

brated fantasy and severed boyhood games from the “real” world of adulthood.

Comments by Joshua Freeman (Queens College, City University of New York) on one panel raised questions that went beyond the particular papers in his session and stimulated a great deal of side discussion among those in attendance. While praising the fresh research and high quality of the papers, Freeman noted the virtual absence of women and families from these discussions of masculinity. He raised a cautionary note—that new interest in men’s studies should not result in ignoring the importance of women in the development of masculine identities. Gender, he reminded the audience, is rooted in relationships not only among men but between men and women. In a related vein, he asked that the authors consider more fully the issue of sexuality in the construction of masculinity and how the images and language referred to in the papers often also contained sexual and autoerotic overtones.

Those intrigued by these thoughtful papers will be able to read revised versions of some of them in a 1999 issue of *Men and Masculinities*, a journal edited by Michael Kimmel. Other papers will doubtless emerge in other venues. The conference showed, above all, that attention to masculinity, work, and technology is a fresh area of research in which much promising work is being done—and still needs to be done.

In Search of a Lost Working Class: Workers in the Soviet Occupation Zone/German Democratic Republic, 1945–1970

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What became of the working class in the German “workers’ and peasants’ state”? What possibilities did workers have to represent their interests in conflicts with their supposed avant-garde, the Communist party (CP)? What happened to the traditional worker milieus? Did they lose their unique contours and disappear into a kind of homogenized society of working people, or did the proletarian habitus itself determine the style of the new society? These questions still await answers, since “workers in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)” still describes a blank area on the map of social historical research. At first glance this may seem astound-

ing. In the GDR, after all, workers were said to form the ruling class, and one would thus expect them to have been a subject of primary interest. But fears of destroying the illusion of working-class supremacy led the party to prohibit scholarly explorations of class or of the social structures on which Marxist–Leninist ideology was apparently based. This policy also extended to West German researchers, who were denied access to authoritative primary sources until 1989. Historical research and analysis of GDR society and its classes, ranks, and stages of development is thus still in its infancy.

The conference “Workers in the SBZ/GDR 1945–1970,” held September 29–October 2, 1997, at Ruhr University in Bochum, provided a first glimpse into current research, theoretical and conceptual perspectives, and larger thematic questions. Hosting the conference was the Institute for the Research of the European Labor Movement, founded through student initiative in the 1970s and headed by Klaus Tenfelde since 1995. Tenfelde’s leadership has had a significant impact on the focus of research at the institute: There has been a shift in emphasis from the political history of the labor movement toward social history.

The conference gathered close to forty social, economic, and cultural historians from the “old” and “new” German *Bundesländer*, North America, and Great Britain. Participants presented on a broad spectrum of topics: the East German “labor market” and its segmentation, case studies of individual worker brigades, and patterns of consumption and family formation. Alongside accounts of the integration of post–World War Two refugees there were presentations on female employment patterns and the recruitment of new elites from the working class. Today, researchers of these subjects face no dearth of sources. On the contrary, the overabundance of archival material presents its own special research problems. Unlike in the West, GDR industrial concerns were obliged to keep archival records, and this wealth of material is now freely available to historians; use is limited only by the need to sort, catalogue, and evaluate. This is in itself no simple task, since as empirical studies like those presented in Bochum have shown, GDR sources elude classification under traditional categories of social history. Perhaps this is because these categories, formulated to describe the “social construction of the political” typical of Western societies, fail to capture the essence of the “political construction of the social” that characterized the GDR.

Aware of these problems, conference participants debated the standard terminology, uncovering even more fundamental methodological disagreements. A particular point of contention was the question of whether the “working class” really continued to exist in the GDR. Ina Merkel (Humboldt University, Berlin), whose paper explored patterns of consumption and lifestyle, argued that the proletariat, as a distinctive social class with its own milieu, ceased to exist. It had dissolved into a “society of working people” (*Gesellschaft der Werktätigen*). The rather narrow income difference between different groups and the shortage of goods that vir-

