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Beyond the Black and White: Female Domestic Servants, Dress and Identity in France and Britain, 1900–1939

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ABSTRACT

Far from being a trivial detail, clothes fundamentally define who we are and how we are perceived by others. Drawing on a large sample of French and British servants' memoirs, this article explores how dress served a crucial but contrasting role in the way French and British servants articulated their identities within and outside the home between 1900 and 1939. It argues that servants' dress was deeply linked to the nature of the occupation in each country and the structure of their respective female labour markets.

KEYWORDS

Domestic service;
autobiographies; dress;
comparative history

Introduction

Autobiographies are important sources for the study of marginal groups whose voices do not boom through the official archives. In particular, they are one of the only avenues available to recover the experiences of female domestic servants. These documents have helped historians understand the economic struggles faced by these women and the social trajectories they followed.¹ But autobiographies are also bursting with revealing digressions and significant details, memories of everyday life, of what was eaten on a certain day, which film was seen, what dress was worn. Rather than overlooking these banal recollections, this article seizes upon them to explore the everyday lives of domestic servants. It is based upon the premise that to understand marginal groups we must actively read at the margins of their stories.

One example is the case of Irene Phillips, who decided to write her memoirs about her childhood in an English village at the turn of the century and her work as a housemaid in the imposing English country houses of the interwar period. As she sat down to write, the dress she had donned on her first day of work vividly came back to her memory. She opened her memoir with the following: 'A servant girls' life was very hard and you were expected to wear stripped cotton dresses and aprons and caps for morning and afternoon black dress, white lace apron and lacy cap.'² In an interview about her time in service, Paulette Belaire, a French maid in the 1920s, was asked whether she wore a uniform and struggled to answer: 'I don't know, I dressed like I wanted. Did I wear an apron? Of course, I did, like any fourteen years old girl.'³ These passing remarks on dress set alongside a broader discussion of these women's occupational trajectories and work conditions are easy to miss. However, they reveal that, far

from a simple dressing of the main text, the contrasting discourses that the two women created around their dress can help us better understand what it meant to be a domestic servant, to wear a carefully selected white lacy cap and apron every day or, on the contrary, to done a work apron without giving it a second thought. That Irene Phillips returned to her dress years after the events highlights the strong emotions that her uniform evoked. Paulette Belaire's experience in France was entirely different. She seemed bemused by the question regarding the existence of a servant's uniform. While these two women had the same occupation, there was a stark contrast between Irene Phillips who, by putting on her black and white uniform, took on the distinctive identity of the domestic servant in Britain and Paulette Belaire, who painted herself as a more elusive figure dressed like any fourteen-year-old French girl.

This article explores how dress served a crucial but contrasting role in the way French and British servants defined their identity.⁴ Clothes provide protection from the elements, but they also fundamentally define who we are and how we are perceived by others.⁵ They can indicate the wearer's occupational and regional identity, class, gender, age and religion. They can empower and confer respectability, but they can also be used to punish, shame, ridicule and exclude. The bulk of the historiography on dress has focused on the clothing of the elite or items with more public symbolism such as ceremonial dresses, court clothing and military uniforms.⁶ Historians of clothing have adopted this narrow focus because of the role of the upper classes as trend setters with a more vibrant, extravagant, and varied fashion and because upper-class clothing has been more carefully preserved. Notable exceptions to this trend include Daniel Roche's seminal work on the wardrobes of the rich and the poor in Ancien Régime France, as well as Vivienne Richmond and John Styles' ground-breaking studies of the clothing of the poor in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which show the important symbolism of dress in all categories of society.⁷ The article builds on Roche, Richmond and Styles' approach to clothing by focusing on the way servants articulated their identity through their dress.

Domestic manuals and employers' accounts mention the servants' dress solely as a conspicuous item to forward the social status and respectability of the employers. This article, in contrast, is based on research drawn from the largest sample of servants' autobiographies collected to date, composed of 103 British and 97 French female servants' autobiographies and interviews.⁸ While this type of qualitative method has already been used on a smaller scale by historians of domestic service in Britain, the French historiography has largely relied on employers' accounts and descriptions of servants in novels to build its picture of domestic service.⁹ The article introduces new materials to the study of French domestic service by tapping into the rich resources of the *Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique*, which houses more than twenty unpublished twentieth-century servants' autobiographies. These sources provide the opportunity to analyse the importance of dress in the self-fashioning of servants, on which conventional sources have very little to say. Servants' autobiographies are key sources to study their work dress, because, as Jennifer Craik points out 'anecdotes about uniforms involve formative moments of self-hood.'¹⁰ The evidence from the autobiographies and oral interview transcripts is nevertheless corroborated with other types of sources such as newspaper articles and official reports to place it in historical context.

