

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik (ed.), *From Slovenia to Egypt. Aleksandrinke's Trans-Mediterranean Domestic Workers' Migration and National Imagination*

V & R unipress, Göttingen, 2015, pp. 270.

Aleksandrinstvo is the general name of the phenomenon of mass emigration from the western Slovenian region of Goriška to Egypt, whose protagonists, *aleksandrinke*, were young women: widows, wives, and mothers who sought short or long-term employment in Egyptian cities. They mostly worked as chambermaids, cooks, and various other kinds of domestic helpers, frequently as nannies, sometimes as governesses, teachers, and wet nurses. Since the destination of their migration was the port city of Alexandria, at home they were referred to as *aleksandrinke* – Alexandrian women – and under this name they remain recorded in the collective memory.

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik opens her edited volume with this introduction – simple and concise, but at the same time detailed, clear, explanatory and comprehensive, addressed to the Slovenian reader, but even more to the international one, accompanying them into a historically and sociologically in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of *aleksandrinstvo*, within the folds of memory narrated by the protagonists and, more generally, in the reconstruction of the Slovenian social imagination.

At the same time, in these few introductory lines, Milharčič Hladnik outlines some of the key constructs, theoretical and methodological perspectives and thematic contents that will be adopted and investigated in the book. She situates her chapter into the field of international migration studies, focusing her attention on the gender dimension, observed through an intersectional perspective. The intersections – within a post-colonial interpretive framework – between gender identity, class position, generational belonging, and socio-familiar placement can be noticed immediately. But the attention paid to the transnational dimension of migration is also evident, or, perhaps more specifically, a “Sayadian” sensibility emerges in the way she observes the migratory experience; a sensibility that explores the experiences of *aleksandrinke* by recomposing the split between the society of origin and the society of arrival, between the context of emigration and that of immigration. To complete this assumption, she employs the construct of the *translocational positionality* and the analysis of the multiple placements experienced by migrant women during their transnational biographies. This leads immediately to the book's central theme: the domestic and care work performed by migrant women. Female workers who, at this particular historical juncture, are not retracing the traditional East-West or North-South trajectories, but are travelling south-east. A geographical trajectory that follows the movements of colonial history which drove the European upper classes, in this case especially the Italian upper bourgeoisie, to Egypt – and with them, many members of the working class “at the service of” the former – at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Finally, the theme of memory is suggested, individual and collective, constructed, reproduced and passed down through storytelling (Hahn; Hoerder).

Milharčič Hladnik conducts an innovative and extraordinary relevant investigation of the topic, creating a dialogue between the study of the historical background and the sociological analysis and perspectives, making these disciplines compatible and mutually reinforced, bringing together the experiences of *aleksandrinke* and their families left behind in the villages of Slovenian Goriška with those of the many migrant domestic and care workers with their children and families left behind studied by contemporary sociology.

This volume, that is, creates a link between the *aleksandrinke* of the past and the “contemporariness of *aleksandrinstvo*”. It is not “only” a historical and symbolic connection between comparable social phenomena, but focuses, today, on the same social actors coming from the same socio-territorial context that were involved yesterday: it connects the social experience of *aleksandrinstvo* with the contemporary cross-border commuting experience of Slovenian (and former Yugoslav) women who cross the border between the Goriška-Primorska region and Italy, to work in the homes of Italian families (Hrzenjak; Milharčič Hladnik).

The book includes various contributions (Kalc; Koprivec) that – from different perspectives and using different methodologies – provide a historical framework for both the local context of emigration, its economic, social and cultural aspects and its collective representations, and the international context of migration (Biancani; Koprivec; Skubic). In doing so, it shows that it is not possible to do sociology of migrations without the necessary support of the history of migrations and the history of the national actors involved. Above all, however, the lesson of Sayad is put into practice, which emphasizes that the sociology of migrations – and perhaps sociology in general – must take a self-reflective stance and cannot be exempted from unveiling the relations of domination, the asymmetries of power and the economic inequalities between nations and continents: the political relations within which the discipline is inserted, and those which are incorporated into the collective and individual biographies of migrant women employed in domestic and care work, in their bodies, brains and hearts put to work.

In “From Slovenia to Egypt”, the individual stories of *aleksandrinke* therefore become paradigmatic narratives of the history of colonial and domination relations between classes and nations, including the Italian upper-class families settled in Egypt and the families of the rural villages of the Goriška region (that was first Habsburg, then Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian, then Austrian and Yugoslav and finally Slovenian); their words become an embodied paradigm of the official and collective history. A history that is generally declined in the masculine (*his-story*), but that here becomes a history told from the female point of view, through a political and academic treatment similar to that implemented by subaltern studies, which have given voice to those who are usually excluded from the historical narration. In doing so, the macro dimension is also tensioned with the micro dimension, without neglecting the aspects of the meso-level. It is thus observed on the one hand as the structural relationships affect the daily lives of the individual subjects and their social trajectories; on the other hand, as the individual actors unfold their agency, draw up their strategies and tactics within the structural interstices; and still further, through the placing of these individuals into the context of nuclear family decision-making, the network of parental ties, the village relationship system, and the framework of the self-attributed intersections of social identities.

