

DOMESTIC WORKERS, THE WORKING CLASS AND SERVANTS' TRADE UNIONS IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES¹

Domestic workers ('servants' as they were usually referred to at least up until the Second World War) have often been ignored in labour history and excluded from definitions of the working class. Despite this, a history of domestic worker organising stretches back to the nineteenth century.

Marx firmly declared that servants were of no interest to those seeking to mobilise the working class as a revolutionary force and agent of history. Capital volume 1 asserted that 'types of work that are consumed as services and not products separable from the worker... are of microscopic significance when compared with the mass of capitalist production' and may therefore 'be entirely neglected'.¹ Yet, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, to exclude servants from this political project was to exclude the most numerous of all waged workers. Marx acknowledged that the 1861 census of England and Wales recorded 1,208,648 domestic servants out of a potential workforce of about eight million, outnumbering all the various forms of industrial worker put together. To neglect servants was also to ignore the vast majority of the female workforce since, as Marx remarked in a footnote, more than 91% of this huge population of servants were women.³ This remained the case in Britain into the 1930s, when servants made up between one-quarter and one-third of all women in paid employment.⁴



Across Europe domestic servants remained one of the most numerous types of waged worker into the twentieth century, declining after the First World War but only definitively disappearing as a central component of the labour market after the Second World War⁵ – a development that, as I argue below, might now only be viewed as temporary. Servants also constituted an important element of the labour market across the territories colonised and settled by European imperial powers, and colonial families tended to employ far more domestic servants (both indigenous and European, men and women) than their counterparts in the metropole.⁶

¹ A version of this paper has been published in the *Handbook of Marxism* (London, Sage, 2022).

² KARL MARX, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 1044-1045.

³ Ivi, pp. 573-575.

⁴ PAMELA HORN, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*. Stroud, Alan Sutton Publishing, 1990, pp. 171-172.

⁵ ANTOINETTE FAUVE-CHAMOUX, *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalisation of Domestic Work, 16th–21st Centuries*, Bern, Berlin, Brussels, Frankfurt, New York, Oxford, Wien, Peter Lang, 2004.

⁶ VICTORIA K. HASKINS, CLAIRE LOWRIE (eds), *Colonisation and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015.

Nevertheless, Marx's contemporaries and successors in male-dominated socialist and labour movements tended to neglect the domestic workforce. Some even made explicit what remained implicit in Marx's work, suggesting that servants were not merely outside of the working class but were in fact a counter-revolutionary force. It was argued that the conditions under which most servants laboured – working in private homes, often alongside their female employers in tiny workforces of ones or twos, with little free time to attend political meetings or socialise with other workers – presented insurmountable difficulties to successful union organising and even the development of class consciousness⁷.

The Domestic Servants Problem.

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The Domestic Servants Problem.

(To the Editor.)

Sir.—As one who has suffered from overwork through inability to secure domestic help, I read with great interest your remarks on the above question. I was however disappointed that you who are generally so ready to lift along any good movement should think fit to, in a way, throw cold water on the effort to start a national movement towards free immigration of girls. There is much that is ad-

attempts to pass legislation regulating household service and limiting the working day, although these ultimately failed.⁸

The Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland (est. 1909–10) was far smaller – a maximum of 2,000 members at any one time – but was led from the grass roots by domestic servants Kathlyn Oliver and Grace Neal, as well as Jessie Stephen of the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers (est. 1911), which merged with the national union in 1913. They proudly declared their union to be an organisation 'by servants for servants' and refused to apologise to critics who complained that the union was 'organised along class war lines'.

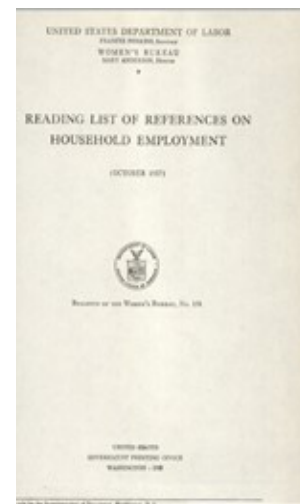
They rejected sentimentalised views of the mistress–servant relationship as anything other than an employment contract, and insisted that domestic labour could be

⁷ LUCY DELAP, *Knowing their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 91–92; Laura Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class and Domestic Labour in the Women's Suffrage Movement*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 164–165.

