

Position Paper

For the Workshop: “Migrant domestic workers and the construction of households: Comparative perspectives” [Mytilene, 30-31 March 2007]

I.

Since the 1980s the issue of paid domestic work has been a major topic of empirical research and an important area of theoretical debate in the social sciences. Most of the relevant literature in sociology, anthropology, social history or political science looks at the new forms of domestic work in the Euroamerican metropolises. It focuses primarily on the United States and Canada (Rollins 1985, Glenn 1986, Colen 1989, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Romero 1992, Bakan και Stasiulis 1995, Parrenas 2001), Britain, Italy and Germany in Europe (Giles 1992, Phizacklea 1995, Chell 1997, Parrenas 2001, Lutz 2002), and secondarily on African countries (Cock 1980, Hansen 1989), as well as on Asia (Kothari 1996, Constable 1997, Chin 1998, Gamburd 2000, Adams and Dickey 2000) and Latin America (Chaney and Castro 1989). It further discusses the intrinsic connection between immigration from peripheral and often post-colonial states, on the one hand, and paid domestic work, on the other. by analyzing work arrangements and the life trajectories of female domestic servants from Latin America, the Caribbean, South and Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Philippines) and Africa.

A number of points emerge from this research tradition:

i. The association between women and paid domestic work is confirmed in the vast majority of these studies on domestic work (Cock 1980 in South Africa, Rollins 1985, Glenn 1986, Parrenas 2001, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001 in the U.S.A., Bakan and Stasiulis 1995 in Canada, Chaney and Castro 1989 in Latin America and the Caribbean, Adams and Dickey 2000 in South and Southeast Asia, Giles 1992 and Phizacklea 1995 in Britain, Constable 1997 in Hong Kong, Cheng 2006 in Taiwan, Chin 1998 in Malaysia, Chell 1997 and Parrenas 2001 in Italy, Iosifides 1997 and Topali 2006 in Greece), with only a few exceptions of countries and regions (Hansen 1989 in Zambia, Kothari 1996 in urban India) where a considerable number of those engaged in paid domestic work are men.

ii. This literature confirms the important role that paid domestic work plays in the work strategies of migrant women. In many instances (including

Greece) the arrival of migrant women contributes to the revival as well as the transformation of paid domestic work which gradually becomes dominated by them. Furthermore, the interconnection between women's migration and paid domestic work leads to the concomitant "feminisation" of domestic labour as a type of employment (Glavanis 1995, Rollins 1985) while at the same time different aspects of domestic work are used as a model to describe the current 'feminisation' of men's immigrant and working experience (long working hours, lack of contracts, insurance and fringe benefits, somatic violence, etc.).

iii. Most importantly, this literature uses paid domestic work as a case for demonstrating women's power relationships and the interconnection of class, race, gender, and ethnicity in a variety of national and transnational contexts and at numerous levels of analysis. At the micro level and in the context of domestic work, female immigrants engage in power arrangements with their employers and adopt strategies of resistance that often question dominant hierarchies. (Cock 1980, Rollins 1985, Glenn 1986, Dill 1988, Hansen 1989, Chin 1998). These strategies, a fundamental aspect of the micro-politics of domestic work, usually assume the subversive and quiet form of a 'hidden transcript' which aims to question, without directly confronting, the existing structural hierarchies of domestic work, state politics and national ideologies.

iv. At the macro level, this literature discusses in particular the hierarchical ramifications of domestic work in the context of flows of migrant women from the peripheries of the post-colonial world system to its centre. Thus it demonstrates the existence of interesting interconnections between the power arrangements of domestic employers and employees and the national, ethnic and religious hierarchies that are constructed in the context of the above migratory flows (that unite the sending with the receiving societies).

v. Much emphasis has been given to the connection between domestic work and globalization. This literature demonstrates the new roots of domestic work in transnational exchanges and networks and analyzes its implications for the restructuring of the global scene of economic dependencies that currently transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. In the 1980s and 1990s, domestic work provided an ideal field for studying ethnic variations of women's submission and exploitation. More recently however, transmigration has become a central axis through which the study of domestic work and mostly immigrant work has been connected to discussions of transnational kinship, economic and political networks and the formation of new group identities.

