SURVEY

Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work

RAFFAELLA SARTI

Department of International Studies. History, Languages, Cultures
University of Urbino “Carlo Bo”
Piazza Rinascimento 7, 61029 Urbino PU, Italy

E-mail: raffaella.sarti@uniurb.it

ABSTRACT: Historical research on domestic servants has a long tradition. Research, however, has become more systematic from the 1960s onwards thanks to social historians, historians focusing on the family, historical demographers and (particularly from the 1970s) women’s and gender historians. For a long time, scholars assumed that domestic service (especially by live-in workers) would decline, or even disappear, because of household modernization, social progress, and development of the welfare state. The (largely unexpected) “revival” of paid domestic and care work in the past three decades has prompted sociologists and other social scientists to focus on the theme, opening new opportunities for exchange between historians and social scientists. This article provides a review of the research on these issues at a global level, though with a focus on Europe and the (former) European colonies, over the past fifty years, illustrating the different approaches and their results.

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an overview of the research by historians and social scientists on domestic service over the past fifty years,1 at times touching upon earlier research. It offers a global perspective, though the main focus

1. This survey is based on literature in Italian, English, French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese. It inevitably has some bias, therefore, due to my lack of knowledge of other languages. I generally use the word “servants” when I deal with a (rather) distant past, and the term “domestic workers” when I speak about more recent decades. A first version of this survey was presented at the International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH), “Towards a Global History of Domestic Workers and Caregivers,” Linz, 12–15 September 2013. I am grateful to the participants for their comments.
is on research on Europe and, to a lesser extent, (former) European colonies. I will highlight those studies of domestic service which in my view have played a major role in stimulating further debate. Furthermore, I will illustrate the studies’ different approaches and results, as well as those issues that appear more fruitful for future developments in this area of enquiry in order to move towards a global history of domestic workers and caregivers.

For a long time, scholars assumed that domestic service (especially live-in) would decline or even disappear because of household modernization, social progress, and development of the welfare state. Although actually declining in certain phases, paid domestic and care work never completely disappeared; moreover, in the past three decades in many countries it has experienced a “revival”. I am interested in studying the forecasts of the disappearance of domestic service and paid domestic work, and in understanding why they have proven inadequate or wrong, for both scientific and political reasons. I believe that organizing work and services in order to reduce the numbers of domestic workers should still be a goal for policy makers.

FORERUNNERS

Historical research on domestic servants is not restricted to recent decades, as I will illustrate with three examples. In 1814, Abbé Grégoire, the former “constitutional” priest who took part in the French Revolution and fought against slavery, published a well-researched book entitled *De la domesticité chez les peuples anciens et modernes* which described the transformation of domestic service over time and tried to show clear differences in the working conditions and legal position of servants in different countries, regions, and cities. The aim of the book was practical rather than theoretical: it sought to contribute to the formation of “good domestics”. Later in the nineteenth century, other French scholars also focused on domestic service; often motivated by curiosity, they compared conditions for servants before and after the Revolution. Some idealized a past of presumed harmony


between masters and servants (which was generally not the case); others had a more rigorous approach, such as, for instance, Albert Babeau.4

The second example is Italian medieval and Renaissance cities, where domestic staff might include enslaved women (mainly from eastern Europe and central Asia). In the 1860s, serious studies on the subject, based on archival research, began to be published.5 That such slavery existed so late elicited surprise; the common opinion was that slavery had disappeared before the Renaissance.6 This hotly debated finding prompted a flow of studies which continues to the present day,7 and has gradually shifted later the “end” of (legal) slavery in Italy to the nineteenth century.8 It has also contributed to the history of slavery in the Mediterranean, a field of burgeoning research.9

9. For instance Salvatore Bono, “La schiavitù nel Mediterraneo moderno: storia di una storia”, Cahiers de la Méditerranée, 65 (2002), available at: http://cdlm.revues.org/28; last accessed 19.12.2013; Aurelia Martín Casares, La esclavitud en la Granada del Siglo XVI: Género, raza y religión (Granada, 2000); Giovanna Fiume, Schiavitù mediterraneo: Corsari, rimessi e santi di età moderna (Milan, 2009); Roger Botte and Alessandro Stella (eds), Couleurs de l’esclavage sur les deux rives de la Méditerranée (Moyen Âge–XXe siècle) (Paris, 2012). For a long time, and with only a few exceptions, this field of studies was restricted to Italian and French scholars. American scholars started to focus on this issue more recently, particularly when conflicts with the Muslim world became sharper (especially after 11 September 2001). As a consequence, the “Barbary wars”, which the US fought against north African Muslims at the beginning of the nineteenth century (because of the enslavement of Americans by Muslims), as well as the more general history of Mediterranean slavery, have entered into the public discourse and the scholarly agenda more often than in the past. See, for instance, Andrea Pelizza, “’Maybe We Are Still Fighting the Same War’: Gli Stati Uniti tra i corsari del XVIII secolo e i terroristi del XXI”, Società & Storia, 126 (2009), pp. 587–614. Mediterranean slavery was completely different from its Atlantic counterpart, because, especially from the sixteenth century onwards,
The third example is the well-documented 1897 book *Domestic Service*, by Lucy Maynard Salmon (1853–1927), an American historian, professor at Vassar College, democrat, and suffragist. The volume remained the most important book on the subject until the 1970s–1980s, when studies by Katzman, Sutherland, Dudden, Salinger, and Palmer were published. Salmon interpreted domestic service as an aristocratic residue which perpetuated personal subordination and dependence and aimed to contribute to solving the “the great American question” (p. 1), i.e. the reciprocal dissatisfaction of servants and masters. Her book not only looked towards the past; it also described the present and provided suggestions for the future: the stigmatization of servants should be overcome; as many domestic chores as possible should be moved outside the domestic sphere; the work should be performed only on a strictly contractual basis; masters and servants should stop living under the same roof; both domestic and extra-domestic work should be more equally divided among men and women.

