

A similar imprecision is apparent in *Sexual Politics*' other main contention. Despite the centrality of "class" to the book's argument, no clear idea of how historians should understand or work with this most slippery of concepts emerges. At times, especially in reference to maternalist arguments for birth control and abortion, class appears to be understood as a linguistic construction, or discursive space, but at other points Brooke seems more inclined to a "common-sense" understanding of class as a social category determined by more basic economic relations. Thus, the supplanting of class-based arguments by those of identity and individual rights is assumed to be an inevitable response to a new reality. Brooke's notion of "class" is diluted to the point of meaninglessness when we are told that Liberal MP David Steel (hardly the most obvious class warrior) highlighted "class difference" in arguing for abortion reform (p. 171), while his common-sense understanding encourages a misleading dichotomy between "class" arguments on one hand and Malthusian, eugenic, and feminist arguments (all of which were themselves shot through with class assumptions) on the other. The neglect of eugenics is particularly remiss, not only because it was a recurrent theme in birth control and abortion arguments, but also because a discussion of eugenics would have enabled Brooke to clarify his understanding of class. Instead eugenics is treated as a self-contained stain that sometimes spoils otherwise good class arguments. The Workers' Birth Control Group, apparently "moved out" of its "Malthusian and eugenicist background" (p. 64), but Dora Russell and Stella Browne were left with "hints" and a "tinge" (p. 32) of eugenics in their respective politics.

The deeper difficulty, that Brooke only partly confronts, is that the sexual reforms of the twentieth century are not easily contained in any party-based account, and the book's relentless focus on Labour – to the neglect even of other movements on the left – "the much vaunted New Left" is dismissed brusquely (p. 152) – is ultimately self-defeating. As we move through the twentieth century, it is increasingly clear that Labour, especially at a national level, was too often trailing extra-parliamentary and non-party movements in feminism and gay liberation. None of which is to deny that British politics without the Labour Party would have been a less sexually progressive place. That is a tale that needed telling and if Brooke is guilty of "bending the stick" – or, less pejoratively, neglecting some of the broader context – he has, nonetheless, done so in a manner that suggests future histories of the Labour Party will need to find more space for a consideration of sexual politics.

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"Throughout the twentieth century, domestic service had a compelling presence in British economic, social, and cultural life" (p. 1). This is the starting point of Lucy Delap's book.

“Domestic service has retreated to a marginal role in the economies of most western societies” was, instead, the conclusion of an important book by Theresa McBride on domestic service published several decades ago.<sup>1</sup> The distance between the two interpretations mirrors a double change of paradigm. Until more or less the 1980s, the idea that modernization would make domestic service disappear was dominant; consequently, among scholars working on Western societies social scientists rarely studied it, whereas historians considered the first few decades of the twentieth century the *terminus ad quem* of their inquiries. Yet from the 1980s onwards it became increasingly apparent that paid domestic work was far from disappearing; rather, it was undergoing a “resurgence”. This has prompted social scientists to focus on domestic workers and historians to increasingly investigate domestic service in the twentieth century. In Delap’s book the demise of any modernization paradigm implying the disappearance of domestic service is complete. “‘Modernity’ as an analytical concept tends to stress discontinuity with the past and thus has lent itself to narratives of the decline or obsolescence of domestic service”, yet during the twentieth century “servant-keeping was reworked rather than discarded” (p. 3).

Not only the growing awareness of the continuing recourse to paid domestic work but also Delap’s approach itself implies a rethinking of the chronology of domestic service. McBride’s book took a socio-economic approach, as did many other studies of domestic service that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Delap presents her book as an example of cultural and emotional history (pp. 1–11).<sup>2</sup> Thus, *Knowing Their Place* “departs from an account of economic and social marginality”, and explores “domestic service through an account of the cultural and emotional centrality” in British society (p. 5). This implies a “rethinking of the ‘when’ of domestic service”: rather than offering a reconstruction of the “rise and fall” of domestic service ending with the death of Queen Victoria, or either of the two world wars (p. 2), the book “explores the evolution and reception of a number of competing discourses of ‘modern living’”, and “in doing so, it offers an alternative periodization of service, which reconnects the early, mid- and late twentieth century, setting them in a single analytic frame” (p. 3). Despite the reduction in the number of people employed as or employing domestic servants after World War II, according to Delap there was “no corresponding diminution of cultural interest in domestic service” (p. 1).

Structured in six chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion, *Knowing Their Place* deals firstly with the aspirations and living conditions of servants, gathered through oral

1. Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France, 1820–1920* (London, 1976), p. 116. While several authors considered domestic service as an anachronistic survival of the past destined to disappear, according to McBride “almost paradoxically it served as a means of the modernisation of rural labor and particularly of women” during industrialization and urbanization (p. 117). Nevertheless, McBride, too, believed that modernization eventually implied its marginalization.