Despite the fact that paid domestic work has proven to be a valuable entry into the discussion of these and many other issues, there is still a lot more work to be done in the investigation of domestic work itself. One important area is its internal socio-economic structure (for example, the technical and social division of domestic labour) or the social arrangements between employers and employees in relation to culturally specific conceptualisations of work. On a theoretical level, studies of paid domestic work have not yet considered domestic workers' experiences and their cultural construction in specific contexts and particularly in perhaps the most privileged context – that of the household. The usual focus of the researchers was on the structural dimensions of domestic work through the study of power/resistance strategies and on the macro level where transmigrant practices under globalization, and an excessive use of the concept of transmigration attracted the attention of social scientists. The restructuring of domestic space and the household which is due to reliance on paid domestic work as well as the effect of domestic work more generally on gender and kinship relations have been left almost unobserved .

II.

The theoretical assumption that the household is both a cultural construct and a social relational pattern has become an established principle of anthropological analysis (Collier and Yanagisako 1987, 1994, Yanagisako 1997, 2002). This workshop is inspired by ethnographic work that has contributed to this theoretical tradition through discussing the symbolic and relational configurations of domestic and extra-domestic sociality in Greece but also in other parts of Southern Europe. As this ethnographic literature demonstrates, sociality, inside and outside the household, is often premised on a sense of similarity which is assumed as natural. Particularly in rural contexts and in situations characterised by an egalitarian ethos and the extensive segregation of the sexes, social ties become meaningful through an emphatic appeal to shared essences and shared habits.

This cultural emphasis on similarity, which definitely characterizes male extra-domestic sociality (see Brandes 1981, Gilmore 1990, Herzfeld 1986, Loizos 1994, Papataxiatchis 1991, 1999, Vale de Almeida 1996), is pushed to its extreme in the context of domestic life where the naturalistic metaphor of biological connection is employed. This has been particularly

salient in studies of kinship and the family. As it has been demonstrated by a number of ethnographers, conceptualizations of the house and household are core metaphors in the construction of gender identity. Gender on the other hand is a fundamental premise of kinship structures. In this respect, both gender and kinship, as ‘mixed metaphors’, mutually construct a hegemonic ideology of individual and social identity (see Collier 1997, Dubisch 1986, 1993, Galani-Moutafi 1993, Goddard 1987, 1996), what has been coined as the ‘domestic model’ of gender identity (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991).

According to this model, the economically autonomous, corporate, conjugal household, what in Greece is known as *nikokirio*, is the ideal environment to which men and women are expected to bring their distinct, gender specific identities and abilities in order to establish a relation of complementarity. This is regarded as the only solid foundation for making a family. Particularly for women, the conjugal household is the physical, social, emotional and symbolic environment most closely related to the realization of their “destiny” and the ‘completion’ of their social person.

Most importantly, the ‘domestic model’ of gender identity suggests a transformation of gender difference into biologically based (kinship) similarity, a transformation more clearly epitomised by tasks performed by women in the household and for the sake of the household and its members. In this respect the household, as the ‘natural unit’ (Harris 1981) par excellence, is the elementary structure of the nation conceived as a homogeneous community built on shared (biological) substance.

Yet, the rich anthropological literature on gender, kinship and the household in Southern Europe has to a large extent taken for granted the unicultural constitution of households. Because of a long standing ethnographic emphasis on the rural family, the reliance of households on paid domestic service and its effects have not been adequately addressed. And little attention has been given to the ramifications of household structure and life that arise out of current dependencies on culturally ‘external’ factors such as migrant domestic labour.

Further, despite the fact that a number of ethnographers of Greece have applied practice perspectives into the study of the multiplicity of domestic tasks through which the household is internally structured, this has not produced a more dynamic analysis of intra-domestic relations. As an effect, the connection between the household and a “regime of difference” (Papataxiarchis 2006), which in the context of a long standing tradition of (state) formalism makes a sharp distinction between a pure, homogeneous, undifferentiated, essential, formal façade and an informal content relatively open to difference and heterogeneity, is left unnoticed.

