Introduction

Political Fictions and Real Oppressions

Domestic work is vital and sustaining, and it is also demeaned and disregarded. Feminists have tended to regard domestic work as the great leveller, a common burden imposed on women by patriarchy and lazy husbands. There has been remarkably little problematizing of paid domestic labour with respect to such an analysis, yet its use enables (predominantly) middle-class women and men to avoid the conflicts of interest inherent in the gendered division of labour and the challenges, both personal and political, that this poses to the ‘nuclear family’. Paid domestic work in private households is disproportionately performed by racialised groups. To omit paid domestic labour, then, is to ignore the divisions of race and class in reproductive work. Paid domestic labour poses real challenges on both a philosophical and a practical level to feminism and political theory, as well as to community groups and women’s organisations.

This book offers a contribution to theory that is based on empirical research into the living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in five European cities – Athens, Barcelona, Bologna, Berlin and Paris – in 1995 and 1996. It also draws extensively on my experiences as a member of Kalayaan, a UK-based group campaigning for the rights of migrant domestic workers, and on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through its Transnational Communities Programme. At an empirical level it begins to map the employment of migrant women in domestic work with a particular focus on Europe. It describes their recruitment, work, salaries, hours, living arrangements and employment relations, and I use this empirical information to test the hypothesis that workers’ immigration status (relation to the state) and whether or not they ‘live in’ with their employer (relation to employer)
are key variables in determining their living and working conditions. As a theoretical level I necessarily address the inadequacy of conceptual tools designed to describe more ‘traditional’ forms of employment (that is, those traditionally of concern to white male sociologists) or to describe the experience of ‘women’ within the domestic sphere (that is, the experience of white middle-class women). Referring to the literature on women’s unpaid work in the home and on paid domestic work, I argue that the paid domestic worker, even when she does the same tasks as the wife/daughter/mother, is differently constructed. The domestic worker, whether ‘cleaner’, ‘nanny’ or ‘servant’, is fulfilling a role, and crucial to that role is her reproduction of the female employer’s status (middle-class, non-labourer, clean) in contrast to herself (worker, degraded, dirty). I assert, with particular reference to the caring function of domestic labour, that it is the worker’s ‘personhood’, rather than her labour power, which the employer is attempting to buy, and that the worker is thereby cast as unequal in the exchange. This is important to our understanding of the ‘slavery’ of domestic work, and helps explain why domestic work is so often undertaken by racialised groups, whether citizens of the state within which they are working or migrant workers. For racist stereotypes and the reproduction of such stereotypes, as well as labour cost and supply, play a crucial role in determining demand. Racist stereotypes intersect with issues of citizenship, and result in a racist hierarchy which uses skin colour, religion, and nationality to construct some women as being more suitable for domestic work than others. The position of domestic workers in relation to the formal sense of citizenship (what passport a person holds) illuminates the broader debates on citizenship and demonstrates that the relationship of domestic workers to the state encourages and reinforces the racialisation of domestic work.

While the applying of employment contracts to domestic workers in private households and the professionalisation of domestic work may seem to offer some way forward and to counter some of the abuses associated with all these factors (such as the selling of personhood, and overt racist discrimination) there are serious difficulties in applying employment contracts to the private domain, both theoretically and in workers’ real experiences. An analysis of the experiences of migrant domestic workers, then, demonstrates the inadequacy of many of the conceptual tools developed by liberal political theory, including notions of contract and citizenship. In particular I wish to draw attention to two political fictions that are revealed as problematic: that of property in the person and the public/private divide. One must tread carefully when dealing with these and other political fictions: on the one hand they are constructed, not real; but, on the other, they order social relations, thereby forming

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Property in the person

[Ev]ery man has a property in his own person. This no one has a right to lay claim to but himself. That the body of an individual, with the mind which animates and directs it, and to which it is a proper object, is that of which he has the property. (Locke 1993: 274)

This idea that there is a right to one’s own body, and labour has protected this right, is a profound tension in the debate, and an ‘obviousness’. Locke’s view does not stand in the light of the contestation of the state or type of property (co-operative)

For men being able to own another man, all the sen... order and about... as they are, made to do so.

(Locke 1993: 26)

So a man does not own another man, because he is the very person of another, as much as the idea of the body of the person and the idea of the body as property... male violence against women... concept of property. There is an extension between body as property and the body as person. The ideal worker is selling, not her personhood. I wish to argue for care, which stands at the breaking point. But...
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the basis for real oppressions. ‘Race’, for example, is not a real category, but this does not mean that people do not experience racist violence and oppression. To understand a political fiction one must both work with it and move beyond it.

Property in the person

(E)very man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.

(Locke 1993: 274)

This idea that there is an intimate relationship between the body, property and labour has proved crucial for Western political philosophy. But there is a profound tension in the idea of property in the person, despite its ‘obviousness’. Locke signalled this in his acknowledgement that a man does not stand in the same relation to his body as he does to any other type of property (contra Pateman 1988: 56) because the body is sacred:

For men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise maker, all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order and about his business, they are his property whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another’s pleasure.

(Locke 1993: 264)

So a man does not have the right to kill himself, or put himself into slavery, because he is the work of God. Put another way, there is a contradiction between the idea of the body as an integral part of personhood and the idea of the body as property.

This has particular resonance for women: at the time of Locke’s writing of the Second Treatise of Civil Government, for example, married women in England were chattels, the property of their husbands. Women’s continuing demands that their rights over their own bodies be recognised, particularly around questions of control over physical reproduction and male violence against women, may be seen as a struggle to apply the concept of property in the person equally to women and to men. But the tension between body as personhood and body as property has not been explored fully. The migrant domestic worker slips into the analytical space between body as personhood and body as property. For the domestic worker is selling, not her ‘labour power’ (the property in the person), but her personhood. I illustrate this with particular reference to the payment for care, which strains the political fiction of property in the person to breaking point. But it is property and its disposition by contract that have
formed the foundation of civil rights for Western political theorists from Locke onwards.

