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The production work groups in the GDR: from mobilisation to control¹

Sandrine Kott

In the GDR of Erich Honecker,² the work group or "collective" represented an everyday social setting for the vast majority of its inhabitants, both at the workplace and outside it.³ At first analysed, from a totalitarian point of view, as a way of regimenting the country's citizens, during the 1990s the work groups came to be regarded more as constituting one of the "niches" in East German society, a sort of protected space within which individuals managed to "arrange" their existence in an autonomous way, in order to articulate and successfully assert their social demands. Instrument of power or place of social autonomy, these two visions of the work group share the same interpretational bias: they presuppose the existence of an autonomous social body crushed by a political power that was independent of it.

The extraordinary success of the work group movement in East Germany, its great attraction and its stabilising role in enterprises and even outside them, in fact lead us to call into question this institutional conception of power. The work group is indeed, as the totalitarian thesis postulates, "instituted" by the political leadership, and, as the revisionist thesis would have it, it does function in everyday life as a social microcosm without any partisan supervision. But this does not necessarily mean that it is spared the issue of power. Domination is not exercised from outside by using the work group: it runs right through it, with the individuals who make it up acting either as the means or the end. Analysing this mechanism thus leads us to ask questions about the way in which, by means of the work group, political power takes root in the "social nexus rather than constituting an additional structure 'above' society".⁴ The work group, a genuine instituted social microcosm, thus appears as a watchdog for political domination in practice and as social reality.⁵

To carry out this analysis, I will try first of all to bring out how the work group movement was built up gradually in response to political objectives. I will then highlight the limits of their capacity to mobilise, and will finally stress the importance of their role in the control and discipline of citizens.

History and significance of a movement

The hesitations and redefinitions that accompanied the gradual establishment of the work groups testify to the progressive adjustments in the objectives and representations of the political and trade union leaders in response to the reactions, often unwanted, of the workers. The first work groups saw the light of day in 1947-48 and were based on the Soviet model of

¹ This article is an abridged and revised version of chapter III of my book *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'État dans la société est-allemande*, Paris, Berlin, 2001.

² In May 1971, Erich Honecker (1912-1994) succeeded Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973) at the head of the Socialist Unity Party. He was to lead the GDR until 1989.

³ Patty Lee Parmalee, "Brigadeerfahrten und ostdeutsche Identitäten", *Beitrag zur Geschichte*, 1996/4, p. 71-86.

⁴ This approach has been inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. See in particular Michel Foucault, "Le sujet et le pouvoir", in *Dits et écrits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, volume IV, p. 222-243.

⁵ For a presentation of this approach and its application in empirical works, see Sandrine Kott (ed.), *Pour une histoire sociale du pouvoir en Europe communiste*, special issue of the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2002/2. See also Thomas Lindenberger (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, Weimar and Vienne, Böhlau, 1999. See further, for the case of the USSR, Jean Paul Depretto (ed.), *Pouvoir et société en Union soviétique*, Paris, Editions de l'Atelier, 2002.

the shock work groups of the 1920s.⁶ In the second half of 1949, the trade union encouraged the development of the "quality work groups" (*Qualitätsbrigaden*), within which a small team of on average seven workers joined together voluntarily.⁷ In 1950, it officially launched the movement of production work groups (*Produktionsbrigaden*), which pursued two objectives: mobilising labour in order to increase both productivity and the quality of work, and ensuring that labour was brought to heel politically, by partially substituting the work groups for the works councils (*Betriebsräte*), which had developed spontaneously after 1945.⁸

By the end of 1950 there were already 98,000 production work groups, bringing together 663,000 workers. This success can no doubt be explained by the material advantages that were granted if they produced more than their quota,⁹ but the work groups also took root in a tradition of collective organisation of work in the industrial world;¹⁰ finally, and above all, the work groups represented an opportunity for the workers to impose a relative autonomy in the definition and organisation of their work. For the work groups signed contracts with the management of the enterprise in an autonomous way¹¹ and they had the freedom to elect their work group leader, who soon became a positive figure, in contrast to the foreman, who was seen as someone who carried out the orders of the management of the enterprise.

