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Life Cycle Servants in Nineteenth Century Sweden – Norms and Practice^{*}

Christer Lundh

1. Introduction

The system of life cycle servanthood, which was well established in Sweden in the nineteenth century, was based on rural custom and regulated by special Servant Acts from the seventeenth century. From legislation we know the rules that structured the lives of young farmhands and maids, and our knowledge of the servant institution is based to a large extent on normative sources.¹ We know considerably less about how important such rules were in practice. Did servants and masters arrange their relations in ways that the legislation stipulated, or was the local practice much different? The relative lack of knowledge in this respect is the point of departure for this paper, in which the legal status of servants is contrasted with servants' actions as they appear in demographic and ethnological sources.

Two main sources are used in this study. The first one is family reconstructions of four parishes in western Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden. This data is gathered in the Scanian Demographic Database.² By using this data, it is possible to quantify certain demographic

^{*} This paper was presented at the third seminar of the EU network “Servant Project: The Socio-economic Role of Domestic Service as a Factor of European Identity” on “Domestic Service and the Evolution of the Law” in Barcelona, December 12–15, 2002. The research was conducted within the projects “Age at Marriage in Sweden, 1750–1900. Trends and Regional Variations” and “Wage Formation and Labour Market Integration in Sweden 1860–1914” funded by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

¹ For a detailed analysis of the legislation, see Winroth 1878.

² The Scanian Demographic Database is a collaborative project between the Regional Archives in Lund and the Research Group in Population Economics at the Department of Economic History, Lund University.

variables, which makes it possible to understand the functioning of the servant system. Thus, the distribution of servants by sex, age and civil status could be studied, together with the turnover of servants.³

The second main source is ethnological reports on conditions in the countryside in Scania during the second half of the nineteenth century, gathered in the Folk Life Archives in Lund. By studying these reports, it is possible to establish the occurrence of a certain practice (but not its frequency) of importance to the servant system. Reports based on a question-list dealing with various aspects of the relationship between masters and servants (LUF 105) are used, together with some other reports that relate to the subject of “servants” in other respects.

2. The Servant Act of 1833

Ever since the middle of the seventeenth century, employment conditions in agriculture had been regulated in certain Servant Acts (*tjänstehjonsstadgarna*). Legislation changed several times, and the last Servant Act was passed in 1833, which was valid throughout the nineteenth century and was not abolished until 1926.⁴ In this section, the norms of this Act are briefly presented.

The Servant Act regulated the relation between master and servant in several ways, and was therefore normative for the employment agreements that were made between individual employers and servants. The decision to take up service or to hire a servant was made freely, but as soon as the employment agreement was made, a relation of subordination and superiority was also established. Even though an individual employment agreement was made freely by the two parties involved, a servant could not refrain from all employment offers. The Servant Act made it compulsory for anybody who did not own or lease land, or possess other sources of income, to find employment as a servant. This was a relic of the mercantilist era, once introduced to provide labour at reasonable wages to estates and peasants. The work obligation was not abolished until 1885.

The Servant Act did not explicitly say anything about who was intended to be a servant. The law used the word “servant”, never sex-specific words like “farmhands” or “maids”. Nothing in the act said anything about the required age of servants. In three paragraphs the hiring of children (including foster children) or adults that were not

³ For a general ethnological description of the servant system, see Svensson 1943 and Granlund 1944.

⁴ The act was named ”Kongl. Maj:ts Förnyade Nådiga Lego-Statga för Husbönder och Tjänstehjon: Gifwen Stockholms Slott den 23 November 1833”.

legally competent was regulated. In such cases it was the parents (or foster parents) or any other guardian that made the employment agreement on behalf of the under-aged.

In a similar way, any required social origin of servants was not stipulated in the act. However, the work obligation probably meant in practice that people of lower social status, with or without land, were more likely to be servants than people from rich homes. Only once in the act was the social origin of servants touched upon, when one paragraph said that the children of poor parents could be hired as servants.

Anybody with a business enterprise who needed to hire servants as labour and had enough financial resources to provide for them, could be a master. As long as the servants were used as labour, he could hire as many as he wanted.