**Public and private**

It is not new to point out that the public and private are inextricably connected. As Pateman put it: ‘the dichotomy between the public and the private is ... ultimately, what the feminist movement is about’ (Pateman 1983, cited Okin 1992: 315). But despite this there continues to be an assumption, both in sociological theory and in common sense, that there is in reality a sharp divide between the regulation of the public and the private. The private/public polarisation implies and relates to other dualisms. Thus:

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It must be remembered that this division is a fiction. Indeed, the experiences and employment relations of migrant domestic workers suggest that the commonly accepted transition from traditional to modern, from unfree labour to free labour, is incomplete. Migrant domestic workers are, I will argue, defined in a very real sense by their social relations, characterised by personal dependency on the employer often reinforced by immigration legislation. Like individuals in Marx’s pre-capitalist world ‘their subjectivities are inseparable from their social position’ (Sayer 1991: 18). But the relations of the private are more than a blip, a feudal remnant, for the work of the private has a crucial relation to capitalist production. It ‘produces’ people who make choices about the commodities produced in the public, and the home is an important locus of consumption.

That the public and the private are not real does not mean that one cannot be caught in the gap between them. Indeed, it is the very imagining of them as two separate spheres that creates the gap. The domestic worker, like the prostitute, occupies the imaginary space between the two worlds, symbolically ordered and imagined in very different ways. Female
employers on the other hand, have their movement between the public and private facilitated by the domestic worker: she is their bridge between the domains. The employment of the paid domestic worker is one of the means by which some women are able to adopt the masculinised employment patterns that now characterise the work histories of so many European female workers, and migrant domestic workers are increasingly taking on the privatised responsibilities of the welfare state. It is by slipping between the two imagined domains of the public and the private that the employer consolidates much of her power: the worker may be treated as ‘part of the family’ (governed by customary relations) when it is a matter of hours and flexibility, and as a worker (governed by civic relations) if she becomes too sick to work.

The private/public divide has been recognised as highly gendered, with women predominantly responsible for the private and consequently often unable to participate fully in the public. Feminism has done much to challenge the divide, and authors such as Pateman have shown how these dualisms reflect, support and reinforce patriarchal power. When one considers the case of domestic workers, however, one must deal with the fact that women can move into the public (for there is nothing fixed about these categories) if they make alternative arrangements covering the loss of their reproductive labour. In tying women to the private and men to the public many feminists have assumed a homogeneity of oppression, and ignored the other kinds of power – not just patriarchal, but class, racialised, national, etcetera – reproduced by such dualisms. For the case of migrant domestic workers it is particularly useful to examine the concept of citizenship, tightly tied to participation in the public, with an emphasis on the formal exclusive meaning in terms of what passport one holds and where one can work.

Women and power

We must first acknowledge differences between women in order to make connections. This is particularly important given the tendency among white middle-class feminists to universalise their experiences, effectively erasing the experiences of most women. bell hooks’s observation is as applicable to Europe as to the USA:

In America, white racist ideology has always allowed white women to assume that the word woman is synonymous with white woman, for women of other races are always perceived as Others, as de-humanised beings who do not fall under the heading Woman. (hooks 1982:138)
This erasure has meant exclusion and privilege rather than unity, but it has also led to serious defects in the analysis of women’s oppression and struggles – so that the cultural, economic and political struggle around reproductive labour, which surely contains the seeds of profound, revolutionary and anti-racist feminist change, is resolved for some middle-class women by employing a domestic worker. It is important, then, to acknowledge differences between women. Our theory must allow that some women hold power (and exercise it) over other women (and men). These differences are extremely complex (though immigration and citizenship legislation do a lot to simplify them!).

Orlando Patterson (1983), following Marx, distinguishes between the pre-modern, personalistic idiom of power, and the materialistic idiom of power under capitalism. In the personalistic idiom, power is openly exercised, its unequal distribution and created personal dependencies acknowledged, but an attempt is made to humanise power relations through social strategies such as gifts and fictive kin. In the materialistic idiom, relations of dependence are concealed, the power relationship is depicted as power over commodities rather than power over persons. The employer of the migrant domestic worker exercises both forms of power: the materialistic because of the massive discrepancy in access to all kinds of material resources between the receiving state and the countries of origin of migrants; the personalistic because the worker is located in the employer’s home – and often dependent on her not just for her salary but for her food, water, accommodation and access to the basic amenities of life. The employer uses both these idioms of power, and both idioms are given to employers and reinforced by the state. The materialistic idiom is an expression of global capitalism, of the global exploitation of the poor by the rich; it can reinforce the personalistic power through immigration legislation criminalising migrants who work, or making them dependent on their employer for their immigration status.

In unravelling the complexities of the relations between female workers and employers, one must also acknowledge differences in workers’ experiences. While some endure slave-like conditions, rape and beatings, others get on well with their employers and have no complaints about wages, work or treatment. I have attempted to analyse some reasons for these different experiences, but one also has to allow for the different contexts in which domestic workers are employed, and in particular for dominant attitudes towards women and towards ‘foreigners’. One must also allow for the different psychobiographies of workers. This was a source of much discussion among workers themselves: to what extent could they improve their situation by being, not just politically organised, but more assertive personally. ‘But it’s still very important for migrant...
workers or domestic workers to really assert themselves to their women employers.... It’s still very important that change should come from us as migrants’ (Debbie Valencia, Kasapi organiser, speaking at seminar for migrant domestic workers, Brussels, 5 June 1996).

