



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Domestic work–affective labor: On feminization and the coloniality of labor



Encarnacion Gutierrez-Rodriguez

Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 17 April 2014

SYNOPSIS

This paper argues for an understanding of domestic work as affective labor. It engages with the affective quality of reproductive labor by interrogating the organization of paid and unpaid domestic work in private households. Thus, while it attends to debates on emotional labor, its main focus is on the affective dimension of the social.

It does so by focusing on reproductive labor, in particular, domestic work and developing a feminist critique of affective labor through the analysis of the cultural predication of feelings associated with and infused in domestic work. In this regard, the cultural predication prescribing the social meaning attached to domestic work will be explored within the framework of feminization and coloniality. Thus, domestic work will be discussed as affective labor surfacing at the juncture of feminization and coloniality. Following this argument, the article firstly engages with feminist analyses on reproductive labor, feminization and domestic work. Secondly, it looks at private households and affective labor. Thirdly, it examines the relationship between paid domestic work and migration regimes from the angle of the coloniality of labor. Using these insights, the article explores the sensorial corporeality of racialized affect negotiated in and around domestic work. It concludes by arguing for a conceptualization of domestic work as affective labor.

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Introduction

This article's focus is on domestic work as affective labor. It engages with the affective quality of reproductive labor by interrogating the organization of paid and unpaid domestic work in private households. Thus, while it attends to debates on emotional labor (Carrington, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 2007), its main focus is on the affective dimension of the social. As such this article engages with the impact of feelings and emotions on social relationships and spaces (Ahmed, 2004; Brennan, 2004; Sedgwick, 2004). Following Spinoza's (1994) observation that affect drives us to act, the article explores the twofold character of affect as a texture of the social and as socially textured. It does so by focusing on reproductive labor, in particular, domestic work and developing a feminist critique of affective labor through the analysis of the cultural predication of feelings associated

with and infused in domestic work. It thus contributes to the debate on affective labor in feminist theory (Corsani, 2007; Federici, 2012; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Precarias a la Deriva, 2004; Weeks, 2011).

Engaging with the affective corporeality of domestic work, this article argues for an understanding of feelings and emotions as interlaced in the social semantics of place and time. In this regard, the cultural predication prescribing the social meaning attached to domestic work will be explored within the framework of feminization and coloniality. Thus, domestic work will be discussed as affective labor surfacing at the juncture of feminization and coloniality. Both processes describe social classification systems related to the creation of a hierarchical social order. In order to illustrate this rather abstract yet material dimension of corporeal affectivity in domestic work, the article uses interview extracts from a study conducted with colleagues on the interpersonal relationships

between female migrant domestic workers and their female employers in Austria, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2004¹ (Caixeta, Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Tate, & Vega Solís, 2004), other observations from research on undocumented Latin American domestic workers employed in private households in Germany and the United Kingdom conducted by the author between 2007 and 2013 are also considered (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010).

The discussion engages firstly with feminist analyses on reproductive labor, feminization and domestic work (Caixeta et al., 2004; Corsani, 2007; Federici, 2012; Precarias a la Deriva, 2004). Secondly, it moves to look at private households and affective labor. Thirdly, it explores the relationship between paid domestic work and migration regimes from the angle of the coloniality of labor (Quijano, 2000, 2005, 2008). Using these insights, the article explores the sensorial corporeality of racialized affect negotiated in and around domestic work. It concludes by arguing for a conceptualization of domestic work as affective labor. First, let us begin with the debate on reproductive labor, feminization and domestic work.

Reproductive labor, feminization and domestic work

According to the ILO, majority of domestic workers are women (82%), many of whom are migrants or children whose “work is undervalued, underpaid, [and] poorly regulated” (ETUC, 2012: 10). These characteristics resonate with features, which feminist activists and scholars have discussed as associated with the feminization of labor (Bair, 2010; Bakker, 2007; Elson, 1998). Domestic work epitomizes the social devaluation of feminized labor (Mies, 1999). This is articulated economically as the productive contribution of domestic work is consistently ignored in official calculations of GDP (cf. Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Folbre, 1994; Hewitson, 1999; Himmelweit, 1995; Pérez Orozco, 2004, 2010; Waring, 2004). It is also articulated socially as domestic work continues to be perceived as unproductive and unskilled labor, devoid of any societal value (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Weeks, 2011).

