Distant Companions

Hansen, Karen Tranberg

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Introduction: The Problem and Its Context

Maids are the thing to have, according to a journalist commenting on the unexpected response to the "Win a Maid" contest launched in January 1986 by Family Circle, an American magazine with a huge readership among mainstream women. When the magazine editor in charge of the contest returned after a two-week vacation, her office was filled with boxes and bags of mail entries to the contest. At the end of March 1986, a weekend magazine accompanying one of Chicago's Sunday papers featured a sweepstakes contest sponsored by a company specializing in household cleaning aids; it offered free maid service once a week for a year as the grand prize. Illustrating the contest rules was a photograph of the face of a woman in a maid's uniform, with lace cap and collar and a willing smile, along with cleaning aids, mop, and broom. It is in such notices, as well as in the growing number of classified newspaper advertisements placed by women willing to hire out their labor for household work as housekeepers, cleaners, cooks, and childminders, or combinations of these, that the late-twentieth-century face of domestic labor is to be found.
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service in America comes clearly into focus. These observations are intended to
question the long-held sociological assumption that paid household
3. This statement is based on my observation of the classified columns of “household help,
work” and “situations wanted” in the Chicago Tribune from January 1986 through May
1987.

A good place to start exploring these questions is Zambia, a developing
country in the southern part of the African continent, the geographical
locus for this work. If the contests described above strike a nerve among
American women, so they would in Zambia, which has only in recent years
emerged from its former colonial status. The great majority of servants in
the past were men as they are today, although women have entered this
occupation, particularly as nannies, in growing numbers since indepen-
dence. Domestic service is not “naturally” women’s work everywhere, and
certainly not in Zambia. There, the question of servants is of crucial con-
cern to madams (as female employers of servants invariably are called in
southern Africa), for many of the same reasons—and for some different
ones—as in the United states.

service as a segment of the wage labor force prompts additional questions
concerning its predicted decline in the course of the industrialization pro-
toces. Taken together, these two sets of observations invite us to reconsider
the comparative dynamics of paid household work, its relations to wider
economic processes and their shifts both at home and abroad; its changing
faces, that is, different labor forms such as live-in and day work; the nature
of the work done in private households; gender differences in the labor
process; and of the consequences of all of these factors for the private lives
of servants and their employers.

During the colonial period in what was then known as Northern Rhod-
desia and also since 1964 in independent Zambia, servants were and are a
vastly more social and economic position, yet their white employers
considered them problematic and their chiefly Zambian employers today
still do so. The colonial period’s unequal master-servant relationship used
to distance domestics from employers. The lack of postcolonial eco-
nomic development in Zambia has accentuated the opportunity gap be-
tween servants and employers. A changed relationship of distance has
emerged in domestic service in which the colonial era’s racial distinctions
have been replaced by class-based ones. In comparison, during the expan-
sion of the United States’ economy in the early decades of this century,
white female immigrant live-in domestics found better jobs and left the
occupation to minority, especially black, women and, lately, to new female
immigrants of Third World origin who now largely do day work.

More recent economic transitions and the growing need for labor to have

dual wage earners have increased the need for domestic help, which is proliferating in many forms—live-in, day work, and commercial contractual. These changed economic developments are creating a new class of domestic workers in the United States whose relationship to employers is characterized by inequality. While the evolving story of domestic service in Zambia provides an important study in its own right, it offers a comparative case that casts critical light on our own situation. Rapidly changing economies, the different, and changing, roles of men and women in paid and unpaid household work, and a growing class gap between poverty and wealth come into play in both Zambia and the United States in the mid-1980s. This situation was not anticipated by conventional sociological wisdom and it requires new thinking.

In this book I describe and analyze continuities and changes in domestic service in Zambia from 1900 to 1985 by a retrospective examination of how the world of domestic servitude was created, maintained, sometimes changed, and at times resisted as a result of the interaction between servants and their employers, both men and women. I also seek to capture how that changing world was experienced in the everyday lives of servants and employers, how their relationships with members of their own households and others in the wider society shaped this peculiar world of work, and how the world beyond the household as a work locus at times was affected by servants' activities. Good household management revolved around strictly upheld distinctions between the servant and the employer, and it also turned on sexual criteria. Human-made distinctions, construed as essential difference in culture, race, class, and sex, turned the servant's personhood in otherness, and the changing construction of difference is a central concern throughout this book.

Why write a book about an occupational domain that according to conventional sociological wisdom has been considered to be obsolete in contemporary society? That belief was based on a limited number of studies, conducted mainly in northwestern Europe and North America, which described changes in domestic service as involving a transition from male to female by the end of the 1700s, and its remaining women’s main source of urban wage income till the second or third decade of the present century, when wage-labor opportunities opened up in new fields. In the wake of

that process the time-honored species of the genus servant, the live-in domestic, supposedly disappeared. Extrapolations from this pattern of near certainty were extended to the developing world with the suggestion that a similar process would occur there.\(^6\)

This thinking has died hard for a number of reasons. One has to do with the lack of serious scholarly attention given to this occupation in the West and elsewhere. An occupational domain that for two centuries or more had been the single largest wage employment avenue for women remained largely ignored. In the scholarship on the developing countries, the working lives of domestic servants were barely explored, in spite of the fact that paid domestic service often provided one of the earliest means to incorporate subject peoples into a newly created world of wage labor. Miners, harbor workers, and traders in the markets were perhaps more conspicuous, and certainly more often targets for study.\(^7\)