Servant's discourses about their clothes are considered in connection with the societal debate called 'the servant problem' or 'servant crisis'. The period between the early twentieth century and the start of the Second World War saw a fall in the number of domestic servants which lead commentators to speculate about the future of the occupation. The extent of the decrease in size of the servant labour force and the scale of the debate, however, were much more important in Britain than in France. While French commentators discussed the insubordination of domestic servants and the growing tension with their employers, there was a real sense of crisis in Britain as employers thought that the rise of new employment opportunities in the service sector and changing attitudes regarding the social hierarchy had sealed the fate of domestic service.¹¹ The debate about domestic service was carried in the news and filled pages of government reports but it also struck at the heart of British households. Servants and employers negotiated new definitions of domestic service, argued over personal boundaries and, ultimately, debated the extent of the employers' authority over the servants' lives. Because dress was a critical tool to define, control and classify workers, it was at the core of what contemporaries called the 'servant problem'.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the nature of domestic service in France and Britain by showing that far from a trivial detail, French and British servants' dress played a crucial role in defining their identity and stood as a visual reminder of the status of their occupation in their respective society. The first section of this paper sets the scene by outlining the way domestic service in France remained connected to the productive sphere much later than in Britain where service was an occupation solely dedicated to domestic tasks following the separation of home and work. The second section provides a description of the uniform commonly worn by British servants and argues that its use was justified by the hierarchical and conspicuous nature of domestic service in the British economy. In contrast with the British servants' uniform, it is shown that most French servants wore ordinary clothes because of their place within the French family-economy. In the third section, it is argued that the presence or absence of a uniform fundamentally shaped the type of identities that French and British servants adopted within their employer's home. While domestic service might stand as a 'reference point for the establishment of class difference' in Britain, the study of servants' dress reveals that this narrative had little relevance in France where rural identities predominated. Finally, the fourth section compares the servant's uniform to other female uniforms in both countries and reflects on how British servants struggled with the symbolism of their uniform in a society where female workers enjoyed an increasing amount of independence.

Home and work: the nature of domestic service in France and Britain

Domestic service was staple part of many young women's lives between 1900 and 1939. In Britain, domestic service was the primary employer of women until the Second World War. Fewer women were employed in service in France as the agricultural sector continued to recruit a significant share of the population. Nevertheless, around fourteen percent of the French female labour force was in service.¹² Servants were employed in a range of households, from grand upper-class mansions with a large staff to middle and lower middle-class households requiring just one or two servants. Up to the Second World War, most servants lived in their employers' home. This close

proximity where constant contact and intimacy were inevitable meant that domestic service was often perceived as more than just a job. It was a key site where people from different social classes, generations and regions met each other and negotiated their respective identities. Domestic servants, therefore, had 'a compelling presence' in French and British economic, social and cultural life.¹³

While domestic service was an important sector of employment and a key cultural institution in France and Britain, the occupation was shaped distinctly by their respective national economies. The industrialisation of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth century meant that the model of the family economy, in which all family members and household residents played a role in the survival of the family as an economic and social unit, disappeared.¹⁴ While historians have agreed that this process of separation between workplace and home was rather 'protracted and tortuous', by the twentieth century, the distinction was undeniable and goods were no longer produced within the household.¹⁵ The impact of industrialisation in Britain has been examined mostly in regard to the agricultural and industrial sector, but the consequences on service were also significant. Domestic servants had been traditionally defined in broad terms as 'persons employed by men of trades and professions under them to assist them in their particular callings; or, such persons as others retain to perform the work and business of their families'.¹⁶ Servants were employed for a variety of tasks: on farms, they helped with the dairy and nursed children; in shops, they sold the goods and cleaned the counter. Because servants could be found in all sorts of trades, domestic service was more characterised by a type of relationship – working for a master and living within his household – than an occupation dedicated to a specific task. Servants' participation in domestic and productive activities alongside the family unit, however, disappeared as work was exported outside the home and rationalised within larger structures. In the agricultural sector, the employment of female servants who took care of the home while helping to raise hens or weed the fields was incompatible with intensive capitalist arable farming, which relied instead on day labour.¹⁷ In parallel, the rise of chain stores and lock-up shops contributed to the dissociation between the homes of shopkeepers and their place of work.¹⁸ While in family-businesses, servants might help make and sell goods while taking care of various domestic tasks, these two types of activity were increasingly separate in the twentieth century. A shop assistant was employed to help in the shop while a servant was hired to take care of the shopkeeper's suburban home. In 1900s, Jessie Henderson, for example, took care to ensure that 'everything was in order' before her employer, a grocer, left his suburban house to work at his shop where his assistants awaited.¹⁹ Shopkeepers who could not afford a suburban semi-detached villa and had to live above or next to their shop also made sure to maintain a careful distinction between rooms identified by functions. In these conditions, the servant had little to do with the shop as she dusted the backrooms.²⁰ In the household of a Jewish shopkeeper in the East End of London where sons and daughters helped their parents run the shop in the 1930s, Winifred Foley, a general maid, solely took care of domestic tasks: 'When business was good', she wrote, 'they would work fifteen hours a day – and I worked fifteen hours a day for their domestic comfort.'²¹ By the twentieth century, therefore, domestic service was an occupation solely dedicated to the care of the home in Britain.

