Worlds Between

Historical Perspectives on Gender & Class

LEONORE DAVIDOFF
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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*Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*

Leonore Davidoff

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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’.

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 briddled their tongues so that 'the past is... often presented as idyllic – totally lacking in smells, urges and bodies'.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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. 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 quotidian function’. For example, recognition has come only haltingly that the body is, among other things, ‘a theoretical location for debates about power, ideology and economics.’

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.

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. 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.
Introduction

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’. 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 works 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).

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.

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.
Introduction

Looking back at this catalogue of hierarchical classification from the perspective of the 1990s, I am filled with wonder at how the dominance of gendered categories could have been overlooked for so long. The very derivation of the word, 'gender', its relation to 'gens' or orders, indicates its centrality to classification systems, particularly those stressing notions of difference. Certainly in Western tradition, gender has operated as a fundamental organizing category at the level of both social relations and the structure of personal identity. 18

Our world has been constructed along gender lines at all levels. Everyday language, images and expressions carry a tint of oppositional masculinity and femininity, but so too do scholarly models and analysis. How could this basic pattern, now laboriously being uncovered by feminists, have been hidden for so long? A simplified answer to such a complicated question must include the fact that gender categories have been built in terms of power relations, no matter how complicated and involuted these may be.

Women who have opposed accepted notions of feminine inferiority frequently find themselves being questioned simply because they assume a posture or manner of authority and competence which has been central to the construction of masculinity. 19 Part of the effort in these essays, then, is to expose the agency given to those with power. On the whole, it is they who have written the scores within which were produced our supposed harmonies of home and community – and even the occasional recognized discordancy (see chapter 2). Gendered ideas became themselves instruments of control over resources, people and things, and legitimated, in principle, the drawing of boundaries between people. Those in positions of control have had no reason to look behind generalized, given categories, designations so often based on covert masculine assumptions. They have had no motivation to seek out the supplementary, shadowy presences without which not only their working concepts but their whole cosmology as well as daily life-support systems would melt away.

In an effort to understand the domination of these definitions, British feminist historians in the 1970s and 1980s spoke of a nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity, while Americans emphasized a specifically women's culture from the same period which emerged from the growth of a 'separate sphere' of the home. The latter, it was then argued, had produced a consciousness leading eventually to feminist action. In both these traditions, contrary to the beliefs of some later critics, the investigation of women's constraints within domesticity, and their exercise of power and influence from within its confines, took into account not only prescriptive writing about women (and men), but institutions and the experiences of daily life, including the appropriation of women's physical, intellectual and emotional work. 20

There is still much ambiguity and confusion over how the central features of the sexual division of labour have changed over time. Specialists in every historical period from pre-antiquity onwards have tended to regard their epoch as the critical
period of transition. All are able to produce evidence of women being defined by identification with childbirth, childrearing, the hearth and the cooking pot. And yet we also know that there have been immense variations in the meaning and deployment of that identification, both over time and among contemporaneous groups. There is as yet – and may never be – no consensus about this issue. But for that matter neither has there been agreement about the related but often-ignored question of what elements are common and what variable in relation to men and masculinity.

Nevertheless, it is fair to ask if there was anything in the emphasis on motherhood and the home in the catalogue of nineteenth-century ‘domestic ideology’ to distinguish that particular culture from the role of affluent women down through the ages. In a recent critique of the models used in feminist history, Amanda Vickery has claimed that extra resources in a family or household always result in the removal of women from the rigours of income-earning and public life; from the seventeenth century onwards, she argues, there were just more families with the means to free their womenfolk from work in fields, workshops or as traders. ‘Domesticity’ is inherent in the fact of social mobility in all ages.21

A blanket assumption such as this begs all sorts of questions. For example, with an increase in wealth, why not release all members of the family, men and women alike, from productive work – as had been normal for the aristocracy and gentry? What was it about late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English culture which put such emphasis on the elaboration of the home, for men as well as women, and the special derogation of productive work for women at social levels well below aristocratic or gentry status? Why not continue to employ adult, married women in the productive enterprise and devote household chores and childcare to older children, servants, apprentices and the elderly as had been the pattern for centuries past?

