

FEMALE LABOR BETWEEN PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT AND DOMESTIC SERVICE: THE GERMAN CLEANING TRADE AS A TEST FOR CURRENT LABOR MARKET STRATEGIES¹

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Abstract

As Europe struggles with a crisis of joblessness, various labor market policies have been suggested to remedy the situation. The ultimate policy question is whether unemployment can be reduced by policies that privatize the public sector and promote the low-wage sector. This issue is particularly salient to women since women have always been overrepresented in low-wage jobs. This article analyzes major labor market interventions and their outcomes at both the European Union and the national levels through the case of the female-dominated cleaning trade in West Germany. In particular, analysis focuses on the three main strategies of low-wage job creation: expanding the public sector; tolerating gray labor markets; and providing incentives to households in hopes that they would become employers. Shifts between these strategies resulted in "double privatization": cleaning jobs were transferred from the public sector to private companies and households. However, these policies generally did not boost employment in the long run; the modest numerical growth in jobs was mainly due to full-time employment being split up into "minijobs," without subsistence wages or social insurance coverage, which were often illegal. In an era in which women increasingly depend solely on their own paychecks, such employment increases their economic vulnerability.

Beyond Theories of Paths and Models: Low-Wage Employment in Germany

Numerous theories hold that Germany is no stronghold of low-wage employment. Both common sense and academic reflections on “welfare state regimes” and “varieties of capitalism” argue that the German labor market is more highly regulated than that of other countries. Gösta Esping-Andersen (1990), in his widely debated study on welfare regimes, characterized (West) Germany as a prototype of “conservative” welfare capitalism: it prioritizes securing stable and well-paid employment for males by keeping females and the elderly out of the labor force through family policies that strengthen the male-breadwinner model and early-retirement schemes. Theoretically, the relatively strict labor law and the traditional system of collective wage bargaining should prevent low-wage employment in Germany altogether.

Despite these academic debates revolving around the veracity of such models and the corresponding existence of “path dependencies,” the facts are that fundamental changes already have occurred in the German labor market. For instance, there is an increasing number of sectors that are not at all covered by collective (wage) bargaining. In other sectors, collective agreements now explicitly establish and govern low-wage employment (Pohl and Schäfer 1996).²

Women, in West Germany as elsewhere, have always been overrepresented in low-wage jobs. On the one hand, women are frequently employed in declining sectors after qualified males have left, such as in the textile industry, or in newly expanding, unstable sectors before the jobs become attractive for skilled workers (“Facharbeiter”), such as electronics in the early twentieth century. In such transitioning sectors wage standards are hard to establish or to defend (Müller, Willms, and Handl 1983). On the other hand, paying women low wages still seems to be more acceptable than paying them to men, since female incomes are often treated as dispensable “extra earnings.” Despite declining marriage rates and exploding divorce rates, women are still considered to be less dependent on their individual income. Both the sectors in which women are employed and the norms governing their employment lead to women’s notorious overrepresentation in low-wage labor.

In addition to women’s labor market vulnerability in terms of wages, their positions are even more tenuous because they are less likely to even be employed. Women are prominent among the ranks of the unemployed and jobless, but the female jobless are largely unaddressed by policy. Unemployment has been argued to be less problematic for women because wives and mothers are believed to have an “exit option” not equally available to males. Women’s unemployment is sometimes even explicitly desired: in times of economic crisis³ campaigns against “double earners” have pressured married women to quit their jobs so that men can find employment. Ideologically, women’s labor, like their earnings, is seen as optional.

Such attitudes are reflected in the rates of female labor force participation. In 2005, the female unemployment rate of 10.3 percent was considerably above the male rate of 8.9 percent.⁴ Moreover, these figures still underestimate the problem, as it is far more common for women than for men to refrain from registering as “unemployed,” even in cases of involuntary joblessness. The number of persons

who are officially registered with the Federal Agency of Labor Exchange and receive unemployment benefits is thus much smaller than the number of jobless persons overall. In the past, this gap between the registered unemployed and the jobless was usually considered not to be problematic since it was mainly attributed to jobless wives and mothers who were believed to “stay at home” voluntarily to look after the household and their children. This voluntary opting out no longer seems to be as common. Instead, the ever-rising share of the jobless women who registered themselves as unemployed in recent years shows an increasing interest by women in gainful employment. Furthermore, despite this visible increase of women’s inclinations toward gainful employment (“*Erwerbsneigung*”), there is also a considerable group of women that is now counted as part of the silent reserve (“*Stille Reserve*”). They are not registered as unemployed because of missing entitlements or personal frustration, but they would readily enter employment if the labor market permitted it. In 2003, for instance, roughly 31 million persons in Germany were gainfully employed, 2.7 million were registered as unemployed, and 1.4 million constituted the silent reserve (Baethge et al. 2005, 280).

