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## Socialist Modern

### East German Everyday Culture and Politics

*Katherine Pence*

*and Paul Betts*

EDITORS

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Ann Arbor

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*Dedicated to the memory and  
spirit of Daphne Berdahl (1964-2007)*

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## Introduction

*Katherine Pence and Paul Betts*

The reunification of Germany in 1989, known popularly as the *Wende*, may have put an end to the experiment in East German communism, but its historical assessment is far from over. In many ways this was a predictable by-product of the *Wende* itself, which abruptly released German history from its cold war confines. With it came a lively transatlantic discussion about the meaning of the past for reunified Germany. While this discussion has largely been inspired by the pressing need to take stock of the country’s changed place in a brave new world of post-cold war geopolitics, a pronounced uncertainty about how to interpret Germany’s historical role within the broader drama of the past century has also fueled the debate.<sup>1</sup> Even if one might detect an assumption that German history is somehow coterminous with the century’s more general “crisis of classical modernity,” the framework for interpretation is wider than ever. For many observers, this is all the more unsettling given that the long-familiar narratives of modern German history—nationalism, socialism, and even liberalism—seemed to have lost much of their once-formidable explanatory power, driving idealism and even popular appeal.<sup>2</sup> No sooner had the Berlin Wall been dismantled than historians began to reassess Germany’s twentieth century from fresh post-cold war perspectives. This has been delicate business, to be sure, as many of these post-1989 debates have been quite contentious and public, particularly concerning reconsiderations of the role of ordinary Germans in the Nazi regime and the Final Solution. For example, controversies over Daniel Goldhagen’s thesis that masses of Germans in the 1930s were “willing executioners” during the Nazi regime, the 1995 Hamburg exhibition exposing crimes of the average Wehrmacht soldier, the opening of Berlin’s Jewish museum in 1999, and the construction of the Berlin Holocaust memorial all dramatically under-

## The World of Men's Work, East and West

Alf Lüdtke

### Honor and Income in the East

In the weekly “argumentations” that the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) Politburo gave to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) press, the following was communicated on October 19, 1989, one day after Erich Honecker’s resignation as both general secretary of the SED and GDR state council chairman: “Go out and report objectively on what moves the working population who produces our wealth. Egon [Krenz, his successor] spoke yesterday [during his television address] about German quality workmanship. Yes, be sure to appeal to their sense of honor. German workers have always worked well.”

As the GDR and its ideology were slowly falling to their knees in 1989, this argumentation remarkably used the appeal of “quality work” as an attempt to maintain the status quo and preserve the GDR state. It used this concept in three revealing ways. First, in the face of political crisis, the cultural pattern of “German quality work” was seen by GDR “superiors” as a source of hope for stabilization; second, “quality workmanship” in this case was not touted as specific to the GDR but rather was attributed more generally to “German workers”; third, “working well” was construed as creating “honor,” in other words, respect for oneself and for others, something that long predated the end of World War II in 1945 or even the founding of the GDR in 1949 for that matter. The few demands from the factories that became known in the autumn of 1989 indirectly confirmed that “good work” had assumed great importance for the workers themselves. Workers from Bergmann-Borsig in Berlin, for example, based their demands to the SED to initiate broad reforms primarily in terms of this idea of “good work.” For them, reform meant that there

should no longer be barriers to “quality work” and that it should be compensated with “real money.”

In another example, on September 25, 1956, the deputy chairman of the GDR’s State Planning Commission (SPK) wrote a memorandum to his boss, Bruno Leuschner, about the emigration of workers from the GDR, what was commonly described as “flight from the republic” (*Republikflucht*). In it he made plain that he was aware that there was a concerted West German effort to entice away East German skilled laborers. But he also conceded that such headhunting “was aided extraordinarily” by the “many deficiencies in the organization of work in our factories and their erratic rhythm of production.” For him, the consequences were clear: “In many cases, workers are leaving precisely because they ‘would like to work in an orderly fashion.’” The numbers involved underscored the gravity of the problem; just one year before (1955), 102,000 of those leaving the GDR—almost 40 percent of the 270,000 “emigrants from the Republic”—were workers. The struggle to “finally be able to work correctly,” or more specifically, deep dissatisfaction about irregular delivery schedules as well as shortages in economic organization, materials, and tools, dominated the monthly reports from countless factories across the GDR during the 1950s and 1960s. Local SED organizations agreed with the factory union administrators (BGL) on this issue. At the Bergmann-Borsig factory for power-plant generators, for example, it was recognized by all concerned that “non-rhythmic” work flows were impeding output targets, to the extent that it was hindering both the quantity and quality of production. These problems endangered the goal of raising productivity, even though this was the central goal animating countless proclamations and planning documents at the time. The classic Marxist authors provided an inexhaustible source for these texts. Invariably Lenin himself was invoked as justification, since he had always claimed that the increase in work productivity was “the most important thing for the victory of the new social order.”

