

Life in the Twilight Zone: Migration, Transnationality and Gender in the Private Household

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According to Manuel Castells, 'the control of the state over time and space is being increasingly outmanoeuvred by the global flows of capital, goods, services, technology, communication and information' (Castells 2002, p. 259). With this he begins a treatise about the increasing powerlessness of the state in relation to its traditional tasks and the specific transformation of the welfare state. This article is concerned with the hitherto neglected process of the *transnationalisation of care services* which, in addition to the global flows described by Castells, also requires the transnational movement of people. With the immigration of foreign domestic workers it is possible to observe a development relating to the acceptance and acceptability of deregulation in the everyday conduct of life, which in this form—at least in Germany—is quite new. As a result, there is a lack of analysis of domestic work as a social phenomenon.

In this article, I wish to present first of all the extent and the shape of domestic work and of those involved in this sphere: domestic workers, the new servants; after that I will focus on three aspects which we are currently researching in our project *Gender, Ethnicity and Identity. The Question of the New Servants in the Era of Globalisation* (viz www.uni-muenster.de/FGEL, and Lutz 2002a,b,c); (a) domestic work as a *potential space* for illegal/ illegalised workers; (b) coping with illegality; (c) the transnationalisation of the private household.

Domestic Workers—the New Servants

'In Germany there are some 3 million private households which regularly employ cleaning personnel or domestic help; however, in this situation less than 40,000 employees are covered unequivocally by social insurance', according to the economist Jürgen Schrupp (2002, p. 65). His colleague, Friedrich Schneider, has—in the framework of an analysis by the IMF (International Monetary Fund)—calculated that the contribution of the new (female) servants to Germany's gross national product stood at around DM 5.5 billion (€2.7 billion) at the end of the 1990s (Schneider and Ernste, 2000). Marianne Friese and Barbara Thiessen concluded in their study on the city of Bremen, that one in every eight households makes use of paid domestic help (Friese and Thyssen, 1997). Despite a lack of statistical clarity and discrepancies, there is a broad consensus concerning the trend towards increased employment in this area (viz Gather *et al.*, 2002, on this subject.) In this situation a so-called informal, feminised labour market has evolved, which makes use of, above all female, migrants from eastern

Europe, from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, notably the Philippines and from some African countries. The recruitment takes place via networks involving family or friends, via recruitment agents, but above all via the Internet (viz. e.g.: www.tschechien.biz/index/html, accessed 29.11.2002).

These female domestic workers perform a variety of duties which include a broad range of work, from cleaning private flats and doctors' surgeries, washing and cooking, gardening, childcare, care of the sick and elderly right up to catering services for private and works parties. The English debate (see e.g. Anderson, 2000) speaks of the three 'C's: Cleaning, Cooking and Caring. Such work is often combined and cannot be separated out, especially when care for children as well as elderly people is involved. It should be said that it is above all those tasks which are considered to be particularly unpleasant that are allocated to migrant domestic workers in such arrangements. The bourgeois concept of dirt and cleanliness is important in this context and clearly influences the hierarchical valuation of domestic work (see Thiessen, 2002 on this subject).

The employment relations are also very varied—they range from the two-hour cleaning job, where employer and employee communicate via handwritten notes and which is carried out on a daily basis in a large number of households, up to the 24-hour, round-the-clock service of live-in servants or—unfortunately also frequently—of au pairs. Equally variable is the rate of pay for these activities—an hourly rate of €7.50 seems to be the norm, but there are also reports of the hourly rate falling below €3, in particular if it is paid as a weekly or monthly wage. This clearly involves the lowest wage levels which are below statutory limits and cannot be legally upheld.

Since the recruitment-stop for migrant workers in Germany, imposed in 1973, is still in force—with just a few exceptions—it is hardly possible to arrange this kind of employment legally. However, as far as we know, many domestic workers have entered Germany legally, for example with a limited work permit as a seasonal or temporary employee, as au-pairs, as students or with a tourist visa, which provides the right to residence but not to take on paid work (see also Bade, 2001 on this subject).

In our research project we repeatedly came across women whose legal status changes from one year to the next: entering the country on a tourist visa, staying on without documentation, then finally gaining a residence permit as a student, only enter a further period of illegal work after the period of study has elapsed. Illegality applies both to the individual's residence status and to his/her employment status.

