James Skidmore, and I'm the Director of the Waterloo Centre for German Studies, an institute at the University of Waterloo that promotes research into all aspects of the German-speaking world. To further this mandate, we've established the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize to recognize first-time authors whose scholarly work provides a substantial contribution to our understanding of German-speaking society. The shortlist for books published in 2020 has just been announced, and it's my great pleasure to interview each of the six finalists about their work. Today I'm speaking with Thomas Fleischman, author of *Communist Pigs: An Animal History of East Germany's Rise and Fall*, published by University of Washington Press. Thomas is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Rochester. He is a scholar of modern Europe, Germany, environmental history, and animals. Tom, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

Thomas Fleischman: It's great to be here and it's a real honour. Thank you so much.

JS: You're welcome. *Communist Pigs* – now, that is an arresting title and quite a witty one for a book about pig production in the German Democratic Republic. But of course, your book is about so much more than industrial pig farming. If I get this correctly, you argue that pigs are central to the rise and fall of East Germany; and I'd like to look at that a little more closely. How did pigs contribute to East Germany's rise?

TF: Well, I started at a more fundamental question, which is: I wanted to move away from the totalitarian framework for understanding what these countries in Eastern Europe were. What I was interested in was taking seriously what socialist governments wanted; and that was, as I came to learn and studying and researching, that they wanted to achieve what they called "real existing socialism." Which meant, at a really fundamental level, assuring that all citizens would have access to and their most basic needs met. That included a guaranteed job, an affordable home in which to live, and, as it evolved over time, access to cheap and affordable consumer goods. So that would include clothing, but primarily food. And, in East Germany, they made meat consumption a central plank of that program.

JS: When you say they made meat a central aspect of that program, was that because the East German area was already strongly into meat production? Or were there other reasons for that focus on meat?

TF: I would reduce it to two general things. First, there is the cultural aspect of meat consumption and particularly pork consumption, which is a very German [or] central European thing. That was certainly one continuity that was being brought into it. But I think if you look at the postwar period around the world, both in Eastern and Western Europe and North America, the consumption of meat and particularly how much meat is consumed per citizen or at a per capita basis became in many ways a metric of each country's modernity and economic development. And so, to achieve high meat consumption was a way of telling your citizens and the world that you were a modern country.

JS: So instead of a five-year plan for increasing potato production or something, increasing meat production would be a sign that East Germany was on the rise; [a way of saying,] "It's a country that



works. You don't have to be concerned about living here. This is a great place to live." Something like that.

TF: Yes. And that was central both to the propaganda that the state disseminated to its citizens, but also the way it presented itself in the world. You can find this everywhere. You can find it in planning statistics, you can find it in their annual agricultural convention or meeting outside Leipzig, you can find it in the ways in which East Germany talks about its relationship to particularly Western Europe as a sort of preeminent producer of pork and meat.

JS: Anecdotally, I was in East Germany a few times before the fall, and I was there in 1980 just at the time of the Moscow Olympics, approximately a month before. And I remember the people who were hosting me complaining that there wasn't enough meat around because it had all been shipped off to Moscow for the Olympics. And people were really upset about that. That was a serious issue for them.

TF: Yes. That's a really fascinating anecdote. I actually hadn't heard that but it certainly fits within the history that I have been researching and writing about. Which is that, on the one hand, like I just said, the state was promising and declaring that it would provide high levels of meat, make it available to everybody at low cost. And yet at the same time, because of the economic situation in which the regime and the state found itself by the early 80s, it became increasingly unable to fulfill those promises; usually due to what I write about, which is this sort of debt crisis that they're encountering by the early 80s.

JS: That's right. The fall part. We have the rise of East Germany connected to meat production – in the case of your book, specifically pork production – but then we also see the seeds sown for the fall. So explain that part to us.

