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Clean Jobs, Dirty Jobs: Ethnicity, Social Reproduction and Gendered Identity

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Clean Jobs, Dirty Jobs: Ethnicity, Social Reproduction and Gendered Identity

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Issues of ethnic identity, gender and politics intersect for two generations of Portuguese women in Toronto. In this article I use a 'social reproduction' approach to analyze the meaning of exploitation for these women. The co-existence of both resistance to the dominant hegemonic culture and appropriation of nativistic notions of progress among the two generations of women are examined. The use of the words 'clean' and 'dirty' as they pertain to wage work and issues of status and ethnic identity are explored.

Deux générations de femmes portugaises de Toronto sont aux prises avec des questions d'identité ethnique, de genre et de politique. Dans cet article, j'utilise une approche de type « reproduction sociale » pour analyser ce que l'exploitation peut signifier pour ces femmes. J'examine aussi comment co-existent la résistance à une culture dominante hégémonique et l'appropriation de notion de progrès de type nativiste. J'explore également la valeur des mots « propre » et « sale » dans leur rapport au travail salarié et aux questions de statut et d'identité ethnique.

Issues of Identity

In the summer of 1992, with a special edition of the *Toronto Star* on the Portuguese about to arrive on the newsstands, a newspaper editor described to me at length how unprepared both he and other staff had been for the anxiety and acute concern expressed by the Portuguese community concerning the portrayal of their 'community' in the newspaper. The editor's comment was that "of all the ethnic and racial groups" that the newspaper had covered to date, the Portuguese were by far the most concerned about their depiction. Among the various delegations that had turned up in his office for long meetings prior to the publication was a group of Portuguese women. According to the editor, they wanted to see Portuguese women portrayed as well educated and 'successful' in business rather than in the 'traditional' Portuguese female roles of cleaning women and factory workers. In my conversation with the editor I said that this assertion had echoes in interviews that I had carried out in the Portuguese community in Toronto.

There are many issues embedded in the interactions at the newspaper offices as well as in the conversation between the editor and myself. Some of these issues are contiguous with questions of diversity and

identity, as well as issues of 'voice' and the agendas of various groups of Portuguese women and men, of the newspaper itself and my own agenda as an anthropologist writing about Portuguese women. I would argue that while on the surface it might appear that some female community activists (who were second generation women) were devaluing the history of their mothers by wanting to deemphasize the importance of their working class roots, they may also, in fact, have been criticizing what they regarded as an appropriation of their voice by a powerful 'mainstream' media, in which by the way, I had an article on Portuguese women in Toronto.

While I am concerned here primarily with the identity of Portuguese women and their voices of resistance as related to generational status, ethnicity and culture, my task also involves examining my own gendered identity, ethnicity and class. Related to this, I am interested in why first and second generation Portuguese women interviewed in a two year study¹ wanted to tell their life stories - an act that may be a form of resistance in itself. Since their agendas as narrators are different from mine as an interpreter, I am concerned with the cultural and historical conditions that contributed to the creation of these narratives (Personal Narratives Group 1989; Bergland 1992).

As well, I want to make clear my own agenda as an interpreter of social change, gender inequality, and resistance among minority groups of women. What is involved in this process is a "reflective practice" (Alcoff 1988:425; see also Boddy 1991:128), that entails a certain distancing in order to understand oneself as the 'outsider' (Boddy 1991:129), but also a self-reflexive engagement with the informant (Moore 1988:189). My interpretation is based on my own experience as a middle class white woman of British and Irish ancestry, born in post World War II Iran, and cannot be universal or completely coherent. But, however limited my interpretation may be, no interpretation can possibly provide the 'Truth'², because the identity of informants is never fixed but rather is constantly changing with historical conditions. Butler refers to identity as an ongoing discursive process "open to intervention and resignification" (Butler 1990:33) in which women have multiple identities (ibid:9).

