Review of "GDR Society and Social Institutions: Facts & Figures" by G. E. Edwards

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In this book, G. E. Edwards, a lecturer at the Loughborough University of Technology, examines East German society by focusing on family, women, youth, and the elderly. She gives a comprehensive overview of social policy with respect to these groups in the German Democratic Republic and presents GDR statistics and research on many topics, such as reproductive trends, marriage and divorce patterns, education, and work force and political participation. For those unfamiliar with GDR society, the book provides much useful information.

A few examples will illustrate what the book has to offer. Edwards describes the school system from day-care centers to the higher educational levels and details the educational goals and the official curriculum. Women under the age of thirty-five have presently reached a rough equality with their male counterparts, and Edwards attributes this, among other factors, to “identical education from crèche onwards for both sexes, polytechnic education, and compulsory vocational training” (p. 113). She notes that girls and boys still show traditional attitudes in their choice of studies, though she does not mention the possibility that the school itself may be responsible for this by channeling boys and girls into traditionally male and female fields—or that policy concerns with productivity may also reinforce traditional patterns.

In the area of work, the issues of shift work are particularly well discussed. While here the interrelations between work and family life come to the fore, it would have been helpful to spell out contradictory state goals with respect to family stability and work productivity and analyze them in greater detail.

In discussing the organized leisure activities of young people, Edwards observes that in contrast to the Soviet Union where idealistic youngsters can still do truly pioneering work, projects in a more developed country like the GDR do not have the same attraction. In her view, young people—especially in the small towns of the GDR—are bored because the activities available to them are mainly limited to “hard work, political activities and discos” (p. 165). Apathy and occasional restlessness, however, may also result from the difficulties of open expression of opinion in the school and in the youth organization. Here as elsewhere, Edwards does not sufficiently analyze the effect of the state and the mass organizations on GDR society.

Edwards rarely shows how policies and institutions are related to competing groups and divergent interests. The reader therefore finds it difficult to understand the causes of some of the problems she discusses. She attributes, for example, the early severe problems of housing to the “lack of materials, shortage of manpower and lack of money within the economy as a whole” (pp. 44–45) as if there were no choice involved in the allocation of scarce economic resources—no choice, no conflicting pressures, no benefits to certain groups and interests rather than to others.

The strength of this book lies in its comprehensive overview of GDR social policy and official goals rather than in its social analysis. Within these limits, it provides a good introduction to the study of GDR society.

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