

Women Amid Social Transformation

The Dual Transformation in Germany and Its

by *Hildegard Maria Nickel*

Cet article examine les changements récents de l'économie allemande, son impact sur les femmes, plus précisément, sur le travail des femmes.

The social consensus of the post-war period was founded on a social contract which aimed to achieve compromise and which was inspired by the idea that all members of society were "social partners."

According to the report submitted by Germany to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, German men and women have taken a great leap forward on equal rights since the Third UN Conference in 1985. What is there to say about that assessment from an East German and feminist point of view? Can we confirm it without more ado, or did the period perhaps witness some stagnation or even countertrends at the same time? The percentage of women among the unemployed in the old states of Germany, for example, has not noticeably diminished,¹ and in the new states it is still rising conspicuously. The group most severely affected by joblessness are single parents (and in the new states 87 per cent of those are women). They are seen as a "problem group" in the labour market, particularly hit by "under-provision" and "income poverty," and are a major contingent among Germany's poor (Hanaesch *et al.*). With regard to earned income, the differences between men and women have not narrowed visibly either: women in Germany still earn 73 per cent as much as men (Detral Ministry for Women and Youth 55). Although there are now more women in political assemblies such as the various

tiers of parliament (Detral Ministry for Women and Youth), their access to leading positions in politics and industry remains blocked (see Hadler and Domsch; Schiersmann). Finally, the provision of child care is still unsatisfactory, or in the case of the eastern states has become so.

So what is the yardstick for measuring equality between the sexes? And what can be said about the social situation of

women if we do not include men, i.e., the gender relationship, in the picture? In 1978 Helge Pross concluded that the Federal Republic of Germany could not boast equal rights in the sense of women enjoying the same participatory status in decision-making, as men continued to occupy the decisive positions in all social spheres almost without exception. The only new quality was the exercise of inviting one or two women to join top-level committees, but the basic pattern, gender division of rule, was untouched (Pross). Has this basic pattern changed in any substantial way since? And more, specifically, has it changed to women's advantage? And, especially in the years since unification, has social transformation in Germany brought progress for women's emancipation?

Two interwoven processes of transformation

The Federal Republic of Germany is undergoing a dual social transformation. On the one hand, there are the economic, social, and cultural processes associated with political unification, which have primarily been taking place in the east, in the new federal states. On the other hand, and this is often forgotten, this trans-

formation of Eastern Germany is set within a process of social transformation in the west, the old federal states, which began long before German unification. This more general process relates to the constellation of post-war growth (see Grunert and Lutz), and is evidently undergoing a crisis. At least, the process is no longer smooth and has not yet entered a new phase of prosperity leading to a noticeable decrease in high basic unemployment. From the outset, West Germany's post-war prosperity went hand in hand with reforms achieved after tough conflicts over the distribution of wealth. The results were high levels of employment, prolonged economic growth, cushions for social inequality, a broad expansion and individualization of educational and career opportunity, a diversification of freely chosen forms of cohabitation, and broad democratization. The main features: creation and expansion of a social security system (secondary distribution), public regulation of income redistribution (fiscal policy), creation and social regulation of a network of industrial relations ("tripartism"), and creation of a system of intermediate institutions to defend particular interests and to perform public, non-governmental functions (associations, societies, etc.). The basic social consensus of the post-war period was founded on a social contract that was not legally enshrined but was nonetheless observed in practice, which aimed to achieve compromise on the distribution question and which was inspired by the idea that all members of society were "social partners" with a more or less equal right to benefit from economic growth. During those years, federal government policy did not merely trail along in linear fashion behind the (upward) development in GNP. Social spending actually grew faster than GNP, as in all western European countries; it also played a pro-active part in shaping

Ambivalent Consequences

the social structure by compensating and regulating, and to some degree the emancipatory interests of the individual made gains from this. In the mid-eighties Peter von Oertzen called this basic consensus an "asymmetrical class compromise." The rights implied by this intention were actually assertible. This was the narrow material basis for a whole series of emancipatory steps forward for women in the Federal Republic of Germany from the mid- or late sixties onwards. An analysis which breaks down federal German women's policy into stages shows, for example, that the concept of "free choice" (career or family) gained ground between 1966 and the early eighties, although by the late seventies discussion about "new motherhood" was gradually beginning, reminding women more insistently again of their alleged "nature" (see Alter). Following the structural crisis in the mid-seventies this overall social construct grew unstable; mass unemployment nibbled insidiously at the financial foundations of social state mechanisms for secondary distribution. From 1982 a policy in effect began of gradually modifying established relations of distribution in the name of deregulation, labour market flexibility and the "restructuring" of the social state. Its aim evidently was to discard the social compromise, and in this it was not entirely unsuccessful: in 1991 the social expenditure ratio fell to 29.3 per cent (see Berger). Such are the nature and intensity of this project to resize the social state, however, that the control potential of capital accumulation is at risk. The fulfilment of individual social and cultural needs is flung back to the level of primary income distribution, ignoring the fact that societies today are stratified in terms of status, power, and access to resources along lines of class, gender, age, and ethnic origin (Fraser 1994b, 255). In the long term,

there is a danger that civil consensus will be undermined.