In a period increasingly imbued with the ‘logic of capitalism’, would it not have been more rational to make use of the labour of such adult women in commercial and professional roles, rather than keeping them financially dependent, sometimes at considerable cost to the family and its enterprise, whether farm, shop, factory or professional office? Why was it that forms of business during this period were constructed precisely to maintain a bulwark between productive activity for men and domestic lives for women in such creations as the trust, the annuity, life insurance and, eventually, limited liability, which broke the connection between home and enterprise? Why were the categories employed in the invention of early nineteenth-century statistics framed along gendered lines so evident in instruments of state and social policy such as the censuses of population and occupations?22 Contrary to such logic, however, in the nineteenth century, gender distinctions were rigidified at all levels from the individual psyche to the national economy while the ‘Home’ as the natural place for women was reified and naturalized.

While it is important to recognize the actual historical presence of many women in the workforce – their involvement in property and money markets as well as the
labour market – upon which such critiques of the models rest, these basic formulations remain as forceful social and historical templates to this day. Of course most women were not quiescent angels in the house; they could be as aggressive, as manipulative, as clever, as any man. The qualities necessary to maintain a household with a very small, often irregular, income such as that of the lower-middle-class or respectable working-class housewife, already belie the Victorian stereotype, not to mention the strength of mind, body and spirit of the women which meant survival to the poor.  

But even among the wealthy dowagers of Mayfair, as well as their lesser provincial imitators, all of whom acted as social-boundary keepers *par excellence*, the home, as the basis of the more formal nineteenth-century ‘Society’ functions, could resemble less a haven than the headquarters of a military campaign. Here strategies of acceptance and rejection were planned and launched, rival enemies sighted and routed, a literary or musical lion captured as a drawing card to evening entertainment. The battlegrounds in such campaigns may have been drawing- and dining-rooms, the weapons marshalled may have been troops of servants and dependants, ball gowns, hairdressers, the beauty of a daughter, the net worth of a husband, the planning of an exquisite meal, but the motivation to join in the conflict was clearly present. The view from behind the lace curtain, social regulation via gossip over teacups, over the backyard fence or in the street doorway – the making and breaking of financial as well as marital reputations took place at many social levels.

The essays presented here conclude that there were new elements in this sub-stratum, that domesticity as a concept as well as the home as an actual space were coined and elaborated beyond recognition on a much wider scale and further down the social hierarchy than ever before, in the countryside as well as in towns. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century it became a central part of the new morality propagated by the Evangelical movements within both the Established and Nonconformist churches; it gave a novel twist to the relationship of men to masculinity as well as women to femininity, to desires, to sexuality, to reproduction as well as to work and production. In its various forms it was critical to the bid for political and social inclusion and leadership made by a variety of groups among the middle, and later, the lower strata of English society.

Doctrines of domesticity were a counterpart to what was seen as the growing incursions of the cash nexus and scientific rationality. From the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the decline of patronage, informal contact across class lines and service gave way to the individualistic employer—workman (sic) contract. At the same time, notions of domesticity stressed both duty and a chivalric masculinity encapsulated in men’s role as breadwinners. For women, the emotional as well as material attraction in such promises should not be underestimated.

The need for support was emphasized at a time when up to 85–90 per cent of women’s lives between their mid-twenties and early forties could be spent in pregnancy and breast-feeding, not to speak of rearing the large numbers of children per family. But the benefits of financial and social maintenance could so easily be
undermined by the inability or unwillingness of fathers, brothers or husbands to provide. Women had no real legal or economic sanctions to enforce support for themselves and their children within the secondary status of marriage or adult spinsterhood. Much of the nineteenth-century emphasis on women's 'influence' can be interpreted as just as much a sop to their lack of actual power as it can be seen as a backlash against women's real gains in public opportunities as has been claimed.

It is these issues of independence, dependence, power and subordination that chapters 1 to 7 address. They were prompted by questions which reach into every level of the human condition, from the formation of unconscious desires and fantasies of power and submission laid down in childhood, to the creation and maintenance of economic and political institutions such as markets, forms of housing, workshops, offices and factories, scientific and political societies, universities, lodging houses – the list is endless. To explore such a range even within the relatively narrow time-band of the long nineteenth century (the 1780s to the First World War), has meant making use of every kind of material – from fiction to demographic statistics. It has meant crossing disciplinary boundaries and borrowing methods, not just from history and sociology, but also anthropology, literary studies, historical geography, architecture, psychology, economics and political theory.