⁸ JEAN H. QUATAERT, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885–1917*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979; RENATE BRIDENTHAL, *Class Struggle Around the Hearth: Women and Domestic Service in the Weimar Republic*, in Michael N. Dobkowski, Isidor Wallimann I (eds), *Towards the Holocaust: The Social and Economic Collapse of the Weimar Republic*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1983, pp.243–264.

regulated and legislated for like any other job.⁹ Around the same time, but on the other side of the globe, class consciousness, pride in one's work and claims to professional status were also asserted by migrant Chinese amahs (skilled domestic servants, household managers and governesses) in Southeast Asia, who formed networks, provided accommodation for fellow servants during periods of unemployment and assumed their own professional dress.¹⁰ These unions were inspired by a general upsurge in working-class and feminist militancy in this period, yet rarely received large-scale or active support from either movement. As a result, they tended to be sporadic, short-lived and disrupted by the First World War. Domestic worker organising in the inter-war period was both galvanised and ultimately limited by the economic crisis of the 1930s and coercive state welfare systems that forced many former domestic servants (who had briefly enjoyed far higher wages as factory workers during the war) back into service¹¹. Nevertheless, the real, if uneven, improvement in domestic servants' pay and conditions that occurred in the twentieth century must in part be attributed to both formal and informal organising efforts by the workers themselves.

By the end of the Second World War, European domestic life ceased to be structured around the assumed existence of a permanent 'live-in' servant. In its Western social democratic nations, improvements in housing and the mass production of household appliances lightened the burden of housework; some of this work (notably elder care and care for the sick) was brought under the aegis of the welfare state rather than the private home. The growing political power of the working classes made domestic service appear even less appealing when compared to jobs in the expanding sectors of retail and light manufacturing. The post-war valorisation of domesticity propelled many middle- and working-class women into the role of unwaged housewife, or at least combining this full-time responsibility with part-time waged work. In 1973 the left-wing North American sociologist

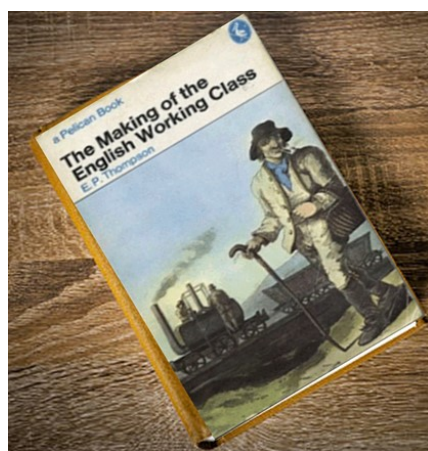


⁹ LAURA SCHWARTZ, "What We Think Is Needed Is a Union of Domestic Workers Such as the Miners Have": The Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1908–1914, in «Twentieth Century British History», 25, June 2014, issue 2, pp. 173–198; ID., "A Job Like Any Other?" Feminist Responses and Challenges to Domestic Worker Organising, Britain 190–1914, in «International Labor and Working Class History» 88, 2015, pp. 30–48; ID., *Feminism and the Servant Problem*, cit.

¹⁰ OOI KEAT GIN, *From Amah-chieh to Indonesian Maids: A Comparative Study in the Context of Malaysia circa 1930s–1990s*, in Dirk Hoerder and Amarjit Kaur (eds), *Proletarian and Gendered Mass Migrations: A Global Perspective on Continuities and Discontinuities from the 19th to the 21st Centuries*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013, pp.405–425; DIRK HOERDER, *Historical Perspectives on Domestic and Caregiving Workers' Migration: A Global Approach*, in Id., Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger (eds.), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2015, pp.61–109.

¹¹ RENATE BRIDENTHAL, *Class Struggle Around the Hearth*, cit.; LUCY DELAP, *Knowing their Place*, cit.; VANESSA H. MAY, *Unprotected Labour: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870–1940*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2011; PAMELA HORN, *Life Below Stairs: The Real Lives of Servants, 1939 to the Present*, Stroud, Amberley, 2014.

