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DOING THE DIRTY WORK? THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF DOMESTIC LABOUR

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Through interviews with domestic workers and their European employers, Anderson identifies the reality that, rather than simply sell her labor, the paid migrant domestic worker is invariably brought into relations with those she is caring for, making a fiction of the capitalist ideology that labor and personhood can be separated. Yet the very acts of labor can bring about feelings of care, challenging the distinction between labor and care. Her work also identifies how the migrant domestic worker's responsibility to perform the carework functions so that her employer can aptly demonstrate her love and commitment as a mother while the paid careworker carries out the actual labor. Her work develops new insights into how "some women exploit others within a general theory of care as women's work."

What is being commodified when employers pay migrant domestic workers? I have argued that the domestic worker is not just doing a set of tasks but is fulfilling a role. This already suggests that it is not simply her labour power that is being commodified. The worker who ha[s] to stand by the door when her employers le[ave] for the evening and remain in the same position until they came home could not really be constructed as selling her labour power.

The migrant worker is framed by immigration legislation as a unit of labour, without connection to family or friends, a unit whose production costs (food, education, shelter) were met elsewhere, and whose reproduction costs are of no concern to employer or state. In this respect, the worker who moves across continents may seem the logical result of capitalism's individual subject, the juridical person, torn from all social contexts, selling her labour power in the global market place. But while states and capitalists want workers, what they get is people.[1] This tension between "labour power" and "personhood" is particularly striking with reference to migrant domestic workers, and I believe it has broader repercussions for migrants and for women (see O'Connell Davidson 1998; Pateman 1988). . . .

COMMODIFICATION AND DOMESTIC WORKERS

According to Marxist theory, workers sell their commodified "labour power" (that is, their property in the person). Marx's theory of surplus value claimed that

capitalists profit from this exchange: the value of labour power is determined by the value of the labour time socially necessary to produce it and:

> If their working day or week exceeds the labour-time embodied in their wage, they are creating surplus value: a value over and above the variable capital investment, for which they will receive no recompense. . . . Profit can thus arise. . . . Its premise is exploitation of labour (Sayer 1991: 3).

However, as Pateman (along with Marx) has pointed out, labour power is a political fiction:

> Labour power, capacities or services, cannot be separated from the person of the worker like pieces of property. The worker's capacities are developed over time and they form an integral part of his self and self-identity. . . . The fiction "labour power" cannot be used; what is required is that the worker labours as demanded. (Pateman 1988: 150–1)

Labour power is, in this fiction, not integral to the person and can be traded in the marketplace with buyer and seller constructed as equals. . . .

Are migrant domestic workers selling their "labour power"? [D]omestic work . . . is concerned with the physical, cultural and ideological reproduction of human beings. Paid domestic workers reproduce people and social relations, not just in what they do (polishing silver, ironing clothes), but also in the very doing of it (the foil to the household manager). In this respect the paid domestic worker is herself, in her very essence, a means of reproduction. It is not just her labour power that is being harnessed to the cause of her employer's physical and social reproduction, but it is the very fact that she, the domestic worker, and not her employers, is doing this work, much of which seems invented especially for her to do. The employer is buying the power to command, not the property in the person, but the whole person.

It is this power to command that employers want more than labour power. They often openly stipulate that they want a particular type of person (Gregson and Lowe 1994: 3) justifying this demand on the grounds that they will be working in the home. So employer Anne Marie was emphatic that she would not accept an employee who "smells too strong," because "I cannot stand strong body smells." Or if the worker is to have responsibility for caring work she should be "affectionate," "like old people" or "be good with children." The worker wants to earn as much money as she can with reasonable conditions, but the employer's wants are rather more complicated. This is an oversimplification of the differences between what is being bought and sold by employer and worker, but I think it is

an adequate description of how many employment situations begin before more complex interpersonal relations develop. . . . The contradictions and tensions involved in paying for domestic labour are most clearly apparent when the function of that labour includes care. The political fiction of labour power is strained to breaking point—can one pay a care worker for her labour power and be unconcerned with whether she is a "caring person"? Can one pay a person to "be" caring? Can money really buy love? . . .