Ethnicity and Reproduction

The contexts for the stories of two generations of Portuguese women in Toronto are linked to historical circumstances and ideologies encountered by Portuguese both in Portugal and Canada. I argue that these are usefully explored through a study of ethnicity that encompasses the world views, traditions and practices of the Portuguese, as well as gender and class relations (Stasiulis 1990). The use of ethnicity as an analytical tool has been important in addressing tendencies among orthodox Marxists to reduce all non-class divisions (e.g. gay, feminist) to relations of production and class³. However, this is not to say that ethnicity in and of itself constructs and creates social change and struggle. Rather, the established institutions and institutional practices of capital, labour and the state create the conditions by which ethnicity as well as other social identities are expressed (Lamphere 1992:2; Stasiulis 1990:279).

This use of ethnicity as an analytical tool is not to be confused with nativist politics that create "ethnic" stereotypes of various foreign born groups of men and women, that ultimately arise out of an "ethnic preference ladder" (Iacovetta 1992:104). This is an ordering based on a 'normative gaze' (West 1982:53-54) that the superior civilizations are those of north-western Europe (Iacovetta 1992:104; Stasiulis 1990:276). It is also part of a modernization approach that posits immigrants, and often also their Canadian born children as possessing static and bounded identities, characterized as having particular universal traits that are less 'modern' than those in power (Meintel 1992). This use of the concept of 'ethnicity' has been appropriated by the state (e.g in Britain) to 'divide and rule' various ethnic groups who experience similar class, gender and racial oppression (Stasiulis 1990:279).

In this paper I argue that the concept of ethnicity or ethnic identity can be usefully analyzed through a study of the relations of reproduction. The definition of reproduction that I use in this paper is broader than one based on the specific functions of reproducing non-productive and productive individuals biologically and psychologically. It takes the definition of reproduction a step further, arguing that most theories of 'reproduction' have dealt in a narrow way with biological reproduction, the reproduction of labour power and state citizenship, and in so doing have failed to consider the reproduction of national, ethnic and racial categories (Sinke et al

1992; Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989; Bhabha et al 1985). Immigrant women and men reproduce their communities not only biologically, but also ideologically, and this work comprises part of the work of reproduction. Sinke refers to social reproduction which "goes beyond meeting basic needs to incorporate activities meant to replicate family, community, ethnic or other cultural phenomenon" (Sinke et al 1992:68). Social reproduction provides a means for examining ethnicity, not as a linear or evolutionary process leading to 'assimilation', but rather as a constantly created and recreated culture and identity (ibid:68-69). As Sinke points out, use of the concept of social reproduction provides a balance for analysis that focuses on the economic forces of migration. Additionally, it is a notion that encompasses men's as well as women's productive and reproductive roles (ibid).

One of the main arenas for the social reproduction of ethnic identity from one generation to the next is the household: the locus where parents, children and extended family meet. It is a place that filters notions of class, gender and ethnicity. The connection of the household to the workplace and the broader community contributes to the definition of identity that is different for first generation women than for their daughters. There is no evolution or progression to an 'ethnic identity' that leads to some form of acculturation with an elusive 'Canadian' culture. To the contrary, women who call themselves 'Portuguese' describe diverse worldviews, traditions and practices. However, whether or not first and second generation women live together, they engage in an ongoing dialogical process, that is a continuing way of reproducing certain aspects of an ethnic identity in common. So while second generation women claim a middle-class identity embedded in notions of the 'successful' business woman in a 'clean' job - this is a vision that their mothers who work in sock factories, clean the floors of Toronto office buildings, or engage in strikes for clean garbage bags⁴ have imbued in their daughters.

The issue I am exploring in this paper is the relationship between class consciousness and gender consciousness and ultimately how this relationship contributes to changes in ethnic identity over time and across generations of immigrants. In other words how does a Portuguese woman in Toronto come to define her situation as exploited? The women interviewed had a number of ways of talking about exploitation, without of course using the word 'exploitation' at all.