This research is ‘messy’ in the same way that work on prostitution is – there are contradictions and tensions in individual experiences as well as theory. Domestic workers are as influenced as anybody else by prevailing discourses on the public and private, domestic work, immigration. While some feel their work is honourable, many more feel degraded and ashamed. O’Connell Davidson has cited E. P. Thompson’s appreciation of the tensions within ‘social consciousness’ that give rise to:

experience – a category which, however imperfect it may be, is indispensable to the historian, since it comprises the mental and emotional response, whether of an individual or of a group, to many inter-related events or to many repetitions of the same kind of event... experience is valid and effective but within determined limits: the farmer ‘knows’ his seasons, the sailor ‘knows’ his seas, but both may remain mystified about kingship and cosmology.


The contradictions around domestic work, paid and unpaid, are expressed in the ‘social consciousness’ within which domestic workers and their employers struggle and negotiate. The polarities and pairings of private and public, of madonna and whore, are not isolated or autonomous. Each contains the other within it, and each refers to and implies other dualisms.

So difference does not necessarily mark separation. Throughout this work I have emphasised the role of female employers in exploiting and oppressing ‘their’ domestic worker; how the female employer raises her own status by degrading her domestic worker. But it should always be borne in mind that ultimately it is men and capitalism that benefit. It is easy to scoff at the employer who complains in her list ‘What she does, what he does’:

Me: Hire and manage cleaner
Him: Grumbles when shirts not ironed
Me: Hire and manage nanny
Him: Tells me to tell the nanny what not to do.

(‘The things men do (and don’t)’ The Independent 13 May 1998: 16)

But, as an Ethiopian worker in Athens put it, ‘men do not share household tasks. They will not accept that. Ethiopian and Greek men are the same. If the Greeks can afford they will hire, otherwise the woman will do it.’ We need to acknowledge and recognise constructed ‘difference’ as
binding as well as separating us. The realities of power are complex. We need to recognise difference in order to heal fractures between us and in order to know where to insert our crowbars!

Note

1 This research was funded by the Equal Opportunities Unit of DGV, the European Commission's Social Affairs Unit, and by the University of Leicester.
In general theorists have taken two approaches to domestic work. The first focuses on women’s unpaid work in the home, the second on paid domestic labour. The former received attention from the turn of the century, but it was only in the 1970s that domestic labour became a key feminist issue. The relationship of women’s unpaid work to production and to capitalism was the subject of much debate, with particular emphasis on ‘wages for housework’ and women as an economic class.¹ Interest in unpaid domestic labour has flagged somewhat in academic circles, although in the press the gendered division of labour continues to provoke comment and the importance of domestic work to the economy is now receiving some attention from European governments.

Writing on paid domestic work is voluminous but fragmented. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists and journalists have all written about paid domestic work, as have domestic workers themselves.² These autobiographical accounts are both historical and contemporary. One of the most interesting of the historical sources is the diaries of Hannah Cullwick (1833–1909) (ed. Stanley 1984), who began working as a lower servant when she was eight years old and worked as a maid of all work for much of her life. She recorded her daily activities for Arthur Munby, a middle-class man with whom she had a relationship for many years and whom she married in 1873. The fact that they were written not for herself but for Munby, a man who was undoubtedly titillated by degradation and servitude, arguably makes them a less reliable source for descriptions of the daily life of a Victorian domestic worker, but they are extremely revelatory of the expression of social and in particular gender and class relations through the institution of domestic service.

Autobiographical and biographical accounts of domestic workers –
those that are easiest to locate, at least – are notably from Europe and the USA. Indeed, most historical explorations of domestic work have focused on the USA and western Europe, although there has been some work on Latin America, Asia and Africa. Historical work on the USA, in particular, is often concerned with issues of race, ethnicity and immigration. Palmer's *Domesticity and Dirt* (1989), for example, on the relationship between employers and domestic workers in the period 1920–45, examines women's complicity in maintaining the gendered construction of housework, their different experiences of domestic work, and the meanings associated with housework depending on their 'race'. Glenn (1988; 1992) challenges what she calls the 'additive model of race and gender oppression' through an examination of the racial divisions of reproductive labour which highlights both hierarchy and interdependence among women. She demonstrates a continuum between domestic service in private households in late nineteenth-century USA and contemporary domestic work in public settings, showing how in both cases 'black women do heavy, dirty, "back-room" chores' (Glenn 1992: 20). Historical interest in these questions has continued to inform analyses of domestic labour, in both the USA and Canada, but constitutes a serious gap in the European literature.

The relationship between migration and domestic work has also been explored in the USA and Canada, and has received some attention from Asian writers, who have tended to focus on the situation of domestic workers as female migrants – unsurprisingly, since the area is such an important source for migrant domestic workers both within Asia and to Europe and North America. Paid domestic work in African countries seems to have been examined least. The exception is South Africa, where the interlacing of racism, sexism and pass laws under Apartheid has been explored by Cock in a well-known study of South African domestic workers which demonstrates the need for more international exchange on the subject. It draws many comparisons between the situation of domestic workers under Apartheid and Victorian domestic workers in the United Kingdom, but is not at all informed about the living and working conditions of contemporary migrant domestic workers – which, because of their racialised experiences and the role of immigration laws and lack of citizenship rights, offer far more scope for comparison. Immigration policies in such varied cases as Canada, Greece, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, the Gulf States and the UK (Bakan and Stasinulis 1995; Anderson 1997a) have reinforced the dependence of migrant domestic workers on their employer through employment and settlement restrictions, with deportation as the final control, and this is very similar to the system under which domestic workers in Apartheid South Africa worked, subject to particular violence.