Above all, these figures indicate that many jobless women in Germany have not had sufficient options for entering gainful employment in the last few decades. So, despite academic theories to the contrary, it may not come as a surprise that there is indeed a substantial low-wage sector in Germany. Moreover, these “McJobs” are concentrated in traditional female strongholds. Today, 15.7 percent of all employees earn less than two-thirds of the national median wage in Germany.⁵ Forty-five percent of the low-wage group, but only one-third of all full-timers, are employed in the service sector, and 57 percent of low-wage earners are female, whereas women constitute merely 35 percent of all full-time employees (Rhein, Gartner, and Krug 2005). Even if the current “precarious feminization of the workforce” (Beck 1999, 70) is increasingly forcing men into low-wage jobs, we still need to turn to labor market strategies originally aimed at women in order to reconstruct the generation of this low-wage sector in Germany.

Low-Wage Strategies in the Cleaning Trade

The growth of low-wage jobs, which shapes labor markets in Germany and in other early industrialized countries, is usually attributed to rising unemployment rates and thus to processes of long-term economic change. With the advance of the economic recession around 1973, mass unemployment emerged as the principal problem of governments for the first time after World War II. This problem was compounded by “sectoral” shifts that primarily impacted the low-skill population. The industrial sector declined in importance since the early twentieth century, and employment in the service sector spread (Klammer et al. 2000). However, the changes in employment were unevenly distributed. Women, who were increasingly pushed into the labor market after the war, largely found themselves in the growing service sector (Müller, Willms, and Handl 1983).

Overall, the increase in low-skill services could not make up for the decline of unskilled industrial labor as job growth was more or less restricted to high-skill services in the 1990s (Baethge et al. 1999, 4–7; Häußermann and Siebel 1995,

32–34). Under these macro-economic conditions, persons with limited formal qualification constituted an ever-increasing share of the unemployed. In 2005, 20 percent of early school leavers registered as unemployed in Germany.⁶

These developments provoked reflections about how to create additional low-skill employment in the low-wage sector by means of active political intervention. Since Germany was thought to suffer from a “service gap” in comparison to Anglo-Saxon countries, it was argued that enormous numbers of low-skill jobs could be generated in the service sector if these services were only cheap enough to attract customers (Baethge et al. 1999; Scharpf 1986; Streeck and Heinze 1999). In particular, private households were made out as promising potential employers of cleaners, gardeners, child minders, and nurses. To motivate employers to create these jobs, it was suggested that the wage gap between employer and employee be widened. This could be achieved either by granting tax benefits to employers; by diminishing wage costs artificially through publicly subsidizing wages or insurance fees; or by cutting unemployment benefits in order to force recipients into low-paying jobs (Hoffmann and Walwei 1998; Kommission 1997; and, for a critique, Mayer-Ahuja 2001).

For many years, political debates have mainly revolved around the question of whether low-paying employment functions as a “bridge” into better-paying jobs or whether it entails a lasting exclusion of employees from regular labor markets.⁷ The actual capacity of the low-wage sector to increase employment opportunities, however, is usually taken for granted. This unanimity is surprising, especially in view of the fact that there is hardly any statistical evidence for that often repeated assumption from the last few decades; the development of the low-wage sector as a whole has not been documented, and even data on particular occupations are rare and scattered. For this reason, the labor market recipes of low-wage strategists need to be tested by reconstructing whether they have succeeded in generating employment growth in a single but typical sector in the past.

The cleaning trade can be considered as one of these “typical” sectors in at least three respects. First, cleaning jobs are characterized by low wages, “flexible” working contracts, and high fluctuation rates (Mayer-Ahuja 2003). Hence, according to neoconservative concepts, this sector should display ideal conditions for employment growth. Secondly, professional cleaning, like most supposedly low-skill occupations, is a stronghold of female employment. Finally, the cleaning trade’s history was shaped by the most important governmental strategies for generating employment for persons with limited formal qualification in Germany as well as in other European countries.

The following case study analyzes the actual impacts of three low-wage strategies on employment growth.

1. In the 1920s and again from the 1950s, a public cleaning service was established. State offices, schools, or hospitals employed cleaners on full-time or extended part-time basis in order to provide “needy women” with subsistence wages, social insurance protection, and a long-term job perspective. From the late 1960s, however, these jobs were massively reduced by means of privatization.

2. Especially private cleaning companies profited from a certain tolerance toward a gray labor market where labor law and collective agreements had hardly any relevance. As will be discussed below, most jobs in private cleaning companies, which expanded from the early 1970s, met the pattern of marginal employment (“geringfügige Beschäftigung”) as working hours and income stayed below the threshold defined for the German health, old age, and unemployment insurance. Hence neither contributions nor wage taxes were due, and even the flat charge for wage taxes (“Lohnsteuerpauschale”) was frequently avoided. What came to be known as “mini-jobs” were thus not registered by social insurance or revenue administrations and constituted a stronghold of illegal employment.
3. The first efforts to fight unemployment by offering incentives to potential employers stretch back to at least the mid-1980s, when social assistance rates, functioning as sort of a minimum wage, were virtually frozen, and legal obstacles to unlawful dismissal and agency work were reduced (Schmidt 1998; Adamy 1988). Moreover, employment in private households was subsidized by tax reductions from 1989. Though first these laws were ridiculed as “maid privilege” (“Dienstmädchenprivileg”), their provisions were further increased in 1996.⁸ Currently, even more far-reaching tax deductions for those who employ maids (as cleaners, but especially as child minders) are being discussed as a means both to create low-skill jobs and to boost the declining birthrate of academic middle classes at the same time.

