

Taking Care: Migration and the Political Economy of Affective Labor

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a) As a starting point for my presentation I would like to take a very particular figure, that is the caretaker (*badante*). It seems that this neologism, which has been recently introduced in the Italian public discourse and legislation (with the creation of privileged paths of regularization for caretakers themselves), expresses the awareness of the fact that there is a particular sector of the labor market – the *care labor* market – which is becoming increasingly important in European and Western societies, and that this sector is dominantly, if not exclusively, occupied by migrants. I think that the semantic shift from domestic work to caretaking labor is significant from many points of view. On the one hand, it refers to structural transformations in our societies, such as change in family structure and gender roles, and aging; on the other hand, it can open up a more general discussion on the fact that “care”, in the meaning of an attention which is rooted in a certain kind of sociability and is therefore given for free, is increasingly becoming something rare, unusual. Only something rare, indeed, needs to be purchased on the market and is therefore bound to be commoditized. “Caretakers” are in this sense indeed very specific and peculiar figures within the contemporary composition of living labor, but they share at the same time – on a very abstract level of analysis, of course – a set of characteristics which are increasingly becoming constitutive of labor. On the one hand, this is a point which can be made in regard to other subject positions within labor market, which are themselves increasingly occupied by migrants (and predominantly migrant *women*) in Europe and in the West: I think of sex workers, but also of the women who sell a very particular kind of “services” – that is, the services of being *good wives*. On the other hand, if we take a look at the discussion on postfordism, one cannot escape the impression that the affective supplement which seems to be implied by the concept of caretaker is going to become a key feature of labor in general, with the consequence that the boundary itself between labor and life, but also between commodity and not-commodity is being blurred.

b) The concept of «affective labor» has been developed in recent years within the discussion on postfordism both on a general, theoretical level (see for instance M. Hardt, *Affective Labor*, in «Boundary2», 26, 1999, 2, 89-100), and on a more empirical level, for instance in many enquiries on the transformations of service work, and particularly of labor conditions in the health care industry (see for instance A.M. Ducey – H. Gautney – D. Wetzel, *Regulating Affective Labor Communication Skills Training in the Health Care Industry*, in «The Sociology of Job Training. Research in the Sociology of Work», 12, 2003, 49-72). In these analyses, affect is considered to be the substance of interaction and communication: contrary to “emotion”, affect is defined by its relational character, and cannot be reduced to an internalized feeling. The production of affect, in a way which recalls Spinoza’s philosophy, is not conceivable otherwise than in terms of the production of a relation. Defined in these terms, affects seem to be at stake everywhere within a labor world which has been analyzed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (*Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999) as dominated by connections, and by the imperative of building connections, of defining one’s own personality as the knot of a network (or better still: of multiple networks). In order to be successful in a world where labor is becoming increasingly flexible, casual, and “precarious”, one has to show that he or she is capable of building relations, of producing affects. In a situation in which the boundary between friendship and business is being itself blurred (are you building a connection with a certain person because you like him or her, or because he or she can be useful for you?), specific problems arise, which can nurture specific disturbances: On the one hand, you have to be flexible, to be mobile, to adapt yourself to changing circumstances, on the other hand, in order to build up “connections”, you have to be fully

yourself, to be “authentic” (cf. Ibid., 552 ss.). I would like to locate the concept of affective labor within the framework of analysis of postfordism which has been developed by Paolo Virno. In his analysis of postfordism, Virno stresses the fact that subjectivity itself – with its most intimate qualities: language, affects, desires, and so on – is “put to value” in contemporary capitalism. In his opinion, this happens not only with particular jobs or in particular “sectors” (e.g. in the sector of services), being rather a general characteristic of contemporary living labor, although shared with very different degrees from different subject positions. I totally agree in particular with Paolo Virno, when he writes that the very Marxian definition of labor-power, a definition which stresses the *potentiality* of all the physical and intellectual attitudes which are contained in a living body, seems to find its full realization in this situation, and that the concept of “biopolitics” itself should be accordingly reworked (P. Virno, *Il ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1999, 122-130).

