CHAPTER 2

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

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Introduction

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

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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.
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.

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. That such slavery existed so late elicited

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