For many of those affected, the move into illegality is not simple, as they know the concomitant risks. Life as an 'illegalised' worker in the *twilight zone* does not simply mean foregoing an employment contract and its associated social security rights, but also the loss of citizenship and not infrequently of human rights. If these conditions of existence are so precarious, then why is the lure of this kind of activity so great?

Domestic Work as an *Opportunity Space* for Those Without Documents?

To start with, migrant workers (male and female) do not simply enter unsecured employment relations and unprotection conditions of existence, but frequently arrive, having already been in precarious situations. A glance at the countries of

origin makes this fact perfectly clear—they involve regions which, compared to the destination countries, are areas fraught with economic and social crisis. The unequal terms of trade between richer and poorer countries have managed to foster the emergence of a new product in the countries of origin: the raw material *care work*. This is today offered worldwide, predominantly by women.¹ The countries of origin do not actively arrange the supply, but rather promote it indirectly, acknowledging that payments made by domestic servants from abroad are a valuable source of foreign exchange and, as such, are irreplaceable.²

Those who make the decision to pursue this kind of work, see domestic work in private households as an activity where they are not exposed to agencies policing employment as they would in other sectors of informal work. The gender-specific nature of the work helps them in this respect: as a result of the traditional *gender code*, work in the private sphere remains un-addressed despite the tenacious efforts of some and is thus outside the area of state control. This reinforces the clandestine character of this work and helps to maintain the gender code within the household. The work remains largely differentiated according to gender roles, albeit henceforth distinguished hierarchically. At first glance, therefore, the private household as a working environment seems to offer the advantage of a protective space. At the same time, however, it represents a danger, since arbitrary reductions in wages, accidents, sexual abuse and violence are also beyond any kind of social control. Domestic work in the private sphere is thus *ambiguous and two-edged*.

A key finding of our project's analyses and of similar studies is that most of the women are not trained for domestic work, but rather are well educated, some of them even up to the level of higher education; east European women, for example, had operated in fields of employment which are no longer in demand since the social transformation of their countries. Their educational qualifications are, however, not simply devalued in their country of origin but also in the destination country, for in the latter it is not their professional expertise which is in demand, but rather the expertise accumulated through practical experience: for instance the fact that they themselves are or have been mothers, if they wish to work as nannies, or that they have the ability supposedly as a result of their femininity to clean, to cook, to care for others, to deal with the most intimate areas with discretion and to create a home. As a provisional categorisation, it is possible to distinguish between the following kinds of motivation which lead women to seek work of this kind:

Young women, for whom the labour market in their country of origin offers few prospects, seek to enhance their career opportunities by acquiring foreign language skills, or hope to go to university in Germany, or want to pay for an academic course, for example at a private university in Poland, with the money earned in Germany. It is in this age group in particular that there are also women who, like their counterparts all over the world, have cosmopolitan dreams and who wish to finance foreign trips in this manner.

Divorced women want to provide for their children to help them to get better education; they also might hope to find a marriage partner with whose help they can bring their children to Germany.

Women, whose families or who themselves have got into financial difficulties, want to work until these difficulties are solved. Sometimes

they have other reasons to save money, for example to start their own business. However, for many of them the change in consumption patterns generated by the transfer of money to their country of origin creates a dynamic of its own and the aims of accumulating savings also change, for example if family networks make new demands and increase pressure.

As a rule, there is never any intention of emigrating for life and continuing to work as a domestic servant. Rather, it involves an aspect of flexible mobility of limited duration, a short-term perspective which serves to compensate for acute financial problems. Women leave home and set off abroad in order to stay at home, as Mirjana Morokvašić (1994) puts it. In the case of east European women, they thereby become commuters rather than emigrants; at the very least it involves the hope of being able to return after a short while. I will look at the transmigration which arises in this context below.

