

REVIEW ESSAY

Rethinking Domestic Service

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HILL, BRIDGET. *Servants. English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996. vii, 278 pp. £35.00.

ROMANO, DENNIS. *Housecraft and Statecraft. Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice, 1400–1600*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore [etc.] 1996. xxvi, 333 pp. Ill. \$54.00.

Over the last two decades, our understanding of domestic service, its changes throughout history and its links to larger political and economical transformations, has been enriched by feminist and historical scholarship. A first step towards a better understanding of domestic work was made when feminists challenged the dominant theoretical bias that formerly had concentrated exclusively on the production process, and argued that the separation of the domestic and the public which occurred with the emergence of capitalism became the root cause of women's subordination.¹ This separation resulted in a situation where anything associated with the domestic became hidden, undervalued and perceived as unimportant. In later debates this dichotomizing framework has been further developed into discussions on the ways in which "the domestic" may shift in content and form; how it may be associated with not only what is conducted within the home, but also with the type of work (domestic work) and the type of people (women) considered as belonging in the home. Although the boundaries separating the domestic and public spheres may perpetually experience shifts, the implications of this separation are considered to be more or less clear, namely the devaluation of women's work and women's identity.

It has been observed, however, that, in the emphasis on the separation of spheres and its role in shaping the subordination of women, the main focus has been on unpaid domestic work. Even within the "domestic labour debate" barely any attention has been made to the issue of paid domestic

1. An example is the statement by Catherine Hall which argues that "with the development of capitalism comes the separation of capital from labour, the separation of the home from the place of work and the separation of domestic labour and commodity production": see Catherine Hall, "The History of the Housewife", in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980).

work.² Such studies reflected the theoretical orientation of the 1970s and 1980s where emphasis was placed on the universality of women's position based on the experiences of the West. More recent studies are critical of stereotypes and universalities regarding domestic service. These studies represent not only a currently growing attempt to highlight the importance of paid domestic service to the social reproduction of households, but also show that many features which we take to be central and common, such as what constitutes the domestic, the "feminine" nature of domestic service or the sharp division of labour between men's tasks and women's in the household, have been products of history.³

It is in this sense that the works of Bridget Hill and Dennis Romano are particularly significant. They illustrate the importance of historical context in increasing one's understanding of the factors contributing to changing trends in domestic service or changes in forms of master-servant relationships. Although they cover two different parts of Europe in different historical conjunctures, they show similar general conclusions. Bridget Hill, focusing on eighteenth-century England, challenges existing stereotypes on domestic servants, showing that the definition of work roles was never as clear-cut as often assumed. In line with the variations in class character of households, employer-servant relationships also varied. At the same time what was noticeable was the loose way in which "domestics" were defined. Besides those working in households, this category included also those workers employed in small enterprises in production and services. Despite this fluidity, certain patterns could be discerned which shifted together with transformations occurring in English society. Medieval England was principally characterized by the presence of aristocratic households, which were large, sometimes amounting to 100 to 200 members, where the domestic staff was predominated by male servants. The further down the scale one

2. The domestic labour debate focuses on the issue of what domestic work means for the accumulation of capital. On the one hand some scholars argue that while having no direct relation with capital, domestic labour "contributes directly to the creation of the commodity labour power": see Wally Seccombe, "The Housewife and Her Labour Under Capitalism", *New Left Review*, 83 (1974), pp. 3–74. Others state that the mechanisms of wage labour as revealed by Marx do not, however, apply in the same way to domestic labour, precisely because it is not wage labour: Margaret Coulson, Branka Magas and Hilary Wainwright, "The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism – A Critique", *New Left Review*, 89 (1975).

3. Some of the major English language works on domestic service in European and American history are, among others: Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernization of Household Service in England and France, 1820–1920* (New York, 1976); Frank Huggett, *Life Below Stairs* (London, 1977); Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams. Domestic Workers Under Apartheid* (London, 1980); Sarah Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton, 1983); Faye Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, 1983); Cissie Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies* (Baltimore, 1984); Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920–1945* (Philadelphia, 1989); David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1978).

went the smaller the households became and the more feminized the servants were. This situation changed in the nineteenth century with the expansion of the single-servant employing households. Such households showed preference for female servants and did not employ male servants any more.

Dennis Romano's study of Venice in 1400–1600 shows a reverse trend but comes to the same conclusions as Hill. He argues that in Italy, unlike northern Europe, bourgeois households which constituted the mercantile class of bankers, notaries and traders, already predominated. These households were small with no more than two or three servants, the majority of them being women. This pattern changed when, as a result of the political subjugation of Italy by northern powers, a process of aristocratization occurred. The ruling elite shifted their investments on land and property and, although not reaching the size of the northern European aristocratic households, household structures became much larger than before. With the expansion of households came also the masculinization of domestic service.