Perhaps the “international class struggle” as well as the late 1950s “Overtaking without Catching Up” (*Überholen ohne Einzuholeri*) campaign moved the Party functionaries. But like most citizens, the large majority of workers wanted to know what this meant in terms of everyday life and where the “overtaking” of capitalist West Germany would become tangible. Occasional leaps forward, such as the definitive end of rationing in May 1958, did nurse dreams of a comparable East German “economic miracle,” but these were short lived. For their part, the “immediate pro-

ducers" (Karl Marx) saw little reason to mess around; as the supposed "ruling class," the workers shrewdly used this new ideological latitude to their own advantage. In many branches of industry, particularly in mechanical engineering, both the internal and public criticism of "false" working norms made clear that the celebrated "producers of social wealth" were actually using their individual opportunities for selfish personal income generation. Economists as well as SED and state functionaries complained year in and year out that it was too easy to fulfill and even exceed production targets. Attempts to counter this with "technically" or "scientifically" based work norms (TAN) were ultimately unsuccessful, however. Instead, the effort to optimize one's own work life, that is, minimizing labor intensity while at the same time maximizing good wages, remained central for many workers. In this sense, the "cash nexus" was by no means overcome for GDR workers and became particularly pronounced during times of prolonged hardship in the GDR at least until the late 1960s.

Discussion transcripts and reports from the factories showed just how much efforts to secure "good" remuneration dovetailed with the concern for worker appreciation. Colleagues and superiors alike—to say nothing of both society and the state more generally—were supposed to appreciate the individual's own activity and production. However, even among colleagues "orderly work" no longer appeared to be a matter of course. Only the interest in wages and the preoccupation with individual success—as opposed to concern for "achievements of high quality"—shaped the general attitude of production workers. This at least was the main thrust of a December 1962 speech transcript by the Factory Party Administration of the "May 8th" machine-tool engineering factory in Berlin. According to this report, the connection between low-quality work, sub par products, and diminished wages was "not yet recognized" by employees. Especially the older ones had supposedly "partially forgotten" (the original draft stated "completely forgotten!") the attention "they had once paid to the achievement of a higher quality of work in the former capitalist factories." In those days, "high quality" had been necessary; the struggle for existence and the need to keep one's job made it clear to everyone that they would lose their position by producing poor-quality work. Today, the report went on, things were different. Under socialist social relations, every person's existence is guaranteed, and now "a few believe" (in the first draft, it was "they") that "the law of quality work" can be simply disregarded.

According to the report, two solutions were necessary. First, "the

character of our state" and the resulting responsibility of its workers must be made plain to all. Second, the "new character of work in socialism needs to be clarified with greater emphasis than before." That is to say, in earlier times before socialism "it would not have occurred to anyone to read the newspaper during the running time while the machines were in the middle of a long automated process or to sit by the machine and (just) keep an eye on it." Back then "workers kept an eye on their machines but at the same time created order in the workplace." In the future, the report concluded, "we must restore" this worker ethos. But this went well beyond avoiding breakdowns and minimizing additional work. "Did not these given examples also reveal a disregard for the work of other workstations?" asked the report. Apparently, only a few cared about how the next colleagues working on the same machine would deal with deficiencies or worn-out tools. Emphasis instead must now be placed on "the redevelopment of work pride among colleagues and with it, the honor of one's own profession." Everyone must "from now on stake his whole sense of honor on performing high quality work." In other words, "up to now the honor in one's profession has been insufficient!"