The dual process of transformation does not affect all the men and women in Germany at the same time and in the same way. The differentiations between the sexes, and also among women, are huge. Struggles over the distribution of resources, above all employment, are exacerbated. In the same breath, the old bourgeois order of gender, which had long since been abolished in the GDR anyway, has finally vanished in the Federal Republic. Or to put it another way, the contract between the sexes associated with the industrial era of capitalism is becoming obsolete, with both parties, women and men, challenging it increasingly. The old gender order centred on the "normal family" and the ideal of a "family income" (Fraser 1994a, 360) and was founded on the division and bipolar gender allocation of gainful employment and domestic labour:

This world was characterized by the idea that people should be organized in a heterosexual nuclear family with a male as its head, living primarily off the

the late sixties at the latest, and in spite of the fact that many families did not fit that industrial model before, it is ultimately the foundation on which the German social state, modifications apart, is built. It is certainly one reason why there are structural limits to integrating women into the world of paid employment. East German women are feeling this particularly at present, but they may be the ones who bring to a head the conflict over who gets the jobs, which is the very core of the equal rights issue, and who shows up in the need for renewal in employment policy and the social state. At least, they illustrate problems which affect women generally in Germany.

East German women: the double salto

Ursula Schroter maintains (and she is not alone in this) that East German women can be divided into two distinct groups, and in May 1993, according to her representative random sample, 35 per cent of all East German women belonged to the group of losers (Schroter 41). I have my doubts as to whether this blanket approach is

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man's earned income. The male head of household received a 'family income' which was enough to feed children and a wife-and-mother who performed the housework unpaid. (Fraser 1994a, 351)

Even if this breadwinner marriage has been eroding in Germany since

correct. What is the yardstick? Is it the social situation of women in the GDR? Is it a comparison with East German men? Or with West German women, or foreigners living in Germany? Or does it simply mean (and I fear it does) that many East German women are worse off than others? Dichotomy hinders our insight into the multiple facets of reality. Besides,

clinging to the thesis of losers and winners assumes that women are the lucky or unlucky victims of a structural process over which they have no influence. The opposite is true. Women, like men, were active protagonists in the changes that led to the end of the GDR. Women, like men, voted in the majority at the GDR's first free elections in March 1990 for rapid economic and cur-

spite of all the myths to the contrary that now seek to impose a different interpretation—that when the men and women of the GDR took recourse to “Exit and Voice” (*Zapf*) and acceded to the Federal Republic, they were relinquishing their claims on a system that included a “head start on equality” for East German women (Geißler) Job security, full employment for women and mothers taken

for granted, gainful employment compatible with motherhood, government measures to assist women and families, abortion available in the first twelve weeks with the costs (if the op-

tion was taken up) borne by social insurance, and a countrywide network of child care facilities. These were the as yet unparalleled trademarks of the GDR's “head start on equality” that, quite possibly, caused more women than men to ponder a while back in 1990, before beginning their democratically elected free fall into a different social configuration, their “crash landing in the modern age” (Wiesenthal). Ultimately, however, these familiar manifestations of a social state in paternalistic form were unable to withstand the tide of history. The men and women of the GDR had broken out of a society that took decisions for them and provided for their wants in order to participate in a modern world that drew its legitimation from other mechanisms—mass consumption, parliamentary democracy, and the welfare state—and that, in times of economic prosperity, had provided universal access to its highly developed mass culture. Social polarizations seemed to have been erased, and the social state seemed to present a reliable framework. But once the men and women of the GDR had arrived in the modern Federal Republic, it turned out that this other kind of society was already “evaporating” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 35).

The stable development that men and women of the GDR had perceived from the outside as the dominant feature of the Federal Republic was founded not on the elimination of social inequality, but on its regulation by means of high wages, full employment (extending increasingly to women), and a redistribution, or “transfer” of resources, by the social state to cushion the “weaker strata” and overcome crasser differences in the standard of living. The cracks that began to permeate this prosperous society in the mid-seventies were less visible on the outside or else appeared to be temporary and, if everyone knuckled down to the task, capable of repair. So the men and women of the GDR were not simply set down upon unification in a different society ridden with modern imponderables and replete with alien challenges that they had chosen of their own will to confront. Instead, the social fabric that they expected to encounter in the Federal Republic was already being eroded by the time of unification, or had at least stumbled against own limits. Nevertheless, the “Wende” of 1989, set in motion an irreversible, dynamic social process, and the head start on equality was plunged into the ambivalent maelstrom of modernization that had already held the West in its grip for some time. It is also buffeting the gender relationship, which is being redefined, while the gender contract hitherto taken for granted and practised by East Germans is losing its structural basis. Suddenly, jobs for women require legitimation and are the centre of bitter rivalry over this “strategic resource” (Kreckel 1992).

