

Were Servants paid according to their Productivity ?

Carmen SARASÚA

Wages, or, more generally, remuneration, are a fundamental element in the study of any working group. Wages express in different ways the economic and social value of work; they are a good indicator of the legal position of workers, since only free workers can contract their work; they help us to see the place of an occupation in the labour market, that is, in relation to other occupations. And they are the best indicator of the workers' standard of living, since, in a market society, wages are the main or only source of income for workers, and thus they determine their purchasing power.¹

Wages have also been a central element of economic analysis. Standard or neoclassical economics defines wages as the price for labour, the main object of economics being to understand how prices are determined by supply and demand. So economics provide economic historians with a solid framework to interpret workers' wages. Yet in the last decades a number of scholars, mainly from economic history but also from labour economics, have pointed to the shortcomings and limitations of this theoretical framework to account for such crucial facts as wage differentials among workers, particularly race, age and gender gaps.

In this paper the main features of what we know about the remuneration of domestic workers in the 18th and 19th centuries are outlined, and an attempt is made to see if the theoretical framework provided by economic theory can help us to interpret them. I suggest that our historical evidence on how remuneration of domestic servants was fixed and paid illustrates the limitations of mainstream economic analysis to account for wages in the service sector in general, and for wages of domestic service and gender wage differentials in particular. I conclude that the notion of wages as

1 I would like to thank Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and Raffaella Sarti for providing me with the opportunity of discussing the history of domestic service within an international research network, and Peter Scholliers and Leonard Schwarz for generously commenting on a first version of this paper.

cultural constructs, rather than market prices, is more useful to understand domestic workers' wages.²

Origins of neoclassical economic theory: domestic service as unproductive work

Before the marginalist theory of the late 19th century, two important notions contributed to shape prevalent ideas about wages, and particularly about servants' wages. The first was the notion of wages as *subsistence* or *living wages*. Until the end of the 18th century, European economic thought linked wages to the cost of living, that is, to the price evolution of the basic food items, mostly grain. Wages were the means by which workers paid for their own subsistence. If the prices of food and rent rose, wages had to follow, or governments had to face an increase in poverty and in the already large number of beggars. Since most domestic servants were living-in servants, that is, servants living in their masters' houses, being fed and clothed by them, the idea of wages as subsistence wages led employers to regard the monetary part of their servants' wages as unimportant: servants did not need them.

A second notion contributing to a certain de-legitimation of servants' wages arrives with Adam Smith. In what is considered to be the origin of western economic thought, *The Wealth of Nations* (published in 1776), Adam Smith defined domestic service (and service occupations in general) as non productive, and as such, as an occupation creating no wealth to pay for the wages received. As Smith was vindicating the productive character of manufacturing and trade, in contradiction to the French physiocrats, who claimed that agriculture was the sole source of new wealth, he used "menial servants" as example of non productive occupations:

"It seems (...) altogether improper to consider artificers, manufacturers and merchants, in the same light as menial servants. The labour of menial servants does not continue the existence of the fund which maintains and employs them. Their main-

2 By servants I refer here to domestic servants, working mostly at home on domestic chores. Wages are broadly defined so as to include money but also food and lodging as well as other perquisites. See Peter Scholliers and Leonard Schwarz, "The wage in Europe since the sixteenth century", in P. Scholliers and L. Schwarz (eds.) *Experiencing Wages. Social and Cultural Aspects of Wage Forms in Europe since 1500*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2003, pp. 3-19.

tenance and employment is altogether at the expense of their masters, and the work which they perform is not of a nature to repay that expense. That work consists in services which perish generally in the very instant of their performance, and does not fix or realize itself in any vendible commodity which can replace the value of their wages and maintenance. The labour, on the contrary, of artificers, manufacturers and merchants, naturally does fix and realize itself in some such vendible commodity. It is upon this account that, in the chapter in which I treat of productive and unproductive labour, I have classed artificers, manufacturers and merchants among the productive labourers, and menial servants among the barren or unproductive.” (p. 639).

In the chapter on productive and unproductive labour in the *Wealth of Nations*, he had, in fact, explained that servants’ labour was unproductive because it created no value (value being understood as a vendible commodity):

“The labour of a manufacturer adds, generally, to the value of the materials which he works upon, that of his own maintenance, and of his master’s profit. The labour of a menial servant, on the contrary, adds to the value of nothing. Though the manufacturer has his wages advanced to him by his master, he, in reality, costs him no expense, the value of those wages being generally restored, together with a profit, in the improved value of the subject upon which his labour is bestowed. But the maintenance of a menial servant never is restored. A man grows rich by employing a multitude of manufacturers: he grows poor, by maintaining a multitude of menial servants.” (p. 314).

