

NEW MODES OF CAPITALIST DOMINATION: TRANSNATIONAL SPACE BETWEEN TURKEY AND MOLDOVA¹

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Istanbul is a metropolis which has more than one centre. Located on the European and Asian shores of the Bosphorus, the two parts of the city are connected by two suspension bridges. The ferries, however, are the moving core of the city both in practice and in the generally perceived image of Istanbul. Attractive to traders and tourists alike, this *perpetuum mobile* of a city accommodates transnational activities in which particular nationalities typically tend to congregate in certain districts. The fall of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union resulted in one particularly intense period of activity. During fieldwork in Moldova I was told about Istanbul from the perspective of Gagauz temporary migrants in the late 1990s. Their narratives described the Laleli neighbourhood as if it were 'downtown Istanbul'. Such a perception is rather telling: just as they are untroubled by the marginality of this local district, so they do not see the implications of their fringe status in the production process. In this article I argue that through such a particular understanding of their environment and themselves these migrant labourers become part of the field which creates new restrictive social space. The performance of their labour is predicated upon transnational fields under neoliberal conditions (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002). Here I explore one dimension or manifestation of neoliberalism, namely the individualization of inequalities through the reconfiguring of gender, class and ethnic belonging (Clarke 2004, Maskovsky and Kingfisher 2001). The inequalities referred to here exist in a restrictive social field in which labourers have no means of changing their position. By exploring the conditions of labour in this transnational field it is possible to see how inclusion comes about and at the same time how new forms of domination emerge.

The aforementioned 'downtown Istanbul' offers an ideal starting-point for my analysis of transnational encounters. On a major street in the Laleli district, as in many other neighbourhoods, a young man is selling fruits on a wheeled wooden carriage. When asked the price of grapes he replies in fluent Turkish '*dört milyon*' – four million. A large woman wearing sweatpants approaches and asks '*vinograd kacha?*', meaning 'what is the price of the grapes?'. The sentence is constructed in Turkish, but she uses the Russian word for 'grape'. The young

street-vendor replies '*dva million*' in broken Russian. This scene is only surprising to those of us who do not expect that in order to be an effective merchant in Laleli, a Turkish person selling fruit would have to know Russian. We know that many large cities have their ethnic enclaves and transnational commercial space. Yet it was not until the late nineties that Turkey began to participate in this type of transnational encounter. In the early 1980s, Laleli was a site for Arabic-speaking tourist-related commercial activities, but only in the 1990s, as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, was it transformed into a prominent market for mutual transnational trade (Keyder 1999).

Unlike the transactions of the previous so-called 'suitcase commerce' in outdoor markets of the early and mid-nineties, Laleli now houses stores selling consumer goods – mainly clothes and shoes – priced in euros (Yükseker 2004). Walking crisscross through the local streets, one sees a mix of hotels, offices for import and export companies, agencies that specialize in travel to and from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Eastern and Central Europe, as well as small bazaars – some of which operate for only six months a year during the presence of circular migrants from the FSU countries and Eastern and Central Europe. The existence of such markets serves as a useful reminder of the conditions of the transnational social field. These markets, which exist because both the buyers and sellers come from abroad, exemplify an opening that was available to foreign commercial activities. Were it not for the involvement of these foreign buyers and sellers, the Turkish economy – despite its highly developed adaptability – might not have been able to accommodate such cyclical markets in view of the high level of unemployment in Turkey. Indeed, while such markets can thrive on the margins, the way the domestic labour market affects immigration and the presence of migrant workers are much more visible issues in the public discourse. Another such opening is the overwhelming presence of Russian-speaking female shop assistants in most of the Laleli stores. Along the streets, female shop assistants, many with bleached blonde hair and brightly coloured clothes, can typically be seen sitting in front of a woman's clothing shop or a perfume shop. When they try to attract the attention of a female passer-by they usually address them in Russian, assuming that the

potential customer is a Russian speaker.