The sole trade union thus soon had difficulty in keeping control over this movement; in fact, after the winter of 1950, the party in power, the Socialist Unity Party (SED, *Sozialistische Einheitspartei*) called for a stop to the movement, no doubt in agreement with the enterprise managements, which had greeted with suspicion the proliferation of over-autonomous units of workers. A series of measures was taken in an effort to return control over the organisation of production to the enterprise managements and the Party; the role of the foremen was re-evaluated with the establishment, at the end of 1950, of the Day of the Foreman (*Tag des Meisters*).

The history of this first version of the socialist work groups shows how difficult the political leaders found it to control the mobilisation that they themselves had encouraged, and in which the workers could see an opportunity to exercise a sort of democracy from below. The trials of those accused of "syndicalism" at the end of the 1950s clearly reveal the tensions that this type of movement gave rise to and the fears of the political leaders when faced with this type of "deviation".¹²

⁶ On the first work group movement, see François Bafoil, *Entreprises et syndicats en RDA. Une histoire de l'émulation socialiste*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1991, p. 63-70, Peter Hübner, *Konsens, Konflikt und Kompromiß. Soziale Arbeiterinteressen und Sozialpolitik in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1970*, Berlin, Akademie, 1995, p. 212-239, Jörg Roesler, "Gewerkschaften und Brigadebewegung in der DDR (Ende der 40er bis Anfang der 60er Jahre)", *Beitrag zur Geschichte*, 1996/3, p. 3-25 and "Inszenierung oder Selbstgestaltungswille? Zur Geschichte der Brigadebewegung in der DDR während der 50er Jahre", *Hefte zur DDR-Geschichte* (Berlin), 15, 1994.

⁷ The numbers increased to reach an average of thirteen people in 1956 and seventeen in 1973. In the metallurgical industry the work groups brought together from six to forty people in 1953. See Jörg Roesler, "Die Produktionsbrigaden in der Industrie der DDR. Zentrum der Arbeitswelt?", in Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, Hartmut Zwahr (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, Stuttgart, Klett Cotta, 1994, p. 144-170, here p. 150.

⁸ Peter Hübner, op. cit., p. 214.

⁹ On this point, see the case of the work groups of the *Schwarze Pumpe* (Black Pump) energy production combine (mains gas and lignite briquettes), developed in Rüdiger Soldt, "Zum Beispiel Schwarze Pumpe : Arbeiterbrigaden in der DDR", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, n°24, 1998, p. 88-109.

¹⁰ Alf Lüdtke, "Arbeit, Arbeitserfahrung und Arbeiterpolitik. Zum Perspektivwandel in der historischen Forschung", in Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis zum Fascismus*, Hamburg, 1993, p. 351-440.

¹¹ Archives of the *Land* (state) of Berlin: Landesarchiv Berlin, hereafter referred to as LAB, Rep 432, 335, or 162. See also contracts of this type for the year 1951 in the enterprise of the Berlin transformers: LAB, Rep 411 1340.

¹² Thomas Reichel, "Jugoslawische Verhältnisse? Die 'Brigaden der sozialistischen Arbeit' und 'die Syndikalismus'-Affäre (1959-1962)", in Thomas Lindenberger (ed.), op. cit., p. 45-73.

The "second generation" work groups

It was in this context of "normalisation", which continued the repression of the movement in 1953, that the movement of the "second generation" socialist work groups (*sozialistische Brigaden*) was planned in December 1958 by the leadership of the trade union; the "communist work groups" launched a few weeks earlier in the USSR provided a model for them.¹³ The "socialist work group" was conceived of as a grass-roots community (not just a work team) that welcomed, educated and supervised individuals in order to mobilise them for a political and economic project, the construction of socialism.