Another reason concerns the unilinear assumptions of modernization theory that have influenced our thinking about development. They center around ideas of convergence of the economic development path in the industrial world and newly industrializing countries. Modernization theory has not held up well in the face of the actual development experiences in most parts of the Third World. And advanced capitalism at home has not been accompanied by the expected promethean industrial expansion. Rather, the old manufacturing structures are crumbling as the West is undergoing partial deindustrialization and transnational corporations locate manufacturing plants in Third World countries, in an overall process that is shaping a new international division of labor.\(^8\) In the course of this transformation process, the composition of the Western wage labor force is changing, not only by sector, but also by sex. The manufacturing sector is shrinking while employment in service industries and service-oriented work is on the rise. The opportunity gap is widening. Today in the United States women of better and worse means are meeting in contractual employment relationships centered on household and child care which are recasting the live-in domestic service relationship of a previous era into new labor forms.

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Far from having disappeared, one labor form of domestic service, namely day work, undertaken by workers who live out, appears to be growing. Economic opportunities among all population segments in that country are linked subordinately to developments in the West. While Zambia is not hosting any global industry for assembly of Western manufactured parts for export to the West, it is intimately linked to world market ups and downs through exports of its chief source of revenue, copper. Aside from mining, there is little local industry or manufacture, and what little there is depends heavily on imported raw materials. When the downturn in the world economy of the early 1970s hit Zambia, the economy stagnated and overall employment declined. Yet within this decline, the domestic service sector and the governmental sector have maintained its growth. Rapid urbanization, one of the highest rates in Africa, if not the Third World, daily adds new potential workers to a labor force of whom fewer and fewer find wage work. The opportunity structure has become markedly skewed and the gap between poor and rich is widening. With it, new distinctions are being forged between fellow citizens as more and more black Zambians go to work as servants for black Zambian employers. As a result of the postcolonial indigenization of the economy, more Zambians than ever before work in middle- and upper-level positions in government, parastatal companies, and in the few remaining private firms. Clerking, teaching, and nursing jobs are held increasingly by Zambian women. These household servants account for the growth since independence in 1964 of the servant-employing class. Thus, the new egalitarianism, and the remaining aloofness of white or Asian background all-white servants, women in Zambia want household help. Not maids, but male servants, for their preferred servant is a man. They have few positive remarks to make about women servants, who are relatively recent entrants to this particular segment of the labor force. Today, paid domestic service is not gender-typed as women's work everywhere, nor was it so historically. The Zambian case allows me to question the application of a biological metaphor in accounts of the social relations in domestic service which stress the occupation's function as a "natural" extension of women's reproductive role. Gender roles are not given; they are made. Their construction depends on a complex interweaving of cultural factors and social practices with economic forces and questions of power, and their unraveling is central to this book.

I set about the task of describing the empirical processes that affect servants and their employers by approaching domestic service at several different, sometimes overlapping, levels of analysis, linking cultural, demographic, and labor market factors over time. I seek to incorporate a sense of history, and I aim throughout to capture how servants and their employers experienced their unequal companionship in a changing world in a way that brings life to their world. My concerns are with changes in the nature of the servant-employer relationship, with special attention to differences in the labor process depending on whether the servant is a woman or a man, with changes in the type of work that is carried out in private households, with the effects that the work of a domestic has on the servant’s own household and off-the-job activities, and the ways in which such social practices in turn affect the job situation, with the structure of the labor force in domestic service, over time and in relation to overall employment patterns, and by sex. I am also concerned with the changing relationships among domestic servants, and between them and other workers—that is to say, with the questions of whether or not—and, if so, when—they constitute a class in terms of objective indicators as well as of felt identity of interests. The final issue I explore concerns the broader dynamics in paid household work between a developing country like Zambia and a Western country, such as the United States. In that effort, I seek to bring my findings from Zambia to bear on developments closer to home, and ultimately on the task of throwing light on the place of paid household work in the changing economic context of advanced capitalism.

The Problem of Domestic Service

But why domestic service? What’s the study for, anyway, as some of the people I interviewed asked when I approached them in Lusaka, Zambia’s capital, between 1983 and 1985. There is more to this than culture, demography, and labor market factors in Zambia, although these factors all bear upon it in complex ways. I wish to stress that the at times fascinating, yet mostly depressing, story of domestic service in Zambia speaks to larger issues. As I hinted at before, some of these issues concern inequalities in opportunity and income—in short, class—which prompted the creation of and fuels today’s reproduction of a dependent, subordinate labor form—paid domestic service—in various disguises across time and space. Its continued existence is not to be understood as an archaic remnant of the early phases of capitalist development. Vast present-day income gaps coupled with distinctive consumption styles are central to the reproduction of domestic service, which in turn plays a focal role in reproducing these distinctions. Because of this double centrality, domestic service is a key
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occupational domain to study for purposes of clarifying the mediation of poverty and wealth which takes place in the encounter across the private household's class chasm beyond the factory gates and the office, and is so intimately linked to developments in these institutions.

