

More a Contribution to Scholarship than to Ideology? The Academic Biography of German Anthropologist Irmgard Sellnow

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After the German reunification in 1990, things got quiet around Irmgard Sellnow, according to Andre Gingrich, who knew her personally, a 'rigid party ideologist (...) with Western training' (Gingrich 2005: 146). [1] Back in 1970, Paul Leser characterized her as 'the leading Marxist theoretician among German anthropologists' (Leser 1970: 283). Nevertheless, in contrast to other prominent GDR colleagues, Sellnow's role in the historiographies of anthropology and prehistory has so far received little attention if any. This counts both for academic routines of remembering on the occasion of institutional anniversaries and for attempts at writing the histories of anthropology and history in post-socialist Central Europe. Her life and her contributions to GDR anthropology and its neighbouring disciplines shed light on the close connections of scientific practices and state policies of cultural engineering, and to what extent individual and institutional careers in the branch of social sciences depended on global constellations in politics and economics intermediated by the communist party. Sellnow's professional biography illustrates how anthropology in socialist Central Europe was both shaped by and shaping the Soviet empire known as the Eastern bloc behind the Iron Curtain. [2]

For starters: can Irmgard Sellnow actually be considered an anthropologist? There are different ways to approach this question. From an institutional point of view it would be yes and no.

According to secondary sources, [3] she held a diploma in 'cultural policy' (*Kulturpolitik*, 1950), a PhD title in anthropology (*Völkerkunde*, 1956), and she was appointed professor of anthropology (*Völkerkunde*, 1969) just in time to accept a leading position at the Academy of Sciences. In 1970 Sellnow became the right hand of Joachim Hermann (1932-2010), director of a newly founded institute with great impact for German Marxist-Leninist historiography, the Institute for Ancient History and Archaeology (Zentralinstitut für Alte Geschichte und Archäologie, ZIAGA), that is, outside the institutional landscape of anthropology. During the 1950s, Sellnow began her career at institutions that only much later were labelled as 'ethnographical': firstly, still under her maiden name Seeberger, she got employed as research assistant in 1950 at the Julius Lips Institute at the University of Leipzig. Married to Werner Sellnow (1913-2013) in 1951, Irmgard Sellnow in spring 1952 enrolled as a PhD student at Humboldt University's recently founded Institute for Anthropology (Institut für Völkerkunde), a year later renamed Institute for Anthropology and German Folklore Studies (Institut für Völkerkunde und Deutsche Volkskunde).

Both institutions lost their autonomy in 1968 as a result of the national reforms in research and higher education. In Leipzig, the Julius Lips Institute was integrated as the Department for Teaching and Research of Ethnography 'Julius Lips' (Lehr- und Forschungsbereich für Ethnographie 'Julius Lips') into the new Institute of African and Middle Eastern Studies (Sektion für Afrika- und Nahostwissenschaften). In Berlin, the Institute for Anthropology was renamed Department for Ethnography (Bereich Ethnographie) and became part of the new Institute for History (Sektion Geschichte). Only these two institutions offered a graduation in anthropology (*Ethnographie*), with the department in Berlin specializing in German folklore and cultural history (*Volkskunde*), and the department in Leipzig specializing in non-European regions (*Völkerkunde*). Anthropology was also represented in the framework of other majors such as prehistory (*Ur- und Frühgeschichte*), area studies (*Regionalwissenschaften*), and philology. As in other socialist countries, the Academy of Sciences in general served as the leading institution in science. Concerning anthropology, this principle was only half-way valid as there was only German folklore and cultural history represented in the Institute for German Folklore Studies (Institut für Deutsche Volkskunde), in 1969 reduced to the Department for Cultural History and Folklore Studies (Wissenschaftsbereich Kulturgeschichte/Volkskunde) at the Institute for History (Zentralinstitut Geschichte). A plan initiated by the anthropologists at Humboldt University in 1960 to found an Institute for Anthropology at the Academy of Sciences was intensely discussed but not realized. Instead, the discussion led to an expansion of the Institute for International Relations (Institut für Internationale Beziehungen) at the Academy of Studies on the State and the Law (Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaften) in Potsdam-Babelsberg. Promising later attempts to institutionally strengthen anthropology, mainly pushed forward by Ute Mohrmann (1935-), professor for anthropology (*Volkskunde*) at

Humboldt University until 1991, unfortunately came too late. Throughout its existence, anthropology in the GDR oscillated between the two traditional poles of *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde* framed by close relations both with the Soviet empire and West Germany: a variation of the epistemic state of art in the 19th century but reacting to the needs and chances of a Cold War society in post-war Central Europe. Anthropologists working in the field of *Volkskunde* were engaged in excavating and inventing socialist German traditions whilst anthropologists of *Völkerkunde* added colours to the socialist racial rainbow (Quinn 2017) or – by looking for traces of the universal primitive society – illustrated perceptions of the origins of communism.