tually everyone endured produced a process of social leveling. Under “real” existing socialism, Merkel argues, it was not possible for the higher strata to differentiate themselves from those beneath them through greater consumption or the attainment of more luxury goods. Others, however, insisted that the working class remained a distinct social formation. Contrasts between laborers and white-collar workers remained clearly recognizable, argued Hartmut Zwahr (University of Leipzig). In industrial production, the symbolic significance of the white collar was simply replaced with the display of party insignia. According to Zwahr and several other presenters, the factory or industrial concern in the GDR remained “an orienting focus of everyday life” much longer than in the West. In the factory the “worker” was still empirically comprehensible, whereas the category quickly melts away in examinations of leisure, family, or consumption. For Zwahr the labor movement itself was the decisive social actor in the GDR. Having been robbed of its organization, unions, workers’ councils, and parties—and even its language—the labor movement became impatient to shake off the SED’s “suffocating futuristic vision.” Consequently, the worker rising of June 17, 1953, *détente*, 1956, the Prague Spring, Willy Brandt in Erfurt—provoked intense discussions among factory workers.

Peter Huebner (Center for Contemporary Historical Research, Potsdam) also alluded to a “silent” labor movement in his opening address. On the factory floor, the work force (and especially workers’ brigades) had the ability to determine the outcome of conflicts with management. After the building of the Berlin Wall, for instance, planning authorities ordered a sharp increase in “production supply,” thus necessitating an intensification of work norms and a decrease in real wages. In the eyes of workers, this action meant that the state had placed itself in an entrepreneurial role. There were no open protests, but workers withheld services in every way imaginable, such as the “illegal transition to a five-day week.” Proof of an intact labor movement? According to Huebner, “workers were incapable of changing the political system, but they could ration their work output so that the opposing side was placed under pressure and eventually had to relent.” The conference proved once again that as more research is done on the microhistorical level the picture of a “command economy” becomes increasingly blurred, and the “limits of dictatorship” come into focus.

Research on the level of individual factories directs our attention to constants of industrial societies, showing that technical preconditions, industrial organization, and labor management often remain stable across system boundaries. Standing alone, however, these smaller case studies risk losing their political dimension. While some participants emphatically represented conflicts on the factory floor as depoliticized and local, others, like Zwahr, insisted that in the GDR there were “no conflicts of distribution without overarching power conflicts.” Similarly, in his closing remarks to the conference, Tenfelde argued that the “strength” of the working class, as

some presenters had described it, was really only a relative strength. Highlighting the freedom of action or lack thereof may reveal the inner dynamics of a dictatorial regime, he argued, but this emphasis must be placed in direct relation to the distinct tendency toward intellectual and social immobility. Historians should now turn to the techniques of oral history and the history of *mentalités* to uncover patterns of behavior, adjustment by defense, unwilling loyalty, resignation, improvisation, and *Dacha*-culture.

Despite substantive, methodical, and theoretical differences, virtually all conference participants agreed that the GDR should be understood as a society with its own structure and history of the social. This perspective gains in importance in comparison to standard political histories of the period, which tend to depict GDR society as primarily an orchestration on behalf of the party. These interpretations are not value-neutral: There is a hotly contested political dimension to the academic debate over the history of the GDR. Understanding the GDR as its own independent society with its own history rejects efforts to record it as a chapter of dictatorship in a national history of the Federal Republic and thus resists conservative efforts to recreate a German national history detached from the context of European integration. The techniques of social history may well give social-democratically oriented historians the weapons they need to reconquer terrain in the field of GDR research—now that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, their colleagues in the social sciences who set the tone in the 1970s and 1980s with their convergence theories have been denounced as “academic helpers” for SPD-*Ostpolitik* or as secret SED collaborators.

Comparative International History of Dock Labour, c. 1790–1970

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A conference on the “Comparative History of Dock Labour” was held in November 1997 at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Participating at the conference were labor historians whose subjects ran the gamut of dockers in Bombay, Mombasa, Tanga, Shanghai, Auckland, Freemantle, Antwerp, Bremen, Hamburg, Le Havre, Turku, Århus, Hull, London, Liverpool, Rotterdam, Haifa, and Glasgow. US labor historians, including myself, brought their area studies of New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco to the conference. This look at dockworkers across