The comments just made may read as if the larger issues in this study are revealed merely by attributing an economic function to domestic service: it reproduces class privilege. Such an explanation might perhaps work, if made on the basis of aggregate statistical data and national input-output statistics. But it would tell us little about the making of this particular labor form. Nor would it tell us how the relation sometimes was resisted, at times changed if not transformed, yet reproduced over time into one or several simultaneously existing forms of paid domestic labor. And the explanation would leave out completely any understanding of this occupational domain as a created world of labor, a product of the lived and changing experiences of women and men, servants and employers, as well as other members of the society of which they are all part.

The larger issues of this book, then, revolve around inequality, and specifically what it has meant and how it has been experienced in the relationship between men and women servants and their employers from different generations and of various cultural, national, or ethnic backgrounds, from about the turn of the century through the mid-1980s in Zambia. Inequality is at the core of their relationship. It is the basis that structures the labor process and informs the asymmetrical encounters between the chief actors in domestic service—servants and employers—whose created places are construed as belonging to distinctly different worlds. Domestic service, I claim, at least in the live-in version I set out to trace retrospectively in Zambia, and perhaps as well under conditions of day work, can only operate smoothly in situations where servants and employers are considered different from each other. These differences are constructed and informed by essentialist notions of race, culture, sexuality and class. Highlighted differentially, but not incidentally, across time and space, these differences mask, at least temporarily, the co-presence and participation of servant and employer in a shared world.

This paradox of conspicuous presence and social invisibility first struck me when I stayed with Danish relatives in Nairobi before traveling up-country in my first stint of fieldwork as an undergraduate in 1969. I grew up in a society permeated by egalitarian values and in a home free of any gender- and aged-based hierarchy. My father died when I was five years old, and my mother, then forty-eight, went back to work to support her household of three girls and one boy aged between five and seventeen. There was never any question of women not doing things on their own, for we had to. Our participation and initiatives were counted on, and our presence acknowledged. And there were no authoritative restrictions placed to
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limit our ambitions. My reaction in Nairobi was one of distinct dislike of what I experienced as the awkward presence of the paid hand who was regarded more as a thing than a person. This experience repeated itself in 1971 when I began my first of several research periods in Zambia, whenever I shared a servant-keeping household. Although my research over the years has taken me into Lusaka’s low-income areas, where I have tried to clarify the forces that influence women’s work in the home, yard, market, and city, I remain puzzled and troubled by the deeply sedimented weight of domestic service, which it seems to me most people in Zambia take for granted.

As an anthropologist socialized in a nonhierarchical setting who has had to study about different societies and social structures around the world, I have been made to understand that some societies are structured by ideologies of inequality which place distinct groups of people in asymmetrical relationships of domination and subalternation. India, for me, is often referred to as a society in which people accept inequalities, rather than question it. With the anthropologist’s conventional stance of cultural relativism, I ought perhaps to have viewed servant-employer relationships in Zambia from that perspective. Given the two sides’ interdependence, here was a relationship that, in the language of cultural relativism, could be seen as benefiting all. Yet my problem, and the problematic and troublesome persistence of domestic service, was not an archaic or paternal one. Old habits of domestic service had not been broken, servants had not acquired many marketable skills from life-long work in private households, nor had they been able to create new ones. The problem in nonacademic terms was that the relationship in practice made exploitation almost inevitable. The colonial era’s authoritarian tradition of white men’s mastery over subject races who lived and worked in fear of coercive rules and regulations had not so much disappeared as been transformed, into a kind of servitude that both servants and their employers find troublesome and would rather not be part of, were the economic situation different. To understand this, cultural relativism is of no use.

The Making of Difference

My choice of terms in the preceding discussion implies certain conceptual and theoretical assumptions. I am influenced by the recent rapprochement between history and some branches of anthropology and the other social sciences. This influence is reflected in my concern to explore and

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explain the dynamics of change within domestic service as well as to ac-
count for the causal relationship between shifts in domestic service and
changes of more macrolevel forces. I do so in a processual sense, recogniz-
ing that although societal structures and their development in many ways
remain and limit local-level activity, individuals are more than cogs in
wheels. They are human social actors who are aware of the constraints on
their activity and who through conscious interaction and goal-directed ac-
tivity are centrally involved both in making the world of which they are
part and in changing it. Given this orientation, I seek to attribute to
servants a sense of life and agency and to highlight their role in some of the
far-ranging changes that have affected and are transforming their society.
And, I suggest that the lack of attention historians and anthropologists have
paid to this particular social and economic domain in part reflects the limits
of explanatory frames that ignore the individual as a human agent. In more
ways than one, the previous generation’s scholarly community reacted like
most employers of servants: they took them for granted.

The attitude of taking servants for granted touches a central nerve in the
making of difference. The unequal relationship across the private house-
hold’s class divide is maintained through practical arrangements that create
distance between the chief actors. Unequal distribution of economic means
differential access to power undermine the relationship whose tenuous
balance is threatened once personality and affect become implicated in
day-to-day interaction. The conceptual and theoretical problem at stake
here is the making of difference, conceived in a manner that has impli-
cations quite unlike the we/them distinctions often drawn in the books on race
relations a generation or so ago. The basis of this distinction was taken for
granted and the questions that were asked concerned the functional
ramifications of race relations in society.