The Servant Act regulated the rights and liabilities of masters and servants, once an agreement on employment was made. It was the duty of a master to instruct the servants on how to do their work tasks and treat them politely and according to their deserts. He also had to provide the servant with proper food and lodging. If a servant was ill, the master was obliged to see to that he or she was nursed, but he could, if he wanted, deduct the costs for a doctor or medicine from the servant's wage. If a servant stayed for a long time (from the age of 30 until old age), the master was obliged to provide for and take care of the servant until he or she died.

According to the Servant Act a servant had to be devout, diligent, sober and decent. He (or she) also had to be faithful and obedient to the master and could not shirk work tasks that were assigned by the master. Besides the description of the general qualities of a servant, the act included a list of things that a servant was explicitly not allowed to do. He or she could not be disobedient to the master or mistress, show unfounded discontent over the food, steal or treat a fire or the master's property in a careless way. Neither could the servant visit inns or other places where alcoholic beverages were served, or without permission leave the master's house or stay out all night.

The way that employment agreements were made and terminated was also regulated in the Servant Act. The period of employment for servants was one year in rural areas, and only in exceptional circumstances could the employment contract be broken during this period. In the late summer, from 26 July to 24 August, both employers and servants had the right to terminate an employment contract. This could have been discussed earlier in the year, but it had to be repeated during the period of notice. As proof of notice, the servant was given a

testimonial (*orlovssedel*) confirming that he/she was free to take up new employment, and which contained the employer's opinion of his/her work performance and moral qualities. If neither partner terminated the contract during the period of notice, it meant that the farmhand or maid continued to work for the same employer for a further year.

If a servant agreed to work for a new master during the coming employment period, an employment contract was made. For the new employer the testimonial provided evidence that he, without the risk of a claim for compensation from a previous employer, could employ the servant concerned. The Servant Act stipulated that the employment contract had to affirm that the servant's *orlovssedel* was kept by the master, and that it contained the agreement terms of wage compensation and other privileges including cash payments of part of the wage paid out in advance. This paragraph indicates that the lawmaker had written employment contracts in mind, even though the act did not explicitly make *written* agreements compulsory. Furthermore, another paragraph of the act regulated disputes in cases when, for instance, a written employment contract was lacking, which indicates that oral contracts were also accepted.

During the period of notice and for two more months, the servants had to continue to work for their old masters. The period of employment did not come to an end until 24 October, which was the official Moving Day. For seven days from the moving day, servants moved from the old to the new employers, thereby experiencing a free week. On the seventh day after the moving day the new employment period started. From his old master, the servant received a supplementary testimonial (*afskedsbetyg*), covering the period after the employment contract was made and including the master's opinion on his or her work performance and moral qualities in this period.

Several paragraphs in the Servant Act regulated how the parties involved in the hiring process were supposed to behave, how matters in dispute were to be settled and how misbehaviour was to be compensated by claims adjustments.

The master could not refuse if he was asked for the servant's *orlovssedel*, and his opinion on the servant's performance and qualities had to be fair. In this way, the servant's right to look for new employer was guaranteed. In order to protect employers against unfair competition, the Servant Act forbade the attracting of other employers' workers during an ongoing employment year. Employment contracts that had not been drawn up according to the rules of the act could be declared invalid and be revoked. Disputes in such matters could be settled by mediation within the village or in a civil court.

Once the employment agreement was made, it was binding for the parties involved. It could not be abolished without the approval of both parties. Servants were forbidden to leave during the employment period. If anybody did, the master had the right to have him or her captured and brought back by the parish constable. In such cases, the servant was to pay for the harm and be deprived of half of his (or her) wage.

3. Norms and Practice

MALE AND FEMALE SERVANTS

The Servant Act was quite precise on who could be a master, but was neutral on the sex, age or social origin of a servant. From demographic sources we know that both male and female servants were frequent. In the migration registers of the parishes of Halmstad, Hög, Kävlinge and Sireköpinge in 1831 – 35, 269 farmhands and 266 maids were registered as moving into one of the parishes. (Lundh 1996.)