Lewis A. Coser declared uncontroversially that the forces of modernisation had made domestic service an almost entirely obsolete occupational role¹². Servants were apparently consigned to history, yet they did not feature in the labour histories that flourished during this high point of social democracy. E. P. Thompson's heterodox Marxism, which famously shunned the scientific socialism of Stalinism in favour of a more humanistic vision of class as a 'relationship' rather than a 'thing', stopped short at incorporating domestic servants into a history of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Although Thompson acknowledged that, next to agricultural workers, servants were 'the largest single group of working people' during the whole period of the Industrial Revolution', he did not examine their place in class struggle.¹³ The discipline of history was itself greatly influenced by the teleology of Marx's historical materialism, so that historians of class, work and social change followed a plot line that had no room for servants.¹⁴



Since the beginning of the twentieth century, feminists (some of them domestic workers themselves) have been arguing for the economic value of domestic labour, rejecting Marxist-influenced understandings of it as 'unproductive'.¹⁵ This argument was made even more strongly with the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement the 1970s and 1980s. All feminists asserted the value of the unwaged work they performed in the home and argued that men should take an equal share in it. Socialist feminists of many hues emphasised how 'capitalism also depends on domestic labour', arguing that the factory system relied upon a healthy and disciplined mainly male workforce, which was enabled by wives at home cooking, cleaning and caring for their husbands and raising the next generation of workers. A particular current associated with the Wages for Housework Movement in Britain, Italy and the USA argued that the category of the

¹² RAFFAELLA SARTI, *Historians, Social Scientists, Servants and Domestic Workers: 50 Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work*, in Dick Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger (eds.), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, cit., pp. 25–60 (39).

¹³ EDWARD P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York, Vintage Books, 1966, pp. 9–10, p. 211.

¹⁴ CAROLYN STEEDMAN, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; ANNA CLARK, *E. P. Thompson and Domestic Service*, «Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas», 1 September 2013, 10 (3), pp. 41–44; SELINA TODD, *People Matter*, «History Workshop Journal», 2013, 76 (1), pp. 259–265.

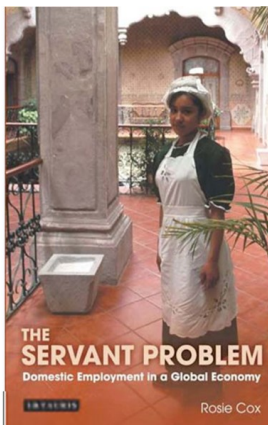
¹⁵ LAURA SCHWARTZ, *Feminism and the Servant Problem*, cit.

proletariat needed to be expanded to include unwaged housewives and that the home was as much a site of struggle as the factory:

In the name of 'class struggle' and 'the unified interest of the working class' the Left has always selected certain sectors of the working class as revolutionary subjects and condemned others to a merely supportive role in the struggles these sectors were waging. The Left has thus reproduced in its organisational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class that characterise the capitalist division of labour.¹⁶

These debates initially focused upon the unwaged housewife, rather than the waged domestic worker. This in part reflected the nature of the labour market in the historical moment and geographical location in which these 'second wave' Western feminists were writing. In the global south the demand for domestic servants did not decline in the decades following the Second World War. Struggles for independence and ensuing decolonisation certainly saw the end of the old colonial servant-employing class, but new postcolonial elites continued to employ servants, while the sudden withdrawal of capital by former colonisers created havoc and unemployment, increasing the numbers of people resorting to domestic work¹⁷.

In the last few decades, the number of domestic workers globally grew by almost 20 million between 1995 and 2010.¹⁸ Since the 1980s, paid domestic labour has rapidly expanded to become a central feature of neo-liberalism and globalisation. As welfare states have been attacked and the majority of women in the global north are now



employed outside the home (over 70% in Britain), some reproductive labour such as convenience food and private childcare has been outsourced to the commercial sphere, and more and more middle-class families have once again begun to employ domestic workers in their own homes. In the UK around 448,400 people worked as cleaners across the industry in 2010, employed by as many as one in 10 British households, and 37% of those in England were migrant workers.¹⁹ Global inequality has thus been key to delivering cheap labour back into British homes, and many migrant domestic workers are enmeshed in a global chain of care that requires them to outsource the care of their own homes and families in their countries of origin.²⁰

¹⁶ SILVIA FEDERICI, NICOLE COX, *Counter Planning from the Kitchen*, Silvia Federici (ed.), *Revolution at Point Zero: House Work, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, PM Press, 2012, pp.28–40. See also MARIA ROSA DALLA COSTA, SELMA JAMES, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1975. |

¹⁷ ELISE VAN NEDERVEEN MEERKERK, SILKE NEUNSINGER, DICK HOERDER, *Domestic Workers of the World: Histories of Domestic Workers as Global Labor History*, in Dick Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger (eds.), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, cit., pp. 1-24.

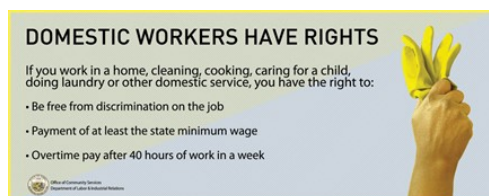
¹⁸ *Ivi*, to pp. 12-15.

