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BOOK REVIEWS

BORIS, EILEEN. *Making the Woman Worker. Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019*. Oxford University Press, New York [etc.] 2019. 344 pp. £22.99.

In 2019, the International Labour Organization (ILO) celebrated its centenary. The event occasioned new historical research into the organization, fostered by the ILO's own "Century Project".¹ Eileen Boris's *Making the Woman Worker* is placed in this context, though it was not published in cooperation with the ILO, unlike another volume on "Women's ILO" that Boris co-edited in 2018.² A specialist in gender studies, labour history, and ILO history, Boris's latest book provides for the first time a comprehensive account of the history of the woman worker within the ILO. Spanning the whole century from the organization's founding in 1919 to the present, the book shows how the category of the woman worker was constructed and how its perception changed over time, thereby tracing fights and debates on protection and standard setting as well as on equality and human rights.

The starting point of Boris's excellent and pioneering study is the conceptualization of the woman worker as "a special kind of worker" (p. 4) that is grounded in the "basic contradiction" (p. 13) of being both equal to and different from the male worker. Especially when working in domestic work (i.e. care and housework), closely linked to and associated with subsistence and reproductive labour, the woman worker has often been exposed to precariousness, lacking the labour standards and social security of formal employment.³ Organized in three parts, each highlighting a distinct historical phase, the book traces the feminist fight for global standards and the recognition of female labour.

The first part covers the interwar years to the first decade of the Cold War. During this period, despite its constitutional equality standard, labour feminists within the ILO often advocated special protection for women, emphasizing their biological and social difference (as potential mothers), thereby pointing to the indispensability of female reproductive labour. Cultural and moral norms often facilitated protective standards for women – for example, when special conventions aimed to prevent women from sexual danger. Some feminists, however, saw special protection as a barrier to legal equality, merely reinforcing existing hierarchies and workplace discrimination. They fought for equal rights and remuneration, thus challenging the dominant Western male industrial breadwinner ideal. Trade unionists formally supported calls for equality but also feared employer use of

1. See the ILO's new institutional history: Daniel Maul, *The International Labour Organization: 100 Years of Global Social Policy* (Berlin, 2019).

2. Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehltker, and Susan Zimmermann (eds), *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2018).

3. For an overview of recent research on precarious work: Eloisa Betti, "Historicizing Precarious Work: Forty Years of Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities", *International Review of Social History*, 63:2 (2018), pp. 273–319.

cheap female labour. To maintain men's jobs and wages, they generally approved special treatment for women, although this might reproduce the gendered division of labour.

In the second part of her book, covering the second half of the twentieth century, Boris focuses on female labour in the Global South. During the years of development, modernization, and decolonization, "women in developing countries" represented a new category within that of the woman worker, not only differing from the male worker but also from women in Western industrial countries. To generate new sources of income and advance self-employment initiatives, the ILO promoted handicraft and other home-based work thought to be most suitable for women in the "Third World". This focus linked women to domestic work and, thus, located them in their conventional social roles and traditional cultural spheres. Mostly informal and with no social security, handicraft work and work in the cottage industry allowed women to earn for the family while still being responsible for social reproduction. Hence, in the decades following World War II, the ILO's approach to supporting poor rural women in the Global South was distinct from the standard setting and equality measures envisioned for urban women working in the formal economy.

Local activists and ILO development feminists, too, often argued for a distinct path to gender equality for women in the Global South, embracing context-specific programmes rather than universalist approaches. Most notably, they emphasized the significance of reproductive labour and homework not only for family survival but also for the world economy. The increased outsourcing and outplacement of production to countries in the Global South towards the end of the twentieth century also made global labour federations realize that outwork performed by industrial homeworkers in the informal sector should be subject to protective standards, leading to the "Home Work Convention" in 1996.

The third part of Boris's book elucidates the most recent developments, from the 1990s onwards. Against the backdrop of neoliberal globalization, discussions on migrant work and the informal economy gained momentum within the ILO as well as within organized labour and some governments. Domestic work was at the heart of these debates, with the migrant woman regarded as most affected by the informality and precarity of paid care and housework. With the standard employment relationship eroding, the ILO was willing to broaden the scope of its standard-setting efforts to work performed outside the formal economy. Global union federations came to support household workers, although they were not organized in traditional ways. The Domestic Workers Convention of 2011 reflected this shift towards formalizing the informal sector on the one hand and recognizing reproductive labour as work central to the global economy on the other. While the 2011 convention focused on commodified forms of household and care work, the ILO's International Conference on Labour Statisticians in 2013 went a step further and also recommended including unpaid reproductive labour as "work" in official statistics.

Boris's study shows that the key issue underlying the fight for global standards for female labour was the question of whether difference or equality between women and men and between women in the Global South and North should be stressed – and, consequently, whether ILO initiatives should be grounded in universalism or particularism. Boris elaborates on how, during the course of the twentieth century, different feminist answers and positions to this key question were voiced, and how the ILO often acted in a dualistic manner as well. But Boris also argues that, in the long run, a transformation from special protection to equality took place. With the concept of gender mainstreaming entering the ILO around 1980, the dominant view within the organization changed, now aiming at replacing women-specific protections with gender-neutral ones and limiting special protection to maternity.

