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Suited for Service

Racialized Rationalizations for the Ideal Domestic Servant from the Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century

From the early 1800s through the 1920s the image of the ideal domestic servant varied dramatically—native white women, European immigrant women, and black women. However, at all times the racial/ethnic identity of the domestic servant played a critical role. The transition from the casualness of “help” to the formality of the “domestic servant” relationship marked the historical moment in which a subordinate racial identity became a precondition of servanthood. The semantic change from help or hired girl to domestic servant reflected a more fundamental change in the nature, organization, and expectation of the work role. Using a comparative-historical approach, we provide a sociological analysis of how shifting labor patterns and societal demands led to the decline of help, the rise of domestic service, and the centrality of a racialized identity to the performance of household work during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The work that goes on within households is differentiated from the work that is carried on within corporate organizations. Work within corporations refers to the production of material goods and commodities aimed “to create profit and to extend the control of the capitalist organization” (Acker 2006: 86). Whereas social reproduction refers to the “array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and inter-generationally,” activities such as “purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnish-

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ings and appliances, socializing children” are considered reproductive labor (Glenn 1992: 1).

While many studies have focused on the gendering of work within the production setting, relatively fewer have focused on this same process within the reproductive setting. Domestic service has always been a bastion of women’s work. Yet little is known about this occupation’s gendering and racializing and its change over time from the early nineteenth century until 1920, when opportunities in clerical and sales work overshadowed the importance of this work as a source of wage labor for women.

Using a historical narrative built on secondary literatures and the socio-historical context, we focus on how shifting labor patterns and societal demands led to the decline of household help, the rise of domestic service, and the centrality of a racialized identity to the performance of household work. Before we delve into domestic servants, we must better understand how the role of women in the household changed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating the need for domestic servants.

Redefining “Women’s Work”

Reproductive labor is almost universally characterized as women’s work, but this attribution is prefaced on the distinction between the public (corporate/factory) and private (household) spheres that did not exist in the early nineteenth century. The vast majority of the population, “more than three-quarters of the Northern United States,” lived on single-family farms in the 1820s (Dudden 1983: 17). Women’s work in the traditional farm household consisted of producing goods that could be sold in the market: textiles, butter, cheese, and eggs (*ibid.*: 13). In the early nineteenth century it was common for farm women to hire a helper to assist in fulfilling that role.

In rural areas like Hallowell, Maine, there were no slaves or indentured servants; the majority of household helpers “were single ‘girls’ between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five.” Laurel Ulrich Thatcher (1991: 81–82) notes, “Hallowell women exchanged daughters the way they exchanged kettles and sleighs.” Hired helpers were more apprentices than servants, since the young women were not used as “household drudges” but instead learned “needed skills [such as textile production] to sustain their future families as well as ways to contribute to their own support in the present” (*ibid.*: 81).

After 1815 textile production increasingly occurred outside the home,

depriving women of an outlet for market production, although women continued in food production throughout the century (Dudden 1983: 17). Yet a woman's productive capacity was not measured only by what she was able to sell in the market; a woman's work on the farm, in general, was integral to the success of the farm and its financial viability. Her work ensured that there was ample food to eat, shoes and clothes to wear, and goods to be sold in the market. Accordingly, Faye E. Dudden (*ibid.*: 18) notes, "the agricultural press urged farmers to hire a girl when possible to lighten the load on their wives," even after opportunities to participate in market production declined.

Yet this way of life, which afforded women a productive role in the household facilitating subsistence farming, was challenged. Innovation and industrialization provided an employment alternative to agricultural work for nonskilled laborers, creating a more desirable occupational opportunity (Licht 1995). But with the transition from an agricultural- to an industrial-based economy, a new ideal for married women was advanced that came to be known as the cult of domesticity (Reskin and Padavic 1994). It crystallized gender roles and idealized the notion that a woman's role was limited to the home or the private sphere, not in the traditional sense that had been true until this time but in a new way that was far more constraining and redefining than these women could have ever imagined.

Bart Landry (2000) argues that the separation of spheres into public and private and the location of the workplace in the public sphere robbed women of the productive roles they served in preindustrial society. By 1830 there was a clear trend away from women's productivity in farm households. The emergence of a discernible middle class, particularly in urban areas, gave rise to a middle-class woman unrecognizable by her predecessor on the farm (Dudden 1983: 46–47). These women no longer engaged in household market production for pay; instead, their husbands' incomes enabled them to purchase from the market all that was needed for familial upkeep.