THE SERVANT PROBLEM, THE TRANSFORMATION OF SERVICE, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW RESEARCH

“Employers on both sides of the Atlantic meet with the same serious difficulties in their efforts to secure competent household employees”, Salmon wrote. As the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth began, people all over Europe shared the idea that there was a crisis in domestic service: the “servant problem”, “servant shortage”, or “great question”, “crise de la domesticité” in French, “crisi delle domestiche” in Italian, “Dienstbotenfrage” in German, and so forth. On the continent, public opinion partly envisaged an

both Muslims and Christians could be enslaved if captured, especially by members of the other religion: slaves were mainly employed as rowers or domestic servants; they could be ransomed or exchanged and thus often returned home.


12. Salmon, *Domestic Service*, p. 278; the chapter on Europe was added in the 2nd edition.

(idealized) good old servant, loyal and faithful to his or her masters. Through propaganda that exalted the value of domestic service and urged masters to adopt a paternalistic attitude towards servants, they hoped to revive this ideal. Since the problem was to find domestics who were morally impeccable and good at their jobs, the drive for obedient and respectful servants often intermingled with efforts to “professionalize” domestic personnel.14

Many others, particularly those who believed that the shortage of servants was a consequence of backward working conditions within


domestic service, dreamed of a better future. For instance, the German socialist leader August Bebel, in his extremely successful book *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (1879), suggested that private kitchens should be replaced by communal ones equipped with every kind of modern (electric) appliance to make work easier. Communal solutions should be adopted for washing and laundry, too. This radical revolution of the household would lead to the disappearance of both servant and mistress. Other authors had similar ideas.

On the other side of the Atlantic, at the beginning of the twentieth century Christine Frederick, in a completely different but also extremely successful book, proposed a new, rationalized system of housekeeping based on the application of Taylorism to housework. Like many others, she too suggested that, to solve the servant problem, servants should no longer live with their employers.

In summary, about a century ago the belief that traditional servants would disappear was quite widespread. It was shared by people who simply noticed, and often regretted, that hiring a (good) servant was becoming increasingly difficult; by people who thought that servants would be replaced by a new kind of domestic worker, more independent and similar to factory workers; and by people who pictured a completely new society without any kind of servants. The persistence of this idea in the succeeding years contributed to making the study of domestic service less interesting. The history of the lower classes would for several decades indeed mainly focus on the formation of the “modern” working class and the development of class consciousness. Servants remained in the shadows: they were employed in a sector that from the late eighteenth century had

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15. According to Salmon, *Domestic Service*, pp. 278–279, both in Europe and America women “prefer work in factories where the hours of work are definitely prescribed and evenings and Sundays are free; [...] in shops where their individual life is less under control [...] in hotels [...] since these give opportunity for specialized work, a life of variety and excitement, and larger wages in the form of fees; [...] prefer short engagements with large fees at summer resorts to permanent engagements with moderate wages in families; because the growing spirit of democracy rebels against the inferior social position accorded household employees, even to those whose work is rightly classed as skilled labor”. On the different ways of interpreting the crisis, its reasons, and its possible solutions, see among others Zull, *Das Bild vom Dienstmädchen*, pp. 32–198; Wierling, *Mädchen für alles*, pp. 183–222, 283–296; Reggiani, “Un problema tecnico e un problema morale”; Sarti, “Da serva a operaia?”, pp. 92–99.


18. See Müller, *Dienstbare Geister*, pp. 172–178, for debates at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century about the future development of households without servants.

been increasingly considered unproductive; they were barely present on the political scene; and, to an increasing degree, they were women because of the growing feminization of domestic personnel, a role that thus did not particularly appeal “at a time when history was still largely ‘his-story’”, as later feminist historians would denounce.

**TRANSFORMATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Census data, despite its many limits and problems, indeed confirm that the percentage of domestic servants in the economically active population declined in several countries after having peaked in 1880–1881. Contemporaries thus had good reason to think that there was a crisis at the turn of the century.

Yet between the 1920s and the 1930s this trend stopped or reversed in many European countries, in the US and even in post-revolutionary Russia. This reversal resulted from the economic crisis and, in some countries, from specific policies aimed at placing unemployed women in domestic service and/or at expanding the domestic service sector. Nevertheless, the idea of a shortage of (good) domestics did not completely recede. Besides, neither advances in household technology nor people’s diminishing need for personal help seemed to eliminate the need for servants. Some people, therefore, started to look for new solutions to the servant problem. One of them was Alva Myrdal in Sweden, who suggested that some domestic work should be changed into wage labour with the state as employer. In other words, she suggested resolving the servant problem by cultivating public welfare services.

After World War II, new public welfare services multiplied in several countries. They contributed to a new, significant fall in the

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number of domestic workers in Europe and in the US.\textsuperscript{25} This strengthened the idea that domestic service would evaporate thanks


Figure 1. In 1958, a law was approved in Italy that regulated domestic work (Law 339 of 2 April 1958). The law reduced (but did not eliminate) discrimination against domestic workers; they now enjoyed some rights, though less than many other workers. Nevertheless, many employers protested. Some of them wrote angry letters to newspapers and magazines complaining about the new rights granted to maids. This was true of the popular magazine \textit{Epoca} whose editor, the well-known journalist Enzo Biagi, while replying to disgruntled readers, invited them to be patient and to treat their domestics compassionately: in his view, they were “gli ultimi dei Mohicani” (“the last of the Mohicans”).\textit{Epoca}, 398, 18 May 1958; photograph by Raffaella Sarti.
to “progress”, and reduced, for social scientists, the interest in studying it. Domestic servants became an object of investigation mainly for historians, who, however, began to study them with new curiosity thanks to the spread of social history, the history of the family, historical demography, and (particularly from the 1970s) women’s and gender history.

