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Worlds Between Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class

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Re-reading some of the earlier essays in this fine collection was to re-visit the site of previous excitements. Age, in this case, has not withered them. They retain a freshness and originality, and are wonderfully complemented by some of the more recent essays published here for the first time. As Davidoff says in her introduction, some of the essays focus on domestic activities, some on domestic relations. All, however, are concerned with social order, with the issues of super- and sub-ordination, of power and powerlessness. All are concerned with what have often been considered the margins of both social activity and historical inquiry, performed by the least influential in society, by women and often children. If, now, domestic activity, the household and family, is considered a legitimate and fruitful area of research, we must remember that it was partly due to the efforts of Leonore Davidoff that this is so. Working from the margins, as were most feminist historians in the 1970s, in subjects considered themselves of marginal historical importance and interest, Leonore Davidoff succeeded in bringing them into the centre, and demonstrating in the process why they had traditionally excluded from enquiry and demonstrating with equal dexterity their historical value. It is often from the margins, from those areas of human activity hidden from view, that many of the historical insights on values and perceptions, status and roles are thrown into sharp relief. For her historical subjects are caught, as it were, off balance.

This collection brings together some of the most influential essays in feminist history. Taken as a whole, it is a fitting tribute to the seminal contribution Leonore Davidoff has made in this field, not least in bringing to the forefront the importance and pervasiveness of gender as an organizing category, in the subtle shapings of class, society, and subjectivity, in political and legal philosophy, in the natural and the built environment. It is unfortunate that collections of this kind often take second place to the scholarly monograph in the policies of review editors, for they deserve far wider publicity and a good critical reception. They make a unique contribution to historiography, by charting the development and thinking over the last twenty one years or so, from conception to a recognisable coming of age.

The arena which Davidoff entered was the traditional heartland of gender and class: the home and, in particular, the middle class servant-keeping home of the late 18th and 19th centuries, redolent and riddled with hierarchies of class and gender and increasingly refined rituals and behaviour to guarantee the recognition and maintenance of status and power - of husbands over wives, fathers over children, sons over daughters, mistresses over servants, servants over servants, indoors over outdoors, civilisation over nature, reason over emotion. In many ways, that home is a microcosm of Victorian society. Leonore Davidoff invites us not only to peer through the microscope, but also to view it through a wide angle lens, to see how it both reflects society, and is refracted through society, above and below stairs. Airing the dirty laundry in public says as much about attitudes, relationships and the social order as the presses piled with neatly laundered shirts and sheets. Arguably more, for the clean shirt hides from view the agencies and activities involved in its production, the stains and blots considered inappropriate to the public gaze, the patterns and assumptions of housekeeping, the family secrets and relationships. The cult of domesticity, and the oppositions established to justify and sanctify it, are themes which run through many of these essays: the sanctity of home and the beau ideal, the blasphemy and disorder of the town, the private world of sexual control, the licentiousness of the city street, order, disorder, morality, immorality, cleanliness, filth. Oppositions they may be, but they exist symbiotically rather than autonomously. Above all, they (and the moral values associated with them) exist courtesy of culture, society and history.

One of the most original essays is (still) the first in this collection 'Mastered for Life', first published in The Journal of Social History in 1974. Base dirt, given the Davidoff alchemy, becomes intellectual gold. Domestic servants and working class wives, the women engaged in the relentless pursuit of cleanliness, were excluded from many of the legislative and social debates of the 19th century, and also from much of the historical endeavour of the 20th century. But it is precisely from the pursuit of, and meanings given to, cleanliness throughout the 19th century that Davidoff produces her insights. It was not cleanliness per se but the meanings ascribed to cleanliness that were vital, for they realized as well as symbolized an increasing separation of work from and within the home, a separation linked with the growth of the middle classes and the need to establish status through deference, order and ritual. Ideas of citizenship began to devalue and finally discredit the role of the (male) servant, as debasing of 'manhood', but the notions of super and

subordination retained their power over women. And, one might add, in the Colonies, over the native, the subordinate par excellence.