The construction of difference has been an object of recent literary work,
whose observations from which I wish to adopt in this study. Edward Said’s
work of literary criticism, Orientalism, describes the creation of the Orient
and Orientalism as a European invention. Disregarding local social and
cultural complexity, a notion of Orientalism emerged in literature which
had less to do with the real Orient and its peoples as free subjects of
the historical work of Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, the sociological work of Anthony
Giddens, and the anthropological work of Pierre Bourdieu. For a discussion of this trend, see
the contributions to “Anthropology and History in the 1980s,”
[742x156]Journal of Interdisciplinary
History 12

12. This, of course, was the important message of E. P. Thompson’s
The Making of the
English Working Class

13. See, for example, Peter I. Rose,
They and We: Racial and Ethnic Relations in the
United States

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thought and action than with the idea of Europe as superior compared with all non-European peoples and cultures. Said discussed and analyzed Orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient." For its strategy, Orientalism manufactures new differences out of what is a manifestly different, or alternative and novel, world. In this, it makes use of a sense of "positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." In Africa, at least till fairly recently, Europeans saw blacks as fit only for domination. They viewed blacks through a lens of contrasts and were struck by how different Africans were from themselves; in terms of skin color certainly, by not being Christian, and because of social and political arrangements very unlike those in Europe, worse still, they lived on vast, unexplored, wild lands they did little to harness for productive purposes. Many elements of these early views remained embedded in the discourse that, at the level of officialdom as well as in private households, came to structure the relationship between whites in dominant positions and their black subjects throughout the colonial period—although the relative emphasis on each element did shift over time, and might perhaps vary, depending on who did the colonizing.

My excursion into the realm of literary discourse is not a detour; it strikes at the core question of how difference becomes structured, and why it takes its particular shape. For it is not only literary writers or professional anthropologists, who view the other as different and removed from the self in space and time. Ordinary people do so; the colonialists did it, as did the servants in Northern Rhodesia, servants and their employers in post-colonial Zambia continue to do so as we ourselves do in the West, construing difference and otherness in such class or classlike terms as subculture, culture of poverty, and underclass, to mention just a few of recent prominence in the United States. Regardless of progress in society, 

15. Ibid., p. 3.
16. Ibid., p. 7.
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unequal gender relations continue too often to be accounted for in terms of difference, that is, essentialist sexual notions. But difference or otherwise is a multifaceted phenomenon. When implicated in creating the boundary between the black servant and his white employer within the colonial household in Zambia, difference stood for the complex interaction of race and other which then consisted exclusions. When servants made trouble and employers complained about their unpredictable behavior, they would refer to their servants' strange customs and tribal mores. Under the thin surface of acquired household mores always lurked the essential African, that is, the primitive. When it came to women servants, trouble was attributed to immorality and promiscuity, that is, essential sexuality. Today's servants continue to make life difficult for their employers. Their Zambian bosses see servants as members of another class whose needs and problems are quite unlike their own and whom they therefore can treat differently. Regarding their problems with women servants, employers are still less neutral in identifying the difference that matters: sexuality. For women are said to be less tractable than menservants because of their struggle either to get rid of or to find a husband and/or lover. Domestic service in Zambia was, and still is, structured around the making and remaking of differences.

The Power of Difference

In order to relate issues of class and power to the construction of difference I need to draw on additional explanatory insights and situate what looks like an island unto itself—the private household with its purposefully interacting agents—within the wider society of which it is a part, so that activity at each level may be understood to have bearing on the other. Domestic service is not quite a total institution in Erving Goffman's terms. It is an open-door institution from which inmates have several exits, which have varied over time and differed to some degree, depending on the political, economic, and cultural setup of the surrounding society. These open doors all influence what goes on in the household between servant and employer, but differentially so. The difference results from the participants' unequal power, which enables the employer to issue commands more often than the servant can choose not to obey. Said's notion of positional superiority is relevant here, as is the version of power formulated by Anthony Giddens.22


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Many of Giddens's concerns—the conscious actor, intentional activity and its central role in the reproduction and change of society—are shared by others. Fredrik Barth, for example, has discussed how intentionality leads to institutionalization, and Pierre Bourdieu how practice becomes habitus. These concepts, however, neither analyze the effects of time nor do they explain how power becomes an element of action. Michel Foucault sees modalities of power everywhere, but in an evocative rather than analytical way. But Giddens's framework does more than invoke such notions: it provides a way of analyzing them.

In his attempt to incorporate the relationship between human agency and structure into social theory, Giddens develops the notion of structuration. The informal rules people devise in their day-to-day conduct are in his framework thought of as social practices that constitute the structuring properties implicated in the reproduction of social institutions. These structuring properties are both the media and the outcome of interaction: they enable as well as constrain. This twofold aspect of interaction produces what Giddens speaks of as the duality of structure. Power is an integral part of this process, for if it refers to transformative capacity, instantiated in action as a regular and routine phenomenon, it refers to rules and resources, though in itself power is not a resource in this framework. Rather, "resources are the media through which power is exercised, and structures of domination reproduced." Power, in matter-of-fact words, is a means of getting things done as well as of choosing not to do them. It refers to relations of autonomy and dependence in interaction, to the capability of actors to get others to comply with their wants.

Because power is a two-way relationship, servants in Zambia retain some autonomy even though they are dependent actors in relation to employers in the household situation. This power is exemplified in their choice not to do, or to perform in their own way, the orders an employer issues. Although the employer is the more autonomous actor owing to the more effective means of compliance at his or her command—that is, the capacity to sack, to withhold pay, and not to provide references or to provide bad ones—he or she is to some degree dependent on the servant. Using the
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discourse of servants, the decision not to obey, or to do things his or her way, is a response to "too much work" and to the employer's "talking too much" or "too loud." Servants pursue such practices with the practical knowledge that household work never stops. For once one task is done, others will be issued. The employers say that "orders have to be repeated all the time" and that "servants are lazy," they "never learn," and to be sure "they're different." By repeating orders, the employer adjusts his social practice to the conduct of the servant, who thus retains some power in structuring the household situation and in a way that affects how both servant and employer are getting things done over time as their activity unfolds in space.