### FIFTY YEARS OF RESEARCH ON DOMESTIC SERVICE

In 1954, Joseph Jean Hecht published an article on “Continental and Colonial Servants in Eighteenth Century England”, and, two years later, a book on the *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England*, which for several years was to remain the most comprehensive study on English middle- and upper-class domestic staff. The title and content of Hecht’s article might suggest that historical studies on domestic service in Britain were going to take colonialism into account. Yet this was not the case: even Hecht’s book did not deal with colonialism; nor did other studies focus on the issue – this aspect was taken up only very recently.

A few years later Philippe Ariès, in his very influential book *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime* stressed the importance of domestic service for the transmission of knowledge and values from one generation to the next in medieval and early modern times. School played a limited role and apprenticeship was crucial. Apprentices lived with their masters, as did young aristocrats placed as pages in families more important than their own. This was one of the reasons why, in Ariès’ view, the relationship

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26. Nevertheless, Lucy Delap has recently shown that being a “modern” middle-class woman always implied, at least in Britain, having some domestic help; Lucy Delap, *Knowing their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 98–139.


between parents and children was rather cold. On one hand, Aries’ interpretation was criticized, but on the other, it inspired ample research on the history of the family, childhood, emotions, transmission of values and culture between generations, and also domestic service.

Several studies have focused, indeed, on the role of domestic servants (both children and adults) in appropriating the values and customs of the upper classes and spreading them among the lower classes, such as, for instance, the book by Daniel Roche on the *peuple de Paris* in the eighteenth century. In investigating emotions within the family, scholars have also, in later years, examined the emotional and cultural influence of servants, wet-nurses, nannies, and governesses on their masters’ children.


Some years after Ariès’ study, Peter Laslett published a book on pre-industrial England entitled *The World We Have Lost*, in which he paid great attention to servants. A few years later, in 1969, analysing servants, he concluded that “the substantial proportion of persons who turn out to be living in the households of others, other than those into which they were born, looks to us like something of a sociological discovery”.

In 1965, another very influential essay was published by John Hajnal, who wrote that western Europe was characterized by a peculiar marriage pattern with a high proportion of single people and marriages at a late age. These two features reduced birth rates, contributing to a slowing in population growth. In Hajnal’s view, this solution to population pressure was specific to western Europe. According to him, western Europeans married late because they had to acquire the ability and means to support a family before marrying. They often reached this goal by working as servants. Life-time single people were often servants, too. Service was thus at the very core of his theory. In the following years Hajnal, Laslett, and the scholars of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure further developed this model, going on to introduce the concept of life-cycle servants.

The homeostatic mechanism initially suggested by Hajnal has been shown to be rather effective in north-western and central Europe, but not in other parts of the continent, either in the east or in the south (in particular in the Mediterranean region). Nor was life-cycle service common everywhere in western Europe. However, this hypothesis...
contributed to a new approach. In the 1960s–1970s, changes in the family were mainly understood to be a consequence of industrialization, whereas the model proposed by Laslett and Hajnal stressed the importance of particular types of marriage and family for making national economic development possible. Though criticized, their theories sparked dozens of papers, essays and books both on Europe and on other countries such as, for instance, Japan. In central Japan, according to Mary Louise Powell Nagata, villagers usually married and established an independent household after their service period ended, at the age of about twenty-three

for women and twenty-eight for men. In other words, service in central Japan showed some similarities with European life-cycle service. The role of domestic service in striking a balance between population and resources does not seem to be unique to western Europe in pre-industrial times.\textsuperscript{39}

Further developments in the demographic approach to the history of the family include the article by David Reher on family ties.\textsuperscript{40} According to Reher, family ties today are stronger and public welfare is less advanced in those European regions, such as the Mediterranean, where life-cycle service was uncommon in the past, i.e. where young people generally did not leave the parental home at an early age, long before marrying. Reher's hypothesis has been criticized but, at the same time, has triggered much research. Moreover, it prompts us to analyse the relationship between private and public welfare.

In 1969 Abel Chatelain stressed the importance of domestic service in understanding urbanization,\textsuperscript{41} another issue that would attract much attention in subsequent years. Later, Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux would even suggest that the particular sex ratio of pre-industrial cities, where women were generally the majority of the population, arose from the arrival of rural girls who worked as maids.\textsuperscript{42}

When Chatelain published his article, the role of domestic servants in migration was not obvious. As described by Karin Walser, the emphasis on factory work as a specific feature of female modernity had led to a


focus on industrial work rather than on domestic service. The recognition that working in a traditional and “backward” sector such as domestic service had been the main avenue through which women of rural origin had become integrated into “modern” urban society and culture instigated an important change in the established interpretative framework. Almost paradoxically it [domestic service] served as a means of the modernisation of rural labour and particularly of women, during industrialization and urbanization, Theresa McBride wrote in her landmark study The Domestic Revolution. The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France 1820–1920.

Since the 1970s, many works have focused on domestic service as a crucial channel for both migration and social mobility (upwards and downwards), particularly for women. Significantly, however, many of the earlier studies, even those that stressed the importance of domestic service within urbanization and modernization processes concluded that modernization would eventually entail the servants’ marginalization. “Domestic service has retreated to a marginal role in the economies of most western societies” was the conclusion of McBride’s book. In the same work she also maintained that in both England and France “domestic service reached its peak during the early decades of industrialisation”. World War I was assumed by many scholars to have been the point at which the history of domestic service in “developed countries” came to an end.

McBride’s conclusion supported the extremely influential thesis of the economist Ester Boserup. Boserup, in Women’s Role in Economic Development, published in 1970, argued that in countries in the first phases of economic development domestic tasks are performed mainly by family members, whereas during the intermediate stages the personal services sector grows very large. Urbanization creates a demand for service personnel in bars and restaurants as well as in the homes of the newly rich entrepreneurial class. At the beginning, this expansion of domestic service involves both men and women, but over time the sector becomes more feminized. In fully industrialized countries, many services are no longer performed at home and the number of domestic workers is low. It is because of this trend, Boserup said, that female servants are particularly numerous in Latin America.

