

“Women and the Nation in the East German Television”

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This paper explores the East German television show *Johanna* which aired in seven episodes between September 1 and October 13, 1989, making it one of the last shows in the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Television underwent numerous changes in the forty-year history of the GDR as well as the representation of women in television. Nevertheless, women were always portrayed in relation to their place of work. This particular show, produced by the German Television Association (Deutscher Fernsehfunk, DFF), under the banner of family series, is explored as a microcosm of the family, which was essential in socialist rhetoric. The protagonist, Johanna Rothermund, a well-established tram driver in Berlin’s public transport company (BVB), juggles her responsibilities of being a working mother, a tram driver, and a forewoman in the company, drawing an interesting picture of the socialist woman, who can do it all. Johanna is often referred to as a nice guy or nice bloke, using male terminology. Similar to the use of the word foreman rather than forewoman in her case. Socialist gender terminology was male. Interesting gender dynamics, mirroring the state’s approach to women’s policies, are touched upon in the seven episodes and explored through several characters in the show. For instance, Johanna’s immediate boss and close friend, Heidemarie Lehmann, an independent, single woman. One of the few women in the company’s leadership, who does not shy away from critique, is asked by her boyfriend to decide between her career and him. In addition to larger concerns about gender under socialism, this particular conflict also explores domestic divisions between the urban and rural spaces in the GDR, implying a certain backwardness and traditional gender images and expectations for East Germans living outside the capital. *Johanna* showcases the socialist version

of the emancipation of the sexes and the state's women's policies with all female characters being working women, often in traditional male professions, yet when it comes to leadership positions and challenging existing gender stereotypes in the private and the public sphere, socialist gender realities set in. It further addresses societal concerns of the East German state such as shortages of living space and raw materials, and the close connection or interdependencies between the state and the individual. Even though the show was created primarily as entertainment, *Johanna* reflects on everyday life, inclusive of rather dull moments, while at the same time emphasizing the modern GDR with all its social and political accomplishments. This paper examines one element of popular culture to draw parallels between the depiction of women in television and in real life.

The GDR prided itself with the emancipation of women and the equality of the sexes which was proclaimed as officially achieved in 1972 by the communist party. Despite the "achievement" of equality, numerous laws supporting working mothers and women, and the large-scale participation of women in the workforce, traditional and gender-based hierarchies were maintained, reinforced and even hardened during the short life of the socialist state. With the expansion of the educational sector and special programs for women, women were introduced into male professions challenging gender norms and expectations while men were kept firmly out of the private sphere reinforcing gender segregation in society and calling into question the double standards of the state and the party. State and party rhetoric often pronounced that women needed to stand their men (*Frauen stehen ihren Mann*); hence their performance was measured against the performance of men while men were simply kept out of women's professions, the household and gender-based policies. These perceptions were challenged in the television show *Johanna* which aired at a time when women were considered full members of socialist society but also a time when they questioned the sincerity and comprehensiveness of the GDR's women's / mommy and / or gender policies.

The show carefully observes the evolution of the protagonist in her role as a tram driver, a mother and a member of the socialist community. It further highlights other female characters, working mothers who seemingly manage the triple burden of paid labor, childcare and household labor as expected of the "socialist superwoman." The depiction of the traditional family structure in the show is interesting, considering that the GDR had one of the highest divorce rates in the world; with most divorces initiated by women. All female characters of the show work as tram

drivers and department heads; hence society is revealed as gender equal or maybe even gender neutral. Both, men and women, participate equally in the work force, the household, and childrearing questioning the existing triple burden women in the GDR struggled with.

East German society is shown as egalitarian and in solidarity, an image repeatedly highlighted in *Johanna*, as well as nostalgic reflections of the GDR, when all families come together to spend their leisure time and to improve the working conditions in the company. The show does not directly address gender issues and expectations, its primary focus are the realities of life, the relevant day to day concerns in a socialist state. Housing and raw material shortages are openly addressed, depicting a realistic picture of the East German state and even allowing for open critique of the state; however, often disguised behind a humorous facade. The show challenges the notion of gender equality from a female perspective, an element that has grown throughout East German television history, where the depiction of women underwent numerous changes. The female characters are all shown as strong, emancipated, independent, yet feminine, working women while the men's characters challenge and reinforce the stereotypical image of masculinity at the same time. Ideas of femininity are not called into question despite the fact that women entered male professions, a fact that was taken for granted under state socialism. Paradoxically enough, women working in male and female professions are accepted as the norm in the show and East German society, further strengthening the image of the socialist woman as a role model for society as a whole. Nevertheless, men working in female professions remained a taboo.

