

Dear workshop participants:

Below find a quite newly reworked version of the critical-historical preface to my fairly tortured manuscript, *Servicing Inequality: Work, Class, and the Politics of Value in Modern America*. The notes are relatively scant, though it's not my intention here to wade much into historiography or my main primary sources but rather introduce the broad outlines of the arguments. Looking forward to our discussion on Wednesday, tja.

More Work to Do: "Service" and Postwar Inequality

In September of 2004, Maytag Industries shuttered its refrigerator plant in Galesburg, Illinois and moved the majority of its production more than 1,300 miles south across the Rio Grande to Reynosa, in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Situated midway between the Illinois-Iowa Quad Cities and Peoria, Galesburg's economy was devastated by the loss of the 1,600 union jobs that paid middle-class wages, guaranteed solid health care and pension benefits, and until its flight to Mexico, was assumed to be a source of stable and secure employment. Maytag's closure was so ruinous for Galesburg that nearly five percent of the town's thirty thousand people left the town and region in the year immediately following the plant's shuttering.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the fortunes of Galesburg and countless towns and cities like it were barely news across the nation. Since long before the initial heyday of cultural attention to localized effects of deindustrialization in the 1970s and 1980s, industries searching for cheap labor, tax incentives, and other enticements like free land, rights-of-way, and publicly funded transportation networks shuttered plants across every region of the United States, decimating the economic livelihoods of communities and workers in their wake. Pioneered at an industrywide level in the 1880s as textile firms moved capital *en masse* from unionized New England to the non-unionized southern Piedmont, by the first

decade of the 21st Century no American goods producing industry had proven immune from relocation.¹

At approximately the same moment that the postwar wave of capital flight swelled in the 1960s and 1970s, automation—central to industrial production since its inception—was increasing at a more rapid rate than had been seen for decades. To take just one example of the process's regularity, in the steel industry every work stoppage from the 1959 U. S. Steel strike onwards witnessed fewer jobs for workers to come back to than were there when they went out. Management that is, took the opportunity of idled plants unencumbered by collective bargaining agreements to automate away jobs at every chance it got. The politics and processes that produced and allowed for capital flight and automation were distinct even if they became broadly noticeable at more or less the same historical moment. For communities and workers on the ground, the difference between job loss caused by industrial relocation or new technological innovation mattered little except insofar as automation tended to occur more slowly and not destroy whole communities overnight. By 2004, Maytag's decimation of Galesburg appeared as just one more blip in this long history of political economy.

That Galesburg's story warranted national attention at all owes to its brief appearance in what stands as this century's most famous speech. Standing on the dais at Boston's Fleet Center on July 27th, 2004, then Illinois State Senator Barack Obama delivered the words that catapulted him into the national spotlight and down a path that led four years later to the presidency. In soaring rhetoric grounded in his own biography, Obama spoke of the essential unity of Americans despite the context of the increasingly unpopular and divisive invasion of

¹ Beth English, *A Common Thread: Labor, Politics and Capital Mobility in the Textile Industry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility: Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

Iraq, the aftermath of the contested 2000 presidential election, and the long-term drift toward expressive (if not ideological) polarization in American political life.

The speech's lines are still easily recalled by many a decade and a half later. "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America." In language that served as perhaps the single greatest synecdoche of Sacvan Bercovitch's 1978 interpretive argument of the "music of America," Obama grounded American exceptionalism above all in hope.² "It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire, singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores...the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too." The fifteen minute-long standing ovation was just prelude. By night's end news anchor were certain—correctly it turned out—that they had just seen the "first black president of America."

Fifteen minutes into the speech at the moment of its first rhetorical transition, he moved in the classic style of Bercovitch's *Jeremiad* from American exceptionalism and greatness to failure and prodigality.

And fellow Americans, Democrats, Republicans, independents, I say to you, tonight, we have more work to do more work to do, for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now they're having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay 7 bucks an hour.

For most of the country, the reference to Galesburg was largely forgotten in the celebration of the speech that followed, though the "more work to do" line and its *diminuendo* function in the cadence of the speech quickly became one of the many oft-remembered highlights. Back on the campaign trail in Western Illinois a few weeks later, WQAD Quad Cities anchor John David opened his interview with the newly minted national figure by asking him to expound on Galesburg and the speech. Obama replied,

² Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). See also Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

People who have worked 20 years in a plant, who've helped build up a brand who had made shareholders wealth and then suddenly had the rug pulled out from under them, it really underscored the difficulties workers are having in the manufacturing sector in this day and age. There's a sense of hopelessness when you know that you're doing a good job, that your plant is productive, that your company's making a profit, that you're still seeing it move to Mexico. It was really disheartening for them.... If we continue on the course that we're going right now, we're really going to have gutted our essential manufacturing functions and we will be increasingly a service economy. Ultimately, what the manufacturing base provided was a possibility of people moving up through the ranks into the middle class and that's increasingly disappearing.

