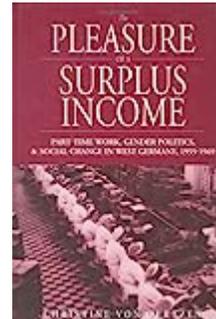




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A Quiet Revolution in Postwar German Women's History

Christine von Oertzen has written a fascinating study of the integration of women into the postwar German labor market through part-time employment. Battles over part-time work for women in the 1950s and 1960s are the focus of her book, yet the significance of her study resonates far beyond this socioeconomic framework. Von Oertzen also attempts to reconstruct, with considerable success, the psychological impact of part-time employment for women and German society. By looking at the grassroots level of interactions between women, their employers, and families, von Oertzen digs beneath the surface of official policy discourse to trace a seismic shift in thinking about women working not out of economic necessity but out of a desire for work. Uncovering a wealth of sources from companies that hired women and interviews with women themselves, von Oertzen reconstructs the physical and psychological conditions, as well as the historical actors responsible for, the transition from a prewar breadwinner/housewife social model to a much more complex social structure in which women negotiated, and often integrated, multiple identities as workers, wives, and mothers. Von Oertzen vividly details the ways in which women were not just objects of state

policy but rather agents who shaped new perceptions of employment and gender roles.

Von Oertzen effectively outlines her argument and the larger significance of her work in her introduction. The focus of the book is on West Germany, but her last chapter compares women's experiences with part-time work in both the FRG and the GDR. The book begins with the mid-1950s debates over part-time work in the midst of the economic miracle and ends with the 1969 legislative institutionalization of part-time unemployment. During this period, von Oertzen argues, a profound change occurred in how society perceived the employment of married women outside the home. As they became increasingly integrated in white-collar work, and factory employment to a lesser degree, women were increasingly accepted as providers of a supplementary income without abandoning the home. In the original German edition of this book (1999), von Oertzen sought to provide a long-needed history of postwar gender, and portray women not as the "domestic caricature" she contends predominated in existing historiography but rather as active individuals spearheading a shift in thinking to a less derisory

regard for working women (p. 2). The appearance of this new English edition allows von Oertzen to mention that recent historiography has substantiated her main arguments: women's work became more accepted during this period, though women lost status in the trade unions, and fathers gradually assumed greater responsibility in child-rearing. Despite the persistence of the male breadwinner model, perceptions of women as normal workers grew.[1] Inspired by studies of American gender relations in the 1950s and 1960s, von Oertzen argues that attitudes towards West German women in paid employment were shaped not only by the rise of feminism but also the rise of women's paid labor in East Germany. The difference between the FRG and the GDR, she argues, was not the higher number of women working in the East, as has been often argued by scholars. Instead, the number of working women in the FRG skyrocketed during this period, but men were labeled breadwinners while women were seen as primarily caregivers and baby-producers. By the late 1960s, von Oertzen demonstrates that this strict dichotomy was replaced by a new reality at different levels in the factories, government agencies, offices, and family lives of West German women.

The book is organized according to themes ranging from changing perceptions of married women and employment to structural and legal changes in industrial and clerical work environments. In chapter 1, von Oertzen provides an overview of immediate postwar perceptions of women at work. In 1945-48, German authorities asserted that women with "family responsibilities" should only work in the absence of male breadwinners; after 1948, definitions of "family responsibilities" shifted as the image of women in part-time work became normalized. However, women in this position were still widely seen as opponents of male breadwinners, and battles ensued between women's associations, the labor ministry, and employers over women and paid work. In the 1954 Weisser report, written by a professor of social policy working for the labor ministry, defined women in paid employment not as a negative symptom of economic necessity, as they had long been portrayed by unions and political parties on both the right and left, but as a positive role model compatible with middle-class society (p. 30). Interestingly, von Oertzen places this social and economic debate within the context of larger popular debates over the question of gender as a social construct. This revolution in thinking began to accelerate in the late 1950s and early 1960s, von Oertzen contends in chapter 2, as labor policy-makers, employers, and the media grappled with this new image of women's employment. In

1959, the Federal Office for Employment reported that it had become easier to place women in part-time positions, and that fears of unprofitability were unfounded. The popular media promoted images of women in part-time work as economic relief for families. This coverage caused political parties across the spectrum to alter their positions and lift the taboo on women's employment, though for different reasons. The SPD supported women within the context of gender politics debates and supported women's desire for work, while the CDU emphasized women's work as a labor market necessity.

