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## Servants

Laura Schwartz

Karl Marx's interest in servants extended only so far as to explain what they were not. They were not part of the working class; they were not producers of surplus value; and they had no place within the logic of capitalist modernity except as its by-product parasitic luxury. The *Grundrisse* (1857–61) asserted an '[e]ssential difference between th[e] *servant* class and the *working* class'.<sup>1</sup> While a worker's labour produced exchange value (a commodity whose value could be circulated to generate profit within a wider marketplace), a servant's labour produced only use value (a personal service for their employer that would be consumed, and therefore its value entirely dissipated, in that single exchange) (Marx, 1993: 401, 465–6). Marx's understanding of labour power as an abstract entity, a potential capacity to labour that does not realise its value until it becomes congealed into a commodity, wed him to an understanding of 'productive' labour as only that which produced 'vendible objects' (Steedman, 2009: 42–3). Servants' labour therefore failed to produce surplus value even when the servant class exhibited superficial characteristics akin to those of the industrial proletariat, e.g. when it was made up of free labourers, rather than enslaved or indentured, and paid in money rather than in kind. Thus, according to Marx, even those servants living and working in the modern capitalist societies of nineteenth-century Western Europe continued to embody pre-capitalist social relations (Marx, 1993: 465–8). In chapter 15 of *Capital* volume 1 (1867) 'Machinery and Large-Scale Industry', he found humour in the paradox of the supposedly modernising forces of industrial capitalism in fact increasing the number of working people employed in the manner of 'ancient domestic slaves'.

Mechanisation enabled an accelerated production of commodities embodying surplus value and thus an ever larger capitalist class:

Their growing wealth, and the relative diminished number of workers required to produce the means of subsistence, begets both new luxury requirements and the means of satisfying them... permits a larger and larger part of the working class to be employed *unproductively*. Hence it is possible to reproduce the ancient domestic slaves, on a constantly extending scale, under the name of the servant class, including men-servants, women-servants, lackeys etc. (Marx, 1990: 573–4)

This description of servants as ‘unproductive’ workers echoed similar sentiments already expressed in the *Grundrisse*, which noted how:

the creation of surplus labour on the one side corresponds to the creation of minus-labour, relative idleness (or *not-productive* labour at best), on the other. This goes without saying as regards capital itself; but holds then also for the classes with which it shares; hence of the paupers, flunkies, lickspittles etc living from the surplus product, in short, the whole train of retainers; the part of the servant class which lives not from capital but from revenue. (Marx, 1993: 401)

In both these works, Marx elided his discussion of a general ‘servant class’ (‘the entire class of so-called services from the boot black up to the king’, including many of the professions) with a critique of *domestic* servants in particular (Marx, 1993: 465). He understood domestic servants’ labour as the performance of their employers’ social status, which reduced them to baubles of luxury rather than contributors to a ‘social product’. This is in spite of the fact that the vast majority of nineteenth-century domestic servants were not flunkies or retainers in the homes of the wealthy, but general servants employed to do hard manual domestic labour in lower-middle-class households. Marx briefly noted this demographic fact in a footnote (Marx, 1990: 574), but did not bring

it to bear upon his general point that not only were servants excluded from the working class, they were not really workers of any kind but luxury items in and of themselves. From this perspective, servants could not even be understood as (re)producing the capitalist class in their daily lives, but were rather the ‘dependents’ or by-products of the ‘surplus product’. Although from a purely theoretical perspective Marx’s distinction between productive and unproductive labour was an analytical category rather than a value judgement, a more historicised reading highlights the politically charged nature of this formulation. Marx’s rhetorical flourishes implied some kind of alliance or shared interest between the capitalist class and the servant class. Servants within modern capitalism were not located in opposition or antagonism to the bourgeoisie but were its parasites, its cringing ‘lickspittles’.

This had important political implications. 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’ (Marx, 1990: 1044–5). 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 (Marx, 1990: 573–5). 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

(Horn, 1990: 171–2). 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 War (Fauve-Chamoux, 2004) – 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 (Haskins and Lowrie, 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 consciousness (Delap, 2011: 91–2; Schwartz, 2019: 164–5).