A fourth group is made up of *young lesbian women and homosexual men* predominantly from eastern Europe who are trying to escape from the discrimination and tabuisation of homosexuality in their countries of origin. These categories more or less follow a socio-economic logic which does not apply exclusively to the group described here but is also applicable to many other processes of migration. However, we take issue with the inference of Malgorzata Irek (1998) that the Polish women interviewed by her operate relatively easily under the conditions of illegality and are characterised by the rational behavioural logic of profit maximisation. Rather, our study which began collecting data in the summer of 2002 has already produced numerous indicators of considerable individual differences in *coping with illegality*. These are not to be wholly explained in terms of differing educational or network resources, but have to be elucidated with reference to the combination of heteronomy and autonomy (exogenous and self-determination) as differences relating to biographical resources. I wish to demonstrate this with two examples.³:

Coping with Illegality

When Ms A arrives from Poland in a west German university town for the first time and works as a cleaner in various households for the summer, she has already completed an Economics degree in Poland and is looking for a short-term opportunity to bridge the unemployment gap immediately following her successful studies. She arrives with a tourist visa, leaves after three months and then reappears six months later. A network of Polish friends, both male and female, help her find both work and accommodation. In order to render her stay legal, she manages finally to register for an academic course in Economics in the summer of 1992. Her Polish degree is accorded limited credit. She works in various households, looks after children, cares for old people with grocery shopping and communication, and cleans in both private houses and doctors' surgeries. Ten years later she has to complete her studies, if she wants to avoid paying very high academic fees. She is thus confronted with the alternative of returning to Poland or staying on illegally. She is afraid of life without official documents. She already feels that it is a "play-acting and deceit", having led most of her employers to believe for years that she had to earn her upkeep as a student, even though she hardly attended any classes. It is important to her

that she works for people who “need” her; she does not wish to “feel like a robot”. She has developed friendly relations to one of the families employing her; she looks after their child, who has learned Polish words from her, she cleans, goes shopping and occasionally helps out at the grandparents; she feels “part of the family”. In contrast to many others in her position, she has *no plan*. It is important to her that she is respected and acknowledged by her employers; she derives satisfaction from the fact that she has a key function as a first port-of-call for the friends of her homosexual Polish network, as well as a communications role. Having not lived in Poland for twelve years, she feels uncertain about what she would encounter if she were to return there (“I know my way around better in Germany”). The fact that she has not saved for her future, but has rather spent her money on pleasure and travelling, rules out the possibility of a new beginning. Returning to Poland as a *migration loser* is just as unattractive an option as continuing her stay in Germany as an illegal immigrant. She finds herself in a social trap, and at the time of the interviews, it was not yet clear how she was going to get out of this situation, since there are absolutely no procedures for recognising the skills that she has developed in her migration project.

Ms M. copes in a quite different way with life in the twilight zone. In the middle of the 1990s she had migrated from Uruguay to Hamburg; at the time she was already in her late 40s. The cause of her migration was, she states emphatically, not of an economic nature. Rather, she was taking advantage of a simple opportunity: travelling to Germany in the company of her daughter who had fallen in love with a German man. Once there she finds a flat and various jobs as a cleaner with the help of German friends, whom she had already got to know through her political activities in Latin America. These jobs provide her with an income. It is via this network that she found accommodation, employment and important knowledge about how to get medical treatment without documents. She comes into contact with the German NRO “No human being is illegal” and gives public lectures for them. In complete contrast to Ms A. she seems to have a plan or develops a plan in the course of her stay. Migration helps her to divorce her husband after 27 years and to realise an emancipation project. She begins to save; while the purposes of saving changed over time and new ones emerge (financing her son’s studies, acquiring luxury goods, building a house), she is now aiming to open her own restaurant in her home country and is preparing for her return. In all the years, she has maintained herself via her activity as “la Putzfrau” (la cleaning lady); she has cleaned private rooms and surgeries, because she lacks the language skills, as she says, to work in any other field: “I clean because I cannot speak”. This very rational sounding justification denotes, on the one hand, a deficiency, which also pains her; on the other hand, she also stresses that—in contrast to Ms A.—she has no desire to cultivate close relations with her employers. She prefers to clean in places where she doesn’t have to speak. The quite different way of coping with the situation of illegality which characterises her personal history, can also be explained in terms of her biography. She has already lived through several biographical ruptures. Together with her husband she had been politically active in her home country for many years; even then she had to “go underground” in order to save her own life, she finally left the country and lived for 12 years in exile in Argentina. There she changed her career anew. The activities which she is pursuing in Germany is a means to an end, but is not at the centre of her life. Her political commitment

allows her to derive recognition from other sources (she gives lectures and interviews and has collaborated on a documentary film about her life); she also gets support from a politically active group of friends, with whom she can certainly “talk”, even though she still has scant knowledge of German.