One of Sellnow's PhD supervisors, the influential Wolfgang Steinitz (1905-1967), [4] secured her a position at the Institute for Oriental Studies (Institut für Orientwissenschaften) at the Academy of Sciences from November 1958 on, in the department of Walter Ruben (1899-1982). As Sellnow did not have any special knowledge regarding either philological or historical research on Africa, apart from interpreting literature and published sources about South African cattle breeders (Sellnow 1961: 358-472), the decision to affiliate her to the small Department for African Studies apparently was determined by political goals. [5] By the end of the 1950s, the Institute for Oriental Studies was considered to be dominated by 'bourgeois' employees not willing to adapt to Marxism-Leninism and Soviet science. Not only was the director of the institute, Hermann Grapow (1895-1967), actively involved in Nazi Germany as he joined the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) in 1937 and, even worse, he had been a supporting member of the SS since 1939 (Nötzoldt/Walther 2004: 421). This was not the only obstacle hindering the establishment of socialist scientific methods and working routines. But the will to keep the institute with this staff going was greater than the will to push the official antifascist, anti-bourgeois and pro-Soviet policies proclaimed by the government as there was simply not enough personnel yet willing and able to build the new socialist sciences. Leaving the GDR for West Germany was an exit option for nearly 2.8 million citizens until August 1961 (Grau et al. 2016), among them a high number of experts and scholars. Facing this ongoing brain drain, it is of no surprise that during the 1940s and 1950s leading party functionaries voted for benevolent cooperation with the ideological enemies in academia, trying to convince them step by step of the superiority of socialism and later replacing them with full GDR-trained successors. Sellnow was engaged in this appeasement and replacement project from the beginning. Her supervisor at the Department for African Studies, Ernst Dammann (1904-2003), retrospectively stated that he had 'the impression she has been employed to represent and expand the socialist point of view' (Dammann 1999: 148). [6]

Indeed, Sellnow was a reliable member not only of the 1946 founded Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei, SED), but also of other important socialist political organizations such as the trade union (Freier Demokratischer Gewerkschaftsbund, FDGB), the Organization of German-Soviet Friendship (Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft, DSF), and the Women's Association (Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands, DFD). Beside these useful memberships, it was an institutional transfer from the Soviet Union that opened

the door for her to an intense life in academia. Until then having worked as an accountant, Sellnow got her high school degree in 1947 at the new Workers' Faculty (Vorstudienanstalt, 1945-1949, later: Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultät, 1949-1963), in the Soviet Union known as Rabfak (1919-1941). [7] At the Institute for Oriental Studies, Sellnow enabled the founding of both the division of the trade union and of the Socialist Unity Party as there were not enough members in each case until she was employed in 1958. Sellnow engaged in the institute's party group from the beginning as the party secretary, a political resource that strengthened her position not only at the institute itself but in the professional field of anthropology in the GDR in general.