Methodology

Research and interviews were carried out between 1989 and 1992 in Toronto. Thirty-seven first and second generation Portuguese women were interviewed, as well as eight Portuguese men and sixteen Portuguese community workers. As well, a sample of twenty Canadian-born women were interviewed to provide points of comparison with non-immigrant, non-Portuguese experience. Informants were located by networking from one woman to another, through personal contacts, as well as with the assistance of community workers. Every effort was made to ensure that the sample of women was as representative as possible of the community at large. Thus census material was reviewed carefully and women were chosen as informants based on their occupational group and their regional origins (from the Portuguese islands or mainland). A detailed open-ended questionnaire, as well as a household survey were administered in Portuguese to first generation women and men, and in English to second generation women and men and Canadian born women.

For the purposes of the research, first generation women are those women who were born in Portugal and entered Canada at age 15 or older and went directly into the labour force upon arrival. Second generation women are those women who were born either in Portugal or Canada, and who attended grade school and/or highschool in Canada. In this paper, a woman's 'generation' does not necessarily correspond to her age.

Clean Jobs, Dirty Jobs

What I found in the data was that first generation women had much closer ties to a collective workplace culture than second generation women. One woman in a strike described this collective as "...the poor Portuguese women that worked so hard" - [as opposed to the Canadians, who would never do the same job for so little money]. This workplace attachment was matched by an equally strong attachment to the household and to an identity that is embedded in a matrix of family relationships. Second generation women did not form the same collective ties to their workplace - they were in non-unionized jobs and were relatively apolitical. Their ties to their households were important, but they also described broader non-kin ties than their mothers. While first generation women openly chal-

lenged wage workplace inequities, second generation women focused their attention on gender inequities in their households.

Women in Toronto who call themselves 'Portuguese'⁵, work in a variety of occupational sectors, but the majority of both generations are located in three occupational groups: the domestic service sector (27.1% in service occupations) and in manufacturing (20.4%) and in clerical occupations (27.1%) (Census 1986). First generation Portuguese women in Toronto work in the domestic service industry and in factories. Second generation women, encouraged by their parents to find "clean" jobs have moved into clerical occupations in large numbers.

First Generation Women

In the wage workplace, first generation women are visibly more political than their daughters. They have very mixed feelings concerning their lives in Canada as opposed to Portugal and in most cases do not view this country as the land of opportunity to which they initially believed they were coming. I would argue that their sense of exploitation is heightened in the move to Canada. Not only do they have first hand experience of international inequalities, but they also bring memories of another life and certainly of another vision of what they thought migration would bring. As Bergland points out, immigrant women are "situated simultaneously and paradoxically both in the patriarchal old world and in a radically different patriarchal new world (emphasis original, 1992:104). On the other hand, these women recognize that work in Canada has brought a degree of material wealth that they could not acquire in Portugal, particularly if they have come from the Azores. However, in various ways, most state that the physical and emotional costs for themselves and their families have been too high.

First generation women described their work as backbreaking labour, that they carried out because they had mortgages and rent to pay, and children and sometimes husbands to support. They regard themselves as mistreated workers and believe that while the work they do is important, it is not recognized as such. They often do more than is called for and are angered by the paternalism and rudeness of their employers and managers. One first generation woman who works as an office cleaner described her situation very succinctly:

Cleaners are seen as someone without value, but they have more responsibility than the average person. We are treated like animals. Many women have left because they just can't take it. Of course they are replaced by new ones. These new ones are fired before they get into the union" (Amelia⁶, office cleaner, 1st generation, Azores, 38 years old).