TF: Yeah. The book has two periods in which it narrates. The first part is about how they came to establish this industrial system of pork production, which I argue was in many ways premised on a capitalist configuration of nature and borrowed from industrial systems that first originated in the United States but quickly disseminated throughout the world. What I argue is that they struggled for the first two decades of their existence to create this sort of self-sufficient system, but were never able to really achieve full self-sufficiency. And then in the 70s, I note that there are four major changes to the geopolitical order and the rules of global capitalism. You have a series of crises in Western capitalism. The one that people most often think of is the oil crisis of 1973, but there's also the end of Bretton Woods in 1971; the system of rules that regulated capital flows was abandoned by Nixon. He allowed the US dollar to float and, with it, it sent the valuation of all other currencies in the world spinning off in different directions. Then, there was also what became known as the Russian Grain Deal, or [what in] the United States became known as the Great Grain Robbery, when for a brief period the Soviet Union cornered the world supply of wheat and drove up prices everywhere. It's a story that I talk about in the book.

TF: Against this background, there's the signing of the basic treaty with West Germany that sort of reset the rules and relations between East and West Germany. One of the parts of that deal was that it opened up channels of investment. So now West German banks could invest directly in East Germany. So what I talk about is that suddenly in this period, you have this flood of capital coming into East Germany. And the peculiar phenomenon [is] that this is also the period of stagflation, so what you see is that interest rates are actually lagging behind inflation. And so the East Germans believe they're actually acquiring money for free, that they can just keep borrowing. And they think it's great. And Erich Honecker says [that] only a fool wouldn't take up loans in today's world.



TF: But that cheap money didn't last very long. By the late 70s, the costs are totally inverted, largely due to the '78 oil crisis and then the Volcker shock, when the Us fed Chair hiked interest rates through the ceiling to tame stagflation in the US. [That] kicks off a global recession. And this sort of boomerangs back on East Germans and all the Eastern bloc, where the loans that they had out were suddenly becoming more and more expensive to maintain. What you see then is a circumstance where they were counting on exporting pork abroad to win them hard currency surpluses that they could then use to invest in their own economy, to invest in infrastructure, to pay for all sorts of social spending programs. But now those surpluses are getting smaller and smaller because they have to be devoted to interest payments. So they're feeling the crunch from the West on that side. And then, to the East, it's also in the early 80s that the Solidarity movement begins in Poland. And it's through that period that the East Germans are becoming increasingly worried that they're going to have a revolution on their hands if they have to raise the price of meat or bread. Which is indirectly what caused much of the unrest in Poland, [i.e.] increasing bread prices.

TF: So the East Germans are feeling increasingly caught up in this situation. And in order to deal with it, at least the seeds of the downfall, I argue, are based in the fact that the East Germans just pushed their farms into overdrive to export more meat than ever before [so as] to continue acquiring as much currency surplus as possible abroad. In a way, they sort of pushed their farms over the cliff. Because what happened was [that] it created this surplus of pollution. One thing I talk about is this epidemic of manure pollution, which I argue was driven by the regime's demand for ever-increasing production. But this has all knock-on effects as well. Part of the problem is they have to acquire grain from abroad to feed these pigs and, if they don't get it, they have to find alternative sources of fodder domestically. And that leads the East Germans to feeding these animals that had been bred for the very specific conditions of a factory farm to be eating things that they probably weren't bred for. [That] causes all kinds of problems, like some of the pigs now can't put on weight as efficiently as they used to. So what I argue is that this [situation of] undernourished pigs and manure pollution flowing into the country undermine the overall legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of its citizens, like you noted with the Moscow Olympics in 1980. You can find – in the Eingaben in particular – people writing to the regime and complaining over and over about the lack of meat in stores, and blaming the trade policy; this demand to either send meat abroad to West Germany and also, to a lesser extent, to feed Soviet soldiers in East Germany.

JS: Right. Because there was a large Soviet presence in East Germany throughout the period that you're dealing with of course. When you speak of a capitalist configuration of nature – I think that's how you put it – what you're referring to there is that [this] leads basically to the manure problem because of a willful ignoring of the ecological or environmental ramifications of pork production. Is that clear, what I'm saying there?

