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What happened in the North? Servants and rural workers in Norway

¿Qué pasó en el Norte? Sirvientes y trabajadores rurales en Noruega

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KEYWORDS

Norway
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 Servants role
 Sex-ratio
 Rural servants

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to investigate the situation of the rural servants in Norway from the preindustrial period, the rural Norway, to industrialisation in the middle of XIX century. I will summarise the research that has been carried out in Norway. In particular I will describe the evolution of the servant's role and tasks, underlining the transformations and passages from an agrarian society to an industrial one and the importance of the service activities from a demographic prospective. Furthermore I will describe the gender roles, the sex-ratio, the differences between male and female servants and the differences in the treatment they received. I will contextualise the case of Norway and see if there were similitudes or differences in accordance with what happened in the rest of the Europe.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Noruega
 Servicio domestico
 Función de los criados
 Tasas de masculinidad
 Criados rurales

RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente artículo consiste en estudiar las condiciones de los sirvientes rurales en Noruega desde el período preindustrial hasta la industrialización de mediados del siglo XIX. Se describe la evolución del papel y de las tareas de los sirvientes prestando atención a las transformaciones y el cambio que se produjo desde una sociedad rural a una sociedad industrial. Al mismo tiempo se atiende a la importancia respecto de las actividades de servicios desde una perspectiva demográfica. Además, se abordan los roles de género, las tasas de masculinidad, las diferencias entre sirvientes y sirvientas y las diferencias en el trato que éstos recibieron. Se contextualiza el caso noruego con otros ejemplos de Europa y se investiga si hubo similitudes o diferencias.

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The aim of this article is to investigate the situation of the rural servants in Norway from the preindustrial “bondesamfunn” to industrialisation in the middle of XIX century. I will summarise the research that has been carried out in Norway. In particular I will describe the evolution of the servant’s role and tasks, underlining the transformations and passages from an agrarian society to an industrial one and the importance of the service activities from a demographic prospective. Furthermore I will describe the gender roles, the sex-ratio, the differences between male and female servants and the differences in the treatment they received. I will contextualise the case of Norway and see if there were similitudes or differences in accordance with what happened in the rest of the Europe.

Today there are many studies of domestic service in Europe but until the 1990s this topic didn’t attract much attention from scholars. The studies done in Norway also reflect this trend but the last 20 or 30 years have brought an increasing number of studies of domestic and rural servants. Sølvi Sogner (1997, 2005) is among the most important scholars to have studied domestic service in Norway. Feminist historians have tended to treat domestic service as part of gender studies. Particular emphasis has been devoted to the study of urbanisation and transformation of the domestic service and to the role of the migration.

Norway is situated west of the John Hajnal’s imaginary line that divided Europe in two, from Trieste to St. Petersburg. This means that according to Hajnal’s (1965) so-called “European marriage pattern”, Norway should have had a high average age of marriage for men and for women and consequently many single people. To the east, conversely, given that the average age of marriage was lower, there were fewer single men and women. According to Hajnal (1983), in Western Europe people were forced to marry late because they had to work in order to be able to establish their own nuclear family. As a result, very often and as a last resort, they had to work as servants. In this regard John Hajnal together with Peter Laslet (1977), introduced the concept of life-cycle servants. According to Hajnal in the early 20th century the average marriage age for Norwegian women was around 23 years and for men it was 26. (1983) Hajnal's analysis was discussed in studies that demonstrated that the situation was far more complex than his “European marriage pattern” theory claimed. (Livi Bacci, 1998) For Norway Hajnal’s theories were confirmed, among others, by studies by the historical demographer Sølvi Sogner (1999) that found that people married even later than Hajnal believed: at 25 years of age for women and at 28 for men.