In both the cases sketched here, the experience of migration did not automatically lead to experiences of crisis. However, the case of Ms A shows that a biographical crisis can occur in the context of the migration which for her finally led to illegality, even after many years. In her case, the manufactured security collapses and with it the securing of the biographical project; the loss of her legal residence status coincides with another crisis around her 40th birthday, in which she questions the very meaning of life. In the case of Ms M on the other hand, migration represents a ‘purposive means of continuing the biography’ (Breckner, 2003); even illegality is an aspect of this overall biographical process. This is not intended to trivialise life in the twilight zone in any way. Not only are the actual activities of domestic workers utterly insecure as far as planning is concerned, being subject to rapid dismissal, seldom having any guarantee of sick pay or holiday money, and providing no recourse to legal protection against wage exploitation because of problems associated with residence and work permits. There is a further aspect which neutralises the double-edged nature of the apparent protective space of the private household, namely that the borders of the private sphere are permeable, particularly when it involves child care.

One example: Ms T is Hungarian, trained as a teacher but unable to pursue her career in Germany because her qualifications are not recognized. After many unsuccessful attempts at finding employment appropriate to her qualification, she had decided to work as a child-minder. Every day, between 7.30 and 13.30, she looks after the two children of a family and recalls the following occurrence:

“I was in a bank with these children, where there was a wooden horse that could be used as a hobby horse. And they were waiting to get on it. I had to sort something out, the children got onto the horse. And then comes a rocking song and since I don’t know any German rocking songs, it’s a Hungarian one. And they then start singing this Hungarian song good and loud, on the horse, and the people in the bank go very quiet. And they’re singing this song good and loud. At first I was somehow pleased, it was an expression of the heart. But then I phew! Now everyone is noticing that these children are foreigners and that’s too much. Because it’s not really, not necessarily an advantage ... what sort of a mess have I landed them in etcetera? (Laughs). That was the second thought. But then, now somehow, who is bothered? I was pleased and that was it! So it was lovely.”

This passage demonstrates the precarious boundaries between private and public sphere very clearly. The children had inadvertently taken a form of *communication* into the public sphere which had developed within the private sphere and which was intended only for that sphere and had thus overstepped the (secret) rules. As soon as the *foreign* language leaves the household, it becomes a problem or can become one. Crossing boundaries in this manner is potentially threatening, because it neutralises the invisibility of the private space.

This passage is also indicative of the subtle relationship between self-image and the image that others have of that self (*Fremdbild*) and their significance for the identity of those affected, in relation to perceptions of social status and

factors associated with them, notably those of exclusion. Ms T. fears negative reactions from her environment to the public use of one, namely *this* foreign language: "Now everyone is noticing that these children are foreigners and that's too much". Speaking *this* foreign language makes the children into foreigners; for, even though it is unlikely that anyone identified the language as Hungarian, it was clear that it could not be an easily recognizable foreign language, like English or French, languages that can still be identified in this bourgeois-conservative neighbourhood. In an earlier passage, Ms T had reported that she spoke German with the children and that this is what the parents wanted her to do. Ms T. feels directly responsible for having "landed" the children "in a mess" with this mistake; it almost sounds as if she had inflicted a wound on them: "... the people in the bank go very quiet". She has obviously become very sensitive to the symbolic significance of language as a sign of social hierarchies. By teaching the children a song in her own language, she transfers the social devaluation associated with this on to them—or so she fears: "today (it is) not necessarily an advantage (to be a foreigner)." She prefaces her remarks with an apology: "I don't know any rocking songs in German, only Hungarian ones". With this she also justifies deviating from the wishes of the parents. The quotation can thus be read in part as a reflection on images of the Other. At the same time it is an expression of inner ambivalence and reveals the desire to resist such pictures of the Other: "At first I was somehow pleased, it was an expression of the heart." This joy may have immediately been set in doubt, but ultimately she comes back to this first, emotional reaction, which touched her heart. Almost triumphantly she says: "I was pleased and that was it! So it was lovely."