Three years later, the vocational honor of skilled laborers and its supposed decline emerged as a film theme. The 1965-66 film *Berlin Around the Corner* (*Berlin um die Ecke*) centers on Paul, an old turner who provides a youth brigade, the "Children of the GDR," with real live examples of the daily requirements for quality work. The film, however, furnishes no happy ending. Paul, played by Erwin Geschonneck, one of the GDR's favorite actors, dies, while the "wild" youth brigade dissolves. Its brigadier, Olaf, portrayed by another GDR star, Dieter Mann, disappears at the end into the unknown. To be clear, this film by no means celebrated that kind of worker's "own way of doing things" (*Eigensinn*) of the kind of worker who concentrated only on himself and a few buddies, while keeping the "rest of the world" at arm's length. That kind of rebelliousness was played out in another film from 1965, *The Trace of Stones* (*Spur der Steine*), in which the actor "Manne" Krug played the construction brigadier "Balja." However different in style and message, both films failed inspection at the Cultural Ministry and remained forbidden until right before the collapse of the GDR. The self-image of many male workers evidently corresponded to a mixture of both Olaf and Balja; and the criticism that real workers heaped on other artistic representations of work and workers indicated that such fictional figures could hardly have been "realistic" enough.

For a year beginning in the fall of 1972, Werner Heiduczek recorded

his observations as a worker at Bitterfeld's chemical combine. In February 1973 the author noted a typical practice. One section of the factory had received the quality mark of Q, "the only chemical product from this combine affixed with this label." A merit of distinction was on the way. And yet in a conversation with Heiduczek, one insider whispered that "everything is not running there as it should." The capacity of a new machine there was only being pushed to 80 percent. This informant had analyzed suggestions for improving the factory over the last few years. Apparently, the factory section recognized for its excellence had always been awarded large bonuses by continuously rationalizing production. For the informant this meant that "If one wanted to, one could produce even more right away." But that was what the workers expressly wanted to avoid. The decisive thing was to control production and be rewarded for it, making sure "that one only gradually let the cat out of the bag. This way, one always stayed in good stead." Everyone knew this, and everyone played along. This took place not only at the point of production but also among the "technical intelligentsia," division managers, and factory administrators, who all took part in overseeing the steady but closely controlled increase in "quality" work and products. The assertion of worker autonomy, or *Eigensinn*—whether seen in the individual distance from those above, from one's peers, or from those "below"—had solidified into a collective practice of asset preservation (*kollektive Besitzstandswahrung*).

Wolfgang Engler has attempted to interpret this social definition of work in the GDR according to a term borrowed from Norbert Elias—the "society of the working man," or *arbeiterliche Gesellschaft*—on the ground that most workers saw themselves as "owners of work." In this formulation, the "working class" did not rule politically but they did reign at a social level. Engler points out that the notion of work as the property of everyone, an idea that was promoted and supported socially in the GDR, caused a backlash among male workers. Because they had been increasingly undermined in their roles as paternal protectors, so argues Engler, "they clung to the body and namely, to the bodies of those men who either did not work at all or did not work physically. Precisely because the man was no longer a man, he attached great importance to at least appearing like one." Masculine body language and ways of life marked by subordination thus became a habitus in their own right for what sociologist Dietrich Mühlberg has called the "common people" (*kleine Leute*). "Uninhibitedly" men displayed "their beer bellies as much as their sexual potency."

What is often overlooked, however, is the flip side of this phenomenon. After all, Engler ignored the work that was actually performed by individuals under difficult and often crisis conditions, be it for one's own brigade, the workshop, or factory. Indeed, it was possible "to make lemonade from lemons." That applied not only—in one famous example—to the much-celebrated construction of elevators in East Berlin's television tower that were built on time despite canceled deliveries of badly needed Western electronic components. But apart from such spectacular cases the common "sporadic work conditions" forced workers to search for makeshift solutions almost on a daily and nightly basis to meet even the most basic production requirements, at the very least just to secure their wages. After so many years most workers made no fuss over resorting to "organizing" goods through personal connections or semilegal channels in the constant quest for needed production elements, as, say, undelivered special screws were sought in the workshop right next door, at another factory, or elsewhere in the country. Such strategies were necessary for production to run at all. Among those involved, this "keep going despite everything" work style cultivated a sense of individual willfulness and ingenuity (*Eigensinn*) such that in moments of uncertainty, workers proved to be stubborn and arrogant or, as Engler describes them, "rough and intractable." This common assertion of selfhood was based on countless similar experiences over the decades across the country that proved to these workers time and again that they would get the job done. Neither guidelines nor planning from above was ever going to change these conditions; rather, the "troubles at our level" (Erich Loest) were only ever to be overcome—if at all—by one's own imaginative solutions and individual willingness to help out.