2. Delap also mentions Leonore Davidoff’s *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (New York, 1995) among the social histories of domestic service in the twentieth century (p. 7); yet it seems to me that Davidoff’s approach in many respects anticipated the later developments of cultural and emotional history. Significantly, Delap refers to Davidoff’s study in several pages of her book. The approach opted for distinguishes Delap’s book from another, more recent, history of domestic service in twentieth-century Britain, namely Pamela Horn’s *Life Below Stairs in the 20th Century* (Stroud, 2001), which — although also focusing on some emotional aspects — is much more interested in the institutional, political, social, and quantitative aspects of domestic service than Delap’s.

histories, memories, and autobiographies. Recalling the fact that service – though portrayed by historians “as the lowest status occupation” (p. 27) – was remembered by servants “in a positive light” (p. 30), the author makes clear that her study “aims to move on from the somewhat sterile debate about whether service was a good or a bad thing, and whether servants suffered from false consciousness” (p. 31). Despite the fact that “servants were not ‘a class apart’ from the rest of the working class” (p. 32), nor were they “deferential workers” (p. 59), Delap claims it is better to regard domestic service “as a site of ‘double consciousness’ rather than of class consciousness – a sense of always looking at the self through the eyes of another, that was available to servants and their employers”. The “irresolvable tensions of domestic service” derived “from this shared sense of gaze, surveillance and judgement” to which both masters and servants felt subject, although employers “had greater opportunities to ignore or minimize its effects” (p. 60).

Chapter 2 focuses on “Servant-Keepers and the Management of Servants”, showing that gender, as well as “divides of region, occupational group, age, ethnicity, and marital status”, made servant-keeping “extraordinarily diverse” (p. 96). Investigating the Victorian mistresshood and the later changes in the pattern of authority, Delap recalls the conviction that domestic service problems mirrored the “sense of chaos” due to the crises of nineteenth-century civilization (p. 97). Yet, until the mid-twentieth century, forms of domestic organization other than servant-keeping were “rarely taken seriously” by middle- and upper-class families “because to do so was to abandon core features of a self-identity of privilege” (p. 97).

“Doing for Oneself” is the topic of chapter 3, which investigates the debate on the “servantless home”, suggesting that “the cultural and emotional work of domestic service, as well as its practical effects on the organization of domestic space, remained important even where servants themselves were not present”. Significantly, electrical devices and appliances were presented as non-human servants (pp. 113–115, 123). Modernity and modern living were shaped by discourses of “transition towards a servantless state” (p. 98). Yet, despite the diminishing appeal of the mistress’s identity, servant-keeping had a continuing attraction to middle-class women, who were not at ease with the “housewives” identity either (p. 99) and increasingly aspired to careers. At the same time, “the continuing employment of domestic workers” avoided the need to question the gender division of domestic labour (p. 139).

Investigating mentalities, Delap focuses in chapter 4 on domestic-service humour, analysing the laughter both of employers and servants. In her view, looking at jokes “provides an alternative means of understanding the servant problem”, which can be seen as a “humour problem”, i.e. as “a damaging tendency to laugh at all involved with domestic service” (p. 140). Corroding any ideas of intimacy and the dignity of housework, humour contributed to making domestic service (temporarily) residual by the 1950s (pp. 168–169). Laughter also “suggests a revised periodization for the ‘servant problem’, with jokes about service persisting well into the late twentieth century” (p. 171), even though much had changed by then in the labour market. This would indicate the existence of a “single cultural imaginary” (p. 172).

According to Delap, both the jokes about domestic service and “the obsessive watching of servants by employers and reformers had a sexual element”, which was central to the cultural elaboration of the servant problem (p. 174). Chapter 5 is precisely on servants in pornography and erotica. Delap criticizes those authors who have “depicted only the sexual objectification or exploitation of the servant”, and stresses “the powers of both employers and servants to narrate the servant problem in terms of sex” (pp. 174–175).

Sexual agency and desire could be attributed to servants too. They were associated with illicit sex (mainly because of their proximity to dirt, which made them polluted). At the same time, they were seen as “a consoling sexual presence” because of their role as nannies and mother substitutes (p. 180). The erotic imaginaries, too, however, shifted over time, even though no simple chronology can be offered (p. 199).