Smith accepts that service occupations (not only domestic servants, but lawyers, physicians, public officers, create no value through their work) may be necessary and useful, and of course deserve to be paid: “The labour of the latter [servant], however, has its value and deserves its reward as well.” However, service workers, and domestic servants in particular, had less social and economic legitimacy to earn wages. By opposing the behaviour of the manufacturer to that of the employer of servants, Smith is criticizing the dominant life style of the upper classes of his time, and trying to incentive a new model of industrious bourgeois. The maintenance of “a multitude of menial servants” is the best example of irrational behaviour he can think of.

The idea of services, and particularly domestic services, as unproductive labour was maintained by economists after Smith. In his 1820 *Principles of Political Economy*, Malthus limited himself to a slight correction to Smith’s principle: “He defined productive labour as that labour that produced material wealth. He objected, however, to the term *unproductive*

labour because he believed it connoted that such labour was unimportant. He preferred ‘to substitute the term *personal services* for unproductive labour’.³

In the second half of the 19th century Marx reinforced this classical under valuation of service work, particularly of domestic service: as domestic servants failed to create surplus labour, they were “living not from capital but from revenue”, and as such defined as *non-productive, relatively idle* workers.⁴ This definition of domestic workers as unproductive, closer to paupers or rentiers than to factory workers, had important implications for political practice and for social consideration in general: since only workers producing surplus value were exploited, political activism and trade unionism made sense only among the truly exploited class. The same process that constructed factory workers (particularly male factory workers) as the real working class, constructed domestic workers (and female workers in general) as alien to it. For 19th-century revolutionaries as well as for 20th-century trade unionists, one of whose main activities was pushing for higher wages, domestic workers were too close to the bourgeoisie and too distant (physically as well as mentally) from the ‘real’ working class.

A main contribution to economic theory, and in fact what is considered to be the foundation of neoclassical economic thought, took place in late 19th century with the marginalist theory, which assumes that wages equal the marginal product of labour. Wages, thus, express workers’ productivity. Increases in productivity are achieved through capital investment, that is, mechanization. Marginalist theory of wages mirrored the age of industrial labour and mass production, but failed to account for productive sectors difficult to mechanize, like parts of the service sector, which has nevertheless become the main productive sector of Western economies in the 20th century.

3 E. K. Hunt, *History of Economic Thought. A Critical Perspective*, Belmont, Wadsworth Pub., 1979, p. 71.

4 “The creation of surplus labour on the one side corresponds to the creation of minus labour, relative idleness (or *not-productive* labour at best), on the other. This goes without saying as regards capital itself; but also holds then also for the classes with which it shares; hence of the paupers, flunkeys, lickspittles, etc. living from the surplus product, in short, the whole train of retainers; the part of the servant class which lives not from capital but from revenue”. K. Marx, *Grundrisse. Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*. Quoted in E. Higgs, “Domestic servants and the households in Victorian England”, *Social History*, 8: 2, 1983, pp. 201–210.

Wages as cultural constructs

Since the 1960s, many labour economists have disagreed with this theoretical framework to explain labour markets, particularly wage levels and wage differentials, and have pointed to the relevant role played by *institutions* in shaping long term economic behaviour. For their part, social and economic historians working on wages and other forms of remuneration argued that customs, traditions, and conventions played a fundamental role in fixing wages. The definition of wages as customary rather than market wages accounts better for, among other questions, the too suspiciously stable evolution of wage levels in preindustrial times.⁵

Working since the 1980s to understand the gender wage gap, feminist historians have also made an important contribution to this critique of economic analysis by pointing to the fact that the very large gap between female and male wages in preindustrial and industrial times cannot be explained solely by differences in productivity. They have gone beyond defining skills and qualifications as cultural rather than purely technical features. Gendered notions of ‘fair’ and ‘appropriate’ wage influenced what employers paid their workers. The institution of the “family wage”, the notion of a salary for male workers sufficient to maintain their families, expanded during the second half of the 19th century and was supported both by mostly male trade unions and employers.⁶ Employers bought industrial peace by agreeing to employ male instead of female workers, who were much cheaper and in many trades less militant due to their lower union affiliation. By defending their right to earn wages higher than those of women in order to preserve their role of heads of households, male workers were above all defending their right to have a paid occupation in preference to women. And they gained a social recognition that they, as much as middle class men, had a right to have housewives to take care of them, their homes and their children. Women workers were the only losers of this historic deal, as they increasingly lost their industrial jobs and were forced to employ themselves in undervalued and little

5 P. Scholliers and L. Schwarz, “The wage in Europe since the sixteenth century”, in *Experiencing Wages*, pp. 3–24.

6 Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman’s Wage. Historical Meanings & Social Consequences*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1990. See, however, J. Burnette, “An investigation of the female-male wage gap during the industrial revolution in Britain”, *Economic History Review* (1997), 257–281, for a classical vision of gender wage differences as the result of differences in productivity.

paid occupations, such home manufacturing, domestic service, or prostitution. In this process, market forces played only secondary roles. Wages were socially and culturally constructed as “woman’s wages” or as “man’s wages”, as much as in the U.S. wages were constructed along race and ethnic lines. This approach seems more useful to understanding how servants’ wages were fixed. Individual skill or capacity, that is the productivity of individual workers, helps to provide us with an approach to workers’ pay, but it may be rather simplistic in view of the complexity of the process of wage fixation. Let us now turn to the historical evidence on domestic servants’ wages.