Economic development and early industrialization continued to encroach on women's identities as contributors at home. Instead, "social identity rested more and more upon proper social observances and effective status competition, while according to the ideology of domesticity middle-class women were to achieve fulfillment in the elaboration of domestic space and rituals" (*ibid.*: 7; see also Wrigley 1991). It was in this context that domestic work came to define women's work exclusively. In the farming households at the turn of the century, maintenance of the household and domestic space was

merely one aspect of a farm woman's identity, and her value and contribution to the household were evident in her productive capacity as well.

By the mid-1800s women were encouraged to relinquish their productive role and embrace their ever-expanding, yet simultaneously limiting, reproductive role. They were to "hearken to hearth and home" and prepare a comforting environment for their spouses when they returned from the harsh realities of the outside world. In fact, a woman could not consider herself a "true woman" unless she adhered to these ideologies (Welter 1966). The home became a site for the accomplishment of gender through the performance of housework. Many contemporary scholars argue that housework provides a unique opportunity to "do gender" because of dominant cultural perceptions of appropriate men's and women's housework (Coltrane 1996; South and Spitze 1994; Thompson 1991; Walzer 1996; West and Zimmerman 1987). This historical period marks the moment when these cultural perceptions were birthed and reproductive labor was idealized as women's work.

Both men and women played equally vital roles in sustaining the household during the agrarian period. In *The American Woman's Home* Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe (2002 [1869]: 229) reflect on historical labor patterns in rural New England, where "the master and mistress, with their children, were the head workers" and all others "were emphatically only the *helps* . . . used as instruments of lightening certain portions of their toil." Similarly, Ruth Cowan Schwartz (1983: 24) points out that although cooking may be conceived of as women's work, it required the labor of both men and women, since "the cooking could not be done without prior preparation of tools and foodstuffs, and a good deal of that prior preparation was, as it happens, defined as men's work."

Agrarian life, Cowan Schwartz (*ibid.*: 38) concludes, required "men and women to work in tandem in order to undertake any single life sustaining chore. The relations between the sexes were reciprocal: women assisted men in the fields, and men assisted women in the house." The rise of industrialization changed these dynamics, Cowan Schwartz (*ibid.*: 53) argues, as "men's share of domestic activity began to disappear, while women's share increased."¹ Increasingly, the once tedious labor common to all men in agrarian households grew to be a faint memory as subsequent generations of men knew more about wage labor than chopping wood, "creating the material conditions under which the doctrine of separate spheres could take root and flourish" (*ibid.*: 66–67).

The home was increasingly seen as a refuge “from the uncertainties, commodification, and calculation of commercial life,” and the responsibility for creating this havenlike atmosphere rested entirely on women (Laslett and Brenner 1989: 387). Gender conformity, via adherence to these perceptions, allowed men and women to perform gender and affirm/reaffirm their identities. Women could “create and sustain their identities as women through cooking and cleaning house,” while men sustained their identities by avoiding these tasks altogether (Coltrane 1996: 50). Barbara Easton (1976: 393) describes the effect this transition had on women living in New England during the mid- to late 1800s:

For women who lived in or near towns, where they could buy cloth from the factories or from stores, there remained little incentive to work all day at the loom to weave four or five yards of such cloth. . . . Most town women (and increasingly, farm women as well) found that they were spending less time making things for their families and more time cooking, cleaning their houses, and tending to the needs of their children and husbands. . . . Responsibility for childcare and care of the home had devolved more and more upon the women.

Women found themselves in uncharted and often unwelcome territory. Child care, which once existed on the fringe of their daily activity, now encompassed it altogether as avenues for productive responsibilities in the household diminished (*ibid.*).

The press popularized ideals regarding domesticity and claimed that a woman’s true calling was to create a welcoming home for her family (Welter 1966). Middle-class women welcomed their revered domestic role but were confronted with the reality of domestic drudgery. Perhaps to combat this situation, the popular press encouraged women to broaden the reach of domesticity, insisting “that this physical space corresponded to a separate women’s sphere, an area of spiritual comfort and compensatory intimacy” (Dudden 1983: 47). The religious nature of domesticity allowed women to devote themselves to church, charitable work, and other such activities (Welter 1966). Some women eagerly embraced this widened view of their role and used this new conception of domesticity as a means of gaining greater influence in community affairs (Laslett and Brenner 1989).