In her memoir, *Die Geliebte, die Verfluchte Hoffnung* (The Beloved, Cursed Hope), the author Brigitte Reimann called attention to what she sensed was "a kind of consciousness of obligation" among the people who worked in production. As she saw it, desk work and writing did not produce the same sense of duty toward society, at least from her perspective in the early 1960s. Only those who delivered tangible, visible, and immediately measurable work, she contended, behaved "correctly" and "acceptably." After the 1960s the spectrum of cultural images of GDR work and workers broadened markedly. Weekly newsreels, magazines, and television increasingly showed images of office work, planning activities, development, technical construction, as well as corrective welfare, educational, and/or scientific undertakings. That did not mean, however, that the central privileges given to manual production work were revised. Quite the

contrary, all the way until 1990 employees who were categorized according to their places of work as “production” workers and “basic production workers” were remunerated by only having to pay 5 percent income tax; all others, as so-called salaried employees, by contrast were forced to pay 20 percent income tax.

Out of this situation emerged a host of conflicts that became the subject of regular and open debate. One key issue in particular was the payment and position of foremen within industry. Foremen often earned less gross income than workers in the 1950s, although their salaries were elevated to 10-20 percent higher than production workers by the late 1960s. Even then because foremen were viewed as salaried employees, their income after taxes was actually less than that of the employees they supervised and managed. Frequent resignations of foremen from their posts, often accompanied by stinging letters of complaints to Party superiors, revealed that this state pay scheme was widely perceived as unjust. From mid-November 1989 through the end of 1990, over three hundred letters a day arrived at the Free German Trade Union Association (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund [FDGB]) central newspaper *Tribüne*. Revealingly, the written complaints about this tax scheme were then categorized and filed by the editors under the heading of “justice.” It was no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of letters came from working women. One typical note read: “When do we low-level salaried employees get to pay only 5 percent income tax as the workers do? . . . A third of our income is deducted, and we don’t work any worse than our colleagues in ‘production.’” Or as another put it: “We work just as conscientiously as production workers”; in this case, fifty signatures were appended, most of whom signed as “long-standing FDGB members.”

### “Quality Work”: Definition and Self-Image

German industrial workers who went to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s—whether to seek work or for political reasons—often experienced a strong distrust of foreigners. Over and over again they described the attitude of Russian administrators and colleagues as evidence of a deep cultural rift between Germans and Russians. As noted in their letters, the “Russian comrades” were seen as incapable of building a one-axle handcart in such a way that it could sustain a heavy counterweight; others wrote that “the Russians” apparently lacked a basic understanding of

mechanics. German returnees from the United States during the same period furnished comparable examples. U.S. colleagues required everything to be “foolproof,” so they said, whereas the German workers were usually able to solve technical problems themselves. Such proud sentiments of German problem solving and technical mastery were not limited to the workers’ own testimony. Indeed, the importance of “manual skill” as an economic resource was embraced by industrialists and engineers alike as a key dimension of “German quality work.” Moreover, practical skill was part of a positive self-image that countless soldiers also held dear. After all, was not the notion of the German army as a “steel mill on wheels” (Curzio Malaparte, 1941) equally dependent on one’s own on-the-spot initiative as the work of those back home in factories in Essen or Dortmund?

Skepticism toward Soviet work and production methods remained strong after 1945 and continued long after the founding of the GDR in 1949. If anything, it was even intensified by the experiences and stories from former soldiers who had fought on the eastern front. The attitude of the Soviet victors, especially during the dismantling of what was left of Germany’s industrial infrastructure, did nothing to mitigate the strong disdain and even contempt toward “the Russians.” When “contract workers” were brought to the GDR in the 1970s from other socialist republics in Eastern Europe, or even from so far afield as sub-Saharan Africa, Vietnam, or Cuba, the racist component of “German quality work” remained present and was quickly and openly activated at various times. While these racist attitudes toward foreign workers developed in Germany, among German workers a community was promoted for rebuilding after World War II. In 1945 and 1946 placards that were produced by the municipal government in Hanover called upon “everyone to help” the bombed-out local populations, refugees, and even concentration camp survivors. In these woodcuts, male workers—notably with proletarian caps, not military ones—were shown clearing away ruins and assisting in reconstruction efforts. Across all of the occupational zones, experiences in the factories were remarkably similar. It was the employees, and especially the union-organized men, who took the lead in rubble clearing, reconstruction, as well as the resistance against the Soviet expropriation of the country’s remaining infrastructure. The importance of rebuilding and “working” as both national community initiative (*volksgemeinschaftliches Ziel*) and collective experience was invoked in the May Day slogans of the major trade unions (i.e., the West German Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund [DGB] and



the East German FDGB). By the same token, these slogans were also accompanied by warnings that only hard work would bring about self-purification, self-healing, and a better future.