The year 1961 brought profound changes. For Sellnow, a big step forward in her career was the publication of her monograph on the subject of the primitive society (Sellnow 1961), a significantly shortened and in parts rewritten version of her PhD thesis defended in November 1956. Her 900-page thesis was based on a conference paper she presented in 1952 (Sellnow 1954). Her book of 1961 got a lot of reviews on both sides of the Iron Curtain and spread Sellnow's name throughout the scientific communities of anthropology, archaeology and prehistory. After Ernst Dammann left the GDR in December 1961 for a professorship in West-German Marburg (Dammann 1999: 171-176), Sellnow got his post as head of the African department at the Oriental Institute. Additionally, in 1961 Sellnow was appointed executive secretary of the Academy's Committee for Anthropology and German Folklore Studies (Sektion für Völkerkunde und Deutsche Volkskunde). This organization of anthropologists employed in academia, museums and in other cultural institutions was headed by folklorist Wolfgang Steinitz (1905-1967) and later by Indologist Walter Ruben (1899-1982) and folklorist Paul Nedo (1908-1984). The committee was never officially dissolved but it stopped working after 1968. Its purpose was to serve as the central planning organization for anthropology but it never fully reached this goal. Nevertheless, it served as an important resource for its members: it was an honour to be offered membership and it was useful for strengthening contacts with colleagues and officials, discussing new projects and getting institutional support. Irmgard Sellnow decided to leave her position as executive secretary of the committee at the end of 1965 for her appointment as deputy head of the Institute for Oriental Studies. However, as a result of the reformation of higher education and academic research in the GDR realized at the end of the 1960s, the Institute for Oriental Studies was dissolved. For some months it was uncertain whether Sellnow would become head of the Institute for Anthropology at Humboldt University, now reorganized and renamed as Department for Ethnography at the Institute for History (Bereich Ethnographie in der Sektion Geschichte). But in the end she stayed at the Academy of Sciences where she got the post of deputy head of the newly founded Institute of Archaeology and Ancient history, where around a hundred historians worked in four, later five departments.

Sellnow's great influence as a manager of science in the professional fields of prehistory and ethnography is reflected in her various influential positions in scientific and political organizations which Sellnow held for almost thirty years from 1961. The archival sources show clearly that Sellnow was activating these resources [8] when it came to the

implementation of Marxism-Leninism into the disciplines' narratives and working routines. As she was politically more than reliable and had no relatives in the West, Sellnow easily could attend conferences abroad and maintain contact with colleagues in the non-socialist countries, representing German Marxist-Leninist historiography as well as the advantages of state socialism regarding improved gender and class relations, enabling a female accountant to grow to an internationally recognized professor of anthropology and historiography. As emerita, after 1982 she continued to be active and present in and out of academia as shown for example in her collaboration in the five-day international conference 'Problems of pre-capitalist societies' (Grundprobleme vorkapitalistischer Gesellschaftsentwicklung) on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the publication of Friedrich Engels' *On the Origin of the Family* in November 1984 in Dresden (Kagel 1985). Among the fifteen speakers invited from non-socialist countries were Eleanor Leacock, Werner Lange, Richard Lobban Jr. and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban from the United States, David Whitefield from Canada, and Andre Gingrich from Vienna.

Shaping Primitive and Ancient Oriental Societies

Sellnow's scientific work dealt with two topics: the classification of global prehistory and socialism in Africa. Prehistory was crucial for Marxist-Leninist historiography. Labelled as the first of five ascending stages, the period of the primitive society (*Urgesellschaft*) was defined as a historical period when mankind was living according to its nature: in primitive communism, that is, in small, kinship-based units without private property, without the state, without social inequalities, without war – in short, in a technically underdeveloped environment but in collective peace and cooperation. Lewis Morgan's conclusions were based on a close reading of various sources and on his own data which he had collected since the 1840s about North American natives, especially the Iroquois (Morgan 1877). His book was happily perceived by Karl Marx, whose reading notes found after his death laid the grounds for Engels' influential *On the Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels 1884). Explicitly referring to the evolutionist milestone of the century, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 1859), Engels aimed at an universal description of culture and society. Engel's book served as evidence for the Marxist-Leninist assertion of communism as a natural way of life. A few months after his book was published, Engels wrote to Karl Kautsky: 'There is a book explaining the origin of society; it is as crucial as Darwin in biology. (...) Morgan independently discovered the materialistic views of Marx and he directly draws communist conclusions for our society. (...) Morgan reveals the primeval age and its communism in a masterful manner' (quoted from Herres 2018: 262).

Sellnow not only published one of the first Marxist-Leninist monographs on prehistory in the German language but she also addressed one of the central problems in Marxist-Leninist historiography: the definition of the five ascending stages – the so-called 'formations' – for global history: primitive society, slavery society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism. In Sellnow's own words, still as a PhD student in her first year, she chose not to write the 'history of a single people' but to 'systematize the material gathered by ethnographic and