The preindustrial period (until the middle of the XIX century) and the agrarian servants

I have divided the history of the Norwegian servants in two parts: preindustrial and industrial. The preindustrial era lasted from late XVIIIth century until the middle of XIXth. The second period -- from the middle of the XIX century -- started with a timid industrialisation and an improvement in the condition of life of Norwegian people, and ended with the transformation of the country into a modern urban society. My analysis will be investigate the lives of rural servants in the Norwegian countryside and only subsequently lives of domestic servants in the cities. My article doesn’t pretend to be exhaustive and is based on the research in Norway concerning rural and urban servants. I apologize for all omissions.

In pre-industrial Norway, 9 of 10 Norwegians lived in the countryside. (Sogner 2003, p. 40) This means that 90% of the population lived in rural areas. (Avdem and Melby, 1985, p. 10) Christiania in 1855 had a population of 40.000 inhabitants. Norway, as the other rural society in Europe had a subsistence economy whose primary objective was to produce food, instruments and all the essential goods indispensable for a family and a farm to survive. Norwegians family lived in a nuclear households, usually consisting of a couple with children. The household, especially if big enough, could host other relatives. Thus it was not unusual to find also extended and enlarged type aggregates. (Avdem and Melby, 1985, p. 15)

According to Ståle Dyrvik, (1979, pp. 192-193) in 1801 there were 95.000 servants in the Norwegian countryside. This accounts for 12% of the national population. In the city of Christiania the percentage was even higher: 14 % of the city population. (Sprauten, 1992, p. 365) According to Hanne Østhus in 1801 the 47% of all females 20 years old and over and 60% of all males between 15 and 29 were servants. Similarly high percentages were

observed for Sweden; in North Sweden in the 1800s, 60-70 % of people were servants. According to Borje Harnesk, (1990, p. 9) in Sweden in the 1700s and 1800s there were one or two servants on each farm.

Table 1. Source: Dyrvik 1984, Historisk Statistikk 1978

Year	Total number servants	Servants pr. 100 inhabitants	Women
1801	105.140	11,92	7,8
1825	136.449	-	-
1835	139.954	-	-
1845	162.957	12,3	7,8
1855	163.681	11,0	7,1
1865	159.062	9,4	6,5
1875	159.636	8,8	6,7
1890	143.941	7,2	5,7
1900	127.343	5,7	4,6
1910	121.447	5,1	4,2
1920	115.328	4,4	3,7
1930	134.232	5,1	4,3

The age of the servants

It is possible to find differences in the conditions of servants before and after the industrialisation of the country in 1850. Before 1850, young people were expected to work as servants; this changed after industrialisation.

Young Norwegians in pre-industrial Norway moved from farm to farm, from area to area to be employed as servants in the years between their confirmation and their marriage. The majority of servants were therefore young -about 12 years' old- but the age could fluctuate depending on the area, the family economy and need. A study shows that in Trøndelag and in Vestlandet, servants were starting even earlier than the average age. (Jan Oldervoll, pp. 91-95) For children of very poor families, service could start when children were as young as 6 or 7. In some areas on the west coast of Norway -according to some sources - 7% of children aged 7, were servants. Very young children were between 2% and 5% of all the servants in Norway. (Frode Myrheim, 2006, pp. 40-42) This was often the case of very poor families that had to send their own children into service in order to survive or for orphans. In this case service and life cycle service provided a remedy and often a comfort. In pre-industrial Norway children or parents often died early. To find another family was some compensation for the high mortality rate. The majority of servants, boys and girls, were around 12. A century later the girls tended to stay home until age 15; their brothers left at 17. (Sølvi Sogner, 2005, p. 34)

Very few servants were recorded as "old" or married. This means that a small number of servants spend their entire lives in this role. We can conclude that in Norway to work as a servants was usually a temporary phase that ended with marriage. Service was therefore a learning time, but also a waiting time: waiting to inherit or to access their part of an inheritance. In the meantime children were obliged to work as servants. The relation between servants and master was often a relation of social equals. Servants were usually considered members of the master's family. Anne Høsthus (2007, p. 3) uses the expression *paternalism* to describe the relation between masters and servants. They were an integral part of the family farm and subjected to the authority of the head of the household. (Sølvi Sogner, 2005, p. 14) Even if they were very often totally integrated in the family, they had the same status as the children. This means they had no power and authority at all. Sølvi Sogner stated that servants had a low position in Norwegian society. As we have seen to work as servant was a stadium in the life of a person in which the majority went through, therefore was much easier for a servant to accept the authority of a master, especially one who had formerly been a servant.