The three organizational arrangements of professional cleaning—cleaning in the public service, private cleaning companies, and private households—thus arguably mirror the most important strategies applied by West German governments since the early 1970s in order to generate low-wage employment. These strategies were often in accordance with European Union (EU) policies. In the following sections, the shift of importance between these arrangements will be reconstructed. Focusing on quantitative developments, we will address the question of whether any of these low-wage strategies has resulted in substantial employment growth in the German cleaning trade. We also will briefly turn to the consequences for the women concerned as well as to repercussions for German and EU labor market policy.

As with the low-wage sector in general, very little has been done to track the posited growth in employment in the cleaning trade. Although professional cleaning occupied the third (1984) or the fourth (1989) rank in Germany among female occupations in the 1980s, it has been neglected by official statisticians persistently (Duda 1990, 15, 30). Hence, in order to gain at least an approximate idea of the cleaning trade’s employment performance during the last decades, researchers need to assemble widely scattered and fragmentary source material to create a kind of “mosaic.” Such a mosaic forms the basis of the following case study.

Job Creation in the Public Cleaning Service

After World War II, jobs were explicitly created in the public sector as a means to provide “needy women” with subsistence wages and long-term job perspectives. Many of these jobs were concentrated in the public cleaning service. While the exact figures are not recorded, most public sector cleaners did have full- or extended part-time jobs.⁹ Moreover, the standards of these jobs were high: unlike most female-dominated jobs, they provided social insurance coverage and were governed by collective agreements. However, shrinking government budgets and a neoconservative movement that disdained public employment led to the gradual decline in public sector employment and the turn toward privatization.

In the postwar era and until far into the 1970s, most cleaners in Germany seem to have been employed in the public sector. According to a survey conducted by the “confederation of towns and communities” (“*Städte und Gemeindebund*”) of North-Rhine-Westphalia,¹⁰ more than half of the cities relied exclusively on public sector cleaners in 1977, and an additional 40 percent of all the cities complemented the work of “public staff” with the services of private cleaning companies (Tofaute 1977, 59). It can thus be argued that the professional cleaning sector was still dominated by public sector employment in the mid-1970s.

This dominance is more striking given that the reduction of the public cleaning service had commenced as early as 1960. After all, cleaners had been among the first public sector employees affected by privatization. According to representatives of the public sector trade union (“*Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport, Verkehr*”), such privatization measures usually started “at the edges, where the economically weakest [such as low-skilled women] are employed” (Die beuten 1976).¹¹ Additionally, the wages in the public service were rising as a labor shortage drove down the supply of willing workers. The labor shortage raised the cost of the emerging private cleaning companies as well, but private services still remained attractive for public institutions because they took responsibility for the time-consuming recruitment of cleaners.

After the recessions of 1966–1967 and 1973–1974, unemployment figures rose, and more women had to accept cleaning jobs. Under these conditions, it would have been easy (and necessary) to recruit “needy women” for the public cleaning service again. However, the economic crisis made public revenue shrink. Finally, when the European Union’s Maastricht Treaty of 1992 imposed sanctions on member states increasing their national debts by more than 3 percent of the total budget, public spending and especially public sector employment were cut even further.¹² Hence, public cleaning services were continually reduced; in the 1960s however, “the reason behind it was the labor shortage in communal cleaning, whereas today [in the 1970s and later], the wish to privatize results from budget deficits”(Minssen 1977).

The decline of public sector employment and the turn toward privatization could have affected various occupational groups, of course, but attention was explicitly focused on cleaners. As early as 1972, the Federal Court of Finance (“*Bundesrechnungshof*”) revised the budget of the Federal Postal Administration, concluding that privatization could cut cleaning costs to one-third; the aim to provide for “needy women” was no longer mentioned (Bundesdrucksache 7/2709,

29.10.1974, quoted in Kellner 1983). In the following years, neoconservative dislike of public employment,¹³ shrinking public budgets, and the increasing number of women who had to accept low-wage jobs no doubt contributed to the decline of public cleaning.¹⁴

While the increase in public sector jobs up to the 1960s and the later reduction of public employment have shaped the cleaning trade's history fundamentally, they have only left minor marks in German statistics. Relevant data is more or less restricted to the "Mikrozensus,"¹⁵ which indicates that the number of public sector cleaners in West Germany was reduced continuously from 110,000 (1975–1976) to 65,000 (1998),¹⁶ i.e., from 1.2 percent to 0.5 percent of all gainfully employed women.¹⁷ While figures may indicate the broad degree of change, they do conceal considerable regional differences in speed and amount of privatization, as well as the fact that some public institutions reinstalled their cleaning services after bad experiences with private companies (Zimmermann 1978).