43. Walser, Dienstmädchen, pp. 7–8.
47. Ibid., p. 34.
Her suggestion, though criticized as too narrowly conceived, sparked research in regions such as Latin America and Africa.\(^{48}\)

In the 1970s, the idea that modernization and “progress” would precipitate the disappearance of domestic service was well established, and in 1973 the sociologist Lewis A. Coser spoke of the transformation of domestic service as “obsolescence of an occupational role”: “that role is dying”, he maintained.\(^{49}\)

The progress of feminism and historical research by feminist scholars inevitably inspired the study of domestic servants. A very important essay was published by Leonore Davidoff in 1974, “Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England”, stressing the similarities between maids and mistresses, while also mentioning the limits to this parallelism.\(^{50}\) Thanks to feminism and the development of women’s and gender history, an explosion of studies on domestic service took place. These studies focused on many different aspects—traditional and new: the feminization of domestic service; the relationship of domestic service with people’s life-cycle, marriage, and/or celibacy; its role in migration, migration,

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52. Wierling, *Mädchen für alles*, pp. 14–15, for instance, contested the idea put forward by Rolf Engelsing that domestic work was a traditional and declining occupation: from women’s point of view, it was an expanding one, and had new features in comparison with the past. For Engelsing’s interpretation, see Rolf Engelsing, “Das häusliche Personal in der Epoche der Industrialisierung”, *Jahrbuch für Sozialwissenschaft*, 20 (1969), pp. 84–121, republished in a longer version in *idem, Zur Sozialgeschichte deutscher Mitte- und Unterschichten* (Göttingen, 1978 [1973]), pp. 224–261. See also Walser, *Dienstmädchen*, pp. 7–8.

53. Almost all the books and articles on domestic service in the eighteenth and nineteenth century analyse or at least mention the issue of feminization.

urbanization, functioning of the labour market, and (upward or downward) social mobility; its connection with illegitimacy and prostitution; maid stereotypes, and their links to actual social practices (or their lack of such links); domestic service as a shelter occupation, or as preparation for marriage; its role in leading to alienation and suicide; domestic chores performed by middle-class housewives as “ghosts”, doing jobs that would formerly have been carried out by maids. Positive aspects of domestic service were also shown (mainly thanks to oral history and autobiography), such as the ability of the maid to improve her status by moving from the countryside to the city, to negotiate with mistresses, or


55. See e.g. McBride, The Domestic Revolution, pp. 9, 82–98; Carmen Sarasúa, Criados, nodrizas y amos: El servicio doméstico en la formación del mercado de trabajo madrileño, 1758–1868 (Madrid, 1994).


57. Fraisse, Femmes toutes mains; Martin-Fugier, La place des bonnes; Walser, Dienstmädchen.

58. Maria Casalini thought, for instance, that the association of the maid with the prostitute was not only a stereotype: “Le serve e i loro padroni”, in Paola Nava (ed.) Operaie, serve, maestre, impiegate: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi: Il lavoro delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea: continuità e rotture (Carpi, 1990) (Turin, 1992), pp. 265–286, 276.


61. See e.g. Davidoff, “Mastered for Life”.


64. See e.g. Wierling, Mädchen für alles; Angiolina Arru, “Nel carattere scortese, nel comportamento impertinente e sfrontata’. Racconti di serve tedesche nell’Ottocento”, in Angiolina
to travel to distant places. Women’s historians were generally well aware of the class divide between mistress and maid, yet they often also stressed the common female oppression in patriarchal households as well as the role of domestic service as “preparation” for marriage and motherhood. At the same time, they (especially European scholars) generally overlooked the issue of race, though they were sometimes conscious of its importance.

Black and other non-white feminists reacted both to the emphasis on the common destiny of maids and mistresses and/or to the lack of attention to race. This was especially the case in the US, where race historically played a pivotal role in shaping the social destiny of people and strongly affected domestic service. Prepared by earlier studies, the article by E. Nakano Glenn, “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Work”, as well as the book by Mary Romero, Maid in the USA, both published in 1992, have been particularly influential.

The issue of race and ethnicity has become central in those studies that focus on domestic service in colonial or former colonial contexts, which have recently attracted increasing attention. Colonial domination and its legacy often actually entailed (and still entail) the employment of non-white servants by white (colonial) employers, sharpening the hierarchy

Arru and Maria Teresa Chialant (eds), Il racconto delle donne: Voci autobiografie figurazioni (Naples [etc.], 1990), pp. 11–26.


typical of the master/servant relationship. Colonizers, on the other hand, often viewed black slaves and native non-white indigenous servants with suspicion because they could have a very “negative” and contaminating influence on their masters, and especially, on their masters’ children, as Ann Stoler has suggested in her very important work. Such an influence might indeed prevent the development of those children’s cultural identity as “white” rulers; therefore the colonizers felt it should be avoided or at least limited. At the same time, however, native servants might appear fascinating, and emotional bonds could (and actually did) develop between them and their white masters (both children and adults). The issue of race and ethnicity was also very pressing because of the “importing” of white servants in several colonial contexts such as Canada and Australia in order to increase the white population and spread the colonizers’ culture. At the same time, local native elites in colonized countries might be “interested” in employing white servants and governesses who could teach the rulers’ manners and language to their children.

Books and articles on Africa and Asia also illustrate different aspects of the complex intermingling of race, gender, and colonial rule. In many Asian and African contexts (unlike in Europe, the US, and Latin America), in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries male domestics were numerous. Scholars who have focused on local male servants employed by white people in countries such as Zambia, India, and Malaysia, but also Australia have shown that they were subject to several forms of


72. Stoler, “A Sentimental Education”; idem, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Stoler focuses on emotions with an approach influenced by Michel Foucault; she does not mention Aries.

