

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 7 (2010)

Networking and Spatial Allocation around the Mediterranean, Seventeenth-Nineteenth Centuries



Leda Papastefanaki, Εργασία, τεχνολογία και φύλο στην ελληνική βιομηχανία. Η κλωστοϋφαντουργία του Πειραιά, 1870-1940

Faidra Papaneloroulou

doi: [10.12681/hr.269](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.269)

To cite this article:

Papaneloroulou, F. (2011). Leda Papastefanaki, Εργασία, τεχνολογία και φύλο στην ελληνική βιομηχανία. Η κλωστοϋφαντουργία του Πειραιά, 1870-1940. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 7, 353-355.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.269>

Leda Papastefanaki,
ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ, ΤΕΧΝΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΦΥΛΟ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΒΙΟΜΗΧΑΝΙΑ.
Η ΚΛΩΣΤΟΨΦΑΝΤΟΥΡΓΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΠΕΙΡΑΙΑ, 1870-1940
[Labour, technology and gender in Greek industry:
the textile industry of Piraeus, 1870-1940],
Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2009,
497 pages (includes index).

This book is concerned with the formation and management of the labour force of the Retsinas textile mill in Piraeus. The author's thorough and historiographically informed study, based on rich archival material, brings to the fore invisible aspects of the history of industrial labour, especially in connection to the gendered division of labour in the factory. The book makes an important contribution not only to social, labour, industrial and business history but also to other closely related fields, such as the history of technology and science. Presented at the Graduate Seminar of the Department of Philosophy and History of Science at the University of Athens, Papastefanaki's book was discussed within the context of the historiography of science and technology. The discussants pointed out connections between Papastefanaki's story and the history of engineering, the history of the invisible technical labour of male and female workers, and the history of the display of a rhetorical discourse on industrial hygiene.

The Retsinas textile mill was founded in 1872 by the brothers Theodoros, Alexandros and Dimitrios Retsinas and was supported by strong family ties with bankers and businessmen, established through specific marital strategies. At the same time, the Retsinas family kept close relations with the political leadership of Greece. Theodoros Retsinas was actually elected mayor of Piraeus and later MP of the region of Attica. In contrast to the relatively smooth operation of the Retsinas mill until the end of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century was characterised by successive cycles of economic downturn, related to a general crisis in the textile industry but also to specific problems of the Retsinas mill, including lack of cash, the absence of effective technical administration and obsolete equipment. In 1925 Retsinas became a limited company, with its main shareholders being family members. Problems of financing the company continued to persist. Despite efforts to renew its equipment and construct new buildings, the production of the factory was

not stable and depended mostly on State orders. More than a century after its foundation, in 1981 Retsinas, one of the longest-lived industrial firms in Greece, was shut down permanently.

In the 1870s Retsinas' labour force amounted to around 180 people, a number that was raised to around 2000 within a few decades and remained stable until World War II. However, as Papastefanaki informs us, a vast number of workers was employed casually. The industry benefited from Piraeus' large pool of workers, while the employment of entire families was common practice: this was beneficial for the factory because salaries were suppressed and the cost of training was avoided. It was also accepted by the families, because they could count on a relatively stable income.

Almost 70% of Retsinas' workforce was comprised of women, and a significant number of workers were children. It was often the case that textile machinery, but also production processes, were based on certain biological characteristics of women and children, such as their small size, flexibility and agility. One of the important contributions of the book is the solid evidence provided concerning the professional mobility of women in the textile industry. According to Marxist historians, women did not become fully proletarianized because they tended to leave the factory after marriage. However, following the works of Marxist feminists, Papastefanaki convincingly argues against the belief that occupational mobility was one of the main characteristics of women's work that was brought to an end when they assumed their reproductive role. The author provides ample evidence that a significant number of women returned to the factory when liberated from pressing family duties. Moreover, she brings to the fore some of the reasons that led to occupational mobility, such as the quest for better wages or even the frequent dismissals that were often part of the employers' strategy for keeping their workforce flexible.

Papastefanaki takes pains to examine the gendered division of labour that took place at the Retsinas factory. It is, perhaps, not surprising that men were placed in higher-skilled and better-paid jobs, and women in non-specialised and lower-paid jobs. Male biological characteristics, such as strength, were acknowledged and rewarded, whereas such female physical characteristics as speed, agility and dexterity were not. According to the author, women's lower wages were not only the result of rational choices taken by the administration, but also of the social perceptions of the nature

of labour. The inequality between men's and women's wages was based on the belief, held also among the left-wing syndicates that encouraged women's participation in their collective organizations, that women's salaries were mere complements to those of men. The study of the gendered division of work leads to the conclusion that the definition of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour cannot be absolute.

Papastefanaki holds a critical stance towards technological determinism, especially on issues that concern the impact of automation on unskilled labour. The thorough study of the labour structures in the Retsinas mill suggests that skilled and unskilled labour did not depend solely on the degree of automation of the machinery used. On the contrary, it is something under constant negotiation under the influence of political and other social forces. Whatever the nature of labour might be, it was not defined only by the execution of specific tasks but also through a system of social relations created and sustained within the factory. As Papastefanaki implies, technology itself cannot be defined by the machinery alone, because it relies on the development of skills and technical knowledge of the engineers who design, the technicians who maintain and the workers who operate the machinery.

Finally, an important part of the book deals with the issue of factory discipline. Male and female workers at the Retsinas mill had to adjust to certain production rates and follow the strict rules of the administration. They were even deprived of basic needs such as access to clean water after their shift. Power is presented in a Foucauldian way, as a network of micro-social relations that could be found throughout the entire social structure of the factory and which, at the same time, created inherent possibilities for resistance, for example the resistance to the imposition of mandatory meals at the factory's canteen in 1932. In this case conflict emerged not because of the price or the bad quality of the food provided, but because it was conceived as an additional means to discipline the workforce.

Although Leda Papastefanaki's reading of the industrial power relations within and across social classes is made through the lens of the gendered division of labour, the book makes a fine contribution to several historiographical areas and is a valuable source for interdisciplinary studies.