This simple example of Giddens's duality of structure at work, chosen from many to be discussed in the body of this work, shows us conscious agents par excellence. The social practices they use in their interaction help to create and reproduce the informal rules that structure their interaction as well as the resources they draw on differentially. In the course of doing so, servants and employers monitor each other's conduct reflexively. Their mutual monitoring is influenced by two levels of consciousness, according to Giddens: "discursive" and "practical." Discursive consciousness refers to peoples' capacity to "give reasons" and "rationalize" their conduct; practical consciousness, to the "stocks of unarticulated knowledge" people use implicitly to orient themselves to situations and when interpreting the acts of others. What servants and employers say about each other involves both these levels.

Servants and employers find their institution hard to understand in discursive terms, but each of them knows, in a practical sense, a great deal about its workings because they participate in it. What they say about each other does not constitute a description or explanation of their relationship. Rather, their statements about each other are part of that relationship, helping them to define each other. Incorporating into my analysis the sometimes contradictory concepts that employers and servants use about each other will, I suggest, throw fresh light on the domestic service institution and present it in a way that reckons with human agency and is not static.

In their mutual monitoring when interacting in the household, servants and employers make use of social practices that become predictable and stable over time. These practices develop into routines, which in turn become patterned in space, that is to say, they become institutionalized. The rules and resources both parties draw on and share in their routines can be recombined into different forms, changed, and new ones can be created.
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These techniques, which are contained in the stocks of servants and employers' practical consciousness, help to reproduce their interaction through time and affect the way relationships are ordered across space. These notions are elaborated in Giddens's *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), in which he develops the idea of localization, pp. 110-161.

The Difference Class Makes

The employers' power over servants results from their control of resources which they can bring to bear on the work situation to effect their servants' compliance. This control is a result of their advantaged position in society in class terms, at least when compared with the servants, who have nothing to sell but manual labor. Few servants in Zambia today have even seven years of schooling, whereas most of the persons who employ them have at least high school education. Even the least affluent of employers have regular monthly incomes (sometimes earned by both spouses) which facilitate access to class privileges—the means by which the difference between servant and employer, is made and re-created.

Class in this book is defined in Marx's terms: by relation to the means of production. It has an objective and a subjective face. The problem that besets its discussion is that although we as observers can readily identify class in terms of objective indicators, people themselves do not always share an identity of felt interests in such broad terms. Most of the world's history shows us that in fact they have rarely done so. Race, ethnicity, and gender complicate the question, as does a variety of sectional interests. Racial segregation, minority status in ethnic and gender terms, cultural practices, and religious prescriptions among others, singly or combined, can affect how a person experiences his or her world as a worker. It is with the unfolding of such experiences that I am concerned here: how servants' experiences have been shaped by broader economic forces in the surrounding society if not the wider world, by the labor process within domestic service, and by social practices that take place beyond the work locus. With

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[32] Advocates of an orthodox version of Marxism assert that collective action is motivated by class-based interests that arise from the given economic circumstances. This focus on the economic sphere neglects people's own involvement in structuring interests and affecting the economic situation in which they find themselves. Recent attention to the labor process has helped to qualify the overly deterministic explanation of how the relation to the means of production influences class consciousness.
this perspective, I have sought to problematize the question of class action by emphasizing the structures by which work and neighborhood or work and household are connected or set apart. An examination of the changing interrelationship among the three loci of work, neighborhood, and household over the course of economic and political turns will, I suggest, throw light on the question of why servants rarely identified themselves in class terms.

Domestic servants are workers like other workers. They all sell their labor power in return for wages. Yet the domestic servant is more "special" than, say, the miner or factory worker. The labor process in domestic service differs in important respects from that in a larger enterprise where laborer and employer rarely meet in person and compliance with the requirements of the job is achieved through a technical division of tasks carried out in a routine pattern and through scientific management. In the interpersonal labor process in domestic service compliance is created through direct supervision. Although legal rules may exist concerning terms of work, they are rarely applied, certainly not in Zambia. The employers decide how to deal with these servants by judging their personal qualities rather than their skills and/or efficiency.

The labor process in domestic service is hierarchical, asymmetric, and deeply charged with idiosyncratic factors. The privatized nature of the job, its special locus in the employer's household, where most servants labor in isolation from other workers when on duty, do perhaps accentuate a servant's sense of personal dependence on the employer's goodwill. This sense in turn may adversely affect the servant's experience of sharing identity with other workers, particularly if he or she resides on the employer's property in a high-income residential area, further distanced from the mass of ordinary workers. The peculiar personalness of the relationship between worker and employer in domestic service, the special nature of the work, which produces use value rather than exchange value, and the odd living


34. There are various different forms of control over industrial workers on the job and a rich literature on the forms and consequences of such forms. For a useful overview, see Michael Burawoy, Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). There is a rich field of research with new vigor as well. See, for example, B. Edwards, Casual Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
arrangement combine to put servants in an ambiguous situation vis-à-vis other segments of the working class. The interpersonnel aspect and domestic nature of this labor genre also mark the experience of work as a private one. Since the work experience is closely linked with domestic troubles, it becomes difficult to talk about it objectively, that is, disinterestedly in Giddens's terms, perhaps because the participants are too close to their material.

