

privatization and commodification of education in Egypt, suggesting that the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” may not be an entirely adequate way of grasping this development and its imbrication in power relations. Finally, we need a fuller discussion of the ways in which Bayat’s non-movements can function both as safety valve and as (actual or potential) loci of opposition to the state and the elites which dominate it.

These questions do not detract from the book’s importance; rather, they illustrate how rich and thought-provoking a study *Life as Politics* is, and the important avenues for further research that it helps open up. By powerfully demonstrating how productive a broader and more flexible definition of the political can be and how crucial it is to explore what the urban masses are doing in order to survive, Asef Bayat has made a signal contribution to scholarship on contemporary urban social life in the Middle East. But his work also helps scholars and activists alike understand more fully the ongoing struggles of the region’s peoples for a better life, in the face of terrible socio-economic conditions and of neglectful, incompetent and/or brutally oppressive regimes whose chief priority is holding on to power at all costs.

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RAY, RAKA and SEEMIN QAYUM. *Cultures of Servitude. Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*. Stanford University Press, Stanford (Calif.) 2009. xiv, 255 pp. Ill. \$65.00. (Paper: \$22.95; E-book: \$22.95.); doi:10.1017/S0020859010000623

In the past two decades numerous studies on the increased employment of domestic workers have appeared. Modernization theories had in fact envisaged the end of paid domestic labour; clearly, those have been proved wrong by events. In many contemporary societies around the globe paid domestic labour is essential to keep the economy running. Most studies of the increased use of paid domestic labour focus on advanced industrialized societies in the North, where women’s increased labour-force participation has led to a crisis in the organization of care.¹ As a result, middle- and upper-middle-class families have become increasingly dependent on migrant labour for cleaning and caretaking tasks.

Ray and Qayum’s *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* diverges in a number of ways from the dominant body of scholarship on paid domestic labour, as they themselves mention (p. 9). Firstly, they focus on a country in the global South where the practice of domestic labour has a long history and is not linked to the increased labour force participation of women. Secondly, unlike countries in the North, where mainly foreign women are employed as domestics, in India local people perform domestic labour. This makes it possible to analyse their position regardless of their immigration and citizenship status. Thirdly, while in most other countries only women are employed, in India both women and men work as domestics. Yet there is a clear shift

1. See, for example, the studies of Filipinas in Los Angeles and Italy: Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA, 2001), and of Latina women in the United States: M. Romero, *Maid in the USA* (New York, NY, 1992), and P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadow of Affluence* (Berkeley, CA, 2001).

to employing female domestics. While it is true that these three points set their study apart from most publications on domestic workers, they are not the first to focus on local domestics. Their book reminded me in particular of Ozyegin's study of domestic workers in Ankara, rural women working for middle-class families living in modern flats who employ domestic workers mainly as a status symbol.²

In India, employing domestic workers is also an important status symbol for the middle classes and therefore plays an essential role in the underlining of class divisions. According to Ray and Qayum, Indian society is characterized by a "culture of servitude", which they define as a culture "in which social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and the public sphere". These unequal relations are not only tolerated but accepted, and reproduced through everyday interaction and practice (p. 4). The employment of paid domestic labour is, in their view, central to the understanding of self and society in India, and in particular to the "self-conscious evolution of a modern Indian elite" (p. 2). Through the prism of the household, they study the reproduction of class relations, arguing that what happens inside the home is of crucial importance in understanding systems of inequality and exploitation in wider society.

Ray and Qayum's study is situated in Kolkata, one of India's major cities, located in West Bengal, the former colonial capital of British India and home to the largest proportion of servants in India. The diversity of households, employment relations, and servants makes it a very appropriate research site. In addition, they conducted research among Indians in New York, in order to find out whether a culture of servitude changes when people migrate abroad. Over a period of 5 years they gathered 52 oral histories of employers and 44 from servants, and carried out a survey of 500 households in Kolkata. In their highly readable book they describe numerous cases, both of employers and domestics, showing their engagement and understanding of the changes and continuities in India's culture of servitude.