It is widely accepted that there are two meanings conflated in the term "care": care as labour and care as emotion, and it can be very difficult to disentangle the two. Finch and Groves (1983), in the introduction to their edited volume, write that caring cannot be reduced to "a kind of domestic labour performed on people," but that it always includes emotional bonds. In her contribution to the volume, Graham states that affection and service "can't be disentangled," and Wærness (1984) argues that caring is about labour and feelings, about relations, and that we all need to be cared for. Much of the labour of care is devoted to basic domestic chores. It would be difficult to care for a child and not include cooking her food, washing up her dishes, wiping her face and the table, changing and throwing away her nappy, tidying up her toys and washing her clothes. But once one allows that caring does include some measure of domestic work it is difficult to draw the line—how much of the domestic work is part of caring for one's charge, and when does it become general servicing of the household? And could not domestic work in general be seen as "caring," as looking after one's loved ones and making sure they are comfortable and at ease? As Rose puts it: "It has been both a theoretical and an empirical problem that even where we tried to separate housework from peoplework, they continually merged" (Rose 1986: 168). Indeed, much female-directed advertising is encouraging us in this perception—show your husband how much you love him by buying our brand of powder and washing his shirts really white. The problem is that while X doing something for Y may demonstrate X's love for Y, it may also demonstrate Y's power over X—and these two are not mutually exclusive. And of course, this is heavily gendered. The labour of care for men is usually manifest in the labour involved in "providing for" the family—few are primary carers either of their children, or of their parents. Eighteen percent of older women are cared for by their spouse, as compared with 53 percent of men. As for household chores, in Europe there has been no significant change in men's participation in domestic work despite female employment rates. The labour of care, whatever proportion of it is domestic chores, is chiefly women's work. . . .

The particular danger of viewing care as labour and care as emotion as indistinguishable is that it can lead to an argument that care is not exploitative because

women want to do it. . . . It also can lead to an argument that informal care is necessarily better care because it is guided by love, which, as Ungerson has pointed out (1995), has serious implications for unpaid women carers. The negotiating of labour and emotion poses particular problems for women. Much of the literature on care in the 1980s focused on this, and in particular on women's experiences as unpaid carers in the home. Issues around paid care in the home and its relation to gender remain unexplored. One of the most influential recent works on care is Bubeck's *Care, Gender and Justice* (1995) which examines how and why caring work is exploitative of women, and renders women peculiarly and structurally vulnerable to exploitation. Bubeck's definition of "care" emphasises the difference between doing something for someone who cannot do it, and doing something for someone who will not do it (which she calls "servicing"), rather than distinguishing caring from other types of domestic work in terms of tasks performed. So cooking a meal for a bedridden person is "caring," cooking a meal for a husband/able-bodied employer is "servicing." No matter that they have not got time to cook, it is possible for them to cook in a way in which it is not possible for someone who is bedridden. Her definition also seeks to elucidate both why caring work is necessary and its peculiarly human quality:

> Caring for is the meeting of the needs of one person by another person where face-to-face interaction between carer and cared for is a crucial element of the overall activity and where the need is of such a nature that it cannot possibly be met by the person in need herself. (Bubeck 1995: 129)

Even if it were possible for the need to be met by machine, without face-to-face interaction, it is unlikely that this would be deemed desirable—the prospect of totally mechanised old people's homes is a nightmare rather than a utopia. The definition does seem to miss the point, though, that it is only human to show one cares through meeting such needs whether or not the objects of our affections can meet those needs themselves—and, from time to time at least, to meet them in an "excessive" way. This is evident from Bubeck's own example of "care" according to her definition, "cooking her favourite dish for a sick child" (Bubeck 1995: 130). But why "favourite"? Cooking food for a sick child is caring according to her own definition, but cooking her favourite dish suggests labour beyond the strictly necessary. And if one's only consideration is the most suitable, easy and economical dish for the sick child, and what she likes to eat doesn't enter into it, is that really showing "care"? The central difficulty around care as labour/care as emotion has not been resolved. Human beings can labour to demonstrate affection—for the able-bodied and powerful as well as for the weak and vulnerable. Community and

human relations, with their ties of power and of affection, are lived and are created through care. . . .