Additionally, there were significant changes not only in the number of jobs, but also in their quality. For instance, the total number of working hours in the public cleaning service must have been reduced even more dramatically than data on the number of jobs reveals. In the 1970s, most public sector cleaners had been full-time employees; in later years, the share of part-time employment increased (Tofaute 1977).

This shift away from full-time work arguably reflects a general trend in employment, which has affected many industrialized countries. In Germany, the late twentieth-century expansion of female labor force participation was due mainly to an increase in part-time jobs, often in spite of women's willingness to work full time. In 2002, 19 percent of all gainfully employed women had a part-time job with social insurance coverage, and 16 percent worked in minijobs without insurance, even though more than half of these women would have preferred longer working-hours (Baethge et al. 2005, 17, 110).

These changes in job quality are not attributable to privatization alone. Even in the German public sector, "marginal employment" spread—in 1987, 62,000 minijobs were recorded; ten years later, their number had gone up to 173,000 (Friedrich 1989, 36; Friedrich 1997, 49). Most of this growth in public sector marginal employment was concentrated in the female-dominated cleaning service (Deutscher Bundestag 1989, 25). Hence, the number of cleaners employed in the public sector was not only *reduced* by at least one-third between 1973 and 1998, but the remaining jobs comprised fewer and fewer working hours. As employment and wages fell, the opportunity to earn subsistence wages in public cleaning was thus continuously diminished.

Private Cleaning Companies and the Tolerance Toward Gray Labor Markets

In the process of privatization, the duties of the public cleaning service were transferred to the staff of a swiftly increasing number of private cleaning companies whose total volume of business expanded as enormously as their employment figures.

In 1973 as well as in 1998, one-third of this exploding turnover was earned by means of cleaning public buildings, which gives additional weight to the

assumption that the employment growth in cleaning companies was a direct consequence of the public cleaning service's privatization (Zimmermann 1978; Seumer 1998, 257–259).

However, the *total number* of cleaners registered in the Mikrozensus did not change considerably; in nearly twenty-five years, this occupational group only increased by 60,000 persons. Still, a striking change is indicated by the fact that the share of cleaning companies grew from 30 percent of all cleaners registered in 1973 to about 90 percent in 1998 (Trades Statistic: Statistisches Bundesamt, Fachserie D, Reihe 7.1).

This comparison may exaggerate the degree of change effected by privatization, as marginal employment was included in the trade statistics but thoroughly underrepresented in the Mikrozensus (1998, 16). After all, the majority of cleaning companies' staff seems to have consisted of "minijobbers."

These minijobbers experienced less job stability and earned even lower wages than women in the public cleaning service. As early as 1977, a survey of the employers' association of cleaning companies concluded that 77 percent of their staff were marginally employed, this share reaching 90 percent "in extreme cases" (Ostwald 1978). Despite the increase in the total number of employees, 75 percent still had minijobs in 1985 (Küpper and Stolz-Willig 1988, 8–9). After that, their share went down to 60 percent in 1987 and 40 percent in 1992, according to the first official statistics on marginal employment in Germany, and there is evidence that it stagnated around 55 percent between 1993 and 1998 (BIV 1993; Friedrich 1989, 36, 84; Friedrich 1993, tables 4d, 21a; Friedrich 1997, 46).

The relative decline of minijobs may be due to the fact that bigger and more consolidated cleaning companies took to planning their labor needs in advance instead of relying on jobs resembling "flexible" day labor. In addition, more women seem to have been interested in working longer hours, as "housewives and mothers," who had constituted the vast majority of staff in the 1970s, were increasingly joined in the 1990s by women who wished to earn more than "a little extra money," but could not find more attractive part-time or full-time jobs because of mass unemployment. Whereas cleaning companies in 1980 found it difficult to recruit staff for four working hours per day, in later years employers increasingly reported employee wishes for extended part-time and even full-time-work (Kommentar 1981; Was sagen 1990).

Whatever the reasons for the rise and decline of minijobs in cleaning companies, their underrepresentation in the Mikrozensus suggests that the total number of cleaners may have been higher and the share of private companies accordingly smaller than available data suggests. Yet there can be no doubt that privatization mainly caused a replacement of cleaning jobs in the public sector by jobs in private companies without creating much additional employment for the women concerned.

This substitution of public sector cleaners by the staff of private cleaning companies resulted primarily from the fact that the latter could rely upon cheap, flexible, and short-term minijobs. This utilization of marginal employment was actively supported by German labor policy in two ways: it was overtly encouraged, and it remained largely unregulated.

On the one hand, marginal employment below a certain threshold of income and working hours was explicitly rendered attractive for employers by the German government for the first time after 1973. When minijobs had first been exempted from social insurance schemes in 1927, women could decide whether they wished to pay contributions and, in turn, become entitled to insurance protection. However, as soon as the postwar labor shortage commenced around 1960, minijobs were *automatically* excluded from social insurance as long as they did not reach a certain level of income and working hours defined by central government (Oertzen 1999, 122–131). This aimed at forcing women, who needed to earn more than “pocket money,” into registered employment. These policies, which rendered minijobs much less attractive for working women, aimed at turning female part-time workers into “regular employees” as they were hoped to increase their working hours in the long run.