This district has turned into a transnational postsocialist enclave and offers a portal on the wider dynamics of permanent, temporary and circular migration. A diverse spectrum of male and female migrant labourers can be found here. In terms of their income level, the women workers range from domestics at one end of the scale to madams (who manage and organize sex labour services) at the other. Most of these persons are speakers of Russian (either as a *lingua franca* of the FSU and some Eastern and Central European peoples and/or as their native tongue). As for Turkish speakers, most of the stores, restaurants, and cafes are owned and operated by Turkish men, many of whom also speak some Russian that they have picked up through their interactions with Russian speakers. Owing to its reputation as a kind of 'red light district', many Turkish women are deterred from shopping in this part of town. As a result of these transformations, Laleli is now a multi-currencied, bilingual *transnational* space that connects not only Istanbul to formerly socialist states, but peoples of formerly socialist states to each other.

Further up from the main roads that connect Laleli to the neighbouring Aksaray, pockets of open space are used to park minibuses and large vans bearing Moldovan, Ukrainian or Russian number plates. Lists of destinations written in Cyrillic on cardboard can be seen affixed to the back doors of these vehicles. These vans transport various goods between migrant labourers and their families back home in the former socialist republics. This service is not only cheap compared to other ways of shipping goods, it is also rather special due to the flexibility that it offers in terms of packaging and timing. Of the many vans, three parked together on one street corner have inscribed upon them the names of towns and villages in Southern Moldova – a region predominantly inhabited by the Gagauz². Although it was a very different setting, this corner of Istanbul – which I came to refer to as home to an 'informal courier service' – became an extension of my fieldwork site in Moldova. Gagauz domestics and other temporary migrants come to this part of town for shopping and to this particular corner to send their parcels home. Here they meet other temporary migrants from Moldova. When they talk to each other they are the persons from particular towns and villages. What is underlined in these encounters is their ethnic and/or place-bound identities and not their positions as temporary illegal workers. This meeting point reflects some of the conditions of life at home and in Turkey for the Gagauz domestic workers. They speak Gagauz, Russian and Turkish and very seldom Moldovan. They are the citizens of

the Republic of Moldova who for this reason may need to travel to the Turkish capital Ankara in order to renew their passports or resolve their Moldova-related bureaucratic problems. They see themselves as responsible mothers, daughters and wives who strive to help their family survive. Unlike in the past, their children need more money for higher education; what is more, irrespective of their age, they all want better clothing in accordance with the newer consumption patterns; medical care of any ill person in the family also requires money since there is no longer a socialist welfare state to fully cover such expenses, and so on.

Most of the time referred to as the poorest country in Europe by the European Union, Moldova is a prime example of the difficulties associated with political and economic transition in Eastern and Central Europe. The Gagauz of Southern Moldova have been particularly harshly affected by these conditions. In view of their Turkic language skills, geographical proximity and the demand for their services as domestics, Gagauz women frequently choose to travel to work in Istanbul – in common with many other citizens of the FSU – so as to be able to satisfy their families' aforementioned needs. These women enter the country illegally on 3-month tourist visas and travel back and forth to Moldova every six months in order to avoid fines or they develop alternative counter-strategies, e.g. by letting themselves be deported and returning with a new passport etc. They have been doing this for anywhere from 2 – 6 years, earning wages that range from \$400 to \$800 a month. Compared to the formal salaries earned in Moldova, this is a rather attractive amount. Although domestic work is a very common source of income, additional non-commodified sexual labour and commodified sexual encounters also generate a good deal of the remittances sent back to Moldova. Here I am only concentrating on domestic labour.

The transnational movements that I describe here could best be approached and understood through an analysis that juxtaposes gender, citizenship and class (Anderson 2000, Constable 1997, Parreñas 2001). In order to map the moral order and economic logic of transnational circuits it is necessary to develop a theoretical framework that accommodates the changing symbolic and moral significance of migratory labour and its demand and supply. The point here is to recognize that the economic processes have to be understood in conjunction with moral economic norms such as perceptions of entitlements, rights and responsibilities in production, exchange and consumption as well as the larger ideological justifications imposed by neoliberal policies. Here I support the arguments that the social and the cultural

are not external to the market and that consideration of the interplay between gender, class and ethnicity can help us to better understand the social and economic processes through which new social strata are formed and others redefined (Clarke 2004, Harvey 2005, Parreñas 2001).