The theme is returned to in later essays, where Davidoff's fine sociological instinct marry with those of the historian. The function of domesticity, she argues (in 'The Rationalization of Housework') is to impose order on disorder, to transform the anarchy of raw material into acceptable cultural artifacts, to maintain the boundaries between nature and civilization. Those boundaries are themselves historically and culturally specific, as is the process of boundary definition and maintenance, and the delegation of those responsible. While patterns of consumption had been the most common marker of status until the eighteenth century, this had, by the end of the nineteenth century, become only one of a range. Of far more significance as a statement of class and status was the equation of class with cleanliness, and the equation of cleanliness with godliness, in which the boundary makers and retainers were women whose standards of femininity were judged to be in direct proportion to their standards of domestic cleanliness. That this should be associated with class in not surprising. Dirt contaminates; the middle class woman who could afford domestic servants rose, necessarily and literally, above the dirt. Dealing with dirt remained the 'natural' milieu of the daughters of the great unwashed. As such, it neatly and tidily put the classes in their place. At the same time, it became the woman's primary role (and became her prettily when she conducted it well) to provide a safe haven from a world increasingly characterized by squalor and disorder. The middle class domestic house was to become the model of domestic rationality as much as the nineteenth century entrepreneur was the model of economic and business rationality. And both created in their wake a form of public chaos, whether sanitary or social. Landladies and their lodgers (particularly working class ones, another neglected area of historical enquiry, and the subject of another essay in this collection) similarly came to offend bourgeois sensibilities by flaunting the private/public boundaries, by compromising the autonomy of the household, by contaminating the sanctity of the home with the filth of the market place and the sanctity of the family with the anarchy of the young, male stranger.

But forbidding dirt, banishing it to the realms of sin, and those who dealt in it to the nether areas of society, did little to reduce its allure. For as purity assumed a sexual as well as a sanitary connotation and both became a metaphor for morality, and civilization, the impure, the uncivilized became the focus of attention, the objects of missionary endeavour and sometimes the missionary position. The poor in the cities, as much as the natives in the empire, lived in conditions in which dirt and the environment, men and women, flowed in and out with promiscuous disregard for acceptable bourgeois boundaries. It was a source of fascination for many Victorians, as the working classes (and the natives, one might add) became both demonized and eroticized, a theme explored with finesse in 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: the Case of Hannah Culwick and A.J.Munby' (first published in 1979 in Feminist Studies), that exemplary couple who lived out an elaborate, extraordinary and (for us) enlightening Victorian parlour game of class and gender.

The richness of a cross disciplinary approach emerges in one of the more recent essays in this volume on the role of siblings in historical enquiry, a plea to move beyond the nucleated triad to recognize the importance of kin and, in particular collaterals, in the creation and maintenance of social networks and in the shaping of loyalties and psyches. It is an area more commonly associated with social anthropology than history and, like all the essays in this volume, has an immediate and contemporary significance. It complements in striking ways the essays which deal with more empirical detail on the 19th century creation of the household and the ideological framework of the family. Arguably, much of the contemporary political concern on the decline of the family and family values - which so often ignores the demographic and social factors of the last hundred years which have changed family composition - has as much to do with the apparent decline in sexual morality as a subtle shifting of the relations of power within families: single-parent female-headed households clearly flaunt the sensibilities of gender positioning while the re-creation of elaborate (and fluid) kinship patterns through the establishment of, for instance, step-families or, indeed, the emergence of a notion of 'families of choice', shifts the balance away from vertical hierarchies of deference and responsibility towards more horizontal and (perhaps) egalitarian sets of family relationships and even fictive-kin. Although there is no direct historical antecedent for contemporary changes in the family, it is always well to be reminded that who constitutes family and household, why and with what effect has never been a

constant, even within modern and early modern British society. Many of the protagonists in the contemporary debate over the decline of the family and family values could do well to consider the historical antecedents of the family.

The final essay in this volume, 'Regarding Some "Old Husbands' Tales": Public and Private in Feminist History' is a highly sophisticated analysis of the growth and development of that old binary the public/private, its increasingly nuanced (and complicated) gendered implications as applied to, and reflected in, the practice of philosophy, politics, economics, citizenship, science, medicine, art, culture, language, as well as sensitivities, subjectivities and identities, the entire panoply of what we know of as society and culture. With impressive detail Davidoff argues how many of our commonplace assumptions which have guided, and continue to guide, the organization and study of society, have been premised on masculinist concepts which at once excluded women (and children, and foreigners) while rendering them both neutral, commonsensical, irreproachable, their gendered bias invisible.

There is little scope in this review to do justice to the depth and richness of this excellent collection. Indeed, only some of the essays have been touched on here, and then only partially. Each essay is a deeply thoughtful, provocative and formative contribution to the intellectual topography of class and gender between 1780 and 1914, and will undoubtedly continue to do so for generations to come. One of the especial delights of the collection is the invitation it affords to travel with its author through feminist historiography, to chart the moves from the early archeological essays which dug through the muck of middle class brass into a contemplation of the gendered intellectual dualisms still lingering in contemporary society. Virtually no stone has been left unturned: whether the issue is citizenship or cooking, status or sex, the body politic or the body sexual, all are appropriate clues and revealing subjects for Davidoff in her analysis of this, the long nineteenth century. Her mastery of her subject and material, the detailed evidence she brings to bear, the sheer breadth of her understanding and scholarship, deserves to make this collection a classic as each essay, in its turn, has already become.

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