In particular, following the lead of a landmark essay (Friedl 1986) that juxtaposes the “appearance” of male authority to the “reality” of female power and attempts in a systematic way to unravel the powerful position that Greek rural women hold in the domestic domain, a number of primarily feminist ethnographers have explored in length the “internal” aspect of the household. They have shown that the interior of the household is symbolically represented by the kitchen and intrinsically connected to a set of household tasks, mostly perceived as “cleaning” (and cooking) and generally involved in the maintenance of the symbolic boundary that separates the household from nature (see Dubisch 1986). These tasks have been treated as most pertinent for the making of female identity and providing an ideal loci of women’s empowerment. As a result, little emphasis has been given to the façade aspect, involving primarily the task of aesthetic ordering. Nor has the contrast between aspects of the household that refer to its everyday functioning and those that pertain to its more formal and ritually significant appearance been exploited analytically.

On the other hand, despite a call for the study of the extra-domestic domains of sociality and the multiplicity of social forms and identities they engender (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991, Cowan 1991), an equally powerful drive to study differences between households and the multiplicity of domestic forms has not been equally successful. This is particularly the case with regard to urban settings and the upper classes but also in relation to generations (Paxson 2004). Perhaps we have overestimated the endurance of the hegemonic model of the household (Kantsa 2006).

The systematic ethnographic study of paid domestic work therefore provides us with a mirror for the study of multiple levels of difference vis-à-vis the household: these include differences within the household in relation to various categories of domestic tasks (‘cleanliness’ versus ‘putting into order’) and differences between households with regard to generation, social standing and class. It also provides an opportunity for a more dynamic approach of the relational dimensions of the household as a contested terrain.

III.

a. The main inspiration for this workshop derives from a research project on “*Gender, Paid Domestic Work and Ethnic Identity: The Cross-Cultural Construction of Households in Greece*”. Our project examines paid domestic work of migrant and non-migrant women workers in urban centres.

It focuses on the ways through which gender in conjunction with ethnic identity are involved in the formation of perceptions of domestic work. It also considers how the new forms of migrant domestic work that emerged in the course of the 1990s contribute to the restructuring of the domestic space of the employers.

More particularly we have pursued a comparative analysis of Filipino, Albanian and Greek women who are employed in the field of domestic work in Athens and secondarily in Patras. Besides placing migrant domestic work in its double context- the socio-cultural background of the workers and the host environment (including the multiple formal-state, media etc. discourses)-, our research has produced a quantitative profile of the technical and the social division of domestic labour, it has sketched the biographical portraits of 'representative' domestic workers from each ethnic category highlighting their migratory experience and their work trajectory and, particularly, it has ethnographically described in depth and detail the content of domestic work arrangements in a relational context that takes into consideration both the socio-cultural background of the workers and the interaction between the domestic workers and their female employers.

Although we are not arguing for a one to one correspondence between ethnic identity and type of domestic employment, there is evidence suggesting a strong and statistically visible tendency of particular ethnic groups to 'specialize' in particular types of domestic work. We have in a way an ethnic division of domestic tasks. Greek women, who were historically involved in live-in arrangements, have eventually turned into part-time ones: the later carry a number of the characteristics of old live-in arrangements. Leave-in domestic work has assumed a new content as it is now performed primarily by Filipino migrant workers. Finally in the course of the 1990s a new form of domestic work emerges, that of part-time, strictly limited to 'cleaning', which is gradually shaped in the context of the work strategies of migrants from Albania and other East European countries.

Among the different aspects of domestic work which are studied in the context of our project we want to distinguish two of them: first, the alternative domestic work strategies and arrangements in relation to the ethno-cultural understandings of work that inform them, and second, the construction of the domestic work relations and the varying transformative effects that they have on the employer's household. These constitute the main themes of the workshop and we hope that they will inspire contributors to reflect upon their own research experiences and extend the scope of the comparative assessment that is attempted here.

b. To start from the first one, our project aims to account for the conditions in the context of which particular ethnic groups interrelate with domestic labour and to explore how migrant and non-migrant domestic workers negotiate their marginal position (Day, Papataxiarchis and Stewart 1999). The terms under which this marginal position is negotiated are produced by interaction with the host society and the state. Yet they are also informed by the cultural dispositions of the domestic workers as these are associated to their particular ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Domestic work is a profession in decline among Greek women. The few, middle aged, Greek domestic workers along with their Greek employers share the same understanding of the conjugal household as the basis of individual (gender) and social identity. Domestic work and the relationships between employees and employers are conceived through the terms *paidema* [torment], *spiti* [house], and *anagki* [need]. Through these terms which bind closely together kinship and work, Greek domestic worker question the authority of the female householder' and set the ground of a contest between the worker and the employer as to who is the principal agent in the household.