Most servants in Zambia today seek from their jobs only the money and the housing that often comes with the job. They have few illusions about acquiring benefits that might improve their prospects for upward mobility. The perks are too few and insufficient to ameliorate with runaway inflation, and their skills derived from labor-intensive toil are hardly saleable in other occupational domains. The question then arises, why do servants consent to carry out a job that endorses dependency in many situations?

Most servants struggle for resources in two senses: they strive to make a living from their employers and their own household members on a day-to-day basis, and they strain their substandard means in an attempt to ensure that their children never will have to make their living as domestics. On both fronts, servants have to overcome odds that for many are insurmountable. While they all desire to exit from domestic service, few succeed. They all know why, at least at the level of practical consciousness: their job has “no future,” they say. Many struggle with the demands of the hierarchically structured labor process for fear of losing their wages or living, and this they rationalize in practical terms: “Half a loaf is better than none.” They also hope that the employers sooner or later will help them. These servants do not, in my view, suffer from a dependency complex as set forth by Octave Mannoni.35 When, following Giddens, dependency is counterposed to autonomy, a sense of personal agency is retained.36 For even in consenting to the creation and maintenance of their own dependence, servants show themselves as autonomous actors with some power to affect the outcome of their dependent interaction within the employer’s household. They con-

35. Octave Mannoni, Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization (London: Methuen, 1956). The colonized in Prospero and Caliban perceived the colonizer as a father surrogate to be respected and obeyed, while at the same time he was responsible for his charge. Mannoni’s dependence was based on trust that, if the relationship between superior and inferior broke, resulted in feelings of desolation and despair among the colonized (pp. 132-162). For a play, written by a white author in Zambia on this theme, see David Wallace, Do You Love Me, Master? (Lusaka: NECZAM, 1977).

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Servants’ behavior while at work is thus shaped not only by the demands placed on them there but also by processes beyond the workplace, principally those that relate to their own households and the changing needs of its members. Some of these extrawork forces are influenced by cultural practices, others by associations with neighbors, fellow workers, people in other lines of work, and friends and relatives. Servants thus have conflicting interests that all affect how they perceive their place in Zambia’s evolving class structure. The interests that a servant feels as an identity may change over time and they may be different for men and women. They may vary with the servant’s familial status and length of domestic employment, so that a long-time servant who is the head of a household may identify the locus of his or her interests in a different way from one who is young, unmarried, and relatively new to domestic service.

The Making of Gender

So far, I have taken my actors as given: servants and their employers. But at the turn of the last century in Zambia there were no givens. When a small white population had settled and gradually began to grow, and in the process felt the need for workers to do the dirty and time-consuming work involved in creating and maintaining households without amenities, there was no ready pool of domestics willing and able to perform household service. There certainly was no script in which roles, gestures, and routines had been laid out in advance, although employers used their experience of servant-keeping at home in their dealings with Africans in the new territory. Persons of African background had to be made into servants in a manner that had much in common with the domestication of wild animals. They were considered “raw,” and even today, some employers speak of “breaking in” their servants.

The resulting social practices were structured not only in terms of class and power, but also by gender. Initially, and for a long time, these servants were not women, but men. Employers in Northern Rhodesia, far from taking women servants for granted, avoided them. For reasons I discuss at length later, many continue to do so today.

Most recent studies of domestic service have emphasized the central involvement of females in such work and have, consciously or not, applied a biological metaphor to explain the subordination a servant experiences in the social relations that structure the household and the wider society. In a febrile environment, Karen Bade has pointed out that the biological nati-
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Phor is part of the anthropological research tradition. Yet the discipline of anthropology does not hold the droit de seigneur on this thinking. It is prevalent in the other social sciences and shared among broad segments of society who tend to think of gender as a product of biological differences that set women and men apart. Such a view has prompted many scholars of domestic service to use the nineteenth-century domestic service pattern in the West to universalize the present situation and thereby underestimate its singularity. The result is a contrasting and stressing of presumably given difference between women and men, rather than the raising of questions about how such differences themselves are created. For gender roles are not given. They are made, and created as a result of women's and men's changing social and economic experiences. The gender division of labor is socially constructed. How, when, and why its slots are allocated to the two sexes become issues for investigation rather than questions to which biological 'nature' supplies ready-made answers.

Zambia provides an interesting setting in which to explore how gender roles are made and changed. I do so by asking questions about how employment practices were routinized in the opening decades of this century and how they become institutionalized in the longer term, even while at times being remade in different forms and undergoing changes. The employment practice at issue is the preference for the male servant, which persists to the present day, and its reverse, the reluctance to employ women as servants.

Domestic Service: Literature and Scholarship

I noted above that till fairly recently, domestic service remained a relatively unexplored domain in scholarship in the West and in the Third World. The nature of the occupation itself helps to explain its invisibility, and shifts in social science interests suggest reasons for the more recent proliferation of studies on domestic service.