The expanded nature of domesticity did not change one factor—the household still required upkeep. Employing domestic servants enabled

middle-class women to strike a balance between the reality and the ideals of domesticity. Furthermore, by displacing the responsibility for housework, a middle-class woman could concentrate on the aspects of domesticity that she found more appealing, such as charitable work. The transfer of the burden of household labor from the employer to a domestic servant granted the employer freedom and therewith the ability to fulfill the ideals of domesticity that she would have otherwise found burdensome.

Phyllis Palmer (1987: 182–83) observes that, at least through the first half of the twentieth century, “most white middle-class women could hire another woman—a recent immigrant, a working-class woman, a woman of color, or all three—to perform much of the hard labor of household tasks.” Without readily available and cheap domestic labor, the idealized traditional form of the family, with the woman as homemaker and the man as breadwinner, would have come crashing down. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992: 33) argues that the availability of domestic servants upheld white male privilege by “perpetuating the concept of reproductive labor as women’s work, sustaining the illusion of a protected private sphere for women and displacing conflict away from husband and wife to struggles between housewife and domestic.”

Household Help versus Domesticity— What’s in a Name?

Domestic service is a unique and particularly exploitive occupation. Our contemporary understanding of domestic service, captured succinctly by Lewis Coser (1973: 31) as an occupation held by those with no alternatives characterized by “premodern relationship between superior and inferior” and staffed by those persons “suffering from marked inferiorities or peculiar stigmas,” was not always the dominant interpretation. Domestic service has an occupational precursor, household help. During the nineteenth century, “domestics” replaced “help” as the moniker representing household service. More than simply a semantic change, however, the title *domestic servant* reflected a more fundamental change in the nature, organization, and expectation of the work role.

The *New York Times* (1872) outlined three major divisions of female domestic servants: “cooks,” “upstairs’ girls,” and girls for “general housework.” The expectations of each role were somewhat fixed by then: “The

'cooks' do what their name implies and the washing, too; while the 'upstairs' girls' sweep, wait on the door and table, 'setting' the latter, and during spare time 'make' the beds and 'keep' the children. The 'girl for general housework' is a comprehensive creature, who engages to do all of the foregoing 'for a small family.'" This change from the fluidity of "help" to the rigidity of "domestic servants" was not a total transformation. At times both models of household work coexisted. Instead, "the help or hired girl and the domestic are models or ideal types" useful for detecting changes and tracking patterns in the model of women's work (Dudden 1983: 5).

Beecher and Stowe (2002 [1869]: 230–31) recount the experience of a lady who hired a servant and was sorely disappointed, then acquired an efficient helper who met her expectations. This anecdote provides a useful illustration of the fundamental difference between the labor forms and the corresponding shift in who was doing the work:

A lady living in one of our obscure New-England towns, where there were no servants to be hired, at last, by sending to a distant city, succeeded in procuring a raw Irish maid-of-all-work, a creature of immense bone and muscle, but of heavy, unawakened brain. In one fortnight, she established such a reign of Chaos and old Night in the kitchen and through the house that her mistress, a delicate woman, encumbered with the care of young children, began seriously to think that she made more work each day than she performed, and dismissed her. Fortunately, the daughter of a neighboring farmer was going to be married in six months, and wanted a little ready money for her *trousseau*. The lady was informed that Miss So-and-so would come to her, not as a servant, but as hired "help." She was feign to accept help with gladness. Forthwith, came into the family-circle a tall, well-dressed young person, grave, unobtrusive, self-respecting, yet not in the least presuming, who sat at the family table and observed all its decorums with the modest self-possession of a lady.

The demeaning characterization of the Irish servant stands in sharp contrast to the near-perfect picture of the help. During the mid-nineteenth century housewives widely shared the sentiment that "you can't get good servants anymore." Dudden (1983: 3–4) points out that "those who spoke of the good old days, however, often referred explicitly to help." The "servant problem," as it came to be known, referred to the transitory nature of most domestic servants and their lack of mastery of their craft. However, it also had a sub-

text that signaled a range of problems with the new cadre of servants, including ethnicity, race, and religion (Romero 1988: 326). The “servant problem” became construed as the “Irish problem,” since Irish women were seen as the “typical American servant” (Katzman 1978: 66). The *New York Times* (1872) did not mince words in describing the general lack of satisfaction with Irish domestic servants:

The influences that make Patrick and Barney a repeater, a rioter . . . percolate down to the kitchen and render Bridget and Kathleen impatient, shiftless, untidy, and gad-about, a steady invader of your larder, and sometimes of your wardrobe. These be harsh words. We confidently put it to almost any American housewife if they are not true words. Indolence and insolences are the faults of the Irish. . . . The class of which we are speaking, however, have such a monopoly of the servant market that they are fully able to get placed by assurance and by the fact that servants must be had rather than by their merit or by their popularity.