An appreciation of the forces of labour supply and demand is essential in order to fully understand illegal transnational labour markets. The new migrant domestic workers from former Soviet countries supply Turkish families not only with domestic labour, but also function as image markers for the lifestyle and identity Turkish families seek (Demirdirek & Keough 2004). The lifestyles of the wealthy Turkish employers of these domestics – their identities as progressive and modern and hence their desires to have an employee with a professional work ethic – actually help to create a new stratum of underclass in Turkey different to that of the ‘indigenous’ Turkish underclasses.

Key influencing factors here are the onslaught of new forms of capitalist processes in neoliberalism and new identities, coupled with a discourse on ‘rights’ associated particularly with the European Union. Turks who employ Moldovan/Gagauz domestics often assert their preference for domestics or nannies from Moldova because they are perceived as more civilized and European than their Turkish counterparts, who are considered to be of a lower-class ‘villager’ (*köylü*) culture. Many employers would claim that workers from Moldova are preferable because they are educated and honest compared to the Turks who would take up such jobs. As a result of the enormous social gap between the potential employers (the middle and upper-middle classes) and the lower classes that can supply domestic labourers, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a demand for others to fill such positions in the large Turkish cities.

At the same time, domestic work is allowed greater visibility and is acknowledged as skilled labour. In fact, its performance by these ‘professionals becomes a marker of modernity for the Turkish household’ (Demirdirek & Keough 2004). The presence of such migrant domestics in the house, and their different relationship with the Turkish families compared to previous domestics, marks these families and their members as modern ones who offer ‘rights’ and ‘benefits’ to their professional employees. These employers saw their employees more as professionals with some specialized knowledge that helped them to fulfil their duties. The talents of Eastern European employees lie not only in their education and consequent ability to learn quickly, but also, and importantly, in their professional work ethic. Several employers attributed

the better work ethic of Moldovans and other migrant domestics from the FSU and Eastern Europe – compared to local Turkish workers – to their superior education. They describe migrant domestics as different from locals in their ‘manners’, in what they wear, and they mention that those who have worked in Turkey before often come with references. The employers find these individuals responsible, industrious and ‘trustworthy’. According to the employers, foreign workers are better at performing their duties than Turks are. They feel there should be open borders and international labour should be legalized. Believing in ‘free market’ principles, they want to be able to hire the best person for the job – no matter what their citizenship. They insist that their preference has to do with skills, and that they are not discriminating against Turkish workers. If they could find a Turkish worker who did the work equally well, they would hire them (Demirdirek & Keough 2004).

Gagauz domestics know the reasons why they are preferred to their Turkish counterparts. Narratives of Gagauz domestics reveal a number of common elements with respect to their Turkish employers. However, it has to be kept in mind that these narratives stem from various experiences that are heavily dependent upon the class, gender, and ethnic positions and values of the employers as well as by the success of a particular combination of personalities (i.e. the employer and the employee). Especially when caring for children, Gagauz domestics describe the way their employers, the parents of the children, treat them as unprofessional. As a result – and this is confirmed by employment agencies – Gagauz avoid jobs that require taking care of children from toddler to school age. A common problem voiced by women of various ages is that children are allowed to disrespect domestics. Given the domestic’s position in a particular home as a working person, their lack of language skills in standard Turkish and in some cases their rural background, the children – if not the parents – feel able to ignore the fact that the domestic is an adult who deserves respect from younger individuals and should be treated as a professional hired to do specialist tasks in the household. Ironically, then, while the employers feel they want these individuals because of their professionalism, it may be the case that in practice they do not treat the domestic as a professional. The domestics complain that Turkish parents expect the domestic to parent, yet they allow the children’s abusive behaviour. Domestics also commonly object to the Turkish family’s failure to appreciate them as individuals with subjective experiences. For example, Maria, a mother of four, recounted this scene: one day, when she saw her employer – a lawyer and mother of two – coming

home and hugging her two children, she got tears in her eyes because she had not talked to her own children back in Moldova for two weeks. Rather than asking her what was wrong, her employer scolded her for showing a 'sour' face. The distance that Turkish employers expect from their employees can be seen here too. Employers want to see the domestic only as a professional (even though in practice, they may not treat them as such). This means not acknowledging that the domestics are mothers themselves, far away from their children.

