POST-SOCIALIST NARRATIVES OF BEING, BELONGING AND BECOMING: EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN MIGRANTS AND TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS IN AN ERA OF EUROPEAN CRISES

Anastasia Christou and Domna Michail

Abstract

This paper draws from an oral history project on 'Gendered Histories of Resilience and Resistance: Eastern European Women's Narratives of Mobility and Survival', which is a narrative ethnography of Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Polish migrant women living in Greece. The paper explores these women's life stories, memories and experiences, in both their ancestral homelands as well as country of settlement, in order to examine the intersections of gender and identity in how the recollection of socialist pasts informs the understanding of living present and future capitalist lives. The diverse, compelling but also competing accounts of women's childhood and early adult lives in socialist times in their Eastern European countries of origin is an intriguing way to explore issues of being, belonging and becoming. Discussions on feminism and identity are also revealing as they highlight the discourses and political projects at the intersections of personal experiences with broader socio-cultural and economic fields, in particular as regards the context of migration and the current crisis in Greece.

Keywords: Eastern European Women Migrants; Greece; crisis; post-socialist; being/belonging/becoming; suffering; resilience

INTRODUCTION: THE POST-SOCIALIST CONDITION IN A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

In almost three decades since the collapse of socialism in 1989, the study of 'post' movements (post-utopias, post-colonialism, post-socialism etc.) has been perceived as a theoretical way to challenge dominant meta-narratives in the uncertainty of globalisation. This has been a critical task in theorising difference, divergence, the re-and-deconstruction of political, economic and social systems of governance, in the imagination of new forms of organisation.[1][2]

Within this historicity, quite disappointingly, the 'post' prefix in 'post-socialism' came to connote the valorisation of privatisation, liberalisation, deregulation and a total transition to a market economy within a capitalist context. The rejection of the previous political order often brought a sense of nostalgia and dismay, a melancholic mood of a lost world and the despair of no alternative to the catastrophic forces of capitalism with the collapse of alternative political frameworks. In a sense this leftist melancholia is another way to reimagine such utopias; as a survival coping mechanism to process any failure to comprehend the new character of the times, and, to develop a robust political critique such a new framework, requires a *moral* vision appropriated to respond to this character.[3][4][5]

In the current context where the normative narrative of 'crisis', 'decline', 'austerity' etc. denotes a transformative era of the European project [6], we seek to move beyond simplistic understandings of the post-socialist context in its temporal and spatial manifestation, to more complex and nuanced analyses of the post-socialist world, alternatives and transformations. We

wish to shift beyond dominant conceptual paradigms and research methods to the co-production of post-socialist understandings, *with* and not just about social actors, in questioning how explanatory frameworks affect academic knowledge, generate and question theory.

More specifically in this paper we address the following research questions:

- How have the socialist regimes in the respective countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Poland) affected our participants' context of gendered migrant experiences?
- How do values and practices migrant Eastern European women have acquired under different regimes shape their interactions with their new host-state environments?
- How have state politics and gender politics in their countries of origin configured their identities as Eastern European women of the diaspora?

We address the above research questions through first generation ethnically diverse immigrant women's narratives of memories of socialist pasts and current experiences of living post-socialist lives. Our findings indicate that their transnational cultural and gendered understandings have shaped their life stories. We consider the very specific circumstances of the current economic crisis and the insecurity it has brought with it. Our study is comparative; our sample has been selected from four particular ethnic groups of immigrant women in Greece, and numbers of subjects from each group are in proportion to the total numbers of each group in the overall population of Greece.

While our disciplinary research backgrounds cross both the humanities and social sciences (cultural geography/sociology/social anthropology) it is not simply our inter/disciplinary orientation that situates the contribution that we see this article making, but rather our critical/activist/feminist stance in offering the gazes, voices and insights of women migrants as a platform of post-socialist transformative politics intersecting with contemporary crises. Drawing on women's narratives, we theorise the post-socialist as an existential condition, as a new 'timespace' [7] and important analytical tool where the politics of being, belonging and becoming are shaped by the saturations of crises seeping into the realm of living migrant lives.

INTERPRETING ACTORS, APPROACHES AND AFFECT IN RESEARCH ON POST-SOCIALIST MIGRATION

In an attempt to (re)imagine post-socialist livelihoods, we have attempted to mobilise an interdisciplinary and international dialogue on the themes with which we have been grappling with and these issues are central in the context of post-socialist migrant worlds. This contribution aims to critically interrogate the complex outcomes and dramatic shifts at the backdrop of globalisation and migration, enabling us to see, sense, visualise and textually read the post-socialist context. Through this (re)reading of the post-socialist as a conceptual and geopolitical category, and with a cutting-edge intersectional lens, this paper endeavours to unpack pluralities, uncertainties, discontinuities of social practices in enabling an examination of shifting categories with a potential to more critically engaged epistemological, theoretical and methodological possibilities.

During the last decade, the debates about social transformations in post-Soviet countries have mainly been focused on whether these processes have come to an end, what kind of trajectory they have or had, and, most importantly, whether it is possible to place countries so different from one another under the common rubric 'post-Soviet'[8][9]. In this paper, gender is at the core of the discussion since despite the flurry of academic and public discussions about gender transitions in the post-Soviet era [10][11][12], and, more broadly, post-communist and post-socialist space, there is scope to reach a deeper understanding of the everyday discursive practices implicated in these changes. The research focus is in the country of reception (Greece) in examining how do the values and practices migrant Eastern European women have acquired under different regimes affect their interactions with their new host-state environments. It provides an innovative insight into the socio-political, historical and contemporary entanglements of post-socialist and crises spaces.