¹⁹ Institute for Employment Research (2010) Labour Market Information Future Trends: Cleaning Industry (Available at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/ngrf/lmifuturetrends/sectorscovered/propertyandfacilities/sectorinfo/subsectors/#cleaning>, accessed 6 April 2020); LINDA MCDOWELL, *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 38, p. 81; SELINA TODD, *Domestic Service and Class. Relations in Britain 1900–1950*, «Past and Present», 2009, 203, pp. 181–204 (181).

²⁰ BRIDGET ANDERSON, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*, London and New York, Zed Books, 2000; ROSIE COX, *The Servant Problem: Paid Domestic Work in a Global Economy*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

The importance of migration to the twenty-first-century domestic service industry has also led to a rise in the number of male domestic workers in the West. In Italy, where this phenomenon is most pronounced, men have made up as much as 17% of declared domestic workers in 1996, fluctuating at around 10 to 11% in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The vast majority are migrants from East Asia and Latin America.²¹ Immigration controls and fear of deportation among undocumented workers and those whose visa is sponsored by their employers, in addition to a more general hostile environment affecting all migrant workers, make it difficult to assert even the limited employment rights currently in place.²²

Yet many migrants have become involved in, and indeed spearheaded, a resurgence in domestic workers' unions and pressure groups demanding governmental and international legislative intervention. These organising efforts began in the global south in the 1980s and were brought to the global north in the early twenty-first century, primarily by migrating Caribbean, Latin American and Asian domestic workers.²³ In Britain, some of the most significant gains made by cleaners in the last decade or so have been won by small grassroots migrant workers' unions such as the Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union, the Independent Workers of Great Britain and United Voices of the World, although these have tended to focus on workers in offices and public institutions rather than private homes²⁴. On a global scale, trade unions have begun to give greater recognition to domestic workers and in 2011 the International Labour Organization passed Convention 189 Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers²⁵. At the time of writing, this Convention is now in force in 32 nations, but has not been ratified in Britain, where cleaners on average earn around £9.44 per hour, less than the national living wage.²⁶



²¹ RAFFAELLA SARTI, FRANCESCA SCRINZI, *Introduction to the Special Issue: Men in a Woman's Job, Male Domestic Workers, International Migration and the Globalization of Care*, in «Men and Masculinities», 2010, 13(1), pp. 4–15 (7); FRANCESCA SCRINZI, *Masculinities and the International Division of Care: Migrant Male Domestic Workers in France and Italy*, «Men and Masculinities», 2010, 13(1), pp. 44–64 (47).

²² LUCY DELAP, 'Yes Ma'am': *Domestic Workers and Employment Rights*, 2012. Available at: www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/yes-maam-domestic-workers-and-employment-rights (accessed 2 April 2020).

²³ ELISE VAN NEDERVEEN MEERKERK, SILKE NEUNSSINGER, DICK HOERDER, *Domestic Workers of the World*, cit., pp. 15-17.

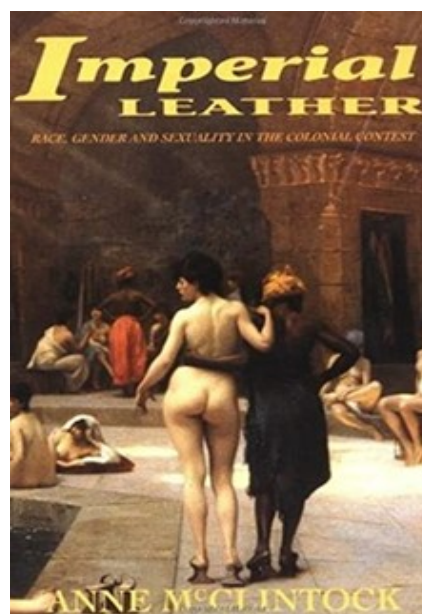
²⁴ KELLY ROGERS, *Precarious and Migrant Workers in Struggle: Are New Forms of Trade Unionism Necessary in Post Brexit Britain?*, in «Capital and Class», 2017, 41(2), pp. 336–343.

²⁵ CELIA MATHER, "Yes We Did It!" *How the World's Domestic Workers Won International Rights and Recognition*, Cambridge, MA: WIEGO, 2013; Eileen Boris, Jennifer N. Fish, *Decent Work for Domestics: Feminist Organising, Worker Empowerment and the ILO*, in Dick Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger (eds.), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, cit., pp. 530-552.