Ironically, shortly after these measures had been introduced, economic recession started. Under these declining economic conditions, women with minijobs were no longer considered an important reserve of labor power that had to be pushed into “typical” or “proper employment.” Instead the “atypical” labor market, made up of all jobs that were not full-time employment and did not offer complete coverage by social insurance schemes and collective agreements, was now actively reanimated. This marked an important policy shift as the German government had tried to abolish “atypical jobs” in the prosperous postwar years, and it paved the way for a gradual erosion of German “standard employment” (“Normalarbeitsverhältnis”) after 1973. Marginal employment, for instance, was to affect more and more employees as the threshold for social insurance coverage was now repeatedly increased (Mayer-Ahuja 2001). In 2002, the Mikrozensus reported that the share of marginal employment had reached 7.7 percent of the gainfully employed workforce in Germany (Baethge et al. 2005, 249).

On the other hand, policy implicitly encouraged marginal employment as German authorities only took halfhearted measures against illegal minijobs. Because minijobs were neither registered by social insurance nor by tax authorities, they were allowed to mushroom. Hence, many women (illegally) combined several minijobs without paying social insurance fees (Buch 1999, 148). It is also indicative that in some cleaning companies, sometimes 30 to 50 percent of the staff were caught without valid residence or work permits in infrequent controls of migration officers (Zu Ende denken 1982). Although some steps were taken to reduce this gray labor market,¹⁸ such laws were hardly ever enforced effectively.

On the European level, tolerance toward illegal employment seems to have been equally widespread. Although European integration and freedom of movement were known to contribute to social dumping, no binding minimum labor standards were introduced. Moreover, the EU Commission implicitly encouraged countries to facilitate the undermining of their own labor standards; since 2004, the Commission has vigorously proposed a service guideline, aimed at allowing companies to offer their services in all EU countries according to the standards in their country of origin (European Commission 2004).¹⁹ This would have led to a decline in standards overall. For example, if Polish cleaning companies could

clean German buildings on the basis of Polish wages and Polish labor law, German authorities would not have to turn a blind eye to substandard jobs any longer; the substandard nature of such jobs would have been legalized explicitly by EU law.²⁰

As to the question of employment performance, the case would be perfectly clear, then, if the cleaning trade were only made up of the public cleaning service and private cleaning companies; although a whole sector of the labor market had been virtually turned upside down by privatization, this process seems to have resulted in an employment growth of *only* 60,000 jobs between 1973 and 1998, many of them containing fewer working hours than before. Hence, abandoning the first low-wage strategy of employing “needy women” in the public sector after 1973 and instead following the second low-wage strategy of tolerating, for instance, marginal employment despite its often illegal character did obviously not succeed in generating a substantial increase in employment opportunities.

Turning Private Households into Employers

Today the German government presents its efforts to fight unemployment by making private households demand consumer services as one of the most promising policy instruments. This approach, which was identified as the third low-wage strategy above, took effect in the cleaning trade much earlier than in other parts of the labor market. Again, the effectiveness of this policy in combating unemployment is largely unsupported by empirical evidence.

At first glance, available data suggests that domestic service has been losing importance more or less continuously in twentieth-century Germany. In 1950, about 9 percent of all gainfully employed women were registered as full-time or part-time domestic servants, but, eleven years later, their share had decreased to 3.4 percent (or 342,000 women), and it dropped even further to 0.3 percent (32,000 women) in 1997 (Müller, Willms, and Handl 1983, 27, 35; Hatzold 1986, 17–19; Friedrich 1997, 46).

During the prosperous postwar years, this decline was not considered problematic, as new low-skill jobs were generated in industry and the service sector. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, rising unemployment figures directed the government's attention toward the declining levels of domestic service.

In 1986, the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs commissioned a research project on the questions of “if and how registered employment could be increased through jobs in private households” (Hatzold 1986, 1). The results were hardly surprising: they confirmed the popular neoconservative assumption that registered jobs in domestic service could not spread because the wage gap between employers and employees was not wide enough. In the 1920s,

“a senior executive officer...almost certainly employed a full-time maid for six days a week. This amounted to little more than 10 percent of his income. Today, a senior executive officer in the same situation cannot afford a full-time maid, because he would have to spend about half of his income on her service” (Hatzold 1986, 13).

In Otfried Hatzold's (1986) opinion, the price of low-skill employment had been inflated since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 because of trade union efforts to close the wage gap altogether. According to his view, if only wages were low enough, private households would be motivated to create employment.