In Europe the relationship between migration, 'race' and domestic work continues, and is sometimes confirmed by a gender and racial divide. Women in Europe, and black and migrant women in particular, improve their situation through the roles that they play – instead of the many white women who are immigrant women themselves (European Forum for Women's Studies).

Although domestic work remains an important area of study, there is little about the living and working conditions of migrant women in Europe. However, the situation of domestic labour seems to be changing, as a large proportion of domestic workers are migrants.

What is domestic work?

Attempts to describe and define domestic work are problematic: it is comprised of many different tasks performed in the home – for example, can it include paying the telephone bills, or purchasing, putting up wallpaper, or taking the children off to school? Domestic work is also involved with the cleaning and ironing – which is characteristic of the tasks of women in the household. Domestic work, perhaps, may all be done by women, and is inextricably linked to domestic work.
worked, subject to pass laws and one-year renewable contracts.

In Europe the relationship between paid domestic work, immigration status, ‘race’ and ethnicity has received relatively little attention. Yet domestic work constitutes a significant area of employment for migrant women in Europe, where their often extremely harsh living and working conditions are compounded by an ‘illegal’ immigration status. This is confirmed by a general report on the situation of black and migrant women in the European Community:

black and migrant women’s organisations point out that as white women improve their situation through campaigning and social change, some of the roles that they are leaving behind are being filled by black and migrant women – instead of being taken up by publicly funded services. As a result, many white women across a range of EC member states, have black and immigrant women as nannies, maid servants, cleaners and domestics.

(European Forum of Left Feminists 1993, Summary: iii)

Although domestic work in private households is acknowledged as an important area of employment for migrant women, very little is known about the living and working conditions of migrants in this sector, and what studies have been done are localised and not comparative.

With some notable exceptions (Rollins, Glenn, Palmer, Davidoff), the literatures on women’s unpaid work in the home and on paid domestic labour are largely uninformed by each other. By drawing on both, and applying them to the experiences of migrant domestic workers in the Europe of the 1990s, I hope to give some insight into why paid domestic labour seems to be on the increase in Europe and why it is that such a large proportion of the workers belong to racialised groups.

What is domestic work?

Attempts to describe what domestic work actually is have been very problematic: it is very difficult to describe what domestic work is in terms of tasks performed. As Glazer-Malbin (1976) pointed out, ‘shopping’, for example, can include such various tasks as drawing up the list, purchasing, putting things away and throwing out old food. Shopping can also involve childminding (taking the baby along with you, dropping the children off at school on the way) or taking the dog for a walk, for it is characteristic of domestic work that it often involves performing several tasks simultaneously – caring for a child, washing up and cooking lunch may all be done at the same time. Rather than a series of tasks, then, domestic work is better perceived as a series of processes, of tasks inextricably linked, often operating at the same time (Schwartz 1983).
Doing the Dirty Work?

The notion of 'production of human beings themselves' is broader than simply the production of labour power, and is a more accurate description of household work. After all, not all household members can exchange labour power: children may grow up to be unemployed, the elderly are no longer working. While some domestic work may be necessary to survive, much of that basic survival work (the manufacture of clothes, the growing of food) is now done outside of the home in many states, particularly those receiving international migrants. The confinement of tasks to those merely necessary for survival would enable most productive workers to service themselves. But reproductive work is not confined to the maintenance of physical bodies: people are social, cultural and ideological beings, not just units of labour. The washing of clothes is not necessary for survival, but most human beings find wearing unwashed clothes for a long time unpleasant - although precisely how often one changes one's clothes is very much culturally determined. How a house is ordered, what food is cooked, how children are brought up and the elderly cared for are in part a personal expression of the household, and particularly of the (female) household manager. Reproductive work - mental, physical and emotional labour - creates not simply labour units, but people. 'Domestic work is 'reproductive work', necessary for social reproduction, defined by Brenner and Laslett as including:

- how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialisation of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the social organisation of sexuality. Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of work - mental, manual, and emotional - aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation.

(Brenner and Laslett 1989: 382-3)

It is important to emphasise that social reproduction is not confined to the family. It refers also to the perpetuation of modes of production and social reproduction with their associated relations such as those of class, 'race', gender and generation. Education and the media, for example, are clearly socially reproductive institutions. Production and social reproduction in this broad sense are bound up with one another. It is not just that reproduction is a necessary prerequisite to production, but that much of what is produced has labour added and is used/consumed in the home. As Delphine and Leonard (1992) point out, in the First World, at least, the objective of production is no longer just survival; it is consumption.

In a recent television news report on refugees the reporter explained that 'Living in crowded conditions these women know that hygiene is
vital, over shots of women washing clothes in a river. The scene changed
to a woman sweeping the space outside her tent, where she had placed a
rug and two chairs. While the reporter went on to say how the camp's
inhabitants were struggling to maintain some dignity in their lives, I was
struck by the sophisticated grasp of the functions of domestic labour
implicit in these words: domestic work is necessary work in that without
it humanity would not continue. We need to accommodate the raising of
children, the distribution and preparation of food, basic cleanliness and
hygiene in order to survive individually and as a species (which is not to
say that domestic work cannot be organised collectively), hence the
clothes washing in the river. But the ordering of our space is also
distinctively human – without domestic work we would, literally, be
living 'like animals'. Apparently paradoxically, given the low status of
domestic work, the woman's sweeping of the ground was presented by
the reporter as giving her and her family some human dignity. Whether
it would have been so presented if the sweeping had been done by a man,
however, is another matter. This aspect of domestic work, the
maintaining of order (in our space, between genders) is not crucial for
survival. Particularly for the middle classes of the industrialised world, it
is bound up with the reproduction of lifestyle and, crucially, of status.
Nobody has to have stripped pine floorboards, handwash-only silk shirts,
ornaments that gather dust. All these things create domestic work, but
they also affirm the status of the household, its class, its access to
resources of finance and personnel, and the adequacy of its manager,
who is almost invariably a woman. These two functions cannot be
disentangled.
To take an example of clothes washing, in some circumstances washing
clothes is necessary for survival, but even when it is not so, to people
across cultures would agree that stinking clothes can constitute an
offence to human dignity – and then, such matters as exactly how often
they are washed, and whether they are ironed, rapidly become issues of
status.