The demand for domestic servants of both sexes could be derived from the way that production was organised at a farmstead in those days. From ethnological sources we know that the work tasks were quite different for male and female servants. (Löfgren 1975a, 1975b, 1982.) Farmhands took care of the horses and worked in the fields in the summer, and threshed grain in the winter, while the maids took care of the milking, looked after the animals and did the household chores.

Thus, the demand for both male and female servants stemmed from the work organization at a farm. At a farmstead with mixed farming the demand for labour was determined by the acreage and the number of horses or oxen and other animals (colts, cattle, pigs, sheep, geese etc.). On small farms of about 10 to 15 acres and a pair of horses/oxen, the need was generally just one maid and one farmhand. On middle-sized farms of about 50 to 60 acres of flat land, and somewhat smaller in woodland areas, where there were two pairs of horses there were often two maids and two farmhands. (Dribe and Lundh 2002.)

AGE STRUCTURE

The Servant Act did not stipulate that a servant was to be of a particular age, but the way the act was written indicates that a servant was normally in his/her teens or older, but seldom very old. For under-aged

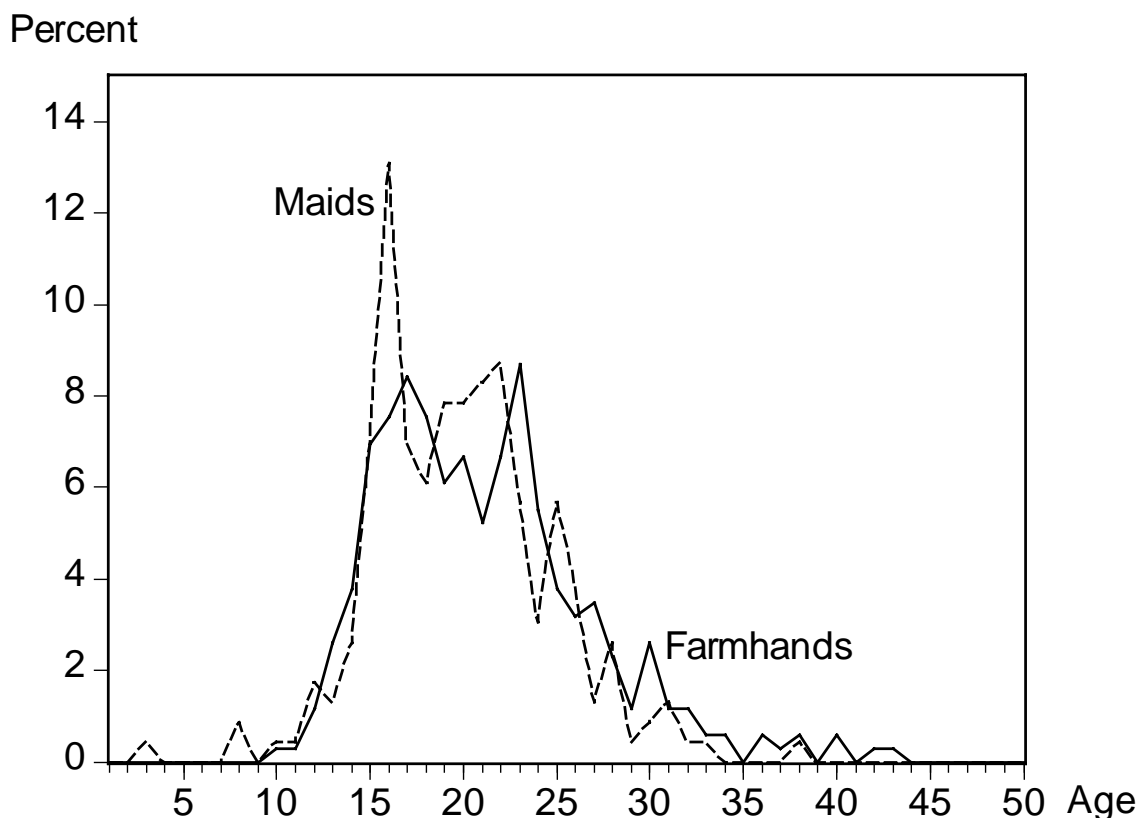


Figure 1. Age distribution of servant immigrants into Hög and Kävlinge parishes 1831 – 1840.