Despite the tendency, which I share, for historians to dive for the haven of the detailed archives, it is historians who are, in many ways, uniquely suited to such a generalized and holistic approach. If nothing else, the widespread use of personal testimonies, oral histories, memoirs, diaries and autobiographies has alerted historians to the way lives cross conceptual categories and muddle theoretical models.

It was with this understanding that in the 1980s, together with Catherine Hall, I undertook a detailed study of the provincial middle class, both rural and urban (see chapter 6). It is in detailed historical examples such as this that the links between categories will be discerned in all the richness of individual lives, in local as well as national organizations. The effort to conceive gender – or class or race – as an abstract logical grid without a notion of historical process is doomed for the categories are only worked out during that process and are emergent in social practices.

Undoubtedly, there is a difficult balance to be achieved: a context so specific that the findings might not bear on any other case must be countered by linking individual studies to wider conceptual issues. An example would be the apparently similar patterns of violence perpetrated against children, servants and slaves by their elders, masters and owners and which can be seen as similar in many ways to that turned against wives by their husbands (see chapter 1). But such formulations, although of heuristic value in making us think about the constituents of power, are too broad. The extent of the status differential between superiors and inferiors is governed by legal, economic and customary factors which vary. So too
do the construction of the superior/inferior categories themselves; for example gender, age, race, class are not of the same order (see chapter 8). And all of these factors are subject to change over time.  

It was in trying to bridge the particulars of the historical material with received concepts of hierarchy, knowledge and institutional practice that I became increasingly aware that existing models of social analysis were no longer sufficient. The words and actions of historical actors constantly broke the bonds and slipped through the meshes of all existing prototypes. As my work on domestic service, innkeeping and lodging houses had demonstrated, quasi-familial relationships oozed across unquestioned assumptions about family, home and workplace (see chapter 5). Notions of kinship pervaded the business enterprise. The family home – moral refuge and temple of beauty – also had to be run on strictly business lines. The ‘rationality’ of science, which by the end of the nineteenth century was replacing a theological world-view, contained a particularly masculine core, exacerbating fears about a displaced moral order so that the ends of creating family life and running a home became ever more sacred, while the means remained ambiguously utilitarian (see chapter 3).

Concurrent with that period of my detailed research into the early nineteenth-century English middle class, postmodern and deconstructionist ideas, especially those initiated by feminists, had begun to tug at the edges of even the most basic traditional conceptual boundaries. Their radical contestation of foundations exposed the exclusion of certain voices, arguing that such narrowing was precisely the precondition making possible an agreed political and intellectual agenda accompanying the notion of agency.

The concreteness and separation of each bounded unit such as ‘the economic system’, or ‘the kinship system’ was being queried from several directions. Historians and sociologists, for example, found familial models being practised within the business enterprise through the nineteenth and into the late twentieth centuries, not just in small family shops and on farms but also within the heartland of large companies.

In sum, and especially when it comes to issues relating to reproduction of individuals and groups, we have begun to realize that it is classification systems themselves which determine what will be understood as ‘significant relationships’. This has become evident, for example, in the contemporary social and political controversy over the role and responsibilities of familial relationships in the 1990s. While the discussion has focused almost exclusively on mothers with a nod in the direction of fathers, in historical (and contemporary?) fact, children’s lives were moulded by a spectrum of relationships: with siblings, aunts and uncles, servants, lodgers, apprentices, neighbours, teachers, state officials, friends.

This radical questioning of the primary assumptions of social analysis has brought back on to the agenda issues about what is common to the human condition. The peculiarly long infancy of human beings, their physical, emotional and psychic reliance upon caretakers, and the rocky road to a separate identity, seems to
promote special anxieties around issues of autonomy and dependence. Undoubtedly English society, like most Western societies, has for many centuries placed special emphasis on the value of self-determination. But social life is more complicated than any free-floating independent individual. It is made up of a constant reworking and re-experiencing of the paradox of the recognition of others in which similar yet different beings encounter the agency of the self and the other. Furthermore, recognition implies a first step towards the possibility of dependence on others. It is in this way that identity, the very stuff of the self is created, whether the ‘other’ is a sibling, a neighbour or a distant colonial subject.