CARE AS LABOUR/CARE AS EMOTION AND PAID DOMESTIC WORK

What implications does this have for the relationship in which one woman pays another to do caring work? While Bubeck states that caring in the sense of providing for the family is "peculiarly male," this is not so. In fact, when a woman is working, the salary for a paid carer is often taken out of the woman employer's wages. Migrant women are themselves usually "providers for" their families, often "providing for" their children back home, who are themselves cared for, paid or unpaid, by another:

> [Y]ou have to look at it from the point of view of necessity, because what they were paying you there (in the Dominican Republic) for doing a job was not even enough to pay for your children's upkeep, let alone pay for someone to look after them for you. On the other hand, when you emigrate to a country, they give you double what you were earning there, you have enough to send back money to your children there, to pay someone else to care for them, and on top of that to live yourself. (Magnolia, Dominicana working in Barcelona)

> The problem in our country is that before men emigrated. Men were going to the US, but the women were staying in the house. Then what happened was that the man emigrated and did not send anything back, he sent back no money. So the woman was a single mother with children, so if she got the chance to emigrate, she emigrated too . . . because she didn't have any other option to find a better future for her children. So it's terrible for her, very difficult, because they are here, they can only send money back home and their children are being brought up and cared for by another, by their relatives. . . . (Gisela, Dominicana in Barcelona)

While most of the migrant domestic workers I met relied on unpaid care by female family members, it is not unusual for domestic workers themselves to employ carers, often rural migrants. Polish women working as domestic workers in Berlin, for example, reportedly often employ Ukrainians to care for their children in Poland. Yet for the majority of migrants interviewed, being a "provider for" rather than carer of their immediate family was not experienced as a liberation, as it is for European female employers, but as another level of exploitation. While the female European employer may continue in her emotional and supportive role, migrant

women can have little emotional and moral input into the upbringing of their children. They do not enjoy care as emotion freed from physical labour. Instead the opposite applies: their care for their children is demonstrated in the fruits of hard labour, in remittances, rather than in the cuddles and "quality time" that provide so much of the satisfaction of care.

> It's terrible for us, because we are far from our children, but we are giving them food, education, we are giving them everything, although staying here you are dying because everything depends on you. . . . [F]or this I am saying, I'm spending three more years here, then I'm going back to my children, whatever happens, because like it or not I am keeping my children going, even though it is with this pain and lack of love. (Berta, Peruvian in Barcelona)

It would seem at first glance that in the case of female European employers, the hiring of a carer reflects those distinctions highlighted by Davidoff (1974) of mutually interdependent female stereotypes being worked out in the domestic worker/employer relationship. In this case the stereotypes are the work of servants (the physical labour of care) and the work of wives/mothers (the emotional labour of care). Could it be argued, then, that the hiring of carers facilitates some privileged women buying into Rose's "care-giving myth" (1986), that care involves only emotion and no labour, and like men, enjoying care as emotion freed from labour? In this case, to take up a point mentioned above, it would be possible for someone to care emotionally for a child and do no physical caring work. Female employers therefore are, like men, divesting themselves of the physical labour of care, but are still the "mother" in terms of their responsibility for and involvement in the emotional and moral development of the child. As Rothman (1989) has pointed out, the exultation of genetic links which has its roots in patriarchy and which has now been "modified" to allow for the equal importance of "male and female seed" has led to a downgrading of nurturing, which includes the labour of care. The privileging of the genetic link, and of care as emotion over care as labour, has rendered the importance of the labour of care invisible and unacknowledged. The labour of care is work that anyone can do, as opposed to care as emotion, which is ultimately dependent on some genetic relationship.