What do we know about servants’ wages?

Wages and remuneration in general is not a well known aspect of domestic service history. Authors refer to the silence of the sources, the private and non written character of the contracts, the wide variety of domestic occupations, and the importance of the non-monetary components of domestics’ remuneration, among other questions, to account for this gap. My own research confirms this difficulty: studying domestic service advertisements from 18th and 19th century Madrid newspapers, I found only a few ads where salaries and other benefits were explicitly mentioned.⁷

Despite all the uncertainties about them, wages play a central role in the way crucial features of domestic service have been explained: the fact that service was the main occupation in most European towns until the second half of the 19th century, the decision of rural youngsters to migrate to the city, the preference of wealthiest employers for male domestics, the increasing feminisation of service in the 19th century, etc. This makes remuneration a crucial aspect of the history of domestic service. And although we are not yet in conditions to write a history of domestic workers’ remuneration, it is possible to reconstruct its main characteristics:

- a. Large differences in servants’ wages, reflecting complex servant hierarchies, personal characteristics of the servants, and employers’ decisions.
- b. Importance of in-kind remuneration.

⁷ C. Sarasúa, *Criados, nodrizas y amos. El servicio doméstico en la formación del mercado de trabajo madrileño, 1758–1868*, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1994. Remuneration and wages in pp. 216 - 226.

- c. Nominal wages lower than in other occupations, but higher real wages, particularly in periods of price inflation, due to boarding as a part of remuneration.
- d. Irregularity of money payments.
- e. Highly valued qualitative aspects of domestic service.
- f. Lower ability to bargain collectively for wages and working conditions.

a. Differences in servants' wages

Studies of domestic service point to large differences in domestics' wages, social status and working conditions. These differences were particularly apparent in the 18th and 19th century among servants of the nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie, who employed large numbers of them and developed a complex hierarchy, to a large extent identified by differences in remuneration.

It is difficult to clearly identify the factors accounting for these differences in remuneration: skill and experience played an important role (as human capital theory would predict), but the personal characteristics of the servant (race, legal status, age, gender, and class) were fundamental as well. Large differences in the remuneration of domestic servants can also be attributed to employers' individual decisions. In her study of domestics in 19th century Florence, Casalini finds "truly surprising wage differences", that reveal "the wealth and generosity of employers". In the 1870's and 1880's, whilst the waitress to princess Olga Tubersckok made 90 lire per month (plus housing and food), the male servant of a priest was making 100 lire a year. There were those happy simply to receive food and housing, whilst others received 20, 25 or 30 lire a month.⁸ This total discretionality contradicts the very idea of a labour market, in which workers with similar skills obtain similar remunerations. The personal decisions of employers seem to reflect their appreciation for particular servants, as well as their desire to show their wealth.⁹

Among the systematic sources of differences in the remuneration of domestics, gender was probably the most classic. The wages of male ser-

8 Maria Casalini, *Servitù, nobili e borghesi nella Firenze dell' Ottocento*, Firenze, Olschki, 1997, p. 189.

9 As for the gender wage gap, Casalini argues that in the highest ranks of the occupation, male servants' wages were higher but often excluded food, because they were not forced to spend all of their daily workday at home.

vants were much higher than the wages of female servants, to the point that, as T. Veblen argued in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), male servants reflected better the wealth and status of their employers, and thus choosing to employ male servants was an obvious way of expressing the employer's higher status. Whilst in the 18th century domestic service was performed by both women and men (it was still the largest male occupation in most European cities), from the later years of the century it became a predominantly female occupation, given the increasing alternative occupations for men in transportation, manufacturing and the building trades. Was domestic service badly paid because it was a feminised occupation or did it become feminised because it was badly paid? My research suggests that feminisation led to a devaluation of domestic service, further reinforced by the fact that the middle classes (including 'poor' middle class families, such as those of shopkeepers, civil servants, teachers, etc., which to a large extent could not afford men's wages) were now the main employers of domestics.¹⁰

There is abundant evidence of domestic service being one of the very few occupations regarded as morally and socially adequate for women, as opposed to factory jobs. But we also know that, whenever an occupation has been recommended as suitable for women, women's social obligation to accept much lower wages than men was determinant. For instance, opponents to minimum wage for women in the US in the 1920's argued that women should instead be more willing to become domestic servants, where they could live with lower wages and even save part of them.¹¹

b. importance of in-kind remuneration

Unlike most other wage workers, a majority of domestic servants were (and a certain percentage still are) live-in workers, that is, workers living in their employers' house, as part of the household (in fact, the group of servants received the name of "family" in the 18th century). Being a living-in servant meant that at least part of their remuneration was in kind: it

¹⁰ For a discussion of servants' employers in 19th century England, L. Schwarz, "The declining number of servants in England, 1650-1900", paper presented at the Conference on Models of Domestic Service, Munich, 2003.

