

BOOK REVIEW

Mitchell G. Ash, *Die Max-Planck-Gesellschaft im Prozess der deutschen Vereinigung 1989–2002*

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023. Pp. 394. ISBN 978-3-525-30209-5. €70.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-3-666-30209-1. €0.00 (open-access PDF).

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Volume 5 of the series *Studies in the History of the Max Planck Society (MPS)* is part of the harvest of a decade-long project at the Berlin-based Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. Together with Carola Sachse's volume 4 on the MPS's *Wissenschaft und Diplomatie* – that is, its international relations – Mitchell Ash's study deals with the domestic German politics of the MPS. The new book is both an in-depth case study of one major part of the institutional backbone of German science during the reunification process and a splendid demonstration of the power of the author's resources-centred concept for writing history of science. This is a crucial contribution to better understanding the relational history of science and politics – two societal subsystems that serve as mutual resources.

How did German reunification change the fabric of science and its institutional underpinning, especially when seen from Western as well as Eastern perspectives? This question is investigated for the Max Planck Society, responsible for first-rate basic research in science and humanities, with around sixty West German institutes opened before reunification, adding eighteen in East Germany between 1992 and 1998.

Ash forgoes simple pictures of 'colonialization' and one-sided 'loser' stories. At the same time, his praise for the *Aufbau Ost* as the West German unselfish reconstruction of a run-down science 'wasteland' is limited, and he provides room for a more nuanced accounting of the dismantling and building of scientific institutions as a result of negotiation processes between science and politics whose inner workings can be exhibited through the lens of resources at work – especially financial, institutional, temporal, social and discursive resources.

In phase I, before formal reunification, the MPS deliberately used tactics (well worn in international relations, for instance with Russia and China) to avoid contact with the Academy of Sciences that ran the respective GDR research institutes. Promoting cooperation between individual institutes in related fields could keep things within low-level science politics. Here, the MPS played it safe and played for time. Institutes were overwhelmed with Eastern visitors, so representational funds had to be beefed up to cover meals for still-strapped new colleagues. There was no intention, however, to recognize their home institutes as direct partners.

Only after the accession of East Germany to West did high-level politics have to confront redesigning the scientific landscape. Phase II dealt with destroying the academy

by breaking it into pieces to be evaluated by the Wissenschaftsrat, an advisory body to the federal and state governments, and then installing select group leaders and their staff on five-year contracts at universities under the guidance of appropriate Max Planck institutes. In principle, these groups might evolve into new MPS institutes, but they were mostly absorbed into universities. Keeping the brighter scientists from the East at arm's length from the MPS (and in the new *Länder*, as politically imperative) while waiting for the rest to find alternative careers, all hopes of party-line scientific ranks for a *Wende*, a manoeuvre to change course but not crew, faded.

Just two new Max Planck institutes opened before 1994, when the expansion finally took off, growing the MPS by 30 per cent in ten years. As several financial crises had an impact, this also meant first a shrinking of the budget of the 'old' institutes in the West by 16 per cent, Ash's phase III, which was then followed by phase IV, roughly from 1993 to 1996, that eventually created a science landscape of reunited Germany with some promise for aspiring researchers from the East but very few opportunities for institute directors with a GDR background. This *Gründungswelle Ost* ('founding wave east') only took off after an engineer-turned-politician from the East, Paul Krüger, became federal minister of research and technology.

The Greifswald Institute for Plasma Physics in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Krüger's federal province, demonstrates how regional politics, as well as national and international dimensions, played decisive roles. Here, the MPS's only West–East double institute emerged in nuclear fusion research, with the Garching Institute in Bavaria closely connected to the new Greifswald facilities – and a rare case of an institute director from the East (and of a woman). Without the European importance of the field and thus its financial resources, this appreciation of an East German research centre would hardly have been possible.

Debates about founding institutes in the humanities were even more intricate and controversial and are not covered in detail in this book; for example, the creation of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science sprang more from general considerations for institutes in new fields than from transforming the transitional employment structure for former academy researchers into an institute (a story Ash has discussed more extensively in a 2020 preprint). In the end, a new institute was opened that allowed a part of the former academy researchers to continue their lines of research, 'often with at best an indirect connection' to the aims of the new institute. While this did not stir much open discussion, founding a Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam was controversial, and the institute was not adopted into the Max Planck family. Both cases exhibit the paramount role of discursive resources often brought into play for maintaining the discursive sovereignty of the old Western actors of research policy.

What influence did East German science and humanities, or rather the way they fared in the reunification process, have on the MPS? In the chapter on the completion of *Aufbau Ost* between 1996 and 2002, with its wave of new institutes, some patterns emerge. While, on the leadership level, few former GDR researchers could be found, younger people who still had to win standing and position had their chance. Constant evaluation became a crucial part of MPS policy. The extension of this approach to all institutes of the MPS in East and West now marks probably the most decisive change in the MPS's history. Political actors pressed for better accounting and a 'system evaluation' with periodic assessments of federally funded research, including its elite MPS, and, in this way, updating, if not tarnishing, the Harnack principle.