

Servants of Culture: Paternalism, Policing, and Identity Politics in Vienna, 1700–1914. By Ambika Natarajan. *Austrian and Habsburg Studies* 34. New York–Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2023. pp. 295.

The volume published by Ambika Natarajan discusses the nuanced role of female domestic workers in fin-de-siècle Vienna, highlighting the intersections of class, gender, and power dynamics. It critically studies the cultural constructions surrounding primarily female domestic workers and portrayals of them either as victims or as perpetrators within the society. Throughout the chapters, Natarajan argues that these narratives are not simply reflections of the domestic servants' realities but are influenced by broader socio-political agendas and served to reinforce existing power structures.

Women's employment in general was a central subject of Austrian historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, which included research on domestic workers, social welfare for women workers, and the role of women in the workers' movement. By the 1990s, however, following the German model, the study of the history of women of bourgeois background became more popular. In the early 2000s, attention was increasingly focused on "Jewish Vienna." To this was added the subject of female homosexuality. Meanwhile, new questions on the subject of female domestic workers (or "maidservants," to use the contemporary term that Natarajan employs in the book) have not really been raised in the last decades. This is why Natarajan's volume can be considered pioneering as an effort to revisit, reinvent, and restructure the subject matter.

Natarajan's point of departure is *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the 1900 book by Sigmund Freud. In this book, Freud introduces his theory of the unconscious with respect to dream interpretation and discusses his theory of the Oedipus complex for the first time. Freud's ideas and Carl Schorske's analysis of the crisis of Viennese liberalism are interpreted by Natarajan as important steps towards the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. The frame of the study is given by American historian Maureen Healy, who, similarly to Hungarian historian Péter Hanák, argued that the collapse of the Monarchy "was as much an internal phenomenon as an external one" (p.2). Natarajan also argues that the collapse of the Monarchy was "characterized by the inability to reckon with the past in the face of the changing reality" (p.3). She interprets Vienna as a kind of multiethnic and polyglot laboratory for her research. She also argues that domestic servants should be given a more central role in the scholarship, which should emphasize their influence on different social norms and behaviors.

Natarajan relies in her discussion on primary sources from 16 archives in Vienna and contemporary proceedings, reports, statistics, and books. Furthermore, she has surveyed a wide range of contemporary newspapers and periodicals, including the most important organs of Viennese women's associations. She provides a very precise conceptual framework. She claims that she refuses to use the term "domestic worker," which is a relatively recent phrase in the historiography. Her aim with the use of the term "maidservant" is to "maintain temporal authenticity" (p.18). She also states that she gives the exact type of servant, when this information was included in the sources. In this review, however, I will insist on the term "domestic worker."

Chapter 1 (The Itinerant Maidservant) focuses on "the itinerant maidservant with a dissolute lifestyle" (p.25) and on the divergent roles of these maidservants as both victims and agents in a rapidly changing society, which according to Natarajan was "the most persistent cultural construct" (p.36) of the nineteenth-century Habsburg Empire. She claims that although this cultural construct appeared during the Josephine era, it did not emerge in a vacuum. The chapter also highlights the cultural feminization of this occupation.

Chapter 2 (Cultural Feminization) discusses that the vagueness of the 1810 Servant Codes, which were in force throughout the nineteenth century and which provided the "legal crucible" (p.43) for domestic workers. Natarajan stresses that while the codes themselves were vague, the cultural definition of the word "servant" tightened over time. She also indicates that at the end of the nineteenth century, the term "servant" referred to poor, lower-class, and migrating women with questionable morals, who performed menial tasks in bourgeois households. On the other hand, paternalistic society continued to hold employers responsible for providing food, boarding, and livelihood for the domestic workers and taking care of them in case they were ill. The chapter also explores how the expectations of society and norms related to their femininity shaped the identity constructions of female domestic workers.

Chapter 3 (Demographic Feminization) again clarifies the conceptual framework of the "domestic worker." In addition to tracing the outlines of the process whereby male servants started to disappear (p.75), Natarajan provides important statements related to the appreciation of male and female servants. She states that while at the end of the 1800s, male servants (e.g. butlers, porters, and footmen) working in aristocratic households were linked with luxurious services, female servants, i.e. maidservants, were connected to the lower rungs of services. To support her claims, she provides detailed diagrams indicating the

absolute numbers and the gender ratio of servants in different sectors of the economy.

Chapter 4 (The Number Game) examines the statistics and the results of official censuses from 1857. While studying the results of these censuses, Natarajan reflects on the problems related to the inconsistencies that have been characteristic of the census records. This “game” with numbers masked several alternations triggered by the urbanization and modernization processes of the late nineteenth century. In this section, Natarajan also discusses the related issues of female domestic servants’ health, morality, and criminality.

Chapter 5 (The Servant Question) investigates the sociopolitical debates surrounding the large group of domestic servants, highlighting the varying narratives that emerged from different political parties, the bourgeoisie, socialists, and progressive feminists. Natarajan highlights that the servant question was a central issue for several populist movements at the turn of the century, and she also reflects on several aspects of the “anti-Mädchenhandel” movement within the Habsburg Empire.

Chapter 6 (Victims and Perpetrators) juxtaposes the portrayal of female domestic servants as innocent victims of (sexual) exploitation and violence, while also acknowledging instances in which they acted as perpetrators or accomplices. Through this discussion, Natarajan challenges the existing scholarship and reconsiders the roles of female domestic workers not merely as subservient figures but as active participants in the economy and in the society. She thus sheds light on broader issues of autonomy, agency, and social changes.

In the conclusion or, more precisely, in every chapter of the volume, Natarajan reflects on divergent cultural narratives that surround female domestic workers. She highlights the importance of nuanced understandings of the working conditions and challenges these women had to face, whose lives it is worth noting, are often reduced to simplistic categories of victimhood or criminality.

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# Hungarian Historical Review

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