What is “Domestic Service” Anyway? Producing Household Labourers in Austria (1918–1938)

Jessica Richter

The adoption of ILO Convention 189 in 2011 has a history of reluctance and resistance of state and supra-state bodies to formalize domestic and caregiving work – and this is merely the most recent episode of the conflicts concerning the nature and status of such work spanning the last several centuries. This chapter deals with struggles to normalize gainful domestic work in the history of interwar Austria. Like in many other European countries, skilled, formalized employment was increasingly established as the most legitimate way to make a living since the last decades of the nineteenth century. However, diverse sources of livelihoods continued to co-exist and perceptions of “work” remained controversial. As much as “work” in general, the definition of gainful domestic work was highly contested. Whether it should be considered as wage labour, as part of family life or as a kind of work different from others, was an important question of the interwar period. A multitude of agents were involved in these struggles: domestic workers’ organizations, politicians and state institutions, employers and their organizations, charities, and domestics themselves. Depending on the perspective, ideas and practices to shape domestic work differed considerably from each other.

* The research leading to these results has received funding from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, Project Y367-G14) and the European Research Council under the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC grant agreement no. 200918. It was performed within the project “The Production of Work” (principal investigator Dr Sigrid Wadauer) at the University of Vienna. I would like to thank Thomas Stockinger, Barbara Duden, Alexander Mejstrik, Sigrid Wadauer, and Marius Weigl for advice and corrections.

So far, conflicting perceptions and practices have not been sufficiently examined. Researchers have done a great deal to investigate domestics’ inferior working and living conditions such as their hard work, long working hours, permanent availability to masters and mistresses, poor nutrition and accommodation, or legislation stipulating relationships of dependency. In this context, relationships between domestics and their masters and mistresses as well as the impact of status and power differences on domestics have been discussed. However, the transformations of gainful domestic work in the context of such struggles still require more research.

In my contribution, I will contrast several facets of the debates and practices regarding household labour in interwar Austria. The legislature, courts and administrative authorities engaged in a prolonged effort to codify gainful domestic work as a specific but well-defined form of making a living. Partly in parallel but frequently at cross-purposes with them, the organized representatives of domestics, the trade union Einigkeit, pushed for the transformation of such work into formalized employment. The visions of both sides, however, were often quite distant from the narrated experiences of those concerned, as

---
