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Wie der Sozialstaat digital wurde: Die Computerisierung der Rentenversicherung im geteilten Deutschland [How the welfare state went digital: The computerization of pension insurance in divided Germany] by Thomas Kasper (review).

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Thomas Kasper, *Wie der Sozialstaat digital wurde. Die Computerisierung der Rentenversicherung im geteilten Deutschland*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2020 (ISBN: 9783835336513)

The digitalization of public administration is a hot topic, with utopian visions from “smart cities” and nation states vying to serve as global models for communal online access to social services and political participation. But are administrators right to assume that citizens expect everything in a few clicks, or should there be some consideration of human-machine interaction problematics? As demonstrated in *The Government Machine*, Jon Agar’s classic study of the history of computing in Britain, government computing sought to gain control over state action and in turn fomented a view of government as an information-processing entity. Agar found it curious that UK governments should presume low anxiety about a centrally controlled, hierarchically organized, governmental computer system, despite the ascendant concept of privacy. Today, the promise of new-economy public-private partnerships for digital governance raises additional worries about individual and collective data sovereignty, surveillance risks, and leaks. These challenges are compounded when two countries seek to merge their benefits administration.

In a remarkable book retracing how the welfare state became computerized, Thomas Kasper focuses on social security in a divided Germany. Both German states invested early in computing to support social services. Was computing merely a tool rationalizing large data processing needs in Germany, or did it provide impulses for social security reforms? Kasper outlines the conditions of data processing under radically different governmental frameworks. After situating public administration as a strand of the history of computing, Kasper dates deployment of the first computer in West German welfare administration to 1956, with first one, and soon a second, IBM 650, and outlines how expansive pension reform (along with the introduction of social security numbers) both advanced and inhibited the automation of social services. Overhauling a system dating back to 1889 increased the number of eligible recipients as well as the complexity of projections. Meanwhile, despite declarations that there is no inequality in socialism, the basic East German pension left a significant share of recipients below the poverty line, leading not only to supplemental schemes but also to the adoption of computing by the East German trade union confederation in 1968, enlisting the second and the fifth Robotron 300 ever built. In turn, the West German benefits reform of 1972 led to renewed investments in computing resources, including the IBM 3270 and 3277 and later Siemens models 4004/150 and Transdata 8151. In the 1980s, Kasper recognizes technical commonalities between East and West German data processing for social security, despite their radically diverging views on data protection as well as on the impact of computing on the labor market. Finally German reunification required merging the two social security systems; new West German social security reforms were passed in 1989 based on projections from shortly before the fall of the Wall, yet soon applied to citizens of the former East Germany as well. Only joint use of both legacy systems allowed for a unification in one digital system supporting social security in Germany.

One ironic aspect of this intriguing history is that distrust in government computing means that voting, taxation, and benefits administration are still not as digitized in Germany as they are elsewhere. While government agencies certainly use computers, the

bulk of their interaction with the German citizenry is still mainly on paper (and constrained by in-person appointments). Kasper opens with a reference to a German coalition platform from 2018 promising to work towards online access to social security calculations, which countries like Sweden or the Netherlands introduced long ago. Like *The Digital Hand*, James Cortada's study of how computing changed the American public sector, Kasper emphasizes policy and practice over technological detail. This book is less a history of the computers installed in social security administration than of the major policy shifts that necessitated the deployment of computing. The main strength of this rich historical study is Kasper's exhaustive mining of public archives in Germany, documented in a voluminous appendix.

Peter Krapp is professor of film & media studies at the University of California, Irvine, with research interests in cryptologic history, simulations and games, and computer history.