Domestic work as social reproduction is profoundly rooted in community. Through the doing of domestic work we literally reproduce our communities and our place within them. In the doing of domestic work, particularly in matters involving the care of children and the elderly, we forge our communities. The organisation of our homes and their arrangements demonstrates our position within wider social relations. As reproductive work is concerned with the social and cultural reproduction of human beings, the actual doing of the work – who does it, when and where – is a crucial part of its meaning (Romero 1992). More than a reflection, it is an expression and reproduction of social relations, and in particular of relations between genders.

Dr Jekyll and Mrs Hyde

What is paid domestic work?

The problem of the definition of domestic work is not simply a theoretical
one. It is experienced by domestic workers as a lack of job description with serious implications for their working conditions. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) uses the following job description for a 'domestic helper/cleaner':

Domestic Helpers and Cleaners

Domestic helpers and cleaners sweep, vacuum clean, wash and polish, take
care of household linen, purchase household supplies, prepare food, serve
meals and perform various other domestic duties.

Tasks include –
(a) sweeping, vacuum-cleaning, polishing and washing floors and furniture;
(b) washing, ironing and mending linen and other textiles;
(c) washing dishes;
(d) preparing, cooking and serving meals and refreshments;
(e) purchasing food and various other performing related tasks;
(f) performing related tasks;
(g) supervising other workers.


This description completely fails to describe the jobs done by migrant
domestic workers. When I asked them what they did, workers frequently
responded 'everything': 'We have to do everything, do the garden, clean
the garage, clean the car, take the goats out for work, the children, there
is nothing we are not told to do' (Irene, a Sri Lankan working in Athens).
Their work covered all household chores and more, including cleaning
their employers' workplaces, cleaning the houses of friends and relatives
of their employers, shopping for food, fetching water, looking after pets
and houseplants, and tasks too many to list. But the crucial omission in
the ILO definition, as far as migrant domestic workers in Europe are
concerned, is caring work. Childcare and care of the elderly are often the
principal responsibilities of such workers. The ILO definition should alert
us to the fact that commonly paid 'domestic work' is not held to include
such caring work, which is more likely to be professionalised as nannies
and personal nursing assistants. But it is, in fact, an important component
of the jobs of migrant domestic workers. This may be acknowledged even
by states. For example, in 1998 the UK government announced that non-
nationals entering the UK as domestic workers had to have responsibilities which exceed the ILO requirements, termed 'basic levels'.

Examples of such duties included childcare and 'personal attention to a
sick, elderly or disabled member of the family'.

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15
Doing the Dirty Work?

Why employ a domestic worker?

Many women of all classes are faced with the problem of how to combine paid employment with caring for young children when state-provided services are minimal or non-existent. As the imagined domains of the public and private are kept apart, the huge tasks of social reproduction are rendered invisible, and arrangements often privatized. The employment of a domestic worker is often presented as a strategy for enabling middle-class women to enter 'productive employment' (Hertz 1986). In Europe many employers needed childcare while they were working, or care for an elderly relative. Given a declining welfare state, families that are increasingly nuclear with no support available from kinship networks, a growth in middle-class female employment outside the home, with a pool of cheap, flexible labour, it is scarcely surprising that the employment of a migrant domestic worker is regarded as a suitable strategy for families in need of full-time carers. Employers often refer to domestic workers as their substitutes: 'the domestic worker is a double', the other self one leaves at home doing those things that traditionally you, as a woman, should be doing.... I felt it in my own flesh, this other self who freed me so I could perform my other roles' ('Leila', quoted in Pereira de Melo 1984).

But women do not simply substitute for the work of their female employers. They perform tasks it is unlikely that any woman with a choice would be prepared to undertake. Take Irene's employers, for example:

They have a very big house, and everywhere, white carpet. They have three dogs. I hate those dogs, with long, long hair. Even one hair will show on the white carpet.... They have another working for them. She is a Filipina and she comes in twice a week to clean the big big mirrors.

Would her employers have both white carpet and dogs if they (or, most likely, the female employer) had to clean the house themselves? One suspects that only if the husband were particularly brutal or oppressive would this be the case. This kind of pointless work is typical of the demands made of migrant domestic workers:

Every day I am cleaning for my madam, one riding shoes, two walking shoes, house shoes, that is every day. just for one person ... plus the children, that is one rubber and one shoes for everyday school, that is another two.... And that is other shoes for the children. Fourteen shoes every day. My time is already finished, I'm cleaning the shoes. I said, 'Why don't you buy like this, the machines?' but they said 'It's very expensive'... You will be wondering why she has so many bathrobes, one silk, and two cotton. I say, 'Why madam have so many bathrobe?' Every day you have to hang up. Every day you have to press the back because it is crumpled. (Francia, Filipina in Paris)

The servicing of life-styles that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain forms an important component of paid domestic work. Among workers I have spoken to this is reflected in a sense that they are being required to do work that employers themselves would never consider doing. It's not fair, you wouldn't tell your fellow human to do something you would not be happy to do. But they don't respect' (Joy, a Ghanaian woman working in Athens).

