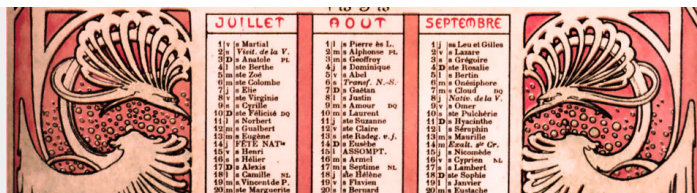


# TOWARDS A GLOBAL HISTORY OF DOMESTICO WORKERS AND CAREGIVERS 49TH LINZ CONFERENCE, LINZ, 12-15 SEPTEMBER 2013

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## di Andrea Ragusa

Organized by the International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH) and the Chamber of Labour of Upper Austria, supported by Friedrich Ebert-Foundation (Bonn), Stichting Professor van Winter Fonds (Utrecht), Labour Movement, Archives and Library (Stockholm), the Provincial Government of Upper Austria and the City of Linz; the 49<sup>th</sup> Linz Conference has been devoted, this year, to the bounpled and not easy subject of domestic workers, one of the crucial matter – among the several different matters related to the world of work – today emerging all over the world, deeply linked to the tremendous changement economy, productive structure, and labour market, are been developing.

The Preparatory Group – coordinated by Silke Neunsinger (Laboru Movement Archives and Library – Stockholm), Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (Wageningen University – The Netherlands), Dirk Hoerder (Salzburg – Austria) Marcel van der Linden (International Institute of Social History – Amsterdam), Raquel Varela (Instituto de História Contemporânea – Universidade Nova de Lisboa) and, for the ITH Berthold Unfried and Eva Himmelstoss – and the Advisory Committee – composed of Josef Ehmer (Universität Wien), Donna Gabaccia (University of Minnesota – USA), Vasant Kaiwar (Duke University – USA), Amarjit Kaur (University of New England, Armidale – Australia), Elizabeth Kuznesof (University of Kansas – USA), Sucheta Mazumdar (Duke University – USA) – have proposed an open and large range of different aspects to develop an interesting discussion about this new field. From the problem of Definitions and Concepts referred to the dimension of domestic work, through the matter of Changing Division of Labour; from the analysis of the new Working Conditions to the more linked to a classical political and historical approach matter of Resistance, Mobilization and Organization, the Conference has discussed in 23 papers proposed, presented and commented by scholars coming from Europe, United States and South America, South and East Asia, Australia, an extended numbers of problems, cases, personal and group stories, organizations and political actions.

At the centre of the discussion, the matter of domestic workers in private homes, considered from the point of view of global history: a labour market – as Dirk Hoerder write in his preparatory report – with a long history, expanded all over the world, and that has included, in addition to physical labour, care for infants, children, and the elderly, such as “emotional labour”. An inclusive concept of work the conference has been discussed about so much, especially when – during the final discussion – Ulla Plener, a recognized and historian from Berlin (President of the Association for the Study of History of Labour Movement), linked to a consolidated marxist approach, claimed her dissenting opinion with the general approach of the Conference, that not sufficiently had developed the analysis of differences between productive and un-productive work, placing the domestic work not precisely in one of the two cathegories. As Raffaella Sarti (University of Urbino – Italy) explained in

her introductory paper, historical research about domestic work represent one of the emerging frontiers of social history, developed in particular from the 1960s focusing history of family, historical demography, and (particularly from the 1970s) women's and gender history. A deep link with social sciences has been developed by social historians approaching the subject of domestic work: in particular the relationship between domestic work and modernisation, industrialisation, and urbanisation, especially by European historians; while also studying these themes specialists of American history focused on the role of black slavery and its legacy, white indenture system and immigration of different nationalities (from the Irish to the Japanese), in shaping the features of American domestic personnel. Scholars of European colonies, paid particular attention to the relationship between colonisers and the indigenous populations who provided them with servants whereas historians of Japan were particularly interested in the decline of slavery from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards and the feminisation of service in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lots of these questions have been discussed, not casually, in some of the papers presented: just to quote some examples the paper presented by Dana Cooper (Stephen F. Austin State University – Texas) proposed an analysis of Irish and Filipina Women's Migration as Domestic Caregivers within the British and American Empires, focusing the legacy and consequences of Imperial Regime, the role of religion, and the availability to work in private homes; a similar comparative approach developed in her paper Sabrina Marchetti (Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute – Florence), suggesting the legacy of Imperial Colonies produced a sort of attitude for domestic employment both for the Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese Women arriving in Europe in the 1960s-1970s. Or, in other cases, David Goodman (Pratt Institute, Brooklyn – USA), reconstructed the ambivalent meaning of the end of slavery in Morocco: both as the beginning of a new condition of freedom, and the legacy of familiarity and attitude of intimacy between employers and servants; Andy Urban (Rutgers University, New Brunswick – USA), developed a similar analysis with regard to the case of Chinese Servants in the "White Pacific" 1870-1900.

One of the most important elements of interest, linked to the relationship between domestic work from a historical point of view and other social sciences, is the revival of attention to the matter as a result of the re-emerging phenomenon of spread and expansion of domestic work all over the world. The most relevant purpose achieved, at a political level, is the recent ILO Convention "Decent Work for Domestic Workers", submitted in 2011, recently joined also by Italy: the first international agreement in which domestic workers had a voice. Also for this reason, the Conference approached the subject trying to mix social history and gender history, observing the problem as a legal – conditions of domestic workers are usually hidden behind the "private sphere" – and a social and political one – the growing dimension of domestic work is one of the crucial aspects of this age, corresponding – as some historians and sociologists suggest – to a decline and crisis of welfare state. For this same reason the approach has been a comparative one: what are the similarities and differences between the world's regions and over time from the early modern to the modern period? What transfers occur? In the very interesting case of Slovenian domestic workers in Italy, for

example, presented by Majda Hrženjak (Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies – Ljubljana), a central role plays the matter of national borders crossing the internal nations, and the relationship between urban and rural societies. Different conditions – racial, social and economic – emerge in other cases: from United States, to South Africa, to Africa and South America.

A very interesting and large overlook has been offered by the Conference on one of the matter of contemporary age and global world (the Conference has been entirely organized from a point of view of global world). A question remains open: in a more and more evident transformation of historical analysis, linked to new methodological approaches and evaluation criteria, the ancient, consolidated and recognized perspective of a historical analysis as a differential one, chronologically based, and deeply linked the political and economic criteria, appears less present every day. Also the Linz Conference – born in 1964 as a Conference of historians of labour movement to permit the meeting between scholars from Western and Eastern Europe – changed so much its contents, fields and approaches during these last decades. But not yet answered is the crucial question emerging: what has history of labour movement become today? What does it mean today studying history of labour movement? Can be still useful some of the ancient criteria of historical analysis such as class-struggle, class-analysis, or some elements of the ancient vocabulary of historians? Or, more simply we have to accept a new truth: that is the disappearance of an entire world and the abandonment of that tradition? In other words, we may ask to conclude: the ancient tradition of historical research as a differential analysis, based on economic and political criteria; the ancient, also discussed but glorious, methodological approach of history as a history of classes and class struggle became simply history of social conflicts: racial as ethnic, gender as generational conflicts? This is a question – we think – next conferences should reflect and debate very much about, during the next years.