Much of their cleaning work is carried out at night and at the expense of women's families who may have to manage without them in the evenings and nighttime for many years:

For almost 11 years I saw my kids in that time just a little bit from 4:00 until 5:00. Just to prepare the dinner, put it on the table and go. And then my husband came. (Maria, cleaner, 1st generation, Azores, 44 years old)

What they don't understand is that extra effort comes off our bodies and our family life because we are ruining our health and we don't have any energy after we come home. But we still have to do what we must for our children and our husbands... (Amelia, office cleaner, 1st generation, Azores, 38 years old).

In many cases first generation women described an active involvement in workplace politics, sometimes resulting in strikes. They recognized the value of strikes as a means of creating change:

Before the strike they used to treat workers in a different way. They didn't exactly beat them but they didn't treat them well either. They didn't know the people's names and they used to call them by numbers ... like prisoners in a prison. Nowadays treatment is better due to the strike we had... (Idalina, factory worker, 1st generation, Madeira, 38 years old).

Second Generation Women

Second generation women, who work in clerical and administrative jobs are generally nonunionized. While many are aware of inequalities in the workplace, they nonetheless, feel powerless to change their workplace situation

I think we all understand the problems but not all of us know what to do with it [with that understanding] (Rosa, 2nd generation, community worker, born in Azores, 33 years old)

I don't really know the purpose of a union. When I think of unions, I think of the fraternal society, a bunch of men working together (Eunice, 2nd generation, accounting officer in bank, Azorean parentage, 23 years old).

Like their mothers, most of the women interviewed work in jobs where the majority of the workforce is female. However, they describe their jobs as different from their mothers' jobs in several ways. One recurring theme is that the jobs of second generation women are 'clean' jobs and it is the parents who encourage their children to find these types of jobs. 'Clean' jobs, however, do not necessarily bring in a higher income than the parents' jobs, but they are thought to bring higher status to the children:

Theirs [parents' jobs] are more labour orientated, mine is more clerical. And it's a cleaner job. They're involved in the cleaning industry and manual jobs and getting dirty while I'm in an office atmosphere (*Julie, 2nd generation, air coordinator, travel agency, born in mainland Portugal, 27 years old*).

You'll often hear Portuguese parents tell their teens, "I want you to at least finish high school. Look, I'm giving you a chance to finish high school because I want you to have a chance to have a clean job. I don't want you working cleaning other people's dirt. I want you to get an 'office job'." That's what they often refer to: an 'office job' (*Anna, community worker*)

For the most part, Portuguese second generation women are in traditionally female sectors of the labour force. Even in those cases wherein women had trained in nontraditional sectors, ultimately they were placed in traditional female sectors of employment. For example this occurred in the case of a woman who had trained in electronics and was placed as a receptionist - another woman who was a computer programmer became a secretary.

The Household

Ackelsberg (1988) refers to the multiple experiences that are characteristic of women's lives as they move between different spheres of activity on a day-to-day basis as creating particular forms of identity, political consciousness and activism. What has interested me is that the political awareness and activism expressed by first generation women in their wage workplaces does not spill over into a gender consciousness in either the wage workplace or at home. In the household, through their social reproductive labour, Portuguese first generation women recreate the Portuguese family with food, ritual, language and custom - 'cushioning' their families from non-Portuguese culture and providing a continuity with the past. While they appreciate the

fact that men seem to 'help' a little in the household, they do not challenge the unequal division of labour there.

My daughters tell their brother, "Make your bed." And I tell them, "No. In Portugal my brothers didn't do any housework." And they say, "Well, in Canada, men have to learn how to do those things." I say, "No, they'll learn by themselves (*Januaria, 1st generation, cleaner, Azores, 39 years old*).

They act as a kind of buffer between the outside world and their families - spending much time dealing with the emotional stress experienced by husbands and children. Their views on issues of sexuality are conservative, and religion plays an important part in their lives. One of the issues arising from my research is the apparent discontinuity between the way first generation women describe their wage workplace relations and their role in the household. I suggest that in both places, women are directing their actions against the hegemony of the dominant culture.