This clearly brings us back to issues of status, to domestic work as an expression and reproduction of social relations. Placed within this context, paid domestic work poses a serious challenge to the analysis of domestic work as a common burden shared between women:

When wives have servants, even part-time cleaners a few days a week, they may appear to do less domestic work, and they are certainly often reviled as lazy parasites when they rely on paid help with childcare and housework even if they are in full-time employment. But women are actually only given servants or au pairs when their workload simply cannot be carried by one person ... or when their husbands want their time to be shifted elsewhere.

(Delphy and Leonard 1992: 235–6)

But waged domestic labour indicates that women have different experiences of housework, mediated by differences such as class, age and 'race' (Palmer 1989). Indeed, in certain European countries domestic labour may also be undertaken by migrant men, effectively depersonalized by 'race' and citizenship. The employment of a domestic worker is not only a coping strategy, and often its purpose is not to free up a worker from the demands of caring and housework to take on productive employment. Cock's South African study, for example, found that just over a quarter of the married female employers were employed outside the home, while for the majority the employment of a domestic worker facilitated leisure activities and a high-status life-style. Unlike those in Cock's study, the majority of workers I have spoke to are working for dual-income families, but this is not always the case:

with my employer the only thing I cannot do is go to bed with her husband. If only I can go to bed with her husband maybe she will ask me to because I am doing everything. She is sleeping in the morning, and she wakes up at one o'clock. She doesn't work since I was there I do everything. She doesn't go out. She is sitting, drinking, smoking, telephone ... if only I can wash her peepee maybe she will ask me for her.

(Teresa, a Filipina working in Paris)
The recruitment of overseas domestic workers in Taiwan was halted in March 1995 because only 11 per cent of the 13,286 women who had been given licences to hire domestic workers had entered the job market. Moreover, while one could argue that childcarers free women for the labour market, for example, could one really say that of cleaners working for a few hours a week? Time-consuming as cleaning a house may be, there are not many women forced to make a decision between, for example, employment outside the home and housework. Whether their employers were working or not, domestic workers often worked at sustaining an otherwise unsustainable life-style.

There are clear parallels between the servicing of life-styles by contemporary domestic workers and the work of domestic servants in England in Victorian times. Davidoff's work on the role of domestic workers in reproducing gender identities in Victorian households (1974) throws new light on the role of migrant domestic workers. She explores how nineteenth-century divisions and polarities -- such as male/female, middle-class/working-class or urban/rural -- were played out in the household. At a time when reproductive work multiplied -- not just because of demands made on wives to be good companions and mothers but also because of the increased size of houses and objects -- middle-class women could, through managing the labour of domestic workers, be 'domestic' without being 'dirty'. The employment of domestic workers meant women could negotiate the contradiction between domesticity, requiring physical labour and dirtiness, and the cleanliness and spirituality of feminine virtue. 'Ladies' need servants. The idealisation of middle-class women as the pure, pious, moral and virtuous centre of the household required a splitting of women and their functions into two mutually dependent but antagonistic stereotypes: pure/dirty, emotional/physical, madonna/whore, each drawing their identity from their opposite, and these stereotypes were expressed and reproduced in the employer/domestic worker relationship. Servants met manual demands, freeing wives to meet the emotional demands of husbands and children. Once established this relationship worked to maintain difference: workers proved their inferiority by their physicality and dirt, while female employers proved their superiority by their femininity, daintiness and managerial skills. Male employers proved their superiority by never having to consider domestic drudgery, while enjoying the home as a refuge, a well-deserved rest from the stresses and strains of productive work.

This division of labour continued beyond Victorian times (Castro 1984: Palmer 1989). Victorian polarities have 1990s resonances and accretions. For example:

Gregson and Lowe's finding in English households in the 1990s -- that the employment of a cleaner was often justified by the parents' desire for 'quality time' with each other and their children to assist in their social, emotional and educational development -- implies a similar duality, non-gendered for the employers but not for the (inevitably female), cleaner. The issue is often one of gender relations: unwilling or unable to argue with a male partner and children over sharing domestic chores, and unable to manage the house to everybody's satisfaction, the woman employs a domestic worker. So gender and generational conflict over domestic work is averted (or often transferred to relations between female employer and female worker). There is another option, of course, which is to tolerate untidy rooms and dusty shelves, but there is pressure to maintain acceptable 'standards' from relatives, friends and others who visit the household, from the internalisations of the woman herself, and, crucially, from the husband.

She doesn't do ironing, because she's particularly slow. I'm particularly quick and my husband is very fussy about his ironing. He likes his shirts ironed just so... If I wasn't working at home I'd have to ask her to tidy up because my husband couldn't bring back his client if there was mess everywhere, but because I'm around I can tidy up.

(Helene, employer in Paris)

It is women who bear the brunt of the public/private distinction -- as housewives, confined to the 'private' and unrecognised workplace, and as workers who must juggle the double day, working around childcare and domestic duties. The employment of a paid domestic worker enables the negotiation of contradictions, not just the public/private divide, but gendered identities and the consequent tensions and demands placed upon women. The employment of a paid domestic worker therefore facilitates status reproduction, not only by maintaining status objects, enabling the silver to be polished or the clothes to be ironed, but also by serving as a foil to the lady of the house. The hired reproductive worker is reproducing social being and sets of relationships that are not merely not her own but also deeply antagonistic to her own interests. Her presence emphasises
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and reinforces her employer's identity – as a competent household manager, as middle-class, as white – and her own as its opposite. Perhaps Leila is right: her domestic worker is her 'other self', but rather than a mirror image the worker is the Mrs Hyde to her Dr Jekyll, the two woven into mutually dependent female stereotypes. A European 'housewife' does not just labour, she (usually) has some control over the management of the process, retains an emotional stake in the household, and often derives economic and other benefits. The well-kept house, children and husband are a tribute to her managerial skills. While wives may gain status and privileges from relations with their husbands, domestic workers do not (Glenn 1992).