Source: The migration registers of Hög and Kävlinge, The Regional Archives in Lund.

children there were special rules, and a person under the age 21, who was living in the parental home, was not allowed to go into service in another household without the parents' permission. Once a person had left the parental home, he or she was free to change employer without permission from the parents. As was mentioned, the act also stipulated that the master had to provide for and take care of a servant that stayed for a long time (from the age of 30 until old age). All such special rules indicate that it was unusual for a servant to be underaged or to be very old.

This picture is confirmed by the age specific migration into the parishes of Hög and Kävlinge in 1831 – 1840. As can be seen in figure 1, as many as 84 – 90 percent of the servants were in the ages 15 – 30. Some of the young servants were orphans and taken care of as foster children or as servant lads or young maids, or were children of unmarried maids. The proportion of servants under 15 was 8 percent for

both girls and boys. Servants who were over 30 were quite rare. Here we find no more than 3 percent of the maids and 8 percent of the farmhands. (Lundh 1996.)

The same age distribution of servants could be found in other sources as well, for instance in the catechetical examination registers, and it corresponds well to the average age at leaving the parental home in this area. (Lundh 1996.) Dribe calculates the medium age at leaving home to be 16 – 17 in the four parishes of Halmstad, Hög, Kävlinge and Sireköpinge in 1829 – 1866. Less than 10 percent left home before the age of 15, but at 21 no more than one third were still living in the parental home. Consequently, almost two thirds moved out while they were in the ages 15 – 21. Ninety percent of those who left home moved within the same parish or within a radius of 15 kilometers. Only 2 or 3 percent left the parental home for marriage – among peasants 3–6 percent. Thus, the vast majority left the parental home in order to work as a servant in another household. (Dribe 2000).

The age distribution among servants corresponded to the demand for labour given by the work organisation at a farmstead. On the farm work tasks were divided according to gender, and within each gender according to age, employment duration and skill. Normally the master and mistress were the oldest and filled the positions requiring the greatest skills in their respective areas. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

Servants were often labeled “first” and “second” farmhand or maid, according to their position in the work hierarchy. Among the male servants, the first farmhand was the oldest and most qualified. He was about 22 or older and was able to do the qualified work tasks on the farm, for instance to be the work leader for the other farmhands, to sow by hand and to repair equipment. The second farmhand, usually aged between 16 and 22, was less experienced and skillful than the first farmhand but could plow with horses and carry out other tasks meant for grown men. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

In a similar way, the first maid, most often over 20, was the oldest and the most qualified on the female side. Her duties were to feed all the animals except the horses, to milk the cows and to be responsible for the work in the barn. She was also supposed to help in the fields at harvest time and to lead, with the housewife, the work involved in washing, baking, brewing, spinning and weaving. The second maid was usually younger, between 16 and 20 years, and less qualified. She took care of the household work indoors, under the supervision of the housewife, and looked after the children. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

On larger farms or estates there could be several servants with roughly the same tasks, status and wage as second farmhands or maids.

Thus, “first” and “second” servants formed the bulk of the hired labour in peasant households. At the age of 20 – 22, a servant probably reached the top of his or her career. The next step was to marry and form a family, and this required an own household and an own farm or croft – to stay as a servant for additional decades was considered to be a “failure”. Therefore, there were few that continued as servants for life – to most young people, the work as a servant was just a phase in life.

On larger farms, especially during the summer, there were certain work tasks for minor children as well. Younger boys, around 10 – 15 years old, ran errands and fed the animals on larger farms or took care of geese and sheep during the summer. Some were hired only in the summer, while others were employed on a yearly basis. On larger farms there could also be younger maids aged between 10 and 15 who took over the task of looking after the children from the second maid. The maids were employed on a yearly basis, while young nursery maids sometimes were employed only in the summer, especially if they were very young. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

CIVIL STATUS

Nothing is stipulated in the Servant Acts on the civil status of a servant. However, the fact that a servant was supposed to live in the master’s house, with board and lodging included in the employment agreement, indicates that the legislation assumed that a servant was unmarried. This is confirmed in demographic sources. Only in rare cases were domestic servants married.