Liudmila Voronova and Ekaterina Kalinina [13] suggest that it is important to follow the lead suggested by prior research in this field by discussing the presence of history in what are now defined as 'post' discourses, by talking about the Western-Eastern symbolic axis that runs through both cultural space and academic perspectives, and by highlighting the political nature of gender issues. The Soviet past appears not as a ghost of the past, but rather, a defining present that has never dissolved, and, now more visibly determines social practice while defining the everyday in complex and unexpected forms.

Although scholars[14] have talked about the 'post' countries in relation to the two modernist revolutions of the 20th century — the socialist/communist and the capitalist — it is this third, counter-counter/revolution that to a large extent forms the gender discourses of the contemporary context. The main aim of this revolution, as Voronova and Kalinina[15] understand it, is: to articulate the uniqueness of the given national culture by referring to 'roots' and 'origins', which in many countries of the post-Soviet space in fact leads to a strengthening of traditionalism and patriarchy[16]. Hence, *gender* today in research on the post-socialist becomes not only a political issue, but also a political trigger. It becomes a platform for political and ideological gender mainstreaming as well as for political activism and engagement. This highlights the importance and specificity of the geopolitical positioning in post-socialist gendered discourses in understanding the intersection of the post-socialist and the postcolonial.[17][18]. At the same time, the role of the state in defining the limits of women's presence in the public sphere and public space is also inherent in the political meanings behind the prevalence of paternalistic practices and representations of masculinity, which in mobility becomes a form of sublimation of post-Soviet trauma.

Norbert Petrovici [19] explains, 'more than two and a half decades after the demise of actually existing socialism, much of the contemporary literature produced about Central and Eastern Europe is still organized around a dichotomy between socialism and post-socialism, transforming the region in an epistemic enclave'. The production of such epistemic landscapes helps us understand how peripheries and asymmetries are positioned in how conceptual modalities, along with their respective critical agendas, have been embedded in the co-production of knowledge that has implicit angles of self-orientalising in how the narratives of 'socialism' and 'post-socialism' are deciphered. Beyond previous debates[20][21][22]over 'post-socialism', any hermetically tight and sealed definition of socialism/capitalism and the post-socialist is a rather analytically limited approach that does not allow for the agentic fluidity and messiness that social actors

transact in making sense of their lives. Thus, this paper underscores both the messiness and the fluidity of accounts of actors, states and regimes, but at the same time, acknowledges the interactive spaces that migrants inhabit, and, which are saturated by both mnemonic remnants of their ancestral homeland histories (Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Polish) and the contemporaneous lived histories of their settlements in a context of continuous austerity and crisis in Greece[23].

Thus, the discussion which unfolds in the empirical sections that follow is contextualised through an engagement with current theoretical debates around migration, post-coloniality, affect and belonging. Prior to that, in the next section we present a brief historical note of the mobilities that the participants reflect in their relocations and how those intersect with the current crisis.

In terms of the structure of the paper, the section that immediately follows analyses some of the empirical evidence in demonstrating the interplay of the symbolic violence and suffering that states emanate and that migrants internalise in living diasporic lives. Thus, mobile lives also reflect journeys of making and unmaking sense of *post-socialist existential conundrums in the face of ongoing crises*. Finally, the conclusion revisits how unpacking institutions requires that we acknowledge the implications for actors and the impact of actors on regimes, while uncertain futures also reflect unfinished projects insofar as the post-socialist one is concerned.

This present study is set therefore in a transnational framework where geographic, political, social and cultural borders are crossed by Eastern European migrant women in the process of migration and settlement. The analysis examines participant narratives through a comparative lens in viewing their experiences of cultural, historical, and political contexts in the transnational social fields they inhabit. While the actual data collection took place in Greece, the participants are immigrant women of Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Polish origin.

The project began in the autumn of 2013 and ended in the autumn 2015. We have conducted a total of 200 in-depth interviews with immigrant women (139 Albanian, 39 Bulgarian, 12 Romanian and 10 Polish; The numbers being proportional to their national presence in Greece). The women's ages range from forty to mid-eighty years old, all have lived in Greece for at least a decade or more and they all speak Greek fluently. As they originated from different Eastern European countries, the participants presented different trajectories and life stories as well as different migration experiences. Immigration patterns varied for each group of participants depending on the socio-historical, as well as political and personal reasons that led the participants to emigrate. They have settled in a variety of places in Greece (including urban and rural areas such as Athens, Thessaloniki, Kastoria, Aliveri-Evia, Larissa, Kozani, Volos, Grevena, Chalkidiki etc.) and were recruited through acquaintances or migrant associations in the host country. While the research instruments and methodological design were jointly developed by both authors, the participants were interviewed by the second author of the paper. Potential candidates were contacted initially by telephone and informed of the context, purpose and objectives of the research. Most interviews took place in the participants' homes, with the rest at their workplaces, in public places or via Skype. The interviews were conducted in Greek, audio recorded and then transcribed and translated as part of the data analysis stage.

In the next sections we reflect on the four groups of migrant women by addressing the core issues that the paper aims to discuss and present. While we are cautious of implicit essentialisations and about conflating the women's voices into one coherent and neat category, that of 'Eastern European' women, we acknowledge some broad trends in how their cultural and political geographies of past socialist lives have shaped their current lives in a crisis-ridden Greek context. Thus, we focus on women's narrations of memories and distilled nostalgias of their socialist upbringing in how they have understood state politics, gender politics and the personal as political through their own subjectivities.