Wages

How much could a servant earn? Were they paid in money or in goods? One peculiarity among Norwegian servants is that they had to pay the taxes on their loan. This could be an interesting difference between the north and the south of Europe where servants were seldom taxed. This endorsement was introduced in Norway after the costly Northern War (1700-1720) that forced the Danish-Norwegian crown to impose a tax also on the thin loans of the Scandinavian servants. From now on they were obliged to pay a seventh of their earnings in tax. (Sølvi Sogner, 2005, p. 19) Servants' wages were very low and depended on the servant's gender, age, and the regional job market. A servant in Trømsø could earn just 1,50 *riksdaler* a year, in the region of Finnmark was possible to earn up to 5,77 *riksdaler* a year. According to Kvalvåg the average wage for rural servants in the south of the country was 2,81 for girls and 3,61 for boys. (Leif Ødegaard, 1975, p. 180) The lowest loan was paid to young girls at the beginning of their professional life: 1 *riksdaler* per year. The highest -- 6 *riksdaler* -- was earned by governess and wet nurses. A normal servant could earn normally between two and three *riksdaler*. (Sølvi Sogner, 2005, p. 19) For the sake of comparison, a barrel of grain cost one *riksdaler* and a cow cost three *riksdaler*. (Sissel Bakke: 53) It was not rare for servants to be paid in kind, usually in clothes and shoes. Farmers did not have much money to pay the servants and money was not circulating as much as today, therefore wages were often paid in grain or goods. Usually half of the wage was in clothes. Usually girls received the 57,8 % of their wages in clothes and the remaining 42,2% in money. Boys received 58,3% of the wages in clothes and the remaining 41,6 % in money. (Sissel Bakke: 67) Even though female servants earned less than male servants, they were often worked as hard, so it was cheaper to hire a woman. Boys had usually higher wages than girls. Servants in Nord Norway earned less than servants coming from other regions but Leif Ødegaard (1975, pp. 288-289) shows that servants in Finnmark (extreme Nord) were earning more than other servants. Sølvi Sogner (2005, p. 20) presents the case of those servants who were paid entirely in clothing. These tended to be young servants in a very poor family who just needed a place to live. Children were also paid in clothes. Servants also received food and a place to sleep, usually in the farm where they were working.

Under these circumstances, can we say that to be a servant in the 1800 century Norway was really a profession? Were people who worked as servants just for a brief period of their life be considered servants? Or we can consider servant those who served for the rest of their life and defined by Laslet as "Lifetime servants". Richard Wall (2004, p. 21) shows for England that after 1800 domestic service became a class as well as an age-specific type of employment. Once someone had become a servant, then it would be difficult to find any other occupation. This was not the case of Norway where the majority of young people worked as servants for 10- 15 years before getting married and finding other employment. The same was observed in Sweden where the majority of men working as servants, were later working in other jobs. (Børje Harnesk , 1990, pp. 216-221) Servants according with "Kristian 5" law, had usually a written contract that lasted six months or a year. (Sogner, 2005, p. 14) We can therefore characterize Norwegian domestic service, especially masculine, as a kind of pre-employment rather than an occupation. In the majority of the cases, servants in Norway were integrated into the household and had had a regular contract.