Not every one of those affected can react with such self-confidence, since public attention is always linked to the fear of discovery in the case of people without papers. In the fragment quoted above, yet another aspect is touched on which I would like to introduce—albeit in brief, for reasons of economy—namely the transnationalisation of the private household.

The Transnationalisation of the Private Household

With the entry of foreign au pairs and female domestic workers into the German private household, there is not simply a change in aspects of organisation and communication on the spot, but additionally the female migrants affected see themselves forced to lead a transnational, multi-locational existence. The short-term cyclical structuring of migratory movements on the part of east European women makes it clear that those affected prefer *commuting to emigration*. *Commuting instead of Emigrating* (Morokvašić, 1994) has become the ideal which is lived out against Germany's laws relating to foreigners, which do not accept this form of migration and seek to block it.

This kind of life, however, demands a huge degree of organisation and logistical skill. Without a half-way functioning network it doesn't work and—as we have seen—biographical resources are necessary to surmount the difficulties thrown up by the situation. Particularly in cases, where childcare for children who have stayed in the country of origin has itself to be organised, immense problems arise. Arlie Russel-Hochschild (2000) talks in this context about a *global care chain*, which leads to a situation where domestic workers who are paid for

looking after (other people's) children in Germany are obliged to pay for childcare for their own children that they have left behind. The emotional attention which is denied to their own children is given to the other children as a surplus. Following the concept *brain-drain* (withdrawal of educational capital) derived from migration research, there is talk in this context of the *care-drain*, the withdrawal of provider capital (See Russel-Hochschild, 2000).

The fact that many of those affected accept this, even though it involves paying a high emotional price, is linked to two factors, at least inasmuch as we can say up until now:

On the one hand, modern communications systems do allow better oral communication. Daily phone calls to the children left behind or to their carers are possible and affordable. In this way, childrearing tasks are conducted over great geographical distances, or at least there is an attempt to maintain contact with the children. Transnational motherhood or parenthood are thus encouraged by the global network society.

On the other hand, there is certainly evidence of an altered conception of the family. Research on upheavals in family forms in the countries of the Caribbean, South America or Asia reveal that the dissolution of traditional family forms has been under way for decades there. Thus Mary Chamberlain (1997) describes the long tradition of emigration by young women in the Caribbean, who emigrated to the USA, to Europe or to another island in search of work, after they had given birth to one or two children at home. For generations, their children have been brought up by their grandmothers or other female members of the family, for generations providing, according to Chamberlain, a basis for a strong preparedness to migrate within these communities. Processes of family fragmentation generated by processes of migration are also described by Pierrette Honagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (1997) in relation to Mexican and other central and south American households, which are increasingly dependent on the earnings of the young women who work as domestic workers in the USA, in Spain and also in Germany. Many of the women are mothers. The situation in the Philippines is the same: in the excellent study by Rhacel Parreñas (2001) the consequences of this feminised migration are described in detail both for the women affected and for the children and family members that are left behind. She reports on women, whose sisters and daughters are scattered over three different continents and eleven different countries, all working as domestic servants.

In these cases, split or de-localised household forms have emerged, transnational family networks which, according to Linda Bash *et al.* (1994) form the underbelly of global capitalism.

The fact that those involved allow themselves to be sucked into these arrangements despite all the obvious disadvantages, is also a function of the gain in status which is linked to the income derived from this work.

Living without important forms of security means that the domestic workers affected are attempting to escape from insecurity and marginality, while exposing themselves to other, new insecurities. By trusting in their capacity to solve problems they let engage with *opportunities*. The success of this enterprise depends on whether they are in a position to activate biographical resources. It is a classic case of *learning by doing*.

Notes on contributors

1. It should be noted that, in recent times, some men can also be found in this area of activity.
2. Take the example of the Philippines: 5.6 million women working abroad provide \$8 billion dollars worth of foreign exchange (see Parrenas, 2001)
3. The interviews on which these descriptions are based, were conducted by Susanne Schwalgin; they were then analysed by us together.

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