This constructs paid domestic labour, then, as simply that: labour. It sometimes seems as if employers are adopting this model, particularly those who hire and fire easily (the carer is "just" a labourer, and the relationship between the carer and the cared-for is of no consequence). It is also made use of when the worker oversteps the mark and gets "too close" to the cared-for. Very occasionally workers, too, attempt this emotion/labour divide:

> I'm telling you, on top of what they are paying you for, the physical work, there is also psychological work, that's double work . . . double pay. Sometimes, when they say to me for example, that I should give her lots of love, I feel like saying, well, for my family I give love free, and I'm not discriminating, but if it's a job you'll have to pay me. . . . (Magnolia, Dominicana working in Barcelona)

Those who were more experienced and who had a greater choice of jobs sometimes refused to work as carers or limited themselves to a particular period with any one family. But it was often a hard lesson to learn:

> I cared for a baby for his first year . . . the child loves you as a mother, but the mother was jealous and I was sent away. I was so depressed then, seriously depressed. All I wanted was to go back and see him. . . . I will never care for a baby again, it hurts too much. (Ouliette, from Côte d'Ivoire, working in Parma)

But in practice this separation is not maintained. Employers are not only looking for a labourer when they are looking for a carer; they want somebody "affectionate," "loving," "good with children." Sometimes employers attempt to keep workers by appealing to their "finer feelings" (rather than offering an increase in salary):

> [I]t's too much. I said, "Madam I am very sorry, I cannot stay here, I have to find another. . . ." "Why Lina, you cannot leave me like this." I said, "Yes, I can, I don't like." "Where is your heart, you will leave me like this? I have no worker." I said, "I'm very sorry. I have to leave you." I cannot stand it. Otherwise maybe I will kill her! (Lina, a Filipina in Paris). . . .

When necessary, however, employers can make use of the labour power fiction, so that any relationship between carer and cared for is not "real" or, if it threatens to be, it can be disrupted immediately without responsibility to the worker. When money does buy care—that is, when care is explicitly commodified—then it is not real care, because real care cannot be commodified: "Money can't buy love," so workers' feelings for their charges are not important. For workers, on the other hand, it can prove impossible to disentangle care as emotion from care as labour: "What they say at the beginning of the job and then what happens, are very different things . . . with old people like it or not it is a job where you have to get to know this old person and take care of them" (Magnolia, Dominicana in Barcelona). For not only may affection be expressed through labour, as has been discussed in the literature, but labour may engender care, and this is particularly true in the case of childcare. As anyone who has been intimately involved with a child can tell, it is often through interaction on the level of basic physical chores—nappy changing,

feeding, cleaning, that one develops a relationship with a young child. Workers who are involved in such a relationship and who are deprived of their "own" children may love the child intensely. The difficulty for the worker is that, as Bubeck allows, caring requires "face-to-face interaction"—that is, at the very least, relating. If this face-to-face interaction is repeated on a daily basis in the kinds of conditions experienced by many domestic workers, particularly those who live in, it almost inevitably develops into a relationship. The paid worker loves the child, the child loves the worker, and jealousy and family friction result. . . .