The transition from independent agricultural family farms in the rural areas to consumers and factory laborers in urban cities and industrializing towns hastened the shift from help to domestic servants. In contrast to the work commonly performed by help, assisting in productive tasks such as making homespun textiles or churning butter, domestic servants were engaged in reproductive tasks. It was uncommon to hire help to perform such tasks. Phoebe Eastman, a farm woman journaling in 1829, recorded, “She only hired such help when she or one of her family was ill; recognizing that it amounted to an economic drain” (quoted in Dudden 1983: 15).

The advancement of the ideal of domesticity for the American housewife, however, changed this view and corresponded to a shift in the expectations of household workers. “Employers demanded longer hours and more stringent work discipline from domestics than they had from help and delegated more of the work to them”; these changes made the work “more demanding and demeaning” (ibid.: 7). No longer was the household help assisting the woman of the house in the performance of household duties; rather, all the household duties were sloughed off to the domestic servant, facilitating the housewife’s concentration on her “expanded social and emotional duties” (Palmer 1989: 5).

Tasks that were deemed “beneath, distasteful to or too demanding for family members” were regularly assigned to domestic servants (Katzman

1978: 269–70). This established a social barrier, Daniel E. Sutherland (1981: 35) argues, since “people expected servants to discharge duties that they neither had the time nor desire to perform themselves.” This characteristic of the servant role set it firmly apart from household help. While both roles were “highly diffuse and non-specific,” the servant role seemed to explicitly trade in humiliation, involving “tasks that are defined as menial and hence below the dignity of the master and his wife” and by extension their neighbor’s daughter or the help (Cosser 1973: 32). As a result, Sutherland (1981: 34) asserts, “servants were in the household but not of it; they were ‘. . . strangers within the gates’ . . . regarded as ‘aliens’ and ‘sphinxes,’ unknown and unknowable.”

As the role of the domestic superseded the role of the hired girl, highlighting the social distance between the employer and the servant became paramount. For instance, Sutherland (*ibid.*: 29) records the subtle and symbolic measures used by nearly all employers to remind servants of their “place”:

Servants must use crockery and ironware to eat their meals, not china and silver. They must never, whatever their desires, eat with the family. Their proper place was in the kitchen. Livery for men and uniforms for women were required in all upper-class households. Even some middle-class employers dressed female servants in a “modest” black dress and white cap to insure that a servant was not “mistaken for a member of the family.”

This is quite a departure from the characterization of the relationship with the help as part of the “family circle” offered by Beecher and Stowe (2002 [1869]: 236). Indeed, white women who served either insisted on equality as help or rejected domestic service altogether:

No wages could induce a son or daughter of New England to take the condition of a servant on terms which they thought applicable to a slave. The slightest hint of a separate table was resented as an insult; not to enter the front door, and not to sit in the front parlor on state occasions, was bitterly commented on as a personal indignity. The well-taught, self-respecting daughters of farmers, the class most valuable in domestic service, gradually retired from it. They preferred any other employment, however laborious.

Native-born American girls preferred hard labor to domestic service, which they equated with slavery. They resisted the transition from assisting the

housewife in doing work to performing work alone and refused to labor to procure another's leisure. Again Beecher and Stowe (*ibid.*) offer us a clear example: "Yet the girls of New England, with one consent, preferred the factory, and left the whole business of domestic service to a foreign population; and they did it mainly because they would not take positions in families as an inferior laboring-class by the side of others of their own age who assumed as their prerogative to live without labor." Once more Beecher and Stowe (*ibid.*: 236–37) recount the story of a mother who, it seems, would have happily provided her daughters to serve as helpers but stubbornly refused their use as servants:

"I can't let you have one of my daughters," said an energetic matron to her neighbor from the city, who was seeking for a servant in her summer vacation; "if you hadn't daughters of your own, maybe I would; but my girls are not going to work so that your girls may live in idleness." It was vain to offer money. "We don't need your money, ma'am; we can support ourselves in other ways; my girls can braid straw, and bind shoes, but they are not going to be slaves to anybody."