The GDR followed the socialist principle that emancipation was possible only if women were equally involved in the work force, a prerequisite of becoming socially and economically independent, an image that was portrayed clearly in DEFA films and East German TV shows, including *Johanna*. The fact that the economic situation in the first decades of the GDR was stagnant and weak, and every worker, male and female, was needed, due to the postwar labor shortage and the mass exodus from the GDR, plays an insignificant role here since it was completely normal during the 1980s that women worked. In 1989, 91 percent of East German women of working age were employed, and 87 percent had completed formal occupational training and were skilled workers and professionals.¹ In the founding years of the republic, the primary aim

¹ Myra Marx Ferree. "The Rise and the Fall of "Mommy Politics": Feminism and Reunification in (East)

of the state's policy was not emancipation or equality of the sexes, even though the communist party declared emancipation its goal, but to jumpstart the economy. In 1949, when the GDR was founded, Article 20 of the constitution declared, "men and women are equal; they have the same rights in all spheres of society."² Exactly this equality, the fact that women can work in male professions and men can work in female professions, is the essence of the show. Equal employment opportunities, equal payment, and education were encouraged by the state, and already implemented by the Soviet Military Administration. Through special programs, the state promoted the goal of moving as many women into the labor force as possible. In addition, Article 38 of the constitution declared, "marriage, family, and motherhood are under a special protection by the state."³ The protection of the family and the prevention of women becoming materially dependent, were the major duties of the communist state,⁴ an aspect clearly shown in *Johanna*. The founders of the GDR believed that through education and equality between men and women, the socialist personality (sozialistische Persönlichkeit)⁵ would be strengthened. *Johanna* can therefore be seen as evidence of the accomplished equality of the sexes in regard to women but draws attention, or even self-criticism, to the fact that men have not been emancipated the same way women have been emancipated under state socialism.

The SED's women's policy was characterized by three different elements: (1) the realization of legal equality between men and women, (2) promotion of working women, and (3) special protection of mothers and children.⁶ To achieve these goals the party followed diverse programs and ideas, all based on socialist principles. The party politics toward women was divided into three phases. The first phase, from 1946 until the mid-sixties, was shaped by the integration of women into the workforce because of the "labor shortage and mass exodus from the GDR."⁷ The consequences of the war and the economic situation made women indispensable workers during post-war reconstruction. The ideological and economic interests seemed identical.⁸

Germany" in: *Feminist Studies* 19, Issue 1, (Spring 1993): Ferree, 89.

² *Verfassung der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, Oct. 7, 1974).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag Dec. 20, 1965), 1.

⁵ An expression that was used in state's rhetoric and Party publications throughout the history of the GDR reinforcing what the state expected from its citizens.

⁶ Grit Bühler. *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1997), 29.

⁷ Christiane Lemke. "Women and Politics in East Germany" In: *Socialist Review*, 15, 1985, 124.

⁸ Gisela Helwig. *Frauen in Deutschland. Auf dem Weg zur Gleichberechtigung* (Informationen zur politischen Bildung, 254/1997), 16.

Furthermore, “the integration of women was seen as the essential criterion for women to develop as socialist personalities,”⁹ the exact personalities depicted in *Johanna*, in almost all female characters, no matter which generation.

