

Asymmetric power relations: domestic labour in global perspective

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Book Reviews

ASYMMETRIC POWER RELATIONS: DOMESTIC LABOUR IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

B. Ehrenreich and A.R. Hochschild, eds

Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy

New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003, 328 pp., ISBN 0-8050-6995-X

Global Woman provides a series of essays and research studies exposing what can be construed as the 'dirty secrets' of western women. The authors explore the asymmetrical power relationships implicit in relationships between employers and employees of domestic labour, arguing that, in recruiting the service of migrant women, the second wave of feminism has allowed men to remain relatively absent from the arena of domestic work.

Ehrenreich and Hochschild begin with a nanny posing the question to her two-year-old charge: 'whose baby are you?' The baby thinks for a moment, and points to the closed door where her mother is working. The nanny replies: 'no, you're my baby', whereupon the child settles the issue by saying 'together'. This story illustrates the discomfort raised in reading the book: the guilt of women attempting to juggle highly pressurized lives; the isolation of migrant domestic workers who leave their own families to care for the vulnerable family members of others and, in their loneliness, invest the love they feel for their own family in those they are paid to care for; the confusion of the children being cared for; and the absent voice of the domestic worker's family

The book places these relationships within the context of both family and wider socioeconomic forces. It highlights that although migrant women are important economic actors, their economic activity is closely related to the needs of their families. The choices women make about work can therefore not be understood without taking into account the wider situation of their families and women's roles within that particular society. Leaving men out of the equation has enabled unregulated capitalism to sustain situations in which women struggle to compete and still be mothers.

The dominant narrative of women at work tends to be that of high powered executive jobs, remaining in contact with children through international phone calls and emails. This picture of 'success' fails to take account of the emotional cost of such conditions of employment. The move to work has created what has been framed as a 'care deficit' in the First World, a deficit that has acted to pull migrants from Third World and post-Communist nations, while at the same time poverty pushes them to migrate for work and new opportunities. With few exceptions (Anderson, 2000; Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Zlotnick, 1995), the flow of women from Third World countries to do 'women's work' has received limited academic

attention. Ehrenreich and Hochschild account for this by noting how the indoor nature of this work means they are isolated from one another and hidden from view. They suggest that the western celebration of independence has meant that for the most part, domestic workers are rendered invisible. They note too that within the US, many female domestic workers are migrant women of colour, and therefore subject to what they refer to as 'racial discounting'. This silence has wide-ranging implications for relationships between employers, employees, children and other care recipients: it is within the First World home that children become aware of the structure of difference and authority relative to which she or he takes up a position in relation to gender, class and race. For example, in learning to render domestic workers invisible, children learn that while some are valuable enough to be noticed, others do not warrant a similar 'reciprocal gaze' (p. 78).

While this book is based primarily on research in the US, elsewhere – Anderson (2000) discussed how in Britain – implicit in the choice of an immigrant as domestic worker is the assumption that they will require less personal engagement and can more easily be 'othered'. Drawing on the South African context, Pollock (1994) proposes that when cared for by both mother and nanny, the child has the opportunity of identifying with one or both women: subject to the power of a mother who is at liberty to leave the home, the child may identify with her. However, ongoing contact with the nanny, the alternate and more present mothering figure who remains at home, means that the child also identifies with the woman who 'belongs there with her, but also *to her*' (Pollock, 1994: 81).

The history of domestic service suggests that it is a job like no other (Toynbee, 2003): it creates a context in which employer and employee are easily drawn into a fantasy of friendship, including the sharing of unusual intimacy and rivalry. However, intimacy is bound by a highly asymmetrical balance of power and privilege. As the chapters by Anderson and Hondagnue-Sotelo indicate, domestic work produces relationships that fall somewhere between family and employment. Although many employers invoke a family rhetoric in referring to domestic workers, family membership is always qualified and balanced towards the advantage of the employers. For example, a family rhetoric enables employees to be expected to work longer than their contracted hours. Even acts of generosity can be seen as acting in the service of the employer, in emphasizing her status and power.

However, this rhetoric quickly collapses when the domestic worker is seen to cross a line and is dismissed. As many work illegally, formal contracts of work are rare. On dismissal, few are paid severance pay or given sufficient time to seek employment elsewhere. However, dismissal not only means the end of paid work but the end of a more personal relationship too. In many cases, difficulties might have existed for some time, but erupt in what is termed in the book a 'blow-up'. In such situations, it is difficult to separate the person from the job. Their shared and different history of intimacy and rivalry means the reasons for ending employment are unlikely to be clearly articulated, adding to the complex web of being personally wounded when an employee is dismissed, or chooses to leave. Although she argues for greater clarification of employees' rights, Anderson cautions against moving too quickly in the direction of 'commodification' of care: while increased professionalism might offer clarification of roles and conditions of employment, it carries the risk of rendering the employee even more anonymous.

