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December 1st. This morning, observing some things to be laid up not as they should be by the girl, I took a broom and basted her till she cried extremely, which made me vexed, but before I went out I left her appeased. Samuel Pepys, Diary, *1660.*

WHATEVER the vicissitudes of appeasement in international relations, there is unanimous and continuous testimony on the necessity for progressive appeasement in getting and keeping domestic servants. Indeed one can hardly escape one or both of two inferences from the perennial complaints about the servant problem: either domestic service is a disappearing occupation or rivals the weather as a major conversational subject.

In 1908, for example, the Maine Bureau of Labor Statistics found that perhaps 10,000 permanent jobs for domestic servants were unfilled in that state's cities and towns.[1] The explanation, snobbery —a "distinct line of social caste separates the 'house girl' from other female workers"—was held to be most unreasonable: domestic servants earned more (a median income of $4 per week plus room and board) than girls in stores and factories; and their health, morals, and dress and manners were at least as good. Nor were they dullards: many were found reading "Goethe, Schiller, Homer, George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, Victor Hugo, and the Chautauqua courses!" The arguments are reversible: they were such admirable creatures that perhaps few recruits could meet the standards.

The purpose of this essay is to describe the general characteristics of the domestic service industry, with special attention to trends in employment. That the information on this field is poor is not

[1] *24th Report of Industrial and Labor Statistics* (Augusta, 1910), pp. 311 ff. It is not clear at what wage rate this demand was unsatisfied; as in 1910 there were about 10,000 domestic servants in Maine, presumably the rate was low.

surprising: on the one hand, it is very difficult to collect information from a million employers or twice as many employees; on the other, the nature of the industry has exempted it from almost all social legislation. But since domestic service is still a major field of employment—in 1939 there were as many domestic servants as employees of the railroads, coal mines, and automobile industry combined—even an exploratory study may prove of some interest.

1 The Number of Servants, 1900-1940

For only one week—in 1940—is the number of domestic servants, either employed or seeking employment, known with tolerable precision. From the occupational data of the decennial censuses, however, a series of 'gainfully occupied' (roughly, working or seeking work) can be constructed that is fairly indicative of both trend and general magnitude.[2] Comparability is purchased at some cost in terms of accuracy: it is probable that the total is consistently low, perhaps by 10 or 20 percent.

The number of domestic servants, measured by the four occupations distinguished by the censuses, increases substantially—roughly by a third—from 1900 to 1940 (Table 1).[3] The apparent interruption of this rise from 1910 to 1920 is shown in Appendix A to be at least partly spurious. The record of the 1930's suggests, however, that the expansion has ended, though there is as yet no evidence of a long-run decline.

When the number of servants is compared with the number of potential employers (i.e., private families) or with total population, the basis for the popular lament over the disappearing servant

[2] If the figures were reduced to cover only those employed, the changes would probably be small in the first three decades. In 1930 the *Census of Unemployment* reported 4.7 percent unemployment in "other domestic and personal service", a category broader and possibly more subject to unemployment (see Vol. I, pp. 54, 55). In 1940 the data are not wholly comparable because of the strict interpretation of employment, but they indicate that about 9 percent of domestic servants were unemployed and another 1 percent were in public emergency work (see *Census of Population, 1940,* III, 81 ff.).

[3] Of the four occupations listed in Table 1, practical nurses may seem to fall outside the usual definition of domestic servants as direct employees of private families, engaged to assist in household operation. They are included not only because their work is very similar to routine domestic service but also to offset certain exclusions dictated by Census records (see App. A).

TABLE 1

Persons Attached to Domestic Service
United States by Decades, 1900-1940

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940
	TOTAL NUMBER (thousands)				
Launderers and laundresses	298	528	392	358	207
Untrained nurses	104	127	152	153	115
Cooks	240	254	202	274	1,776
Other servants	867	958	738	1,240	
Total	1,509	1,867	1,484	2,025	2,098
	RELATIVES (1900:100)				
Launderers and laundresses	100	177.0	131.5	119.9	69.4
Untrained nurses	100	122.5	146.8	148.2	110.8
Cooks	100	106.0	84.5	114.2	152.5
Other servants	100	110.5	85.1	143.0	
Total	100	123.8	98.4	134.2	139.1
	FEMALES (thousands)				
Laundresses	289	516	383	354	203
Untrained nurses	92	111	133	140	109
Cooks	232	243	191	257	1,619
Other servants	826	891	679	1,155	
Total	1,439	1,761	1,386	1,906	1,931
% of all domestic servants	95.4	94.4	93.3	94.1	92.0

For sources, see Appendix A. Totals and percentages computed before rounding off figures.

becomes apparent. The ratio of servants to private families fell 36 percent and, reflecting the decreasing size of family, the ratio to population, 20 percent from 1900 to 1940. Even if we allow for a relative undercount in 1920, most of the decline occurred in the second decade.