This Western emphasis on personal autonomy and a separate notion of self seems to have buttressed a certain type of masculinity; the ability to control one’s own destiny betokened manhood. Subjugation to the will of another had the potential to ‘emasculate’, to make men effeminate. Yet innumerable other societies also seem to equate manhood with control of the feminine and fear of mastery by women, whether women’s power be expressed through their putatively natural ability to excite men’s desires or their bid for positions customarily seen as men’s preserves. These fears often peak around women’s claims for access to the sacred, whether theological or scientific. A woman in authority may represent (to both men and women) a relapse into submission to the mother – the terrifying combination of physical, emotional and spiritual totality echoed by submission to a priestly office.

Conversely, the essence of Western femininity has been defined as dependence and service, the obliterating of the self, combined with the enabling of a higher, dominant, and masculine authority. The equation of effeminacy and submission is often despised, yet it fascinates too. It has been applied to males of ‘inferior’ cultures as well as to women, graphically illustrated once again by the archetype of the domestic servant, both in Britain and in the vast numbers found serving as batmen in the armed services, colonial ‘native boys’, shading into indentured labourers and concubines in the Empire abroad.

The experiences of the Second World War saw the virtual ending of residential domestic service. Even affluent women had to assume some of these service functions. The declining number of children born to each family which had reduced the need for servants was also accompanied by the demise of the older sister, the helpful aunty, the obliging landlady, as the empirical essays investigate. It is possible that some of the impetus for the modern Women’s Movement was fuelled by the servantless young middle-class housewife of the late 1960s and early 1970s confronted with taking on not just the increase in physical tasks of food preparation, washing dishes and clothes and round-the-clock care of small children, but the additional unrelenting dependence of all family members on her for emotional attendance, to the detriment of her own interests and identity. Since selflessness still made up at least part of feminine identity whilst the material, social and psychic benefits of marriage and motherhood, at least under ideal circumstances, could be
considerable, it has been exceptionally demanding to make manifest the tensions generated by this situation.

These excursions into a range of relationships of hierarchy, dependency and power have raised critical general issues about what is constant and what variable in human societies. In fact, it is becoming evident that we need modes of analysis as well as description which encompass both, for, while time inexorably moves forward and one truly cannot step into the same river twice, timeless principles may still regulate parts – and lead to useful abstractions. In particular, the essential frailty and ultimate mortality of all human beings and the resulting need for societies and social groups to constantly renew themselves demands cooperation. Only an understanding of both commonalities and historical variation can signpost that cooperation.

To come to grips with such complexity as well as with inevitable indeterminacy, the traditional codes and models, based on one-sided perspectives of the powerful (and those who fear the powerless) are no longer sufficient. Chapter 8 seeks to go behind as well as beyond those accepted models – of work and home, abstract and embodied, masculine and feminine, public and private. This essay is a more sustained attempt to confront, at a conceptual level, the issues raised by a long experience of empirical and grounded historical research. In so doing it reaches for a position which would subvert binary modes of thinking ‘by seeking the intermediary spaces where boundaries become effaced and Manichean categories collapse into each other’.

Such a re-evaluation, coming from a social and cultural historian and joining with other feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines, is attempted here only as a beginning. But it is a necessary first step in ‘not only critically assessing questions of general interest but also commanding a general interest in our own questions’, called for by the medievalist Judith Bennett. If nothing else, this foray into the concepts behind interpretations of the recent past confirms that historians as well as all practitioners of the human sciences have hitherto depended on the notion of a gendered (masculine) individual.

Yet far from being marginal or even external to the real business of society, or the focus of historical action, it can be argued that what men are and what men do is at least partially built on conceptions of the female – her body, mind, role and spirit. Women constantly invade men’s imagination as muses, fairies, witches, erotic and demonic creatures, while at the same time they are vital human workers and agents in men’s lives. Gender always operates in the relationship of one category to the other.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century changes built on already deeply held structural and symbolic relationships of men and women. But so also, our own situation, our own time is a palimpsest of past lives and past times. We cannot begin to reveal present problems without a consciousness of those lives and times.
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But that consciousness must include everyone’s past, humble as well as mighty, colonized as well as colonizer, children as well as adults, women as well as men.

The ultimate aim of social analysis surely must be, to paraphrase C. Wright Mills, that all people might become aware of historical structures and of their own place within them.41 Such a call must be based on a genuine recognition of those whose place up to now has been in the silence and shadows of the non-social, a designation which history has tragically taught may lead all too easily into the darkness of the non-human.42 But if that recognition is forthcoming, it might possibly lead to sorely needed visions of renewal and reconstruction.