The postwar German community forged through work made the later discrimination toward guest workers that much more striking. In West Germany, the Italian working immigrants who arrived in the late 1950s “fit” into the racially colored clichés of foreign workers as much as the Turkish immigrants did a few years later. Apart from all of the officious gestures of solidarity with these new “colleagues,” countless German workers and factory administrators harbored great mistrust toward these new arrivals and their alleged “aversion to work.” In the name of expediency, the “bloody foreigners” from Turkey (“Kanaken”) were assigned most often to jobs that were particularly laborious, dangerous, and dirty: in transport and stopgap unskilled labor crews.

#### Achievement Consciousness in the West

How did standards among German workers in West Germany look compared to those of their East German counterparts? In 1957, Heinrich Popitz published his study *Gesellschaftsbild der Arbeiter* (Societal Image of Workers). It was based on questionnaires and statistical surveys conducted in 1953 and 1954 in a West German iron and steel factory in Dortmund and revealed sharp distinctions between various worker groups in relation to their “social images.” While it was acknowledged that “the bosses [had become] nicer” and the administrators for their part “more congenial,” the authors contended that there was an essential similarity, in that “All workers ... see society as a dichotomy—one that is at once rigid and mobile, inaccessible and ‘partnerly.’” Typically they tended to see themselves more on the side of those whose power was limited; when in doubt, society would most likely fail to grant these persons either recognition or justice. Against this workers set forth a distinct consciousness of their own performance, whether they were skilled or semiskilled workers, specialized or unskilled laborers. Each group saw itself as embodying true “human labor” (*menschliche Arbeit*) of at least equal value to that of “dead capital” (*toten Kapital*). For them, the main distinguishing criterion of human labor was “physical work” (*körperliche Arbeit*), that is, “human activity that is most obviously ‘labor’ whose

achievement creates immediate value.” As one of the interviewees put it: “For in the end, they [the others who don’t perform physical labor] do live off the productivity of workers.”

Particularly for a group of iron rolling mill workers (*Umwälzer*), the authors revealed to what degree confidence of experience as well as the mastery of both work method and machinery—which often meant simply a good understanding of the particular dynamics of each apparatus—determined the successful production of a good product and in turn the avoidance of risky work accidents. No less significant is that it helped cultivate a feeling of self-worth, as well as providing more latitude in terms of the space and time for individual autonomy (*Eigensinn*).

Even so, two caveats need mentioning in terms of Popitz’s study. First, it included only younger and middle-aged workers in the first blush of that hallowed economic boom period famously known as the “economic miracle.” It was only a few years later when this development really began to take effect, slowly eradicating as it did the still palpable privations of the industrial “proletariat.” Second, the research centered exclusively on a large factory in a concentrated industrial area. What was missing was the overwhelmingly large number of workers in small and medium-sized factories across the region, as well as those working outside this and other industrial belts in small cities and in villages.

The perceived linkage between the valued physicality of work and the claim that manual workers were the true embodiments of “productive work” was based on everyday networks of work such as those in domestic or neighborhood agricultural and garden economies. While the economic and structural crises in heavy industry caused a mental and emotional shock in the early 1970s, such “blows of fate” in this setting actually strengthened collegial and neighborly cooperation among those who experienced (and remembered) the can-do resolve and economic upswing of the late 1950s and 1960s. Worker pride was closely connected to pride in work. In the face of economic crisis the collective *Eigensinn* of workers motivated them to seek out their own solutions together to overcome pressing structural hardships and what they saw as unfair treatment; in the end, this attitude helped ensure the livelihood of working men for many years to come. Fitting with this pride in work that surged in the first postwar decades, an icon of the manual worker was even erected in front of a high-rise building in Frankfurt am Main in 1954 as part of the federal “Kunst am Bau” public art and sculpture program. This figurative statue,

several meters tall, featured a relaxing miner. Never again was the cultural significance of (male) manual industrial labor culturally represented in such a direct, positive way to the West German public.