A large scale survey of the number of domestic servants in other countries is not feasible because of the baffling differences in classifications of occupations between both countries and censuses. Reasonably comparable series for England and Germany (see Table 2 and Chart 1) suggest that the decline in the number of servants relative to population has been widespread.[4] There is also some evidence that a major war accelerates the decrease of servants; but the validity of this generalization probably depends upon the ability of the economy to provide commercial employment after the war.

The ratio of servants to population varies among countries in a

[4] The number of servants in France parallels the American series.

TABLE 2

Number of Domestic Servants in Relation to Families and Population United States, Great Britain, and Germany, Selected Years, 1895-1940

	SERVANTS		
	No. (000)	Per 1,000 families	Per 1,000 population
UNITED STATES			
1900	1,509	94.3	19.8
1910	1,867	93.1	20.3
1920	1,485	61.3	14.0
1930	2,025	67.7	16.5
1940	2,098	60.2	15.9
GREAT BRITAIN			
1901	1,344	192.4	41.3
1911	1,361	171.4	37.7
1921	1,232	141.0	32.5
1931	1,484	145.0	37.1
GERMANY			
1895	1,434	145.0	31.2
1907	1,465	120.7	26.6
1925	1,394	90.8	22.3
1933	1,269	71.5	19.5

For sources, see Appendix A. American families here and subsequently are only private families; the institutional families, which were not shown separately by the Census in 1910 and 1920, are eliminated by linear interpolation of their ratios to all families in 1900 and 1930.

manner that cannot be completely rationalized. Agricultural nations peopled with west European stock, such as Switzerland and Canada, have relatively low servant ratios, as one would expect.[5] But the wealth of a nation has no obvious effect upon the number of servants: Germany, France, Australia, and especially England have as high or even higher servant ratios than the United States.[6] This is all the more surprising because the distribution of income is the primary determinant of the distribution of servants among families in the United States.[7]

[5] In Switzerland there were 10 servants per 1,000 population in 1920 (*Recensement Federal de la Population*) and in 1931 Canada had 14 per 1,000 population (*Census of Canada,* I).

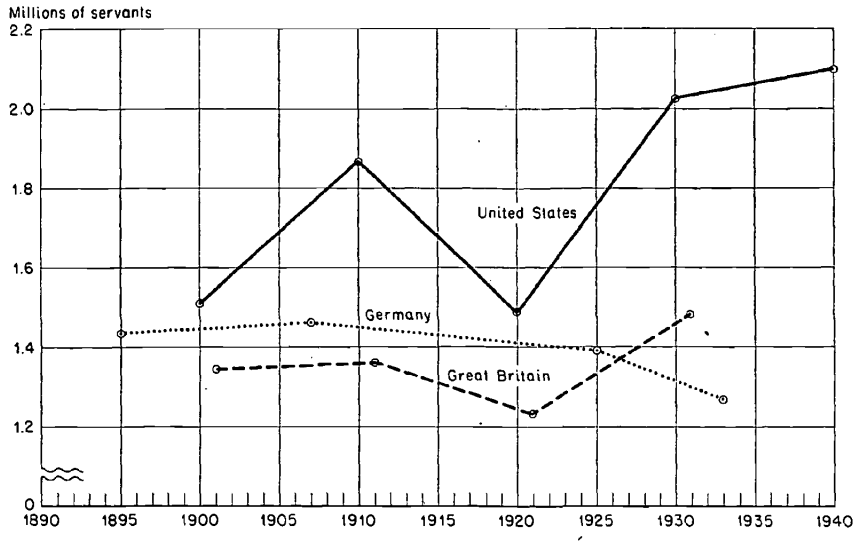
[6] The Australian figure was 19 servants per 1,000 population in 1933 (*Census of Commonwealth of Australia,* II); France had the same ratio in 1933 (*Recensement General de la Population,* I, 2). The figures for England and Germany are given in Table 2 and described in Appendix A.

