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Agency as capabilities: Ukrainian women's narratives of social change and mobility

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SYNOPSIS

The article argues for the usefulness of the capability approach in understanding agency in situations of social change. It develops the notion of agency as a continuum of capabilities. Agency defined in this way comprises of various stages of resistance, action, reception and adaptation and involves different capabilities intrinsic to individual well-being, including mobility. Agency as a continuum of capabilities accounts for the element of chance inherent in situations where habits and routines cannot guide action in meaningful ways. It also grasps the new forms of action needed in situations of social change better than definitions of agency that emphasise deliberation and reflexivity. The article illustrates this re-conceptualisation of agency through a close-reading and follow-up of the lives of three Ukrainian women who recall post-Soviet 'transition', migration to Italy and their trajectories into, and out of, domestic work.

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet regime and the ensuing transformations caused some of the most radical social transformations in post-war Europe. The move from a centralised economy to a neoliberal market capitalism transformed the everyday lives of millions of people in Eastern Europe and altered the gender regimes in these countries, resulting in migration movements that are both gendered and gendering (cf. [Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992](#)). These migratory movements – among other social processes – have significantly transformed both the destination countries and the countries of origin and Ukraine was one of the most deeply affected countries ([Saarinen & Calloni, 2012](#); [Solari, 2011](#)). In this context, the article asks how to understand agency in a situation of radical social change? It argues that in situations of social change, habitual practices are no longer useful as new ways of acting and doing need to be invented. In such situations people need to put their existing capabilities into use in creating new ways of action. Hence, the article argues that capability approach is useful for understanding agency and that agency

should be understood as a continuum rather than a dualism. The argument is that understanding agency as a continuum of capabilities best grasps agency at times of drastic social change.

The article argues that in the same way as gender relations are foundational relationships in a society, social transformations are always gendered and gendering processes. Moreover, social transformations generate different kinds of mobilities in individual lives.¹ The article focuses on the interplay between gendered social and geographical mobilities. It is argued that individual social and geographical mobility always carries a gender dimension. In other words, processes of social mobility, such as deskilling or social advancement, are closely connected to gendered values and norms, gendered processes and divisions of labour among others. Similarly, as the introduction to this Special Issue discusses, and as the scholarship on gender and migration has demonstrated (see e.g. [Donato et al., 2006](#) for a review), gender is at the core of migration processes, and is part and parcel of geographical mobility. Finally, in the context of migration, geographical and social mobility are interlinked, as mobility often involves various social costs, including social downgrading and deskilling.

The article analyses these interlinked processes of gendered social and geographical mobilities through the case study of

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three Ukrainian women, Alla, Tatyana and Julia.² All three recall the post-Soviet 'transition'³, and their migration to Italy at the turn of the millennium, as well as their post-migration trajectories into and out of domestic work. I got to know the women during an 18-month period of extensive ethnographic fieldwork in 2004–2005 in Naples, Italy (Näre, 2012). In 2013, nearly ten years later, I contacted the women again and conducted several follow-up interviews via Skype backed up by e-mail exchange. This partial revisit to the lives of the three research participants is a means to grasp social and personal change across time (cf. Burawoy, 2003).

Here, I critically explore the current notions of agency and argue for the usefulness of the capability approach in understanding agency. Moreover, the article discusses how different forms of mobility (notably geographical and social mobility) are necessary means for social advancement. Mobility can then be understood as an intrinsic capability, but at the same time, the outcomes of mobilities can be ambivalent (see also Näre, 2009, 2014). One of the aims of the article is to examine the interplay between individual and collective agency and social structures (cf. Giddens, 1984). In order to put this idea into practice, I have adopted a writing strategy that combines the micro-level of individual experiences with the macro-level of structural forces. Therefore, I will first draw on the interview data to present how Alla, Tatyana and Julia experienced the structural changes of the post-socialist 'transition', followed by a close reading of the individual life trajectories of the three women.