Albanian domestic workers interpret work in general through the application of a 'historical consciousness' that juxtaposes the (Greek) capitalist present to an (Albanian) socialist past. *Doulia*, the indigenous concept to describe domestic work, functions as a transformer at multiple levels. In one respect, through part-time work strategies that allow for effort-money maximization and turn domestic work into a sort of profession and career it contributes to the transcendence of the hierarchical aspects of the work situation and sustains visions of upward mobility. In another respect, *doulia* provides the ground for a cultural conversation and eventually a contest between the immigrants and the host population.

The strongly relational aspect of the Filipino strategy is manifested in the conceptualization of work as a relation of "care" towards the employer, a particular relational quality that is built on a special ability of "adjustment" and involves the silent, inchoate and efficient adoption of the 'ways' of the particular household and its mistress (particularly in relation to food habits) as well as the systematic avoidance of verbal expression. In relation to this notion and the domestic practices it informs, Filipino domestic workers are widely depicted as the ideal stereotypical example of live- in work

c. To turn to the second aspect, our project considers the effects that paid domestic work and the restructuring of the division of household labour that it generates have on the gender-specific identity of the female

householder (*nikokira*) and the very concept and constitution of the household as a relational framework. The social relations of paid domestic work are an important factor that structures and restructures the employer's household. Particularly in situations where the domestic worker comes from a different socio-cultural background, the relations of domestic work are subjected to a double, often (explicitly) diverging interpretation. Thus they become the site of (an often implicit) contestation or synthesis between these alternative interpretations the outcome of which defines the direction and the extent of the shaping influence that domestic work exercises on the employers household.

The relationship between Greek domestic workers and their Greek employers represents a contradiction to the basic axiom concerning gender and the household: one household, one woman in charge. Through the concept of the 'employer in need of help' the domestic worker assumes the role of the *ninokira* and becomes her employer's substitute. The worker's discourse is counteracted by the later through a discourse that describes the relation of domestic work as a relation of "apprenticeship": the employer occupies the role of the experienced teacher as she holds not just 'local knowledge' but more generally the skills of maintaining the household. The employer claims an, often nominal or partial, physical presence in the realization of the domestic duties that symbolically demonstrates that she is in control of her household.

Albanian (and more generally) part time domestic work strategies have found extremely fertile ground in the Greek society of the 1990s: they quickly spread thus creating a vibrant domestic work sector in the informal economy and contributed to a transformation of women's domestic identity and role. The part-time domestic worker seems to have co-produced the 'part-time domestic employer'. Part time domestic work arrangements tend to take the form of a clear cut and straight forward division of household tasks between employer and worker, a division perceived by both parties in terms of the contrast between "cleanliness" and "tidying up". Albanian part time work arrangements and the corresponding relations effect an important transformation in the Greek household. They sharpen the divide between "cleanliness" and "order", a divide which is implicit in older household forms, thus producing a two levels household.

To the strongly relational concept of "care" the employers of Filipino women respond by applying the equally strongly relational idiom of kinship. They perceive their employees as 'daughters' and relatives. The 'silent' and 'submissive' domestic worker becomes an integral aspect, an extension of the role of the female householder. Under these conditions the upper middle

class employers can symbolically afford to deliver the totality of household tasks to their employees-“relatives”, thus maintaining a nominal control of the household without having to be practically involved in its running. When, however, the ‘kinship’ practices of the employer cannot match any more the ‘kinship’ expectations of the worker and the latter silently makes a decisive break and leaves without notice, the fundamental differences in the interpretation of the relation explode. The silent departure of the domestic worker constitutes a cognitive paradox that promises a rethinking of the hegemonic model of the household.

IV.

The research questions that will be discussed in the workshop emerge at the intersection of our research experience on the one hand, and some interesting issues that are raised in the literature on domestic work and the household in Southern European societies on the other. They can be placed into the following categories.

i. The extra-domestic context of paid domestic work

We are interested in assessing comparatively the different ways in which the migrant subjects of domestic work are constituted in relation to the extra-domestic environment of sociality and institutional regulation. There are a number of factors – transmigration and the involvement of state structures in the migratory context as well as dominant discourses coming from political parties, the media, immigrant associations, religious authorities and recruitment agencies - that provide among, other things, the context in which workers constitute their subjectivity. In this regard we want to consider the following issues.