73. See e.g. Marilyn Barber, Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada (Ottawa, 1991); Sedef Arat-Koc, “From ‘Mothers of the Nation’ to ‘Migrant Domestic Workers’”, in Abigail B. Bakan and Daiva Stasiulis (eds), Not One of the Family: Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada (Toronto [etc.], 1997), pp. 53–79; Horn, Life Below Stairs, p. 161; Christiane Harzig, “MacNamara’s DP Domestics: Immigration Policy Makers Negotiate Class, Race, and Gender in the Aftermath of World War II”, Social Politics, 10 (2003), pp. 23–48; Paula Hamilton and Barry W. Higman, “Servants of Empire: The British Training of Domestics for Australia”, Social History, 28 (2003), pp. 67–82.

74. For instance Petzen, “Matmazels nell’harem”, pp. 61–84.

de-virilization and inferiorization: male servants were culturally constructed and treated as “boys” even when they were adult.76

Karen Tranberg Hansen’s book on domestic service in Zambia, published in 1989, was important not only because of its focus on male domestics, but also because of its contribution to the history of domestic service worldwide. Hansen noted that:

[...] the Zambian case is but a variation on the story of domestic labor which has no final, or single, conclusion, for it is still unfolding. Domestic service is not an archaic remnant of feudal practices persisting only in remote corners of the twentieth-century world. It represents a labor process that takes many different forms, and it employs growing, not decreasing numbers of workers in an advanced capitalist economy such as that of the United States today.77

While reviewing Hansen’s volume and three others, Louise Tilly concluded in 1991 that the books and essays under scrutiny effectively demolished “any notion that there is a simple inverse correlation between development and the proportion of women workers in domestic service, as Boserup suggested”. “Rather than a simple linear process at the national level, development is a world-level process, in which economic inequality between and within national states is a critical factor.”78


76. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, male domestic workers underwent a symbolic castration in many European countries, too. They were, for example, prevented from growing moustaches, which at the time were a sign of virility. Significantly, this prohibition provoked several protests, see Raffaella Sarti, “Fighting for Masculinity: Male Domestic Workers, Gender, and Migration in Italy from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present”, Men and Masculinities, 13 (2010), pp. 16–43.

77. Hansen, Distant Companions, p. xii.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, scholars increasingly questioned the idea that industrialization would bring about the retreat of domestic service. As early as 1984 Saskia Sassen had described the expanding flow, towards the US, of Third World women who would be employed in domestic service and in the informal sector, as well as the expansion of services and informal activities in the so-called global cities. In 1987, Sassen and Alejandro Portes went on to question the theories according to which widespread informal economic sectors were a feature of Third World economies and were destined to wither away thanks to modern, industry-led growth. They presented evidence that these activities were not waning in industrializing countries either, and that they were continuing or even experiencing a revival in the advanced economies (speaking of an “apparent revival”). A few years later, in 1994, two geographers, Niki Gregson and Michelle Lowe, in their book Servicing the Middle Classes, more overtly “announced” the “resurgence of paid domestic work” in Britain. Even though they were not the first to notice the phenomenon, their book...
was particularly influential. In the following years similar statements were made in other studies too.\footnote{For instance Simone Oderina, \textit{Die heimliche Rückkehr der Dienstmädchen: Bezahlte Arbeit im privaten Haushalt} (Opladen, 2000); François-Xavier Devetter and Sandrine Rousseau, \textit{Du balai: Essai sur le ménage à domicile et le retour de la domesticité} (Ivry-sur-Seine, 2011).}


In 1994, the French journalist Dominique Torrès created the Comité contre l’esclavage moderne (Committee against modern slavery), and in 1996 she published a volume entitled \textit{Esclaves: 200 millions d’esclaves aujourd’hui} denouncing the presence of “modern” slaves, often employed in domestic service.\footnote{Dominique Torrès, \textit{Esclaves: 200 millions d’esclaves aujourd’hui} (Paris, 1996). On the CCEM see \url{http://www.esclavagemoderne.org/}; last accessed 20.12.2013.}

has been particularly shocking since modernization had long been conceived as a process that would spread contractual (wage) labour. The definition of “modern” or “new” slavery addresses a complex phenomenon partially different from most forms of slavery in the past. A major difference is that in the past masters generally had legal rights over their slaves, while this is not the case with “modern” slavery, because legal slavery has been abolished all over the world.88 Exploitation and violence are instead common features of “old” and “new” slavery. So, while at the beginning of the twentieth century many people expected that domestic service would (soon) disappear, by the end of the century not only had there been a revival of paid domestic work but new forms of domestic slavery were also being denounced.

As mentioned above, domestic work in Europe and the US, particularly after World War II, had increasingly become a research field for historians rather than for sociologists, economists, anthropologists, etc. For several decades, social scientists almost ignored it. The (largely unexpected) “revival” of paid domestic and care work in the past three decades has prompted sociologists and other social scientists to focus on the issue, paying attention to its global dimension; to its relationship with the difficulties of welfare states; to its connection with the (growing) economic and demographic inequalities between the global north and the global south, and with the crisis of former communist countries in eastern Europe; to its role within international migration, human trafficking, and the growth of “modern” slavery; to the economic importance of remittances; to the spread of global care chains; to migration policies and the rights of migrants employed in domestic work; to the links between