Although this neoconservative view appeals to contemporary common sense, the vanishing of maids in the 1920s and in the years of postwar economic growth was not due to exorbitant wages in the first place. Instead, domestic service, like public cleaning, suffered from recruitment problems. Even women with limited formal qualifications and family obligations could easily find more attractive and better-paid, full-time or part-time employment in factories, offices, or shops (Hatzold 1986, 13). After that, even the mass unemployment of the 1970s and 1980s did not suffice to make women return to domestic service. Moreover, the tax reductions introduced by diverse "maid privileges" could not persuade many households to spend money on servants' wages and insurance fees.²¹ Some demand for domestics existed, but it remained limited.

Hence, governmental efforts to revive registered full-time or part-time employment in private households proved rather ineffective. Instead, another group of domestic servants seemed to be growing in the last quarter of the twentieth century: charwomen ("Zugehfrauen" or "Stundenfrauen"),²² who were employed on an hourly basis and who had "survived" all attempts to reduce marginal employment in the period of labor shortage. Despite the paucity of data on minijobs in private households, charwomen were made out as a potential source of employment growth in the mid-1980s. Their mere existence stimulated low-wage strategists to claim that mass unemployment could be substantially reduced if governments only succeeded in making such consumer services attractive enough. This optimism was founded both on the vague impression that the last few decades had seen a beginning revival of domestic service and on a clearly perceivable trend toward social polarization.

This polarization increased the need for domestic-service jobs as they offered a solution for both middle-class women who employed cleaners in order to reduce their workload and less well-to-do housewives and mothers who increasingly accepted these jobs.

At one end of the social spectrum, many middle-class families had acquired an "alternative" lifestyle in the last quarter of the twentieth century, making children's education or the self-realization of women appear more important than household tasks. This same lifestyle rendered housework more time consuming as ecological cleaning agents and natural textiles gained popularity (Lutz 2000, 12). The most important aspect of change, however, was the increase of female employment, especially as many women had to adjust to flexible working hours. High-skill female employment thus rendered domestic service necessary and affordable at the same time. It approached "male standards" to a certain extent, thereby widening the wage gap between these women and their "poor sisters" even further.

At the other end of the social spectrum, then, married women with less formal qualifications accepted cleaning jobs in private households because they faced similar problems. For them and for their potential employers, it had become

increasingly necessary to combine flexible working hours with family obligations. The cleaners were driven into wage-labor, for instance, by “new poverty,” but neither industry nor nondomestic services offered enough attractive employment with working hours adjustable to housework and childcare. Besides, female migrants took to domestic service, as only undocumented minijobs provided a chance to earn a living without valid residence or work permit (Odierna 2000, 71, 97, 198; Thiessen 1997, 49). Hence the return of domestic servants appeared to be in the shared interest of both middle-class and working-class women, but it came at the cost of increasing inequalities in the distribution of wages.

It may thus be argued that the polarization of income standards, so strongly recommended by the third low-wage-strategy, has indeed already taken effect in private households. The question of whether it has resulted in employment growth, however, is not easy to answer because of the lack of reliable statistics—here are, again, only scattered pieces of information. In 1978, for instance, the employers’ association of cleaning companies estimated that private households, which were reported to spend one billion DM per annum on cleaning staff, probably employed about 70,000 cleaners (Zimmermann 1978, 32). In 1987, the first official survey on marginal employment suggested that there were 667,000 minijobs in private households. Supposing both figures were correct, the number of private households’ employees would have increased tenfold in the course of only one decade. This is exactly the kind of data that seemed to strengthen the assumptions of low-wage strategists, but its persuasiveness is weakened by the fact that more or less *reliable* surveys on this are not available before 1987. In the decade following 1987, however, the expansion continued to be considerable, but not as dramatic as indicated by the above figures. The number of minijobs in private households increased from 667,000 in 1987 to roughly one million in 1992 and 1.2 million in 1997 (Friedrich 1993, tables 4d, 21a, 38b, 54b; Friedrich 1997, table 2a). Of these, in 1993 only 60 percent and in 1997 merely 40 percent were believed to have required cleaning duties rather than gardening or child minding (calculation based on: Friedrich 1993, tables 4a, 4d, 21a, 22d; Friedrich 1997, tables 2a, 3a). Comparing these figures with the Mikrozensus, which counted 528,000 cleaners in 1992–1993 and 582,000 in 1997, in public cleaning service and cleaning companies, charwomen in private households thus seem to have constituted the biggest single group of cleaners in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the number of cleaners in private households was declining in the 1990s according to official statistics. Even if we suppose that this amazing result is due to statistical errors, and that cleaning jobs expanded as dynamically as the entirety of domestic minijobs (which increased by 500,000 between 1987 and 1997), there is no reason to believe that “more jobs” automatically coincided with “more employment opportunities.” After all, there is some evidence that in both private households and cleaning companies, many women (illegally) performed several minijobs at a time without being included into social insurance schemes. In the mid-1980s, for instance, 586,000 minijobbers reported to be employed in private households, whereas 1.3 million households indicated that they employed minijobbers (Hatzold 1986, 17; Friedrich 1989, 36, 84). Hence, many cleaners must have been combining several (in some cases up to fifteen) minijobs (Odierna

2000, 59, 61, 103). This strategy on the part of individual workers thus compensated for the loss of income, but not for the loss of social protection that would have been connected with registered full-time or part-time employment.