These work groups constituted the framework for a collective organisation of productive and social life; its members were supposed to "work, learn and live in a socialist way". This triple injunction was assessed as part of the competition for the title of "Work group for socialist work" (*Brigade der sozialistischen Arbeit*). The work group thus formed a work and life community (*Arbeits- und Lebensgemeinschaft*), to which the "work group chronicle" (*Brigadetagebuch*), a collective work, was intended to bear witness.

According to official figures, this movement was a success. By December 1960, 130,074 work groups, bringing together more than one and a half million members, were already taking part in the socialist competition. This number did not cease to grow, especially from the 1970s onwards. In 1989, five and a half million people (65% of the active population of the GDR) were organised in 310,000 socialist work groups. Many of these work groups, especially in the administrative and managerial sectors, only existed on paper, but in the workshops they fulfilled specific functions of mutual assistance and managing the economy, and thus constituted an important feature of collective life.

Mobilisation?

The first production work groups were specifically established with a view to production; their objective was to fulfil, or if possible to exceed the plan. During the 1960s and even more during the last twenty years of the regime, however, the vaunted productive heroism gave way on the ground to breakdown management practices.¹⁴ Production difficulties, failures of machinery, poor quality material, and gaps in the supply of raw materials slowed down the work and weighed heavily on economic results. They were omnipresent in most of the work group chronicles and made it necessary to perpetually develop adaptive strategies.

The necessity for a high level of skills on the part of each member of the work group thus became a response to the problems of labour management and its deficiencies. Similarly, the work group became the setting for surveillance of attendance and application at work. Absentees and latecomers who had a negative impact on the results of the work team as a whole were singled out, a record was kept of them, and they were carefully monitored.

Paradoxically, these difficulties seem often to have helped strengthen ties within the collective, since in the face of the chronic deficiencies of the system, the survival of the work group and its results clearly depended on the solidarity between its members. And the economic success of the work group was important: the payment of the collective bonuses depended on it, and, above all, it opened up opportunities to negotiate with the foreman or even with the director of the department about wage levels and working hours. It was in this

¹³ Peter Hübner, op. cit., p. 223-228 and Jörg Roesler, art. cit., p. 145.

¹⁴ On this "breakdown economy" see in particular, among many others, Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

sense that the work group constituted a relatively effective framework for the economic survival of the system.

The work group was also conceived of as a privileged setting for shaping the political culture of the workers and their political mobilisation. The articles, pictures and drawings in the work group chronicles followed the official political line. If the way of presenting it was more colourful, the language remained just as lacklustre. It was within the work group, in "closed ranks", that the workers were invited to take part in the major political rituals,¹⁵ that they attended the "red meetings" (*Roter Treff*), prepared the noticeboard (*Wandzeitung*), and organised various solidarity initiatives, including many collections to help the peoples of the Third World in the war against "imperialism".

These "routines" had largely lost the political significance that the political leaders had wanted to confer on them. The members of the work groups, who incidentally were rarely members of the Party in the industrial workshops during the final twenty years of the regime, were not institutionally responsible for political orthodoxy, which was a matter for political organisations like the Party or the Free German Youth. In addition, just like the trade union leaders, they attempted more and more clearly to avoid ideological confrontation.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the major political rituals, just like the more commonplace expressions of "solidarity", continued to provide a rhythm for the everyday life of the workers; they formed habits and conveyed values that were slowly interiorised, producing effects that can still be measured today.

From both the economic and the political points of view, then, the work group in the Honecker era was not the authority for mobilisation of the "heroic times", but it nevertheless fulfilled the important function of creating a political culture and of economic stabilisation. Above all, it was a link in the process of exercising domination that could not be avoided.

The work groups in a society permeated by power

In 1958, during the 5th congress of the SED, its first leader, Walter Ulbricht, defined socialist Germany as a "community of human beings" (*Menschengemeinschaft*). The use of the term "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) related back to a German tradition that had promoted this concept since the period of political romanticism.¹⁷ Ferdinand Tönnies,¹⁸ the first theoretician of the contrast between "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) and "society" (*Gesellschaft*), represents in this respect an essential reference in German political thought in the twentieth century, in particular in the movement of the workers.¹⁹

¹⁵ On the political rituals in the GDR: Dieter Vorsteher (ed.), *Parteiauftrag : ein neues Deutschland. Bilder Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR. Buch zur Ausstellung des Deutschen Historischen Museums vom 13. Dezember 1996 bis 11 März 1997*, Berlin, DHM, 1996.