88. “The Parliamentary Assembly is dismayed that slavery continues to exist in Europe in the 21st century. Although, officially, slavery was abolished over 150 years ago, thousands of people are still held as slaves in Europe, treated as objects, humiliated and abused. Modern slaves, like their counterparts of old, are forced to work (through mental or physical threat) with no or little financial reward. They are physically constrained or have other limits placed on their freedom of movement and are treated in a degrading and inhumane manner”; Giuseppe Gaburro, “Domestic Slavery: Servitude, Au Pairs and Mail-Order Brides”, Report for the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, doc. 10.144, Strasbourg, 2004.
former colonies and colonizer countries; to racialization and ethnicization processes; to the segregation of the labour market and the evolution of ethnic niches; to citizenship and rights; to unions and organizations of domestic workers; to policies to fight unemployment through the expansion of domestic and personal services; to new connections between private and public services; to the very identities and sociological profiles of domestic workers as far as gender, age, marital status, education, and skills are concerned; to their movements in and out of domestic work; to social mobility (upwards and downwards); to the features of families having recourse to domestic help; to the relationship of domestic workers both with their own families and with those of their employers; to cultural exchanges within the private household; and many other specific aspects. Hundreds of articles and books have been (and continue to be) published (see Figure 2).\(^{89}\) New concepts and categories such as transnational motherhood,\(^{90}\) global care chains,\(^{91}\) contradictory class mobility,\(^{92}\) and feminization of survival\(^{93}\) have been elaborated in order to conceptualize the current features of paid domestic work and its global dimension.


92. Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization*, pp. 150–196; “Migrant Filipina domestic workers define their sense of self and place in the global labour market from the contentious subject-position of contradictory class mobility. This contentious location refers to their simultaneous experience of upward and downward mobility in migration. More specifically, it refers to their decline in social status [because they work abroad as maids, being often middle-class women in their own country] and increase in financial status [because salaries in countries where they work are higher than salaries in the Philippines]. This is the central dislocation that defines their experience of domestic work” (p. 150).

Possibly the most influential book in this field is Rhacel Parreñas’s *Servants of Globalization*, which focuses on domestic workers from the Philippines in Rome and Los Angeles. Italy has rapidly changed from an emigration country to an immigration one, and has been characterized by limited welfare provision associated with growing female employment, by a failure to redistribute domestic tasks between men and women, and by a rapidly ageing population. Mainly thanks to this book and another important one, Jacqueline Andall’s *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service: The Politics of Black Women in Italy*,94 the Italian case has become almost a paradigm of the possible consequences of new worldwide inequalities and new strategies of survival based on the exportation/importation of care and global care chains.95


NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXCHANGE

In the 1970s–1980s, as previously mentioned, domestic service was almost ignored by sociologists and other social scientists focusing on Europe and the US. Instead, it was investigated by some scholars who conducted...
research on Latin America, Africa and Asia.97 Here, as had been the case in Europe and the US in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, there was some dialogue between historians, sociologists, and social scientists. Furthermore, a knowledge of history was considered necessary in order to change or improve domestic workers’ conditions in the present (through, for instance, new organizations and unions), and there were also connections between scholars and activists.98

The “revival” of paid domestic work and its “(re)discovery” by social scientists have brought about new opportunities for exchange between them and historians, as well as between scholars and activists worldwide. Some arenas for discussion have developed. Seminars, workshops, sessions of congresses, and conferences, both at national and international level, have offered opportunities for meeting and exchange. Some international meetings especially deserve to be mentioned.99

The round table “La Phénomène de la Domesticité en Europe, XVIe–XXe centuries”, organized in Prague in 1996 by Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and Ludmila Fialová, though mainly involving demographers and historians and focusing on Europe, was possibly the starting point of a networking activity that in the succeeding years would link scholars with different backgrounds and research interests, and from many different countries and continents, as well as some unionists and activists.100 In particular, it was the origin of one big network, the Servant Project, funded by the European Commission, which was to connect some twenty European universities and research centres and to organize five main conferences and some minor meetings between 2002 and 2004, with the participation of about eighty scholars.101 Among the participants in the

97. For instance, Whisson and Weil, Domestic Servants; Rutté García, Simplemente explotadas.
99. I list only international conferences where both historians and social scientists were present. I do not list sessions and panels in congresses, which are too numerous to be mentioned.
100. Fauve-Chamoux and Fialová, Le phénomène de la domesticité.
101. The application for the “Servant Project” was prepared by Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, Raffaella Sarti, Suzy Pasleau, and Isabelle Schopp. The official title of the project was “The
network were Regina Schulte and Pothiti Hantzaroula, who in 2000 had organized the workshop “Narratives of the Servant” at the European University Institute in Florence in 2000.102

A preliminary meeting of participants in the Servant Project was held in Brussels, during the conference “Bonnes pour le service. Déclin, professionnalisation et émigration de la domesticité, Europe, Canada, 20e siècle” (13–15 December 2001), organized by Eliane Gubin and Valérie Piette.103 Some months earlier, in February 2001, another meeting took place, the conference “Domestic Service and Mobility: Labour, Livelihoods and Lifestyles”, organized in Amsterdam by Ratna Saptari and Annelies Moors and mainly focusing on Asia.104 Among the participants at both this conference and the Servant Project was Helma Lutz, who in 2005 would coordinate the conference “Migration and Domestic Work in Global Perspective” held at the NIAS (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies).105

Socio-Economic Role of Domestic Service as a Factor of European Identity”, with the main conferences taking place in Florence (14–16 February 2002), Oslo (13–15 June 2002), Barcelona (12–15 December 2002), Essex (8–10 May 2003), and Munich (8–11 September 2003). See Fauve-Chamoux, Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity; Pasleau and Schopp, with Sarti, Proceedings of the Servant Project. I: Servants and Changes in Mentality, 16th–20th Centuries; II: Domestic Service and the Emergence of a New Conception of Labour in Europe; III: Domestic Service and the Evolution of the Law; IV: Domestic Service as a Factor of Social Revival in Europe; V: The Modelization of Domestic Service. For the conclusion of the project see Sarti, “Conclusion: Domestic Service and European Identity”.


105. The conference was financed by the Volkswagen Foundation as part of the research project coordinated by Helma Lutz on “Gender, Ethnicity and Identity: The New Maids in the Age of Globalisation”. Many papers presented at the conference were published in Helma.
Another scholar involved in this networking was Carolyn Steedman, who, in 2008, organized the conference “Waged Domestic Work and the Making of the Modern World” at the University of Warwick.  