archaeological research in the course of the last eighty years' in order to find the essentials of 'a newer and more complete periodization of prehistory' that 'showing the main periods of historical development the laws of history will become evident' (Sellnow 1954: 138). It may not be surprising that Irmgard Sellnow chose this topic as her entrance ticket to the national and international scientific communities. Her political experiences gained since her studies at the Workers' Faculty may have influenced her. Other explanations for her choice may be her husband's similar interest in the origins of the state and the law (Sellnow 1963) or the lectures of Soviet guest professor Sergey Tokarev (1899-1985) in the academic year of 1951/52 in Berlin and Leipzig. In any case, Sellnow not only opted for a central topic of Marxist-Leninist historiography, but also for a perfect combination of supervisors, namely German folklorist Wolfgang Steinitz, Soviet anthropologist Sergey Tokarev, and German archaeologist Karl-Heinz Otto (1915-1989). None of them was employed at the Institute for Anthropology and Folklore Studies where Irmgard Sellnow got her PhD but every one of them was influential in the areas where Sellnow aimed to succeed: anthropology and (pre-) historiography, both on the national and international level. Together with her political resources she had collected since the late 1940s, these decisions guaranteed promising perspectives for Sellnow's professional future.

Just having been enrolled as a PhD student at Humboldt, the 30-year-old Sellnow was listed as one of fifteen speakers at the inaugural conference of the Institute for Anthropology in April 1952. As early as at this moment, Sellnow had a career waiting for her as all the other speakers were established or highly advanced scholars with research experience and only Sellnow was not. Nevertheless, with her paper, Sellnow positioned herself in the centre of Marxist-Leninist anthropology, proclaiming a new concept for the periodization of prehistory applying Marxist-Leninist theory (Sellnow 1954: 170), allowing ethnographers and archaeologists to analyse their data correctly: 'The systematization of a socio-economic formation (...) is necessary and useful because it enables and supports analysis and provides for the right classification of ethnographical and archaeological material' (ibid.: 138). Sellnow's new concept consisted mainly of two elements: one was her option for setting the means of production as the basic principle for categorizing cultures into one of the five 'formations'. The 'systematization' Sellnow intended for the discussion on the history of the primitive society lay in her four-step model: the beginning, the middle, the late period, and the period of dissolution. A third innovative element was seen in Sellnow's classification of ethnographic data in the framework of the primitive society. In her PhD thesis of 1956, Sellnow then expanded her literature report, ranging from the antique to the 'classics' of Marxism-Leninism, Soviet ethnographers, and the 'bourgeois' who 'reject the existence of the historical laws and in doing this, dissolve as a historical science' (ibid.: 156). In the second part of her thesis, Sellnow interpreted European and US-American perceptions of contemporary natives in Polynesia, Australia and South Africa published since the 18th century as ethnographical evidence for her model of four stages of the primitive society which she had presented at the international conference in 1952. Wolfgang Steinitz saw 'sparkles of dogmatism' in her work but appreciated Sellnow's contribution to 'the

development of ideology' (Steinitz, Comment on Sellnow's thesis, September 12th 1956, p. 2). Otherwise he left the evaluation of Sellnow's work to his colleagues Tokarev and Otto as he considered them to be the experts for the questions addressed by Sellnow. Tokarev, himself a prominent Soviet anthropologist, having taught in Berlin and Leipzig in the winter term of 1951, wrote a 10-page evaluation full of critique (Tokarev, Comment on Sellnow's thesis, August 31st 1956). In his summary, nevertheless, he declared his doubts as marginal and pragmatically wished for a shorter and more balanced publication. He also underlined Sellnow's attempt to consequently apply theories from historical materialism. Reviewers, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, of the version of Sellnow's thesis published five years later also saw a lot of contradictions in her argumentation but also appreciated the first steps towards German Marxist-Leninist anthropology.

Around the same time, migrant scholar Karl Wittfogel (1896-1988), since 1947 appointed professor for the history of China at the University of Washington, published various articles and a monograph on 'Oriental despotism' (Wittfogel 1957). His thoughts were widely discussed and reopened the controversies on the Asiatic mode of production, often abbreviated as AMP, and the ancient oriental class society that had been silenced in Leningrad in 1931 (Dementjeva 2005: 162-167). Back then, Sinologist and party member Karl Wittfogel was one of the main protagonists of AMP. He was declared a renegade when this concept was interpreted as endangering Stalin's policies. Now, thirty years later and almost a decade after Stalin's death, a vivid international debate in socialist countries and among Marxist scholars started and emerged to open critique on dogmatic tendencies in Marxist-Leninist historiography (e.g. Pečírka 1966; Skalník/Pokora 1966; Vidal-Naquet 1964). It seems that the second wave of discussions about AMP during the 1960s was nothing less than the result of destalinization in socialist social and historiographical sciences. After Soviet scholars had intensely engaged in the debate, their German colleagues finally took up the discussion in 1969. Its peak was reached in 1977 with the publication of the volume *Weltgeschichte*, edited by Joachim Herrmann and Irmgard Sellnow.