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF POST-SOCIALIST DIASPORIC LIVES IN A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

Elsewhere[24] [25] [26]we have reported on some of the very personal and intimate migration stories of women who left Eastern European countries to relocate to Greece. The varying insights gained do not lend themselves to easy linear generalisations, nevertheless specific cultural motives and behavioural patterns derived from the women's home countries emerge very clearly.

Albanian women, for example, are seen emphasising the aspect of personal freedom and economic opportunities as major reasons to emigrate, and that in turn seems to reflect the more paternalistic society in Albania. By asking the women about how their children are dealing with the challenges and opportunities of their dual backgrounds, the realisation has been that such families live 'transnational lives' responsive to their respective situations, for example in relation to the current social and economic global and local crises. A rather intriguing aspect is that many participants who were also mothers were actively and consciously preparing their children for a life of transnational mobility as they hope this pathway and flexibility of movement will enhance their chances in life. This is no doubt accentuated by the current crisis in Greece which has significantly curtailed youth opportunities and aspirations[27] [28].

In the Albanian context, gender inequality was prevalent as patrilineality, male moral authority and the subordination of women in the domestic sphere were the doctrines of the Albanian family structure[29]. However, under socialism, 'socialist gender order' functioned as a Marxist-Leninist driven ideological compass that attempted to ease gender inequality. In Michail and Christou we read: 'During the industrialisation post-war period almost half of all women were employed, something which happened without men undertaking any domestic work in return. Women consequently became overloaded with duties in and outside their homes, and although the state was supposed to provide care for children, it fell short both in quantity and quality. In many cases therefore, sometimes quite young children had to look after even younger ones. Progress in education, urbanisation, and marriage to urban men created limited prospects for a few women, but those in rural areas were still unable to prolong their education since that was seen as "a battle against patriarchy"'[30]. Along the same lines Riki Van Boeschoten observes, 'their personal lives had been embedded in a network of patriarchal relations in which they were supervised by their brothers, husbands, and mothers-in-law, as well as by the local community. [Their life stories were dominated...] by the conflicts generated in this setting between their own individual aspirations and the rules of the patriarchal extended family'[31].

Chrysanthi is a 42-year-old woman from a rural area in Northern Albania. She is married to a Greek, has lived in Greece for 24 years and socialises almost exclusively with Greeks. She criticises Albanian male authority over women in Albania but also Greece and suggests that this could only change after 30-40 years when this middle-aged generation of immigrants dies and the second generation abandons patriarchal attitudes. She expresses very openly what many others implied more or less directly:

> Women worked during socialism but they were not independent. They would give all their money to the men. The men handled the money. Even with the household decision-making in the family, the man had the upper hand. The women would obey the men either they liked it or not. Both here (in Greece) and there (in Albania). If you would ask me today, if you were to say, 'Chysanthi, we will give you everything, it will be exactly as you are living in Greece, all this (meaning her household possessions and her job) you could take with you and bring it along to Albania', there is no way I would go there. Because that is the mentality, it is that way, meaning they think that the women can be treated any way it suits them. They (the men) can do whatever they want and the women should not say or do a thing about it. I know women who are battered and they still are in good terms with their husbands. They don't reveal this to the outside world. There is a lot more progress to achieve in order for Albanian women to become like Greek women. Albanian women do not enjoy the freedom that Greek women have. No. (Chrysanthi, 42 years old, Albania)

Mara comes from Tirana and has been in Greece for over twenty years. She makes clear that what she reports applies only to the city where she used to live and not to the rural areas where things might be much stricter for women:

> Women would work but they were not independent. The women had equal access to education but in the privacy of their homes a whole other story would unfold. That is where they would often endure domestic violence….and the divorced women in Tirana they would place them in old army barracks, these really small rooms about two to three square metres with a common use toilet and with the tap outdoors. They lived there isolated and there were often fights. They were not allowed to have their own house. (Mara, 44 years old, Albania).

Unmarried and divorced women were undervalued and scorned. Mara tells us the story of a woman member of the Socialist Party and a Minister: 'She was a beautiful woman, she was divorced and each time she started talking in the Parliament the male parliament members started whistling and yelling at her that she shouldn't talk because she is like a washing machine [There is sexual insinuation here which is derogatory] […] I feel that if I was living in Albania, my life would be a lot worse. I would be divorced and with just a moped. Things are difficult here but I have my freedom'.
The *Bulgarian* history of gender and power relations during the socialist regime presents some similarities with the Albanian one but there are also significant differences. The socialist perspective here in combating patriarchy was through legislative means whereupon laws were

introduced for equality between men and women 'establishing a new type of family, based on love and partnership instead of hierarchical relations between the sexes'[32].

Forty-five year-old Nina and fifty-one year old Rhea are very explicit regarding gender equality under socialism in Bulgaria:

> I believe that women had a very good and equal position. I would admire the fact that women had opportunities, especially in education and work and everywhere. She has the respect of others. And to tell you the truth, because my mother was a very dynamic woman, I believe the specific system, the fact that it would speed up developments in that area was positive for women. Irrespective of the fact that today we can say that it is possible for a woman to be a truck driver. That she is able to work in industry. Yes, it is possible. For me this is equal opportunities and this is a matter of rights because if you have equal rights in employment with someone else, irrespective of the particularities of the feminine physical nature, at a different social and psychological level you are giving a variety of opportunities and you are cultivating different perspectives, you are not marginalised. And I think that women had a quite good and equal position in society. (Nina, 45 years old, Bulgaria)

> Women's roles were creative. Women would vote, would be elected, that means they were active in political life. You could find women in every professional position and professional role; in every job. There were no distinctions between female and male jobs, that is, you could find women in hospitals working as doctors, in construction sites working as engineers, in education as teachers, in the factory as managers, in other factories as factory workers, you could find them everywhere. I mean, I remember from my childhood years that there were no distinctions between male and female jobs, that some jobs were clearly male jobs and others clearly female jobs (Rhea, 51 years old, Bulgaria).