¹¹ "But women, objecting to their endless hours, close supervision, and live-in conditions, frequently refused them". Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage*, p. 45.

consisted of food and lodging, plus working clothes and shoes and other perquisites. These non-monetary components of their remuneration constituted around three quarters of the total wage, according to most accounts.¹² Graph 1 shows the evolution of the monetary and non-monetary components of domestic servants' wages in Norway.¹³

[Graph 1]

12 For mid-19th century Paris, "the monetary wage represented less than half of the total value of the servant's wage". Theresa McBride, "The Modernization of Woman's Work", *Journal of Modern History* 49, June 1977, pp. 231–245. Quote in p. 240.

13 Fritz Hodne, Ola Grytten and Jorund Alme, "Norwegian real wages: trends in prices and wages, 1850–1950", in P. Scholliers and V. Zamagni (eds.), *Labour's Reward, Real wages and economic change in 19th and 20th century Europe*, Aldershot, E. Elgar, 1995, pp. 61–75. Data is based on the first Norwegian cost of living index, calculated in 1913 by the statistical office of the city of Oslo.

Living conditions were so bad for workers, particularly for children and women, that living in a comfortable house and eating every day was enough recompense for most of them:

“To understand how children could be pressed into such servitude, one has to recall the general economic conditions of the time. In the 1890s thousands of Londoners were homeless, sleeping in the parks, on the Embankment or in the recesses of London bridge. However badly a servant might be accommodated, it was no doubt better than the prevailing housing conditions for the poor in the London of the 1890s...”¹⁴

This means that a qualitative feature of the servant wage (the fact that it was paid mostly in kind) compensated the quantitative aspect of wages being lower than in other occupations. The domestic servant was not only able to eat better herself or himself, but also to help unemployed or poor relatives, an image common in literary sources.

Boarding as the main or only component of domestics' remuneration helps also to better explain the social composition of domestic servants' employers. Edward Higgs has argued that the idea of domestics as a form of conspicuous consumption (that is, well paid domestics working for the middle and upper classes) fails to account for the “large numbers of girls recruited from the workhouse, who were paid little, if anything”.¹⁵ Workhouse inmates that “could be employed at board cost”, as well as poor female relatives, worked in massive number for working class families. Sixteen per cent of heads of his mid-19th century sample of households containing living-in servants “were artisans, clerks or semi-skilled and unskilled workers” (p. 207). Not only girls or workhouse inmates; poor widowers and many other women found their living this way: “Single *señor*, not being able to maintain a maid servant, offers an independent room, with coal, lighting, species, vegetables and water to a widower or married woman, to assist him” (*Diario de Avisos de Madrid*, February 7, 1759).

Although not paid in cash, boarding was as fixed a component of the servant's wage as the money part: the worker knew exactly what to expect, in terms of quantity and quality, about food, clothes and housing,

14 Frank Victor Dawes, *Not in front of the servants. A True Portrait of English Upstairs, Downstairs Life*, New York, Taplinger, 1973, p. 24.

15 Higgs, “Domestic servants in Victorian England”, p. 201.

and when it should be paid. Components of boarding were mentioned in the contracts or advertisements more often than money wages: chocolate was mentioned as part of the boarding in many advertisements in the second half of the 18th century in Spain.¹⁶

c. Nominal wages lower than in other occupations, but real wages higher, particularly in periods of price inflation, due to inclusion of boarding

Boarding as part of the remuneration made the sector very attractive to workers in times of price inflation: during the second half of the 18th and the early decades of the 19th centuries, with rising commodity prices in Europe eating up most of the purchasing power of nominal wages, servants did much better than workers who were paid mostly or totally money wages, and so living-in domestic service was one of the most looked-after occupations

For McBride, “the most common motivation for the migration of domestics to Paris was the attraction of substantially higher wage levels”.¹⁷ In the second half of the 19th century, a male servant might earn 2.5 to 3 times as much there, and a female servant twice as much. Higher wages existed in large cities for every occupation, but they were eaten up by the much higher cost of living. “Because they were boarded, however, Parisian servants did not suffer much from the Parisian cost of living; their decision to come to Paris made more economic sense than that of other lower-class elements.” (p. 239).