### Working Outside the Factory: Refuge during Crises

In both East and West Germany, work has functioned for decades as a goal-oriented activity for men in industrial production. Their products were defined by and valued for their practical utility; their exchange value was of course also important, and it was in this context that product aesthetics came into play. But to a great extent, this work is defined in concrete terms (*gegenständlich*): working materials (*Werkstoff*) and working components (*Werkstück*) are worked on with working tools (*Werkzeug*), as the workers make use of their bodily strength and “manual skill.” Such labor is then organized and run according to factory logic. The “immediate producers” stand in a relatively horizontal “working relationship” with one another, which in West Germany also eventually led to a certain “solidarity among employees” (*Arbeitnehmerverhältnis*). Employers or consumers are as a rule almost like outsiders, including anonymous customers or directors with whom workers related only in the abstract. Such relationships have been well studied, but wage-earning work outside of that organized within the factory is rarely addressed by scholars or politicians. It is, however, very present in the experiential world of the workers, their colleagues, family members, and their neighbors. An Oldenburg study of dock workers, pipe fitters, and welders in the northern part of West Germany in the mid-1980s showed that the “overwhelming majority” was involved in countless productive activities outside the factory. This included “repair, installation, and renovation work in the home, on the car and on household consumer appliances.” Half of the ninety-eight studied cases showed that for these workers a certain phase of their life was devoted to work on a greater goal, such as their own house, boat, or workshop. For them, all resources were marshaled to this goal and undertaken “without breaks.” Others concentrated for long stretches of time on specific projects ranging from repairs to gardening, devoting one to one and a half days a week to these activities over many years. Nearly a third of those polled said that they were regularly busy with an array of skilled manual-work activities of all kinds.

Strikingly, two-thirds of the study participants experienced, or at

least described, such work outside of the factory as “completely different” than that done in the workplace. For the majority, the appeal of work outside the factory was multifaceted. Around half of them felt that it was only under such conditions that they could develop their own abilities, make their own decisions, and enjoy complete sovereignty over the work process. No less significant was the cooperation and exchange with others outside the factory as well. Notably, the amount of energy involved was usually taken in stride. Only about a fourth judged this exertion to be at times burdensome. As one such worker put it: “If I’m forced to do work [that is, for a livelihood], then I would like to be able to arrange it myself here [in the garden].” Yet for about two-thirds of those polled, such activity was less “work” than a “hobby.” For many of them, the payoff of work outside of the factory was not simply compensation; rather, what was prized was the fact that it was their “own work” (*das Eigentliche*). As many explained, it was only after work that things really began. If nothing else, this study made plain that for many work outside the factory was necessary not only for economic success but seemingly also for raising their social status. Above all, it seemed necessary for ensuring the recognition of the male worker as “an upstanding man” within his household, family, neighborhood, and residential community.

It is also worth bearing in mind that this study was conducted during a period of gradually increasing mass unemployment. In fact 2.2 million people, or 9 percent of those able to work in West Germany, were registered as unemployed in 1987. The situation was particularly grave in the local shipyards where the industrial workers in this study were employed. What seems to have happened, however, is that the decline in men’s salaried work was compensated for by a new premium placed on “leisure time work” (*Freizeit-Arbeit*). While this may not have brought them much money, it provided great psychological support in giving them the chance on a daily basis to prove to their wives, children, relatives, and neighbors that as men they were not washed up. Such sentiment found similar expression in a piece of documentary fiction about a large industrial city in East Germany—Leipzig—that appeared in the late 1970s. In it the hero is repairing a spin dryer on a Sunday morning when he remarks: “And I messed with the thing much longer than necessary, since as an old tool-maker I was so happy to have proper work [*richtige Arbeit*] between my fingers again. I toyed with the fantasy of how it would be for me to do this kind of thing all the time—repairing dryers and washing machines, driving around house to house in my van, having a quick chat, a cup of coffee.

removing and installing pieces, could that be a life for me?" The parallel between this episode from Leipzig and the experiences of those in West Germany discussed previously fits up to this point. After that one can see a big difference between East and West, especially in the ability of workers to make ends meet through work outside the factory. In the East German story, the hero from Leipzig continues: "A little tip money in my pocket, the removed parts taken home, repaired, and sold off cheaply on the side—it easily adds up to the same dough I'm making now."