In northwestern Europe and North America, live-in domestic service

38. This is a slightly changed paraphrase of M. Z. Rosaldo's description of how non-anthropologists are misusing anthropological data, in "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," Signs 5 (1980): 389-417.
has indeed declined as a major occupational domain for women. When
women replaced men as servants toward the end of the eighteenth cen-
tury, they tended to be young, from rural backgrounds, poorly educated,
and unmarried. At this time the decline of household production was eli-
minating the economic role for unmarried women at home and the urban
center offered them little else than low-paid jobs as household servants.
Live-in domestic service was something many such young women expected
to do for a while but not to engage in as a lifetime occupation. They hoped,
as did women in Zambia today, to marry, preferably men of slightly better
means than their own fathers and then to establish their own households.
The fate of Samuel Richardson's Pamela illustrates the scenario the down-
erness servant girl marries her rich master, thus solving her problem of how
to make a living. Domestic service was not considered a particularly nice
job, and what official census figures we have on this occupation in Europe
and North America in the past are likely to underreport the actual numbers
of servants. Domesticity might have been reformulated to include the nature
of their occupation to some extent. In the United States, where few native-
born American women made themselves available as live-in domestic
workers, newly immigrant European women were typically drawn into
service, and many married "up." 41  

But domestic service has not disappeared as an important occupational
domain for women in late twentieth-century America. When white women
left domestic service, it remained an occupational venue for minority wom-
en. For historical reasons such as slavery, and because of continued dis-


40. Samuel Richardson, Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded. In Series of Familiar Letters From
41. Janice Reiff Webster, "Domestication and Americanization: Scandinavian Women in
Market 1860 to 1920, ed. Daniele Halsey and Brette McInerney (New York: New York Uni-
versity Press, 1997); and Daniel E. Sutherland, Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the
42. On this point, see Judith Rollins, Between Women: Domestics and Their Employers
(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); and Katzman, Seven Days.
43. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese Ameri-
can Women in Domestic Service (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), and Rollins,
Between Women.
example. Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Central American, and Carib-
bean—to the army of day-working domestics in the United States can
expect much upward mobility in today's shrinking economy. As in the past,
many of today's domestics remain unskilled, and we have little substi-
tutive knowledge about the nature of this occupational domain today.44

The upward mobility thesis, derived from the experience of one segment
of women domestics during an expanding phase of the West's economic
history, has been exported to the developing world, where, with a few
exceptions, it has been useless.45 In general, few studies have been under-
taken of domestic services in the Third World. Most of the existing work
concerns Latin America, where most servants are young migrant women
from rural backgrounds. They have been described as moving through a
series of gradually better-paying service jobs that serve as a route up46 but
while there are many women domestic servants, their occupation ap-
pears to be declining as a major urban employment source in many Latin
American cities.47 Studies from India show a somewhat different situa-
tion, as does the available information on domestic service from China
and Malaysia.48 In all these cases, cultural factors complicate the employ-
ment relationship. The Indian situation, for one, is complex because of the
division of labor embodied in the caste system. Extravagant factors struc-
ture work recruitment, determining which caste as well as which sex may
perform which tasks for whom. An exception occurs in the recruitment of
Christian servants, both women and men, in a manner perhaps neutral to
the religious and gender terms of the caste system. In the state of Kerala,
unmarried Christian girls from poor rural backgrounds seem to be pre-
ferred as domestic servants in many affluent Christian households,
where they work for varying lengths of time before returning to marry in

44. Shellee Colen, "'With Respect and Feelings': Voices of West Indian Child Care and
Domestic Workers in New York City," in All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties That
45. The main proponent of this thesis is Chaplin, "Domestic Service."
46. For example, Emily M. Nett, "The Servant Class in a Developing Country: Equador," Journal
of Inter-American Studies 8 (1966): 437-452, and work by Margo L. Smith, e.g., "Domestic Service as a Channel of Upward Mobility for the Lower-Class Woman: The Lima
Case," in Female and Male in Latin America, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburgh: University of
Pittsburgh Press, 1973), pp. 191-207. Ximena Bunster and Elsa M. Chaney qualify this view
47. This is indicated by Harley L. Browning, "Some Problems of the Tertiarization Process
in Latin America," in Urbanization in the Americas from Its Beginnings to the Present,
48. Papers presented to symposium on domestic workers at the Eighty-fourth Annual
Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., December 4-8,
1985, bear this out. Among them, M. Jocelyn Armstrong (University of Illinois), "Female
Domestics in Industrializing Malaysia," and Rubie S. Watson (University of Pittsburgh),
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Domestic service is a challenging experience, but this case illustrates the inadequacy of such knowledge outside of the employing household. The women were unable to transfer their work-related experience so as to move beyond their original position in the social structure.

Aside from the Latin American cases just referred to, none of the non-Western studies of domestic service supports the upward mobility thesis. The thesis ignores the critical role that race and ethnicity can play in structuring relations in production. That role is exemplified in black American and other minority women's continued experiences in domestic service in the United States. It is also illustrated by the countries of eastern and southern Africa, particularly during the colonial period and in the Republic of South Africa today, where race and sex were primary factors in the state's structuring of roles in production.

The existing studies of domestic service in Africa pertain almost exclusively to the southern region. The remainder consists largely of descriptions drawn offhandedly in the context of studies with different focuses across the African continent. Recently, several studies, particularly from West Africa, have highlighted the role of young female relations in performing household work without pay. Commonly referred to as fostering, this practice is a research topic in its own right—and I shall have something to say about the Zambian variety in the main body of this book.