Resistance to the appellation *servant* largely stemmed from the democratic ideals of equality and traces back to the early nineteenth century. Consider the following conversation, from 1807, between a European visitor and the help that answered the door: "Is your master at home? . . . I have no master. . . . Don't you live here? . . . I stay here. . . . And who are you then? . . . Why I am Mr. —'s help. I'd have you to know, man, that I am no servant; none but negers are sarvants" (Glenn 2002: 62). Thatcher (1991: 224) notes, "To call persons of this description servants or to speak of their master or mistress is a grievous affront." Most American workers who performed servile tasks resisted the term "servant," preferring "help," "hired help," or "hired man, woman, or girl" (Glenn 2002: 61–62).

The help was treated with respect, as neighbor's daughters were equals, but servants were decidedly not equals. In fact, housewives labored to impress upon their servants the importance of class distinctions. The fluidity of the American class structure as opposed to the concreteness of the British servants' class meant that American servants aspired to one day abandon service. The master-servant relationship drew on archaic notions rooted in the feudal system that Americans and immigrants, becoming Americanized, sought to leave behind (Beecher and Stowe 2002 [1869]). Thus the ser-

vant role was wrought with tension, as servants did not want to assume the lowly position and demeanor expected of a servant.

Resistance to the characterization of meekness and servility bred much contempt between servants and housewives. Many housewives readily accepted and tolerated otherwise bad servants if they were willing to “play the role of humble subordinate” (Sutherland 1981: 37). Sutherland (*ibid.*) notes that, knowing their place was of paramount importance to employers, servants “may have been terrible cooks or abominable waiters, but if submissive and smiling, they were retained and called ‘good.’”

The diametrically opposed goals of the employer for unquestioned superiority and of the help or white servant for equality were jointly solved by the rise of black women in service, as their radical inequality was societally acknowledged. In stark contrast to the dissatisfaction expressed with Irish women, the reporters at the *New York Times* (1872) universally revered black women for their docility and willingness to work:

Of the few [American citizens of African descent and southern nativity] that have come up the slightest tact makes most excellent servants. They do not have to learn to keep their “places.” . . . In the not universal quality of kindness to children, they are simply excellent by the laws of their gentle, cheerful, grateful natures. They are the coming help, the servants of the future. . . . These colored people, for the present at least, have acquired few of the vices of the superior race of servants . . . and they are so unconscious of the indignity of fully earning their wages that they are likely to do twice the work of other kinds of servants without regarding themselves overtaxed.

The need for a delicate dance to confirm the status of employers was eliminated as racial cues, instead of social cues, served as continual reminders of the servants’ lowly position. Ultimately, the experience of racial/ethnic minority women in domestic service was characterized by their racial dissimilarity from their employers.

Intertwining Race and Domestic Service

We contend that the recasting of the role of the household worker from help to domestic servant was implicitly, and at times explicitly, racial. The semantic transition coincided with the increasing racial diversity of women doing this

work. In particular, three groups performed this work—native-born white women, foreign-born white women, and black women. Moreover, her race, nationality, and class influenced a woman's experience of this work. Native-born white women were primarily engaged in domestic service in the North, but these were lower-class women whose financial constraints tethered them to the labor market. Upon marriage, these women departed from domestic service (Katzman 1978). Others departed after finding new employment opportunities in clerical services. Yet others, Lara Vapnek (2009: 5) argues, sought broader political and economic independence from the household and saw the rejection of domestic service as one way to achieve this. Thus, by and large, native-born white women were employed as domestic servants only temporarily. The departure en masse of native-born white women from domestic service created the space for a new depersonalized image of the domestic servant to take hold.

In comparison to native-born white women for whom domestic service was merely a stopgap occupation between better labor market opportunities or marriage, for arriving Irish women entering domestic service was appealing, since it “solved the problem of finding housing in a strange city where tenement landlords practiced price gouging” (Dudden 1983: 60). Further, the household, as well as the housewife, took on an alternate function. Aside from being a place of work, it also provided newly arrived immigrants with an opportunity to “learn English and become familiar with American customs” (Glenn 1980: 444).

