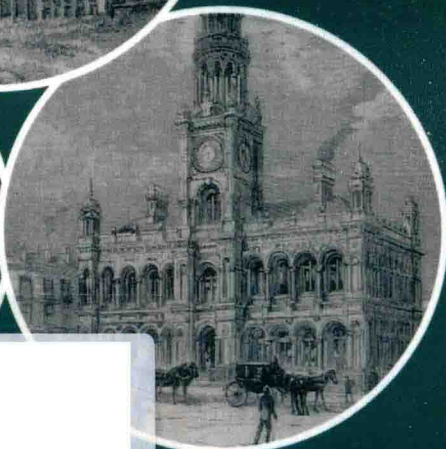
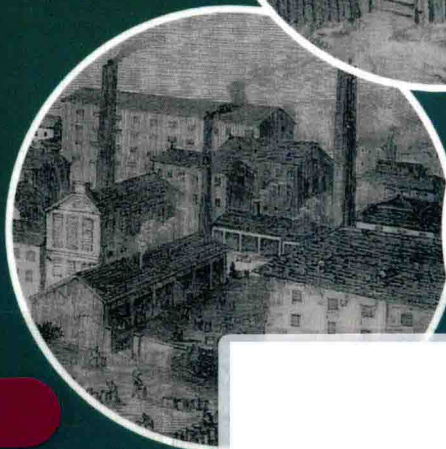


Worlds Between

*Historical Perspectives
on Gender & Class*



LEONORE DAVIDOFF

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*Historical Perspectives on
Gender and Class*

Leonore Davidoff

Polity Press

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Worlds Between

In memory of my mother-in-law

EDITH ANNIE LOCKWOOD

In service 1898–1913

**And of the millions of anonymous women
who spent so much of their lives in
domestic service**

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Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 <i>Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England</i>	18
2 <i>Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society (with Jeanne L'Esnerance and Howard Newby)</i>	41
3 <i>The Rationalization of Housework</i>	73
4 <i>Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Case of Hannah Cullwick and A.J. Munby</i>	103
5 <i>The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England</i>	151
6 <i>The Role of Gender in the 'First Industrial Nation': Farming and the Countryside in England, 1780–1850</i>	180
7 <i>Where the Stranger Begins: The Question of Siblings in Historical Analysis</i>	206
8 <i>Regarding Some 'Old Husbands' Tales': Public and Private in Feminist History</i>	227
PART I: Adam Spoke First and Named the Orders of the World	231
PART II: As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap: Concepts and their Consequences	249

List of Illustrations

- Plates 1 and 2:* *Symbolism and Reality:* Watercolour sketch by A.J. Munby of himself and a colliery girl; photograph of the same (photographer unknown). Both reproduced from Derek Hudson, *Munby, Man of Two Worlds: The Life and Diaries of A.J. Munby, 1828–1910* (Abacus, 1974) by kind permission of the Master and Fellows, Trinity College, Cambridge. 118
- Plate 3:* Hannah carrying slop-pails. Photograph by A.J. Munby. By permission of the Master and Fellows, Trinity College, Cambridge. 122
- Plate 4:* Hands. Photograph by A.J. Munby. By permission of the Master and Fellows, Trinity College, Cambridge. 124
- Plate 5:* Hannah scrubbing steps. Photograph by A.J. Munby. By permission of the Master and Fellows, Trinity College, Cambridge. 126
- Plate 6:* Hannah as a slave. Photograph by A.J. Munby. By permission of the Master and Fellows, Trinity College, Cambridge. 128
- Plates 7, 8, 9 and 10:* Hannah as a neat servingmaid; Hannah as a middle-class lady; Hannah as an ‘angel’; Hannah dressed as a man. Photographs by A.J. Munby.

By permission of the Master and Fellows,
Trinity College, Cambridge. 130

Plate 11: Hannah as a rural maiden. Photograph by A.J.
Munby. By permission of the Master and Fellows,
Trinity College, Cambridge. 132

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Introduction

The essays in this volume come from the margins. In both subject matter and conceptual approach they inhabit a space between those areas which have usually been seen as central concerns of society. They focus in particular on two aspects that traditionally have been taken for granted and/or trivialized. First, they examine activities: domestic preoccupations, the intricacies of housekeeping, the symbolic and material aspects of dirt and disorder. Then they consider people and relationships: domestic servants, landladies and lodgers, farmers' wives and daughters, siblings.

