



Université  
franco-allemande  
Deutsch-Französische  
Hochschule

Paul MAURICE

Ph.D. defense on December 9, 2025, Sorbonne Université / Saarland University

<https://theses.fr/2025SORUL125>

**Permanency of the traditional elites and the integration of permanent members in the socialist elite in the GDR.**

**Jürgen Kuczynski, a figure of wisdom and a bourgeois-marxist in the vanguard of Eastern-Germany economic history**

The PhD thesis analyzes Jürgen Kuczynski's career in the GDR as a privileged vantage point for observing bourgeois continuities within a state that purported to abolish class elites, taking as its field of investigation the community of economic historians structured around his person. It proposes reading East German economic history not only as a discipline for the Marxist legitimization of the regime, but also as a space for the reproduction of a bourgeois intellectual habitus that was reconfigured under the socialist category of the intelligentsia. The starting point is the autobiographical staging of Jürgen Kuczynski's communist commitment, which is presented as a teleological continuum from his joining the KPD on July 14, 1930, through the end of the GDR and his death in 1997 - an account that invites us to question how, in retrospect, he justifies his place within a dictatorial regime. The central question is therefore to what extent the milieu of economic historians surrounding him can be understood as a consistent "bourgeois-Marxist" elite situated at the intersection of party, state, and university, and specifically within a system that officially denies the existence of such elites.

This research combines elite history, Bourdieu's sociology of life courses, and the social and cultural history of the GDR, drawing in particular on the concepts of the "hidden group" (Sandrine Kott), the intelligentsia, and the Leninist vanguard. The thesis's hypothesis was that the GDR, far from abolishing the old intellectual bourgeoisie, provided the conditions for its partial transformation into a socialist elite, while simultaneously preserving forms of anti- or a-egalitarian distinction. Jürgen Kuczynski emerges as a borderline figure who unites the various dimensions of the elite identified by Ralph Jessen (functional, performance-based, position-based, value-based, origin-based, male) and embodies this oxymoron of the "bourgeois-Marxist intellectual" described by Axel Fair-Schulz. To avoid the "biographical illusion" defined by Pierre Bourdieu, the dissertation adopts a socio-historical biographical approach that focuses on the GDR period of Kuczynski's life, which is linked to the decisive legacy of his British exile (1936–1945), and links this to a prosopography of the milieu of economic historians (former students, staff members, colleagues), particularly the careers of the female economic historians promoted under his aegis, which reveal both a genuine openness toward women and the persistence of academic paternalism.

The findings first highlight the formative role of the British exile (1936–1945) in Jürgen Kuczynski's East German career: Proficiency in English, scholarly and political networks, and

experience in militant organizations constitute a specific form of capital that facilitates his position as a mediator between the GDR and the Western world, but also fuels a persistent mistrust on the part of the SED, which is evident in the Stasi files regarding the authorities' actions against him. Second, the analysis of the network of economic historians reveals the emergence of a socially relatively homogeneous milieu that possesses high, often internationalized academic capital and functions as an academic elite entrusted with producing a Marxist historical narrative of the GDR, while simultaneously preserving forms of bourgeois distinction in its practices (recruitment, internal hierarchies, lifestyles, access to resources). The work carried out under his leadership largely conforms to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which makes Jürgen Kuczynski more of a loyal communist than a "dissident who toed the party line," as he likes to describe himself. The concrete organization of his Institute for Economic History at Humboldt University and later at the Academy of Sciences reveals considerable scope for autonomy vis-à-vis the proclaimed egalitarianism: the appreciation of scholarly competence according to classical criteria of the bourgeois university, the special handling of academic privileges, and the importance of intellectual and familial socializing.

Finally, the investigation into Stasi surveillance brings to light a complex web of loyalties, mistrust, and protective mechanisms: Although Jürgen Kuczynski was under strict surveillance, he possessed political and academic capital that limited the services' ability to intervene directly, while his circle - colleagues, students, and family members - often proved to be an unreliable source of information, suggesting strong bonds of solidarity and opaque spheres within this elite. By linking the biography and social history of the intellectual elites, the dissertation thus demonstrates that the GDR did not so much abolish the elites as it reorganized profound continuities of bourgeois habitus under the label of "socialist intelligentsia," whereby the figure of the "bourgeois Marxist" became not an exception but a central catalyst of East German society.