Care involves the whole person. It is bound up with who we are. A worker is not only a worker, she is a woman, a human being, and caring is, as Bubeck puts it, a "deeply human practise," with a particular resonance for women since "Caring as an activity, disposition, and attitude forms a central part of probably all cultural conceptions of femininity" (Bubeck 1995: 160). Employers of domestic workers take advantage of the fiction of labour power but they also acknowledge that care involves the whole person in the personal requirements. The domestic worker is not equated socially with her employer in the act of exchange because the fiction of labour power cannot be maintained: it is "personhood" that is being commodified. Moreover, the worker's caring function, her performance of tasks constructed as degrading, demonstrates the employer's power to command her self. Having allegedly sold her personhood, the domestic worker is both person and non-person. She is, like the prostitute, a person who is not a person, someone for whom all obligations can be discharged in cash (O'Connell Davidson 1998). So, particularly for those jobs which necessarily demand some human interaction, an employer can purchase the services of a human being who is yet not a real human being—with likes and hates, relations of her own, a history and ambitions of her own—but a human being who is socially dead (O'Connell Davidson, 1998: Patterson 1982). Such an exchange further dishonours her before her employer: "I can say that they think about themselves, how to take more money, better conditions for them. They offer because they have to, not because they feel sympathy. Love is silly for them" (Nina, employer in Athens).

The contradictions in the concept of property in the person, apparent from Locke onwards, trap the worker between being a labourer without emotions, selling commodified labour power, on the one hand, and a dishonoured person on the other. . . . So Bertha expressed the contradictions implicit in the attempt to commodify that which cannot be commodified fully:

> Live-in, what are they paying for? Freedom. It's emotional work, and physically you have to be there twenty-four hours, you have to give them your liberty. That is

what they are paying for. To be there all the time. Even if they pay you, give you free time, I think a young person is worth more than the money. There is no amount that they can pay you that can justify you being imprisoned.

"'MEMBER OF OUR FAMILY'—OH REALLY?"

In order to negotiate the contradictions inherent in the attempted commodification of domestic work, and the tension between the affective relations of the private and the instrumental relations of employment, many employers and some workers made use of the notion of the family.

> We are treated as a servant . . . like my employer, they say, "Ah Teresita, we used to treat you as a member of our family." Oh really? But try to observe . . . they will introduce you to their friends as a member of the family, and then they are sitting down, eating with crossed legs, and you will be the one who is running for their needs. Is that, can you consider that a member of the family? It's very easy to say, but it's not being felt inside the house. (Teresita, Filipina in Athens)

"Part of the family." This phrase appears time and again in the literature of domestic work, as it did in my own discussions with domestic workers. This is in part precisely because of the intertwining of domestic work and caring work that I have attempted to tease out (but which employers clearly have no interest in unravelling!) which allows for what Bubeck would count as "servicing" to be portrayed as "care." For employers can argue that domestic workers "love" their employers and show it through action. So while they hire a labourer, gradually the labourer becomes incorporated into the family and has the same kinds of relationship with family members as the kin do.

But which part of the family are they, one is tempted to ask? . . . [T]he phrase suggests becoming part of the special relationship beyond the simple bond of employment, in which the worker will be loved and cared for. . . . For the employer there are clear advantages to the obfuscation of the employment relationship, since it seriously weakens the worker's negotiating position in terms of wages and conditions—any attempt to improve these are an insult to the "family" and evidence of the worker's money grubbing attitude. The worker risks forfeiting "good" relations with her employers by making too many demands. It must be remembered that in these highly individualised work situations, good interpersonal relations can be extremely important, to the extent that a worker will often consider a lower-paying job if she feels happier with the family, since this will have a significant impact on her living and working conditions. For employers of carers, describing a

worker as part of the family facilitates the myth that caring is untainted by the market place. They can imagine that the worker is fulfilled by a "real" relationship with the person cared for—while retaining the possibility of terminating the relationship because it was contracted on the labour market and, therefore, can be deemed unreal if necessary. . . .