Such topics are often seen as peripheral to historical and sociological interests. Because they are defined as inessential to the real and significant aspects of society, such as class, political, military or cultural affairs and institutions, they have low status. A major reason for this neglect is, arguably, that they mainly involve the lives of women and children, groups already defined as subordinate in the hierarchy of power, resources – and scholarly attention. Trying to draw such issues into the centre has meant swimming against mainstream intellectual and scholarly convention, including much of the radical tradition.

Yet a moment's thought shows that every centre must be defined by its rim – and in social as well as psychic life we are increasingly discovering that the boundaries between centre and periphery are unstable if not permeable. The liminal as well as the repressed will always come back to haunt in some form. A satisfying social analysis must take on the whole circumference.

This holistic approach has meant analysing aspects of society usually swept under the carpet, regarded as too private, too intimately related to the body, too particular. It is the theories (and historical topics) 'that are most divorced from blood, sweat and tears, that have the highest prestige'.¹ But it also may be that these are precisely those areas of life which are often threatening psychologically – and ultimately politically to those with authority to define what is important and

worthwhile. Not only autobiographers but also historians have concealed their imaginations and bridled their tongues so that 'the past is . . . often presented as idyllic – totally lacking in smells, urges and bodies'.²

Some of the essays explore the position and response of subordinates. Others focus on the way dominant groups created and maintained their centrality – and the material, financial and emotional rewards they reaped by doing so. It has been increasingly recognized that one of the most potent of these advantages is having power to observe, to pronounce, and to gaze on other human beings as subjects. The *flâneur*'s licence to wander, to look, to write from his standpoint and to make that standpoint the template for cultural, architectural and institutional forms is, and has been, one of the greatest forms of mastery that can be conferred.³

But, of course, certain groups are subordinate in some situations, while at the same time having power over others. Such was the case of middle-class wives, who were subordinate to their husbands in many ways, while having considerable authority over their servants and children. The truism that power takes many forms and is more a complicated web than a straightforward causal or mechanistic relationship is now widely accepted in late twentieth-century thought.⁴ It is also evident that using such simple models in social and historical research is far easier than trying to implement the concept of dispersed or fractured forms of power.⁵

In my own intellectual journey these patterns, and the common threads running through the essays, did not appear all at once. The articles were researched and written over a period of twenty years, starting in the early 1970s, before the advent of the Women's Movement and feminism had raised fundamental questions about how psyches as well as societies have been constrained along gender lines. This was also before 'postmodern' questioning of institutions and categories had appeared on the horizon. The essays are presented in the order in which they were written from chapter 1 which first appeared in 1974 to chapters 7 and 8, published here for the first time. Inevitably some of the concepts and language in the earlier pieces reflect concerns and approaches of the period in which they were written.

My first interest in these subjects began with a post-graduate thesis undertaken in the early 1950s on the employment of married women in England, at that time defined as a 'problem' since marriage was considered most women's primary occupation. To a nascent sociologist, it soon became evident that such a study could not be done without taking into consideration the history of the recent past; Edwardian, even Victorian, culture cast a long shadow over the lives of older women as well as moulding the institutions of post-war England. Thus began an abiding involvement with social history, immeasurably strengthened by the concurrent discovery of 'history from below', the history of ordinary people spearheaded in Britain by the History Workshop movement in the 1970s.

From that study onwards the relationship between kinship/family and the waged economy became one of my central concerns, not least because by far the largest group of married women 'workers' either were, or had been, in domestic

service. Nineteenth-century residential domestic service was a twilight world; domestic servants were not really part of the family (as many employers would have liked to believe), but neither were they legally or traditionally seen as unequivocally part of the paid workforce. This anomaly, however, seems to have held little interest either for academic investigators or the public at large. Up through the mid-twentieth century, domestic servants were a taken-for-granted part of the social landscape, of less than passing interest to mainstream and Marxist economists alike. They regarded service as unproductive labour because it added nothing defined as of economic value and was carried on outside a recognized workplace. Even the tiny handful of investigations into women's work tended to neglect servants. Ivy Pinchbeck, for example, in her pioneering study of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, excluded domestic service on the grounds that servants' work had been unaffected by the industrial revolution.⁶

Furthermore, housekeeping, childcare and the employment of servants were the provenance of women who were themselves often relegated to a biological, and thus non-social, non-historical and naturalistic limbo.⁷ My increasing focus on the history of domesticity, housework and domestic servants which emerged from that wider study was seen as quixotic at best, faintly ridiculous at worst.