For black women, however, domestic service did not serve as a bridge to social mobility in the way that it did for white ethnic women; instead, black women remained in domestic service for generations due to the pervasiveness of racial discrimination, which limited all other occupational opportunities. Black women redefined the terms of the servant role by refusing to “live in” as white domestic servants did, but household service remained a grueling occupation (Clark-Lewis 1994). Aside from being physically demanding, Enobong Hannah Branch (2011: 69) argues, domestic service was emotionally taxing, since “Black domestic workers were subjected to explicit and constant messages that reminded them of their inferiority and their alleged suitability for the domestic role.” The experience of domestic work was fundamentally different for black and white ethnic women. Whereas immigrant white women saw domestic service as a way station or stepping-stone, not as lifelong drudgery, “domestic service was an occupational black hole for Black

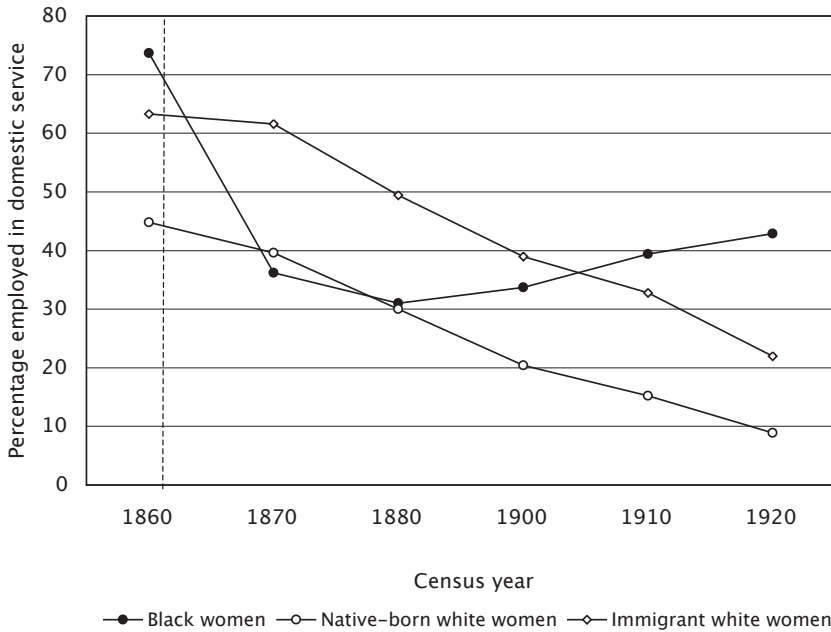


Figure 1 Distribution of women employed in domestic service by race and nativity, 1860–1920

Source: Ruggles et al. 2009.

Note: Graph based on the first author's analysis.

women,” Branch (*ibid.*: 64) claims. “There were multiple roads in, including economic necessity, and legalized coercion, but no way out.”

US census data help illuminate these trends (figure 1). Nearly half of all employed native-born white women worked as domestic servants in 1860, compared to nearly two-thirds of immigrant white women. By 1900 fewer than a quarter of native-born and immigrant white women were still employed in that capacity. Mistresses desperately sought reliable domestics, but few native-born women would work as domestic servants (Locke 1990). “Young native-born daughters who had been willing to help,” Dudden (1983: 7–8) notes, promptly withdrew from domestic service (see also Schneider 1998). Growing disdain for domestic service, coupled with increased educational and occupational opportunities for native-born and immigrant white women after 1900, led to their rapid departure.

Further, this decline reflected the desire of white women to distance themselves from domestic service as it came to be widely characterized as

racial and ethnic women's work. Prior to 1900 there was a racial/regional delineation of the servant market such that white women dominated the North and Midwest and racial/ethnic minority women dominated elsewhere. However, whenever racial/ethnic minority women were available to serve as domestics (blacks in the South and Mexican women in the Southwest), white women were loath to engage in domestic service as well. In 1901 the social scientist Orra Langhorne said, "When a Southerner speaks of servants, Negroes are always understood, Irish Biddy, English Mary Ann, German Gretchen, and Scandinavian maids are as yet unknown factors. . . . Black Dinah holds the fort" (quoted in O'Leary 2003: 37). After 1900 the racial/regional delineation of the servant market became increasingly blurred as racial/ethnic minority women, particularly black women, became engaged in domestic service nationwide.