Consequences for Women: Intensified and Increasingly Precarious Labor

In the German cleaning trade, then, “double privatization”—i.e., the continuing transfer of jobs from the public sector to private companies and households—implied that an average employment relationship contained a diminishing number of working hours, as registered full-time or part-time employment was increasingly replaced by minijobs.

One consequence of this development was the intensification of the labor process; as cleaning areas were usually not reduced in proportion to the working hours, a shift from full-time to part-time employment implied that women had to clean the same or even bigger areas in less time. Hence, the physical strain reached a degree that rendered full-time employment almost impossible. An employee of a Hessian cleaning company stated in 1987: “Well, I would never in my life go cleaning for eight hours a day. This will get anybody down. See, I am finished in the evening after four hours, but for eight hours, I would never go on cleaning” (Merz 1995, 131).

Moreover, the cleaning trade’s double privatization rendered these jobs more precarious in the sense that material standards, standards of legal protection, and standards of social integration (into the informal solidarity of colleagues and formal structures of articulating interest) were increasingly undermined (Mayer-Ahuja 2004). To start with, cleaners’ incomes were diminished by the reduction of working hours as less hourly wages were paid. Moreover, collective wage agreements, which were previously enforced by powerful trade unions in the public (cleaning) service, lost importance. Private companies often ignored collective agreements, and most employers in private households were not even aware that a collective agreement for charwomen existed. As a result, rather than being supplied with additional job opportunities, many cleaners had to perform a number of full-time, part-time, or marginal jobs in order to maintain their standards of income in the period under review (Jindra-Süß, Kleemann, and Merz 1987, 24–25).

The undermining of legal standards has already been discussed when pointing to the apparently enormous share of illegal minijobs. It is often argued, especially by representatives of cleaning companies, that this was mainly resulting from women’s own wishes to earn “fast money” without having to pay taxes and insurance fees and without having to produce a work permit. Doubtlessly, these advantages of working in the gray labor market may have appeared convenient to many cleaners, but as soon as a conflict with their employer arose, they could not appeal to court without accusing themselves of illegal employment. Hence even legal standards to which minijobbers were actually entitled could not be enforced effectively. Moreover, some laws and many collective agreements explicitly excluded minijobs because they were not considered “proper” employment. For instance, before 1991 the law on the continuation of payment in case of illness (“Lohnfortzahlungsgesetz”) did not apply to workers with minijobs. This

protection was only extended after a complaint by cleaner Ingrid Rinner-Kühn led the European Court of Justice to direct the German government to change this law (European Court of Justice 1991).

Finally, standards of social integration were gradually undermined when cleaners were employed less permanently in the wake of double privatization. After all, public sector cleaners had been part of the staff working in a public building, were represented by the same works council, had often been employed for years, and performed various side duties (like looking after patients in hospitals). Employees of cleaning companies, instead, were considered “foreigners” who usually worked in deserted buildings, displayed a high fluctuation rate, and were hardly ever represented by their own works councils. These factors further facilitated wage dumping and “hire and fire” strategies. Cleaners in private households were even more vulnerable. They had no colleagues at all and faced their employers individually, which could lead to convenient working conditions in some cases but also to sexual harassment and poor wages in others, particularly if the women had an illegal migration status.

Lessons for Labor Creation Policies

In conclusion, we need to return to the question of whether any of the three low-wage strategies, which can be studied in Germany as well as in other European countries, has generated substantial employment growth in the German cleaning trade between 1973 and 1998. We can state with some confidence that the evidence at hand does not warrant any answer in the positive. Statistics are far too scarce to reconstruct the development of employment in this part of the labor market in any detail, but the scattered data ascribes no considerable generation of employment to the process of double privatization. Moreover, even the limited expansion of jobs was mainly due to the fact that registered full-time or part-time employment was split up into several minijobs, which were at least partly performed by women who took to combining jobs in order to earn a subsistence wage. Consequently, the number of jobs increased, but the number of working hours stagnated or was even diminished by a massive intensification of the labor process. Of the three low-wage strategies, it can thus be argued that only the employment of cleaners in the public sector, which was slowly abandoned after 1973, had been an effective means of supplying women of no or limited formal qualification with an opportunity to earn their own living. Tolerating a gray labor market and offering incentives to potential employers did not result in any substantial job growth but merely increased the precarious character of labor in the cleaning trade.

These lessons from the history of professional cleaning have important repercussions for future efforts to create new jobs. The European Union’s “Lissabon Strategy” (announced in 2000), for instance, postulates that member states should take measures to increase female employment rates, thus turning Europe into “the world’s most dynamic and competitive knowledge economy.” It is obvious that this addresses the employment rate of highly qualified middle-class women, but will only be effective in increasing employment if these women are provided with affordable child care facilities and disburdened from household

tasks. Reviewing the history of professional cleaning, there are only two options to achieve this aim. The first option would be to promote low-wage employment in private companies and households even further, despite its precarious and frequently illegal character. The cleaning trade's history may illustrate, however, that indirect governmental intervention that forces wage earners to accept low-pay and inferior-rights work has so far not succeeded in generating large numbers of jobs despite mass unemployment and increasing social polarization. Hence, future schemes of implementing such low-wage strategies will probably have to rely on higher levels of direct pressure on the wage earners concerned—and will have to do so without any empirical proof that similar measures have substantially reduced unemployment in the past.