¹⁶ On this point see Renate Hürtgen, "Der Gewerkschaftsvertrauensmann des FDGB in den 70er und 80er Jahren: Funktionsloser Funktionär der Gewerkschaften", in Reichel (ed.), *Der Schein der Stabilität. DDR-Betriebsalltag in der Ära Honecker*, Berlin, 2001, p. 143-159.

¹⁷ On this point see also the article "Gesellschaft et Gemeinschaft" in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Rainer Koselleck (ed.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Stuttgart, Klett Cotta, Vol. 2, 1972, p. 801-862.

¹⁸ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, first edition 1887. Translated into French under the title *Communauté et société, catégories fondamentales de la sociologie pure*, Paris, C.E.P.L., 1977.

¹⁹ We should remember that from 1890 on Tönnies had always been close to the socialist movement, and in 1930 he became a member of the SPD as a sign of solidarity. He saw in the trade union movement a possible form of community in modern economic structures.

Following on from Tönnies, the East German leaders saw in "community"²⁰ a "life that was truly in common and sustainable (...), a living organism", while "society" was no more than a "mechanical and artificial jumble".²¹ The metaphor of community provides a possible model for analysing the functioning of the collectives within an enterprise, and also makes it possible to better understand their function for the whole of the political system.

Reading the work group chronicles gives the impression that, as with the community, the element of emotional closeness constituted an essential link between the members of the work group. The chronicle of the *Anne Frank* women's work group at a clothing factory, written in the early 1960s,²² consists almost exclusively of an account of the celebrations and parties organised by the work group for its members, often outside working hours. The same impression, in a very different context, is given by the chronicle of the *Pestalozzi* collective in the 1970s, which brought together the teachers at a professional training centre attached to an enterprise, that of the transformers in Berlin. All we read about is going on outings and grilling sausages. For example, all they have to tell us about their visit to the "Trade Fair for the Foremen of Tomorrow" (MMM) in Leipzig is their journey there in two clapped-out Trabants, the night spent in a tent on inflatable mattresses that kept on losing air, and the sausages they wolfed down at the kiosk in the trade fair hall.²³

If we are to believe these chronicles, and also the retrospective accounts of a number of East German citizens, the work group was a happy community, based on a genuine emotional closeness between its members. Besides, a large number of gestures were aimed (unless they were simply being put on for show) at maintaining the quality of these relationships. Parties organised by various members of the work group, outings and excursions, afternoons spent round a glass of beer or a cup of coffee – all these things, as the work group members themselves often stress, were ways of strengthening the collective identity.

Giving gifts and providing services for each other further reinforced these ties. If a worker was ill, the others would bring flowers or a small gift; those who were on holiday or in a delegation in a "fraternal" country would send a card to their colleagues at the enterprise; birthdays and other personal occasions were celebrated regularly. The differences between the sexes formed an important dimension of this community feeling and were paraded with great show on 8 March, designated as International Women's Day. On this occasion the female members of the work group or in the workshop in general became the object of great attention and received presents that had often been prepared a long time in advance.²⁴

From solidarity to control

These material and symbolic exchanges without doubt helped to establish ties between members, but they also provided an opportunity to reinforce dependencies and relationships of subjection. Moreover, from the mid-1960s onwards, the political leaders themselves presented their social policy or their efforts to develop consumerism as a gift from the Party to the people as a whole in exchange for their loyalty.²⁵ This "gift policy"²⁶ was accompanied by

²⁰ See in particular Gerd Meyer, Kirsten Rohmeis, "'Kontrollierte Emanzipation.' Thesen zu Patriarchalismus und Paternalismus im politischen System der DDR", in *Tradition und Fortschritt in der DDR. Neunzehnte Tagung zum Stand der DDR-Forschung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 20-23 Mai 1986*, Köln, 1986, p. 102-117.