In contrast, France experienced a slower rate of urbanisation and industrialisation. In 1901 more than half of the French population still lived in the countryside and around 40 percent of female labourers worked in agriculture. Not only was the agricultural sector far bigger in France than in Britain, it also offered more opportunities of employment to women. In contrast with the capitalist, intensive and specialised style of farming which came to dominate British agriculture, 61 per cent of the agricultural labour force in France worked on their own account in 1906.²² This different type of agricultural organisation had long-term consequences for women's employment. On small French farms, the family economy continued to thrive and required the work of both men and women. Women laboured in the fields, at home, and also often sold the production on nearby markets.²³ The French economy also contained a significant share of small family-owned shops and businesses in which women did all sorts of domestic and productive tasks. In 1939, half of the retailers in France were small structures located in rural areas far from the modern lights of the Bon Marché department store in Paris.²⁴ Many French servants recalled in their autobiographies that they worked in the shop, sold food in the market, distributed oats for the coachmen's horses, made deliveries by bicycle, alongside cleaning the house and caring for the children.²⁵ Yvonne Cretté-Breton, for example, worked as a maid in a bakery.²⁶ She cleaned the house and helped with various tasks in the shop: 'On Sunday, I also had to cook twenty roasts; on Monday, I had to put some cinders into bags with a shovel; on Tuesday, I had to clean the copper and marbles with the help of the bread delivery girl.'²⁷ A deposition for a court case made by a servant who was accused of stealing money from her employers in Lyon in 1934 also highlights the difficulty of trying to narrow down the servant's occupation in France. When asked what her occupation was, Marie Bouget gave the following answer to the jury: 'I served M. Michalon who lived at 135 Roanne street, Central Café, the whole time he was in charge of this business (...) I was a waitress and I also did the housework. As a matter of fact, I was a maid-of-all-work.'²⁸ Marie Bouget did not say that she did waitressing or housework as a side activity. Both seemed of equal importance to her and we cannot reduce her to a servant who did a bit of waitressing on the side of her domestic service activities. Yvonne Cretté-Breton and Marie Bouget's experiences show the multi-faceted aspect of domestic service in France as servants cared for children and animals, washed the dishes and served the clients at the shop. Domestic service was a specialised type of occupation dedicated to the care of the home and its inhabitants in Britain, while the same category in France corresponded to an older understanding of service – common in Britain until the eighteenth century – in which servants were not only those who performed domestic tasks but anyone who left their home to live and work in someone else's.

Dressed for the job: the servant's uniform

The way that French and British servants dressed was directly connected to the different nature of the occupation in their respective economies. Each of the 103 British female servants in my sample described themselves wearing a uniform. It was a common experience regardless of the social standing of the households which employed them. In wealthy households that employed more than one servant, the uniform varied according to the servant's position within the staff hierarchy. A parlour maid wore

a morning uniform to do the cleaning and an afternoon uniform to serve at the table and welcome guests. Eileen Balderson started her career as a between-maid – i.e. a junior housemaid at the bottom of the staff hierarchy – in a country house in 1931 and later moved up to the position of housemaid. She recalled that her employer asked her to wear ‘a striped print dress, usually blue and white, but [sometimes] pink or mauve and white’ with ‘a large white apron and a cap’ and ‘black shoes and stockings’. In the afternoon, she changed into ‘a black dress with the same apron and cap as in the morning’.²⁹ In contrast, cooks, kitchen maids and scullery maids did not change outfits for the afternoon as they stayed in the kitchen all day and were not on display. Nannies, housekeepers and lady’s maids also sported different styles of dress to underline their higher position in the servants’ hierarchy. Most servants worked as maids-of-all-work in middle-class households and wore a similar uniform to the housemaid. Elsie Oman, for example, was a maid in a 1920s middle-class household that had gone bankrupt and in which the daughter of the house was helping with domestic tasks. Despite working in a more modest household, she was still required to wear a print dress for the morning and a black dress with ‘white collars and cuffs’ for the afternoon.³⁰

Urbanisation and industrialisation contributed to a public anxiety concerned with the difficulty of distinguishing people according to their rank in the anonymous crowd of the city. In this context, the uniform was used to create a distinction between the mistress and her maid, to underline who was inferior and who had power in the household.³¹ As the nature of the relationship between servants and employers became less intimate – they did not work alongside each other anymore – the servant’s uniform was designed to articulate visible status distinctions.³² The famous black and white uniform that servants wore in the afternoon was also symbiotically linked to the ‘domestic’ nature of the occupation. As domestic servants stopped being involved in productive activities, their role became increasingly one of social display. While servants spent backbreaking hours cleaning, washing and dusting the various rooms of their employer’s house, they also helped their mistress entertain her visitors. For the idle if not slightly bored middle-class wife waiting for her husband to return from work in the evening, calling on friends and acquaintances in the afternoon was a way to pass time as well as an important social practice to maintain her place in the social circle.³³ As a result, servants wore an *afternoon* uniform so they would be suitably dressed to impress potential callers when they greeted them at the door. The material of the afternoon uniform was delicate if not extravagant to represent the status of the employers. The white apron, collar and cuffs also highlighted the neatness and cleanliness of the servant.³⁴ Being able to employ a maid solely dedicated to menial domestic tasks that would not stain her pristine white uniform was a mark of respectability.