Furthermore, while the site of struggle for each generation differs, both generations identify themselves as 'Portuguese', indicating a common commitment to a Portuguese ethnic identity. The explanation for this lies partly in the fact that second generation women have a different and perhaps a more distant experience of migration than their parents. For first generation women, migration is accompanied by a devaluation of their labour power and a heightened sense of economic exploitation which is an important determining factor in the identification of the wage workplace as their site of resistance. However, class relations alone are inadequate to define identity or status (Sinke et al 1992:68) among the Portuguese of either generation or any ethnic group for that matter. They do not explain why, for example, Portuguese first generation women do not pass on a 'working class culture' to their daughters. The social and cultural underpinnings of everyday life also require exploration.

One of the aspects of the identity of second generation women concerns their position in the family as unmarried daughters, who have struggled with their families against the traditional gender roles. This resistance has led to what might be called a 'feminist' identity that for second generation women has focused on gender inequalities in the household. All these women speak of the different treatment accorded them as opposed to their brothers.

I find that Portuguese families feel that men are not the same as women. And my brother would sometimes come home at one o'clock in the morning and there wasn't really a problem... They kind of think of it, "Well, he's a male and there's no problem." But a female, it does cause more of a problem ... more of a disrespect. And they're afraid of what other people might think" (*Emilia, 2nd generation, office manager, born in Azores, 29 years old*).

Daughters in the family express feelings of being controlled and held back. For example, some women either left home to attend university or dropped out altogether to avoid the tension that their unpredictable schedules caused their parents:

I got into U of T, did my first year and it was just a hassle all of the time. It wasn't economic, they could afford it. I just got so fed up with my parents, so I quit. They would say, "Don't go - you're coming in late. You don't have to stay after school at the university." But it's not nine to three and you're home at 3:00! The upbringing was so strict. Today I understand it was because they were scared. Everything was beyond their comprehension. But I was so bitter with them (*Rosie, 2nd generation, receptionist, born in Azores, 39 years old*)

In the majority of cases they describe their fathers as being most concerned with their sexual and social freedom, although their mothers played an important enforcement role:

... as far as my being able to go out, I think I'm more liberal with my mother telling her that I'm going out with this person. Whereas with my father, I would not keep him abreast of any relationships. It's something that they know is happening or they will at sometime expect, but the fathers are usually: "Well, I may know. I may suspect but I really don't want to know..." You may have to lie on occasion and say: "I'm going out with a friend." And not specify male or female and the degree of the relationship" (*Eunice, 2nd generation, accounting officer in bank, Azorean parentage, 23 years old*).

The gender consciousness expressed by second generation women in their own households is related to their experience as daughters. They express a desire for more equal gender relations with men in the household. For some this meant not marrying a Portuguese man and for most it means a more equal sharing of unpaid labour in the house:

But she [my mother] has to have the dinner ready for when my father comes home and

from my point of view, I think it's important for both the husband and the wife to help one another. My mom sometimes disagrees with me and she says, "No, it's the woman's responsibility. She should be responsible for all that." And I go, "Well, why all that? It just burns you out. They are married and they become as one, they [men] should help share the duties" (*Emilia, 2nd generation, office manager, born in Azores, 29 years old*).

...it's something we contracted that we'd help each other so we could spend more time together. He does all my house work and vice versa. I'll wash the car for him and do the gardening. That's very, very different from my parents. Especially the way that my mom is so used to having dinner ready for my dad. " (*Lucinda 2nd generation, office supervisor, born in Azores, 31 years old*).

Women of both generations have a bourgeois idea of class that is associated with material wealth, lifestyle and sometimes with a sense of community distinctions:

Mid or low [class]... I try so hard for what we have. It really depends. What you have is really not important. It's what you do to have it. I guess you belong to what you really want to make believe that you really belong to. You've got to work, if you're in the low class. You've got to work (*Anna, 2nd generation, loans officer, bank, born in mainland Portugal, 32 years old*).