A domestic worker may be employed to act as a carer or to service a lifestyle, though in practice the two functions are difficult to disentangle. While female employment may create a demand for childcare, it may also be presented as a choice made by women citizens opting for higher-status paid employment rather than low-status reproductive labour: "Now the girls, the Greek girls, they want to be secretaries. They go to university. Who will go to university and then clean houses?" (Caritas volunteer worker in Athens). While a family may 'need' a worker to look after their children, they do not need a worker to clean the children's shoes every day. But the relation between a domestic worker and her employers, and in particular her female employer is inevitably one of relative status, while men's ultimate control over the household remains unchallenged.

As one French employer put it:

My husband has been well brought up by his mother to be sensitive to dust and to notice that kind of thing, so ... he'll say, 'Here's a cobweb, when you see Madame C you must tell her to clean there'. Then I pull the cobweb, and he says, 'No, you don't do it, that's for her to do. That's her job.'

The very hiring of a domestic worker lowers the status of the work she does – the employer has better things to do with her time. Moreover, while the housewife is acknowledged as manager and labourer, the domestic worker is simply a labourer, the 'hands' (Davidoff 1974) (though in reality she, like the housewife, is constantly managing processes) who is managed by her female employer. The hard work of the domestic worker redounds to the credit, not of herself, but of the household manager, who has demonstrated her skills in such a marvellous find. What women have in common is the management of the processes of domestic work, but most women have to both manage and labour, while some predominantly manage. This makes for very real conflicts of interest between women as household managers and household workers, as the manager seeks to extract maximum hours and minimum wages – thereby having an interest.

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in her capacity as household manager, in devaluing household work.

A domestic worker, then, is not just a person who does a job; like the 'mother' and the 'wife' she is performing a role within the family. In the final analysis, domestic work is not definable in terms of tasks but in terms of a role which constructs and situates the worker within a certain set of social relationships. Even when her tasks are ostensibly the same as those performed by 'mother' or 'wife' – though often not, they are cast as such – her role is different; she affirms a household's status, and in particular affirms the status of the woman of the household.

How to value domestic labour?

Domestic workers that I interviewed in European cities were clear that there was no such thing as a 'fair wage' – and this raises the broader issue of how to value domestic work. Domestic labour is not included in national accounts. If a meal is cooked in a restaurant, it is reflected in GDP; but if it is cooked at home, it is invisible. Some attempts are being made, however, to acknowledge domestic labour officially. In the UK, for example, the justifications given for the omission of household production from the system of national accounts in 1993 were:

1. that household services have limited repercussions on the rest of the economy, and the decision to produce a household service entails a simultaneous decision to consume that service;
2. that there are no suitable market prices that can be used to value such services, because they are typically not produced for the market;
3. that imputed values have a different economic significance from those available in cash, so that if household members could choose between producing services for themselves and producing the same services for another household in return for cash, they would probably choose the latter because of the greater range of consumption possibilities it affords.

In 1997, however, the UK Office for National Statistics attempted to produce a Household Satellite account:

the term satellite is an unfortunate analogy. By almost any measure the household industry is probably larger than that of any of the main single digit heading industries within the production boundary. The accounts could be seen more as twin planets rather than earth and moon. Nonetheless, difficulties in valuation outweigh these concerns and justify the use of a satellite.

(Murtatroyd and Neuburger 1997: 65)
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As is apparent, the Household Satellite report rebuffed the claim that household services have limited repercussions on the rest of the economy. Indeed it found that, depending on how one values domestic work, in the UK it accounts for between 40 per cent and 120 per cent of GDP. The practical problems of valuation outlined in points 2 and 3 nevertheless pose real difficulties. Moreover, point 3 is far from being as simple as it purports to be – there are all kinds of reasons why one would prefer to bake a cake for oneself and one's loved ones rather than sell it on the market. Consumption possibilities are far from the only or indeed principal consideration, and this is of the essence in domestic work. Should we attribute the same value to housework in all households irrespective of the earning potential of their members and of the level of household capital equipment? Or if, for example, a barrister chooses not to work in chambers but to look after her children, should it be valued at £250 an hour, since that is what is worth to her?

The issue becomes even more complex when we attempt to recognise the value of paid domestic labour. If we allow that domestic workers enable the employment of female household members, should we argue that the domestic worker who facilitates the employment of the barrister should earn half the hourly wages of her employer, since without her the barrister could not go to work? But rates of pay in this case will depend directly on the status of the employer and be completely independent of the worker's skills, needs and costs: and the domestic worker who works for a primary school teacher would earn substantially less than the barrister's worker for doing the same job. Or what should we make of the argument that, since most women work for nothing in the home, no one should be paid to do it?

I had a helper. She said she was coming at 8 am. She comes at 9.30 am. I have already started to do the work of course. I am afraid to give her a machine because she doesn't know how to use it, so I do that. Then we clean the fridge – together. So I do half the work. So half the money is mine. So if we take foreigners it is because we want to help them.

(Employer in Athens)

And what about the monetary value of caring work? While motherhood is priceless, when we pay for childcare we are eager to explore the cheapest options, as if mothering and nurturing were separate functions (Rothman 1989).