In Norway, and probably in other parts as well, the long-term tendency of the monetary part of servants’ wages to increase was interrupted only during WWI, when price inflation arrived to the highest levels.¹⁸ In fact, boarding gained weight as part of servants’ remuneration every time that a social or economic crisis took place. Early 19th-century, Spanish cities, devastated by the Napoleonic troops, witnessed dramatic changes in their labour markets. Civil servants and soldiers became unemployed due to the government’s inability to pay their wages, and employees in the trades were laid off, because of the general crisis. As advertisements published

16 “40 reales y chocolate”, were offered as a monthly wage to a maidservant in the *Diario de Avisos de Madrid*, on July 18, 1758. “46 reales y dos libras de chocolate”, also to a maid servant, on September 20, 1760. Sarasúa, *Criados, nodrizas y amos*, p. 217.

17 McBride, “The Modernization of Woman’s Work”, p. 237.

18 F. Hodne, O. Grytten and J. Alme, “Norwegian real wages: trends in prices and wages, 1850–1950”, p. 69.

in the Journals during 1812 prove, the main strategy used by these new unemployed and homeless from the middle classes was to offer themselves as domestics, simply for the food and housing. In times of crisis, then, boarding became a privilege for most workers, who were ready to work simply for it.

Yet the value attached by servants to boarding as part of their remuneration changed during the 19th century. Domestic workers (male domestic workers in particular), were now in a urban and industrial environment, with new job opportunities in industry and trade, jobs with a fixed working schedule and more independence. Furthermore, working class culture heavily rejected the concept of personal service. Increasingly, being housed and fed at the master's house appeared less attractive. William Tayler, a footman writing in 1837, described the life of a servant "as something like that of a bird shut up in a cage. The bird is well housed and well fed but is deprived of liberty".¹⁹ In Spain, conservative voices lamented at the end of the 19th century the fragility of religious beliefs and traditional life among working class women. The worst manifestation of this "sinister change" was their "sick preference for the dangerous life of the cigar-maker, instead of occupying themselves in domestic service".²⁰

This changed perception suggests that the in-kind component of domestic servants' remuneration was less valued, and this probably forced the composition of the remuneration to change.

d. Highly valued qualitative aspects of domestic service

Living in the employer's house also meant a closer, more personal relation with the family, which often opened the door to important benefits, such as gifts and inheritances. Privileged domestics were 'protected' in many ways by the family. Wet nurses are a good example : they developed a very special relationship with the family's children and were regarded as 'second mothers' for them. The interest of domestics in developing these relationships of patronage can be shown in the case of late 19th-century Florence, where more than one third of domestics had members of the highest ranks of society attending as witnesses to their weddings.²¹

19 Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p. 185.

20 Geraldine Scanlon, *La polémica feminista en la España contemporánea (1868-1974)*, Madrid, Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1976, p. 86.

21 Casalini, *Servitù*, p. 194.

In some periods and for certain types of servants, domestic service was an attractive occupation for these qualitative aspects. This was so for two main reasons. Firstly, because in large cities, and in periods when regional differences were still intense, rural young women were ready to trade high wages for friendly environments. In late 19th century *Morriña*, a novel by the famous Spanish writer Emilia Pardo Bazán, the young maid-of-all-work from Galicia working in Madrid complains bitterly of a previous stay with a non Gallego family: she would not understand the language spoken (Spanish), and would lament never heard about her homeland. “For half the pay and double workload I want to serve someone from my country”.²²

Secondly, because closeness to the employers meant a real possibility of upward social mobility, which for many historians of domestic service was a reality for domestic servants. Upward social mobility was partly achieved through savings (which tells about the importance of money wages for many domestics), but also through acculturation, the contact with middle class values, rituals, behaviour, and language. A young man or woman who entered service entered also life in a different social environment. Many of them were able to acquire the skills needed for a new occupation, including literacy.²³

e. Irregularity of money payments.

A second implication of servant wages being mostly in kind is that masters saw the money payment as not really needed by servants, and thus not required to be paid on a regular basis. This is evident from the many instances we know of masters paying their servants only once a year, or at their deaths, as many employers’ wills show by mandating delayed wages to be paid to their servants;²⁴ or by masters simply not paying their ser-

22 See 3rd ed., Barcelona, Impr. De Henrich y ca., 1895.

23 Theresa McBride, “Social mobility for the lower classes: domestic servants in France”, *Journal of Social History*, 1974, pp. 63–78; J. Jean Hecht, *The domestic servant class in eighteenth-century England*, London, Routledge and Paul, 1956, particularly ch. VII, “The rewards of service: social advancement”; Raffaella Sarti, “Il servizio domestico: un canale di mobilità sociale ? Il caso di Bologna (fine ‘700-inizio ‘900)”, *Secondo Congresso Italo-Iberico di Demografia Storica*, 1992, vol. I, pp. 187–213.

24 In the Netherlands, “Payment once a year (or sometimes twice a year) was the norm for living-in staff, such as servants, farmhands and maids. Since this payment was on top of room and board, the actual amount of money involved did not have to be that much, especially not once advances of, say, one guilder pocket money per week had

vants at all. Because servants received their money wages when their subsistence was already paid for, and very often only once a year, those who really received their money wages had a much higher capacity to save and to spend than other workers. They were able to lend money to their families or even to their masters.

