

Servicing the Middle Classes

Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe

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This is an important book dealing with a topic which sits squarely at the intersection of 'private problems with public issues'. It is the first serious academic study of the return of domestic servants in the 1970s and 1980s – something that surely we all knew about, but which nobody has systematically studied until now.

The book combines geographical with sociological perspectives and is divided into two parts. The first looks at the temporal and spatial trends in the distribution of domestic servants during the 1980s and at the determinants of 'demand' (why people want to employ them) and 'supply' (why people want these jobs). Demand is explored in two ways. First by analysing advertisements for domestic servants of various kinds in *The Lady* magazine, a national publication, and in local newspapers covering the two local labour markets studied: Newcastle and Reading, between July 1981 and June 1991. Those aspects of family relationships and interactions which influence whether couples will employ domestic servants are explored in interviews with 300 households in Reading and Newcastle with both partners in full-time professional or managerial employment. This reveals that couples who share domestic tasks fully are far less likely than those with a more traditional division of labour to employ servants (32% versus 85%).

Thirty-two per cent of even those with fully shared domestic labour is still a high proportion, and Gregson and Lowe go on to a more theoretical discussion of why it is that the use of servants by even these families is now so widespread. In their attempt to unpack (as they put it) this aspect of the demand for paid domestic labour, the authors range widely over sociological ideas about leisure. Although this is a valuable and necessary beginning to such discussion, it is perhaps slightly less successful than some other parts of the book. The authors have not quite made contact with the notion of leisure activity as a source of 'Distinction'. I believe Bourdieu shows us that what is done in leisure time and thereby made available for display to others is itself a part of the constant struggle to gain and maintain status. By failing to explore this aspect of what constitutes 'quality' leisure time, the book misses one part of the puzzle. Low status activity takes up time which striving middle-class couples feel they would be better advised to spend doing things which either bring them more into contact with higher status or more powerful reference groups, or provide

credible and status-enhancing topics for discussion with significant others. In the heightened status-struggles of the 1980s and 1990s such considerations probably strengthened.

Such a perspective would also help to solve a question not raised at all in the book but which leapt out from the excellent interview material: why do some of these people, with the attitudes they expressed (especially some of the fathers), wish to have children at all? One reason is that being able to display the existence of a family is credible and status-enhancing in our present society. In the same way, feminist sociologists of organization have shown, the trick is to get someone else in the office to do the hard work, and keep the appearance of skill, competence (virility? femininity?) etc. for oneself. Men have traditionally done this to women. Now we are seeing what happens when middle-class women start doing it to working-class women. Gregson and Lowe return in the final chapter to the social and political implications of this. This discussion is rather taciturn, but who is to blame them? The whole topic is so emotionally charged, and the book maintains an almost frustratingly cool stance throughout: only in the acknowledgements do we find heartfelt declaration that 'this book was written without the assistance of any waged domestic labour'!

The question of 'supply', and the more complex aspects of the relationships between employers and employees, is investigated by in-depth interviews with 30–40 employees and 15 'employer/servant pairs' in each of the two study areas. The increase in the supply of women willing to take on other people's domestic work for low wages is elegantly explained in terms of two main trends. The number of young women with some nursery training willing to work in private households is influenced by the falling numbers of childcare jobs in publicly provided institutions such as hospitals and council nurseries. The increased supply of cleaners is due to increased un- and non-employment and the reduction in benefit levels which means that more women now live on benefits of one kind or another, and must take additional jobs to make ends meet. None of the cleaners (and only some of the nannies) was employed 'on the books'.

The authors themselves seem not fully satisfied with their own explanation of why some young women become private nannies. They found that these women came from traditional families and were taking stopgap work until they themselves could marry and set up similar households. There is almost a critical stance towards their 'traditionalism'. And yet if all men and women were highly qualified and did interesting paid work, someone would still have to look after children. Why do we not place more value on the desire to care, and give this option higher priority in political demands? The vivid interview material leaves one feeling that many of the

middle-class children were extremely lucky to have carers who did not resent time spent with them as their parents seemed to. Some nannies became deeply attached to their young charges despite the fact that these children would not represent a source of status to them, either in the present or even less in the future (who will be invited to degree ceremonies and christenings, or qualify for support in old age?). Surely this commitment must be something to value? And then there is the other side of the coin: surely there needs to be some questioning of what pressures adults still feel to produce children even though they have little desire to care for them?

The fact that this book arouses so sharply these very painful questions and allows one to begin to think 'theoretically and politically' about them is perhaps the greatest of its many qualities. It is not beginners' reading, but should be obligatory for all second-year and above students in sociology and social policy and their teachers, and highly recommended for all the social sciences (including economics and psychology).

Mel Bartley

Feminism and Geography

Gillian Rose

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Feminism has made its presence felt in the discipline of geography for some two decades. Since the early 1970s feminists working in human geography have sought to expose, challenge and overcome the various ways in which women are ignored, misrepresented and mistreated in the discipline. This project has entailed developing strategies to secure gender equality at all levels within the discipline; it has entailed critiquing the body of knowledge called geography; it has entailed attempting to create a new kind of geography.

Gillian Rose's book, *Feminism and Geography*, is an important and original contribution to this project. She draws on a body of feminist theory to elaborate her claim that 'to think geography – to think within the parameters of the discipline in order to create geographical knowledge acceptable to the discipline – is to occupy a masculine subject position' (p. 4). And she explores how feminists might think differently in order to resist and go beyond the masculinism of geography.

Rose's critique of geographical knowledge is powerful and far-reaching. She draws on feminist analyses of rational knowledge to argue that