The second phase, from the mid-sixties until 1971, was determined by the concentration on qualified job training and further education of women. Special women’s promotion plans were prepared as promotion and qualification of women had always been measured by male standards, proving that the idea of emancipation was seen differently by the communist party. Based on these perceptions, women were introduced into male professions and technical work which from a feminist standpoint could be considered an achievement. This state support and women in typical male professions are portrayed as a completely normal aspect of society in the TV show. During this phase, a new image came into existence, women as mothers. Motherhood also played an important role in the depiction of the women in *Johanna*; motherhood emerges as a major element of the socialist role model. Every female character was a mother and except for Heidemarie, the department head, all were married yet all women were shown as socially and economically independent from their husbands, an essential part of socialist women’s policies. At the end of the sixties the double burden of women became visible; a double burden that was actually a triple burden of paid labor, household labor and childcare. On these grounds, the Family Law Book of the GDR was ratified in 1965. It contained social and political regulations that were meant to simplify women’s lives, paving the way for the women’s policies of the seventies. It encouraged, “mutual upbringing of children, mutual responsibility for the household, and mutual help to combine profession and family.”¹⁰ Even though laws were established to improve the living and working conditions of women, the situation was far from becoming reality, where many women struggled with their responsibilities. These were, however, seen as a woman’s personal failure since the state had provided all possible support; support which was not offered to men, even single fathers. As mentioned above, in *Johanna* all but one couple equally shared household and childrearing responsibilities which could be interpreted as evidence of a successful implementation of the women’s policies of the 1960s and 1970s. The triple burden and the shortage of leisure time,

⁹ “Die Frauen – der Frieden und der Sozialismus, Kommuniqué des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschland (DFD)” in: DFD, *Geschichte des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands* (Leipzig, 1989).

¹⁰ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1965), 2.

or time spent exclusively on oneself and one's own interests, however, is shown in one case where a wife is completely overloaded by work, family and household.

The third phase, from 1971 to 1990, was ushered in by the resignation of Walter Ulbricht and the inauguration of Erich Honecker as new leader of the state. At the VIII Party Congress of the SED (Parteitag der SED), numerous new social measures were added to the constitution and the FGB to ease women's triple burden. These new ideas resulted in the most innovative actions taken to improve women's lives. Childcare facilities were improved, and as depicted in the show, children were taken care of while both parents worked fulltime, making both sexes full and seemingly equal members of society. During this phase, the conflict of household and work had become too great, hence discontent with the state's social policies increased. In the eighties the economic situation further intensified; East Germany was not able to fulfill the economic plans it strived for, and difficulties to provide the population with supplies and food became apparent, one aspect which was openly shown in *Johanna*, along with the creativity people used to bypass existing shortages.

State socialism was not able to challenge century old gender stereotypes and women's role in the private sphere. The GDR's women's policy was progressive in many respects, but the socialist regime maintained and even hardened traditional gender roles, spheres and expectations. Despite all efforts, the labor market continued to be strongly gender-segregated.¹¹ Despite making headway into male professions, women dominated the occupational fields of education, health care, social services, and textiles; even in these female sectors women earned less than men. Girls were often guided into "gender appropriate" professions. Places for professional training were limited and the state regulated who received which training and where. Even though some women successfully entered distinctive male professions, the state never promoted men into female jobs, testament to a superficial and half-hearted commitment to the equality of the sexes. As a consequence of this gender segregation, the female-specific employment sector remained undervalued.¹² Nevertheless, employment became an essential part of women's identity as also shown in *Johanna*, where women's employment came naturally. Women largely remained at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy despite the existing and praised gender-based laws and regulations, a fact that is only partially represented in the show. Women are shown in typical male

¹¹ Ferree, 91.

¹² Susanne Diemers. *Patriarchalismus in der DDR* (Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 1994), 127.

professions and with the exception of a female department head, it is clear that men work in higher, more respected, better paid positions. Contrary to wide-spread belief amongst many East Germans, women were consistently paid less than man even if they had entered male professions.

In 1971, as mentioned above, the SED enacted further laws and regulations for women. The Party granted one-year maternity leave (Babyjahr) with the guarantee to return to their jobs following their leave, a fact also portrayed in the show, when a young woman who just completed her tram driver training is given full support despite her pregnancy. The state's focus on supporting young couples is emphasized by the show, just as it was by the state in its policies. Young couples received preferential treatment in getting apartments, which was at times very difficult during the sixties and seventies due to constant shortages. In addition, working hours were shortened from forty-three and a half hours a week to forty hours a week and regulations concerning shift work were enacted. Women received one paid day, a so-called household day off every month; they could take off work when children were sick, and childcare facilities were improved qualitatively and increased quantitatively. Furthermore, they received maternity assistance of 1,000 Mark per child, a measure to counter falling birth rates. Despite all these implementations, women continued to struggle and the female characters in *Johanna* though seemingly content were barely shown during leisure activities, unless they were organized by the company, highlighting the interdependence of the private and the public sphere in the GDR.