In his study of the 18th century French trades, Sonenscher found “an essential difference in the natural law tradition between the status of journeymen and the status of domestic servants”.²⁵ This essential difference in legal status conditioned to a large extent the forms of remuneration for their work:

“The usual phrases (...) concerning the payment of wages in eighteenth-century France... were ‘le prix de son travail’, ‘le prix d’une journée de travail’, ‘le prix de la façon’, and, less currently, ‘le salaire’, or, finally, the word ‘gages’. This last term was indicative of the difference between those employed for limited periods, who were usually journeymen or labourers, and those employed for longer periods. It was used almost exclusively in connection with payments to domestic servants. There were good reasons for this limited usage. The terms ‘le prix d’une journée’ or ‘le prix de son travail’ denoted the contractual and limited nature of the engagement. Labour was hired for a certain price for a certain duration. (...) The status of domestic servants was somewhat different, since they had engaged themselves to their masters or mistresses (and were therefore ‘à leur gages’), for extended periods (...) In addition, they worked in their employers’ households (rather than a *boutique* or *atelier*) and used their possessions. The nature of the engagement was therefore more extensive. The wages of servants were the price of their engagement: the wages paid to journeymen were the price of their labour.”

Most important than the irregular character of money payments is to what extent servants received directly the money payments they were entitled to:

“Servants did not always receive wages directly. The merchant Pierre Lacoste paid a chambermaid’s wages directly to her peasant father. Similarly, Monsieur Flahaut

been deducted”. Jan Lucassen, “Wage payments and currency circulation in the Netherlands from 1200–2000”, in *Jaarboek voor Munt- en Penningkunde*, vol. 86, 1999 (published in 2001), pp. 1–70. Quote from p. 6.

25 M. Sonenscher, *Work and Wages. Natural law, politics and the eighteenth-century French trades*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 70.

sent foodstuffs or coals to the parents of servant girls, or paid rents on fathers' farms for girls who served the Flahaut family from 1811 to 1877"²⁶

Simonton concludes: "Instead of saving, some girls had no funds at their disposal." Not paying wages directly to servants but to their fathers was relatively common among female servants of rural origin, young and unmarried. But among adult, married female servants the point is that they often had no actual capacity to spend their wages, since all family earnings were administered by husbands or fathers.²⁷ This widespread practice contradicts the notion that labour markets are formed by individuals who own their labour and are able to freely contract in the market, earn their wages and use them for their own needs.

f. Lower ability to bargain collectively for wages and working conditions

Domestic service was performed in private homes, not in factories or workshops. This space and symbolic privatisation of the work place of domestic workers had important implications for their wages. Firstly, because workers were isolated, they had little opportunities to communicate with co-workers, and so discussion of labour problems was extremely difficult. Secondly because, as a result of this identification with the private realm, domestic service was seen as a private relation between the employer and the employee, rather than as a work relation. Unions' pressure to improve workers' conditions and state intervention to guarantee workers' rights, were almost totally absent from domestic service. Protective legislation, including working day limitation, child labour prohibition, regulation of night work, and minimum wage, were never applied to domestic servants, as labour inspection never arrived to the sector. The tradition of economic and social policy described in the first pages, which regarded service work, and particularly personal and domestic services, as non-productive, had no doubt much to do with this absence.

26 Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work. 1700 to the Present*, London/New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 105. She is quoting examples from Scott and Tilly and Margaret Darrow.

27 As the paper by Oyzeguın on Turkish domestic workers shows.

Can domestic servants' productivity be defined and measured?

Productivity is a basic indicator of economic performance. But this economic concept was developed to account for industrial factory production, and its capacity to account for production in other sectors, particularly in the service sector, is very limited.

There are two basic ways of purchasing work: by the time (by hour, day, month or year), and by the task. When purchasing labour by time, the main problem of employers is to monitor the intensity of work (which explains the endless variety of devices to control whether the worker is actually at work). When paying labour by the task (the piece rate system), the main problem is not the time (since the worker is the one interested on working as rapid as possible), but the quality of the work done. Most domestic workers were paid by time, usually by the year if they were living-in servants. In the case of servants living and working at the employers' home, the problem of monitoring the intensity and quality of the work done was to a large extent solved. Middle-class employers lived physically close to their servants, so they knew at any moment where the domestics were and what they were doing. In larger households, masters employed a housekeeper whose job was precisely to monitor the work of the rest of the domestics. Working hours were long, beginning at 5 or 6 and ending at 11 or 12, and days off one (sometimes half a day) a week. Most importantly, living-in servants were always "on call": they could, and in fact they were, called at any moment, at night, or in their day off. As for the work intensity, many examples in the literature show domestic servants not working when masters are gone. This is why a traditional way to control servants' work in their masters' absence was to fix up tasks to be done.