Referring in general to the Soviet 'World History', published in German a decade earlier in ten volumes (Shukow et al. 1962-1968), this collection of essays on pre-capitalist societies differed from the Soviet example in that there was now the ancient oriental class society as the second of six formations presented, grounded in the theory of AMP. Sellnow once again argued for the importance of doing research on the primitive society, now adding the ancient oriental societies as a new historiographical stage:

'From the beginning, the periods of ancient history were of special importance for both the development of Marxist-Leninist methodology and for the general perception of history. Each of these periods raised interest for the classics of Marxism, for different reasons. (...) Studying the primitive society brought evidence for the fact that private property, class society and the state were not natural institutions, as bourgeois historiography of the 19th century stated, but they were historically formed and fade away again. (...) Marx' and Engels' interest in the ancient oriental societies and states was different. Here, their aim was to

disprove the ahistorical bourgeois notion of property' (Sellnow in Sellnow et al. 1977: 13).

This introduction of the oriental class society as a legitimate sixth formation in Marxist-Leninist historiography was not the beginning of a new dogma, as one might expect. In 1982, the 'History of the Primitive Society' was published (Grünert/Kossok 1982). It was designed as a textbook for students of prehistory, archaeology and ethnography, and it ignored the innovation presented in *Weltgeschichte* (Behrens 1990). The sixth formation, the oriental class society, was surprisingly simply left aside. Years later, in the context of the ongoing debates started by Yulian Bromley's reconsideration of the notion of 'ethnos' (Elfimov 2014: 73-76), Irmgard Sellnow discussed the notion 'peoples' (*Völkerschaften*). Here, she negated the necessity of linking each formation with a different notion of ethnicity arguing that 'only capitalism and socialism brought a higher form of ethnic socialization' (Sellnow 1990: 209). Sellnow voted to stay with the notion 'peoples' when referring to the Marxist-Leninist formation of the primitive society, and she suggested leaving the definition of the ethnicity of the ancient oriental class society to those who interpreted it as an 'independent socioeconomic formation' (ibid.).

For Sellnow, the topic of the primitive society proved to be a sustainable resource for her career. Publishing her PhD thesis in 1961, during the 1960s Sellnow concentrated on her new topic, the Hausa in Ghana and Nigeria. Though not engaging in the German discussion on AMP before 1973, she made herself visible as an expert in ethnographical perspectives on Marxist-Leninist primitive society by participating in important conferences and becoming a member of the international scientific communities dealing with related questions. These resources gained inside the GDR and abroad interacted and multiplied. Despite easily integrating AMP as it went mainstream, Sellnow remained loyal to the five-stage scheme of Marxist-Leninist historiography which she had got to know as a student at the end of the 1940s.

Supporting Socialism in Africa

In 1967, Sellnow's name was published in the international directory of anthropologists: she was presented as a social anthropologist with a special interest in 'West Africa, esp. Nigeria' (*Current Anthropology* 8/1967: 628). Around ten years earlier, when beginning her work at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin in November 1958, internal documents mention Sellnow as having expertise on 'Indonesia and Oceania'. Apparently this description related to her thesis, a major part of which referred to literature on natives in Polynesia, Australia and to a lesser extent in South Africa. Nevertheless, after a short stay in Walter Ruben's Department for Indology she was promoted to the Department for African studies. Here she was introduced to the culture of the Hausa by Ernst Dammann, a scholar with a past as member of the NSDAP since 1931 and as functionary since 1933. Also while working in the GDR, Dammann, living in West-Berlin, did not conform to socialist science policy and he continued to support the Christian mission in Africa. Despite his past and his present behaviour not really fitting into the anti-fascist self-image of the German people's democracy, Dammann's knowledge of African languages was warmly welcomed together with

his international reputation, above all by high-ranking Soviet colleagues (Heyden 1999: 219-223). Efforts were made to keep Damman under political control. The arrival of Sellnow was one of those efforts, arranged by Wolfgang Steinitz personally, enabling a division of the Socialist Unity Party to be established at the institute with Sellnow as the party secretary.