Sex ratio

How many servants in preindustrial Norway had a farm? Sølvi Sogner wrote that a three- quarters of the farms in Norway had servants. Usually they had just one: a girl. Quite a lot had two: a boy and a girl. Very few farms had more than two servants. A study for an area around the city of Bergen (Nordhordland and Voss) shows a big circulation of servants. Almost half of farms had servants with 58% recorded for the parish of Voss. (Sissel Bakke: 2009) The sex ratio in preindustrial Norway varied. Women were the majority and some studies have showed that in the 1600s, some areas had a predominance of female servants. In the fishing districts, male servants outnumbered female servants. Sex ratio was decided by the availability of working force, but also by the necessity of the farm, the natural resources and type of work that needed to be done. This applied only in the countryside. (Sissel Bakke, 2009, pp. 39-40) It was possible to find servants in all social groups in the countryside as in the cities. Servants in Norway were a mobile work force. A farmer could not have more than a couple of males sons

over the age of 18 years old at home. Some of them were obliged to find employment as a servant in another farm. As we are going to see later, this was regulated by the Norwegian law. To work as a servant was a factor also of modernity and sometimes of emancipation. Often it was the only way for a daughter to leave her parents' household. Servants were sleeping alone and experienced for the first time a certain freedom, even sexual freedom.

Servants moved around in Norway but also in cities like Amsterdam. Sølvi Sogner has studied Norwegian servants' migration to the Netherlands between 1601 and 1800. Thousands of young Norwegians moved to Dutch cities to work as servants, especially in the beginning, and until they were able to find better paid jobs. A large proportion of these servants were young unmarried women. In the Netherlands both women and men could earn much more than they could in Norway. In the majority of the cases, working temporarily as a servant was a temporary phase in the life of a woman before marriage. Frode Myrheim (2006) has studied the geographic mobility of Norwegian servants in the 1700s century. Mobility in Norway was higher among female than among male servants. Servants moved after labour needs had changed or after changes in the household cycle; poor diet, bad relations with the householder, and to get married. Sometimes a servant moved because of differences in the loans. The movements of the servants were regulated by law and servants could just move twice a year: 14 April or 14 October. Servants were moving often and the majority had a contract that lasted half year or a year. It was very rare for servants to remain in service for more than a couple of years. We can extend to Norway the same conclusion that Richard Wall (1987, p. 81) had pointed out for England as characterised by mass movement of adolescent since also Norwegian youth were quite mobile. How did a young servant find employment in preindustrial Norway? The majority of servants found employment through network and family contact and relationships. For those who were not finding a master with this means –and this was just for Christiania -- they could register in an “engagement office” *byens festemenn*, that had opened in 1739. The servant's workday started around 5 or 6 o'clock. He or she would light the oven so that the house would be warm when the family woke up. In the 1700s and 1800s a servant usually worked 15-16 hours a day.

The regulation: Rights of servant

Raffaella Sarti (Sarti, 2014, p. 310) pointed out that historical research has showed that servants and domestic workers have been fighting for their rights for at least a couple of centuries. This doesn't seem the case for Norway where the rights of servants and masters were carefully regulated. Sølvi Sogner reveals that in the sixteenth century policies were introduced which guaranteed the availability of agricultural labour. To work as a servant was mandatory. In 1291 there was a law that forced poor people who did not have an occupation to work as servants. In 1349 after the Black Death (and the consequent shortage of labour) people out of work were obliged to serve for at least one year. Throughout the 1500s new regulations required farmers to have enough servants. Compulsory service became a part of Christian 5S Norwegian law in 1687 that remained in force for almost 200 years. The law obliged unmarried young people to work as servants until they were able to have their own farm or another profession. (Sogner 2005, pp. 14-15) The law was designed to ensure that unmarried children above the age of 18 who were redundant on the farm to look for service work. The class dimension of regulating labour in this Norwegian case can be seen by the ruling that able-bodied men or women “of restricted means” were obliged to take up work in service. This law was not abolished until the late nineteenth century. (Sogner 2004, p. 180) According to the authorities, to force the entire population into stable employment prevented begging and vagrancy. As I already highlighted a law from 1754 prohibited a farmer from having more than a daughter and a son at home. The other children were obliged to move to another household or be employed as servants. The fear of people being idle, which was considered to lead to criminality, is also illustrated by Lund's (2004) studies on Sweden. Lund shows that anybody who did not own or lease land or possess other sources of income had to find employment as a servant.