According to Christiane Lemke, overall the state plans were not very successful due to family matters, male prejudices against women, and the lack of qualification and higher education. The old role patterns of the sexes and the old division of labor within the family and within the labor force remained.¹³ Parallel to these measures, birthrates declined and divorces increased. This provided reasons for additional government improvements; for example, one-year paid maternity leave for the second child. All societal improvements were based on motherhood, children, and family. Due to these mommy policies and the enacted social programs, women were perceived as privileged because the measures undertaken only applied to women; men, including single fathers were conveniently ignored. This privileged status of mothers increased prejudices against working women which in the long run proved to be disadvantageous,¹⁴ a fact that was not emphasized in

¹³ Irene Dölling, "Culture and Gender" in *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic* ed. Marilyn Rüschemeyer and Christiane Lemke (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 1989), 29.

¹⁴ Frederike Maier. "Frauenerwerbstätigkeit in der DDR und der BRD," in *Ein Deutschland – Zwei Patriarchate* ed. Gudrun Axeli-Knapp and Ursula Müller (Hannover, 1992), 32.

the show. Women became acknowledged as a disturbance to the working process and were accountable for losses because they needed to stay at home if their children were sick or while on maternity leave. Women were degraded because they and their performance were measured against men's capabilities.

According to communist party ideology, the GDR achieved complete emancipation of the sexes, simply by introducing women into the labor force and easing yet not eradicating the triple burden. Based on that characterization of gender equality the GDR was progressive compared to many western and non-western countries because it had one of the highest female employment rates in the world. On the surface, it almost appears as if women in the GDR had no problems combining paid labor with raising children and the household, given rise to the image of the superwoman who can do it all. The reality, however, was quite different in some respects. Even though the party believed the women's question had been solved, women were still discriminated against in leading positions in politics, and the work place; often hitting the socialist glass ceiling, however, men were also discriminated against in female professions and as fathers since laws targeted women only. *Johanna* showcases the state's women's policies with all female characters being working women, yet when it comes to leadership positions and challenging existing gender stereotypes in the private and the public sphere, the show failed to portray reality, just as the state's women's policies and the party partially failed its male and female citizens. It took many years before women and men realized that the GDR was a paternal state, and both sexes were limited by expected gender roles and gender hierarchies in the private and the public sphere.

This socialist self-perception and self-identity become visible when studying gender relations and the characterization of men and women in *Johanna*. However, it becomes clear in the show as well as the realities of East German life that the GDR and its women were not as black and white as often portrayed. The GDR was a nuanced and complex society. This socialist state had obviously not achieved gender equality, despite its proclamation in the early 1970s, but it had accomplished more than many other countries, including unified Germany in the early 2000s. Critics often highlight that the GDR failed to provide "real emancipation" or "real gender equality," but what does "real" mean in relation to gender and the sexes? This analysis provides interesting insides, and from the TV show it is clear that women took advantage of the opportunities that were given to them and many felt fulfilled in their professional lives and supported by the state. Women were more outspoken and articulate about their issues and concerns

than often assumed or “allowed” by critics, and in *Johanna* women are the ones who are willing to accept a reversal of gender roles, possibly because they had been used to the masculine and feminine roles attached to the image of the ideal socialist woman. There is no discussion that the state socialist system was patriarchal, restrictive and controlling but women need to be looked at in their own right as women and not as gender-neutral, oppressed and victimized citizens of the GDR since this is purely a continuation of the GDR’s legacy of comparing women to men, of women measuring up to men (Frauen stehen ihren Mann). However, there is further need to also study men in relation to gender expectations, gender roles and perceptions of masculinity under state socialism.

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