(Women's) Jobs in Crisis

Feminists in the United States are talking about a “vision of post-industrial society” in which “the age of family income is being replaced by the age of paid employment for all” (Fraser 1994a, 360), with a negotiable social policy that should “promote the full and equal participation of women in all spheres of public life:

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rency union. Now, however, what many did not wish to recognize at the time is becoming very clear. The crisis of transformation in the west, with a still incomplete transition to a post-Fordist stage, is hitting (eastern) women harder than (eastern) men (“Aspekte der Arbeitsmarktentwicklung”). It is a waste of time celebrating the “winners” among women who, in spite of massive job losses in industry and agriculture, the erosion of once reliable social measures such as child care, and all the manifestations of political exclusion, have managed nonetheless to stay on keel. It is also a waste of time to lament the “losers,” who are still not able, or else are less able than ever, to extract themselves and their children from the nightmare of fears and uncertainties. It is rather more useful to address the transformation crisis in the Federal Republic of Germany and ask how it is affecting women at various levels, and also to recall and demand those mechanisms that society can employ to regulate such matters. The response to the drastic social problems of the waning twentieth century must not be the fatalism that now appears to haunt the social sciences in Germany like a new spirit of the age.

If we look back at the drastic changes of 1989-90, we can see—in

at work, in politics, in the communality of civil society" (Fraser 1994a, 358), but there are a few sociologists in Germany who no longer feel any doubt that "we must accept that as a permanent feature a large proportion of adults of both sexes will not find their place or their income in 'normal' employment" (Offe 796). Mass unemployment in the west and "people's unemployment" in the east are to be appeased by a "citizens' annuity," and the apparently worrying "appetite" of East Germans for jobs, which is reflected in a much stronger "inclination to seek employment" (Kreckel 1995, 3) might possibly be quelled in this way. The latest IWH report, for example, suggests that the lack of jobs can only be solved "by withdrawal from the labour market" ("IWH Report" 13).

This is not the place to discuss in detail the complex and problematic facets of this line of argumentation. Let us focus, rather, on one aspect of particular social sensitivity. A line of argument that would have seemed unthinkable not so long ago appears to be launching an insidious attack on women's eagerness for jobs, which is growing in the west and refusing to decline in the east. These days no sociologist can be so blind to gender as not to recognize the essential targets of this onslaught. After all, the structural data on long-term employment in the new federal states speak a clear language: long-term unemployment has become a women's problem. In 1992, women accounted for 43 per cent of the unemployed in the new states, but 78 per cent of the long-term jobless. The labour market statistics, which have been discussed at length elsewhere (see Nickel, Kuhl, and Schenk; Schenk), reflect two conflicting trends: on the one hand, a structural discrimination against women in the German labour market, especially when a new occupational orientation is required; when women lose their jobs, usually unwillingly and through no fault of their own, their chances of a fresh start are poorer. The other trend reflected in the statistics reveals the

"obstinacy" of East German women, who insist on expecting to work in spite of all the obstacles (Kreckel 1995, 7). East German women are resolutely resisting the social ostracism that is transmitted to them via the labour market. Apparently, the sense of being dependent on somebody else's grace or provision without earned income of one's own is so alien to eastern women that they will try all they can to remain in the shrinking labour market. They meet with very varying degrees of success. Processes of social differentiation are at play that give the lie to blanket assumptions about "winners" and "losers". Access to jobs and success having acquired them is structured, not only by gender, and also by the classical features of age and qualifications (Schenk 77), but today previous experience of a particular sector of the economy or a specialist field can turn out to be a major home advantage or, given the deindustrialization that pervades the new federal states, an insuperable geographical hurdle.²

Creating and resharing jobs as a positive alternative to the "citizen's annuity"

In the light of the developments we can expect, it is doubtless important to appeal to "solidarity between the

value generation and a comparatively underdeveloped service sector (83). Since the "quantum leaps" in the development of productive forces due to new "lean" technology and the structure of labour, no new social consensus has been forged. Value creation in the core sectors of industry is falling continuously within the long-term structural transformations. Job losses in these sectors are not being automatically compensated by new jobs in the tertiary sector. This faulty development is reinforcing an already unfavourable distribution of wealth that militates against dependent employees and is intensifying the trends towards exclusion and marginalization within that group. Schenk and Schlegel see the following scenario as conceivable for Eastern Germany: formerly female sectors (services, care, etc.) become mixed; mixed-gender sectors increasingly close their doors to women; male sectors remain closed to women. In this situation, projects for social reform need to find ways of interacting the social core that is engaged in employment with those constantly growing sections of the population that have only indirect or temporary links with employment structures.