The young and domestic work

In many countries of the world domestic work is regarded as suitable employment for children and young people, particularly young girls. It is according to Anti-Slavery International (AS), one of the most common forms of child labour. In many countries of the south children may be seen performing reproductive tasks considered too arduous for children (or even adults) in the north. Children of five and six care for babies, collect water, make fires and cook. It is not unusual for children to be sent to live with other, wealthier members of the family – one source of my own interest in domestic workers in private households was my grandmother's recollection of her Burmese mother's taking in of poorer relatives who were responsible for childcare and housework in return for her finding them suitable husbands when they grew older. Today such arrangements are increasingly commercialised: children may end up very far from family and home, under the control of adults who do not even have to pretend that the child's well-being is their priority. There are large numbers of children working in such circumstances throughout the world. In Haiti, for example, large numbers of rural families send their children to work in the homes of town dwellers, and in Port-au-Prince alone there are an estimated 40,000 restaveks as they are known. Similar systems have been observed in Bangladesh, Philippines and Senegal. They can result in grossly exploitative practices and in poor conditions that impact particularly badly on children, such as lack of adequate physical and emotional care, loss of parental contact and affective relations, and lack of recreation and education. Many children end up in situations like that of Demsee, taken from her village in Sierra Leone to work in Freetown when she was about eight years old. She was handed over to a Lebanese family by her father in exchange for the use of a two-room shelter. Every day began at six o'clock. Apart from being nurse to two young children she had to look after two schoolboys and do all the house cleaning, as well as being at the beck and call of the gardener, chauffeur, cook, watchman and houseboy. She was given only leftovers to eat. 'I was always being beaten. I was beaten so much that after a while I didn't really feel it any more'. Her male employer raped her from the age of nine, and when she was ten he forced her to be circumcised. She put up a fight, but to no avail. Demsee was brought to London by her employers seven or eight times from the age of twelve. She was kept isolated but managed to make friends with a woman whom she met in Regent's Park. She helped her run away, and so Demsee started a life on the run as an 'illegal immigrant'.

In Europe the more typical form of allocating domestic work to young women (though not to children) is the au pair system. This cultural/educational exchange agreement was formalised in Strasbourg in 1969 among some European countries. An au pair, generally speaking, is a young person (almost always, but not exclusively, a young woman) who
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This means that from that year the au pair, as far as Filipinos are concerned, has been understood to mean domestic helper – not cultural exchange visitor as originally envisaged by the 1969 agreement. (Philippine Embassy statement, published in Philippines News Briefs, February–March 1999, Netherlands)

In the Philippines, women are charged a placement fee from 10,000 (€165) to 45,000 pesos (£750), while host families in the Netherlands are charged a mediation fee of up to NLG 1,000 (£340) which is often passed on to the au pair. This, combined with the cost of flights to Europe and the fact that they are earning only ‘pocket money’, means that many of the women have not paid off their debts by the time their permit has expired, and must then become ‘illegal’ Adela, a single parent from the Philippines with the immigration status of au pair, found her work intolerable: ‘I was like a slave. I had to attend to my employer, her baby, their two dogs … Prepare food for my employer’s factory personnel … do the laundry, clean the house and attend to the baby when he cries especially at night’ (interview with Fr Jusay, Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers, Netherlands). She was paid 500 guilders at first, and then nothing at all. Unable to endure this treatment, and needing the money for the support of her child in the Philippines, Adela ran away from her employer and is now an undocumented worker. According to the embassy statement, the concomitant irregularities and complaints have come about, such as under-compensation, excessive hours, over-work, culture shock, etc. There have been reported cases of abuse, discrimination, runaways and even prostitution.

Nor is this restricted to the Netherlands: such cases have been reported in other European countries, in particular Scandinavia. The au pair system, then, is as open to abuse as any other when the workers it places are vulnerable.

Conclusions

Paying for reproductive labour raises challenging issues, particularly when it is being performed in the employer’s home. It is not simply paying for work that the employer does not have time to do. Nor is the paying in itself what makes it distinctive – after all, many domestic workers, particularly children, do not get paid at all. What is peculiar about the position of the domestic worker in terms of work is, first, her role in the household; and, second, her lack of power and authority within the house. Being unable to set limits to her own tasks reinforces...
her role as the doer of 'dirty' work: 'to my surprise I had to bring also the dog outside at 12.30 in the evening and after that I had to wash the anus of the dog if he shit' (Lourdes, Filipina working in the Netherlands). This job does not have to be done by anyone. To force another person to do it (Lourdes was undocumented and not paid by her Dutch 'employers') is surely only to exercise power by demeaning other people. Not all domestic workers have to perform such degrading tasks, but the boundary between Lourdes' work and that more typically performed by domestic workers is not clear. Indeed this lack of clarity is one of the key difficulties in analysing the experiences of domestic workers, even when one limits the field to the experiences of migrants. The same task may have multiple meanings, depending on the context. While some migrant domestic workers feel that they are paid adequately, and have no complaints about their living and working conditions, others are exploited and abused. It is important, therefore, to have some means of analysing the heterogeneity of their experiences.

Notes

1 See, for example, Benston 1971; Berk 1980; Gardiner 1975 and 1976; Gardiner, Himmelweit, and Mackintosh. 1975; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Gerstein 1971; Vogl 1973; Harrison 1973; Secombe 1974; Coulson, Magas and Wainwright 1975; Himmelweit and Mohun 1977; P Smith 1978; Fee 1976.


7 The project was focused on first-generation migrant workers who were 'Third Country Nationals' i.e. from outside the European Union. It did not include migrants from within the European union, although migrant women from Spain, Portugal and Greece used to work in the private households of Northern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Almost all of these women now work in hotels or as concierges, and those who continue to work in private households are living out. As European Union citizens these workers have rights that Third Country Nationals do not. Migrant' is an extremely elastic term, and the complexity of different national definitions and legislations make comparative work on migrants in the European Union a complex