The book is divided into eight chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 2 focuses on the urban development of Kolkata and its implications for the employment of domestic workers. During the colonial period Kolkata's middle and upper-middle classes (the *bhadralok*) lived in great houses and mansions; after independence many of them were forced to move into multi-storeyed apartment buildings replacing the old family homes. The shift to modern flats has had major consequences for the relationship between employers and domestic workers. While domestic workers in the past almost always lived with the family, nowadays it is more common to employ live-out workers. Secondly, whereas in the past most servants were male, contemporary domestic workers are more likely to be female. And thirdly, the space employers and domestics share is much more restricted than in the past, which necessitates new spatial arrangements.

In the four core chapters of their book Ray and Qayum analyse in more detail the impact of the changes in Kolkata's urban middle-class living arrangements for the relationship between employers and domestic workers. They compare the experiences and opinions of two generations of *bhadralok* employers; the older generation, who are now between sixty and eighty and who have vivid memories of the old feudal system of having servants, and those in their thirties and forties, who aspire to a more "modern" relationship with their domestics. For both groups, domestic life without a servant is unimaginable, and both adhere to the culture of servitude. Many employers idealize the

2. Gul Ozyegin, *Untidy Gender: Domestic Service in Turkey* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001).

past in which servants were considered “part of the family”, who lived in and were loyal to the family. According to Ray and Qayum, “love, loyalty and mutual obligation are seen to tie servants and employers to each other in a way that is characteristic of a feudal mode of servitude”. The more impersonal relationships of today, in which servants work mainly for money, are evaluated negatively by employers. Yet, domestic workers too sometimes yearn for more personal relationships with their employers, claiming that they were taken better care of in the past and that the new generation of employers treats them merely as workers.

Despite the changes that have taken place in the employment of domestic workers, Ray and Qayum argue that class inequality continues to be central to the relationship between employers and domestics. Employing domestic workers is one of the main ways in which the middle and upper middle classes distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Both employers and domestics continuously learn and reproduce that distinction, yet the clear class divisions of the past are increasingly becoming blurred. Some domestic workers have started to dress and behave like their employers; they aspire to a lifestyle comparable to that of their employers and no longer automatically accept the traditional social hierarchy. Women servants would like to stop working and be taken care of by their husbands, and both male and female workers hope that their children will no longer have to do domestic labour. Employers find these new attitudes of their domestic workers disturbing, and regard the political awareness of their servants as a potential class threat. This is particularly so for the new middle classes, who are afraid of the blurring of class boundaries that threatens their own class position.³

In the last chapter of their book Ray and Qayum take the reader to New York, where they present a number of cases of Indian (and American) employers, aiming to analyse whether the culture of servitude they have described is peculiar to Kolkata. Not surprisingly, in New York too a culture of servitude persists, not only among Indian employers but also among American ones. The authors therefore conclude that the site in which domestic labour is performed and the labour relation itself entails a culture of servitude, both in the global North and South. Whereas employing domestic workers is not seen as essential for a middle-class lifestyle, and employers claim to be searching for a more horizontal relationship with their domestics, the structural inequalities inherent to domestic labour continue to exist.

Any new publication on domestic workers suffers from the fact that much has already been written on the topic, which makes it a major challenge to add new insights. Ray and Qayum’s introduction of the term “culture of servitude” and their analysis of this culture of servitude, based in particular on class inequalities, is undoubtedly an important contribution to the study of paid domestic labour. Whether this culture of servitude is particular to Indian society is debatable, as they also show in their last chapter. Similar class differences and systems of inequality can be found in many other societies, coming most clearly to the fore in the relationship between employers and domestics. The increased employment of domestic workers in the North could therefore even lead to the production of “cultures of servitude” in societies where such a culture did not previously exist.

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3. See also *ibid.*, and Marina de Regt, “Preferences and Prejudices: Employers’ Views on Domestic Workers in the Republic of Yemen”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34 (2009), pp. 559–581.