²¹ Ferdinand Tönnies, op. cit., p. 48.

²² LAB, Rep 470/01 47.

²³ LAB, Rep 411 1339 volume 6.

²⁴ There are many examples in the work group chronicles. See in particular Lunik III, Leo Arons, Erich Mühsam, Anne Frank from the light-bulb enterprise in Berlin. LAB, Rep 409/01 215, 223, 213, 212.

²⁵ The line of clothing christened *Präsent-20* (present-20) and launched in 1969 to mark the 20th anniversary of the GDR provides a good example: Cordula Günther, "Präsent-20. Der Stoff aus dem die Träume sind", in Ina

official talk about love that has been analysed as a method of exercising domination in socialist Germany.²⁷

At the heart of the social microcosm that the work group represented, a price had to be paid for the benevolence and protection accorded to each of its members, the recognition by all that the work group, as a socialist institution, was entitled to exercise authority. Differences of age (and also of sex) played an essential role in this. Within the work group, the younger workers were placed under the responsibility of the older ones, who played the role of trainers and youth workers.

The "youth work groups" were certainly encouraged by the regime, but a law passed in 1974 stipulated that they must always include more experienced workers.²⁸ The trade union leaders insisted on this "mixing of ages" that allowed knowledge and experience to be passed on while at the same time underlining the disciplinary role of the older workers. The latter denounced the "frivolity" of younger workers who did not do their work properly or were skivers, but they also had to forgive and help them,²⁹ insofar as the work collective explicitly remained the basic forum for socialisation.

Moreover, during the discussions surrounding the establishment of the socialist work groups in 1959, the exclusion of bad workers was explicitly rejected. If the work group was not a force for mobilisation, it did control and educate its members, helping to reinforce the "educational dictatorship" that was characteristic of the SED state.³⁰ This dimension of the work groups was further used and institutionalised by the regime in order to integrate the individuals who were classed as "asocial". Thus the best work groups regularly accepted former prisoners or minor delinquents who served alternative punishments with them,³¹ and even, from the second half of the 1960s onwards, individuals who had been ordered by the courts to carry out regular industrial work, considered as an element of resocialisation. During the 1980s the "special work groups" included among their members individuals with psychological problems.³²

There was thus a price to pay for the educational supervision provided by the collective: the obedience and conformity of each individual. Each work group thus had its "problem child" (*Sorgekind*) whom it tried to integrate and discipline. Such was the case in 1973 of a certain "colleague V.", member of a telecommunications work group in the enterprise of the transformers in Berlin, whose punctuality had left something to be desired for several months.

Two representatives of the work group visited "colleague V."s apartment in May 1973 following another absence without any excuse. Not finding her there, they telephoned the crèche and found that her daughter was also absent; they also learned that the crèche had not

Merkel, Felix Mühlberg (ed.), *Wunderwirtschaft. DDR Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren*, Cologne, Böhlau, 1996, p. 144-151, here p. 144.

²⁶ On this see Sandrine Kott, "Le don comme rituel en RDA (1949-1989). Instrument de domination et pratiques quotidiennes", *Le Mouvement social*, n°194, janvier-mars 2001, p. 67-83.

²⁷ Dorothee Wierling, "Über die Liebe zum Staat. Der Fall der DDR", *Historische Anthropologie*, vol. 8, 2000/2, p. 236-263.

²⁸ Sandrine Kott, "Die Unerreichbaren der sozialistischen Gesellschaft. Die Arbeiterjugend 1970-1989", in Renate Hürtgen, Thomas Reichel (ed.), *Der Schein der Stabilität. DDR Betriebsalltag in der Ära Honecker*, Berlin, Metropol, 2001, p. 229-249.