TF: Yeah. In that case, I'm drawing on the work of Jason Moore and Raj Patel, who have written about capitalism and ecology for a long time; capitalism as world ecology is their theory. Their basic argument is that we have to see capitalism as a force within nature and as a way to subvert this Cartesian divide. But what I took from their work was [that] they located historically when this moment happens and traced it across 500 years. What's really telling for me is that the industrial model of agriculture originates in the western United States around the turn of the 20th century. And what was clear from the very beginning was that it produced enormous amounts of food and then it became an object of fascination around the world, especially in Germany. But I thought it was kind of interesting to discover that it was also an object



of fascination for the Soviet Union and for Stalin. They hired experts from the USDA in California to come to the Soviet Union to help them set up hog farms and enlarge monocultures of wheat. Hitler himself was also fascinated. If you know anything about Hitler's inspiration from American Empire and how he wanted to apply that in Eastern Europe, there's a component of there that is built on industrial agriculture as well. But it also fascinated a whole host of Germans in the 1920s and 30s.

TF: What they all failed to understand was that that model was only possible in that moment in which land had been taken from Native peoples; when there were these so-called free gifts from nature that you could acquire cheaply – whether it's labor or land in that case – and then exploit it to the hilt. Over time, those free gifts become incredibly expensive. I think what was missing for boosters of industrial agriculture was this understanding that the cheapness of the system goes away very quickly and becomes actually very expensive and has to be covered up with new technological innovations, whether it's hybrid seeds or agrochemicals or new machinery. Those are all efforts to cover up the falling productivity of those free gifts and how expensive they're becoming. I see East Germany as sort of a canary in the coal mine of the true cost of industrial agriculture. That cheap food is very expensive.

JS: And then compounded, of course, because they then have to enter into a different economic system to borrow the capital or to get the funding to make that all happen – which then just exacerbates their problem exponentially, I would think.

TF: Exactly. And then, once they enter in, they can't get back out.

JS: They can't get out. Right. Yeah, your book makes that very clear. You handle really well these macroeconomic issues, but you also bring it down to a micro level; often in the case of the microeconomy, of course, but also then just some of the anecdotes and some of the things that are going on that just seem so bizarre. One chapter you devote to the claim that, in East Germany, pigs could fly, which I thought was very funny. But I want you to explain that because I think that just gives a good flavour of how you're doing history in this book.

TF: Yeah. That anecdote was a really surprising one. There was a newspaper produced by this industrial hog factory in this city called Eberswalde. They had their own newspaper, and they had an anniversary edition from the late 80s where they talked about this flight of hogs, which they had imported from abroad. Essentially, over a three-month period the East Germans had about 9,000 breeding sows and several hundred boars imported from Yugoslavia. They would serve as the initial breeding stock for this new factory farm. It was a crazy anecdote, and I had to run it down on a few other places, but I did find the contract that they signed with the Yugoslavs for this delivery and how many pigs would come in. It took three months. Now I can't remember how many flights there were although I wrote it in the book, obviously; hundreds of flights, for sure. I just thought this was funny that, in order to make this system work – in particular, this factory model – you couldn't just plug and play any pig. You needed a very specific kind of pig, a pig that had been bred for the harsh life of the factory farm. Exactly. Because, the old breeds, they suffered. They didn't put on weight, they died at a higher rate, their litters were smaller. So the East Germans had to turn to this growing body of international expertise on animal life under factory conditions. And that's where that story originated.

JS: Did you find out why they flew them in as opposed to truck them in or send them in by rail?



TF: I never found a justification. But, to me, the reason is [that] moving pigs is a very difficult thing. There's a gene in pigs called the halothane gene. If a pig gets too stressed, this gene will kick in and their body temperature will heat up and they'll basically cook their brains and die. So it's very difficult to move pigs. And so my theory is that flying them was faster. Because they had to come from Ljubljana and the flight took, I believe, 4 or 5 hours rather than days. Since these are very expensive and important animals, I think they decided that that would be better. Now, I don't even know how many of them died on the flight. It wouldn't surprise me if a few of them did. But I didn't see that anywhere. I couldn't find that out.