c) Within this analytical framework, the aim of my presentation is to locate migrant labor – and more generally migrants’ experience, and “form of life” – in the context of the transformations of labor I have briefly, and indeed very abstractly, referred to. A first problem must be addressed: When I talk about “migrant labor”, migrants’ “experience”, and “form of life”, maybe many of you think I’m “essentializing” the category of migrant, that is, I’m producing an “ideal type” which does not recognize the plurality of experience, forms of life, and even labor conditions, a plurality which is crisscrossed by gender, “race”, and class differences, as a key feature of migrants’ condition itself. That’s not the point: I *do* acknowledge this “plurality”, and I think that categories as “migrant labor”, and “migrant experience” must be handled with care, both on the level of theory and on the level of empirical research. But just because I think that the relation between a plurality of subject positions and elements of commonality is one of the key theoretical and political problems in any attempt to understand the present composition of living labor (and in my opinion, which is not necessarily the opinion of everybody using the concept, it is the real vantage of the concept of *multitude* that it compels us to keep this point always in mind), I’m also convinced that we need to develop a new methodology which allows us to forge concepts able to grasp this problem. To put it briefly: We cannot get rid of “generalizing” concepts precisely because we are aware of their limits, which are the limits of a commonality which cannot be stressed at the expenses of the plurality of peculiar subject positions which defines the composition of living labor. In this way we can talk for example of migrant labor as a subjective figure which shows an element of commonality which is shared by the whole of contemporary living labor (that is, a general attitude to mobility and flexibility, the subjective counterpart of the «flexible regime of accumulation» described for instance by David Harvey), without for this reason on the one hand sacrificing the subjective and objective peculiarity of the experience of mobility by migrants, and without on the other hand forgetting the radical diversity of migrants’ experience itself. In a similar way, I think it is possible, as I shall attempt to do here, to review some recent literature on migrant “caretakers”, domestic, and sex workers, in order to derive some insights which can be useful in a general analysis of contemporary migration, without eliciting on the one hand the differences between different kinds of migrants, and without on the other hand producing the image of an “homogeneous” migrant caretaker, domestic, and sex worker.

d) One more preliminary remark is needed, and it has to do with the particular kind of research I’ve been doing for several years on migration. I’ve begun to get interested in migration not so much in the course of my experience as a scholar (which has indeed centered at least in an early stage on quite different topics), but rather in my experience as an activist. Coming from the Italian autonomous movement, and living till a couple of years ago in Genoa, I was deeply impressed by the transformations of urban landscape which was brought about beginning in the mid 1980s by an increasing presence of migrants. When, in 1993, Genoa became the city where the first riots against the presence of migrants happened, I was among the people who started a very important political experience, that led to the building of an association of which many Italian and migrants (especially from Morocco and Senegal) became members and which has led a number of effective, and rather successful struggles against racism and for migrants’ rights. Since then my political activity has basically focused on the issue of migration, also within the so called global movement which emerged

with the “battle of Seattle” and became an important political actor in Italy (and indeed in Europe) with the days of July 2001 in Genoa, where the first – and the only peaceful – demonstration against the G8 meeting was precisely a demonstration for migrants’ rights. Only a couple of years after the events of 1993 I began to work on migration also as a scholar, editing and writing books (most notably *Diritto di fuga. Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione*, Verona, Ombre corte, 2001) and contributing several essays on the subject. Although I’ve worked (and I continue to work) with several scholars who do field research, my own contribution has been rather theoretical. On the one hand, I tried to address some key issues arising within the framework of the so called Italian autonomist Marxism when the subject of migration is taken seriously into consideration. On the other hand, as a political theorist, I’ve been particularly interested in analyzing the political sides of migration movements: to put it briefly, I tried both to show how migration allows us to look from a particular point of view at the general transformations which are reshaping the whole of citizenship in Europe, and how it is possible to consider migratory movements themselves as *social movements*, stressing the agency and subjective protagonism of migrants. At the cross point among my interests in the field of migration research, are precisely the concepts of subject and subjectivation, which I try to develop putting together insights and challenges coming from different sources, such as the works of Negri, Žižek, and Rancière.