The relation between domestic service and productivity poses at least three problems: first, the service sector has a lower potential than industry or agriculture to incorporate technological innovations (such as mechanization) or organizational innovations (such as mass production) and thus to intensify production. Second, because most services involve an important element of interpersonal relationship, in the production of services intensification and speeding up of the working process in services opposes itself to the quality of what is delivered in a more intense way than in other sectors. And thirdly, in the service sector workers can be hired to do

no work other than displaying their employers' wealth. I will examine these three problems now.

a. Lower potential for services to mechanize

The service sector has a lower potential to incorporate technological innovations, and particularly to mechanize. Technical innovations that have an impact on labour productivity are the responsibility of employers, who have to pay for them. In the industrial sector, technological investments took place only if owners had prospects of increasing benefits, either by lowering labour costs or by intensifying production. Mass production has been a powerful incentive to mechanization in industry, but is not possible in the service sector, much less in personal services. Development of mass production has historically been favoured by three conditions:

- a. The first condition is production spatially concentrated in a work space, be it a factory or a commercial centre. The fact that domestic service takes place at the individual homes of the employers prevents the technological innovations associated with spatial concentration of production to be incorporated.
- b. The second condition favouring mass production and mechanization is the labour process being divided into small operations to be constantly repeated. Division of labour was, according to Adam Smith, the most basic technique to intensify productivity, and was the basis for the Fordist revolution in industry, based upon chain production. Yet this division of labour can rarely be applied to services, particularly personal services. Unlike public services, personal services are by definition, individual: only one person is required to feed a child, to take care for an elderly person, to cook lunch for a family. The worker is required to do the entire service, not just a small part of it, so it makes no sense to cut the working process into small pieces. Chain production and mechanization are in fact the very opposite of personal services.
- c. The third condition is the product being standard. Mass production in both industry and agriculture has required a certain degree of standardization of the unit of output, a process that arrives at the extreme in industrial chain production. Personal services can-

not be standardised. This is also the reason why piece rates have never been a system of remuneration in domestic service, because piece rate wages require the quantity of work to be measured.

In sum, domestic service fulfils none of the conditions that favoured the adoption of technical innovations and were fundamental to increase productivity. As a result of this lower potential of services to incorporate new technologies (technologies which developed precisely to speed up mainly the industrial and agricultural production process), the amount of time required by some of the tasks performed by domestic workers is not very different today from the time required a century ago (with the exception of laundering).

A second consequence of this lower potential of services to increase labour productivity is the lack of competition among service workers. Competition among workers, fuelled by mass migration since the late 19th century, was the driving force behind technological innovation in industry and agriculture, particularly international competition. It was because of the higher productivity of American agricultural workers that European farmers were forced to mechanize. But except for some highly qualified occupations (precisely the ones that are more technological, like health services), markets for services were not international until very recently. The reason is that the personal characteristics of the worker, be these real or perceived (such as for instance regional stereotypes of cleanness) are very important in domestic service. Domestic services include physical proximity between the employer and the employee; access on the part of the employee to the employer's most private spaces and valuable possessions (for instance, the employee is responsible for the employer's children). This explains why the worker's language, country or region of origin, gender, age, race and physical appearance, become determinant in personal services. This is why personal networks have always been a main source for hiring domestic workers. In the absence of personal recommendation, letters of reference from peers, and stereotypes, work very powerfully.

What this means in economic terms is that domestic workers are not easily replaceable: employers will not necessarily replace a domestic worker by another solely because the latter is cheaper. In other words, there is no competition through prices, and thus a basic element to increase productivity is absent in domestic service. The internationalisation

of markets for services that is taking place nowadays (including international migrations) is different from international markets for agricultural and industrial goods developed since the 18th century: flows of foreign services do not mean increasing *competition* and price reduction (and thus an incentive to technological modernization). Foreign domestic workers arrive because of an insufficient local supply of domestic workers. There is no competition and thus no need to reduce prices. This process takes place in other services as well: Spanish nurses are being hired in large numbers in England not in competition with English nurses (and thus not because they are paid less), but due to an insufficient supply of English nurses.

b. quantity vs. quality in service production

In the industrial sector, the concept of productivity is related to the intensification of the worker's effort and the speeding up of the production process. We can ask ourselves if this makes sense in domestic service. Did masters look for cooks who could cook very fast or rather they were looking for sophisticated cooks, able to cook French dishes, and probably taking lots of time to prepare a meal? Did masters look for servants able to clean very fast, or was extreme rapidity interpreted as a job badly done? Was a wet nurse more valued (and her salary was higher) if she was able to feed five children in the same time that other wet nurse fed only one? The concept of productivity associated to speeding up of the working process makes no sense in cleaning or cooking, much less in caring. *In personal services, quality seems often opposed to quantity.*