What the "part of the family" rhetoric obscures is that relations in paid care are, to use Wærness's (1984) term, "asymmetrical." While the worker is expected to have familial interest in the employing family, this is not reciprocated. Cock (1989) found in South Africa that employers were simply unwilling to consider their workers' private lives, and similarly very few employers I spoke to had any idea about the lives of their domestic workers—indeed they resented it if their worker "talked too much." Relations within the family are typically asymmetrical, with women doing more "caring" than men. But paid workers, unlike "wives," "mothers" and "daughters," are not part of a network of obligations and responsibilities (however unequally distributed): all obligations are discharged in cash. "Caring" work requires human beings to do it and cannot be mechanised, but when care is paid for, the person who is paying can avoid acknowledging that the worker is expressing and forming human relationships and community (which is not to say that unpaid care may not be expressing and forming oppressive human relations); her caring brings with it no mutual obligations, no entry into a community, no "real" human relations, only money. So a worker who has cared for a child over many years, who has spent many more hours with her than her "natural" mother, has no right to see the child should the employer decide to terminate the relationship, because the worker is paid. Money expresses the full extent of any obligations.

This reduction of human relations to cash is rendered easier because the emotional relationship is typically not between the carer and the person who is paying her wages (who is, in the final analysis, her employer) but between the carer and the cared-for, and both are relatively powerless before the financier of the care. The growth of this emotional relationship renders the carer vulnerable to exploitation, and the cared for vulnerable to the whims of the person holding the purse strings. As Bubeck points out, some unpaid carers may find themselves empowered by care, their self-esteem enhanced by making others happy and well: "it is this sense of power that underlies the peculiar logic of care, whereby the more one gives the more one is given in return" (Bubeck 1995: 148). This is strikingly inappropriate for paid carers, where even on the level of the individual relationship between carer and cared-for, a genuine affectionate relationship does not bring empowerment

but rather its opposite. The care financier is able to manipulate the relationship between the carer and the cared-for to her own ends—to extract more labour from the carer for lower wages for example—safe in the knowledge that the carer will want to do her best for the cared-for. . . .

Becoming "part of the family" is not only a means of maximising labour extracted from the worker. It is an attempt to manage contradictions. For the employer it helps to manage the contradictions of intimacy and status that attach to the role of the domestic worker, who is at once privy to many of the intimate details of family life, yet is also their status giver, their myth maker. It emphasises the common humanity of employers and workers, and explicitly rejects the commodification of human relations while sustaining an illusion of affective relations, and, in some instances, encouraging their formation. The situation of Zenaida, a Moroccan woman working in Barcelona, reveals the vulnerability of carers and the problems for them in being regarded as part of the family. She had cared for an old woman for five years, doing domestic chores as well as caring work. She lived in, was "part of the family," and felt she was treated with respect by her employing family. She was paid by the woman's sons, who even took a holiday in her house in Morocco. Yet she could spend only one night a week with her five children, who lived in Barcelona, and the rest of the time had to leave them to fend for themselves because she lived in. Although he could have obtained a residence permit for Spain, the father of her children remained in Morocco because the first two children were too old to be admitted to Spain under family reunification. The youngest child was six, and she had left her when she was only a baby for six days a week in order to be the old woman's carer. There was no question of her being allowed to sleep with the baby: "You can't do these things. No. Everyone thinks, I don't know, about themselves. You can't do that."

Zenaida's terrible situation points to one of the greatest advantages to the employer of regarding the worker as part of the family, which is the erasure of the worker's own family. While being part of the family may be perceived by the employer as a great favour, for the worker it may be experienced as a denial of their humanity, a deep depersonalisation, as being perceived only in their occupational role, as a "domestic" rather than as a person with her own needs, her own life, and her own family outside of the employers' home (Palmer 1989). By incorporating the worker as "part of the family" employers can not only ignore the worker's other relationships, but feel good about doing so—for it is an honour to be part of the family.

I have highlighted the caring function of domestic work because it brings out the contradictions and tensions in paid domestic labour. But the slippage between

labour power and personhood, and the employer's power to command the whole person of the domestic worker, applies whatever function of domestic work the person is hired to perform. It is this slippage that can help us begin to understand what Bubeck sets out to explain, but never fully accounts for: how it is that some women exploit others within a general theory of care as women's work.

NOTE

1. This comment has stuck in my mind for years, but I can find no reference to it. I only know that I did not originate it.

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