There are several interesting contradictions here in terms of the points that I am making in this paper. The employers want Gagauz domestics because they are perceived as having similar values and being 'closer' in some ways to their Turkish employers in terms of education and professional attitude, yet this very professionalism requires of them a respectful 'distance' from their employers. It is precisely this professionalism that they say is lacking in Turkish domestics.

For instance, employers themselves sometimes assert that they prefer to hire Turks for some tasks, especially for cooking, but that it is difficult to find live-in work because Turkish employees have families nearby and want to return to them in the evening. Live-in domestic work is also acknowledged to be much more demanding. It would be hard to find a Turkish person who would work as a live-in domestic for the wages that they pay their Moldovan domestic workers. What they might instead be faced with is accountability for the international gap between rich and poor. Yet this understanding is elided with the employers' notions that international free market capitalism, with open borders and competition, will correctly balance supply and demand, determine prices and establish a situation where the best worker gets the job and the best wage. Such insight is also obscured by the swallowing back of Maria's tears, by the hiding of her positionality as a displaced illegal worker far away from her children.

Still, it may not be entirely appropriate to see these practices as calculated manipulations of psychological states associated with 'class conflict'. Rather, the practices of the upper middle class Turks (lately referred to as 'white Turks') and migrant domestics are not only manipulative acts, but also genuine and complex indicators of the contradictions involved with 'modernity' in Turkey today and how the transnational space that has been opened up interacts with it (Demirdirek and Keough 2004).

The ambiguous class position of migrant domestics through these international encounters eases the national and international tensions of

competing class moralities while facilitating the redrawing of class distinctions. This may be coupled with another ambiguous position created as a consequence of movements in transnational social space – namely, that of small Turkish entrepreneurs in Moldova. For me, the latter is significant because it shows the presence of more than one form of 'opening' or 'newer set of relations' in the market. Furthermore, such a position is also illustrative of the redrawing of class (sub)divisions as a result of the structural transformations taking place within the transnational field. Postsocialist conditions, which led to the loss of financial and social security for citizens of the postsocialist countries, opened up new channels of financial gain for people in the neighbouring countries and created fresh opportunities - e.g. in the service sector - for locals and foreign citizens alike. In a phenomenon similar to that claimed in 'developing countries', an area of brokerage has opened up through the establishment of such a service sector. The Moldovan capital, Chisinau, serves as a base for Turkish businessmen running large and small companies. The owners of small companies can be seen as marginal entrepreneurs. They seek business success in Moldova by operating between the Turkish state and the Moldovan business world. In contrast to the poor but highly thought-of Gagauz domestics in Turkey, these Turkish men – while they may be financially well off – are reputed to have little 'general culture and cultivation' by Moldovan standards. They possess Turkish notions of modernity and progress that are similar to those of the employers of domestics described earlier. They regard themselves as modern representatives of the new Turkey created with the neoliberal export-oriented policies of the 1980s and they talk about 'teaching Moldovans how to do business the right way'. They attribute backwardness to the old socialist system and at times to the rather 'outmoded' practices of the Gagauz business community.

Ironically, however, good business practices for them include some of the very informal or illegal networking and business transactions that they claim are 'backward' in Moldova. Informal transactions might include participating in a range of activities such as procuring construction materials and labour for the restoration of buildings, arranging security for VIPs, organizing venues for sexual encounters, providing raw materials for the preparation of culturally appropriate food for representatives of the Turkish state and so on. These practices become an informal site of brokerage superimposed upon the businessmen's already existing petty commodity and service dealings. Initially dependent on Moldovan and Gagauz intermediaries, these entrepreneurs

themselves become culturally and economically liminal brokers. Such new encounters and long-term relationships between Gagauz and Turks dismantle some of the existing distinctions between urban and rural identities and between class positions and contribute to the formation of new social layers and interest groups in Moldova and Turkey. One of the most visible manifestations of how these Turkish men transgress their masculinity to some degree is the short- and long-term relationships which they enter into with female Moldovan citizens. Although such Turkish men do not all belong to the same subculture, their gendered position conventionally entails a particular common code of honour that they actually challenge. By way of illustration, although they make distinctions between women who can be married and others with whom they 'can have fun', many of them end up marrying the women whom they classify in the former category. In some cases their wives end up becoming their business partners and play an integral role in running the business within the transnational context. Through their wives and business circles these (lower) middle-class urban Turks experience and actively engage in class encounters that would otherwise not occur.