The second option, then, would constitute nothing less than a break with neoclassical principles of job creation in Germany as well as on the EU level. Such a reorientation has long been proposed by heterodox economists who hold that a marked increase in public investment²³ is needed in order to reverse the decay of public infrastructure and the dramatic cutback of public sector employment (Memorandum 2005). Investing into public jobs in crèches, kindergartens, service pools, or health care would not only improve the chances of highly qualified women to combine wage labor and family obligations, as the Lissabon Strategy demands, but would offer the same to women of lower-income strata who are even more dependent on public services. Moreover, there is empirical evidence that the extension of public employment (in sharp contrast to neoclassical labor market strategies) has indeed created additional jobs, especially for women, on various qualification levels.²⁴

Low-wage strategists argue that “(almost) every job is better than none” (Streeck and Heinze 1999). The history of the German cleaning trade, however, proves that their traditional labor market recipes have not generated more employment. Instead they have merely rendered existing jobs more intensive and precarious. It is high time, then, for a change of direction in professional cleaning and beyond.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is based on Nicole Mayer-Ahuja's work (2003). The designations "German" and "Germany" refer, in this article, exclusively to the former Federal Republic of Germany (1949 to 1991) and to unified Germany (after 1991). Statistical data on the long-term development of the cleaning trade, however, refer to only the territory of West Germany (Federal Republic until 1991, "alte Bundesländer" thereafter).

² Low-wage employment is defined in European Union statistics as work generating less than 66 percent of the national median income.

³ Such as the Great Depression of 1929, the years of Nazi rule before World War II, and again in the early 1970s.

⁴ Author's tabulations from Eurostat.

⁵ Employees are defined as those with more than fifteen working hours per week (European Commission 2004).

⁶ In contrast, only 5.6 percent of those with university degrees were registered as unemployed. The European Union average displays a similar but slightly smaller difference of 10.3 percent of the early school leavers to 4.7 percent of those with university degrees. Author's tabulations from Eurostat.

⁷ Current data indicates the latter development (Rhein, Gartner, and Krug 2005).

⁸ From 1989, couples with two children, lone parents, and persons in need of care who employed domestic servants with insurance coverage could subtract labor costs up to 12,000 DM (roughly 6,000 €) per year from their tax sum (§ 10, EstG) (Thiessen 1997, 43–44). In the "programme for growth and employment" this sum was increased to 24,000 DM, and personal preconditions were abandoned (Klenner and Stolz-Willig 1996, 195).

⁹ Unfortunately, statistical evidence on labor market development, employment figures in different sectors, and especially individual or collective labor biographies are rare before the mid-1970s. It can be reconstructed, though, that there were indeed full-time jobs in public cleaning.

¹⁰ Home to one-third of West Germany's population.

¹¹ All German quotes translated by author.

¹² In Germany, private cleaning companies profited from this situation because their union rates were not only much lower than in the public sector, but also thoroughly ignored by many companies. Because many women did not even know about the wage level, sick leave, or paid holidays to which they were formally entitled, the staff of private cleaning companies constituted cheap and “flexible” competition to public sector cleaners.

¹³ “A decisive step towards socialism” (Faltlhauser 1976).

¹⁴ Full-time cleaners were supplanted with part-time employees through the intensification of labor and the expansion of cleaning areas per person. As the supply of unskilled labor rose, cleaners were less able to insist on full-time standards and were left to accept the reduced wages and increased workloads.

¹⁵ An annual survey of 1 percent of the working population.

¹⁶ Statistisches Bundesamt, Fachserie 1, Reihe 4.1.2, cleaners employed in “Gebietskörperschaften/Sozialversicherung” up to 1995 resp. in “öffentliche Verwaltung.”

¹⁷ The total number of gainfully employed women rose from 9,580,000 in 1976 to 12,416,000 in 1998.

¹⁸ Steps included issuing “social insurance passports” in 1991, for instance.

¹⁹ The “Bolkestein directive.”

²⁰ After public protest against this directive had contributed to the French rejection of the European Union constitution in 2005 and had boosted trade union marches in February 2006, the leading political forces of the EU seemed prepared to compromise on the “country of origin” principle at the time of writing.

²¹ This marks a difference from the French case, where “service cheques” proved to be much more successful from 1994 (inforMISEP Nr. 48, Winter 1994).

²² Female persons who work in private households for a limited (usually small) number of hours and do not live in their employer's home.

²³ Such public investment has been reduced in Germany from 2.6 to 1.4 percent of gross national product since 1995.

²⁴ For the Swedish experience, see Häußermann and Siebel 1995.