

Eva Kolinsky, Hildegard Maria Nickel, eds. *Reinventing Gender: Women in Eastern Germany since Unification*. London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003. xi + 284 pp. \$62.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7146-8311-9.



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Negotiating Gender

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Since 1990, a wealth of scholarship has been produced dealing with the German Democratic Republic and its forty year history. The sheer amount of research, facilitated in large part by the opening of state archives, testifies to the very specific and problematic nature of this state and its position in European history. Further complexity is added to this by the numerous studies on the role of gender in the GDR and the unique situation of women in this state. From its inception, the GDR state endorsed female emancipation as a goal and enacted laws and provisions to allow for one of the highest female employment rates in Europe, while at the same time providing one of the most comprehensive systems of support for mothers.

As the title implies, *Reinventing Gender* does not deal with the role of women and gender in the GDR, but rather concentrates its investigation on the situations and experiences of women in the *neue Bundeslaender* in the thirteen years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This collection attempts to address these experiences in their many

social, economic and political manifestations. In their introduction, Kolinsky and Nickel detail the prevailing constructions of gender in the West and the East before reunification and describe the challenges posed by unification for East German women. They describe a gender order which is “more pluralistic, as traditional patterns co-exist in the west and/or east alongside newly emerging hybrids and varying gender arrangements in the east” (p. 15). Within this more pluralistic, flexible gender system, Kolinsky and Nickel argue, East German women cannot simply be dismissed as the losers of unification. Rather, they hope to demonstrate that “East German women have emerged more forcefully as agents and creators of their own living conditions than was possible or necessary before 1990” (p. 13).

The book is divided into three sections. The first section deals with employment and education in unified Germany and the impacts of changes in these areas on East German women. Hildegard Maria Nickel, Sabine Schenk, Rosalind Pritchard and Eva Kolinsky investigate the new constructions of gender identity in light of em-

ployment policy and educational practices in the unified Federal Republic. Nickel examines recent political discourse on female employment within the context of a “service and ‘knowledge’ society” (p. 34). She argues that female employment takes on added importance in post-industrial society, and the hierarchical, traditional gender structures of the Federal Republic are insufficient for its creation. Despite the disadvantages experienced by East German women in the new gender order, Nickel maintains that they are actually in a position, due to their training and education, to participate more fully in a system which will have to ignore traditional gendered employment patterns in order to thrive.

In “Employment Opportunities and Labour Exclusion: Towards a New Pattern of Gender Stratification?” Sabine Schenk examines statistical information about women’s participation in the labor market to demonstrate that East German women are unwilling to accept the patterns of female labor “inherited” from West Germany. East German women, Schenk argues, do not appear to want to submit to the pressures of maintaining both family and financial independence by retiring from the labor market. Although East German women experience increasing difficulties finding work, and their presence is declining in the work force, “contrary to the West German pattern, where the family situation is a significant predictor for the labour-force participation of women, the only significant predictor in the case of East German women is their occupational status” (p. 72).

Rosalind Pritchard examines the changes in educational programs and their implications for gender roles. She demonstrates that the element of choice and increased individual autonomy within the new educational system seemed to benefit girls, as they generally fared better in the new school system than boys. However, the restructuring of vocational education affected women more adversely than men due to structural insufficiencies. Pritchard demonstrates that higher education reform has increased female university attendance, and women who leave higher education are more likely to move to pursue higher-status jobs. Pritchard concludes her piece by examining the position of female teachers since unification. Although affected by radical change and re-training, many school teachers stayed in their jobs despite structural changes and continue political education of the young despite recriminations about ideology and their involvement with the state in the GDR. Teaching remains a largely female profession, with a noteworthy staff continuity despite regime change.

In the final essay in the first section, “Gender and the Limits of Equality in East Germany,” Eva Kolinsky investigates the paradigm of the working mother so important in the GDR. She demonstrates that despite the economic and political pressures exerted on East German women after unification, few were willing to give up this *Leitbild*. As she states, “if transformation was to have exported the western model of policy packages, institutions and system parameters to the east, it failed with regard to women. They retained distinctive orientations. In their insistence on regarding qualifications and employment as core components of a female biography, women in East Germany tried to retain their established priorities and defy the assumptions about gender and its social space built into the transformational model” (p. 118). Indeed, the decline in birth-rates and marriages as women postpone their families not only contrasts with the western model, but also demonstrates, Kolinsky argues, the continuing appeal of GDR gender constructions.

The second section of the book is entitled “Gender and Families in the New Risk Environment.” In “Women and Poverty in the German Welfare State,” Mechthild M. Matheja-Theaker looks at statistical data and sociological research to determine how poverty is defined in unified Germany, and how it affects the social groups which are most at risk. Women in unified Germany face a higher risk of unemployment and loss of income than men; initially most East German women thought this problem would be resolved quickly when the transfer to a democratic, market system was complete. However, the failure of the economic upturn to materialize hit East German women especially hard. They comprise the majority of unemployed and welfare recipients. Matheja-Theaker maintains that this situation is unlikely to change in the near future due to changing economic imperatives. She argues that the gender regime might offer a solution to the problems posed by this situation, but fails to articulate this solution, concluding that a radical, but unlikely, change of social norms would be required. This engaging contribution seems to add little new material to the debates opened up in the first section.