At the beginning of the new century, recognizing domestic work and reproductive labour as “work” entitled to global standards should further advance gender equality. Boris makes clear, however, that fundamental problems have not changed. Housework and care work, whether paid or not, predominantly remain female labour. As such, domestic work is either still considered an obstacle for women’s participation in the workforce, or conceptualized as a feminized realm of work that allows women to have an income without competing for male jobs and wages.

Boris’s seminal study amplifies our understanding of the construction and politics of the woman worker and feminized labour of the last century in substantial ways. Among the plethora of findings crucial for global labour, gender, and women’s history, three points should briefly be mentioned. First, Boris points to the importance of knowledge production. Not only a definitional arena, but also a prime site for labour studies, the ILO fostered research. Innovative programmes like the “Programme on Rural Women”, directed at the woman worker in the Global South, led to pathbreaking research, embracing novel and unconventional approaches. Launched in the mid-1970s when traditional development economics was losing ground, the programme focused on the new method of “participatory research”, striving to “decolonize knowledge” by actively involving the rural women themselves as experts.

Second, Boris’s book reveals how political ideologies shaped the making of the woman worker. After World War II, Cold War rivalries and the era of decolonization influenced female labour politics within the ILO. A more fundamental transition, however, was the global spread of neoliberal ideology that took shape in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, “unholy alliances” between feminist claims for gender equality and neoliberal calls for more flexibility have resulted in an erosion of protective standards for both male and female workers.

Third, Boris’s study shows how changing strategies of trade union federations proved crucial for gaining recognition for female labour. For the “Home Work Convention” in 1996 as well as the “Domestic Workers Convention” in 2011, the support of traditional labour federations for the women’s cause was essential to get access to ILO’s negotiation and lobbying processes. Whereas trade unions in the decades before often felt that they needed to protect male work and avoid female competition from the informal sector, in the heyday of neoliberal globalization they were willing to embrace a new regime of worker solidarity.

The strength of Eileen Boris’s well-composed and dedicated book lies in her detailed account and insightful analysis of the political fights and debates within and around the ILO’s tripartite organization, involving governments, employers, and workers. Grounded in an impressive number of primary sources, Boris carves out the ambivalences and inconsistencies of this organization but also demonstrates its potential to make the world a better place for the woman worker. With its close focus on the international dimension and transnational networks, the book can fruitfully inspire further research that interconnects the international level with developments in local, regional, and national contexts, thereby illuminating how global labour standards and globally circulating labour knowledge are transformed in and adapted to local settings, which, in turn, reflect back to the international arena.

The most important political lesson from Boris’s book is that the global labour movement must avoid the trap of playing off reasonable feminist claims for both difference and equality against each other, as this might divide the movement in its joint fight for more freedom and autonomy for all workers of the world. Demands for gender equality should not neglect differences and specific contexts, acknowledging that sometimes an emphasis on difference may

lead to more equality, and that the fight against precarious work and for global standards always and everywhere needs the support of many allies.

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EVANS, RICHARD J. Eric Hobsbawm. *A Life in History*. Oxford University Press, New York [etc.] 2019. xiii, 785 pp. Ill. \$39.95.

Eric J. Hobsbawm was the most famous historian of the second half of the twentieth century – perhaps not in terms of his significance in any single country or language sphere, yet arguably as somebody read in all major world regions and across many languages. It is thus no surprise that the first major biography of Hobsbawm – historians’ biographies normally being a subgenre of little appeal to a wider audience – was delivered by a prominent historian himself and has garnered both wide attention and acclaim. And, indeed, it is a profoundly well-researched treasure trove for anybody interested in the history of historiography, the rise of social history, and the intellectual history of the left in the twentieth century. At more than 700 pages, it offers readers a detailed record of a truly wide-ranging life. It is both magisterial and, in many ways, invites debate and criticism.

Many moments and facets of Hobsbawm’s life are well-known, not least because of his bestselling autobiography *Interesting Times* (2002). These include his Jewish-Viennese background, his adolescent years in Berlin, his move to England, his membership of the Communist Party (which, unlike many others, he did not quit after 1956), his writing ambitions and skills, his role in the rise of social history, his interest in cultural phenomena, social outsiders, and marginal rebels, his ability to trigger central debates, his “parallel life” as a jazz columnist, and his role as a grand-panorama historian of modernity, artfully mixing argument, analysis, and narrative sweep.

Evans’s aim is not to compete with *Interesting Times*, but to complement it. He had full access to the papers from Hobsbawm’s estate. These, together with interviews and other abundant archival material (including declassified intelligence reports), allow for an extraordinarily detailed reconstruction of Hobsbawm’s doings and feelings. Evans makes use of this rich mountain of material in a way that would have been to the liking of his hero: a fully “materialist” rendering of the intellectual as a mythical figure of modernity. Evans highlights the degree to which the work of a professional thinker, writer, and teacher is dependent on their ability to generate income, on institutional support (and obstruction), on the available media for communication (Hobsbawm’s career being partly contingent on the paperback revolution), on living arrangements, particularly housing, and not least on their emotional well-being. In that sense, Evans’s minute reconstruction of Hobsbawm’s crisis when his first marriage came to an end, as well as his longer and shorter relationships subsequently, some of them non-standard, does not appear glib but shows how essential this well-being was to allowing Hobsbawm to work. This real-life-embeddedness, moreover, does not include much information on the pressing questions of reproduction – eating, drinking,