As a result Bulgarian women gained access to the labour market and in a sense employment became practically mandatory, while the laws governing divorce and abortion were liberalised. Hence, while wider structures of social patrilineality and honour dissipated but not completely abolished as patriarchy on the microsocial level became transformed into a kind of 'state patriarchy'[33]. As a result a kind of 'parent state' emerged, underscoring the role of women as biological producers of the nation while pronatalist policies were introduced[34]. Mothering and motherhood were emphatically fostered and sustained by providing an extensive period of maternity leave amounting to two years after the birth of each child, coupled with free medical and dental care for children and an efficient system of nursery schools and childcare so women could resume full time employment[35].

> Women were working, the same way that men were working during socialism basically everybody was working, there were no strikes that is what I remember, OK, the salaries weren't that high, not so much but both women and men were working. The best thing with the system was that when women would have children they were on maternity leave for two years and were drawing a full salary but staying home and raising their children.

And there was the option of the third year of maternity leave, she would not lose her job, and she could stay home and raise her child. (Agapi, 48 years old, Bulgaria)

Everybody would work. Nobody was just sitting at home. I remember if anybody didn't want to go to work they would get a fine. The same thing with the children if they didn't want to go to school, the parents would receive a fine. All the children would go to school, the state would pay for everything and parents didn't have to pay for anything. The children would go on trips and in the summer they would send us on a holiday to the mountains for two weeks. (Voula, 44 years old, Bulgaria)

Our Bulgarian participants have claimed that during socialism they had far more responsibilities than men and were overloaded with work as they had to work both in and outside the house. Quite unlikely with our Albanian participants, they claimed that they felt free to express their opinion both within the family and in the public, and in case of divorce they received support by the state and were able to take care of themselves and their children.

As I said, everybody would have a job and this included women. There were women who were managers at factories, there was no such thing dictating men to have the upper hand. It was almost as if the women were the heads of the household. I remember when my father was working and we had a salary he would give it all to my mother and we would tell her that from now on you manage the household. (Nadia, 45 years old, Bulgaria)

The socialist state supported women, nevertheless women often reported that men used to drink alcohol after work and did not offer much help to their wives who were overloaded with domestic duties after their work:

Women had to work either in the fields or in the factory and after their job they would have to do all the household chores. Women were working a lot. They had to ask their husbands in order to take decisions. Men had a very serious drawback: they would drink a lot and things would go out of hand. (Electra, 51 years old, Bulgaria)

The women were with their heads down, at work, a lot of work, chidcare of course including that as well, it was a given. I could easily characterise the women in the communist era as heroes. In Bulgaria there was always the habit of men drinking and the only thing they could do is to go to work and nothing else. The women had to think of everything. In order to have the family on a good pathway, the woman had to take that into consideration as well. (Ivanka, 41 years old, Bulgaria)

We stated elsewhere that 'in the post-communist era in Bulgaria there has been a turn to traditionalisation with women pushed "back home" and out of the public sphere'[36]. According to our participants this was the period that most women lost their jobs, state protection and the security they enjoyed as working women and mothers under communism.

It happened really badly (the collapse of socialism) because all the factories we had and we were working there in those factories, they shut them down and they sold the machinery at a loss. And we were forced, people younger than me and older than me to

leave from Bulgaria and to search to live somewhere else to support our families. It was really bad. (Jenny, 62 years old, Bulgaria).

Nevertheless some reported that in the post-socialist era women gained their freedom from male authority and unhappy marriages.

> Better much better. In the past if your husband would beat you it was difficult to separate but now things are a lot more flexible for women as regards certain things. I am saying this because women in Bulgaria were a lot more depleted in the past, now they are better. They go to University, they work, they take their own decisions. They would work in the past but things were much more difficult. (Voula, 44 years old, Bulgaria)

These were practically the reasons why many Bulgarian women, young and older ones, emigrated following a kind of individual transnational migration pattern. The older ones left their families behind to be able to work as live-in domestic servants. The younger ones worked at the service sector at bars and restaurants as waitresses, cleaners or cooks, or at the entertainment sector which includes sex work[37].

In Romania during the 1970s and 1980s President Ceausescu imposed harsh austerity measures to be able to repay Romania's debts. Among these measures major cuts to domestic consumption and public welfare at large were included. During this period *Romanian* women were deprived of reproductive rights through a pronatalist programme which also denied them the right to abortion. Two of our participants vividly describe this period:

> Yes, a woman's role was above all to work. And to work a lot for her entire family. She had no free time, she was obligated to work and to work very hard. This is especially true for those women who worked in factories because they worked in three shifts and it was very tough. As I said she had to raise her children. Another problem was that in those days they wanted Romania to have a large population, so they had forbidden abortions, so poor women had to give birth to as many children….(May, 40 years old, Romania)

> A woman's role was difficult then because like today of course a lot of things have remained the same, don't think that they have changed direction, because as I know even today in Romania women are responsible for all the household chores and all the agricultural work in the fields and everything else, the children, everything is taken care of by women…. (Diamanda, 42 years old, Romania)

As Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou[38] explain: 'Severe rationing in the 1980s caused enormous difficulties for women simply in obtaining the food to raise their children as daily life became a struggle for survival. On the other hand, part of state welfare policy was to offer women and families guaranteed work and subsidized holidays, while women were allowed equal participation in the labour force, which meant that they were "liberated" from the domestic sphere'. This 'liberation' though resulted in the overload of women with work in and out of the house. Our participants held a rather contradictory position regarding the communist regime. 'All of them despite referring to the "repressive regime of communism" which imposed harsh pronatalist policies on women and led to more perinatal deaths of mothers and orphans,

nevertheless emphasized that they have good memories of childhood and adolescence in communist Romania'[39].

