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Review of Pothiti Hantzaroula's Σμιλεύοντας την υποταγή: Οι έμμισθες οικιακές εργάτριες στην Ελλάδα το πρώτο μισό του 20ού αιώνα [Carving subordination: domestic workers in Greece in the first half of the 20th century]

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Pothiti Hantzaroula

Σμμεύοντας την υποταγή: Οι έμμισθες οικιακές εργάτριες στην Ελλάδα το πρώτο μισό του 20ού αιώνα

[Carving subordination: domestic workers in Greece in the first half of the 20th century]

Athens: Papazisis, 2012. 656 pp.

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This book by Pothiti Hantzaroula represents an important contribution to the analysis of the formation of workers' subjectivities. It deals with the lived experience of Greek women who worked as domestic servants during the interwar period and after the second world war. The aim of the book is to utilise women's oral histories in order to highlight the formation of subjectivities of servitude. Moreover, it represents a conscious effort to bring forward the "voices" of oppressed and exploited people. The domestic servants of the aforementioned period formed an "occupational" category who, although they spent their life in the service of family and employers, their own place in the history of the working class has been negated. This paradox is resolved by the author in two ways. Firstly, by briefly, but rather effectively, highlighting the theoretical pitfalls of orthodox Marxist class analysis and, secondly, by tracing a three-stage process whereby skills of servitude were learned and internalised; from gender relations within the family (where the girls were raised) to work (where the girls were

used as cheap labour) and back to the formation of their own family, where they spent the remainder of their life in the service of their own husbands and children.

The study is organised in four parts in which the author puts forward her argument. The first part provides a concise – and much needed – review of the major contributions in historical, sociological and anthropological literature concerning the issue of domestic work. A substantial part of the review refers to modern studies of domestic work in the context of migration and focuses on the relationship between workers and employers. After the literature review, there is a theoretical approach of "shame" that prepares the reader for the much more detailed analysis to come on the stigmatisation of domestic work. The second part of the book places domestic service in the context of class antagonism. It, firstly, presents the structural characteristics of the Greek labour market in the period from 1907 to 1928 and, after that, the various legal forms through which domestic work was approached from 1880 to 2010. In this section, the author rightly suggests that paid domestic work has been – in a relatively timeless fashion – regarded as a nonlabour activity, thus undermining the rights of the workers and adding to their vulnerability. The rest of the second part deals with the dominant discourse of the middle class, which is the basis for the stigmatisation of domestic work. Similarly, particular emphasis is given to the crucial role that domestic service played in the development of the middle-class household from the end of the nineteenth century to the interwar period.

The third part of the book presents the research findings. The research focuses on

three different groups of domestic workers with rather different backgrounds, which nonetheless tend to converge when it comes to the impact of servitude on the lives of the subjects. The first group refers to internal migration from the island of Folegandros. In this case women were migrating to urban centres where they would follow a “career” in domestic work and use their income as a means to generate a dowry, which was essential for their marriage later on. As soon as they would gather the necessary amount of money or items (furniture etc), they would return to Folegandros, where they would be married after an arrangement was made by their parents. The second group were also young girls from rural areas, but in this case they originated from the mainland. This particular group is crucially important for the analysis of domestic work, since it introduced the institution of the “adopted daughter” (*psychokori*), a rather popular means of ensuring low-paid domestic labour for middle-class households. The employment relationship in the “adopted daughter” case was based on dependency, since the girls were to be informally adopted for an often unclear period until they would earn an equally unclear amount of money for a dowry. Hence, the time span of their “adoption” was indefinite and the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour were particularly blurred. This blurring of boundaries is presented as a conscious strategy on the part of the employers to ensure a long and ‘prosperous’ relationship for them. The third group of domestic workers consisted mainly children from the refugee population that came to Greece from Asia Minor after the Greek–Turkish war in 1922. In this case, child labour was not a life stage before marriage but it was a relatively short-term, direct contribution to family income. As mentioned earlier, apart from the differences between the groups, there are common threads that run through the life and work experienc-

es of these workers, which are analysed in the last two chapters of the third part of the book and refer to the employment relationship and the mechanisms of subordination used by employers. Lastly, the fourth part of the book deals with the exit from domestic service and the marriage and dowry practices of the women’s families; practices that paved the way for the continuing subordination of the subjects, only this time in a familial context.

Hantzaroula’s research represents an important contribution to the analysis of domestic work as part of the working-class life cycle.¹ It looks at work not only in the context of its economic function but, more importantly, as an integral part of the formation of subjectivities of servitude. The values, beliefs and attitudes of these women were shaped by the continuing subjugation to the will (and whims) of parents, employers and husbands, thus forming a “habitus of servitude”. In these three cases of workers studied by the author, family and work represented two respective fields which were dominated by the complete and utter lack of choice and self-determination. The entering into domestic work was decided by working-class parents on the basis of their economic constraints. The deep-seated belief in women’s inferiority rendered the young girls’ say on the matter unimaginable. The conditions of work and the exploitation and abuse (physical, sexual and psychological) were the result of both gender stereotypes and the undisputed power of the employer. The movement back into the family through marriage signified the continuing subordination to the will of the husband and to the economic survival of the family unit. Looking at the concept and practices of subordination as the thread that runs through the biography of working-class women in their respective life stages is the main and crucial contribution of the book to the analysis of domestic service as part of the life cycle.

Similarly, an important contribution is the methodological approach of the book. The focus on oral history is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it brings forward the process through which subordination was experienced and the ways in which it came to be the organising principle around the lives of many women during the interwar period. On the other hand, the “voices” of the workers reveal the latter’s rightful place in the history of the working class. Through the biographical records provided in the study, exploitation and, especially, class antagonisms are treated not as theoretical constructs of Marxist literature but as a lived experience that in many ways transcends the “class in itself/class for itself” divide. It is in this spirit that the book represents a conscious effort on the behalf of the writer to recover the “voices” thrown in the “dustbin of history”² by both the ruling classes and working-class historiography.

All in all, this study is an excellent insight into the workings of subordination and the subjectivities it created for Greek domestic servants in the first half of the twentieth century; women whose emotional bonds with parents and employers were the ideal basis for their continuing exploitation. Their long-lasting subordination engendered subjectivities centred around the idea of provision of care for others. The exercise of power over these women had often detrimental effects throughout their lives as daughters, servants or wives. However, such a statement should not raise questions about the victimisation of the subjects. After all, the book does not try to present the workers only as victims, or heroines for that matter, but it focuses on the biographical accounts of women in order to highlight their perceptions and the interrelation between work and family in the analysis of women’s history. As Davidoff points out, “the heroines must be seen in context. Otherwise there is a danger that they will

be frozen forever in the amber of a new feminist hagiology rather than taking their rightful place in the mainstream of human history.”³

NOTES

- 1 See Leonore Davidoff, “Domestic service and the working-class life-cycle”, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 26 (1973): 10–12; Edward Higgs, *Domestic Servants and Households in Rochdale 1851–1871*, New York: Garland, 1986; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- 2 Greil Marcus, *The Dustbin of History*, Boston: Harvard UP, 1995.
- 3 Leonore Davidoff, “Mastered for life: servant and wife in Victorian and Edwardian England”, *Journal of Economic and Social History* 7 (1974): 406–428, here 422.