Both Hill and Romano show that there is a clear link between class, household size, the cultural style of households and the nature of domestic employment. As households became more oriented towards public display (which in this case was associated with the aristocratic lifestyle) male servants were preferred. Or, conversely, as households became more inward-oriented domestic servants became more feminized. With the bourgeoisification of households, there also emerged the notion that one's rating in society was based on hard work and self-achievement rather than on splendour and public display. Household life became more confined and separated from the public sphere and male servants as symbols of wealth and prestige became less required.

Hill and Romano suggest the interaction of a number of factors to explain this shift. Both provide corresponding analyses when they among others point to state taxation as providing a large influence on shifting the nature of employment of domestic servants. Households with men servants were taxed higher than those with women servants. What has not been explored by both authors is *why* the state imposed higher taxes on men. Was this based on an inherent patriarchal ideology adopted by the state or was the gendered nature of such a tax based on patriarchal forces already existing within society? In other words, was it because the state wanted to drive men out of the domestic sphere because their place was considered only appropriate in the public sphere; or was it because men's wages were already higher than women's?

Hill maintains that the state policy on domestic servants was "a calculated economic strategy", but does not go into the gendered bias underlying such a policy (p. 37). The tax on male servants in England was first imposed in 1777 and only eight years later a tax, which was less than the tax on male

servants, was imposed on maidservants. This came at the same time that the tax on male servants was increased to half a guinea per one servant.⁴ Romano does not view taxes on servants as an instrument attempting to control and monitor the recruitment and hiring of domestic servants, but as part of a larger attempt by the administration to regulate contractual relations between employers and servants.⁵ Therefore the regulations were focusing more on disciplining, judging and punishing rather than guarding the implementation of contractual relations as it did in the preceding period. In fact Romano suggests that it was a response to the increasing masculine character of domestic service that stimulated changes in the nature of government regulation rather than the other way round (p. 57).

It would seem that the tax on employers for having male servants was basically a tax on wealth. Male servants were a sign of wealth because their wages were higher, but then the question is: why were male servants' wages higher? Hill questions whether male-female wage differentials in domestic service existed because male servants gave a family more prestige or whether male servants gave prestige because they were generally paid more than female workers. This question was somehow left unanswered by Hill. Romano argues that in fifteenth-century Italy male servants made only a fraction more money than their female counterparts (p. 230). However, during the first half of the sixteenth century the gap between men's and women's wages widened considerably, men's becoming almost three times as much as women's. He explains this phenomenon by focusing on two things, namely the increased demand for male servants for livery and inclusion of servants in portraits (lifestyle), and the effect of foreign invasions and the plague which resulted in an opening up of the labour market for skilled trades for men which reduced the supply of male servants. Here we can see that the gendered nature of the labour market in combination with changing lifestyles to a large extent influenced the level of wages for men and women.

In comparing nineteenth-century labour markets in France and England, Louise Tilly and Joan Scott showed the link between levels of industrialization and domestic service. England, which experienced industrialization more rapidly and earlier than France, faced a decline in agricultural wage work which caused many women to be pushed out of the agricultural sector. However, the manufacturing sector was still limited in its absorption capacity and therefore women entered domestic service instead. This was

4. Bachelors were required to pay double the sum; families with children were given special dispensation from the full burden of the tax (pp. 37–38).

5. This grew from the attempt to monitor both the slave and indentured service in fourteenth-century Venice (p. 47). The changes occurring in this regulation reflected the changing perceptions on the side of Venice's elite regarding the position of servants. Where at first they were considered to be nondescript, later they were viewed as "purveyors of deceit, insolence and presumption" (p. 55).

manifested by the fact that in 1851 40 per cent of women workers were absorbed in the paid domestic sector and in 1880 50 per cent of all service employers were domestic servants. In France, on the contrary, because industrialization was not so rapid and started much later, agricultural work was still available for women and accounted for 40.2 per cent of employed women. Only 22.5 per cent of working women were domestic servants.⁶

The absorption of women in domestic service went in congruence with the withdrawal of men from this type of work. Hill states that this could be attributed to the opening up of opportunities in the labour market particularly for men which also increased their bargaining position and allowed them to leave when work conditions were not favourable to them. This complements Tilly and Scott's conclusion above that women's entry into domestic work was primarily because of the limited absorption into manufacturing for women workers.