A month before, with the participation of some scholars involved in the meetings already listed as well as several others, another conference took place: “À qui me confier? Du monde des nourrices aux réseaux des ‘mamans de jour’: Pratiques et enjeux de la garde d’enfants”, organized in Freiburg, Switzerland, by Véronique Pach and Véronique Dasen (2008). Among the conferences that have been held outside Europe, it seems to me that the conference on “Intimate Labors” in Santa Barbara, California, the proceedings of which have been published by Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas, was particularly productive of exchanges, while the conference held in Newcastle (Australia) by Victoria Haskins in 2012 addressed the crucial issue of “Colonization and Domestic Service”.  

An international workshop with the participation of scholars looking at the idea of the servant from different perspectives, entitled


107. “À qui me confier? Du monde des nourrices aux réseaux des ‘mamans de jour’: Pratiques et enjeux de la garde d’enfant”, Fribourg, 23–25 April 2008; for the proceedings see Véronique Pache Huber and Véronique Dasen (eds), “Politics of Child Care in Historical Perspective: From the World of Wet Nurses to the Networks of Family Child Care Providers”, special issue of Paedagogica Historica, 46 (2010). On Pache Huber’s production see n. 32. Annelies Head Koenig, who had a responsibility role within the Servant Project, was one of the scholars who also took part in the Freiburg conference, to mention one example.


“In Pursuit of Invisible Forces: Servants in History and Today”, was organized in 2009 at the Humanities Center at Harvard University by Markus Krajewski.  

Exchanges among scholars with different backgrounds are not always easy, but they are necessary if we want to understand what is really new with “new” domestic work and what is actually a “resurgence” or a “revival” of “old” features. For instance, the presence of international migrant domestic workers, male and female, is not a modern novelty, even though the phenomenon of international migration of domestic workers has by now probably reached unprecedented levels. In several contexts, the growth of “new” domestic work has involved the expansion of arrangements that were long considered “old”, “traditional”, and not appropriate in “modern” societies, such as, in particular, the co-residence of employers and employees under the same roof. A point in case here is gender, which has played such an important role in research on domestic service. As previously mentioned, feminization of domestic staff was often considered a feature of the stages before the (alleged) final phase in the evolution of domestic service, i.e. its disappearance. A feminization of domestic personnel took place, indeed, in many different countries, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Significantly, however, in recent decades paid domestic work has


112. For example Sarti, “The Globalisation of Domestic Service”.

113. For comparative data see, for instance, Raffaella Sarti, “Notes on the Feminization of Domestic Service: Bologna as a Case Study (18th–19th centuries)”, in Fauve-Chamoux and
experienced not only a revival (instead of a decline) but also, in some contexts, a (slight) re-masculinization.114

Obviously, strengthening the dialogue between historians and social scientists does not simply mean supplying scholars working on the present with information and data on the events of the past; it also (and more fruitfully) means developing new interpretative frameworks after the rejection of the old paradigms that have proven limited or wrong. “Throughout the twentieth century, domestic service had a compelling presence in British economic, social, and cultural life”, Lucy Delap recently argued, moving away from previous interpretations of the history of domestic service in twentieth-century Britain, which considered it to be a declining phenomenon.115 However we view her interpretation (praising or criticizing it), it constitutes an interesting example of changing paradigms.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A GLOBAL HISTORY OF DOMESTIC SERVICE

As I have shown, a huge amount of research has been done on the history of domestic service in many different places and periods. Certainly, there still are contexts for which research (or at least research accessible to scholars with knowledge of western European languages only) seems to be limited, such as, for instance, Russia (where domestic workers did not disappear after the Russian Revolution),116 and the former European


socialist countries, or China. However, those studies already available, as well as the many others under way, constitute a good starting point for a new global history of domestic service. This also implies, for the future, a discussion of what global history could, or should, mean in relation to domestic service. Could or should a new specific theoretical framework be developed?

The answer cannot be simple, particularly if we consider that, in the case of domestic service, comparison over time and place raises very serious methodological problems. Domestic service has always been a very difficult research subject because its boundaries are not well defined. Yet the broadening of the research field and arena for comparisons to a global level sharpens the problem and constitutes a challenge for the whole field.

A century ago, some historical studies had been written to contribute to a better future: a future without any kind of servants or, at least, with domestic workers enjoying dignity and rights. Instead, today many domestic workers still suffer because of stigmatization, poor working conditions, low salaries, a lack of dignity and rights, and even worse. It was only in 2011 that the ILO (International Labour Organization) eventually approved Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers: a success on the one hand, a sad confirmation of the persistence of bad working and living conditions for domestic workers on the other. Unfortunately,
there is still a need for such a convention; combating the lack of rights and dignity is still on the agenda.\footnote{122}

Collaborations between scholars and activists can, one hopes, contribute to overcoming the current situation. Historical research has shown that servants and domestic workers have been fighting for their rights for at least a couple of centuries. Formal recognition of rights generally arrived (where it has in fact arrived)\footnote{123} later than for many other workers; at the same time, when formal rights were introduced, they often were, and still are, disregarded or have not always entailed real empowerment of domestic workers.\footnote{124}

“Domestic work is work. Domestic workers are, like other workers, entitled to decent work”, a brochure of the ILO maintains, while describing Convention 189.\footnote{125} More than 200 years ago, domestiques and other persons claiming rights for domestics during the French Revolution also argued that they were workers:\footnote{126} why is there still a need today to make the argument that domestic workers are workers? Some scholars suggest that this has to do with the particular place where domestic work is performed, i.e. the private household, and/or with the very characteristics of domestic work. For a long time, domestic work has been frequently singled out so as to exclude domestic workers from enjoying rights and protective legislation.\footnote{127}


\footnote{124} For instance, Sheireen A. Ally, \textit{From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State} (Ithaca, NY, 2009); Raffaella Sarti (ed.), \textit{Lavoro domestico e di cura: quali diritti?} (Rome, 2010).


