**Social Inclusion**
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12737
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.12737

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BOOK REVIEW

Open Access Journal

# Home Care for Sale: Marketisation and Social Change

**Attila Melegh** [1,2]

[1] Demographic Research Institute, Hungary
[2] Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

**Correspondence:** Attila Melegh (melegh@demografia.hu)

**Submitted:** 5 May 2026 **Accepted:** 7 May 2026 **Published:** 8 June 2026

**Issue:** This book review is part of the issue "Transnational Organization of Labour, Mobility, and Senior Care in Central and Eastern Europe" edited by Ewa Palenga-Möllenbeck (Goethe University Frankfurt), Dora Gabriel (ELTE Centre for Social Sciences / ELTE Centre for Economic and Regional Studies), Olena Fedyuk (CEU Democracy Institute), and Kristine Krause (University of Amsterdam), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i533

## Abstract

The evolving crises, contradictions of care, marketisation, and demographic developments are clear, substantial, and inevitable, and are driving social change. In this context, the book *Home Care for Sale: The Transnational Brokering of Senior Care in Europe*, which highlights some of these contradictions, is essential reading. More importantly, it provides valuable insights. Rather than offering simplistic critiques, we need to consider contradictions because we must understand not only how societies (and vulnerable groups) struggle due to certain institutional arrangements, but also how to find innovative solutions to social problems and care gaps due to social tensions. Few people dare to consider how societies not only collapse, but also innovate under neoliberal stress.

## Keywords

ageing; care; labour; marketisation; social change

We are living in turbulent times. We are witnessing significant social change, with social institutions under severe strain in the neoliberal era. The entire geopolitical order is under dramatic stress and the prospect of much larger-scale warfare is looming. The neoliberal era and its market-driven changes promise a bleak and insecure future. During this period, it is crucial to consider how we can organize and guarantee basic social services, such as care and support for our families, neighbours, and fellow residents. Such concerns are especially pressing in the context of demographic ageing and the increasing demand for both the quantity and diversity of care services. Nevertheless, relative to needs, governments reduced redistributive capacities over recent decades: Tax revenues as a percentage of GDP declined after the global crisis of 2008 and have stagnated ever since, except during the Covid-19 pandemic (Melegh, 2023). Under these conditions, only

substantial economic growth could cover the cost of social support and the rapidly rising cost of healthcare. The evolving crisis is therefore clear, significant, and unavoidable, pushing social change forward.

In this context, *Home Care for Sale: The Transnational Brokering of Senior Care in Europe* (Aulenbacher et al., 2024) provides an important contribution to debates on care, labour, and marketisation. Rather than offering a simplistic critique of neoliberalism, the volume examines the contradictions embedded in contemporary care arrangements. It demonstrates not only how vulnerable groups experience increasing precarity under existing institutional structures, but also how new forms of adaptation and innovation emerge in response to care deficits and social inequalities. In this respect, the book highlights both the destructive and transformative dimensions of neoliberal restructuring.

Before discussing the book's key analytical aspects, it is important to note that the volume is an edited collection consisting of chapters by numerous authors, each providing a critical analysis of related issues in different national contexts. Each chapter functions as an independent contribution and provides an insightful theoretical overview. Although this occasionally results in repetition, the editors successfully establish a coherent analytical framework that integrates a wide range of empirical cases and theoretical perspectives. This framework represents one of the volume's major strengths and effectively turns the book into a comprehensive overview of the marketisation of care and its mechanisms.

The first major topic in the book is marketisation itself. The book clearly argues that the commodification of care reflects the ways in which capitalist economies increasingly integrate care and care work into market relations despite their socially reproductive character. This holistic approach is important because marketisation is a complex process that cannot be confined to a single definition. In fact, recent scholarship has similarly emphasized the conceptual complexity of commodification (Bertrand & Panitch, 2023). Furthermore, in our view, marketisation should be understood as a complex historical process characterized by recurring waves and transformations (Burawoy, 2020).

Within the volume marketisation refers to several interconnected and parallel processes. Firstly, since the early 1990s, key global economic forces and organisations have promoted the expansion of transnational labour markets (Chawla et al., 2007; van der Linden & Roth, 2014; World Bank, 1995). The rise of the global care labour market represents a particularly significant aspect of this transformation (Hoerder et al., 2015). This new global labour market and care labour market needs new and organized types of matchings operating both online and offline. As demonstrated in the chapter by Gábriel and Katona, brokerage structures have become increasingly important within care sectors. This development is increasingly based on migrant labour and market-mediated relations. At the same time, care, labour, and migration are becoming ever more fictitious, allowing the system to commodify and exploit resources that are not originally produced for market exchange (Polanyi, 2001).

The volume further suggests that care labour has become what might be described as a "super-fictitious" commodity. Care labour is commodified labour, but it is also tied to socially reproductive activities that historically existed outside market relations. Furthermore, it is migrant labour, which is even more socially decontextualised—being often managed via market-oriented brokers—with massive consequences for transnational family relations (Aulenbacher & Handapangoda, 2025). This labour is frequently performed within home-like environments that blur the boundaries between domestic life and the workplace, as

discussed in the chapter by Lutz and Benazha. To illustrate this radically disembedded scenario, one Hungarian care worker explained in an interview that she migrated to Austria after her husband became permanently ill and unable to work (Melegh et al., 2018). Such cases demonstrate how neoliberal arrangements compel families to adapt to transnational labour demands that may override their own social and emotional needs. All of this happens in pseudo-home-like workplaces that are generally not acknowledged as workplaces, but merely as locations for the provision of services. Thus, care labour becomes super fictitious, a scenario amply illustrated in the book.

