Maria Papathanas(s)iou (University of Athens)

Female labour, life cycle and the peasant household: Looking into the working lives of women in the Austrian Alps (late 19th, first decades of the 20th century).

Drawing on extensive autobiographical records as well as contemporary ethnographic material the paper discusses rural women’s labouring lives in the Eastern Austrian Alps within gender as well as geographical comparative contexts.

Well into the previous century, farms in the eastern Austrian Alps were for the most part inherited by one heir (impartible inheritance); thus peasant households constituted living as well as working units, where work largely served subsistence purposes. Animal husbandry was crucial to these alpine peasant economies (where the soil was generally hard to cultivate) and demanded a readily available workforce, namely servants.

Was there “a woman’s place” within the peasant household’s division of labour? Did women’s place within labour hierarchy depend on the life cycle period they stood in and vice versa? In which ways did gender interact with age and social status (since f.e. in the region under examination, social class did not directly and necessarily correspond to female servants’ position within labour hierarchy or since certain positions within female labour hierarchy enjoyed particular privileges)? In which ways did remuneration and thus wages, paid in cash as well as in kind and attributed subtle social meanings, reflect a woman’s position within labour hierarchy? What labour, social, emotional relations develop between working women, as well as between them and labouring men?

Women of different ages (girls as well as older women) and of different socio-economic backgrounds conducted different, and differently evaluated, kinds of rural work from different positions within labour and socioeconomic hierarchies, that on the whole privileged men in various (though not always visible) ways: The wives of peasants headed female working groups; on their part, peasant daughters, foster and/or illegitimate children, cottagers’ and agricultural workers’ children, worked as female servants occupying well defined positions in elaborate hierarchies, and occasionally, at peak times, as agricultural workers. Working women in the region of the eastern Austrian Alps, where the restricted labour market functioned largely along kinship and neighbourhood lines and where, as mentioned above, wages were still largely paid in kind, appear to have constituted an exceptional case, a sort of pre-industrial female workers in an age of advanced industrialization – and yet their life and labour was variously influenced from the outside world.