In any case by the time that study was completed, along with so many women of my generation, I had left the public world of work for a dozen years of housewifery, childrearing and helping to care for an elderly relative. It was that experience – the hours spent sitting by the sand-pit, ironing shirts, mashing baby food, swilling out and trying to dry nappies while coaxing a particularly recalcitrant boiler to stay alight in the depths of winter – which set me to ponder on the division of labour, conceptions of time, space, purpose and rewards which seemed to differ so radically between the world of work and the world of home. Why? What did it mean? How did this division appear in the first place?

The questions were there but the only framework available to answer them lay with the methods, conceptual schemes and theories built around their unacknowledged relevance to a form of intellectual masculinity. The conceptual order on offer was only to be found in a transcendental realm which passed beyond the local and the personal, where my questions seemed to originate, 'the place where body, space, the myriad tasks of the quotidien function'.⁸ For example, recognition has come only haltingly that the body is, among other things, 'a theoretical location for debates about power, ideology and economics'.⁹

When at last I returned to social and historical research, these questions resurfaced. What was the source of such a logic of 'rationality' which justified ignoring and thus perpetuating the heavy physical drudgery as well as mental, and often emotional, isolation of so many girls and women within private homes after conditions had ameliorated for many, women as well as men, in public workplaces?¹⁰

But the meaning of domestic service to the millions of women (and thousands of men) who had worked as servants was especially difficult to fathom. Considering

the numbers involved, both autobiography and fiction were strangely silent, while oral historians had barely begun their investigations. Here I had the invaluable advantage of long listening to my mother-in-law's stories of her early days in Yorkshire. Born in the late 1880s, like so many girls raised in the countryside, she was sent away into residential service with no choice in the matter. She went through a series of posts, starting with the first harsh and lonely place as general servant at the age of eleven. Later she moved from parlourmaid in a mill owner's establishment and finally to nursemaid for a doctor's family. Her vivid and detailed recollections of work patterns, emotional reactions and concepts of hierarchy, refracted through a female servant's encounters with the provincial upper-middle-class world while living under the same roof, kindled my determination to give voice to servants as human beings in their own right as well as historical subjects.

As might be expected, higher general standards of living, as well as the revolution in hygiene, had furthered an emphasis on cleanliness. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons for the enlargement of housekeeping rituals and increased employment of servants throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. But the more I probed into the practice and meaning of housework and the deployment of servants, the more it became obvious that much energy and time were also expended on using these resources to maintain status rituals, to mark boundaries between class strata. The shining brass ornaments and daily whitening of doorsteps, the variety and upkeep of furniture, crockery and dozens of other household items, the servants in neat, clean uniforms to open the front door to visitors, were part of elaborated codes of gentility and respectability.

Furthermore, for decades in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lower-middle-class and respectable working-class women literally almost killed themselves over the weekly family wash to turn out their sons and husbands in clean white Sunday shirts and their daughters in starched white pinafores. Yet many, if not most, were living on limited, often irregular incomes in households with large numbers of children and a minimum of sanitary facilities such as piped-water supplies. What drove individuals and families at all levels to such lengths for goals which in our relaxed post-sixties, blue-jean-wearing culture seem so unnecessary, even bizarre?

The overwhelming weight given to such signs of social status was also evident among the more affluent, in the etiquette of visiting, dining and calling. Such practices, along with widening access to public-school education for boys, enabled English nineteenth-century society, which had been dominated by aristocratic and gentry culture, to absorb a large influx of individuals and families whose wealth was based on commerce, industry and the professions.¹¹ Far from being trivial, these rituals and patterns of consumption were at the centre of changes in nineteenth-century English society. Economically they provided new demands for a huge variety of products in the home market and stimulated production related to the expansion of Empire. Socially they were key elements in the shift to a broader based politics and culture.

As part of these changes, by the mid-nineteenth century a cluster of forceful and widespread ideas about domesticity, the home and its role in marking boundaries, between classes and class fractions had emerged. Careful demarcations separated the genteel from the vulgar, the respectable from the rough, the civilized from the uncivilized, as well as the English from other nations and races, both on the Continent and in the colonies. In particular, notions about right living in the home, the private sphere as differentiated from the public, had become ever more interwoven with ideas about femininity and masculinity, womanhood and manhood. The dominion of this 'social imaginary' ideal could be found in a multitude of places and forms.¹²

Rapid industrialization, urban growth and the impetus for political inclusion was taking place within a nation of seemingly inviolate island boundaries and a remarkably homogeneous population (with the constant exception of Irish Catholics). Paradoxically, partly due to this lack of external differentiation, nineteenth-century English literate culture appeared to be particularly obsessed with denoting distinctions between sections of that population, especially when confronting a growing waged and urban working class. These distinctions, often based on notions of disorder, pollution and dirt, especially marked out the position of those at the lowest sections of societies.