Underlying much of the book is how personal engagement challenges the meaning of family connectedness. All forms of care work are relational: bodily care, like bathing and feeding, cannot be separated from emotional attachment,

affiliation and intimate knowledge. However, although employees might be hired for their capacity to relate sensitively to vulnerable family members, personal engagement is seen to be antithetical to what is normally regarded as employment.

Several authors discuss how far-reaching lifestyle changes have been made possible by the global transfer of services associated with a woman/wife's traditional role. Immigrant women are seen to embody traditional feminine qualities of docility, nurturance and eagerness to please. For example, as sex workers, immigrant women signify the possibility of sexual and romantic love (as discussed in the chapters by Brennan and Bales); nannies bring the children they care for 'real' maternal affection. So too, as Lan's chapter outlines, Taiwanese women are freed from the obligation towards parents-in-law, how through the employment of immigrant women hired to fulfil traditional requirements.

As suggested earlier, increased employment of immigrants may not only be determined by economic factors: it may be an attempt to ensure that the person recruited to perform tasks traditionally seen as part of family interaction is kept in an 'othered' position, be this based on racialized or ethnic difference, or through the use of uniforms.

Women from the Philippines form the most prominent group of domestic workers in the UK and several papers draw attention to the Philippines. An estimated 30 percent of children in the Philippines live in households where at least one parent is overseas (see Hochschild's chapter). Domestic work needs to be placed in the context of wider global economies: care is now the Philippines' primary export. To call for the return of migrant mothers would be to ignore the country's dependence on these remittances. Hochschild's and Parrenas's chapters debate the implications this has for children's mental health. Although they note the suffering of many children, who grow up without ongoing care from parents, they caution against moving too quickly to pathologize their experience. Instead, as noted in the context of Caribbean migration (Chamberlain, 1999; Fog Olwig, 1999), they argue for examining how emotional ties are also sustained across a geographic divide.

As mentioned, with few exceptions – the book draws primarily on the US context. Nonetheless, it has a great deal of relevance to Britain and Europe, where the last decade has seen both an increase in the domestic service industry, an increased recruitment of immigrants and where the bulk of female employment is in the service industry. As such, these workers' rights to remain in the country remain uncertain, rendering them extremely vulnerable to abuse. In an attempt to redress this, a self-conscious 'community' has been established in Britain, with the organization KALAYAAN acting as a support for immigrant domestic workers in the UK. It is through their work that the government has introduced legislation regularizing the position of migrant domestic workers.

State provision of childcare is minimal in America. Although several European countries have gone a long way towards ensuring universal state childcare, in the UK, there is still enormous dissatisfaction with the failure to provide universal childcare with well-paid nursery assistants. It could also be argued that increased emphasis on care in the community has added to the need to recruit others to assist in caring for elderly or disabled family members. Rather than arguing against women working outside the home, the book highlights how the low market value of care lowers the way in which the provision of care is viewed. The authors call for increased salaries, better public services and the involvement of men in an issue that involves not only women but families. This means taking domestic work outside the home: campaigning around issues of migration and

domestic labour, and as Anderson suggests, recognizing that this work is 'in the best sense, just another job' (p. 114).

Although never stated, as an academic book one may assume that the views expressed are weighted towards a middle-class understanding of the issues. Despite this, it draws extensively on the narratives of many working in domestic service and has therefore much to offer in moving the complex and potentially shameful dynamics of domestic labour to a more public arena. It will serve as an invaluable resource for academics working in the fields of social policy, migration and gender studies, as well as mental health professionals working with people struggling to retain their dignity as they move between the personal and professional within a small and intimate space. However, written in a clear and engaging style, it is equally recommended for all men and women engaged in the arena of domestic employment.

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WOMEN AS COLLABORATORS AND AGENTS?

Kevin Passmore, ed.

Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, xii + 275 pp., £15. 99, 23.70, ISBN 0-7190-6617-4

In 1983, a German feminist magazine published an article on women and the National Socialists that created an intellectual storm.¹ In her essay, sociologist Irene Stoer discussed the relationship of the umbrella organization Bund Deutscher Frauen – the Alliance of German Women's Associations, or BDF – to the Nazi regime.² According to Stoer, the BDF never was part of the Nazi system because the organization positioned itself outside politics. To back her claim, she cited a statement made by a prominent BDFer, Gertrud Bäumer, who declared that political systems and parties did not affect women's struggles.³ These women,