²⁶ LINDA MCDOWELL, *Working Bodies*, cit., p. 85; *International Labour Organization, Ratifications of C189 - Domestic Workers Convention*, 2011. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::p11300_instrument_id:2551460 (accessed 6 April 2020); *Payscale Cleaner Salary*, 202. Available at: www.payscale.com/research/UK/Job=Cleaner/Hourly_Rate (accessed 6 April 2020).

Over these last few decades the domestic servants of the past have begun to be written back into the history of capitalism, imperialism and class formation. Leonore Davidoff's pioneering work traced how the British industrial revolution, that laboratory of early industrial capitalism attended to so closely by Marx and Engels, generated both the material and ideological separation of home and work. This was accompanied by a gendered division of labour that relegated women's economic activity to the private sphere and rendered it non-work. In showing how domestic labour came to be devalued and defined as unproductive, Davidoff also revealed the historical conditions under which Marx's own thinking on servants was shaped. Instead, Davidoff maintained that

industrial capitalism was founded upon the unwaged and low paid labour of housewives and domestic servants in the family home. She also highlighted domestic servants' importance in defining and affirming middle-class identity, offering a different perspective on the 'lickspittles' and 'flunkies' so derided by Marx.²⁷ In Davidoff's view such servants were not unproductive but, on the contrary, performed the crucial ideological and material labour of class formation.²⁸ Whereas Davidoff's emphasis was on the metropole, Anne McClintock examined the central role of domesticity, domestic labour and domestic servants in the formation of the British Empire, drawing an affinity between the 'denial of the value of women's domestic work in the industrial metropolis and the devaluing of colonised labour in the cultures coming under violent imperial rule'.²⁹



More recently, historians have begun to bring domestic servants into labour history, to tell a different story about 'the making of the working class'. Carolyn Steedman has done this for eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England, disrupting the 'plot' of Thompsonian social history by placing servants at the centre of accounts of modern labour and property law. Writing about a period before the stigmatisation of domestic labour that Davidoff recounted, Steedman insisted upon treating eighteenth-century servants not as 'dirty disgusting... social others' but as workers who, 'with the means available to them in a profoundly inequitable society', were aware of and asserted their legal rights.³⁰ Selina Todd's history of 'the rise and fall of the [British] working

²⁷ KARL MARX, *Grundrisse*, London, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 401.

²⁸ LEONORE DAVIDOFF, "Mastered for Life": *Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England*, in «Journal of Social History», 1974, 7, pp. 406–428; LEONORE DAVIDOFF, CATHERINE HALL, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class, 1780–1850*, London, Hutchinson, 1987; LEONORE DAVIDOFF, MEGAN DOOLITTLE, JANET FINK, KATHERINE HOLDEN, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830–1960*, Harlow, Longman, 1999.

²⁹ ANNE MCCLINTOCK, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 138.

³⁰ CAROLYN STEEDMAN, *Labours Lost*, cit., p. 17, pp. 26–28; see also Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

class' has argued that, far from being marginal to this story, servants should be understood as barometers of social change and the fortunes of the wider working class.³¹ Todd has also called for historians not just to attend to the personalised aspects of the mistress–maid relationship, but also to take a labour-history approach to understanding how wages and conditions shaped experiences of service.³² A 2015 special issue of the journal *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 'Historicizing Domestic Workers Organizing Resistance', edited by Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, reveals the extent to which such a project is now being undertaken from a global perspective. Premilla Nadasen's history of African-American domestic workers, who organised collectively in the 1950s–70s, highlighted the persistence of domestic service in the USA even after the Second World War, whereby in 1960 one-third of all employed African-American women were household workers. This bucking of the Western European trend towards decline serves as a reminder of the importance of race and the legacies of slavery in structuring the domestic labour market and cutting across the gains made by a (white male) labour movement.³³ Histories of domestic servants' efforts to transform the conditions under which they labour point towards possibilities and offer lessons for future workplace activism in economies that are increasingly service- rather than manufacturing-based. The shift in terminology from 'servants' to 'domestic workers' is significant – an indication that it is no longer possible to refuse to recognise them as agents of their own history.

LAURA SCHWARTZ

³¹ SELINA TODD, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class, 1910–2010*, London, John Murray, 2014; ID., *Domestic Service and Class*, cit.

³² *Idem.*

³³ PREMILLA NADASEN, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2015; see also VANESSA H. MAY, *Unprotected Labour*, cit.