There were two main reasons for the rising interest of GDR politicians and scholars in African affairs: the rise of liberation movements reaching its first peak with Ghana's independence in March 1957 and the return of archival sources that were taken from Germany to the Soviet Union in 1945. In 1955 the documents of the Imperial Colonial Office (Reichskolonialamt) were integrated into the archives in Potsdam and Merseburg and made accessible to historians from the following year on (Bürger 2016: 3). The latter event allowed exclusive access to the colonial history of Germany as documented by the official bureaucracy while the rise of liberation movements in the Global South enabled transnational support for the expansion of socialism and also allowed for the expansion of the global socialist market. In academic terms, here in the words of contemporary leading historian Walter Markov in the legendary *Year of Africa* of 1960, it was expected of 'the historian to support the intensification of the friendship of the German people and its state, the German Democratic republic, with the peoples of Africa: not by just declaring but by showing solidarity in his work. The historian shall help to build an African perception of history rooted in the grand global wealth of the heroic anticolonial and antiimperialist movements of freedom' (quoted from Brahm 2010: 116). The work of Irmgard Sellnow developed in accordance to these demands. Her publications on African issues are limited to the histories of the Bantu in South Africa and of the Hausa in Ghana and Nigeria. Sellnow's sources range from published reports and archival documents since the 18th century as well as fieldwork data collected during her stay in Ghana from October 1965 to March 1966. In her first presentation relating to Africa, on the occasion of the 14th conference of German Oriental Studies in Halle in 1958, Sellnow reported on the policy of apartheid in South Africa (Heyden 1999: 244). Her following publication informed about anticolonial actions of the Bantu. Later she concentrated on issues of trade and the overcoming of non-socialist behaviour and traditions of the Hausa in Ghana and in Nigeria. But overlooking her publications and presentations since 1958 when she expanded her research interests on these issues, Sellnow used the data collected from literature, archival sources and her six-month fieldtrip in Ghana mainly to discuss the Marxist-Leninist primitive society.

Sellnow's regional interest stemmed from the contemporary global political constellation and from the research interests of Ernst Dammann, Sellnow's supervisor from 1958 to 1961 at the Institute for Oriental Studies. Ghana was the first African state to gain sovereignty and it was the first African state where state socialism was attempted, ended by a military coup d'état in 1966. The government under President Kwame Nkrumah took up close ties with socialist countries and in this frame, GDR historians, linguists and anthropologists could easily do research abroad, even after August 1961 when private and official travels abroad were greatly restricted (Niederhut 2005). Sellnow was one of many GDR scholars who travelled to Ghana between 1958 and 1966. Sellnow spent the time between October 1965 and

March 1966 in Ghana, leaving in times of the beginning of political upheaval. In her article *The contribution of ethnography to the research of recent problems in Africa*, published in Hungary in 1967, Sellnow positioned herself as a Marxist-Leninist in the field of African Studies: doing research in this postcolonial environment served to detect the obstacles for the establishment of socialism, that is, non-progressive traditions like religion, many different ethnic groups and languages, private trade, clan chiefs. The challenge then was to push these traditions from the political into the cultural sphere (Sellnow 1967: 9), where they could no longer slow down political progress – that is, the installing of socialist institutions and routines – but would bring colour to the global communist union and national identities.

This kind of research was not continued by Sellnow after she was appointed deputy head of the ZIAGA in 1970. Finishing a collection of essays on *Tradition and non-capitalist development in Africa* (Mardek/Sellnow 1971), Sellnow ended her African decade. She returned to her beginnings, writing about the primitive society, but acted on a higher level now as Sellnow had gathered strong resources in the meantime.