While representations of domestic servants in literature, paintings, films and domestic manuals might lead us to think that French servants wore a similar uniform, servants’ accounts tell a different story.³⁵ The popular figure of the French maid in a becoming little black dress and a dainty white apron was a carefully constructed cultural figure that was used to export the fashion and sophistication of the French bourgeoisie to both national and foreign audiences. This classy and often erotic figure in uniform, however, was far from representative of French domestic service. In reality, few French servants remembered wearing specific clothes for work. Those who worked for the provincial bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, artisans, or on farms, did not wear

a uniform. For example, Juliette, who worked for a small middle-class household in Lyon, was told by her mother that her old dress, a patched skirt and a smock 'would do' for her work dress. When she arrived at her employers' house, they only requested that she wear an apron over it.³⁶ While white aprons were the most common, some women also recalled wearing grey and black aprons.³⁷ The cap, one of the key elements of the distinctive dress of the domestic servant in Britain, was mentioned only once in the sample of autobiographies. Even then, the servant who mentioned it strongly suggested that it had disappeared from use in most households by the 1920s, for she denounced her employer as being 'stuck in the past'.³⁸

The rules regarding servants wearing caps, black dresses and dainty white aprons were only followed by the urban elites. For example, when Marie worked in Paris for an upper-class courtesan after a few jobs in some provincial households, she was asked to wear a short afternoon apron decorated with embroidery. This outfit made her feel like 'an operetta lady's maid with this small apron that doesn't even reach my knees. I don't feel comfortable'.³⁹ Marie's reaction suggests that she saw aprons as a regular accessory that was useful to protect a servant's dress and make her look clean, which in turn highlights that decorative aprons were not regularly used in smaller provincial households. The only mention of a black dress in the sample of autobiographies came from Marie Tual who worked for a countess in the 1930s. Having worked in smaller households beforehand, she thought that the imposition of a black dress was an odd request and 'laughed' at what she called a 'costume'.⁴⁰ By referring to the distant world of the stage to make sense of their new uniforms, these two women's accounts show their unfamiliarity with the performative and deferential aspect of domestic service in upper-class households.

In the countryside, where half of the French population lived until the Second World War, the maid was often part of an informal network which made the need for a uniform irrelevant as she was already known to be a maid within the social structure of the village. Moreover, in the countless small family businesses spread around the four corners of France, women did all sorts of domestic and productive tasks alongside their employers for which they often simply wore an apron over their everyday dress. Servants were employed more for the hard work that they could do, whether it was in the kitchen, the henhouse or at the shop's counter, than for representing the social standards of the household by wearing a uniform. This finding complements Diana Crane's research on the fashion expenditures of the wives of farmers and skilled workers in late nineteenth-century France.⁴¹ Using Frédéric Le Play's collection of household budgets, she discovered that, in contrast with the process of emulation among the lower-middle class in Britain, the wives of farmers, some with a significant income, and those of artisans and craftsmen living in the French provinces did not buy many fashion items to copy the urban middle class. In a society where women continued to play a productive role within the home, there was little sartorial emulation and thereby, little need for a servants' uniform.

Domestic servants and their dress: a feather in their cap?

Whether or not servants had to wear a uniform led French and British women to have drastically different experiences of domestic service and build different types of identities around their occupation. Because working-class women paid a particular attention to

their clothes as a publicly visible form through which they could demonstrate their respectability, the extent of servants' ability to control what they wore had a profound impact on the way they made sense of their position in society.⁴² Some British servants were proud of their uniform, especially in the few exceptional cases where it was provided by rich employers rather than made or bought by the servant herself. Mrs Woodburn, a housemaid in Lancaster in the 1900s, was thrilled with the new uniforms the maids were given for a family wedding: 'We were all dressed in grey, lovely silver grey, shiny like alpaca, in them days, nice plain pinnies, no lace, but happen a lot of tucks round the bottom.'⁴³ In these conditions, the uniform was the mark that one served a prestigious household and was well-placed in the hierarchy of domestic servants. The acquisition of new items of clothing was also an exciting event for those women who often owned very few clothes and were used to wear hand-me-downs from sisters or mothers; although this practice was subsiding by the 1930s.⁴⁴ Other servants like Mollie Moran, a kitchen maid in an upper-class London in the 1930s, were proud of their uniforms for different reasons:

I've heard of some scullery maids who were ashamed to wear their uniforms outside, for fear of being seen as a skivvy. Not me! I was proud of it and I wore my apron like a badge of honour. I had a job and was sending money home to my mother. That meant I was respectable.⁴⁵

The uniform marked Mollie Moran's place in a class of respectable workers, who, even if they did not earn much, were nonetheless able to provide for their family in contrast to the badly clothed, unemployed and charity-dependent poor. It contributed to her pride in becoming a wage earner and, thereby, gaining an adult or independent status. While Mollie Moran was a severe critic of the hierarchical system of domestic service in other parts of her autobiography, she nonetheless had a positive discourse about her uniform. Her reaction illustrates what Lucy Delap calls the 'complex emotional landscape' of domestic service and the wide range of ways servants made sense of their personal experiences in service.

For many British servants, nevertheless, the uniform carried a darker symbolism. They resented having to wear a garment that was used to create a distinction between the mistress and the maid. While it was respectable to be employed and earn a wage, for many, there was little respectability in complying with the rituals of middle-class employers to the point of losing their sartorial and personal freedom. Violet Firth was a middle-class woman who experienced domestic service during the First World War. She joined the Women's Land Army and worked as a gardener for private households. She wrote her memoirs during the interwar period, hoping to contribute to the 'servant problem' debate and raise awareness about the harsh social and material conditions of domestic service. Having been on both sides of the mistress-servant relationship, she felt even more strikingly the way that clothing drew a boundary between two women, giving authority to one and forcing the other into subservience. She recalled:

The woman in the fashionable silk frock tells the woman in the washed-out print dress that she cannot afford to give higher wages. In the evening, the woman in the kitchen uses her scanty leisure to patch the dress, and so make it hang together a little longer. Then she goes into the dining room to serve dinner and sees that the silk frock has been changed for a satin frock. Next evening, she patches the print dress again, because the material, never strong, is

rotten with wear and washing. When she goes into the dining-room she sees that the satin frock is replaced by a lace frock. Is there any need for me to detail the feelings of that woman towards her employer?⁴⁶

The dress of the servant became a signifier of class, highlighting the difference between the middle-class woman and her servant. The afternoon apron and cap, often called by servants 'a badge of servitude', were further symbols of the servants' inferiority. Having long fallen out of fashion by the 1880s, the cap was viewed as an anachronistic imposition on servants that singled them out and emphasised the power that employers had over them.⁴⁷ When Jean Rennie learned that she would have to give up her hope of a secondary education to become a servant, she was apprehensive about having to 'submit to the badge of servitude – a cap and apron'.⁴⁸ Hannah Mitchell, who would later become an active member of the socialist and suffragette movement, insisted on the distinction between normal aprons and decorative aprons used in domestic service. She argued that while she was used to wear an apron to work, she could not stand the idea of having to wear a special cap and apron to serve at her employers' table. She 'absolutely refuse[d] to don the muslin badge of servitude' because of the inferior and servile status it embodied.⁴⁹ Far from a simple whim, servants' reluctance to wear caps was commented upon in newspapers, governmental reports and manifestos dedicated to the future of the occupation. As early as 1891, *Reynolds's Newspaper* noted that 'the servants' cap, that badge of servitude stops many girls from becoming servants.'⁵⁰ This belief was put more strongly in the 1916 report on domestic service by the Women's Industrial Council – a organisation promoting the interests of women at work –, which found that 'the caps were generally referred to as the trademarks of modern slavery'.⁵¹ The denunciation of caps as badges of servitude was still in vogue during the interwar period and served as a rallying point in the campaign for the modernisation of domestic service. The Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations at the National Conference of Socialist Women in Blackpool in 1931, for example, put forward a proposal to abolish 'the servant's cap as a badge of servility'.⁵² It was argued that a more modern relationship between servants and employers included a practical uniform that did not single out the servant only to show off the employer's status.

Servants also experienced a sense of inferiority because of how the uniform physically felt to wear. In the 1916 Women's Industrial Council report on domestic service, some women complained that the black dress they were required to wear in the afternoon was too warm in the summer.⁵³ In servants' autobiographies, Jean Rennie noted that when working long hours, sweating from carrying buckets of water, her black woollen stockings were uncomfortable as the wool absorbed the moisture and became itchy and heavy.⁵⁴ Monica Dickens who worked as a general maid in London also criticised the unfunctional cap which kept falling in front of her eyes when she was trying to work in the 1930s.⁵⁵ Servants *felt* their inferior position through their impractical and uncomfortable uniforms, which were maintained only for the sake of their employers.

Because the main aim of the uniform was to enforce a strict social hierarchy and to represent the social standard of the household, some servants felt that it reduced them to a fixed identity, thereby suppressing their individuality and self-esteem. Violet Firth argued that the uniform constructed the servant as an 'other': 'that is a shock to them

[the employing classes] to find human nature akin to their own concealed by a servant's apron.'⁵⁶ Dorothy Fudge, a parlour-maid in the 1920s, was angry when her employers used her uniform to stress her inferior status and suppress her identity, even when she was off-duty:

We went to Bournemouth with them [her employers], and on arrival, we were told they would meet us at a certain restaurant on the seafront. When the time came, we were having tea in the 'best room', and feeling very grand, when the colonel's sister came in. She told us Mr and Mrs Adams would be late picking us up and then, in a very loud voice, said: 'I hardly recognised you! You look so different without your caps!' We could have hit her.⁵⁷

With her cap, Dorothy Fudge was a faceless maid, hence the surprise of her employers when they saw her off-duty in her every-day clothes. These women were alienated from their own appearance in order to help their mistress and master maintain a respectable image.

Finally, the uniform was not only a symbol of servants' inferior status, it was also an important financial struggle for the many women who had to pay for their uniform out of their meagre income. One servant, for example, wrote to *The Common Cause* journal in 1911 and complained that she was required to buy a uniform out of her £10 annual wage, leaving very little spare money.⁵⁸ It is relatively difficult to estimate the cost of the uniform as many servants bought some fabrics to make their own rather than purchased readymade clothing. Servants' testimonies, nevertheless, highlight that in many cases, these women worked for free for the first months of their employment as the money they earned barely covered their travel and clothing expenses.⁵⁹ In 1904, Kate Taylor, a general maid who was paid 15d per week, took six months to repay 'the necessary print for dresses and hessian for aprons'.⁶⁰ By the interwar period, buying the uniform was still an important financial hurdle. In 1933, Mrs Slade who earned £18 a year as an 'in-between maid' had to repay £12 for her uniform.⁶¹ This system contributed to the power imbalance between servants and employers and restricted servants' opportunities, for they could not leave service early without empty pockets.