²⁹ Annegret Schüle, "Mächtige Mütter und unwillige Töchter. Ein Generationsvergleich unter Arbeiterinnen eines Textilbetriebes der DDR", in Peter Hübner, Klaus Tenfelde (ed.), *Arbeiter in der SBZ/DDR*, Essen, Klartext, 1999, p.709-741.

³⁰ Gerd Meyer, "Sozialistischer Paternalismus in der Ära Honecker. Lebensweise zwischen sozialer Sicherheit und politischer Bevormundung", in Gerhard Riege, Gerd Meyer (ed.), *In der DDR Leben. Interdisziplinäre Studien aus Jena und Tübingen*, 1991, p.75-89.

³¹ For the enterprise of the Berlin transformers: LAB, Rep 411 1094.

³² For the Narva light bulb enterprise: LAB, Rep 409 537.

been paid for two weeks. Next day, "colleague V." turned up for work again and said that she had passed the day at her mother's.

A few weeks later she disappeared again for three days. From a conversation with the local police officer her colleagues learned that she had gone off in a car with a man she had met in a bar "of ill repute". The police officer also reported that several neighbours had complained of disturbances at night due to her keeping bad company with men. On the morning of the fourth day she reappeared but refused to answer any questions on the grounds that it was "her business". After a stormy discussion she was dismissed from her job, but the work group leader immediately found her another post at the Köpenick radio enterprise.³³

This case, though extreme, is nevertheless revealing. The home visit, the conversations with the neighbours and the local police officer were common practices and they illustrate well the role of surveillance played by the work group, even in the private sphere. Consequently we can well understand how, even if the collective selfishly got rid of the young V., they found another community to accept her that would be capable of "keeping an eye on her". The work group was very definitely the first level on which discipline was imposed on citizens.

This one example among others shows that the work group was not only the final authority responsible for discipline in a vertical conception of the exercise of power; it also imposed its own hierarchies (of age and sex) and moral values, which the leaders then made use of for political ends.

This is also why common and recurrent minor infringements of discipline, such as being late for work and ordinary absences, if they were accompanied by regret and promises of improvement, were soon forgiven until the next time. Within the collective, each individual remains under the close surveillance of the group. This is the essential function of the support offered. The visit to the sick colleague, even if taking them flowers, makes it possible to ensure that there is good reason for their absence. The surveillance is even more effective because private and family life dissolves into a public life that is dominated by the work sphere. Not only the political leaders, but also the members of the work group believe that it has the right to intervene in order to correct certain forms of private behaviour that are considered contrary to socialist morality. Thus the work group is not only a warm and friendly collective, but it is also a place of surveillance and discipline; the ties that are formed there make a major contribution to the integration and social education of as many as possible and to the control of all.

Conclusion

The work groups may have been communities of solidarity and warmth, indeed settings for genuine mutual assistance, but they were "instituted communities", they had their origin in an initiative from above, and they were part of a political, ideological, economic and cultural scheme of things that limited and set the direction for their existence and development. In spite of many abortive attempts, they were never able to form the seeds or the outline of a direct democracy.

While it is true that the strength and quality of the ties formed were able to protect those who accepted the rules, the work group was also a machine for maintaining surveillance of, and for excluding, those who were seen as radically different, who behaved in a way that did not conform to the interests of the group, or who were simply too rebellious to submit to the rules of the community. Exclusion, which was well known to be the reverse side of

³³ LAB, Rep 411 1339 volume 1.

community integration, was not necessarily in keeping with the interests of the regime, but the latter was able to use the dynamics of the community to mobilise individuals in their work or to exercise surveillance over their behaviour. Of course, this did not exclude the phenomena of reappropriation and subversion, but it limited their impact.

In this sense, it seems to me to be debatable to see the work groups as a "niche", a space of liberty, even relative liberty. They were places within which "arrangements" were certainly possible, but always after more or less clear and formal negotiations with the various power-holders in the enterprise: the Party, the economic management, or the trade union. In this complex interaction, the limits imposed by dictatorship on the autonomy of each individual was an insistent and lasting reality.