The eroticization of domestic service also emerges from the way it is remembered. The final chapter is entitled “Heritage Nostalgia: Domestic Service Remembered and Performed”. It focuses on television, cinema, as well as on depictions and re-enactments of domestic service within British stately homes. The uninterrupted cultural centrality of domestic service in Britain is demonstrated by the fact that it “has come to take centre stage as an evocative, fantasized means of dramatizing the past in Britain” (p. 207). It can be seen as an (overloaded) site of memory (p. 210). The remembered domestic service is located in stately homes; middle- or lower-middle-class servant-keeping is underplayed; the working-class one is absent. Nostalgia for a world where everybody knew her/his place is incompatible with the status uncertainties of lower-class households, whose servant-keeping moreover resembles the contemporary employment of domestic workers and thus “can be historically distanced less successfully” (p. 231). The interest in domestic service also shows a concern about class as long as it “helps to locate ‘class’ in specific settings, and render it tangible” (p. 234).

Delap’s book opens new interesting perspectives, and will stimulate historical debate. It deserves a much longer discussion than is possible here. Such a discussion would also necessarily elaborate on a number of criticisms that can be made of the book, the main ones being, I believe, the following.

Delap questions the results of previous socio-economic studies and suggests new interpretations and periodizations. I believe she should have tried to integrate them more with the results of previous socio-economic research, which are not necessarily wrong but simply refer to different aspects. At a methodological level, the very fact that the periodization of domestic service turns out to be different if one considers, for instance, the number of those employed in the sector or, instead, its cultural presence, is in itself an important finding that should be recognized as such (stressing the contemporary presence of different chronologies for the different aspects considered rather than proposing one chronology as the “true” or “better” one).

My second point relates to what Delap considers to be “British”. Scholars are increasingly analysing domestic service in relation to colonization and imperialism.<sup>3</sup> The “exporting” of British servants to the colonies and the dominions was a crucial aspect of British imperialism well into the twentieth century;<sup>4</sup> British families in the colonies resorted to complex strategies to distance themselves from their local servants in order to avoid cultural contamination and raise children with a “true” British identity. Focusing on these issues would have contributed to an understanding of the importance of domestic service for British culture defined in a wider sense than Delap’s, particularly because during the twentieth century Britain lost its empire and its identity as the most powerful

3. See, for instance, the conference “Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives Research Symposium”, Crowne Plaza Hotel, Newcastle, 16–17 July 2012; available at <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/institute/research-institute-for-social-inclusion-and-well-being/activities-and-events/colonization-and-domestic-service-symposium.html>.

4. For an overview see R. Sarti, “The Globalisation of Domestic Service – An Historical Perspective”, in H. Lutz (ed.), *Migration and Domestic Work: A European Perspective on a Global Theme* (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 77–98.

imperial nation. Delap briefly mentions her childhood in Swaziland and her relationship with local domestic workers (p. 1), but she does not develop the issue of empire beyond making a few scattered references (pp. 17, 79, 101, 181).

Whereas recent studies of domestic service often take a comparative approach, Delap concentrates her gaze on Britain; certainly the very novelty of her approach makes a comparison difficult; yet some scope to develop comparisons does exist, and if pursued they would have yielded interesting results.

Finally, Delap devotes only limited attention to contemporary domestic work, which sounds rather surprising in a book that, according to the author, also places the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries – “periods when ‘domestic service’ became a site of nostalgia or fantasy, but which also witnessed a resurgence of paid private domestic work” – into its “single analytic frame” (p. 3).

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VEGA, EULÀLIA. *Pioneras y revolucionarias. Mujeres libertarias durante la República, la guerra civil y el franquismo*. Icaria, Barcelona 2010. 389 pp. € 23.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859013000102

One of the most powerful images and myths (in the sense of strongly structured accounts of collective memory and identity) bequeathed by the Spanish Civil War to the left is maybe that of the war as a setting of personal promotion and liberation for republican women. In particular, the libertarian organization *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) soon fascinated both anarchist and feminist activists and researchers. As early as 1971 in an article published in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Temma Kaplan presented the organization *Mujeres Libres* as a key player for the visibility of female-specific issues during the Civil War, together with the Ministry of Health under Federica Montseny.<sup>1</sup> In Spain, the publication of the works of Mary Nash, whose study on the magazine *Mujeres Libres* even preceded the dictator's death,<sup>2</sup> and later those by Martha Ackelsberg, opened the door for the female anarchist organization, described by several authors as anarcho-feminist – despite the rejection of a feminism considered to be “bourgeois” by the free women themselves – to be well-known and studied. However, the broader phenomenon of women's participation in the libertarian movement is relatively poorly known and has been subject to militant rather than strictly historiographic interest. Eulàlia Vega's book therefore represents the most serious attempt to date to provide a long-term overview (Republic, Civil War, Franco regime, exile) of the experiences and militant paths of the female anarchists who made up the generation of “free women”.

1. Temma E. Kaplan, “Spanish Anarchism and Women's Liberation”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6:2 (1971), pp. 101–110.

2. Mary Nash, *Mujeres Libres, España, 1936–1939* (Barcelona, 1975).