[7] It has been estimated that from 1939 to 1944 the number of servants fell by a fifth in the United States and Canada, and by two-thirds in the United Kingdom (*The Impact of the War on Civilian Consumption,* Combined Production and Resources Board, Washington, D.C., Sept. 1945, p. 59). The servant ratio was thus approximately equal in the United States and England at the peak of the war effort.

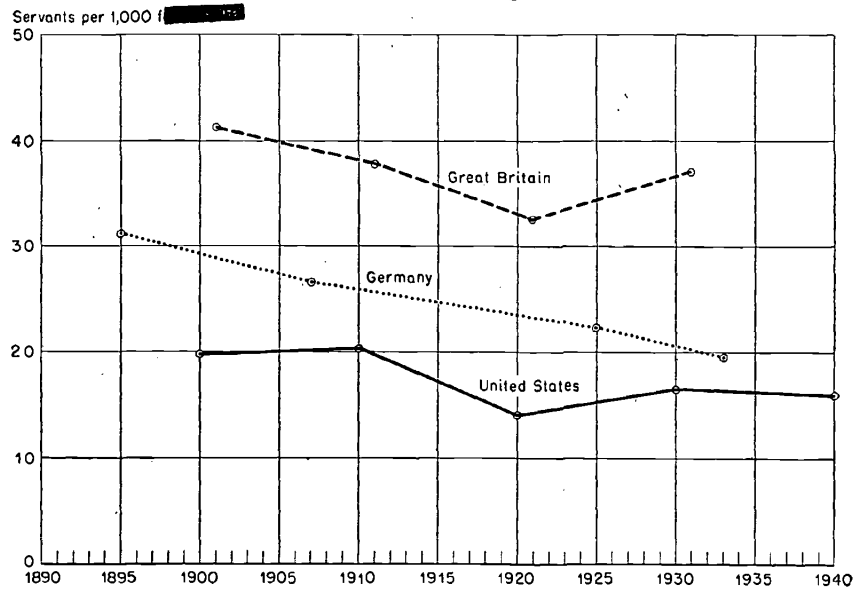
CHART 1

Domestic Servants
United States, Great Britain, and Germany
1895 – 1940

A Number of Servants



B Ratio of Servants to Population



A possible explanation of these wide differences among nations is associated with Thorstein Veblen: "The need of vicarious leisure, or conspicuous consumption of service, is a dominant incentive to the keeping of servants."[8] That is, the *equality* of the distribution of income, rather than the amount, may be a factor of considerable importance. A society with relatively many families at both ends of the income scale would provide both a large supply of servants and a large demand. Unfortunately this conjecture cannot be tested either internationally or nationally, because of lack of data on income distributions.[9]

2 The Characteristics of Servants

Racial Composition

The low social status of domestic service, the absence of vocational or educational requirements, and the discrimination practiced in other lines of employment seem adequate to explain the fact that immigrants and negroes have constituted more than half of female servants since 1900 (see Table 3)—and no doubt an even larger proportion before. During the first decade of this century, when immigration ran high, more than a fifth of the female servants were foreign-born, and a third negro; in 1940 nearly half were negro. The effects of social attitudes and occupational requirements are documented by a comparison of ratios of servants to all women in the labor force: even in 1900 this ratio was twice as high for immigrants and negroes as for native white females, and it is now nearly five times as high for negroes as for whites. A striking illustration of the strength of the aversion to domestic service is that children of immigrants enter domestic service in the same proportion

[8] *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Modern Library, 1934), p. 62, also pp. 55-67. Only the childless Veblen would write:

"In the modern [1899] industrial communities the mechanical contrivances available for the comfort and convenience of everyday life are highly developed. So much so that body servants, or, indeed, domestic servants of any kind, would now scarcely be employed by anybody except on the ground of a canon of reputability carried over by tradition from earlier usage." (*ibid.*, pp. 64-5).

[9] A relatively large number of servants are employed in southern cities where the inequality of incomes (measured by the distribution of rents) is great, but information necessary to segregate the effect of inequality is lacking (see Sec. 2).