Von Oertzen characterizes these shifts in thinking as evidence of West Germany's transition towards a more "modern" society. But while the social and cultural climate was changing, West Germany's legal structures still had to catch up. The legal institutionalization of part-time work is the focus of chapter 3, where the author analyzes debates over tax, social security, and civil service law pertaining to women's work. Von Oertzen argues that legal support for part-time employment resulted from an "artful process of negotiation" in which a compromise was reached: women could have employment status of their own as long as they did not challenge fundamentally the gendered division of labor (p. 72). At the same time, institutionalization of part-time work in systems of social security and civil law signaled a quiet revolution that re-cast the future of work and the gender order. As explored further in chapter 4, this balancing act between a revolution in women's work and traditional family structures created an interesting paradox, as women earned their own money and established themselves as valued workers while remaining "bound within the 'premodern' structures" of the family principle" (p. 99). On one hand, housewives moved from the economic margins, where they had been statistically ignored in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to occupy a socially accepted position in the workforce. However, this success was not universal.

In chapters 5 and 6, von Oertzen traces women's factory and clerical work, and she argues that women were more successful in winning acceptance in the latter. Interestingly, von Oertzen highlights a complex interaction between women's interests, desires, and needs in negotiating work conditions. She portrays women as actively building strong friendships and communities as they became loyal, productive, and integrated workers at sites like the Bahlsen cookie factory. However, these case studies of success were exceptional, as female industrial workers were still seen as a social problem, especially if their husbands were white-collar, salaried

employees. In contrast, women assimilated into clerical work more smoothly. Technological changes and increasingly flexible hours and conditions made it possible for women to balance work and home without disrupting prescribed gender structures. In chapter 7, von Oertzen explores women's motives for pursuing part-time work and the domestic environments that encouraged or discouraged them. The question of part-time work was not just a problem of time and space, but women also had to "find common ground with their husbands, despite differing ideas about family life and paid employment" (p. 179). Von Oertzen stresses how difficult it is to pin down women's motives from existing sources, and she argues that the answer lies somewhere between the "needs" and "desires" for work articulated by women in the interviews conducted. One conclusion that emerges from her sources is that women were not simply trying to combine work and family, but were also fighting for their own interests. The nuances of distinction between these positions, she argues, still remain buried and are difficult to recover.

In her final chapter, von Oertzen compares women's part-time employment in West and East Germany. She relies on Almut Rietzschel's work on the GDR as she considers the history of women's labor for German society as a whole. Von Oertzen identifies similarities between the two nations in the phases in which part-time work was problematized and discussed. In both contexts, labor shortage was a major impetus, and struggles over part-time work were most difficult in industrial labor. However, there were significant differences. Though both societies debated gender roles and family priorities, in the

East these debates concentrated on the politics of "equal rights," whereas in the FRG, part-time employment "represented a consensus-building societal compromise" (p. 199).

Von Oertzen's study is essential reading for any scholar interested in postwar women's history. Her work is a model for historians using social history to investigate continuity and change in gender roles, both at the political and popular level. The wide range of archival sources at the basis of her arguments makes them convincing, and though von Oertzen identifies some of the complexities in reconstructing women's consciousness and motives, she substantially supports her thesis regarding the broad-based shift in thinking about women as integrated, "normal" workers. By searching out examples of women playing an active role in spearheading this shift in perception, she persuasively demonstrates the ways in which this new thinking developed largely in the everyday actions between women, their employers, and their families, rather than primarily in legal and political institutions. Thus, her work provides scholars, teachers, and students a fascinating glimpse into the grassroots, daily reality in which feminism was actualized for women in the postwar world.

Note

[1]. For comparisons to early twentieth-century perceptions of women's labor, see Kathleen Canning, *Languages of Labor and Gender: Female Factory Work in Germany, 1890-1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

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