Beate Schuster and Angelika Traub review the research on single motherhood in East Germany, both before and after unification. Single parenthood was far more common in the East than in the West, and was a politically and economically more viable family form. This family form continued after unification. Single mothers continued to participate just as much in the labor force as their married counterparts in the East, in marked contrast to the West; thus, the authors deduce, the per-

centage of single mothers whose survival depends on social security benefits is much smaller in the East than in the West. They deduce that East German single mothers have, in part, maintained their presence in the labor market due to the increased availability of time-saving household consumer goods, although child care is more difficult to obtain. Schuster and Traub argue that East German single mothers, despite their larger risk of poverty, do not see themselves as losers of the unification. Rather, self-reliance and flexibility fostered in the GDR have made them more aggressive and adaptive in preserving their politically and economically independent status in unified Germany.

The optimism Schuster and Traub trace is not to be found in the interviews Vanessa Beck conducts and analyzes. Beck interviewed women in Sachsen-Anhalt who are unemployed or involved in retraining to avoid unemployment. These interviews demonstrate the traumatic effects of market instability on women who took employment for granted before unification. Beck concludes that, “generally speaking, unemployment shows up and increases divisions between individuals and society, and between individuals and (state) institutions” (p. 185). It is unclear, however, whether this is a specifically post-communist experience or a more general phenomenon in any society with unemployment problems. More interestingly, she traces a development in the recognition of gender bias among East German women, specifically among married women who, because their husbands are employed, are ineligible for unemployment benefits themselves. Beck notes a desire to continue combining motherhood and work, and a reluctance to either “revert” to traditional Western gender patterns or to accept of Western employment strategies. East German women mentioned in this study seem less to be reinventing gender than relying on traditional Eastern conceptions despite pressures to change.

Similar desires appear in the study of the aspirations of young women in the East conducted by Barbara Keddi, Patricia Pfeil, Petra Strehmel and Svendy Wittman. Even among women in the East who were children in 1989, themes of employment and motherhood still dominate “life-plans”; however, the authors are uncomfortable making any far-reaching conclusions from small samples. Once again, “reinventing” gender is not an overwhelming concern of the young women interviewed, or of the authors of the study. They concede that “all young women have to cope with gender-role expectations that arise from collective assumptions about the female life,” yet maintain that young women define for

themselves the “lasting priorities” in their lives (p. 207). How this redefinition affects, or is affected by, gender constructs remains unclear.

In his analysis of studies on attitudes towards the family in East and West, Harald Uhlendorff concludes that East German women have a stronger family orientation than either East German men or West Germans. However, this orientation does not imply a return to traditional “house-wife” roles, as employment continues as an integral part of East German female identity. Rather, the family, which had served as a buffer between individual and state in the GDR, became a support mechanism for women who still wanted to combine employment and motherhood. Although a tightening of family ties was to be expected immediately after the rapid transformation of unification, Uhlendorff maintains that these relationships in the East will remain close, and “that East German specifics in family life and differences between East and West German families will continue to exist for a long time to come” (p. 223). The specifics of the East German family model, with its inter-generational support and normativization of the working mother, provides an anchor for the identity of East German women who do not want, and sometimes cannot afford, to cease working.

The final section of the book includes two articles about gender and politics in unified Germany. In “Women in Politics in Post-Communist East Germany,” Marilyn Rueschmeyer argues that unification narrowed the women’s potential to participate publicly in political life, due to the new economic constraints on balancing work and family. Moreover, women’s issues were under-represented in the political agenda of the new parties after 1989. Rueschmeyer points out, however, “that women’s interests are historically constructed. Articulating women’s interests in a radically new economic, political and social situation and making these goals attractive to women in their transformed life situations, is inevitably a slow process” (p. 238). She identifies a “slow rise” (p. 246) in the political participation of women in the East and attributes this partly to the failure of the West to address the needs of the population in the East. Such participation, Rueschmeyer suggests, is also part of the legacy of the GDR, where women were experienced in political participation, if only at a factory or local level. As women grow increasingly aware and confident of their ability to negotiate the new system, they become both more vocal and visible within it.

In the last chapter, Karin Weiss and Katrin Isermann

consider women invisible and unheard in the system imposed on them. They deal with the involvement of young East German women in right wing groups and organizations. Weiss and Isermann argue that East German women are more visible in this culture in the East than in the West, since they feel marginalized and displaced by the transformation of unification. These women typically have a lower educational level, fewer chances at success in the market economy, and look to such groups for stability and community. They argue that the certainty of state-sanctioned, nominal, gender equality and the loss of the viable role model of the working mother left many East German young women with no incentive to support democracy. They demonstrate that women in the East play an important role in these groups, and although they participate less actively in violence, they share attitudes with male members of these groups and they occupy important positions within them. Unless democracy, Weiss and Isermann argue, can demonstrate its relevance to the disaffected youth of the East, this alarming trend will not disappear.

Overall, this volume makes a valuable contribution to the growing corpus of research on gender studies and post-war Germany. This reviewer would have liked to have seen more thorough theoretical analysis of the title, “reinventing gender,” and the potential that this concept

might have not only for socio-historical studies, but also for other areas of German and gender studies. Indeed the “gender” that is reinvented seems to refer to gender patterns of the West that are not accepted and adopted unequivocally in the East. Many of these essays suggest that East German women cling to gender patterns advocated in the GDR as one way of maintaining individual independence and collective identity in the face of an unpredictable economic system. Gender in these cases is certainly renegotiated, yet for us to really believe that it is reinvented, essays dealing with West German women’s reaction to their East German counterparts and their presence or absence in the labor market should have been included. In some cases, the issue of reinventing gender appears only in the last paragraph of these essays. However, these papers on women, work and politics prove just how much material there is for scholars in this field, and present one more way of engaging with the events of the last fifteen years in Germany.

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