The article is structured as follows. I first discuss the theoretical concepts which have informed my research, followed by a presentation of the methodology. I then examine how Ukrainian women recall the impact of the 'transition' in their lives and the reasons for migrating to Italy. Finally, I offer a close analysis of the trajectories of Alla, Julia and Tatyana, and examine how they managed to put their individual capabilities to use in order to exit domestic work.

Agency as a continuum of capabilities and gendered 'transition'

One of the dramatic effects of the post-socialist 'transition' and the subsequent economic crisis was the mass migration of women and men to countries within the European Union countries, but also globally. The literature on post-socialism, which for the most part, operates within a nation-state framework, has somewhat failed to connect these gendered migratory movements to the analysis of the current developments of the post-socialist societies (for important exceptions see Hrycak, 2011; Saarinen & Calloni, 2012; Solari, 2011; Passerini et al., 2007; see also Lulle, 2014; Näre, 2014). Yet, migration has changed and continues to transform the post-socialist societies, not only demographically (in contributing to depopulation), but also economically (in the form of remittances) and socially (in the form of transfer of ideas and practices, the so-called social remittances, for example see Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Since the 1980s, there has been an increased interest within the field of migration studies in women's autonomous labour migrations (see Morokvasic, 1984). This interest is commonly underpinned by an erroneous assumption that migration has also become a feminised phenomenon during that same period.

However, statistically women were as likely to migrate in the 1960s as they are today (Zlotnik, 2005). As Leah Briones has argued (2009), migrant women (typically domestic workers, refugees, survivors/victims of trafficking, etc.) have commonly been depicted as either victims who are at the mercy of their employers/smugglers/men, the local labour markets and the globalising economic structural forces, or, as self-supporting agents, who are able to demand their rights. Similar to Briones' (2009) analysis I argue that viewing the two perspectives as dichotomies is both problematic and redundant, and that we need a more nuanced and sensitive analysis that takes into account women's strategic use of mobility as a form of agency and as an intrinsic capability.

In the vast literature on the international division of paid reproductive labour, researchers have argued that female domestic workers have agency and are inventive in resisting the power inequalities inherent in paid reproductive labour (see Andall, 2000; Anderson, 2000; Lan, 2003; Parreñas, 2001). However, these studies tend to take the notion of agency for granted without properly defining it. There is also a tendency to focus on the employer–employee relationship, which is analysed as static within a specific time and place. Without a broader empirical time-frame, these research accounts fail to grasp the innovative ways through which female domestic workers can express their agency and achieve social mobility, sometimes long time after migrating and after the limited research period has ended. This article is an attempt to offer such an analysis by revisiting the lives of the interviewed women after several years. The focus is less on the classic formulation of the dilemma between structure and agency in social sciences, i.e. how structural aspects of society influence human agents (see e.g. Archer, 2003; Callinicos, 2004) than on how to understand agency in this context.

In the space available, I cannot do justice to the range of literature on the theorisation of agency in Social Sciences at large. Instead, I connect my argument to one specific, but influential tradition of agency, the Weberian tradition and its feminist critique (hence overlooking for instance the functionalist and Parsonian, interactionalist and pragmatist traditions). In my discussion on Ukrainian women's agency and mobility, I draw on feminist conceptualisations of agency. The classic sociological notion of agency is based on a Weberian conception of power. For Max Weber (1968: 22–24) social action is behaviour that is meaningfully oriented to the behaviour of others. In Weberian thinking, action is thus not only connected to rationality but also to power. A formulation of this idea is found with Anthony Giddens (1984: 14), who defines an agent as someone who can exercise power, who has the capacity to 'make a difference'. This notion of agency, which could be termed as a negative notion of agency (McNay, 2000) has been criticised by feminist theorists. Lois McNay (2000) has problematised the understanding of action 'mainly through the residual categories of resistance to or dislocation of dominant norms' (McNay, 2000, p. 4). McNay stresses the importance of understanding agency as a generative notion that triggers creative forms of action and involves 'accommodation or adaptation as much as denial' (McNay, 2000, p. 3). Like McNay I also argue for a dynamic notion of agency as useful in perceiving action and agency not only as *resistance* and *active* action, although these are also important aspects, but as

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