JS: Again, another anecdote; this is from my own life. I grew up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, which is in Western Canada. I remember my dad and I going out to the airport to see a Jumbo jet arrive – which was a big deal at that time – full of cattle from France. They were bringing in Charolais to start breeding Charolais cattle in Western Canada. And I just wanted to see, how is it that cows can fly?

TF: There's clearly a book waiting to be written about livestock and air travel.

JS: That's your next project, that's right. The subtitle of your book is *An Animal History*. And I'm wondering, doing animal history – does that require different techniques or approaches from doing human history?

TF: Yeah. Animal history, for me, really means considering the roles of animals in shaping the past. What it requires is that you have to first learn a lot about the animals. You have to do a lot of reading on biology, behaviour, ecology to understand all the things that make an animal an animal. In my case, all the piggy characteristics of a pig; because once you learn about that stuff, you can actually start to see them in the record in a way that you wouldn't have if you didn't know. For me, in this case, what I was really struck by with pigs is that they're amazingly adaptable animals. They can change their size and shape and behaviour and diet to live pretty much anywhere. And what I came to realize – not only in studying all those characteristics of animal biology – was that you can also see it historically. These aren't characteristics that exist unchanging throughout time, but they are different depending on when you look. I started to realize that a pig actually can tell you a lot about the environment and its relationship to people very easily, by paying attention to what they're doing, what they look like, and where they live. And I suddenly realized that a pig is a lens onto human history if you look at it the right way. And, in many cases, a pig is affecting and shaping human decisions and behaviours – if you know where to look.

JS: And you make that clear in your book, frankly, with regard to the GDR. And it leads us into this larger picture you're trying to paint in the book. I want to refer to the epilogue of the book in that regard. In the epilogue, you're describing the effects of Hurricane Florence on the hog industry in North Carolina, and you end the book with the following sentence: "Though East Germany has long gone from the world, the world becomes more like East Germany every day." That's a surprising conclusion. So, explain that to us. I think it makes perfect sense but I want to hear it from you.

TF: When I started reading about East Germany and its environmental history, the first thing you learn about is all the terrible things that happened to the environment under the East German regime. The charges of ecocide were very prevalent throughout the 90s; that East Germany was an environmental outlaw of the first rank, that its environmental crimes were unprecedented. Related to that accusation, then, was the conclusion that this proves that communism is in and of itself an ideology that is antithetical to environmental protection or sustainability. And I always found that analysis unsatisfying. In particular,



the more I read about East German agriculture, I found it to be very similar to Western agriculture, particularly in the United States and even in Canada. The industrial model, I realized, didn't just happen in East Germany. It was all over the place. And [I realized] that many of the problems that people blamed East Germany for creating are endemic throughout the world today. So, while I document the real problems of manure pollution throughout East Germany, you can go to any part of the world that has industrial hog production and find the same problems that are, in many cases, worse because of the scale. We just don't tend to see them because they tend to happen in places where few people live.

TF: East Germany was a small country for Americans, [for example] for people in the Midwest – I used to compare it to the size of Ohio, but then I realized over time that not everybody knows how big Ohio is. The point being that it's relatively small. And they're trying to do a number of different industrial activities, producing all kinds of things for domestic consumption and export abroad. And they didn't have anywhere to hide the industrial hog farms. They were near where people lived. So people experienced and saw the pollution epidemic everywhere. In the United States, it's less clear. We tend to put the hog farms in poorer communities. We put them in rural places where fewer people are able to come across them. But anyone can see that there are vast algae blooms and dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico. Poison water exists throughout the California Central Valley. You can go to China today and find this problem of hog pollution there. And what I realized when Hurricane Irene happened, that – or wait, I'm getting the wrong [inaudible 00:25:43].