The South African studies offer a kaleidoscopic story of women of all races and men passing through domestic service. After the abolition of slavery in 1834, poor Afrikaner women and British women brought over from Europe worked as domestics in white households. As members of household staffs consisting mainly of African men, these white women's


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Domestic service remained problematic, and they were replaced by African men soon after the turn of the century. African men continued to dominate domestic service on the Witwatersrand till the late 1930s, but were replaced by coloured and African women in the Cape much earlier. With growing demands for African labor in the mines, women gradually became more numerous in this occupation also on the Witwatersrand. Today in South Africa domestic service is considered an African woman's job, and it remains a life-long occupation through which married and unmarried women as well as single mothers pursue a series of dead-end jobs. In white-dominated Rhodesia, domestic service remained a male preserve longer than in South Africa.

The vexations that reflect the difficulty of maintaining difference between servant and employer within the household have been captured forcefully by the literary imagination. Indeed, novelists and writers have had much to tell us about the nature and meaning of the servant-employer relationship that has social scientists. Servants and their employers have been recurrent figures in European, North American, and African literature. The literary writer's servant is there in an active variety: as loyal tool, mercenary opportunist, active agent, disordered of the social order, representative of the rising bourgeoisie, forebode of the revolution. As a metaphor the figure of the servant has been used to highlight intimate psychosocial power relationships, to represent the African oppressed, as a symptom of national awakening, or as a yardstick against which the health or sickness of postcolonial African society is measured. African writers, black and white, have used the figures of the servant for all of these things, yet not exactly in the same manner. In several works by black writers produced in Zambia, servants do figure, though not prominently. Domestic employment is just one detail in the context of the lives of the main characters.

Taking the literature from the southern Africa as my example, there are differences in the way black and white writers construct the servant’s viewpoint. Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer, writing on Southern Rhodesia and South Africa respectively, have offered acutely sensitive and at times shocking descriptions of the domestic service institution. But few writers have surpassed Ezekiel Mphalele's “Mrs. Plum.” This story gives voice to the African woman servant, depicts the economic and interpersonal situation that emerges in the servant-keeping context, and highlights that servants, despite all odds, retain some power in the relationship. Since the writer’s imagination often captures popularly shared sentiments that are rarely part of the official discourse, insights gained from literary works on domestic service may be brought to bear creatively on more conventional social science analysis.

Why has this particular occupational domain received so little scholarly attention? Since they rarely formed a class in objective and subjective terms, servants might have been invisible to those labor historians who have viewed labor mobilization and strikes as the chief evidence of class. Defining class in such terms would tend to eliminate servants from the terrain of class analysis proper, for they often appeared unresolved in the political sense. Servants may have been ignored by mainstream social scientists because they have considered domestic labor to be women's work, and for a long time they saw no need to problematize or raise questions about its agents. But domestic service has had a long history in the West as a typical man’s job—and in some parts of the world it still thought to be so. Thus we must look farther than gender for an explanation of why the occupation was for so long neglected by scholars.

I suggest that the additional reason concerns the special nature of the labor process in domestic service. As the subordinate actors in a hierarchically structured work relationship, servants rarely spoke freely. Although they were conspicuously present in wealthier households, servants were rendered virtually “absent” by the social practices that became routinized in household work. Most of what we know about servants is expressed in the discourse of their employers. With some interesting exceptions, servants have left few personal records. In their efforts to make...
In introduction to servants visible, scholars have had to tease information out of their employers' letters, diaries, and biographies, to read between the lines of travel descriptions, in addition to sifting through employment data and legal records. These data have already been edited in the recording process and from them we are most likely to glean a flat, stereotyped description of servants which lacks a sense of life. Studies that make use of oral history data and "life histories" capture a better sense of lives and active interactions. This methodology is central to much recent research in social history. I see the recent proliferation of domestic service studies as a part of this effort and conceive to capture the lived experience of ordinary women and men, the ways in which their activities contributed to maintaining as well as to changing the societies in which they lived. A parallel concern has fueled recent scholarship in African history, which has sought to demonstrate the results of African initiative in the face of repressive colonial economic and political structures and of continued postcolonial dependency relationships. To tease out the African voice requires ingenuity and imagination, for if the West is poor in terms of conventional records on ordinary people, Africa is even worse.

Drawing on interdisciplinary insights, I explore in this book how domestic service in Zambia historically and at the present time came to be taken for granted as a perquisite of social and economic position. I suggest that the occupation in that country is developing its own trajectory, which is not a delayed repetition of patterns found elsewhere. To explain the difference I review with the critical role of race and sex in structuring relations of production during the colonial period and of class and sex during the postcolonial period. I have attempted to clarify how and why the African woman's gender role was fabricated in such a way that she was excluded from most urban wage labor, particularly domestic service. Economic, demographic, and political factors shaped the gender division of labor in domestic service, but so did cultural and ideological factors. These factors, in slightly altered configurations, continue to do so in Zambia today. In my comparative discussion of late twentieth-century dynamics in paid household work, I seek to bring my findings from Zambia to bear on developments closer to home. Today, it seems everybody in the United States wants relief from housework. I seek to make sense of this resurgence of need.

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interest by relating the forces that have recreated the need for paid household workers in our contemporary economies to world economic developments. Household work, whether paid or not, is a critical economic domain, and this study challenges us to do more research on the ways it articulates with other occupational avenues over the course of local and worldwide economic booms and busts.