After the Revolution in the early 1990s many factories closed and unemployment rose. At that period many women were forced to take early retirement. The transition to a free market economy, rising inflation and unemployment made consumer goods unaffordable for many while a number of benefits which had been guaranteed to women were withdrawn. Our participants suggest that the period that followed the revolution was not as it was expected to be. For the first time in their life many people, men and women, faced unemployment and insecurity. The migration flow that started in the late 1980s continued all through the second post-socialist decade. Today some of our participants seem nostalgic about the socialist period. Three of them explain:

> There are a lot of people who have regrets and are nostalgic. Most people are nostalgic of that era because they have forgotten all the bad things and they remember all the good things: you had job security, you had the flexibility of education, they gave you a flat in a working class apartment building, so you didn't have the problem of seeking employment and not being able to find a job. (Rebecca, 50 years old, Romania)

> I can say that men in that era were very harsh. Yes they were. I know a lot of families where unfortunately the women were very obedient and unfortunately, I am repeating myself again (clenching fists), they were battered some times and beaten by their husbands and things were very difficult. This still exists today, so if someone thinks that they are very strong they actually beat their wives. (May, 40 years old, Romania)

> The people living in rural locations because they would return home earlier from the collectives and all the agricultural work in the fields, probably because their day would finish early they would drink a lot. It was a way to spend the time, probably the day would go faster that way or in a more relaxing way and then for some of them the alcohol would create problems. There were a lot of cases from what I was hearing where men would become extremely violent and take it out on their wives and there was no particularly serious reason to trigger this aggression. (Monica, 45 years old, Romania)

The *Poles* in Greece are an intriguing migrant group as they appear to be semi-autonomous as a community, having developed their own institutions and networks to cater for their needs, without developing either the attitudes or the reality of an ethnic enclave[40]. The Polish community is one of the oldest immigrant communities in Greece and one of the best organised. Most importantly, the Poles are the only immigrant group from Eastern Europe who have been present in Greece since before 1989. And this despite the distance between both countries, and the lack of historical, cultural, religious, economic, or any other kind of ties between them[41].

The above snippets reveal a limited glance into some aspects of past socio-cultural and political geographies of the four groups whose backgrounds vary considerably, and, to an extent their motivations to migrate to Greece. The next section examines through an affective lens how the state has shaped experiences of suffering, violence and exclusion which are then juxtaposed with current migrant livelihoods in a context of an affective and gendered violence of austerity.

STATES, SUFFERING, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ACTORS IN THE UN/MAKING

There is an inherent triadic interrelationship of crisis/austerity/hostility translated into mechanisms of neoliberal governance/neo-colonialist oppression and xenophobic racialisations[42], while, the Greeks, the 'Wretched of Europe', starring in their very own postmodern tragedy, have been demonised, denounced, ridiculed and racialised as the European project has diverted from its founding principles of democracy, peace and unity to one of bullying, arrogance and division with transforming Greece into a 'debt colony'[43]. While austerity policies have a particularly negative impact on women[44], it is the very gendered affective and symbolic violence which exacerbates the suffering that those can yield on women who are called upon to tackle even more challenging balancing acts in their multiple roles as carers and workers.

In a rather limiting perspective, the post-socialist context is often seen less as grounds for theory and more as illustrative of particularity in a historical context. However, we suggest that thinking through post-socialism offers *alternative* and *differing* perspectives on the constant process of making, un-making, contesting and producing contemporary publics within crisis and austerity complexity. In turn, thinking *with crisis* and the *gendered violence of austerity* develops theoretical understanding of post-socialism as a condition, process and perspective. While again it is important to draw caution against essentialising specific properties about 'post-socialist contexts', the plurality implies a de-centring of experiences. At the same time, as tempting as it is to place the state as the core unit of analysis, with all its layers of scales involved, we should remain reflective of the potential of methodological nationalism when we become alert to the importance of the realisation that an alternative approach exists. It is one that builds on a global power perspective which includes 'transnational fields of power', as well as, 'multiple entry points and pathways of local and transnational incorporation', and, hence is not dependent on the divide of migrants and the nation-state[45].

So gearing the discussion to the locale, the 'topos', how has childhood and early adult life been, by and large, depicted as narrated by Eastern European women when asked to describe what sticks out as particularly powerful in their memory?