e) To put it very briefly: I’m deeply convinced that contemporary migrations are a tremendous laboratory of transformations of subjectivity, that they are a field of tensions within which old and new technologies of governmentality which aim at producing precise subject positions are confronted with a set of social practices and behaviors which can be conceptualized as processes of subjectivation. By the way, I think that the predominance of a “cultural” approach in contemporary migration studies, independently of the evaluation of the works produced within this research line, reflects a kind of awareness of the fact that strategic transformations of subjectivity are at stake in contemporary migration movements. Anyway, I want to focus here, although very briefly, on some recent researches which have to do with the particular kinds of “affective labor” that I have taken as my starting point in this presentation: “caretakers”, domestic, and sex workers. These workers are mostly women, and this is a first point to be highlighted, in a situation in which what has been loosely described in a section of the literature on postfordism as “feminization” of labor coexists with a more substantial (and difficult to be denied) feminization of global migration. Women are on the move as never before in history, this is a sentence that you can read as commonsense in many works on migration. Which are the transformations of gender roles – that is, of the “sexual contract” which is, as Carole Pateman has so well showed, the unrecognized presupposition of the social contract, and therefore of a given shape of the “subject” – which are related to this process? We can find a first, provocative, answer in the work edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman. Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2003): «the first world», this is what the two editors of the book write in their *Introduction*, «takes on a role like that of the old-fashioned male in the family – pampered, entitled, unable to cook, clean, and find his socks. Poor countries take on a role like that of the traditional woman within the family – patient, nurturing, and self-denying. A division of labor feminists critiqued when it was “local” has now, metaphorically, gone global» (Ibid., 11 s.). Although the way Ehrenreich and Hochschild assume the divide between «first world» and «poor countries» seems to me too rigid, I think indeed that the point of view of the «international division of reproductive labor» must be considered strategic in the research on migration and domestic work, in order to understand the political economy of this particular kind of affective labor (which is also an often unrecognized presupposition of the increasing importance of affective labor as a whole in contemporary capitalism, which has been just described as leading to a kind of “feminization” of labor). Important researches, such as the ones lead by Jacqueline Andall (*Migration and Domestic Service. The Politics of Black Women in Italy*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000) and by Bridget Anderson (*Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labor*, London – New York, Zed Books, 2000), have showed how deeply this sector of the labor market is shaped by hierarchization and by latent and explicit forms of racism. I find Bridget Anderson’s work particularly interesting, since she has stressed that the peculiarity of domestic labor market consists in the fact that at stake here is not so much the labor time, but rather the personality of the worker as a whole, her capacity of producing and selling

affects. And it is precisely in this field of tensions, which is shaped by so different affects such as racism and “caretaking”, that specific forms of subjectivity are forged, that for example the very meaning of the roles of “wife” and “mother” are deeply transformed. Moreover, as the work by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (*Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*, Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 2001) has particularly showed, the analysis cannot be confined to the interplay among migrant domestic workers and “receiving societies”: If the “countries of origins” are taken into consideration, a more complex dynamic emerges, in which the attempt of many women to escape from patriarchal relationships often plays a role in the migration process, while gender and class subordination is reproduced within the social space of the migratory experience both in the “receiving society” and in the country of origin. It is the same complex dynamic that has been recently highlighted – and worked out of the rhetoric of sex-trafficking – by Rutvica Andrijasevic in her brilliant research work on sex workers coming from «eastern» Europe (see especially her Ph.D. dissertation, *Trafficking in Women and the Politics of Mobility in Europe*, to be downloaded at <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/dissertations/2005-0314-013009/index.htm>).