Within the 40-year span from 1880 to 1920, black women's entry into domestic service was concomitant with white women's exit. The number of domestic servants among native-born white women fell more than two-thirds between 1890 and 1920, while the number among white immigrant women fell by nearly half. By 1920 only 9 percent of native-born white women and 22 percent of immigrant women were employed in household labor, compared to more than 40 percent of black women. Not only were black women the only choice available for domestic service at the time, but they were also more likely than immigrant white women to remain in service in spite of marriage. The turnover rate overall among white domestic servants was high, as they were unlikely to continue working after marriage and childbirth.

Decreasing rates of immigration, coupled with an increase in the overall ability of families to afford domestic labor, led to a great demand for domestic servants that outstripped the available supply. This inadequate supply was heightened between 1910 and 1920, when there was a sharp decline in the availability of household labor, attributable to three factors: the low propensity of the "new" immigrants (the Russians, Poles, and Italians) to work, a decrease in the propensity to work as household laborers among second-generation Irish women (roughly 60 percent of the first generation, compared to less than 20 percent of the second generation), and a chance for greater occupational mobility among immigrant women overall due to increased educational opportunity and the availability of sales and office jobs as well as teaching positions (see Katzman 1978: 48, 67–70).

The departure of white immigrant women from domestic service and

the increasing entry of black women coincided with a change in the character of domestic work, which increasingly served as a status enhancer for employers. The status-enhancing feature of having a domestic servant was a major reason, Judith Rollins (1985) argues, that the employers she interviewed preferred to hire black women. There was no doubt that a black woman in a white household was a servant. But a more sinister secondary function was filled by her presence; the employers' racial superiority was reaffirmed by the nature of the work and her relationship to the worker. In this context the statistics surrounding the representation of black and white women in service are astounding.

As white women found opportunities for occupational mobility that precipitated their departure from domestic service, black women were migrating from southern to northern cities in search of work. Between 1900 and 1920 the proportion of white women employed as domestic servants declined by over one-half, whereas that of black women increased by 23 percent.

As native-born and immigrant white women transitioned out of and black women transitioned into domestic service, theories regarding each group's desire for and suitability to this type of work were developed. Glenn (1992: 14) argues that dominant group ideology defined "the proper place of these groups as in service: they belonged there, just as it was the dominant group's place to be served."

Rationalizing a Woman's Suitability for Service

The change from the household help, who assisted the woman of the house in performance of household duties, to the estranged and exploited domestic servant, who did all the household work herself, underscored a seismic shift in the role of women in the household. Taken-for-granted patterns regarding the nature of household work and workers changed not in a single household or community but on a societal scale. Housework became something that could and should be done by someone other than the woman of the house, freeing her for other pursuits, and white middle-class Americans collectively built an understanding of who should perform such work and what that work would be.

Aside from relieving middle-class women from the burden of household work, hiring domestics also permitted an alternate form of self-definition to that of "housewife." "Supervising domestics," as it was referred to, accom-

modated roles typically not associated with the household, such as “roles of authority and activity rather than passivity and isolation”; managing domestics, Dudden (1983: 7) argues, demanded of middle-class women “a work role similar to that of entrepreneurial men.” Similarly, Palmer (1989: 15) claims that middle-class housewives could “confirm their beings through and in relation to other women who had to take jobs as domestic servants.” Julia Wrigley (1991: 324) comments, “Denied power in other areas, white middle-class women could establish their social prestige and exercise power in their roles as mistresses.”

The housewife derived her power not only from her financial ability to hire someone to perform work that she had no interest in doing but also from her ability to hire someone who had less power and status in society than she did. Thus, more than the ability to perform household chores, the housewife needed a woman who was markedly different from herself, Palmer (1989: 138) argues, “one whose work and very identity confirmed the housewife’s daintiness and perfection.”

Increasing demand for domestics to perform onerous household work and the ever-expanding list of responsibilities to be accomplished during the workday coincided with major demographic changes within the occupation. Just as housewives sought to hire more and more workers to run the household, the workers on whom they had traditionally relied were beginning to find work in the burgeoning factories of the North.

“The shift away from hired girls to domestics,” Mary Romero (1988: 325) notes, “preceded the general decline of the occupation.” By 1870 nearly one-half of all employed women worked as domestic servants, by 1900 about one-third did, and by 1930 only one-fifth of all working women did. Although this decline represented increasing opportunity for women, it also reflected the disdain for domestic service as it came to be characterized as racial and ethnic women’s work (Glenn 1992).