But these beliefs about 'matter out of place' and disorder were *also* connected to one the most deep-seated classifications entertained: gender. One of Western femininity's most enduring traits has been women's responsibility for coordinating and managing dirt and disintegration, the association of women with polluting aspects of birth and death. While all women partook of this association in some form, it was nuanced as part of class differentiation. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women who had servants were perceived as more pure, more feminine, more ladylike. The servant (and servant class as a whole) absorbed dirt and lowliness into their own bodies.¹³

Both as symbols and in the work they performed, female servants could represent the whole underside of bourgeois culture. A.J. Munby, for example, one of the most assiduous students of gender and class in this period (and the subject of chapter 4), here describes a young scullery maid of the 1860s washing up in a dirty, evil-smelling cellar:

She stood at a sink behind a wooden dresser backed with choppers and stained with blood and grease, upon which were piles of coppers and saucepans that she had to scour, piles of dirty dishes that she had to wash. Her frock, her cap, her face and arms were more or less wet, soiled, perspiring and her apron was a filthy piece of sacking, wet and tied round her with a cord. The den where she wrought was low, damp, ill-smelling; windowless, lighted by a flaring gas-jet: and, full in view, she had on one side a larder hung with raw meat, on the other a common urinal.¹⁴

It was the physical, intellectual, even emotional, work of servants and landladies, as well as wives, sisters, maiden aunts, nieces and daughters, which ensured that

others (the employing class and many men) could possess and ‘enjoy the benefits of pursuing gainful occupations and intellectual enrichment, the refinement of morals, customs and taste’.¹⁵ Men from higher strata were released from care of their own personal and physical needs by servants and protected by their womenfolk from social and emotional disorder. The fear and distress at the number of ‘redundant’ women around mid-century focused on potentially independent ‘ladies’ or impertinent factory girls. Unmarried servants were not a problem, for, in the words of a well-known commentator, they were ‘attached to others and connected with other existences which they embellish, facilitate and serve. In a word, they fulfil both essentials of woman’s being; *they are supported by, and they administer to, men*’ (his italics).¹⁶

These insights into the symbolic, organizational and material aspects of gender and class were fuelled by my engagement with feminist thinking in the 1970s and 80s. Feminist analysis in several disciplines uncovered layers of gendered metaphor and the hitherto unacknowledged gendered nature of institutions. In particular, there was increasing recognition that the law gives concrete representation to current social opinion as well as moulding constraints or opportunities for living people. Legal classifications in the nineteenth century were built on existing assumptions about gender, the family and work. For example, the idea of a business as a ‘personality’ rested on the notion of ‘person’, itself an unnoted masculine concept. Legal debates in this period and changes around marriage, inheritance, the contract of employment and the creation of the business corporation, as well as feminist debates about the gendered definition of ‘person’, underlie much of the analysis in these essays.

Another key area I was drawn to investigate was the placing of social groups in space – both actual and metaphorical – an approach more often left to historical geographers, architectural historians or anthropologists. Material artefacts, the use of space within buildings as a social marker, the lay-outs of streets, towns and countryside appeared in documents (and sometimes literally on the ground) as a complicated tapestry of gendered meanings. There were the men-only public arenas of office, inn, public house and club, as well as wealthy homes divided between lady’s boudoir, children’s nursery and school-room, gentleman’s smoking-room or study, mixed-sex public drawing-rooms and the back passages or basements inhabited by servants. Lower down the social scale, these divisions were maintained even though they might be reduced to the husband and father’s special chair by the fireplace.¹⁷

Gendered meanings were even mapped out on the grid of the human body itself. Like the prototypical ‘other’, woman might not only be the tender heart to man’s cool, directing head, but sometimes was relegated, along with other social outcasts such as paupers and gypsies, to unsavoury nether regions below the waist. Ideas about beauty and ugliness, morality, sin and desire, all were imbricated in constructions of class and gender, the English and inferior others.