Employers disliked fast cleaning and even mechanical innovations allowing for lighter work because these conflicted with the idea that a good quality service is only possible through much time and effort. At the end of the 19th century a letter published in the English newspaper *The Sphere* expressed the discomfort of employers at increasing rapidity:

“Home is rapidly becoming the place that one seeks only when it is impossible to go elsewhere. The servant who takes an interest in her work seems no longer to exist, and in return for high wages, we get but superficial service. Where is the maid to be found who takes pride in the brilliance of the glass used upon the table or remembers of her own initiative to darn the damask? Every sort of contrivance now lessens labour (carpet sweepers, knife machines, bathrooms,

lifts) in spite of this the life of a housewife is one long wrestle and failure to establish order".²⁸

The problem of the quality of services becomes further complicated in the case of domestic service, which has a large component of personal service. In domestic service, the standard of a good job, the only possible definition of a job well done, is to please the master: a job well done is a job the master likes. A different master may have a completely different idea of how the floors should be cleaned or the laundry done. This introduces an element of intense singularity, and also makes it impossible not only to observe anything close to "mass production" or standardization of the service, but also serves to question the very idea of domestic workers' productivity. Expanding the concept of productivity so as to include *qualitative productivity* (raising quality), as opposed to physical productivity (physical output or quantity per hour of work) seems a possible solution to account for domestic servants' remuneration.²⁹

c. The paradox of leisure workers

Servants have also historically been hired to do no work: rather, they were hired to display the master's wealthy lifestyle. The function of exhibiting the master's wealth by doing no work besides accompanying the master or being available to him or her, was described by Thorstein Veblen in *The theory of the leisured class*. What mattered here was not what the servant did (the tasks performed), but their simple existence and public display as servants. The paradox described by Veblen consists in that these servants' function was not work, but leisure, exactly like middle class housewives in the 19th and much of the 20th century were educated and trained to do no work (that is, no paid work). How can economic analysis account for these highly rewarded workers whose duty was wearing expensive clothes and to be near their masters, never doing any manual work ?

28 Frank Victor Dawes, *Not in front of servants. A True Portrait of Upstairs, Downstairs Life*, p. 28.

29 Reinhold Reith, "Wage forms, wage systems and wage conflicts in German crafts during the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries", P. Scholliers and L. Schwarz (eds.), *Experiencing wages*, 113-138.

Were servants paid according to their productivity?

My initial question was aimed at discussing which theoretical framework was best placed to understand and interpret domestic workers' remuneration. As we have seen, standard wage theory was developed mainly to account for industrial labour and many forms of labour do not fit this model. In particular, the notion of productivity, basic in the neoclassical economic analysis, fails to account for how workers, particularly in the service occupations, are hired and their labour rewarded. The notion of qualitative productivity could be an alternative concept for these occupations. As standard wage theory is based on the notion of labour's productivity, it fails to account for how wages have historically been established in domestic service.

By studying domestic workers' remuneration, both historical and contemporary, it is possible to see that wages are much more than payment for a commodity in the market, and also to observe the importance of personal relations in fixing "labour's reward". The importance of the personal characteristics of the worker, culturally defined, characteristics such as race, gender, age or class, are then translated into the perception of the worker's qualification and worth. And, as a result, they became fundamental in determining the worker's remuneration. By looking at domestic service, we can see that even the more basic notions of economic theory, such as markets, fail to account for the complexities of labour relations. In sum, domestic servants' remuneration shows us that probably all wages should be analyzed as cultural artefacts rather than within a supply and demand framework.

Servants were not paid according to their productivity, because productivity has little to do with domestic service. Speeding up the work process is not what servants' employers were looking for. On the contrary, rapidity and mechanization are usually seen as opposed to a quality service. Employers were reluctant to purchase electric domestic appliances and tended to prefer domestic workers doing domestic chores "old style", either by hand or with traditional non electric appliances. Domestic service includes personal services as well, and in this case (wet nursing, care of children, elderly and sick persons, attention to members of the family in general), permanent personal availability is the quality demanded.

To a large extent, servants were paid simply following the employers' desires and decisions, taken personally and in view of personal cases.

Personal satisfaction with personal services played a major role in the determination of both the forms and the amounts of remuneration. This is not to deny that there was a market for domestic servants, and that average wages for different domestic occupations existed. Domestic service is not an exceptional case in the workings of historical and current labour markets. Rather, domestic service shows to what extent values, traditions, and socially constructed roles shape supply and demand, and “labour’s reward”, in history as well as in our days.

Légende de 23SPSarasua

Fig. 1. A servant cook in a wealthy household. Engraving, 1862. Museo Municipal, Madrid.

Frequent are the references to “*sisá*”, this servant practice to “fiddle the basket handle” when they go shopping, apparently benefiting from a semi institutionalized privilege. In France the kitchen maid used the same way to keep some coins after shopping (“*faire danser l’anse du panier*”).