

NOTES AND QUERIES

THE INSTITUTION OF SERVICE

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The discovery of the considerable numbers of servants in the past social structure of Britain and North West Europe, and the reconstruction of their functions, has been an interesting development in historical sociology. The present note is an attempt at an outline of the service institution as it existed in this region in pre-industrial times, and which survived in some areas into the twentieth century. It is written out so as to encourage comparison over dimensions of both time and space, in order to note when and where service was differently constituted, generally less important, and perhaps in some cases almost entirely absent. No claim is made that either the description or the discussion are complete.

The note is set out as a series of suggestive assertions, without explication or development and with no references. The tense is the historic present and the reader must assume himself/herself to be an observer and analyser of a traditional social order for the most part as it was in a North West European region before 'industrialisation' occurred. In that social order households, it must be noted, are ideally formed at marriage, and no marriage takes place without a new household being founded.

There are three general heads: statements about the significance and function of service, servanthood and service; statements about the definition, distinctiveness, status and types of servants; statements about the importance of service and the servant relationship in historical sociology.

Significance and function of service, servants and servanthood

Servants are found as members in about a third of all households, always serving the family, but also, where households engage in production, comprising the productive work/group, usually along with the head, his wife and children if any such are resident, and often also, during the day, along with hired day labourers and journeymen.

Most people are servants at some time in their lives, and those currently in service comprise a tenth or more of the whole population.

Servants are therefore highly significant in the constitution of the labour force, of which they form so large a proportion, as also in the maintenance of production and of productive units.

The condition of servanthood between maturation and marriage gives structure to the life course for most people in the population.

Accordingly servanthood is instrumental in regulating the age at marriage, and proportions marrying, for both sexes: this helps in its turn to keep the rate of household formation in step with economic activity, current and prospective.

These circumstances mean that numbers of servants and their proportions in the population vary with prospects for household formation, that is with the economic outlook, and with demography.

The retaining of a servant or servants demonstrates the personal superiority, public as well as private, of members of the elite, and of everyone in authority; this is so whether servants are engaged for the most part in relieving the household head and his family of menial tasks and attending to their wants, or whether their time is almost wholly spent in productive activity.

Service is a means of secondary socialisation coming after primary socialisation within the elementary family, and ensures the transmission of skills; as an educational process for adolescents it complements the church and the school.

In being required to accumulate the means to establish their households at marriage, servants are savers of petty capital, occasionally lodged in banks: hence, in employing in return for subsistence and extremely low wages at the time of life when these young men and women are at their most vigorous and productive, masters and mistresses are exploiting them.

Service is sometimes used to provide life support for those without families, or without families able to keep them alive, especially in the case of children placed in solvent households by poor law authorities.

Servants change households frequently at the end of their one year periods of service, a half or even more moving annually: most servants find their positions through their own connections, but there are hiring fairs, or servant markets, in the Autumn (Martinmas) and in the Spring, the Spring market occurring mainly in pastoral areas.

Circulation of servants between households, villages and towns, along with the hiring fairs, provides a marriage market for the mass of the population and facilitates mobility and migration, internal and external, even colonisation.

Such circumstances ensure that courtship, sexual experimentation and exploitation are a feature of the experience of servants, who are, both male and female, the most important source of illegitimate births: this makes the function of service in relating procreation to available resources a little less effective.

Definition, status and types of servants

Servants are persons of either sex, usually but not necessarily young persons, who are retained in households to take part in their activities, and to serve and support family members, especially the status and actions of household heads.

Though they become members of the households of their employers when they enter service, servants also remain members of the families of their parents, with obligations to them and expectations from them: it is uncertain how and on what basis they may send money home.

Servants have a right to their subsistence and in addition to their annual wages, if the employer has agreed to pay them, which may not be so with apprentices or with very young servants; they have a right to the use of common household property, but no access to the common household fund, no expectation of inheritance or other attributes of kin.

Masters or mistresses have complete control over the time and labour of servants, to chastise and discipline them in any way they choose; nevertheless the laws and conventions governing service provide safeguards for servants and their contractual status limits the actions of employers.

Since servants are regarded as included within the personalities of their masters or mistresses, they lack a degree of social and political independence and personalities of their own in society at large, their employers having to take responsibility for much of what they do.

Servants are found in households of all kinds and occupations and even labourers' households can have servants: there is no difference in their status or function between town and countryside: where the learning of a craft is important, which occurs more often in urban areas, servants are usually called apprentices, who pay a premium for their apprenticeship, serve for a specified period of years, often seven, frequently unwaged except for their keep and their clothes, and are unable to change households except by permission of outside authority, that is the magistrate or the craft guild of the occupation in question: changes of household are not uncommon among apprentices, however, and failing to serve the full apprenticeship is by no means unusual.

Servants can come from any status group in the population, even from the gentry when the employer is a great man, or when it is a question of apprenticeship to occupations of high status and profitability: there is some doubt whether the menial element in apprenticeship is compatible with gentlemanly status.

The only method of entry to most commercial and craft occupations is by apprenticeship, and besides the premium, which can be large, there may be conditions as to level of personal means, physical growth and even legitimacy of birth, especially in trades of high standing and income potential.

Though appreciable numbers of servants in the countryside as well as in the towns come from families on the same social level as their employers, most of them, and most servants generally, originate in poorer families; funds for paying apprenticeship premiums for needy children are a common form of charity, and apprenticeships to agriculture, usually of very modest people can occur.

Servants are normally currently unmarried, but can have been married, and if in superior positions in large households may even be currently married, their resident spouses being also superior servants: servants with spouses elsewhere, regular or common-law spouses, are sometimes found, and undercover cohabitation may very occasionally occur, especially cohabitation with other servants.