Some domestic servants defied such expectations and in the early decades of the twentieth century they formed unions in many countries, including Australia, Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden and the USA. The German Domestic Servants’ Union (est. 1906) was one of the strongest, and was initiated by Marxists and Socialists in the Social Democratic Party such as Clara Zetkin and Helene Grunberg. The union demanded an end to the semi-feudal regulations which still determined servants’ working conditions, a cause that was taken up once again in 1917

by the Central Union of Domestic Employees and continued into the Weimar Republic. Membership peaked in 1919 at 31,000 out of a total of 1,300,000 domestic servants. In 1921 and again in 1927 it spearheaded attempts to pass legislation regulating household service and limiting the working day, although these ultimately failed (Quataert, 1979; Bridenthal, 1983). 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 regulated and legislated for like any other job (Schwartz, 2014, 2015, 2019). 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 (Gin, 2013; Hoerder, 2015: 98). 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 service (Bridenthal, 1983; Delap, 2011; May, 2011; Horn, 2014). 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.

Most nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Marxists and socialists, however, did not look to the organisation and/or revolutionary activity of domestic workers as the solution to their low pay and poor working conditions. Instead they argued that domestic service would wither away under socialism through the mechanisation and collectivisation of housework. The German Marxist August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* (1879), widely translated, reprinted and read by socialists across Europe, argued that housework must be modernised in line with other forms of industry:

The preparation of food must be conducted as scientifically as any other function... The private kitchen disappears... All the former troubles of keeping ranges, lamps etc. in working order removed by the central heating and electric apparatuses for lighting. Warm and cold water supplies places bathing within reach of all... The central laundries assume the washing, drying, etc. of clothes and the central cleaning establishment see to the dusting et cetera of clothing and carpets... Domestic life being thus radically transformed, the servant, this 'slave of all the whims of the mistress,' is no more... (Bebel, 1904: 338–41)

Jane Clapperton, Clementina Black and Sylvia Pankhurst in Britain and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the USA also proposed blueprints for collective living and/or the collectivisation of cooking, cleaning and childcare (Clapperton, 1894, 1904; Gilman, 1912; Black, 1918; Pankhurst, 1920). While all of them worked within a broadly socialist tradition, only Sylvia Pankhurst advocated a Marxist-influenced revolutionary politics. Ideas of 'cooperative housekeeping' gained a much wider audience within the

varied political currents of the women's movement, and also drew upon visions of cooperation put forward by the British Owenites and the French Fourierists in the early nineteenth century – those whom Marx and Engels had labelled 'utopian socialists' in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* (Taylor, 1983; Thomson, 1988, Marx and Engels, 2012).

The early years of the 1917 Russian Revolution also generated a great deal of enthusiasm for the collectivisation of housework as part of an even more radical project for the eradication of the bourgeois nuclear family. The Bolsheviks argued that under socialism household labour would be transferred to the public sphere, and during the Civil War (1918–21) public dining halls, laundries, creches and free food for children were introduced. Vladimir Lenin described housework as 'the most unproductive, the most savage, and the most arduous work a woman can do', reiterating Marx's belief that it was 'barbarous' and 'unproductive' (Lenin, 1934: 63, 69). Alexandra Kollontai maintained that sewing, cleaning and washing would become indistinguishable from mining and machine production, condemning the institution of the family for its inefficient use of labour, food and fuel. Housewives, rather than domestic servants, were the subject of this professed desire to emancipate women from housework, although in Russia too the vast majority (80%) of waged women workers at this time were either servants or landless agricultural labourers (Goldman, 1993: 3–5). In their desire to create a society without household servitude, early revolutionaries ignored paid domestic labour and thus excluded servants from their definitions of the proletariat. After 1921, however, when the New Economic Policy conceded that some form of domestic service would continue, servants were encouraged to develop proletarian consciousness and join the state-run trade union of Workers of Public Catering and Dormitory Workers. In 1926 ground-breaking labour legislation was introduced,



intended to meet the particular needs of servants who were not adequately covered by the existing Labour Code designed with factory workers in mind. Recognising the flexibility of the domestic labour process, the new legislation did not specify a working day but rather a monthly limit of 192 hours and guaranteed paid holidays. Although it was difficult to ensure that this was implemented in private homes, it did give servants a formal legal basis upon which to assert their rights as workers. Steps towards including domestic servants within the Soviet proletariat were limited by the fact that service was viewed as exclusively women's work, with men still expected to undertake higher status 'productive' work outside the home. Such value judgements also informed the push towards industrialisation from 1929, when women were called upon to leave service for 'real' work in the factories. By the end of the first five-year plan in 1933 the number of servants had fallen from 527,000 women to 241,000 (Goldman, 2002: 6, 9, 19, 90–1; Klots, 2018: 85–86, 90–92).