Both servant and master duties were strictly regulated. Servants were bound to the farm for six months or one year. They were also obliged to inform the farmer seven weeks before moving. It was illegal for the servant to sign a service contract and not to show up and it was illegal for a master to turn down a servant who had signed a

contract. The master was also obliged to pay the servant on time. Servant could leave tenancy if he or she was not treated appropriately, but in this case a judge or legal authority would intervene. (Østhus 2007) Breaches of the service contract would be punished and both servants and masters paid a penalty if they broke the contract. The master had the rights to chastise and to guide the servant as if he or she was his own child. Is interesting to observe that the master had a moral obligation to his servant. For example he had to make provisions for the servant to attend church or execute his religious obligations. Masters also had control over the servant's sexual life. Masters were obliged to issue a letter of reference for the servant after the period of service. The scripted declaration could be written also by the other authorities of the district. A servant who was accepting other jobs without a "pass" or "certificate" could be punished. Masters in turn were fined for writing deceptive information about a servant.

Servants in the cities: The feminization of the domestic service

In 1801 lived in cities less than 10 % of the entire Norwegian population. In 1900 just one third of the entire population of Norway lived in cities. The population in Norway doubled and from 1815 to 1865, increased from 900.000 to 1.700.000. As industries grew, so did the nautical industry which became a resource of vital importance for the future of the country. The naval sector was going to hire a consistent number of workers and generate revenue for the Norwegian economy. In the XIX century Norway changed from an agrarian into a modern urban society. (Sogner, 2005, p. 39)

In 1875 there were 76 000 inhabitants in Christiania and 7000 servants. (Sogner, 2005, p. 50) To find employment as a servant was the most important source of money for women. The city grew and so did the demand for servants. Better diet, hygiene, living conditions improved and life expectancy increased for the Norwegian population. Thousands of young people were moving to the city to find better lives and jobs. At the same time, other Norwegians crossed the Atlantic. Most of them were finding employment as servants. The feminisation of domestic service happened across Europe and it is well documented. As pointed out by Raffaella Sarti (2006, p. 23) in many European countries the percentage of domestic workers in the economically active population peaked around the 1880s and thereafter declined into the early decades of the twentieth century. What happened in the North? Did the country have a "servant problem" or a "servant shortage"? In Norway the feminisation of domestic service started in the 1800 with the industrialisation of Norway and especially in Christiania, but women were already the majority. In the 1801 between two of three girls and one of three boys were servants. In 1901 one in three girls and one in ten boys were servants. (Sogner, 2005, p. 39) In the 1900s Norway saw the disappearance of the male servant.

The feminization of domestic service brought also a difference in the relation between master and servants, the social distances between them and in the attitude toward servants. The middle class could afford servants. To have servants was not just a necessity but also a status symbol. It was especially prestigious to have a male servant like a butler. (Sogner, 2005, p. 21) To have a servant gave status to a family. There was a hierarchy among the servants working in a house. One-fourth of families had a domestic servant. Seventy per cent had just one, 20% had two and the 10% had three or more. Solvi Sogner (2005, p. 50) shows that 40 % of employed women in Christiania between 1900 and 1930 were servants. Men preferred to avoid domestic service; jobs in industry paid better. Thus for men wage labour replaced life cycle-service. For a young woman the only way to survive in a city was originally to work as a servant in a middle class home. And even though also women after a while could find employment in the new born industry, at the beginning it was not that common. Later the improved employment possibilities - even for women - would eventually lead to the disappearance of the servants of both sexes altogether and bring Norway to face what Raffaella Sarti called the "servant problem", "servant shortage", or "great question", "*crise de la domesticite*" in French", "*crisi delle domestiche*" in Italian. (Sarti, 2014) In other words, domestic servants disappeared from Norway. (Hagemann, 1997, p. 157). The demise of the life cycle servant brought a decrease in nuptiality and the fact that women and men were earning a salary made it possible to marry earlier. (Thorvaldsen) When the cities were still facing a high demand for domestic servants, the specialisation of the domestic service sector began, with more roles and functions inside the house.

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