How do ethnic difference, in general, and stereotypes, in particular, which are produced by state politics, movements for citizenship rights, recruitment and market agencies, and the mass media, relate to perceptions of domestic ‘others’ that emerge in the context of paid domestic work? To what extent do these upcoming notions of domestic ‘others’ suggest a transformation of dominant discourses on ethnic others? The current European socio-political context is marked by the quest for cultural

similarities leading to the construction of a common European identity. In the context of domestic work do we have evidence of a ‘European’ production of domestic ‘otherness’?

ii. *Constructs of domestic work and the strategies they inform*

In relation to the cultural meaning of paid domestic work and the ways in which this is constructed by different ethnic groups of domestic workers, the following parameters of analysis could be considered. Is it possible to develop a unified and generalized conceptualization of paid domestic work or is this phenomenon culturally differentiated in relation to the societies of origin of the domestic workers? Which are the main symbolic parameters (body, money, domestic space, kinship, religion, etc.) in the conceptualization of paid domestic work by the workers themselves? In what ways are these parameters linked to the construction of gender identities in the context of both the sending and the receiving societies? Is there a ethnoculturally specific division of paid domestic duties? What kinds of duties are performed by different ethnic categories of domestic workers and to what extent is the worker’s conceptualization of domestic work related to his/her duties?

The vast majority of the literature on paid domestic work often presents it as a quite rigid, (even though resisted), asymmetrical female power relationship. How do culturally specific strategies and conceptualizations of work by domestic workers restructure the monolithic power structure of domestic work? To what extent does ethnographic research on the micro-level, focusing on women’s practices, challenge the assumption that the power asymmetry in the domestic employer-worker relation is a given?

iii. *Intercultural work relations and the constitution of the employer’s household*

The presence of domestic workers in the household and their everyday practices transform its content and create new gender performances and models of gender identity. Is the cultural content of the work arrangement a more important factor in the shaping of the household and its transformation than its formal structure (part-time, live-in)? Are these transformations a function of the ‘degree’ of ethno-cultural difference (and similarity) between the domestic employer and the employee? Or alternatively, what kinds of conceptualizations of domestic space emerge through the inter-cultural management of domestic work in everyday life? How are the various

interpretations of domestic space by domestic workers and their employers mutually articulated in the practice of domestic work? To what extent does this articulation vary in relation to the type of paid domestic work arrangement (part-time, live-in)?

On the other hand, the cultural constitution of domestic space is as much a product of the cross-cultural labour relation as it is an over determining factor. What are the effects of the cross-cultural as well as the mono-cultural domestic work relationship on the hegemonic (in the Greek and other Southern-European cases) model of the conjugal household as a community of natural similarity built on gender complementarity? In the case of Greece, to what extent is the transformation of difference into similarity, for which the *nikokirio* stands, undermined by this surplus of ethnic difference that the presence of the migrant domestic worker produces? On the whole, what kinds of transformations of domestic space are affected by the involvement of ‘other’ women in its reproduction?

iv. *Different kinds of paid work and symbolic ‘reworking’/restructurings of the household*

Female paid domestic work is one of a number of practices (including sex work and entrepreneurial work) that share the following characteristics. They are undertaken by women in exchange for a monetary payment. Their performance involves the domestic space, either directly, as its locus, or indirectly, as a privileged point of reference, and, in effect, they are often interpreted, particularly but not exclusively from the employer’s point of view, in terms of personalistic/kinship idioms. However, as the case of Albanian part-time strategies of domestic work suggest, and as research on sex work has also shown (Day 2007), the connection of these practices to the household is often rendered problematic. The female agents of these practices re-interpret them in dualistic terms and juxtapose these work practices, which are symbolically connected to money, alienability, transient relations etc., to a realm belonging to household and kinship proper, a realm from which a more authentic sense of the self derives.

To what extent do the female workers’ understanding of domestic practices, as these occur in their own household, match their conceptualization of paid domestic work offered to another household? What effects do these symbolic restructurings of work have on the household itself?

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