f) At stake in this dynamic, as can be particularly well seen in researches that have to do with affective workers, is precisely migrants’ subjectivity. And while it is clear, and it is increasingly recognized also by mainstream migration studies (especially by the so called “new economics of migration”), that migration cannot be understood by reading migrants’ agency exclusively in terms of individual agency, it seems to me that the researches I have briefly discussed also put into question an other kind of representation of migrants’ subjectivity, widely circulating in scientific and public discourse: that is, the image of the migrant as a «*traditional*» subject, totally embedded in family and ethnic networks, as the “other” of the Western individual, which can mirror himself or herself in that image, deriving gratification or expressing resentment. We know that this image of the migrant is very present both on the level of political philosophy and on the level of commonsense. In the opinion of Michael Walzer (*What it Means to Be an American*, New York, Marsilio Publishers, 1992), for instance, migrants play a particularly positive role within American society just because they import the family and community ties that life in a capitalist society continuously destroys, ensuring a kind of affective supplement to social kit. And it is clear, as Bonnie Honig has pointed out in her beautiful book *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton – Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001), that Walzer’s “progressive” attitude is bound to be elicited in a set of discourses that emphasize the fact that migrants can contribute to reinforce the roles, expectations, and social norms which have been powerfully challenged in the West by the movements of the last decades. It is no abstract discourse: A particular, and indeed flourishing, sector of the market of the affects, the one in which transnational marriage agencies are operating, has grown around a male demand of patriarchal normalization of gender roles, offering old-fashioned women for whom «their husband and family come first», «women with traditional values as we had 40 years ago» to quote an US-American client of these agencies. And it’s once again clear that the xenophilia which is nurtured by exoticism and fantasies of a “new masculinity” becomes xenophobia when it comes out that many of the women that had been presented as docile and loving were only interested in the green card, and were just waiting for the first occasion to leave their husbands... I think that these “lines of escape” must be traced and mapped if we are to draw a realistic and politically productive image of the migrants’ subjectivity, an image, to quote Honig, which allows us to come out of the dichotomy of the idea of migrant «as either a *giver* to or as a *taker* from the nation». We might break the resulting vicious circle of xenophilia and xenophobia, Honig suggests, «by thinking about immigrants in relation to democracy, rather than the nation, and by thinking of taking as the very thing that immigrants have to give us» (Ibid., 99).

g) Let’s try to summarize. Migrants’ subjectivity is neither to be reduced to the icon of the “individual”, nor to a “traditional” subject totally embedded within family and ethnic networks. What seems to be characteristic of the social experience of contemporary migration, remaining on a level of very abstract analysis, is that within that experience complex systems of belonging and identity construction are experiencing deep transformations, are constantly undone, challenged, and rebuilt. This is a particular kind of “affective labor”, which appears to be inscribed within the

composition of contemporary living labor by the strategic position that migrant labor occupies in it. The subjective experience of mobility is not to be separated from this kind of affective labor, and when I talk of migrants' flight and right to escape I always point to this complex of problems, which can be the source of an incredible amount of pain as well as the basis for a radical reinvention of freedom and equality. But on the other hand, my discourse on migration, flight, and right to escape, is also based on a radical rereading of the role of labor mobility in historical capitalism, which has been developed in recent years by such important works as Yann Moulier Boutang's *De l'esclavage au salariat. Économie historique du salariat bridé* (Puf, Paris, 1998) and Peter Linebaugh's and Markus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2000). To put it shortly: These and other researches have showed that capitalism's relation to labor mobility has always been and continues to be deeply ambivalent. On the one hand it's true that there is no capitalism without labor mobility (and without migration, we can add); but on the other hand, considering capitalism in its global and historical scope, mobility has always been disciplined and limited by more or less "despotic" means, while "free" (waged) labor has always coexisted with a plurality of forms of forced labor. Mobility has always been a contested field, crisscrossed by subjective practices and behaviors through which the subjects of living labor have challenged the capitalistic norm of production, labor, and life. I'm deeply convinced that the *turbulence* of contemporary global migration, to borrow the term which has been introduced by the Australian scholar Nikos Papastergiadis (*The Turbulence of Migration. Globalization, Deterritorialization und Hybridity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000), consists precisely in the fact that what I have called the ambivalence of labor mobility reaches its peak in the age of "globalization". Working on this hypothesis, I'm developing together with other scholars and activists in different European countries, the idea of the *autonomy of migration* (see for instance S. Mezzadra, *Capitalisme, Migration et luttes sociales. Notes préliminaires pour une théorie de l'autonomie des migrations*, in «Multitudes», 19, 2004, 17-30). What we mean talking about the autonomy of migration is precisely that it is impossible to understand migratory movements reducing them to the "laws" of labor demand and supply which should govern the «international division of labor», that migratory movements are crisscrossed by a set of subjective behaviors, claims, desires, affects, imaginations structurally *exceeding* the «objective» and structural causes which are of course very important in determining them. It is this moment of *excess* which is politically strategic, since in regulating and disciplining it new technologies of domination and new modalities of exploitation are forged, while only in valorizing it a politics of the multitude can reinvent the concepts of liberty and equality. Whether this politics will still speak the language of citizenship and democracy, although in a radical shape, or will be compelled to invent new concepts and new worlds is one of the questions I would like to leave open for the discussion.