It is no longer possible to return to the simple replica of a familiar fabric, such as the transition period within the post-war constellation. The Fordian era has produced a so-

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genders" (Holst and Schupp 25). After all, "What is to become of a country with no place for her" (Dettling 366)? But then who seriously believes in the power of enlightenment when we are talking about sharing "strategic resources?"

According to the OECD Report on Germany, the Federal Republic has an above-average share of industrial

cial structure that is too developed and differentiated for that. We must look towards modern, modified proportions in society that today will have to take account of women's share in the socio-economic reproduction process. This implies changing the present pattern of distribution in women's favour. The second condition for moving on to a new

stage of development is a well-chosen design for the tertiary sector. Both of these restructuring processes presuppose that society can agree on a new "social contract," whereby the huge increase in GNP generated by higher productivity is reflected in a rational distribution that is not forced by unregulated market forces to exclude and marginalize people, but that draws on the innovative potential of society, such as more highly intellectualized and feminized labour. We do not believe this will be an easy task: this orientation means shifting more income away from highly productive to less productive (service) work, and that requires broad social consensus and new forms for civil society to establish compromise.

The principle for future investment and for a policy that seeks to create full employment for both men and women must be, given the circumstances, a redistribution and restructuring of gainful employment: less industrial work (by the week but also per lifetime), calling for greater skills and more humane and ecological standards, and more intelligent socio-cultural work in providing services. Whether this would include the proposal to "make private households employers" needs uninhibited discussion (see Schauble 141f).

Predictions of labour requirement trends until the year 2010 assume that manufacturing activity will decrease in relative terms from 34.9 per cent to 28.3 per cent and primary services (general services, office work, retail trade) from 42.4 per cent to 36.2 per cent. Expansion is only expected in the secondary services (support, consultancy, teaching, organization and management, research and development), with their share of labour increasing from 22.8 per cent to 35.4 per cent (Holst and Schupp 42). Whether women can profit from these developments will not depend merely on their "determination," but quite considerably on external regulated and regulating factors, because in terms of education and vocational qualifications they are the equals of

men. It would certainly mean integrating women into employment structures on an equal basis rather than temporarily and peripherally.

Proposals for a provisional solution to the crisis that would guarantee a minimum standard of existence based on need, such as the idea for a "citizen's annuity" to permit a "modest lifestyle" (Offe 806), will only function (what else could we expect?) in a stable employment system. One way or the other, overcoming mass unemployment remains the key question. Condemning efforts to create new jobs to failure from the outset reveals a lack of political imagination. In any case, this is not a debate that only concerns the experts. There are concrete proposals for stepping up public and private investment, for a regional structural policy that includes active job creation, for developing a sector of local authority employment in social and cultural services to be publicly funded and adequate to the primary labour market, for shortening the working week and revaluing reproductive work in the family (see eg. *wst*-Mitteilungen). All of them need to be discussed, detailed, and implemented. The advantage of such a solution is obvious: highly skilled services in the fields of health, education, and the arts exert a beneficial effect on social productivity. Women eager to enter the labour market or clinging to their place within it would not be the only ones to profit. In fact, building these services could offer a way out of the mire into which Germany is descending more and more with regard to its social culture and social care. The socio-cultural service sector could become the launch pad for a public intervention aimed (in the long term) at overcoming the crisis.

The author wishes to thank Hasko Hüning of the Free University, Berlin, for discussions, ideas, criticism, and cooperation.

¹On a positive note, the percentage of women in employment is stated to have risen noticeably in all OECD coun-

tries apart from Finland, from 52.1 per cent in 1982 to 59.7 per cent in 1992 (OECD 8). At the same time it is recalled that most part-time jobs are held by women, over 60 per cent in the OECD countries ("Arbeitsgruppe Sozialberichterstattung, Teilzeitarbeit—eine Frauensache"). In 1985, 9.3 per cent of women in West Germany were registered unemployed. This figure fell continuously until 1991 to 6.6 per cent but has since been rising again to reach 8.2 per cent in 1993 (Detral Ministry of Women and Youth, Table 15).

²This is reflected in current research on the banking and insurance sector. See Hüning and Nickel, "Finanzdienstleistungsbeschäftigung im Umbruch," and "Personalstrategien in Finanzdienstleistungsunternehmen in Sachsen-Anhalt," both funded by the Commission for Research into Social and Political Change in the New German States (KSPW), final report forthcoming in 1996.

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