

## Alissa Klots

**Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger, eds. *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015. 568 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-28013-7.**

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*Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* is an ambitious book that sets out to write domestic and caregiving work into the global history of labor. The authors define the subject of their research as “[w]ork in the households of others [which] includes all tasks concerning *household* work such as cooking, washing, cleaning as well as *care* work such as taking care of children, elderly and sick persons” (p. 2, emphases in the original) thus encompassing a wide spectrum of arrangements, from domestic slavery to the wage labor of unionized workers.

The edited volume contains 22 chapters based on papers presented at the 49th Linz conference organized by the International Conference of Labor History and Social Movements in 2013. The contributions are organized in four sections. The introductory section provides readers with a useful overview of existing literature on domestic and caregiving workers and a historical outline of paid domestic labor. Each part opens with a brief introduction that brings together the most important themes of the sections, making the volume more coherent and easier to navigate.

The opening chapter of the volume clearly shows that even though it is a history book, it is very much grounded in the present. Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger, and Dirk Hoerder passionately argue for the need to better the labor conditions of domestic workers today. Calling for dismantling the boundary between productive and unproductive work in scholarly analysis, they state that domestic work always produces “surplus value”—be it economic, social, or cultural. Rafaella Sarti’s historiographical essay analyzes the way social scientists’ belief in the inevitable disappearance of domestic service with the development of housekeeping technology and social services has shaped scholarship on domestic labor over the past 50 years. Sarti highlights its most important aspects, such as the role of domestic workers in cultural exchange between upper and lower classes, the place of domestic service in the life cycle of Western Europeans, the migration of mostly female domestic workers as part of bigger processes of urbanization and industrialization, questions of race and ethnicity of domestics and their employers in the colonial context, and so on. One thing I would have liked to see in this impressive overview is a discussion of how the transformation of history as a discipline over the last half century, with its turn away from social history to questions of culture, has affected the way we study paid domestic labor. Dirk Hoerder’s review of the global history of domestic and caregiving work through the lens of migration and gender strikes a good balance between outlining macrotendencies and doing justice to the regional

specificities of paid and unpaid domestic labor. He makes a strong case for the fluidity of “service” as a concept and its embeddedness in gender, class, racial, ethnic, and religious hierarchies. At the same time, he argues that domestic and caregiving workers should not be viewed only as victims of structures of inequality. In many circumstances, working “in service” is a choice and a manifestation of domestic workers’ agency. Hoerder calls for scholars to take women’s reasons for opting for caregiving and household work seriously, respecting the choices they and their families make even when we examine such problematic practices as self-sale or sale/pawning of family members. Domestic service can be an effective strategy for social mobility, while domestic workers’ cultural “otherness,” often analyzed within the frame of stigma and exclusion, can be a valuable resource and a source of self-assertion.

Agency is the overarching frame that unites articles in the first part of the volume. Majda Hrženjak challenges the notion that the global care chain is a recent phenomenon by showing that Slovenian women have been traveling to Italy since the mid-nineteenth century, choosing domestic work abroad as a way to improve their families’ economic status and become more independent. Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman and Jaira J. Harrington compare how Brazilian nonunionized women formally employed in domestic service and girls from poor families performing household services for their “adoptive parents” make sense of their experiences and resist exploitation. Marta Kindler and Anna Kordasiewicz trace the development of domestic service in Poland from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Adéla Souralová uses the fascinating case of Czech nannies for Vietnamese immigrants’ children to argue that emotional satisfaction from childrearing could play an important role in the decision to take up caregiving jobs. Lokesh analyzes the history of domestic workers’ organizations in Puna, India, to examine the potential of the domestic workers’ union movement to challenge gender- and caste-based hierarchies. Yukari Takai and Mary Gene De Guzman show how Philippine domestic workers in Canada strategize their careers and build a home away from home.