If both Hill and Romano point to the combination of the cultural and the economic in explaining the feminization of domestic service and a corresponding devaluation in this type of work, others are more unequivocal about the role of culture. Cultural shifts emerged out of economic transformations, but became the major force behind the domestication of women. Davidoff and Hall, describing nineteenth-century England for instance, suggest that the bourgeoisification of the elite meant also the redefinition of moral ideals as the middle class "sought to translate their increasing economic weight into a moral and cultural austerity". They argued that since the emergence of the middle class coincided with "turmoil and threatening economic and political disorder" intensified efforts were made to create a "semblance of order". This was enforced among others, through separating social categories and exaggerating differences between groups. Therefore "masculine identity was equated with an emerging concept of 'occupation' while women remained within a familial frame".⁷ Cissie Fairchild, in her study on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France also showed how the major transformations occurring in this period (economic growth, changes in the notions of the purposes of government, new attitudes toward life, death, religion, separation of consumption and production, etc.) created the backdrop for the redefinition of the family.⁸ Sarah Maza argues that enlightenment ideas caused the labelling of male domestic service with economic stagnation and its identification of an outmoded system of production.⁹ In the United States, the identification of women with homemaking was strongly founded on the "cult of true womanhood" which emerged

6. Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York, 1978), pp. 68–69.

7. See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Classes, 1780–1850* (London, 1987).

8. She states, "[...] the traditional patriarchal family was replaced by a more modern, more affectionate, more egalitarian, and more child-centered one": Fairchild, *Domestic Enemies*, p. 17.

9. See Maza, *Servants and Masters*, pp. 276–298.

when “the development of industrial capitalism drove men to intensify their work efforts, harnessing them to the accumulation of capital which resulted in the masculine ethic”.¹⁰

The question here is not whether cultural or economic factors were the main driving force behind the inclusion of certain categories of labour in different periods in history, but the extent to which they mutually affect each other in shaping labour markets, wage differentials and employer-labour relations. The discourse on women’s subordination has become enriched by the integration of gender, class and race as social constructions. In looking at racial differences, for instance, the domestic sphere was not just associated with women and womanhood but also to other social categories which were not accorded full status in society. In nineteenth-century United States one-third of adult domestic workers were black men.¹¹ This was mainly because of the discriminatory nature of the labour market where blacks were excluded from nearly all other types of work except domestic service. Although domestic service was considered a female occupation, racial discrimination and cultural notions on what type of workers were appropriate for which type of work, pushed black men to enter service.¹²

The reverse is also true where economic contingencies pushed certain social groupings into certain types of work creating new social constructions on the types of work involved. Thus Tilly and Scott show that as more urban jobs opened up in the twentieth century, local workers would abandon work in domestic service and their places would be filled by immigrant workers. Thus women from Brittany, rural Italy, Spain or Portugal became the typical French servant. The women workers from Ireland, Scotland or the poor northern regions would become the English servants.¹³ Together with these trends came also the social characterizations of the occupation itself.

Apart from the discussion on the causes of the devaluation and feminization of the domestic service as well as the varieties in the nature of the

10. See Julie Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America* (Brighton, 1982); see also Dudden, *Serving Women* and Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, n. 2.

11. Unlike Hill’s description of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, in America, however, Matthaei shows that within the domestic service clear sex-typing existed. Therefore men were the coachmen, footmen and butlers, whereas women cared for the children and cooked.

12. Faye Dudden shows that among all ethnic groups, only Chinese men were as prone to enter service work. She mainly points to the labour market for the general absence of male servants, i.e. that it was greater labour market opportunities that prevented men from entering the domestic service: see Dudden, *Serving Women*, p. 222.

13. Besides the availability of more white-collar urban jobs, the decline in (live-in) English servants was attributed also to: the curtailment of young girls from employment by school and labour legislation; the increase in the cost of living and house-rents; the change in the age structure of the servant population (this was because of changes in the demand for servants where live-in help was no longer required) and the introduction of labour-saving technology: see Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, pp. 153–154.

domestic labour market, an important element to look at is the nature of domestic labour relations itself. Again certain general trends have been discerned by Hill and Romano. The aristocratic cultural orientation contained within it the notion of the male household head as paternal protector and benefactor of the household. The work relationship was built on non-written agreements and expectations. Besides the annual wages that the servant received, it was normal for servants to receive food and lodging and rewards for their services when they performed well – by hand-outs, often in kind.¹⁴ Hill seems to suggest that because of these “extras”, paternalistic forms of labour relations gave more financial rewards for servants. Romano emphasizes that in sixteenth-century Italy the change from bourgeois to aristocratic notions of employment implied that much importance was stressed on the personal honour of the patron as the household head. Such a situation created new possibilities for servants as they could call on such notions of honour in waging their demands. However, it is questionable whether the power of the patron would allow much manoeuvring space for servants. This would depend undoubtedly on the nature of household relations and the resources that servants have in confronting the employer’s power. Current situations show that in many societies, both patronage- and contract-based relations often exist at the same time and in most cases written contracts are not made. On top of this, an examination of social and economic dimensions alone do not explain the cultural inhibitions that servants may have in struggling for better work conditions. This is particularly clear if we take into account that forms of control are not only economic (with the use of fines, wage deductions) but also cultural. Many authors have reminded us that at the same time as the labour of servants is desperately needed by middle-class households, they are also often seen as a threat, as these “strangers” of different class and blood are considered to intrude on the private and often highly intimate aspects of a household.¹⁵