Glenn (*ibid.*: 11) points out that “despite the preference for European immigrant domestics, employers could not easily retain their services . . . domestic service became increasingly the specialty of minority-race women.” As the housewife continued to hire an increasing number of people to perform domestic work, she also needed to make sense of the changing demographics of the workers who were willing to do these tasks. During this time, the availability of black women to work as domestic servants increased dramatically as black women migrated from southern to northern cities in search

of work. David Katzman (1978: 72) notes, “As the number of white female servants declined by one third between 1890 and 1920, the number of black female servants increased by 43 percent.”

The housewife made sense of these demographic changes by assuming that the new groups of workers had a desire or were ideally suited to perform this work, since it was recognized as “low-status work that whites—even immigrant whites—shunned at all costs” (Landry 2000: 48). For instance, a group in Macon, Georgia, who self-identified as “friends of the Negro race” argued that black women were “specially trained and otherwise adapted” to domestic service (Hunter 1995: 350). A justification for the preference for black women over immigrant women can be traced in the literature of the period; it was supposed that black women were less difficult and more submissive than were immigrant servants due to the legacy of slavery (O’Leary 2003: 40).

Wrigley (1991: 320) points out that the domestic/mistress relationship was plagued by the “intensity of dependence and subordination,” since employers saw their very identities as tied to “domestic displays of privilege.” The practice of linguistic deference, referring to a domestic servant as a “girl,” which originated in the South but was used nationwide traditionally, “reinforced social distance and underscored notions of superiority and subordination between employers and domestic workers” (O’Leary 2003: 35). The racial/ethnic identity of the domestic worker was so salient that Rollins (1983: 4) described it as “the darker domestic serving the lighter mistress.”

The racial dissimilarity of the servant facilitated her exploitation and broke all attachments to the notion of help. Since racialized minorities represented the quintessential “other” in whom the employer could never see herself or her “neighbor’s daughter,” they came to be seen as the ideal domestic servants. Domestic service evolved from the flexibility associated with help to a permanent, lifelong occupation characterized by onerous, demeaning labor, which reaffirmed the employer’s racial superiority by the nature of the work and her relationship to the worker.

Conclusion

As middle-class white American women struggled to redefine their identity during industrialization, the boundaries between those who helped and those who served were recast. As their productive role was curtailed, middle-class

women were left with few choices but to focus on their reproductive role, creating a welcoming and nurturing home for their husbands and children. But fulfillment of this role required help. Native-born white women, who once “helped” the household maintain its productive capacity, were unwilling to acquiesce to the menial demands of a servant role. Immigrant white women began to fill the “servant” void left by native-born white women, but housewives found their inconsistency and indolence insufferable. Yet a servant was seen as integral to the reproductive functioning of the household. Native-born white women were impossible to retain, and white immigrant women were preferred but intolerable; a new class of workers suitable to the task of maintaining the household as a haven was required.

Who would these workers be? The only group of women left who could be enticed to enter the drudgery of domestic labor was black women. All other women departed domestic service as soon as it was feasible, seeking opportunities for employment in burgeoning industries or retreating to their homes upon marriage. Black women, however, were a constant. No other employment opportunities were available to them, and their employment, even after marriage, was necessary for the financial survival of their families (Landry 2000).

Yet this was not the rationale deduced by middle-class white women. Instead, it seems, they believed that black women were uniquely endowed with the deference and nurturance required to make the middle-class white experience possible. Middle-class white women rationalized black women’s persistence in this role as evidence of their suitability. Being a racialized minority came to be seen as a precondition of employment, a qualification as necessary as the ability to perform household work.

The racial connotation of domestic service broke all attachments to help. No longer was the domestic servant someone with whom the housewife could personally identify. A neighbor’s daughter was treated respectfully as an apprentice, gaining exposure to the types of activities that would be required of her once she married and established her own household. Instead, the social distance offered by the disparate lives of the middle-class white woman and her black domestic servant were preferred, as it facilitated the servant’s exploitation. Domestic servants did not “help” the woman of the house; they “served” her, performing the work she found unpleasant yet necessary to meet the ever-expanding ideals of domesticity.

Note

- 1 “In most families, processing of grain was a frequent and sometimes a tiresome chore. The switch from home-grown to ‘store-bought’ grains relieved men and boys of one of the most time-consuming chores for which they had been responsible. At the very same time, the switch may well have increased the time and energy that women had to spend in their tasks, particularly cooking and baking” (Cowan Schwartz 1983: 49). Similarly, the advent of the stove reduced men’s labor, while women’s labor remained unchanged.

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