The second part of the volume deals with the history of domestic and caregiving work in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Shireen Ally uses three cases from the history of domestic service on the territory of today’s South Africa to demonstrate the coexistence of violence and intimacy in domestic service. Robyn Allyce Pariser complicates the history of African servants as powerless victims with her study of the multiple ways they influenced their masters’ domestic life in colonial Tanganyika. Andrew Urban’s contribution shows how ideas about race and gender as well as notions of egalitarianism perpetuated the stereotyping and exclusion of Chinese servants in the Anglophone Pacific. Victoria K. Haskins’s novel approach to the history of “outing”—the placement of Native American girls into white families as maids—uncovers the symbolic meanings wages had for the parties involved. Bela Kashyap traces the way precolonial gender norms, colonial rule, and the policies of postcolonial governments shaped domestic workers’ migration routes in Southeast Asia. Sabrina Marchetti’s contribution, based on analysis of oral interviews with Eritrean domestic workers in Italy and Afro-Surinamese caregivers in the Netherlands, argues that the way they make sense of their experience is shaped by the particularity of the relations between their countries of origin and former colonial metropolises.

The third section of the book focuses on the transformation of working conditions for domestic and caregiving workers in the modern world at the local, national, and international levels. It opens with R. David Goodman's chapter on the abolition of slavery in Morocco that shows how limited the effect of declarative legislation can be when there is no political will to enforce it. Magaly Rodríguez García examines the role of international organizations, especially the League of Nations, in the campaign against the *mui tsai* system—the practice of transferring girls to wealthy families in exchange for payment in China and Hong Kong. Dimitris Kalantzopoulos's contribution deals with the influence of colonial legislation on domestic service in Cyprus. Marina de Regt explores the role of migrant domestic workers in the construction of social hierarchies in contemporary Yemen. Jessica Richter depicts the construction of domestic work as a formalized employment category by legislators, courts, and domestic workers themselves within the context of building a welfare state in Austria. Elizabeth Quay Hutchison emphasizes the role social workers and unions played in the struggle for domestic workers' labor rights in Chile. The book concludes with Eileen Boris and Jennifer N. Fish's chapter on the International Labor Organization's long road to acknowledging domestic workers as laborers.

As is often the case with edited volumes, the contributions are of uneven quality. What I found surprising was that, although the editors position the volume as a book on history, a significant number of contributions deal with contemporary issues of domestic work, turning to history only as background, if at all. Tellingly, only half of the contributors are historians by training, the rest are working in the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, or migration studies. While, as Rafaella Sarti shows, historians were the first ones to "discover" domestic service as an object of scholarly investigation, the "return" of paid household labor in the late twentieth century led to a boom in research by social scientists (pp. 48–49). As a result, the history of domestic service turned into a search for a "usable past" for champions of domestic workers' rights today.

There is also one glaring omission in the "global" scope of the book: a complete absence of chapters on domestic and caregiving work under socialism. Even those authors who deal with socialist periods in the histories of countries like Poland and Yugoslavia do not problematize the relation between paid domestic labor and socialism.<sup>1</sup> This is no fault of the editors, who acknowledge the gap (pp. 56–57). Rather, it points to the problem within the scholarly community working on paid domestic labor. Whether analyzing domestic service and the making of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or studying the effects of neoliberalism in the global care chain today, researchers who are very much influenced by feminist scholarship and hold left-leaning political views appear to be trapped in their vision of society, in which inequality and exploitation so characteristic of paid domestic labor are associated with capitalism while socialism remains its default alternative. Only once we overcome this "blind spot" can we write a truly global history of domestic and caregiving work.

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<sup>1</sup> Hrženjak's section "Domestic Work during the Socialist Period in Former Yugoslavia" focuses on Slovenian women working as domestics outside of socialist Yugoslavia (pp. 129–131), while Kindler and Kordasiewicz, writing on domestic service in Poland, spend one paragraph on domestic workers in socialist Poland that boils down to the statement that "(c)ommunist approaches to domestic work were ambivalent" (p. 168).