Among servant migrants into the parishes of Hög and Kävlinge in 1831 – 1840 as many as 98 percent were unmarried. (Lundh 1999a.) When a young couple married, they normally moved into an own household, and quit their work as domestic servants. To be able to marry, they had to find another job and a house to live in. In those days, the job market and the housing market were often combined, so that the house went with the job. For young people of peasant origin, this meant that they could take over the family farm, or use the compensation from a sibling who was taking it over, to buy another property. Young people of poorer origin could not expect to get a farm, but could negotiate a tenancy contract with some landowner for a croft or cottage in exchange for work or money.

The servant system was an institutional precondition for the relatively late marriages that characterised the Swedish marriage pattern. While waiting to get married, young people worked as servants for a period of their lives. Laslett’s term “life cycle servants” is well suited to

the Swedish system. (Laslett 1977.) From previous studies, we know that the average marriage age was quite high in this area. In the period 1811 – 1860, the mean age at first marriage was 27 for women and 29 for men (Lundh 1997).⁵ In the course of the nineteenth century the marriage age decreased for landless and semilandless groups. (Lundh 1998.) This development probably reflected an increase in the possibility of the landless to get access to jobs and dwellings as commercialisation of agriculture and industrialisation progressed.

SOCIAL ORIGIN

While the Servant Act did not say anything about the social background of servants, it did about the masters. To be a master, one had to be self-supporting and not an object of the work obligation of the law. In rural areas this meant that a master could be a civil servant (priest, officer etc.), a farmer or landlord, or a mine owner, whose business was good enough to bear the costs and who needed domestic servants for labour. Thus, indirectly we can conclude that a servant could be anybody who lacked these resources. Since a servant was supposed to live in the master's household, young and unmarried people, who had left the parental home and intended to, marry and form a family later on, were well suited for the role of servant.

It has been established that servants were recruited from all social groups including the peasant group itself. Regardless of sex and social background, the vast majority of young people worked as servants before they married. One study calculates that the probability of becoming a servant prior to marriage was 85 – 90 percent in the parishes of Halmstad, Hög, Kävlinge and Sireköpinge in 1740 – 1859. (Lundh 1999b.) Thus, there is no doubt that servanthood in rural areas was an important institution that affected the life courses of young people, even those from peasant homes. However, there was an over-representation of young people from landless or semilandless families in the recruitment of servants. (Eriksson & Rogers 1978; Lundh 1999a – b.)

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the occupation of servant was not a lifetime job but a temporary one. Servanthood was a phase in young peoples' lives, between childhood in the parental home and the life as a grown up and married with an own household. Children from peasant homes worked as servants for some time, but still had a good opportunity of progressing to the position of a married farmer or farmer wife later on.

⁵ The parishes included in the study are Ekeby, Frillestad, Halmstad, Hög, Kävlinge, Sireköpinge and Stenestad, all situated in western Scania.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the character of the servant institution was partly changed. The combination of a rapidly growing population, commercialisation of agriculture and industrialisation brought about a process of downward social mobility. Work as a servant was no longer a temporary job, but became a first step to permanent wage labour. Peasants became reluctant to send their sons or daughters to work as servants, and kept them at the farmstead. Overrepresentation of servants from non-peasant homes increased, and, for young people of peasant origin, working as a servant increased the risk of becoming a permanent wage labourer. (Lundh 1999a.)

MOVING DAY AND EMPLOYMENT TURNOVER

The Servant Act stipulated that 24 October was to be the Moving Day and the new employment period was to start seven days later. In between was a free week. Consequently, there were strong institutional reasons for migrations to be concentrated in October or November. Of all the dated servant migrations from the parishes of Halmstad, Hög, Kävlinge and Sireköpinge in the period 1825 – 1844, 78 per cent occurred in October and a further 12 per cent in November. The remaining 10 per cent of the moves were equally distributed over the year except for a minor concentration to April. This may be due to the fact that contracts for a farm, croft or cottage at the estates often contained a moving day in the spring. (Lundh 1999b.)