The book also provides an analytical guide to the radicalisation of inequalities within transnational care systems. Several chapters examine the role of brokers and agencies in structuring labour relations. Mercille's chapter analyses brokerage businesses in Ireland, while Aulenbacher and Prieler examine the branding strategies of agencies operating within Austria's self-employed care-worker regime. Gábriel and Katona provide a typology of brokerage structures in Hungary. Palenga-Möllenbeck further demonstrates that brokerage relations between Germany and Poland are themselves hierarchically organized, producing unequal divisions of labour and revenue between German and Polish agencies. These arrangements reinforce broader East–West inequalities within European care systems and generate additional forms of rent extraction (Katona & Melegh, 2020).

The East–West divide constitutes a recurring theme manifesting in various aspects of the semi-peripheral position of Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe has become a major provider of migrant care labour, producing significant forms of care drain. At the same time, Eastern European care workers are often racialised through representations that position them as an inferior form of "Europeanwhiteness" (Böröcz & Sarkar, 2017; Melegh, 2006). As discussed in Uhde's chapter, this racialisation also shapes negative attitudes towards refugees and migrants from other parts of the world. Furthermore, massive inequalities emerged during the Covid-19 crisis when East–West hierarchies became crucial selection mechanisms during border closures. Eastern European workers often assumed high-risk positions within care and food production sectors. As Ezzedine demonstrates, many care workers accepted significant personal risks in order to maintain care provision during the pandemic labour.

To make matters worse, these structural inequalities occur in emotionally charged settings, where conflicts are difficult to resolve due to power relations embedded in marketisation. There is a lack of distinction between work and leisure spaces, and related spatial divisions of labour. Familial environments become work environments where workers are poorly protected. Giordano's chapter shows how brokerage systems in Belgium capitalize on social and economic inequalities, while similar processes of rent extraction are documented in Spain by Martínez-Buján and Moré. Thus, receiving homes become workplaces where conflicts are twisted. In such situations, market-oriented brokers often intervene with special interests, as Amorosi demonstrates in the Italian case.

It is no surprise that workers react to such conditions by becoming "professionals" in order to secure some limited forms of legal and social protection. This professionalisation can be regarded as a countermovement to the marketisation of care work, without challenging market relations. As discussed by Lutz and Benazha, professionalisation may therefore function simultaneously as a response to and reinforcement of marketisation. Workers do not necessarily embrace commodified labour relations; rather, they attempt to navigate among intersecting forms of vulnerability and exploitation (Fraser, 2022; Goikoetxea, 2024). These

dynamics illustrate the contradictory nature of marketisation and the diverse forms it may assume. This is why the book should not be read merely as a critique, but as an analysis of the key tensions shaping the future of care, labour, and broader systems of social reproduction.

This tension comes up directly in the final section of the book, where the concluding analytical points concerning the struggle over rights, exploitation, ethics, and fairness as fundamental aspects of contradictory marketisation are discussed. Contributions by Edmunds, Schwiter, and Kaddour, and Fouskas and Schilliger document a range of initiatives and practices—already implemented—that seek to address existing inequalities. There is evidence here of a great deal of innovation, including the use of various forms of social capital, such as ethnic bonds, or additional resources utilized by care workers in the form of trust and solidarity networks, dimensions that remain insufficiently addressed in labour movement studies. However, as Fraser and Van der Linden have pointed out, it is not only "normal" and "normalised" wage labour that should be incorporated into our critical work, but also forced labour and domestic labour, in order to do justice to workers, at least from an epistemological perspective (Fraser, 2022; van der Linden & Roth, 2014). From this perspective, care work must be understood as central to the functioning of capitalist societies rather than as a marginal or secondary form of labour.

At the same time, we should also recognise that capitalist 'servitude' is inherited and developed from status-based systems of family arrangements in historical times. Historical cycles of marketisation have been key driving forces in this historical process (Hoerder et al., 2015; Kertzer & Laslett, 1995). In this respect, *Home Care for Sale: The Transnational Brokering of Senior Care in Europe* offers important insight into the changing organisation of care within contemporary capitalism and provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding current transformations in social reproduction. It is exactly the intellectual contribution that we need in our turbulent times.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## LLMs Disclosure

LLMs have been used in the linguistic editing of this manuscript, in a supervised manner.

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## About the Author

Attila Melegh is a sociologist, economist, and historian. He studied economics and sociology at Karl Marx University of Economics and social history at Oxford University. He has a PhD in history from Debrecen University and received DSc from the Hungarian Academy. He is a habilitated full professor at Corvinus University, Budapest, and a scientific adviser at the Demographic Research Institute. Current editor of the *Eszmélet and Demográfia* (English edition) journal, he was the founding director of Karl Polányi Research Centre at Corvinus University between 2014–2022. He has been a Vienna Karl Polanyi Visiting Professor at Vienna University of Economics, University of Vienna, and Central European University. He is the president of the Demographic Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and a member of the European Academy. He is the 2025 winner of the Hungarian Academy prize. Author of *On the East/West Slope, Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Central and Eastern Europe*, his most recent work *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe: A Global Historical Sociological Analysis* (2023, Palgrave-Macmillan)