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 Lewis A. Coser declared uncontroversially that the forces of modernisation had made domestic service an almost entirely obsolete

occupational role (Sarti, 2015: 39). Servants were apparently consigned to history, yet they did not feature in the Marxist and Marxist social 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* (Thompson, 1966: 9-10, 211). 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 (Steedman, 2009; Clark, 2013; Todd, 2013).

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement, Marxist and socialist feminists began to critique and reconfigure Marx's and Marxists' conceptualisation of domestic labour as unproductive. 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 engaged most closely with re-writing Marxist theory, arguing that the category of the 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, (Federici and Cox, 2012: 28–9; see also Dalla Costa and Federici, 1975)

Far more controversial was the Wages for Housework argument that domestic labour produced surplus value as well as use value and thus directly contributed to profit – an idea that provoked a great deal of debate and was by no means accepted by all Marxist-feminists (Harrison, 1973; Seccombe, 1974, 1975; Coulson et al., 1975; Gardiner, 1975, 1976; Gardiner et al., 1975; Himmelweit and Mohun, 1977; Federici and Cox, 2012).

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 work (Van Nederveen Meerkerk et al., 2015). Critical feminist approaches to Marxist theory have also been used to illuminate these contexts in which large numbers of women continue to be employed in domestic work and where employing full-time servants remains the norm for middle- and upper-class families. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum’s study of ‘servitude’ in India engaged ‘with precisely the “microscopic” relations that Marx dismissed... and

posit[ed] that the macroscopic relations of exploitation that interested Marx are rooted in the dialectics of the day-to-day and the intimacies of power' that characterise domestic service (2009: 5–6, 20, 188–9). These Marxist-feminist interventions must be understood alongside parallel and intersecting moves within critical race theory and anti-racist and postcolonial politics to critique and expand more orthodox Marxist understandings of the proletariat. Looking beyond the Western, white, male factory worker has shifted attention not just to domestic workers but also peasants, slum-dwellers and a range of 'subaltern' subjects. These developments owe as much to thinkers and activists who position themselves against the grain of Marxism, as to those working within a broadly Marxist remit to rethink some of its categories.

In the last few decades, analysis of domestic work has also been informed by Marxist theories of immaterial, emotional and affective labour. Such scholarly developments occurred as the number of domestic workers globally grew by almost 20 million between 1995 and 2010 (Van Nederveen Meerkerk et al., 2015: 12–15). 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 (Institute for Employment Research, 2010; McDowell, 2009: 38, 81; Todd, 2009: 181). 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 (Anderson, 2000; Cox, 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 (Sarti and Scrinzi, 2010: 7; Scrinzi, 2010: 47). 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 (Delap, 2012). 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 (Van Nederveen Meerkerk et al., 2015: 15–17). 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 homes (Rogers, 2017). 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 Workers (Mather, 2013; Boris and Fish, 2015). 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 (McDowell, 2009: 85; International Labour Organisation, 2021; PayScale, 2021).<sup>3</sup>

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. In Davidoff's view such servants were not unproductive but, on the contrary, performed the crucial ideological and material labour of class formation (Davidoff, 1974, 1995; Davidoff and Hall, 1987; Davidoff et al., 1999). 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' (McClintock, 1995: 138).

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 (Steedman, 2009: 17, 26–8; see also Steedman, 2007). Selina Todd’s history of ‘the rise and fall of the [British] working 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 (Todd, 2014). 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 (Todd, 2009). 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 (Nadasen, 2015; see also May, 2011). 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 no longer conform to orthodox Marxist visions of the industrial proletariat. 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.

## Notes

[TS: Insert Endnotes here]

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> In 2017, 70.7% of women aged 16 to 64 were in paid employment, compared to 79.5% of men, the highest female employment rate since records began in 1971 when the figure was at 52.8%, Office for National Statistics, 'Statistical Bulletin: UK Labour Market' (December 2017), [www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk).

<sup>3</sup> In 2017–18, the national living wage was £9.50, rising to £10.85 in London, [www.livingwage.org.uk](http://www.livingwage.org.uk) [accessed 11 June 2021]