Feminist theory has challenged this perception (cf. Barrett, 1980; Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Delphy, 1984) and insisted on the constitutive value of domestic work for social reproduction (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Barker & Feiner, 2010; Bedford & Rai, 2010; Benería, 1979; Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2004; Kofman, 2012; Molyneux, 1979; Peterson, 2009). This calls into question Marxist views that restrict this labor merely to the sphere of reproduction by underscoring its productive force (cf. Jacobs, 2010; O'Hara, 1998; Redclift, 1985). More recently, feminist research has highlighted the emotional character of domestic work (cf. Boris & Parreñas, 2010; Carrington, 1999; Hochschild, 1983, 2003; Lan, 2006).

Taking these observations on board and considering the transformation of the organization of labor in post-industrial societies, feminist theorists and activists in Spain and Italy have placed a renewed focus on the question of reproduction (Benería & Sarasúa, 2011; Corsani, 2007; del Río, 2004; Fantone, 2007, 2011; Federici, 2006; Pérez Orozco, 2004; Precarias a la Deriva, 2004; Ruido, 2008; Sconvegno, 2007; Vega Solís, 2009). In doing so, they consider care work (Spanish: *trabajo de cuidados*) in particular as a pivotal axis for organizing precarious work. For example, the Madrid-based feminist group Precarias a la Deriva has drawn attention to the

significance of care work for social reproduction by focusing on personal caring activities and re-evaluating the ethical implications of care for society (Precarias a la Deriva, 2004). Thus, Precarias has complicated the Marxist division of productive and reproductive labor. Introducing care work as a hybrid category, Precarias defines care work as a hinge between reproductive and productive labor. Care work articulates the increasing interpenetration of these spheres in post-industrial societies, a tendency that they coined “the feminization of precarity” (Precarias a la Deriva, 2004). In a similar vein, other feminist analyses of the impact of the economic crisis in Spain and Italy suggest that we depart from taking the feminization and the precarization of labor as vantage points from which to understand crisis capitalism (Benería & Sarasúa, 2011; Carraquer Oto, 2013; Carrasco Bengoa, 2013; Federici, 2012; Martín Palomo, 2008, 2013). Acknowledging that feminization does not simply refer to the quantitative dimension of the gendered division of work, that is, to the overrepresentation of women within low-income and insecure work sectors, this debate has drawn attention to the historical and cultural implications of feminization as a process of labor devaluation. Thus, feminization connotes the cultural predication of work historically delivered by feminized subjects as “inferior.”

While the feminist analysis of crisis capitalism emphasizes the relevance of reproductive labor through the lens of care work, some feminist research warns us not to subsume reproductive labor under the umbrella term “care work.” “Care work” refers to a specific range of activities engaging with direct or indirect personal care (Folbre, 2006) and to professional pathways such as nursing, child care or care of the elderly. In contrast, domestic work is not considered a profession—with the exception of the “housekeeper” in Germany and Austria, which involves the management of the household and household workers. Subsuming domestic work under the term “care” may obfuscate the “dirty work” of physical activities dealing with dirt (Anderson, 2000). Yet, as numerous studies have shown, in light of everyday practices care workers very often need to deliver domestic work and domestic workers are requested to do care work (c.f., Anderson, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Lan, 2006). As Silvia Federici (2012) notes, despite the interchangeability between domestic and care work, the assumption that reproductive labor is care work and thus “affective labor” needs to be critically interrogated.

Federici stresses the historical conditions through which reproductive labor has been imposed on women and become a terrain of women's agency and struggle. She notes that the practices developed in this field that have been passed on over generations represent the creation of common wisdom and collective knowledge acquired through experiences of oppression and resistance (Federici, 2004). For Federici, subsuming reproductive labor under the label “affective labor” fails to acknowledge the persistence of a gendered division of work, whereby reproductive labor addresses a specific quality of labor that is related to certain physical tasks, personal and emotional skills. Thus, “the fast-food female workers who must flip hamburgers at McDonald's with a smile or the stewardesses who must sell a sense of security to the people she attends to” (Federici, 2012: 122) are not synonymous with the care workers who need to complete specific physical tasks and deploy emotional

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