In contrast with the heavy emotional weight that the uniform bore on British servants, few French servants thought about their work dress as a fraught marker of class within the employer-employee relationship. This attitude partly came from the different composition of the servant labour force. Since around 33 per cent of female servants came from farming families, many of these women were not the obvious inferiors to their employers.⁶² The daughter of a farmer who could return to inherit part of the property after her marriage, for example, was not the social subordinate of the next-door farmer or shopkeeper for whom she worked.

The numerous servants who travelled to a town or city to find a new position nonetheless found that their clothing cast them apart. This feeling of inferiority, however, was linked to their rural identity rather than their social class. In Britain, a large share of servants came from urban areas and those who migrated from the countryside did not tend to have a very distinctive style or identity as the communities they left were often barely different from those in nearby towns by the interwar period.⁶³ In 1921, white-collar workers were the third largest occupational group in English county districts after domestic servants and agricultural workers.⁶⁴ In contrast, it was a much more striking experience for French servants to leave the tightly-bonded agricultural communities,

some with their own dialect and style of dress. The French servant's slightly old-fashioned clothes, her accent and her unfamiliarity with urban ways marked her as an 'other'.⁶⁵ Marie was told by a friend as she stepped out of the train in Paris that her wide brimmed hat looked like a shepherdess' hat and that she should wear a fashionable cloche hat instead.⁶⁶ Others noted that their black dresses were old fashioned compared to the more colourful outfits of the Parisian women or that their long-braided hair contrasted with the trendy cropped hair of the 1920s.⁶⁷ While the daughter of a small-property holder farming family might be superior to an urban employee in the strict economic sense of 'class', her rural origins could be used to make her feel inferior. The rural-urban continuum was an alternative system of identity within servants' lives. When Jeanne Bouvier made the mistake of dropping the clean laundry on the floor, for example, her employer severely reprimanded her and called her 'you peasant!'.⁶⁸ This incident suggests that her employer used Jeanne Bouvier's rural origins to put distance between the maid and the rest of the family. It also reveals that the insult was meaningful for Jeanne Bouvier who distinctly remembered this precise incident and the humiliation she felt afterwards. While both French and British servants had to come to terms with feelings of inferiority in domestic service, their experiences were mediated through different discourses about class and rurality.

A new look: comparing servants' and female workers' dress

The distinctive uniform of domestic servants in Britain stigmatised them both within the household and made them feel inferior to other workers outside the house. As servants dealt with suppliers and delivery men to fill their employer's pantry or as they accompanied their mistress on errands, they felt self-conscious about their uniform. The garment marked the distinct status of the domestic servant compared to other female workers. Young women's employment opportunities beyond the domestic sphere radically expanded between 1900 and 1939 as the number of women working in the retail and the clerical sector grew.⁶⁹ These new jobs did not always provide women with higher wages but they offered increased independence and more free time to workers who were not expected to live on their place of work.⁷⁰ For example, while most British servants only enjoyed one half-day off during the week and every other Sunday afternoons, most workers had their evenings to themselves and the entire Sunday off. The significance of those changes on the female labour market was heightened by the campaign for women's political enfranchisement which associated women's political emancipation with the public world of work and its promise of social and financial independence. While the factory or the shop girl fitted with the suffrage representation of 'modern and emancipated womanhood', the domestic servant was looked down as a passive and servile worker stuck in the private sphere.⁷¹ From both a social and political standpoint, therefore, domestic service – with its lack of private space, sparse free time and nosy mistresses – was casted as a dated occupation.

However, it is not the case that domestic servants felt singled out because they were the only ones to wear a uniform in the crowd of modern female workers. On the contrary, there was an increasing number of workers who wore uniforms to advertise the company they worked for, to distinguish between ranks in organisational hierarchies or to assert

their professional status in the twentieth century.⁷² However, these new uniforms were fundamentally different from those of domestic servants. Diana Crane argues that the nature of uniforms changed in the twentieth century as they became increasingly linked to an occupational status with little bearing on the workers' identity beyond the workplace.⁷³ In this context, the servants' uniform was dated not only because of its style but because of the broader message that it vehiculated about the servants' place in the social hierarchy. While modern uniforms highlighted the skills or the types of job performed by female workers, the servant's uniform was more encompassing and cumbersome as it defined these women's social status and hierarchical relationship with their employers. The contrast between the status of domestic servants and other female workers fed the heated debate around the 'servant crisis'. A 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction report, based on interviews with a panel of domestic servants and employers, noted that: 'the fact cannot be denied that domestic workers are regarded by other workers as belonging to a lower social status. The distinctive dress which they are required to wear marks them out as a class apart, the cap being generally resented.'⁷⁴ A chambermaid felt similarly distressed about the way her uniform was looked down upon by other female workers: 'The greatest trouble with service is having to wear a cap and apron. Shop girls and business girls look down upon servants for that reason.'⁷⁵ Domestic servants, therefore, suffered from the comparison of their uniform with the dress codes of the new professions and the more popular occupations in the service sector.