Most first generation women identified themselves as working class:

We are working class. Our children studied and everything but we are poor, we are not rich — we are working people. My husband always had very low wages in Canada — me too and we had to exert a lot of control so we wouldn't fall into debt. If we didn't have money — we didn't spend it (*Lurdes, cleaner, 1st generation, Azores, 58 years old*)

And one second generation woman linked herself with her mother through what might be described as an inherited working class culture:

I think there are very many Portuguese like me who have become middle class who have come from working class, who have just developed a different lifestyle. But the working class roots are still there... For me, to have working class roots means to have a consciousness. It means that I do things always remembering that side of my life (*Rosa, 2nd generation, community worker, born in the Azores, 33 years old*).

Conclusion

While first generation women can be said to have stronger views of class than second generation women - arising out of their workplace consciousness - they have a less critical view of gender. The manner in which they reproduce themselves as Portuguese women preempts them from acting independently of men. On the other hand, second generation women are less bound to their mothers' notions of gender relations. However, both generations have bought into a modernization image of class that is part of the dominant Canadian view of class. For first generation women, 'clean' jobs represent progress, an escape from exploitation: from being a devalued worker, who does a job that is considered low status. They do not want their children doing the same 'dirty' jobs that they do, and ultimately they see their status as tied to that of their children. While on the one hand they engage in resistance that takes the form of political activism at work, and a fierce protection of Portuguese traditions and worldviews at home; on the other hand, like their daughters, they have bought into a nativistic notion of ethnic progress. Into this concept are woven ideologies of work that is 'clean' and 'dirty'. Looked at from this point of view, perhaps the women who presented themselves at the offices of the *Toronto Star* protesting the 'traditional' description of the Portuguese cleaning woman were in fact not only representing their own views, but also indirectly, those of their mothers.

Thus 'exploitation' takes on a particular meaning in the context of the social reproduction of Portuguese ethnic identity. Although first and second generation Portuguese women express diverse views of class and gender relations, they also share a common ideology that is linked to a middle-class identity of the 'clean' job and the successful Portuguese woman. The household acts as the locus of linkages between women of different generations. At one and the same time, the social reproduction of ethnicity is a response both to resistance to losing a connectedness to a Portuguese identity, as well as an endeavour to appropriate a new identity that is embedded in a liberal bourgeois notion of progress.

This by no means diminishes the importance of the struggles waged by first generation women at their place of work and by second generation women in their households. What I am exploring is the context of these struggles. While on the one hand,

these forms of resistance have contributed to positive and collective changes in the workplace and more equality in gender relations at home, the politics in which these movements are embedded reflect at one and the same time, the pre-migration experience of working class roots as well as the post-migration conditions of Canadian liberal political tradition.

Notes

1. This research was carried out under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council of Canada, the Secretary of State and York University, as well as with the invaluable contribution of Ilda Januario of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).
2. I refer here to an argument made by the Personal Narratives Group regarding the "multiple truths in all life stories" (1989:262). They state the following: "...we realize that generalization without attention to the truths of experience is fruitless. Therefore, rather than focus on the objective Truth, we focus on the links between women's perspectives and the truths they reveal" (ibid).

There has been a great deal of discussion in academic and non-academic circles concerning the political correctness of for example, a non-Portuguese woman writing about Portuguese women. Analyses such as those of the Personal Narratives Group above, as well as Butler (1990), de Lauretis (1986), Alcoff (1988) and others reflect the fact that identity is multiple and thus implicitly challenge notions that any person (also composed of multiple identities) can be a politically correct interpreter.
3. See Stasiulis (1990) for a further critique of the incompleteness of orthodox Marxism and the usage of ethnicity as an analytical tool.
4. Such a strike did occur in 1970s in the Toronto cleaning industry.
5. In this instance, I am referring to women who have self-identified as Portuguese for the census.
6. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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