### Alternate Modernity?

The editors of this volume propose to reconsider East German socialism as "modern." This emphasis challenges the focus on repression as pivotal for East Germany, a focus that regained momentum after the *Wende* of 1989-90 and, in its wake, the opening of the archives of the "organs" of repression. Still, explorations of modern facets of social relationships or imaginations, especially in people's practices, do not contradict the valence of scrutinizing the settings and activities of control from above.

In addition, inquiries into characteristics of the modern might redirect scholars away from evaluating German societies through comparative levels of "modernity" and toward attention to their very processes of striving for and working toward "becoming modern." By this token, what is at stake is not a comparison of states or systems. On the contrary the analysis has to trace and map clues of different or "alternate" practices of working toward "modernity" and the specific configurations in which they operate.

Notions, symbols, and practices of work are particularly intriguing issues in this regard. Working people, whether they held blue- or white-collar jobs, employed notions and images that they derived from "former times" to describe their own everyday activities or those of others. Until the late 1960s this reference point in the past meant the capitalist era, and people in East Germany invoked it explicitly. In one of the cases from late 1962 that I quoted earlier, the particular author of an internal memorandum of the Berlin "May 8th" tool company's SED group referred to what he understood as standard practices of good German workmanship. The author rendered the latter as constitutive of an "honor of labor" that he thought the new state and, in particular, the ruling working class desperately needed. He stressed the point that prior to 1945—that is, during the

evil age par excellence that was the background for the GDR's foundational focus and myth of "antifascism"—workers' conduct had allowed for more efficiency and productivity than in socialist times. Thus, when working for the new Germany one should actually orient oneself toward that older model of "German quality work"; to most people it stood for a "better Germany" they saw as part and parcel not only of both the Imperial Reich and the Weimar Republic but even more of Germany under Nazism. At the same time, many East Germans likewise perceived socialist "friends" and neighbors, such as the Soviet Union or Poland, within this very matrix measuring levels of more or less "proper" work habits and products. On this score the GDR figured as the most "advanced" case, representing the "West" within the socialist bloc.

The irony is that perceptions of and claims for "things modern" if not "modernity" during the decades under consideration here simultaneously operated in two contradictory arenas. For one, the GDR's comparison of its own settings and accomplishments to those of other regimes, whether socialist or Western, employed modern criteria like efficiency and calculability. In this respect, it was an either/or of "more" or "less" that mattered. Second, and at the same time, one's own practices differed in important ways from the binary of "more" and "less" just as they did from the polarity of "traditional" versus "modern." In other words, people didn't just simply "carry on" established ways of doing or perceiving things (or people). On the contrary, they developed *specific amalgams* combining what they had operated in or perceived from former times to be "good practice" with ways of dealing with the specific demands and opportunities they encountered in their actually existing current "given" settings. Such amalgams emerged in everyday practice as workers developed multiple ways of innovatively overcoming, for instance, the chronic short supply of screws, switches, semifinished items, or even raw materials that reigned in most working people's days (and nights). The result was openness to and reliance on self-help and any kind of creative way of finding solutions to the most pressing shortages or systemic shortcomings. Thus, people could and increasingly did demonstrate to themselves and to others the agility and productivity of ordinary workers. By the same token, these ways of creatively bypassing customary work standards shifted the focus of "German quality work." The notion had previously revolved around the products themselves as well as the best standards of tools and work practices. However, in the East German context "German quality work"

meant the personal ability to solve a task “in spite of” recurrent disruptions of the steady process of daily work and of overall production.

When irregular gaps yawned time and again between official promises and actual delays of production, the feeling of being able to master the regularity of these irregular circumstances fueled many East Germans to stem the tide of a collapse, at least for themselves. Certainly these workers were a minority, but they were the people keeping things going. Only by the very “modern” energy of individuals to act creatively and independently did East Germany overcome repeated chances of breakdown, until its implosion in the late 1980s.