The Turkish businessmen in Moldova, the Turkish employers of domestic workers in Turkey and even, in some senses, the domestic workers too legitimate themselves in terms of 'free market capitalism'. Yet all of them operate in a context where the informal economy is part of capitalist (not just postsocialist) business practice. These transnational interactions have local effects on nation, class and gender. The creation of transnational social space thus has to be seen as transforming the networks of relations between places (Appadurai 1996) and facilitating the emergence of new types of social relations (here between Moldovans and Turks in different settings: business and home) as well as new forms of power (capitalist, neoliberal and patriarchal), some of which give rise to contradictory outcomes. While the new employment opportunities may be beneficial to domestics, their citizenship position and illegality offer no security. In terms of their position in the 'process of production', they are the furthest from being able to exercise control over their marginal position – yet this does not translate into a corresponding class consciousness.

This paper sought to highlight points for further exploration in the context of the multilayered connections between class, gender and ethnicity, particularly as they pertain to the relations that have developed between Moldova and Turkey in the transnational field. I consider the legacy of socialism as well as the prevalence of nationalist and neoliberal discourses to be structurally limiting elements

influencing the conformity, agency and contestation produced in this field. Male Turkish entrepreneurs provide a convenient source of brokerage by smoothing over incompatibilities and also opening up new spheres of activity between Moldova and Turkey. Their survival as businessmen is predicated on the way in which they transgress class, gender and ethnic categories. In a similar vein, the implications of the social role played by Gagauz domestics in the production process are inevitably predicated on their migrancy. Yet although they cannot change the reality of being hired as domestic labourers, they can still claim to be morally superior to their employers. Gagauz labour migrants compensate for their social inequality in the labour market by explaining the social segmentation along individualized (i.e. by attributing inequalities to an employer's individual characteristics or personality traits) or in some cases ethnicized lines (i.e. by drawing on Turkish and Gagauz cultural differences to account for incompatibilities between employers and domestics). One might think of these explanations as predictable coping mechanisms for migrants faced with a new environment. In this article, however, I argued that these understandings of social reality that specifically manifest themselves in the transnational field are fed by neoliberal cultural regimes. This transnational field reveals a new articulation of the mode of domination and hence illustrates the meeting of postsocialist ideas about capitalism with the new ideological jargon of neoliberalism in Turkey.

Notes

¹ In the EASA workshop that was the point of departure for the majority of the papers in this special issue, Leyla Keough and I gave a paper entitled 'Maids of education, entrepreneurs of margin: class and gender between Moldova and Turkey'. In order to accommodate more papers in the workshop we combined our insights from our respective fieldworks in Moldova and Turkey. Having focused on Gagauz domestics and motherhood in a separate paper given at a workshop of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, Leyla Keough developed her analysis further and offered very fruitful conclusions in *Anthropological Quarterly* (2006). The present article is an amalgam of my section of that paper (although in parts we refined the ideas and formulations together) as well as descriptions and analysis that I used in a paper given at the American Anthropological Association's 2005 Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. entitled 'Postsocialist Transnational Space and Neoliberal Contradictions' as part of the session on 'Regimes of Power: The Contours of Neoliberalism'. I benefited from initial discussions with Leyla Keough through

communication over the internet during our work on writing a paper together and later from the comments of Catherine Kingfisher on an earlier draft of the AAA paper as well as from Lale Yalçın-Heckmann on this version.

²The Gagauz are a Turkic-speaking Christian minority whose population numbers around 150,000 in Moldova. My connection to Gagauz female migrants in Turkey arose through my initial doctoral research on the Gagauz struggle for autonomy. Since 1995 I have witnessed the movements of Gagauz persons between Moldova and Turkey.

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