Within the current debate it is often taken into account in order to (possibly) improve their conditions. Some scholars, for example, believe that, since many domestic workers are migrants, “portable rights” should
be expanded; some suggest a “creolization” of rights; some propose the developments of transnational welfare. These issues cannot be discussed in an essay of this length. In my view, the extension of universal rights to domestic workers is certainly necessary, but evidence shows that it is not always sufficient to change their working conditions radically. Thus, it seems to me that the question of rights and entitlements, in order to be resolved, needs comparisons over time and space from many different perspectives, and requires the expertise of historians, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, jurists, unionists, activists, and, obviously, domestic workers themselves, as well as their employers. As such, it constitutes, in my view, an arena for fruitful comparisons at both academic and policy making levels. Within such an arena historians bear responsibility for supplying evidence about past experiences which can contribute to the elaboration of new interpretations and new tools, possibly contributing to a more just future. What is needed is a global history of domestic service and domestic work, because domestic work had a global dimension in the past and possibly has even more of one today.

At the same time, the once common forecasts of, and hopes for, the disappearance of domestic service and (even) paid domestic work should not be forgotten. As mentioned, I am interested in studying them and in understanding why they have proven inadequate or wrong for both scientific and political reasons. In my view, the question formulated by Joan Tronto years ago, “Are there alternatives to hiring domestic

129. Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Migration, Domestic Work and Affect: A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labour (New York, 2010), pp. 148–169; she comments, “Creolizing human rights […] evokes a cosmological perception of rights, one that attaches rights not to a single individual or subject, but to the relationship of this individual or subject to others and his/her environment. From this angle, human rights cannot depart from the separation between the Self and the Other or the Human and the Environment. Rather, it engages with an ethics of relationality and transversality […]. Thus, framing domestic workers’ rights from the perspective of creolizing human rights entails more than just fighting for fair working conditions or professionalization of domestic work. Rather, it interconnects domestic work as affective labor to a cosmological perspective, uncovering it as the main source for the production and maintenance of human vitality, the sustenance of ‘perpetual life’. Further, it urges us to locate this labor within a collective framework of sustainability and transversal conviviality, departing from a decolonial ethics of affects” (p. 164).
130. Piperno and Tognetti Bordogna, Welfare transnazionale.
servants?”, is still relevant and should be addressed by the scholars involved. Do we still want to contribute to giving a positive answer to it?\textsuperscript{132}

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Raffaella Sarti. Historiens, spécialistes en sciences sociales, serviteurs et travailleurs domestiques : cinquante années de recherche sur le travail et les soins domestiques.


Traduction: Christine Krätke-Plard


Die historische Forschung zu Dienstboten hat eine lange Tradition. Seit den 1960er Jahren hat diese Forschung allerdings einen systematischeren Charakter angenommen, was Sozial- und Familienhistorikern, historischen Demographen sowie (insbesondere seit den 1970er Jahren) Forscher und Forscherinnen aus den Bereichen der Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte zu danken ist. Lange Zeit gingen Wissenschaftler und Wissenschaftlerinnen davon aus, dass sich der Haushaltsdienst (insbesondere wenn die Hausbediensteten im Haushalt wohnen) aufgrund der Modernisierung der Haushalte, des sozialen Fortschritts und der Entwicklung des Wohlfahrtsstaats zurückentwickeln oder sogar gänzlich verschwinden würde. Die während der vergangenen drei Jahrzehnte zu verzeichnende (und weitgehend unerwartete) “Wiederkehr” der bezahlten Haus- und Pflegearbeit hat Soziologen und andere Sozialwissenschaftler und Sozialwissenschaftlerinnen angeregt, sich auf

das Thema zu konzentrieren, was neue Möglichkeiten des Austauschs zwischen Historikerinnen und Sozialwissenschaftlern eröffnet hat. Der Artikel bietet einen weltweiten, wenn auch auf Europa und die (ehemaligen) Kolonien fokussierten Überblick über die Forschung, die in den vergangenen fünfzig Jahren zu den genannten Themen entstanden ist und veranschaulicht die verschiedenen Ansätze sowie ihre Ergebnisse.

Übersetzung: Max Henninger

Raffaella Sarti. Historiadores, científicos sociales, sirvientes y trabajadores/trabajadoras doméstico/as. 50 años de investigación sobre el trabajo y el cuidado doméstico.

El análisis histórico sobre el servicio doméstico tiene una larga tradición. La investigación, sin embargo, ha sido planteadal de forma mucho más sistemática desde la década de 1960 en adelante gracias al impulso dado por los historiadores sociales que enfocaron su atención sobre la historia de la familia, los historiadores demográficos y (particularmente desde la década de 1970) los historiadores e las historiadoras de las mujeres y del género. Durante un largo tiempo los académicos venían asumiendo que el servicio doméstico (especialmente el interno) declinaría de forma paulatina y que incluso llegaría a desaparecer a causa de los procesos de modernización de las tareas en el hogar, del progreso social y del desarrollo del estado del bienestar. El renacer (completamente inesperado) del trabajo y los cuidados domésticos remunerados a lo largo de las últimas tres décadas ha dado pie a los sociólogos y a otros analistas sociales a prestar atención sobre el tema, abriendo nuevas oportunidades para el diálogo entre historiadores y otros científicos sociales. Este artículo trata de plantear una revisión de la investigación que se ha desarrollado en los temas anteriormente mencionados desde un nivel global, aunque con un enfoque fundamental sobre el espacio europeo y las que fueron colonias dependientes de las potencias europeas, a lo largo de los últimos cincuenta años, ilustrando las diferentes aproximaciones y sus resultados.

Traducción: Vicent Sanz Rozalén