



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989
Education and Social Mobility (1982)

The role of social background as a criterion for professional and career advancement in the “Workers’ and Farmers’ State” of the GDR is subject to caricature in the following excerpt, which also examines the positive and potentially “dangerous” aspects of a well-educated populace for the government.

Worn-Down Coins or Socialist Rules of Play

[. . .]

Family Tree

Belonging to the ruling class cannot be commuted into values or privileges. Laborers and farmers are part of the workforce like almost all citizens. Assignment to a class or social stratum is asked in questionnaires; it is still essential for statistical purposes. But this was not always the case. In the 1950s, when the bourgeois privilege of education was abolished, children of workers and farmers had priority in receiving places at secondary schools and universities. In 1949, the ABF [Workers’ and Peasants’ School] was founded to make it possible to attain the *Abitur* through special courses. In 1950, thirty percent of all college students were the children of workers and farmers, and by 1966 their share had risen to 55 percent. A new intelligentsia thus emerged. The former ABF graduates today have leading positions in politics, industry, and culture. [But] they are fighting so their children will not be classed as belonging to the “intelligentsia,” so they won’t carry the mark of Cain of that background.

Once the “socialist human community,” the “kingdom of humanity,” was proclaimed in the 1960s, and every citizen had to develop his socialist personality and the classes and strata were supposed to embrace each other as brothers, the 8th Party Congress of the SED in 1971 posed the class question anew. It was about the proletariat, about communism, and about how the working class has to be deliberately fostered through social policy and cultural measures. The old slogan from Wismut¹ days, “I am a miner; who is more?” reappeared. As a professional group, construction workers received a propagandistic value-increase because building housing had been declared the economic focus. Although no one assessed how it could pay off, it once again became important to belong to the working class – best of all to one of the trades of the construction industry. Heated discussion started in union meetings and also in public. Its only purpose was for everyone to prove personally that they had the proper pedigree. The former

¹ Reference to the Soviet-German Wismut corporation located in Saxony that mined uranium ore for the Soviet Union – trans.

ABF graduates were leaders at this; they asked if only every second generation of a family was allowed to belong to the “ruling class,” and they impressed upon their children the reasons to leave school after ten years. In cultural and intellectual circles it became trendy to boast: “Our son is becoming a laborer.”

The waves of the debate – who, in fact, belonged to the “ruling class” – did not subside. They crashed all the way up to the highest echelons. The only ones to show absolutely no interest in this matter were the workers and farmers, and the self-employed skilled tradesmen. Unrest greatly rattled the superstructure and led to so-called “useless discussion.” That distracted from the postulated main task: “Raising the material and cultural standard of living of the workers,” which was to be monitored in practice and through agitation. After almost a year, the main task evolved into the Gentleman’s Agreement: We are all workers and do not lack the glory that we should have before the party. Now everyone who earns a salary or wages is a worker and is allowed to consider himself part of the working class. Consequently, at the end of 1980 a local politician was totally justified in announcing on GDR television that exclusively working-class families were moving into the apartments in a newly built housing block in Berlin. One strange thing has remained from the ancestry debate. The candidates for every election, and people honored with medals and decorations, are always introduced with two occupations. Erich Honecker for example: Roofer, chairman of the Council of State of the GDR. The happy coincidence that the first man of the state once belonged to the construction workers’ trade, however, will not tempt any construction worker to utopian wishes.

Education

Knowledge counts in the GDR. Knowledge does not mean power; but knowledge and skills are still attributes. The experience of two world wars still has an effect: “Whatever you have in your head cannot be expropriated.” The tradition of the German workers’ movement since Bebel is ever-present: Education programs have constantly been on the agenda, ever since the 1864 Leipzig Club Day for the “Association of German Workers’ Clubs.” Lenin’s slogan, “Study, study, study,” has been elevated to a popular aphorism. The maxims of the middle classes from the early years of Germany’s industrial society have remained alive: Study in order to be better off, to climb socially. Getting qualifications and continuing education are a part of everyday life in the GDR. People go to night school either to finish up tenth grade or to get their *Abitur*, or they attend evening or special study programs to obtain a tradesman’s certificate of proficiency or a vocational school degree; and through distance learning programs they can graduate from college. Anyone who drops out of the “unified socialist education system” can find many options to drop back in. There are also partial courses of study, special courses, adult education courses. They are primarily designed to better prepare the worker for the job he already holds. Major companies have their own on-site academies. In 1977, 1,455,300 employees of the socialist economy did some form of continuing education, 573,200 of whom were women. Every company is legally required through the company collective contract (annual agreement between management and unions) to implement a plan to promote women, another to promote young people, and yet another for further qualifications. Filling the plans “with life,” as it is called in the language of the functionaries, is difficult, because it is understandable that fewer women than men are willing and able to burden themselves with additional learning. Legal prerequisites, practical options, and social benefits (additional vacation, financial assistance) are exemplary. They are more favorable for women than for men, and more attractive for mothers with children than for girls. So it is not rare to run into people with two completed vocational trainings, with state certification for several skills, with dual university or college degrees.

Although specialized training has priority, general education is not neglected entirely. For example, anyone who completes a master craftsman’s certificate has to have read at least five

belletristic books and be able to say something about them, two of them from the “cultural heritage,” and three modern ones. The required titles change from time to time.

Knowledge and skills are also bartering objects; that is very obvious in the technical field. Whoever can build or repair something has a “good” to offer. The same is true for all kinds of advisory activities. Usually incomes increase with the level of education. But social climbing does not always mean financial advancement. A typesetter earns more than someone who is qualified to train typesetters; a construction worker can have more take-home pay than a civil engineer; a university graduate definitely earns less money than a window cleaner. These discrepancies in the pay structure along with a general dissatisfaction with the state keep some young people from striving for further education. Based on experience, this fatigue and lassitude does not persist for years. Soon after getting married, furnishing an apartment, and the first child, one of the partners decides to go back to school. If the husband is a qualified engineer, the wife wants at least to complete her master craftsman’s certificate. A familiar sentence among young women is: “Now it’s my turn.” Level of education is a family’s trademark. The woman’s profession always counts and is usually more deliberately appraised because it allows conclusions to be drawn about lifestyles. When introductions are made at social gatherings, the occupations of both are always named, usually along with the place of work and the type of work they do: Frau Meier, team leader at the telecommunications plant; Herr Meier, parts manufacturer in the construction combine. Occupations are a starting point for conversation; further or continuing education is – after bartering – the most popular topic of conversation.

The state-promoted drive for education harbors risks for the state. Anyone who knows what’s going on might use his knowledge “for the good of society,” but will also judge social processes more critically. Greater knowledge leads to expectations, and to more informed and complicated debates. The bitterness that knowledgeable people often experience when decisions are not made according to a specialized point of view is increasing. Criticism and unrest grow in proportion to knowledge. There’s no telling what will come of that. But no one doubts the value of knowledge and skills; they are everyone’s well-invested capital.

Source: Irene Böhme, *Die da drüben. Sieben Kapitel DDR* [*Over There. The GDR in Seven Chapters*]. Berlin (West), 1982, pp. 75-79.

Translation: Allison Brown