Forty-seven year old Chloe from Romania declares:

> Life was very different then and very difficult because there was no freedom and everything was tight. Both of our parents worked and that was difficult because when we returned from school we had to do all the household chores and help the family. (Chloe, 47, Romania)

Also Chrysanthi from Albania:

> How was my childhood? From what I can remember, I was continuously working. I don't remember as a child playing and doing other things, I don't remember that. Since the age of ten, I recall myself taking care of smaller children, cousins and nieces and nephews. That is it. I was taking care of the household chores, I was the youngest, all the others were older, my siblings started working at the age of fifteen. There were working for the

state, my two sisters were working in the fields, those state fields, agriculture, during the Hoxha era, one was working in a factory but she got engaged at the age of sixteen and then got married so I was left behind at the family home along with my younger brother and my parents had to work so I had to take care of him. (Chrysanthi, 44 years old, Albania)

So while Chloe above emphasises the challenges of having household responsibilities as a child, coupled with restriction and financial constraints, most of the participants painted a portrait of happy childhood memories of play, carelessness, family warmth, socialising, fun, holidays. Such experiences were similar across backgrounds in terms of the parental educational and socio-economic status. And, while 'freedom' features in terms of childhood playfulness and fun, the lack thereof in terms of the society itself is pronounced in all the women's accounts. That is, the optics of regulation, control and surveillance are core in the women's narrations:

> Basically, if socialism did not deny freedom from people then I believe that the society and life would be very good for all under the regime. (Marcella, 45 years old, Romania)

> Well, it is better so people can be a little bit freer, so more shops and factories can be accessible and people can come out from their shell, so they can see more things and do more things, it is better. (Dora, 46 years old, Poland)

> I hope it never comes back (socialism) because it is better to suffer (as a migrant) but to know that somewhere, somehow you can make the effort and you can leave Bulgaria and succeed. While in a communist state you cannot leave and go somewhere else and spread your wings. (Nandia, 45 years old, Bulgaria)

Nandia's last phrase is symbolic of the flying and freedom, mobility as a route to challenge but also potentially success. So while the post-socialist state is perceived as one that cultivates individual decision-making and hence becomes a pathway to optimising one's potential, the socialist state is equated with constraining freedom and potential for individual growth. The optics of control and surveillance are interestingly perceived even within the confines of the private domestic space where participants often talked about keeping the radio and television at the minimum possible volume so neighbours could not listen to the specific entertainment and programmes that were viewed and listened to as they could be reported to the party.

But, there were also a few voices of 'sweet nostalgia' for a past of certainty which gave a sense of security as with each day following the next there was a perception of a stable job and income (as low as that might have been), some basic standard of living that included a residence, health care and education. Although few participants longed for a socialist past of stable standards of simple living, nevertheless, those few did voice sadness for a lost past, the dream of living a content simple life and their contemporary despair exacerbated by the widespread uncertainty and dread that the times of crisis have brought to their lives. These have been some of the affective parameters shaping their sense of belonging which is still being shaped by their experiences living and working in Greece. Yet, lamenting the current austerity ridden period of devastating instability and uncertainty, they also seemed to appreciate a system that would be inherently socialist in the welfare provision sense, but, capitalist in terms of 'freedom', choice

and aspiration. To a degree such a description is reflective of a welfare state in its peak, with less neoliberal governance and more welfare state provision of more social democratic leanings.

But, it is not just 'states' that are considered as potential to be 'un/made' by participants contemplating post-socialist livelihoods, it is the real and symbolic violence that emerged as part of the socialist system that has created deep rooted trauma. So, while Michel Foucault[46] reminds us that although space is fundamental in any form of community life, it is also fundamental in any exercising of power; feminists have further justified why domesticity is a space not always safe for women and where violence against them is often concealed in the realms of the private[47] [48] [49] [50].

The gendered violence that was extensive and apparent in the socialist family lives that our participants reflected on was one of the most poignant and disturbing aspects of the life stories they shared with us. The majority, if not all of the participants, repeatedly confirmed that despite the sense of autonomy that women enjoyed in having professional roles and making decisions in the household, they were often clearly victims of repeated and extensive physical abuse explained through the prism of high alcoholism in men during the socialist period.

Here are some extracts from the most revealing narrations of the women's experiences:

> Oh, well, the beating was daily bread. Men firmly believed that they were the sole powerful and no one else. The women had to be silent and not speak otherwise they would be beaten. (Karmen 53 years old, Romania)

> The basic fault was that the men drunk a lot, they did drink a lot and that's why things would get out of control….(Electra 51 years old, Bulgaria)

> Yes, for sure, yes, there was a lot of domestic violence. It was widespread and very sad. And that is why we have feminism; that is what feminism is all about, so things like this can disappear. Why should women be victimised this way? For what reason? Why shouldn't the women find the strength to resist? Why should she endure a man like this? Why should he beat her, rape her? I don't understand this. (Ivana 58 years old, Poland)

> Well, I can definitely say that men were tough. Yes. I know a lot of families where the women were always obedient and unfortunately, I say this again (fists clenched) that they were beaten by their husbands and it was very difficult. This continues to exist even today, if men think that they are very strong then they believe they can easily beat their wives. (May 40 years old, Romania)

While research on men and masculinities in Eastern Europe is still limited, even recent research cannot possibly offer either a unified or a generic 'East European masculinity' with the best of insight being 'men grappling with the cultural and ideological tools available to them as they attempt to establish themselves as respectable individuals'[51]. Similarly to other recent studies[52], masculinities as concepts, social categories and performativities are 'slippery, intangible, but breathtakingly powerful'[53]. At the same time, feminist analyses of male dominance (and the exploitation of women's labour) are relevant to the study of the socialist and post-socialist

context[54]. More importantly however, the relation between masculinities and violence is quite complex[55].

There are a number of interconnections that we can discern between the social arena in a socialist context when regime imposed hegemonies also saturated the fabric of private life where male violent behaviour emerged. As Jeff Hearn and Keith Pringle [56]suggest, a key principle is to recognise that there are nodes of interconnectivity between male violent behaviour and such social arenas as the home, work, care, social exclusion. Moreover, Jeff Hearn et al.[57] suggest that such interlinks are existent in the gendered structures of a given society, its symbolic realms, individual gender life trajectories and even the division of labour. Thus, it becomes clear that the family institution and the private household can simultaneously co-exist as spaces of caring and spaces of violence. Such spheres are also contingent on wider geopolitical dynamics and it seems pertinent here to contextualise the participants' narratives on male violence within the wider context of state regime hegemonies and power geometries.