Although Romano stresses that any attempt to improve their position is on an individual rather than group basis, there are various channels that servants can use to escape exploitative conditions. For Italy, Romano shows that servants obtained leverage when demand exceeded supply. Servants understood this and were able to manipulate it. He showed that female servants often preferred short-time employment. In fact 19 per cent left after a month of service (p. 52). He also stresses that the changes in elite ideology

14. This practice of vails was the subject of a furious debate in the course of the eighteenth century.

15. Davidoff and Hall mention that “by opening their homes to strangers, masters place their own lives and those of their kin, as well as their material possessions at risk”: *Family Fortunes*, p. 52. In the Dutch East Indies, Ann Stoler shows that since nursemaids and other domestics were thought to perform “intimate functions” for children under their control, native servants represented sexual and moral danger: see Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham, 1995).

where personal honour became very important increased the significance of individual actions that manipulated social codes to extract concessions from their patrons (p. 238). It is true that organized protest is not commonly linked with domestic servants; however, in some parts of the world, domestic servants are able link themselves with unions or form organizations of their own.¹⁶

In most cases, however, organized efforts to improve their position is almost non-existent and therefore servants' hope for improvement may only be supported by conditions in the labour market, by the employer's own goodwill or the social and economic networks they may have to channel them to better types of work. Indeed in the case when these alternatives are not available desperate actions of "lashing out" against employers' abuse may occur. Romano mentions the case of a woman servant who murdered her master's son by putting arsenic in his food. This servant was later burned at the stake (p. 52). Jannie Poelstra, in her study on domestic service in the Netherlands, shows how a woman who was sexually violated by her employer tried to break her contract by burning her employer's barn. She was later sentenced and put in an institution for the mentally insane.¹⁷

To conclude, accounts of domestic servants have particularly stressed women's vulnerability, social isolation, depressed wages, long working hours and degrading work. Although the feminization of domestic service has often been attributed to the domestic/public separation, historical analyses have shown that questions still need to be posed regarding issues such as whether the separation between the "domestic" and "public" has indeed taken place across the board, whether it was the reason for or a reflection of the denigration of domestic work, whether the different types of work included under the domestic sphere are identical, and how class, race and gender have affected the meanings given to the different forms of domestic service. It has also been shown that the state has played a large role in directly or indirectly channelling certain categories of workers into certain types of jobs. However, it is not clear whether this is a reflection of inherent patriarchy or an outgrowth of patriarchal forces operating in society.

Such questions can only be answered by looking at the interplay of the ideological and economic within the historical context. Differentiation among domestic workers also determines the conditions under which men and women enter domestic work and their experiencing of labour relations as well as how they view their work in terms of future prospects.

Hill and Romano have argued that the kind of arrangements in domestic service reflects the dynamics of the society at large. In other words, through

16. Cock, *Maids and Madams*, mentions the South African Domestic Workers Union in the case of South Africa; and Lesley Gill gives the case of Union of Household Workers in Bolivia: see Lesley Gill, *Prekarious Dependencies: Gender, Class and Domestic Service in Bolivia* (New York, 1994).

17. See Jannie Poelstra, *Luiden van een Andere Beweging* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 25–29.

the study of domestic service we can see the public in the domestic, where power, sexuality, race and gender affect labour relations within the home. On the other hand we also become attuned to the domestic in the public, where cleaning, cooking and care services are organized in the formal sector.¹⁸ We are becoming more aware of the way in which domestic service and domestic workers are regulated by the state, at the same time as it is regulating the family, household arrangements, sex and marriage. All this implies breaking any rigid analytical separations we have so far made.

Bridget Hill reminds us in her conclusion that: “The experience as domestic servants of a vast number of the population in eighteenth and nineteenth century England is now being repeated in many areas of the world. Those interested in discovering more about domestic service in our past might find stimulation in the Third World experience. If nothing more, it might suggest new questions that need to be asked of our own history.” To this we can add that the reverse is also true.

18. See Wenona Giles and Sedef Arat-Koç, *Maid in the Market: Women's Paid Domestic Labour* (Halifax, 1994).