Notes


5 For an early attempt at conceptualizing these problems see Leonore Davidoff, ‘Power as an “Essentially Contested Concept”: Can it Be of Use to Feminist Historians?’, unpublished paper, Conference on ‘Women and Power’, University of Maryland, 1977.


7 At that time (and even now not completely routed) there was a tendency to regard the realm of work and technology as the real (material) basis of society while gender (read women) was part of a symbolic superstructure. This is clear even among non-Marxists such as Talcott Parsons with his division between ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ values as institutional as well as personal characteristics. See in particular Talcott Parsons, ‘The Family in America’, in *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Free Press, New York, 1964). For a critique of this position see David H.J. Morgan, *The Family, Politics and Social Theory* (Routledge, London, 2nd edn, 1985).


10 In the hierarchy of domestic service it was often the youngest (and overwhelmingly female) servants who did the heaviest work. With the assistance of the Castle Museum, York, I estimated that a full hod of coal weighed around 30 lb as did an average jug of bath water. Before the 1850s, perambulators were unknown and nursemaids or servant-girls had to carry young children in their arms often for hours at a time. The average eighteen-month-old middle-class child of the 1880s weighed 26 lb. See Leonore Davidoff and Ruth Hawthorn, *A Day in the Life of a Victorian Domestic Servant* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1976), p. 78.


12 See Cornelius Casteriadis, ‘The Imaginary Institution of Society’, in John Fekete, ed., *The Structural Allegory – Reconstructive Encounter with the New French Thought* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984). This term has been used here in preference to ‘ideology’ which was current at the time many of the essays were written. ‘Ideology’ has proved to be a confusing concept, used both instrumentally and prescriptively, its double character making it difficult for historians to work with. It is also frequently taken to be a set, or system, of beliefs and institutions/practices which conveys the impression of something that is internally organized, coherent and complete. Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988), p. 3.


17 In the last few years the gendering of space has attracted considerable attention. For an excellent example see Sarah Deutsch ‘Women, Space and Power in Boston 1870–1910’, *Gender and History*, vol 6, no. 2 (1994).


22 Edward Higgs, personal communication.
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25 Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres?’

26 This has been published as Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850 (Routledge, London, 1994).


31 For one of the most perceptive of these efforts see David M. Schneider, A Critique of the Study of Kinship (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1984), p. 181. Such re-evaluation is taking place in all disciplines, not just the humanities and social sciences. Not only new knowledge but a fundamental paradigm shift has contributed to this liberating but potentially frightening stance. Even the mind itself is no longer seen as a simple system but a diverse, divergent organism which has evolved in ‘an almost impossibly complicated way’, raising contradictions which come with being human. See Robert Ornstein, Multimind (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1986), pp. 176 and 179.

32 See, for the nineteenth century, Patrick Joyce, Work, Society and Politics (Methuen, London, 1982); and, for the twentieth, Michael Roper, Masculinity and the British Organization Man since 1945 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994).


34 There is genuine uncertainty about the origins and strengths of the drive towards separation or autonomy and its implications for human identity. Nevertheless, a transexual examination of some basic commonalities is a way of viewing human nature ‘without relapsing into reactionary biologisms such as sociobiology, or Freud’s theory of instinctual agression’. See Joel Kovel, ‘Cryptic Notes on Revolution and the Spirit’, in The Radical Spirit: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society (Free Association Books, London, 1988), p. 328.


37 ‘If it is impossible to think in the Western logo-centred traditions without binary oppositions, then the task of feminist reading [and I would add writing], becomes the articulation not of a new set of categories but of the transcendence of categorical discourse altogether. One searches not for a new language but for a discourse at the

38 This strategy has been called métissage by Françoise Lionnet in Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1989), p. 18. The acceptance of its inherent indeterminacy was clearly set out in the pathbreaking article by Sandra Harding, ‘The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory’, in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. vol. 11, no. 4 (summer 1986).


41 Quoted in Phillip Abrams, Historical Sociology (Open Books, Shepton Mallet, Somerset, 1982), p. 17. Note that Mill’s original and as quoted by Abrams says ‘all men’ (sic).

42 The use of social in this sense is more abstract and more central than the historically specific creation of an area which came to be designated as ‘social’ in the late nineteenth century, as distinguished from either the economic or political. This specific development is discussed by Denise Riley, Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History (Macmillan, London, 1988); and in greater detail in Jane Lewis, Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1991).