Conclusion

'More a contribution to scholarship than to ideology' (Strauss 1984: 630): with these words Barry Strauss characterized the compilation of 53 essays on the topic of pre-capitalist societies and economies, edited by Irmgard Sellnow and her supervisor, Joachim Herrmann (Herrmann/Sellnow 1982). This volume collected the papers from a conference Sellnow and Herrmann had hosted in 1978. Gingrich's dictum about Sellnow being a 'rigid party ideologist (...) with Western training' raises questions about the notion 'Western'. What can be understood as 'Western' in anthropological training in the GDR? Irmgard Sellnow had never joined a 'Western' institution, be it as a student, as a graduate or as a guest professor. She was trained in socialist institutions ranging from the newly founded Worker's Faculty to the thoroughly transformed universities of Leipzig and Berlin, and she graduated in the new socialist major *Kulturpolitik*. These two aspects can possibly be considered as 'Western' elements in her vocational training: a) some of her colleagues migrating from or into 'the West', b) literature of authors living in non-socialist countries marked as 'bourgeois' as they were not members of the communist parties in 'the West' (Koffer 2018). As it was the usual habit of high-ranking and aspiring scholars in the GDR, Sellnow used 'bourgeois' literature only as empirical material, now and then defining the authors as ideological enemies according to contemporary political needs or simply as ignorant of the 'historical laws' (Sellnow in Mardek/Sellnow 1971: 141). In fact, Sellnow referred to 'Western' or 'bourgeois' literature much more than to Soviet or Marxist-Leninist literature when it comes to her studies on contemporary Ghana or her works on the universal laws of primitive society based on data from South and West Africa, making this part of her work easily accessible for her 'bourgeois' colleagues.

Sellnow's work over almost four decades concentrated on questions of the primitive society. It fitted into the state socialist concept of anthropology as an auxiliary tool for an evolutionist historiography, as already practised by Lewis Morgan, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and their

contemporaries in the 19th century. Ethnographical material gained by observing social groups defined as underdeveloped or uncivilized cultures was used as a source for prehistorical periods when material – that is, archaeological – sources were not available or were not sufficient. According to this concept of a legitimate historiography ethnographers found evidence for every one of the five, later six, stages of Marxist-Leninist global history. A new aspect of Marxist-Leninist anthropology was the demand for political commitment in favour of the formerly subaltern and against authors defined as bourgeois and imperialist.

Concerning the history of anthropology in the GDR, Sellnow's work surely contributed to the discipline's transformation in terms of content and organization. Anthropology became fluid as a so-called 'complex science', expanding into institutions of anthropology, prehistory, ancient history, regional and cultural sciences, and other disciplines doing *Völkerkunde* (that is, research on non-German peoples) and *Volkskunde* (research on German peoples). In the instable years of the establishment of socialism in the GDR, Irmgard Sellnow was one of the few scholars already educated in the new socialist institutions, having extensive resources to integrate Marxism-Leninism into anthropology and (pre-) historiography by publishing and teaching, by transforming and founding suitable institutions, and by supporting like-minded colleagues and aspiring young researchers. Sellnow's high ranking positions in national and international organizations allowed for long-lasting year-long contacts crossing the Iron Curtain, resulting in collaborations like the panel 'Marxist approaches to the process of state formation' at the conference of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnographical Sciences in Zagreb in 1988 with Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (*Current Anthropology* 28/1987: 586) or the conference volume 'International perspectives on Marxist anthropology' (Fluehr-Lobban 1989) relating to the IUAES-conference in Quebec in 1983.

Irmgard Sellnow retired in 1982 but stayed active and visible in the academic field during the 1980s. Her sudden disappearance after 1990 may be surprising regarding her importance for GDR social sciences and her contemporary international reputation. But regarding her importance for the implementation of Marxism-Leninism into GDR anthropology and historiography, her fall into oblivion seems not too surprising. Her younger colleagues and students aimed to continue their career after 1990 in an All-German academic landscape being shaped by West German rules, where former resources like Marxist-Leninist concepts and links to the Socialist Unity Party were not only no longer useful but, on the contrary, harmful. Irmgard Sellnow died in Berlin at the age of 88. Her legacy for anthropology during times of the Cold War and beyond is yet to be discovered.

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[2] For inspiring discussions on the notions of transfer and empire relating to the history of anthropology and social sciences see Steinmetz (ed.) 2013.

[3] By means of German federal archival law, access to Sellnow's personal files in the archives is not allowed before February 2020. For this reason, some of my conclusions can only be preliminary.

[4] Wolfgang Steinitz held various important positions in the fields of science and politics, among others: deputy president of the Academy of Sciences from 1954 to 1963 and from 1954 to 1958 member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (*Zentralkomitee der SED*), see Steinitz/Kaschuba 2006;

Nötzoldt 1998.

[5] From 1958 to 1961, there were only three people working at the department: Ernst Dammann and his assistants Irmgard Sellnow and Ursula Hintze.

[6] All quotations were translated from the German unless otherwise stated.

[7] For an introduction to the history of the Workers' Faculty see Miethe/Schiebel 2008.

[8] On the use of the term 'resources' see Ash 2002.