In many British servants' autobiographies, the authors admired the nursing profession and considered its uniform as a standard to emulate. For Anne Kynoch, leaving domestic service for nursing was a personal triumph:

I had already made several applications to different hospitals for entry as a probationer nurse. Nothing has given me a greater feeling of achievement than the receipt of a letter from the matron of a Yorkshire hospital for infectious diseases. All the world was mine! After drudgery and struggle the ladder was in place now for the climb.⁷⁶

The comparison between nursing and domestic service was also frequently made in the press because nursing was seen as an occupation that had successfully transformed itself.⁷⁷ In the nineteenth century, the 'new nurse' rose in status from that comparable to a maid-of-all work in contact with bodies and dirt, to a respectable middle-class woman who was in a position to heal not only the physical diseases but also the moral sins of her patients. The profession also became highly desirable for lower-class girls like Anne Kynoch who had aspirations for a respectable and skilled occupation.⁷⁸

The desire to become a nurse was paired with an admiration of the nurses' uniform. Elsie Oman, for example, commented that before she became a servant, she and her friend 'both thought we would like to be nurses and wear a smart uniform.'⁷⁹ Margaret Powell, a kitchen-maid in the 1920s, drew a contrast between the despised servant's dress and the respectable nurse's uniform: 'My mistress wanted me to wear a cap, but I wouldn't. It always struck me as a badge of servitude. I know nurses wear caps but somehow it's different with them.'⁸⁰ She thought that the uniform of the nurse had a different and more attractive meaning to the servant's. Rather than a 'badge of servitude', the Red Cross uniform, in particular, was 'the proudest badge'.⁸¹ During the interwar period, the memory of women's important contribution to the war effort during

the First World War gave a heightened meaning to the nurse and her uniform, while the maid was associated with domesticity far from the front.

The position of shop assistant was another object of envy for servants. When Lily Kerry explained what job she first wanted to do before ending up working as a servant in 1937, she painted a sort of hierarchy of the type of employment a young girl could aspire to:

When I was about 12 or 13 years old, our teacher asked us what we wanted to do on leaving school. (...) I said I wanted to be a nurse, but my teacher said I would be a domestic servant. Unfortunately, you couldn't start training to be a nurse until you were 17. What I would have liked to have done before then was to work in a shop selling clothes and hats, but my mother had other ideas.⁸²

This hierarchy of employment, which placed shop work before domestic service, indicates the popularity of the figure of the shop assistant amongst young women. This trend was bitterly commented upon in the introduction of the 1916 report on domestic service: 'partly owing to the multiplication of other openings for women's work (...) the most promising girls are apt to prefer lower wages, less material comfort, and much less security of employment in shops (...) to the often-quoted advantages of domestic service.'⁸³

With the rise of the department store at the end of the nineteenth century and the feminisation of shop work after the First World War, an increasing number of young and single women were employed in big stores and chains.⁸⁴ The number of women working as shop assistant rose from 87,000 in 1861 to 500,00 by 1914.⁸⁵ Shop work was desirable because of the independence it gave to these young women, especially after the First World War, when the employees did not have to live at the shop.⁸⁶ Sally Mitchell's study of girls' magazines between 1880 and 1915 highlights how shop work was valued over domestic work as it replaced paternalism with a market relationship. In one fictional story published in *Girl's Own Paper*, a character who first worked as a companion – a sort of genteel domestic servant – before becoming a shop girl explains that she 'would much rather there was nothing but a "money" bond between me and my employer. (...) From ten to six I am at his order, but all the rest of the time I am independent, and I needn't feel grateful to him, because my salary is fairly earned and just a matter of business.'⁸⁷

If the shop girl worked in some drapery establishment, she might model the products which were on sale, feeding the fantasy of upward mobility.⁸⁸ In most cases, however, the shop assistant wore an elegant although discreet uniform. She was required to dress all in black or white, sometimes specifically in black silk.⁸⁹ While the colour of the shop girl's uniform was subdued, black silk gave it a sophisticated air.⁹⁰ Ultimately, the shop girl's uniform was only worn in the shop and did not encroach on her identity while the servant's uniform was an important part of the servant's life, defining her appearance from dawn till dusk. In consequence, many women chose to become shop assistants because it was perceived as a more glamorous, socially enhancing and freer occupation than domestic service. British servants' rejection of their uniform, therefore, was not solely based on their personal relationship with their employers, but it was also strongly linked to the evolution of the status and appearances of women on the labour market. As female occupations were increasingly articulated outside of the private sphere – with the

advantages it entailed in terms of personal freedom – and specialised to the same extent as men's, British servants felt the disadvantages of their occupation and its uniform more strikingly.

In France, in contrast, there were few occupations with a distinctive dress to which comparisons could be made. Some shop assistants and waitresses in large towns and cities wore uniforms and enjoyed a relatively independent lifestyle. Parisian shop assistants in department stores, for example, were referred to as 'the queens of the urban proletariat' because of their lavish clothing.⁹¹ However, most shop assistants kept working for small family-run shops.⁹² In these stores, most of the workforce was either family or servants, dressing very far away from the glamorous standards of the shop assistant in a department store and enjoying less independence.⁹³ These women often simply wore an apron for what was deemed a traditional female occupation in the sphere of the family economy.