By this token working people actually practiced an “alternate” mode of German quality work. Its particular modernity emerged, even more ironically, much more clearly and forcefully after the fact; only in the 1990s, when they had to compete directly with Western counterparts, did it become visible how GDR working peoples’ potential for innovatively mastering tasks on the spot during production matched the most modern styles of industrial production and management that the West had to offer. Thus, to operate on one’s own blend of manual and mental dexterity and creativity, which had served both management and workers in the difficult conditions of the GDR economy, proved to embody not backwardness but the most productive mode of coping with changing work tasks in the new market. Still, only in a few cases could East German workers actually take advantage of these resources; the successful relaunch of the East German Filmfabrik Wolfen (“Orwo” films) by the Bayer Leverkusen concern in the 1990s is a rare case in point.<sup>1</sup>

*Translated by Katherine Pence, Paul Betts, and Maria Arroyo*

#### NOTES

This essay is a revised and expanded version of the article “Bei der Ehre packen: Männer und ‘ihre’ Arbeit in Ost- und Westdeutschland.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 20, 2000, 3, reprinted as “Männerarbeit Ost—Männerarbeit West,” in *Archäologie der Arbeit*, ed. Werner Baecker (Berlin, 2002), 35–47.

For reports from the SED Politburo see Ulrich Bürger, *Das sagen wir natürlich so nicht* (Berlin, 1990), 228ff. See Alf Lüdtke, “‘Helden der Arbeit’: Mühen beim Arbeiten: Zur mißmutigen Loyalität von Industriearbeitern in der DDR,” in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kacble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart, 1994), 188–213. The files of the SED were cited out of the collection in the Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im

Bundesarchiv (SAPMO). See the quote from Lenin in W. I. Lenin, “Die Grosse Initiative,” in *Werke*, vol. 29, 399–424, here 416, for example, quoted in *Kleines Politisches Wörterbuch* as authoritative proof of “worker productivity,” here 7th ed. (Berlin, 1988), 85. For the critique of the workers toward artistic production of the GDR see Arnulf Siebeneicker, “Kulturarbeit in der Industrieprovinz: Entstehung und Rezeption bildender Kunst im VEB Petrolchemisches Kombinat Schwedt 1960–1990,” *Historische Anthropologie* 5 (1997): 435–53. The quoted protocols from Werner Heiduczek are found in *Im gewöhnlichen Stalinismus—meine unerlaubten Texte* (Leipzig, 1991), 20, 29. For the concept of the “society of the working man” (*arbeiterliche Gesellschaft*) see Wolfgang Engler, *Die Ostdeutschen: Kunde von einem verlorenen Land* (Berlin, 1999), i98ff, 2ooff. On the topos and symbolism of “German quality work” see Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn* (Hamburg, 1993), 249ff, 283–350, 4o6ff, also for army letters of drafted and willingly enlisted Leipzig workers with opinions of Russian and American workers. On “clearing the rubble” (*Aufräumen*) and “reconstruction” see Lutz Niethammer et al., eds., *Arbeiterinitiative 1945* (Wuppertal, 1976); on reactions to guest workers see Jan Motte et al., eds., *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik—50 Jahre Einwanderung: Nachkriegsgeschichte als Migrationsgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999); see also Günter Wallraff, “Wir brauchen Dich”: *Als Arbeiter in deutschen Industriebetrieben* (Munich, 1966). On a reprint of the 1957 study of worker consciousness in the FRG see Heinrich Popitz, Hans Paul Bahrdt, Ernst August Jüres, and Hanno Kesting, *Das Gesellschaftsbild des Arbeiters: Soziologische Untersuchungen in der Hüttenindustrie*, 5th ed. (Tübingen, 1977), 272ff. For a propaganda brochure on cowork (*Mitarbeit*) see Dirk Cattepoel, *Sozialreise durch Deutschland: Vom Arbeiter zum Mitarbeiter* (Düsseldorf, 1953). On the mentality of the “economic miracle” see Michael Wildt, *Vom kleinen Wohlstand: Eine Kosumgeschichte der fünfziger Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996). See the Oldenburg study by Johann Jessen, Walter Siebei, Christa Siebei-Rebell, Uwe-Jens Walther, and Irmgard Weyrather, *Arbeit nach der Arbeit: Schattenwirtschaft, Wertewandel und Industriearbeit* (Opladen, 1988), 221, 252. The documentary novel of a Leipzig worker can be found in Erich Loest, *Es geht seinen Gang oder Mühen in unserer Ebene* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1978), 86; empirically differentiated, and at the same time analytically provocative, is Michael Vester et al., *Soziale Milieus in Ostdeutschland: Gesellschaftliche Strukturen zwischen Zerfall und Neubildung* (Cologne, 1995).

1. Regina Bittner, *Kolonien des Eigensinns: Ethnographie einer ostdeutschen Industrieregion* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998).