Feminist movement in 20th century germany

<u>How influential was the work of Helke Sander in the feminist culture of 20 th century Germany?</u>

Following 12 years of Nazi rule in Germany, German women of the post-war period were forced to adapt to an increasingly hostile political culture as well as day-to-day discrimination on the basis of their gender. Despite this, German women managed to increase their political influence in Germany throughout the 20 th century, as well as become more artistically relevant in areas such as film production. Helke Sander was an extremely influential female film producer and director of the time, who used her work to highlight feminist issues that were often ignored in German society. This could therefore be argued to increase the influence of women in many aspects of life in German society post 1945.

Firstly, it is important to mention the huge role played by women in the rebuilding of Germany post 1945, which could be argued to lift their social status and make them more respected in German society during the 1940s and 1950s. An example of the efforts of these women were the *Trümmerfrauen* who worked at clearing cities which had been destroyed by war in order to reclaim materials and resources from buildings and attempt to provide suitable housing for their families. In addition to this, due to male war casualties women had to take up traditionally male orientated jobs, for example being crane drivers or coal miners (Fullbrook, M 2014). As a result of this, public opinions of women changed to view women as more capable of performing tasks that they would previously not have carried out. This work taken on by women is argued by many to have been one of the main starting points for the rise of German feminism in the 20 th century, and the

beginning of the more influential role of women that we see in today's society. However, there was still widespread resistance within Germany to women's participation in culture and academics, which is shown by the fact that there was almost no female film directors and artists, however those there were such as Elisabeth Langgässer were largely shunned by the literary establishment and critics (Fullbrook, M 2014). Therefore, it could be argued that although women made huge efforts towards the rebuilding of German society following 1945, this did not change public opinions of the capabilities of women.

As previously mentioned, the work of film director Helke Sander played a pivotal role in the life of women in 20 th century Germany. An example of one of her most prominent works is Sander's *Die Allseitig-reduzierte Persönlichkeit—Redupers* (1978) which follows a mother who is struggling to balance her work as a photographer and providing for herself and her daughter, resulting in her working long evenings often at the expense of carrying out traditional female roles such as housework. Eventually, she begins a project with other women which aims to photograph the city in a way which will promote the area and attract tourists; however, they instead focus on neglected aspects of the city and highlighting injustices in society at the time. Sander's film is extremely important in terms of emphasising the struggles of women in terms of providing for their families and working at the same time and also places a large emphasis on the artistic culture of 20 th century Germany, which often favoured men (Mennel, B 2014). Therefore, the film could be argued to be a useful way of addressing the discrimination that was faced by German women of the time period. A further example of

the male dominance in literature of the time is the fact that many pieces of literature which were core to German society, such as the work of Goethe and Brecht survived (Fullbrook, M 2014), showing how male-dominated artistic society still was despite the multiple attempts of feminists to change this.

Furthermore, *Die Deutschen und ihre Männer* (1989) was a major work produced by Sander which played a huge role in challenging the patriarchy in 20 [th] century German society, which would therefore help women gain more equality to men. In the film Sander uses a large amount of juxtaposition to highlight the huge differences in the traditional gender roles of men and women. Sander also uses interviews within the film to provide first-hand opinions of German people surrounding the issue of the role of women. An example of this is the last scene of the film which features an interview with a group of teenage boys who are describing the differences between men and women. The majority of the boys regard men as the provider for the family, whereas women are the ones who stay at home to carry out domestic roles such as cooking and cleaning (Zinn, G 1999). This particular interview is therefore extremely useful in highlighting the fact that although the role of women is slowly changing within German society, traditional gender roles still remain deeply engrained into German culture, which will be a disadvantage to women who are fighting for equality. Sander addressed this issue herself in 1968 when she discussed the fact that male politicians, specifically male SDS (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund) members were more than willing to discuss women's rights in a political context, however when it came to discussing women in a household context

they still appeared to cling on to traditional gender roles (Sander, H 1968). Although Sander believed that women had been emancipated to an extent, for example women were now more able to have a career and play a role in politics, she also believed that once women became married and had children they would be forced back into traditional homemaking roles, potentially due to the fact that they may be made to feel guilty for not fulfilling the traditional role of a woman within the home. Therefore, Sander's statement about this issue clearly outlines the fact that women may not be able to be fully emancipated and acknowledged as functional members of society until their role is appreciated and made relevant both in the public and private sphere.

In addition, one of Sander's most highly acclaimed films *Befreier und Befreite* (1992) places a strong emphasis on the occurrence of rape of German women by Soviet soldiers in and soon after 1945, which is believed to be one of the most prominent feminist topics in 20 [th] century Germany. Despite the usefulness of the film in raising awareness to this topic, it has also received huge criticisms from the film community. For example, at the annual conference of Women in Germany in the autumn of 1992 it was debated whether the film was insensitive to the struggles of racial minorities during this period. Additionally, it was argued whether it was appropriate to portray German women as victims when the Germans had just been responsible for a war which caused massive repercussions and loss of life across Europe. It could also be argued that viewing German women as 'victims' is a method of reducing war and especially holocaust guilt among the German people (McCormick, R 2001). Despite this argument, many

viewers of the film may also argue that this does not take away from the importance of discussing the incidences of rape of German women. During the Nazi regime, women were very much viewed as submissive meaning that the incidences of women committing war crimes such as murder were very rare. In addition to this, it can also be argued that many Germans went along with Nazi ideals during the second world war because if they did not they may be killed for resisting. Therefore, many people may believe that the war guilt of Germans post 1945 is not a valid reason to take away the victim status of female rape victims. Sander addressed this issue herself and stated that with the rare exception of female concentration camp guards, women were mainly not responsible for Nazi war crimes, meaning that the rapes by Soviet soldiers were possibly not linked to war anger. As well as this, male war criminals who were captured were not raped or sexually assaulted but instead killed or imprisoned, suggesting that the issue of rape is predominantly an act of sexual violence towards women (Sander, H 1995). Moreover, it can also be argued that Sander's film has broken a huge taboo in German society, due to the fact that at the time people were aware that mass raping was taking place, however people decided to avoid discussing the topic. As a result of this, many people may commend Sander for bringing a difficult and rarely discussed topic to the limelight in German culture.

In conclusion, the feminist movement in 20 [th] century Germany played a huge role in liberating women of the time period and allowing them to gain more rights and freedom after a long period of Nazi rule, which could be argued to have supressed the potential of women in many aspects of life. Many people would also consider the work of Helke Sander to have played a

massive role in giving women a voice and a platform during this time period, meaning that they were potentially taken more seriously and granted with more equality to men. Therefore, it could definitely be argued that the work of Helke Sander was extremely influential in allowing German women to gain more rights and freedoms in society in the post-war period.

References

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