The volume is also infused, more or less consciously, by a Bourdieusian interest. In addition to a focus on the changing aspects of socio-historical reality, gender relations, family relations, symbolic representations and the material aspects related to the experience of migration and care work (Lukšič Hacin), the book inevitably depicts the mechanics of the process of social reproduction. As anticipated, the work reveals how, by observing a social phenomenon located in a specific historical moment (that is, between the second half of the nineteenth century and 1954) it is possible to observe and analyze how various social dynamics are continuously reproduced.

One of the focuses, for example, is the transnational dimension involving migrants, experiences, expectations, family and village relationships, care practices and maternity (Hahn). The book shows that transnationalism is not a “new” phenomenon, but rather a new *perspective* which can be employed to bring out hidden or neglected items, experiential and socio-cultural aspects, their symbolic and normative power through the migration space, and the influences of the extended family from the context of the emigration to the immigration society. Above all, the transnational perspective is intertwined with a gender-analytical perspective, taking into account the contribution of husbands and fathers in promoting or opposing the redrawing of gender relations and the transnational division of reproductive work.

Similarly, the research included in the volume addresses the historical and sociological “novelty” of women’s presence in the migration scenario and shows how ancient are the roots of the global care chain and the persistence of the phenomenon in space and time: a colonial robbery of affections, emotions and reproductive work that traces – over the centuries – the familiar process of market globalization.

Another central aspect of the book is the focus on social representations that have been constructed on *aleksandrinke*: the *State thought* aimed at controlling their bodies and their behaviour as women, and their mobility as migrants (Hahn). On the one hand, these workers were either labelled with the stigma of amoral deviant, mothers who became victims of public blame and social condemnation because of the abandonment to which they forced their children and their families in general, or, conversely, as passive victims and examples of sacrifice at the centre of an idealized worship of gratitude (Lukšič Hacin; Mihurko Poniž; Mlekuž). Both of these are paternalistic and reductive representations that are directly linkable to the public images addressed to the women who emigrated after the implosion of the countries of so-called real socialism, the countries of Eastern Europe – unlike the men, whose migration has been portrayed as a duty of a male breadwinner, but rarely framed as a *gendered experience*. On the other hand, the condemnation of migrants, represented as women of “dubious reputation”, was inserted into the framework of the process of the construction of national identities, into a socio-spatial context where borders have frequently and repeatedly shifted, with conflicts, sufferings and, above all, national rhetoric. Once again, then, women’s bodies were bodies to be controlled as symbols whose meaning was made out of them; bodies representing the honour of the motherland, which implies the honour of the men called to defend the motherland (the term again refers to the symbolism of family and gender) and, therefore, women become the object of patriarchal protection. Ultimately, they are labelled as bodies that, through the experience of migration and border crossing, are potentially exposed to the view and access of others, endangering both the honour of the men of the family for whom they worked and the honour of the men and families left behind, especially since they are bodies that are forced to devote their attention to other men and other children, to dedicate their productive and reproductive potential to other families.

But the image of those left behind, the male honour of *aleksandrinke* husbands and fathers, is also threatened by the so called “gender paradox”: a contradiction which means that they are the breadwinner in their own families and the maid-servant of other families, but also which means that their transnational act changes everything both “there” and “here” and reconstructs the roles and normative boundaries between genders (Hahn). A redrawing process that – according to Milharčič Hladnik – is necessarily *relational*, as the gender construct itself is relational. So both the gender studies and the international migration studies are expanded through a perspective of *engendering migration*.

At the same time, Milharčič Hladnik invites the social scientist to reflect on the many gender stereotypes that often constitute the scientific *doxa* and to apply these considerations to their empirical research. First of all, her invitation is to not consider “*gender as a synonym for women*”; then, not to think that intimacy and the family sphere is an area from which men are excluded; not to legitimize scientifically male absence from the care dimension; not to search for a linear and unidirectional causal explanation in order to gain a mechanistic understanding of social changes and, specifically, the changes that international migration undoubtedly brings within the intertwining of family and community relationships. Due to this last aspect, the volume shows how the emigration of women from the Goriška region to Egypt was planned and negotiated in different ways and with different aims within the family context of origin: sometimes it was well accepted by the domestic aggregate and from the male component of the family that had helped to organize the transnational family; sometimes it triggered a process of family reunification with the husbands in Egypt, using the logic of a collective migration strategy; sometimes it was fuelled by the search for individual “migratory dividends”, as a strategy of emancipation from an unsatisfactory family context and from no longer tolerable patriarchal relations (Lukšič Hacin) – similarly to what emerges from the narratives of many protagonists of contemporary migrations that increase the ranks of the army of (care) labour in Europe and the United States; sometimes, finally, it was followed by returning home, where, however, due to social condemnation and exclusion from the family and village network, it resulted in a further emigration with no more return (Hoerder).

So, when will the aleksandrinke truly return “home”? Milharčič Hladnik, quoting some of the interviewees, answers:

It is only now that they have truly “come home” in the sense that the people understand the complexity of their decisions, the existential need for their departures, the exceptionality of their work and payments. Aleksandrinke have “come home” only today, when their experience is understood as an experience of cosmopolitanism, transculturality, resourcefulness, courage, and dignity. To be understood despite the never-ending stream of moralist discourse in literature and film and in the Orientalist shaming of the places of their working addresses, means to “arrive in heaven” – to rest in peace.

Francesco Della Puppa