The Servant Act stipulated a yearly employment period and regulated the terms for renewal or termination of employment contracts. The yearly employment period was a guarantee of available domestic labour for the master, and of continuous board and lodging for the servant. But the Act was not a guarantee that servants would stay for longer periods than a year, even though one can suspect that this was the norm of the lawmaker. One study reports widespread disapproval of the extensive servant turnover in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Swedish Diet of the Four Estates (*ståndsriksdagen*) and among peasants all over the country. (Harnesk 1990.) There is also ethnological evidence from the latter half of the nineteenth century that peasants were not in favour of a large turnover of servants. On the contrary, from Scania there are several reports, from the latter part of the nineteenth century, of masters favouring farmhands and maids they were satisfied with and wanted to keep or reward for loyal service. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

Even though the norm might have been a long-term relation between a master and a servant, in reality servants changed employers quite

frequently. In the parishes of Halmstad, Hög, Kävlinge and Sireköpinge in 1829 – 1867 a servant moved on average eight times between the ages of 15 and 30, including the first move out of the parental home and, in some cases, a final move to get married. Thus, the turnover of servants was impressive. About 60 percent stayed only for one year with the same employer, and another 23 percent moved after two years. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

The extensive servant mobility has been found to have its incentives deeply rooted in the local rural economy. About half of the moves of a servant could be due to advancement within the social hierarchy that characterised rural life. For a boy, a servant career started with the employment as a herder lad, later to become a second farmhand and a first farmhand, and ended when the servant left life cycle service to get married and establish a new household on a farm, croft or in a cottage. Three of four years on average would then be spent on one and the same farm. Besides this structural basis for the frequent changes of employment by servants, there were a lot of other reasons. A servant might have been dissatisfied with the standard of board and lodging, got into a conflict with the master or anyone else in the household, or moved to find a marriage partner. A master might have wanted to substitute adult children for a servant, and in times of bad harvests the demand for male labour, or the master's capacity to pay, might have been reduced. A master might also have wanted to prevent his grown up children from being too closely involved with one of the servants. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

BREACH OF CONTRACT, MEDIATION AND AWARD

The Servant Act presupposed the existence of a written testimonial. This document was the previous master's judgement on the servant's work capacity and loyalty, which was to be handed over to the new master who kept it during the employment period. As far as employment contracts were concerned, the act was formulated as if written documents were the normal form, but written contracts were not compulsory.

Very few written testimonials and employment contracts are preserved for posterity. Such documents were normally kept in private hands and were seldom registered by official authorities who were obliged to file them. Probably, most employment contracts were oral. In times when oral contracts were common, certain ceremonies were used to confirm an agreement, for instance a handshake in front of witnesses. From ethnological sources we know that the giving and accepting of a

payment in advance was a quite frequent way to ratify the employment contract.

The rights and duties of masters and servants were regulated in the Servant Act, as was how to handle disputes and breaches of contract in many detailed situations. That conflicts occurred and that the agreements were sometimes violated are witnessed in ethnological sources. Servants who were careless or disobedient to the master were punished by deductions from their wages or were dismissed. Only in rare cases were younger servants physically punished according to the ethnological reports. Servants who left during the employment period without serving for the period of notice lost their wages due and did not get a testimonial from the master, which probably made it difficult to get a new job. Even though the master had the right to get the runaway brought back by the district police, the ethnological reports mention that he seldom utilised it. (Dribe & Lundh 2002.)

Sometimes the disputes were taken to the District court for award or judgement. According to ethnological sources the most common disputes concerned assault and absconding. As far as I know, there is no study yet of such disputes based on court archives, which could shed new light on the relation between masters and servants in the nineteenth century.

4. Concluding Remarks

Far too much of our knowledge of the servant system is based on the normative source of the Servant Act. This Act tells us how the lawmaker wanted the system to work. But the law does not tell us the realities of everyday life in rural Sweden in the nineteenth century – from such a source it is not possible to say anything about the practice of the servant system. Yet, the servant institution is often described in the way the system was intended to work by the lawmaker, not as it really worked in practice.

This paper has gathered some facts on the practice of the servant system. As is obvious, our knowledge is mainly based on demographic sources, informing us of the existence and frequency of phenomena. Ethnological evidence provides supplementary information on the occurrence of customs and behaviour. One important source that has not yet been used is court records of disputes. By using such a source, it would be possible to expand our knowledge on what was acceptable and what was not in the relation between masters and servants.

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