CONCLUSION: UNPACKING INSTITUTIONS, ACTORS AND UNCERTAIN FUTURES

In unpacking the institutional trajectory of what counts as 'socialist' and 'post-socialist', it is evident that there is both durability and change in how a regime as such unfolds, through both experiential learning in new migrant surroundings, and, the imaginative constitution of how participants as actors understand and articulate those institutions. Coupled with the reality of a volatile present and an uncertain future, Eastern European women migrants see themselves as actors in the un/making of their 'destiny' despite the constraints. This is reflected in how they transmit to their offspring their transnational and global aspirations for them to a mobility that will ensure success in their personal and professional lives, what we have elsewhere described at length as 'intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis'[58] which testifies to their degree of self-agency and self-motivation.

Yet the territorial trap that engulfs the magnetic lure of 'belonging' is clear and present. It has been accurately proposed that human beings, both individually and collectively, are victims and perpetrators not only of the ongoing process of 'caging', but also 'self-caging', as they seek to form and maintain 'cultural islands' based on a set of shared memes (words, symbols, behaviours, opinions, values, etc.) that are perpetuated by customs and relationships in real physical spaces[59].

We thus encounter a degree of *operational resilience* that Eastern European women migrant participants exhibit, as a constellation of agentic practices and processes that allows them to adapt to changing patterns of social life, be that post-socialism, migration, crises. In the face of changing and challenging conditions in both their personal and social lives, participants re-evaluate their pasts and consider their futures. In the process, we recognise that they also grapple with what a post-socialist condition is and how they are un/made as post-socialist subjects. While one unified and consistent answer does not exist here, what is important to underscore is that their past life histories shaped by state regime practices and ideologies have penetrated their socialisation and identity making, while still to this day decades later, their memories testify to the powerful impact that such state regime practices have had psychosocially on their lives and their relations with others.

[1] Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, 'Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51, 1 (2009), 6-34.
[2] Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, 'Postsocialist politics and the ends of revolution', *Social Identities*, 24, 2, (2018) 139-154, DOI:10.1080/13504630.2017.1321712

[3] Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London: Verso, 1988.

[4] Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy', in The Weimar Republic Sourcebook, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.
[5] Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', *boundary 2*, 26, 3, (1999), 19-27.

[6] Anastasia Christou, 'The Wretched of Europe': Greece and the Cultural Politics of Inequality, *Humanity and Society*, (2016a), DOI: 10.1177/0160597616664169.

[7] Elizabeth Mavroudi, Ben Page and Anastasia Christou, eds. *Timespace and International Migration.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017.
[8] Balihar Sanghera, Sarah Amsler and Tatiana Yarkova, eds. *Theorising Social Change in Post-Soviet Countries: Critical Approaches*. Verlag Peter Lang, 2007.

[9] Sarah Phillips, D. 'Civil society and healing: Theorizing women's social activism in post-soviet Ukraine', *Ethnos*, 70:4, (2005), 489-514, DOI: 10.1080/00141840500419766

[10] Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, eds. Reproducing Gender Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after *Socialism,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
[11] Deniz Kandiyoti, 'The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern'?, *Central Asian Survey*, 26, 4, (2007), 601-623, DOI: 10.1080/02634930802018521

[12] Alexia Bloch, 'Emotion Work, Shame, and Post-Soviet Women Entrepreneurs: Negotiating Ideals of Gender and Labor in a Global Economy', *Identities*, 18:4, (2011), 317-351, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2011.654104
[13] Liudmila Voronova and Ekaterina Kalinina, 'Introduction. Gender and post-Soviet discourses', *Baltic Worlds*, 1-2, (2015), 36-37.

[14] Susanne Brandstädter, 'Transitional Spaces: Postsocialism as a Cultural Process', *Critique of Anthropology*, 27-2 (2007), 131-145, doi: 10.1177/0308275X07076801.

[15] Liudmila Voronova and Ekaterina Kalinina, 'Introduction. Gender and post-Soviet discourses', *Baltic Worlds*, 1-2, (2015), 36-37.
[16] Anna Temkina, and Elena Zdravomyslova, 'Gender's Crooked Path: Feminism Confronts Russian Patriarchy', *Current Sociology*, 62–2, (2014), 253–270, doi: 10.1177/0011392113515566.

[17] Madina Tlostanova, 'Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference', *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 1, 2, (2015), 38-58. http://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/article/view/38

[18] Nadia Kaneva, 'Mediating Post-Socialist Femininities: Contested Histories and Visibilities", *Feminist Media Studies*, 15,1, (2015), 1-17, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2015.988389.

[19] Norbert Petrovici, 'Framing Criticism and Knowledge Production in Semi-peripheries – Post-socialism Unpacked', *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 1,2, (2015), 80-102. DOI: 10.17356/ieejsp.v1i2.105.

[20] Tatjana Thelen, 'Shortage, fuzzy property and other dead ends in the anthropological analysis of (post) socialism; *Critique of Anthropology*, 31, (2011), 43-61.

[21] Tatjana Thelen, 'Economic concepts, common grounds and 'new'diversity in the Anthropology of post-socialism: Reply to Dunn and Verdery;, *Critique of Anthropology*, 32, (2012), 87-90.