The expression life cycle servant is used to cover all those in the servant

category in England, and is appropriate since nearly all of them are in the stage between maturation and marriage; those few who never marry and stay in service are termed lifelong or lifetime servants.

At the end of any period of service, servants may leave service and return to the parental household, where they normally live between jobs or when unemployed: on quitting service finally most agrarian servants marry and set up households, either as freehold farmers if land is available to them, or as small tenant farmers (husbandmen) but most frequently as cottagers or as day labourers, i.e. workers who join the work group of a farm household for the day, but are in their own homes at night: solitary unmarried labourers are sometimes found.

On completing their terms of service, apprentices may marry and set up households as masters themselves, if they have the resources, or may become journeymen, married or unmarried; journeymen work during the day in the households of masters, where they have the status of servants in respect of the household head, as do day labourers in the same situation, though journeymen and labourers are paid wages for each day worked and are not usually tied to a household for any period of time: journeymen and labourers who are householders nevertheless enjoy personal independence when outside the employing household and are full citizens for most political purposes.

Servants are not necessarily all engaged in the occupation of the household head and his family, since general servants (domestic servants in later terminology) are found in craft households as well as elite households and agrarian households: servants of this type are usually women but women can be apprentices in some skilled occupations.

Servants can be hired out temporarily by their employers, who receive money for the work they do, and servants may live in an employer's house where neither the employer nor any member of his (or her) family is present; exceptionally and anomalously servants may even live and work on employers' business in dwellings away from the employer's household.

Slaves are included in the servant category, although the servile conditions which attach to slavery, that is being owned as chattels by their masters and being totally deprived of freedom and independence, cannot legally be enforced in Britain itself, only in British dependencies.

Although it is usually easy to distinguish servants from other persons, difficulties may arise in relation to lodgers, who are also attached to households and may work in them; the principal difference is that servants are paid to stay and lodgers pay rent to stay.

Lodgers and boarders whose accommodation on the premises where they work and whose subsistence may count as part of their wage ('trade assistants') do not conform to the definition of servants since they pay to stay: individuals or families living in separate dwellings on a farm, or an estate, or a 'place of business', are not servants even if they work wholly at the farm, craft or commercial undertaking: nevertheless distinctions between the service relationship and the lodging or boarding relationship are often hard to draw

because boarders and lodgers are sometimes referred to as members of the household, even of the family.

Servants are occasionally, in England very rarely, kin-related to the families in whose households they serve though apprenticeship to kinsfolk is more often seen; where a kin relationship does exist the use of the title servant or apprentice seems intended to underline the fact that the status of the individual concerned in the household is not that of resident kinsman or kinswoman: in spite of this fact servants often find their positions through their kin-network.

Although life cycle service and yearly engagements are the general rule, irregular engagements for shorter periods are quite common, and a few of those performing service functions do so for institutions, and so do not belong to the regular service system: these servants may however, sometimes be regarded as members of the households of the heads of the institution concerned.

By no means all housework is done by servants resident in households since a great deal is carried out by casual workers, often married women from poorer households: such persons are also outside the regularly instituted system of service.

Significance of service and the servant relationship in historical sociology

The servant relationship is an outstanding example of the universal disposition of the richer and more dominant to get the poorer and weaker into their power, and to use them instrumentally, even to subsume them as extensions to their personalities; reciprocally, those who become dominated or even owned show a disposition, especially when young, to accept and even to seek protection, support, instruction, patronage from the more powerful; the servant relationship is particularly conspicuous because it involves non-kin, and servants cannot often be usefully called surrogate kin.

In spite of what might seem to be its demeaning character, service can be a source of considerable satisfaction to the servant, by making it possible to identify with other individuals and enabling them to achieve things which would otherwise be out of the question and which can be of general significance and value — the servant relationship is generally a stable one, a reciprocity of support and protection on the one side and service and obedience on the other: nevertheless it is often irksome to the employer because of the loss of privacy and the tiresome responsibilities which it brings, and is always resented to some degree, sometimes deeply, by the servant because of the requirement to submit; this endemic friction manifests itself at times of social unrest, challenge or crisis, perpetually feared by employers, who nevertheless find the hostility of servants puzzling when it comes to the surface.

Service is an important link between the micro-social structure and the macro-social structure, between the family and the household and the communities, local, regional and national in which families and households are placed: this link is most apparent in the function of servants in the labour market.

Service demonstrates that familial relationships and contractual relationships

are by no means necessarily opposed, since the servant is both contractually and familistically related to the master, contractually because a period of service and its conditions are overtly or implicitly contracted for on both sides, the parents or even the friends of young servants often being party to the contract; servants are related familistically to their masters because they become household members for the period of service and are subject to the household regime.

The functions of servants in work groups and their behaviour in respect of procreation, approved and disapproved, illuminate both the productive and reproductive systems of traditional society.

Servants indicate the shortcomings of defining classes by economic function, since they can scarcely be called a class in the usual way, firstly because their description as servants is almost always a temporary one, lasting for a part of the life course only; secondly, because their relationship with their superiors is patriarchal and thirdly because their relationships with each other are effectively impeded by the boundaries of the separated households in which they live, and from which they are very seldom absent.

Servants also reveal the inappropriateness of supposing that capital accumulation and exploitation of labour were uncommon in traditional society, and demonstrate that these circumstances are not confined to capitalist employment.

Life cycle service is perhaps one of the definitive features of the social structure of the European West and Northwest, yet service is very widespread in other societies of the world, the form of the institution often being very different and its features variously accentuated in different societies and cultures; the critical variable in familially organised societies is the extent to which the social norms encourage or forbid the introduction of kinsfolk into the household to do menial and productive work.