

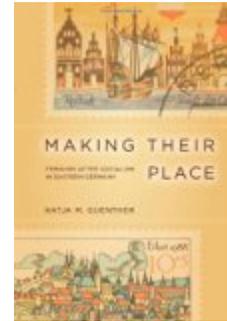


Katja M. Guenther. *Making Their Place: Feminism after Socialism in Eastern Germany*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xii + 247 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7071-2; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-7072-9.

Reviewed by Lyn Marven (University of Liverpool)

Published on H-German (March, 2014)

Commissioned by Chad Ross



## A Place for Women in the former GDR

Katja M. Guenther's readable account of the development of feminist movements in eastern Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall focuses on Rostock and Erfurt, using these two demographically similar but geographically distant cities to tease out an understanding of place and its function in social activism. Using a mixture of participant observation and interviews, along with archival and official governmental materials, Guenther creates a narrative account of each city before comparing the two explicitly in a final chapter that also draws wider conclusions about the factors for success for feminist organizations within (though not restricted to) post-socialist states.

Chapter 1 sketches the context of the study, outlining the dimensions of place germane to the analysis and setting out the specifically gendered effects as well as the wider economic and social consequences of unification in eastern Germany; the two cities in question are introduced by way of more personal impressions. Chapter 2 then goes into more depth about the history of women's issues (notably centered around enabling mothers to work) and feminist organizations in the GDR, comparing these to the former FRG, before examining the role of women's groups in the collapse of the GDR and their gradual exclusion from the subsequent process of unification. Since unification, women's organizations in eastern Germany have tended to be localized and relatively isolated from one another; as elsewhere, many women are wary of labeling themselves as feminist, and the ideolo-

gies espoused by individuals and organizations are both varied amongst themselves and differ from those prevalent in western Germany. Chapters 3 through 6 focus on Rostock and Erfurt in turn, with a chapter devoted to each city and one to their respective Länder and wider spatial positioning. The chapters are interspersed with brief but telling anecdotes drawn from Guenther's fieldwork, giving a more intimate flavor of the issues at stake in the analysis.

Guenther's use of place to frame analysis is persuasive: the concept of place here allows for the synthesis of political, historical, and cultural factors specific to each locality, as well as attending to the geographical location and wider spatial-political orientation of each city which have a bearing on the success of feminist organizations and interventions. Thus in chapter 3 Guenther demonstrates how postunification politics in left-leaning Rostock (a legacy of the GDR and the relatively privileged treatment the city received from the SED) combine with the city's older history as a Baltic port-oriented towards Scandinavia rather than the German interior, and with a strong tradition of women's participation as a result of menfolk absent at sea—and, further, its legacy as the site of an early community of Beguines. Feminists are able to latch onto these narratives of the city's identity and present their agenda as part of a historical continuity of women prominent in the city.

In chapter 5 by contrast, Guenther shows how Erfurt,

where dissent and (as a result) surveillance were high under the SED's regime—not least because of the historically strong presence of the churches—turns to the CDU after unification; this confluence of religion and conservatism equally draws on an older historical lineage and influences local perspectives on gender roles as the city positions itself as Westernized. In this case, the historical and cultural identity of the city does not offer a foothold for feminist activity, and the political atmosphere precludes social intervention and thus militates against work within areas (such as domestic violence) deemed to be private and thus outwith politics.

Subsequent chapters further focus on the different levels of geographical-political space within which the feminist movements are embedded beyond their respective cities: chapter 4 elaborates Rostock's geographical orientation towards Sweden on the one hand, and the EU on the other hand, both of which arenas are open to feminist claims and promote the concept of gender-mainstreaming in particular. Chapter 6 examines in more detail the cross-border perspective in Erfurt which saw the city attempt to "catch up" with West Germany rapidly after reunification. This included adopting Western ideologies of feminism; indeed some Western feminists and women's organizations even moved to Erfurt—most notably an order of nuns who set up a shelter for victims of domestic abuse. However, while the understanding of gender perpetuated by the expanded federal state—which is viewed as distant in Rostock—chimes with the local views in the city and in Thüringen more widely, both are by and large closed to feminist intervention; the EU by contrast plays almost no role here.

Local culture and politics also affect the particular forms of feminism developed within each city: in Rostock, neosocialist feminism is in synergy with the leftist agendas of the city and the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; in Erfurt radical feminists react against, and conservative feminists draw on, conservative views of women's roles propagated by the CDU and the churches. A virtuous circle thus emerges in Rostock, as feminist interventions are informed by and in turn inform the city (and state) politics, while in Erfurt ideological divisions and internal conflict hinder feminist efforts. The potential congruence of conservative feminism and CDU politics in Erfurt moreover is hampered by the contradictory views within conservative feminism about women's participation within politics, and the role of the state vis-à-vis private (domestic) issues which are the mainstay of the feminist organizations in the city.

Eastern women, used to combining roles as workers and mothers, attempt to change the local culture of the CDU but cannot resolve these contradictions.

Guenther concludes measuredly that both cities demonstrate success in creating and maintaining organizations, feminist activity, and services for women "that far exceed what is available in similarly sized cities in western Germany" (p. 187), but while the provision of programs may be similar, Rostock has seen much more progress while in Erfurt feminist organizations are facing increasing challenges. This is perhaps all the more surprising given the prominence of Erfurt feminists during the events of 1989/90: it was here that the group Women for Change took direct action against the Stasi, putting the city and its feminists on the map nationally. Nonetheless, the example of Erfurt is perhaps even more instructive for readers: analyzing the obstacles in the way of success may help other organizations avoid the same pitfalls and in that respect the conclusions of this study go beyond the immediate context of postsocialist eastern Germany. In summing up, Guenther points in particular to the dangers of institutionalization or "NGO-ization," the importance of diversification of funding, and the need to manage cooperation between groups and with state officials. In paying attention to dimensions of space as well as culture and politics, Guenther's multilayered analysis thus offers a model for future studies as well as for feminist activism.

One afterthought: in the appended methodological discussion, Guenther remarks briefly on the particular complexity surrounding anonymity in this context: many of the individuals interviewed were keen to speak on the record, feeling that their voices are otherwise silenced as women and/or eastern Germans. (Guenther uses pseudonyms for respondents but the real names of organizations.) Given the self-reflexivity apparent throughout the analysis, it would perhaps also have been salient to address here the question of translation, which is of course another form of ventriloquism. All quotations are given in English, further distancing the women from their own words, with only a few references to German terms or phrasing (most frequently when gender-mainstreaming is discussed, as the English term is used in German for want of a standard German translation). I do realize that the decision to use English only will likely have been made by the publisher not the author but as a linguist, I would certainly have welcomed the opportunity to read the actual words spoken by these dedicated and often pioneering women.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Lyn Marven. Review of Guenther, Katja M., *Making Their Place: Feminism after Socialism in Eastern Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36607>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.