JS: Was it Florence or Irene?

TF: Florence, sorry. When Hurricane Florence happened, people were discussing it, and there were these images of dead hogs floating in rivers and manure lagoons overflowing. And I thought, "Well, you're just describing East Germany." This is that country. We've already had this happen. This isn't unprecedented. I saw someone write online that, you know, "This is the world that global warming is going to create for us. This is our future." And I thought, "Actually, no, this is our past." This has already been happening. And it happens around us all the time. We just always see it in these moments of disaster. And I thought, in that case, East Germany has a lot to tell us about the world that we are continuing to make and are becoming ever more like.

JS: I think that's an excellent point. You point out that it's not the first-order ideology that's creating the problems; be it capitalist or Communist or what have you. It's this style of industrial hog production, which is then embedded by certain aspects of capitalism, like the use of capital to make it happen, [or] certain aspects of communism, that you can manage it in a way that allows you to do things that you might not be able to do in other situations or what have you. But it's the style of hog production that's really the issue here, not the ideology.

TF: For me, it's the pigs. Because they are produced within this particular configuration of nature that is rooted in capitalism, they actually reconfigure the world with their appetites. They can change what farmers grow half a continent away based on their aggregate demand. 13 million hogs have a big appetite, and you're not going to find enough fodder to feed them in a very small country.

JS: No, you're not. You know, books answer questions, but they also raise questions. And so, are there any questions we haven't discussed yet that your book raises?



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TF: In writing the book, I was trying to scratch an itch I had about the East German historiography. Which was that, by and large, it's a body of literature that, on the one hand, just transformed how I think about German history. But to me, all the questions still seem produced within the framework of the East German state within its borders, or within maybe its relationship to Eastern Europe, or sometimes with West Germany. What I had not seen as much of was a consideration of East Germany within the context of the global 20th century. What does the history of that country look like when considered alongside the history of the planet in that time period? And then I developed it further, and I wanted to think about: What does it look like if we start with different actors in that history? That's why [I chose] animals and in particular pigs. I think they helped me ask questions about East Germany and its relationship to the world that beginning with people or politics or ideology don't get you.

JS: You nailed that for sure. And this is opening up such an important new perspective on the GDR but also, as you put it, the GDR's relationship to the global world of the late 20th century. The other thing I want to say in closing [is that] the book demonstrates that you are a gifted writer, and so I congratulate you on that. And I'm curious; what have you read lately in your field or generally that you've really liked?

TF: Thank you for that compliment. That means a lot. I wouldn't say I'm gifted, I'd say I just worked a lot.

JS: Yeah, well, that's the thing. You can be a gifted writer, but it comes with a lot of blood, sweat, and tears.

TF: Yeah. It doesn't feel like a gift.

JS: No, I imagine it doesn't.

TF: So, what book? I'll just mention it because I was teaching it last week. But I really enjoyed Monica Black's book *A Demon-Haunted Land* about postwar West Germany. I love the book for a number of reasons, [such as] resetting how we think about the history of Zero hour; that 1945 wasn't a blank slate for Germany. And these are things we know and assume but to see it taken on and looked at in this way is really fascinating. I guess I am haunted by the thought that conspiracy and fantastical thinking flourish in an environment in which the authority of institutions [is] severely undermined or destroyed. It's something I think we are all thinking about quite a bit. And her book is truly instructive and generative for thinking about that stuff in our present life.

JS: Very relevant, you're right. Thank you for that, and thanks for telling us about your book today, Tom. I really enjoyed speaking to you.

TF: It was my pleasure to speak with you all. Thank you so much for this honour.

JS: You're welcome. I've been speaking to Thomas Fleischman, whose book *Communist Pigs: an Animal History of East Germany's Rise and Fall* has been shortlisted for the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize. To find out more about Thomas and his book, check out the show notes or go on over to wcgs.ca Thanks for listening.