[22] Elizabeth Dunn, C. and Katherine Verdery, 'Dead ends in the critique of (post) socialist anthropology: Reply to Thelen', *Critique of Anthropology*, 31, (2011) 251-255.
[23] Anastasia Christou, 'The Wretched of Europe': Greece and the Cultural Politics of Inequality, *Humanity and Society*, (2016a), DOI: 10.1177/0160597616664169.

[24] Anastasia Christou and Domna Michail, 'Migrating motherhood and gendering exile: Eastern European women narrate migrancy and homing', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 52, (2015), 71-81.
[25] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[26] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Diasporic Youth Identities of Uncertainty and Hope: Second Generation Albanian Experiences of Transnational Mobility in an Era of Economic Crisis in Greece', *Journal of Youth Studies*, (2016b), DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2015.1136052.

[27] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[28] Anastasia Christou, 'The Wretched of Europe': Greece and the Cultural Politics of Inequality, *Humanity and Society*, (2016a), DOI: 10.1177/0160597616664169.

[29] Julie Vullnetari and Russell King, 'Washing Men's Feet', Gender, Care and Migration in Albania During and After Communism, *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography,* 23, 2, (2016), 1-18.

[30] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[31] Riki Van Boeschoten, 'Transnational Mobility and the Renegotiation of Gender Identities. Albanian and Bulgarian Migrants in Greece', in Hans Vermeulen *et al*, eds, Migration in theSouthern Balkans, IMISCOE Research Series, 161-182, 2015.

[32] Riki Van Boeschoten, 'Transnational Mobility and the Renegotiation of Gender Identities.Albanian and Bulgarian Migrants in Greece', in Hans Vermeulen *et al*, eds, Migration in the Southern Balkans, IMISCOE Research Series, 161-182, 2015.

[33] Karl Kaser, *Patriarchy after Patriarchy. Gender Relations in Turkey and in the Balkans, 1500-2000*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008.

[34] Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.

[35] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[36] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[37] Aliki Angelidou, 'Migrations in the 'neighborhood'. Negotiations of identities and representations about 'Greece' and 'Europe' among Bulgarian migrants in Athens', *Balkanologie* 11, No. 1-2, (2008), http://balkanologie.revues.org/1152.

[38] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[39] Domna Michail and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[40] Anastasia Christou, 'Agency, Networks and Policy. The Case of Poles in Greece', *Journalnof Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 6, 3, (2008) 312-325, DOI: 10.1080/15362940802371051.

[41] Michaela Maroufof, 'Polish Migration in Greece', http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/en/2009/10/michaela_maroufof_polish-migration_en_july091.pdf

[42] Anna Carastathis, 'The Politics of Austerity and the Affective Economy of Hostility: Racialised Gendered Violence and Crises of Belonging in Greece', *Feminist Review* 109, (2015), 73-95, doi:10.1057/fr.2014.50.

[43] Anastasia Christou, 'The Wretched of Europe': Greece and the Cultural Politics of Inequality, *Humanity and Society*, (2016a), DOI: 10.1177/0160597616664169.

[44] Mary Evans, 'Feminism and the Implications of Austerity', *Feminist Review* 109, (2015) 146-155, doi:10.1057/fr.2014.39.

[45] Nina Glick Schiller, 'Beyond the Nation-State and Its Units of Analysis: Towards a New Research Agenda for Migration Studies. Essentials of Migration Theory', Bielefeld: COMCAD, Working Papers – Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development; 33. https://www.unibielefeld.de/tdrc/ag_comcad/downloads/workingpaper_33_Glick_Schiller.pdf, 2007.

[46] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. C.Gordon. Trans. C. Gordon, L. Marshal, J. Mepham, and K. Sober. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

[47] Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space', *History of Human Sciences*, 6, 97, (1993) DOI: 10.1177/095269519300600205.

[48] Gillian Rose, *Feminism and geography* : *The limits of geographical knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

[49] Doreen Massey, *Space, place and gender*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994.

[50] Linda McDowell, *Gender, identity and place. Understanding feminist geographies*, Cambridge, Oxford, Polity, 1999.

[51] Roland Clark, 'Editorial: Masculinities in Russia and East Central Europe', *Sextures*, 3,3, (2015), 4-13.

[52] Anastasia Christou, 'Ageing masculinities and the nation: disrupting boundaries of sexualities, mobilities and identities'. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 23,6, (2016b) 801-816.

[53] Roland Clark, 'Editorial: Masculinities in Russia and East Central Europe', *Sextures*, 3,3, (2015), 4-13.

[54] Rebecca Kay, 'Caring for men in contemporary Russia: gendered constructions of need and hybrid forms of social security', *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, 50, (2007), 51-65.

[55] Jeff Hearn, et al., 'Studying Men's Violences: Some Key Methodological Principles in Developing a European Research Framework', *Masculinities and Social Change*, 2,1, (2012), 82-115. doi: 10.4471/MCS.2013.22
[56] Jeff Hearn and Keith Pringle, with members of CROME, *European Perspectives on Men and Masculinities: National and Transnational Approaches*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

[57] Jeff Hearn, et al., 'Studying Men's Violences: Some Key Methodological Principles in Developing a European Research Framework;, *Masculinities and Social Change*, 2,1, (2012), 82-115. doi: 10.4471/MCS.2013.22

[58] Domna Michail, and Anastasia Christou, 'Eastern European migrant women in Greece: intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis', *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society*, 64, 1, (2016a), 58-78.

[59] Eva, Fabrizio, 'Caging/Self-caging: Materiality and Memes as Tools for Geopolitical Analysis', *Human Geography* 5,3, (2012), 9-14.