It was also unlikely for French servants to compare themselves to nurses as the professionalisation of nursing was incomplete and the occupation remained dominated by nuns well into the interwar period.⁹⁴ The religious roots of nursing were apparent in the nurse uniform, which closely resembled the dress of a nun with a long white veil.⁹⁵ The slow transformation of the occupation was linked to a deep suspicion of women's waged labour in French society. As the ideal of a professional woman clashed with the Third Republic's conservative gender values, the state favoured nuns as nurses instead of female civilians, despite the government's secular crusades in other fields.⁹⁶ The few nurses who were not religious were unskilled women from working-class or peasant backgrounds and were mostly treated as domestic servants.⁹⁷ This was the case for Suzanne Ascoët, whose experience in a hospital in the 1930s seemed no different to her previous job as a maid, and for Joséphine Rochet, who left her job as a maid-of-all-work to work without a diploma or qualification in an hospital in Grenoble during the First World War.⁹⁸ In consequence, few women looked up to nursing as a modern aspirational occupation.⁹⁹ The relative absence of popular female occupations with distinctive uniforms that servants could look up to highlights the lack of specialisation of women's work in France. In a society where women's work was still significantly happening within the family economy, it was difficult for French servants to make sense of their experiences as a distinct occupational group.

Conclusion

While both groups of workers in each country were called similar names – '*domestiques*', '*servantes*', 'domestic servants' – and performed tasks inside their employers' home in exchange for a wage as well as boarding and lodging, this article has shown that what it meant to be a servant in the first half of the twentieth century was different in France and Britain. The contrast between the uniform in Britain and the simple work apron worn by domestic servants in France provides an interesting avenue through which to explore servants' identities in both countries. In Britain, domestic service was an occupation that was detached from 'productive' activities and mainly dedicated to domestic tasks. As servants cleaned their employers' house, their role was also conspicuous as their presence signalled the respectable status of the employers who could afford such help. The uniform that servants were required to wear was a key part of this conspicuous display by making

them more visible and distinctive from other members of the household. As a result, this garment made many servants feel inferior and frustrated by the way it restricted the sartorial expression of their sense of self. Servants also struggled with the symbolism of their uniform beyond the home as they compared themselves to other uniformed female workers. As employment opportunities for women expanded and new service jobs offered more free time and independence to workers, servants suffered from the way their uniform symbolised a less flexible and more intrusive type of relationships with the employers. The uniform, therefore, was a source of inferiority and alienation for many British servants. In contrast, domestic service retained a connection to the productive sphere much later in France. Within small family production units, servants worked alongside their employers and other employees to keep the household running. Their appearance and occupational identity were not distinct from that of other female workers who also toiled within the home. They simply wore a rough apron to protect their clothes as they went about their day. For the servants who left the countryside to find work in towns and cities, nonetheless, clothing did play an important role in their sense of self. Instead of marking their occupational or class identity, however, these women's clothes often helped to define their status as rural migrants.

The comparison of servants' attitudes towards their dress in France and Britain helps us recast the 'servant problem' in new terms. The strength of the debate around the servant problem in Britain compared to France was not the sign that dated paternalist behaviours were more prevalent in the former. On the contrary, the revolt of British domestic servants against bad working conditions and their uniform was fostered by the modernisation of the female labour market. The uniform was a symbol of servitude and exploitation for many domestic servants, but it also was a product of the increasing specialisation of female occupations which gave the possibility for *distinct* groups of female workers to argue for their rights. While attempts at creating servants' trade unions from the late nineteenth century onwards were relatively unsuccessful because of the difficulty of mobilising a fragmented labour force, the uniform was nevertheless a rallying point for many women who otherwise worked in drastically different environments.¹⁰⁰ The recognisable black and white uniform and the distinctive cap and apron also helped make servants' complaints more easily identifiable in the public sphere. While French servants suffered similar levels of exploitation and a lack of regulation of their work, it was much more difficult to foster a debate around a 'servant crisis' when few women saw the work they did in their employers' home as a distinct occupation. French servants' integration within the family economy might have saved them from painful feelings of inferiority and alienation, but it also made it more difficult for them to argue for the improvement of their rights as workers. Because service work was invisible and malleable, these women's voices have been harder to identify and promote up to the recent times. In the 1970s historians of domestic service in France claimed that servants 'were not generators of sources' and 'did not have a voice'.¹⁰¹ This deficiency makes it all the more important to show that it is possible to retrieve French servants' testimonies and explore the complexity of domestic servants' experiences beyond the elite circles of the Parisian capital.

Notes

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3. Paulette Belair, interview by the author, 1 September 2016; in the author's possession.
4. This article focuses on live-in servants rather than daily servants, charrs or cleaners. The way that these women articulated their identity outside of more traditional "live-in" domestic service conditions should be the subject for future research.
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10. Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 5.
11. Todd, 'Domestic Service', p. 195; Pooley, 'Domestic servants', p. 408; Fugier, *La place des bonnes*, pp. 339–47.
12. This is probably an under-estimation because of the difficulty to distinguish between farm and domestic servants in the countryside.
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14. Maxine Berg, 'Women's Work, mechanisation and the early phases of industrialisation in England', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 64–66.
15. John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 18; Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002); Sally Alexander, 'Women's work in nineteenth-century London: A study of the years 1820–1950', in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 59–111; Sonya Rose, 'Proto-industry, women's work and the household economy in the transition to industrial capitalism', *Journal of Family History*, 13 (1988), pp. 181–93; Leonore Davidoff, 'The separation of home and work? Landladies and lodgers in nineteenth and twentieth century England', in Sandra Burman (ed.), *Fit Work for Women* (London, 1979), pp. 64–97.

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21. Winifred Foley, *A Child in the Forest*, (Cheltenham: Thornhill, 1991), p. 219.
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23. Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 75.
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39. Marie, *Mes patrons*, p. 182.
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