For Obama, the tragedies of Maytag's closure were myriad. The workers there didn't *deserve* to lose their jobs—they were working hard, the company was making money, and had a recognizable brand. The closure was “disheartening” and produced “hopelessness.” The “manufacturing base” produced an avenue into the middle class while a service economy meant nothing but “competing with your children for \$7/an hour jobs.” That Galesburg provided an ideal backdrop for Obama's symbolic Jeremiad—rather than his policy commitments—was clear to local observers early on as he continued to rhetorically return to the decimated town in speeches throughout that campaign and as he began to run for President four years later even as his policies and politics tended to support unencumbered capital mobility. As International Association of Machinists President Tom Buffenbarger said of Obama, “he didn't lift a finger to help those people when they needed help the most... a Johnny come lately candidate won't solve the problems facing blue-collar families.” For Obama, the tragedy of Galesburg was important as symbol not fact, as a metaphor for the broader problems with the nation's transition from an industrial economy to a service economy.

Obama's metaphor of Galesburg expressed a truth rarely questioned in American discourse—political, economic, cultural or scholarly. Namely, that a so-called “service economy,” or any of its slightly differentiated cognate signifiers like “post-industrial,” inevitably leads to declining prosperity, low-wages, and inequality. Indeed, it would be hard to overestimate just how much this assumption is embedded in American political life. Broad

swaths of American political culture understand and have understood service work and an economy in which tens of millions of Americans perform such labor as anathema to broader local, regional, and national prosperity. Depending on the commentator and moment, such work is backwards and premodern. Parasitic and either valueless or unproductive of long-term value in the minds of mainstream economists. An economy built on it would produce a world of other-directed, conforming personalities, unable to rise to the challenges confronting the modern nation. It would turn people who worked in such jobs slavish, unable to separate their interests and desires from those of their bosses or the people they served. The jobs themselves would be “dead-end” “McJobs,” in which people did little but “bullshit.” Such work and such industries could and can only survive by low-wages, thus there’s no point in imagining them as avenues to economic security. A country “reduced to shining each other’s shoes,” as AFL-CIO President George Meany would put it over and over again in the 1970s, was a nation destined for decline economically and culturally. Cities and states based entire development strategies on this axiom. Both major political parties adopted it whole cloth in their economic and labor policies, ranging from job retraining to the manners in which they addressed capital mobility. Obama’s story of Galesburg and the transition from “manufacturing” to “service” and its lessons is the story the we tell ourselves—politically, economically and culturally—about the declining prosperity of working Americans and about the economic inequality that has grown annually forty-seven years in a row. It is not a new story, though neither is it as old, transhistoric, and uncontested as we imagine. As Labor economist Sarah Kuhn succinctly expressed it in testimony to Congress in 1984:

The continued erosion in basic industry, the epidemic of plant closings, the interindustry, interregional, and international mobility of capital, and the transformation of America into a ‘service economy’ with growing numbers of low-wage dead-end jobs all point to a society increasingly characterized by chronic unemployment, inequality and insecurity.

An industrial economy, that is, produced upward economic and social mobility, a service economy generated stagnation, inequality, and meaningless work. Political and policy options and choices since the middle of the 1960s followed and continue to follow directly from the assumption that the *kinds* of work Americans do has an intrinsic connection to national prosperity, economic security, and equality. How did it come to pass that by and large American politics and culture has come to understand inequality as a function not of a *political* economy but of a *service* economy?

Before proceeding with this question it's worth stepping back to consider what exactly American politics and culture has meant by the terms "service economy" and "service work." Even at the most technical of levels, the terms have elicited little consensus. Economist George Stigler's 1958 argument that "there exists no authoritative consensus on either the boundaries or the classification of the service industries," remains true more than six decades later.³ Victor Fuch's comprehensive 1967 study *The Service Economy* suggested that his titular subject was defined simply as a "nation in which more than half the employed population is not involved in the production of food, clothing, households, or other tangible goods."⁴ For Fuchs, this was a momentous if relatively unheralded development:

The transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy, which began in England and has been repeated in most of the Western world, has been characterized as a "revolution." The shift from industrial to service employment, which has advanced furthest in the United States...too has implications for society, and for economic analysis, of "revolutionary" proportions.⁵

While there tended to be broad agreement that services did not produce physical goods, the slipperiness of the categories and their epistemological overlap—at both the industrial and labor level—usually went unremarked upon. Was a shipping company a service or manufacturing firm? It did not make any *thing* per se, but one could also argue that the very

³ George J. Stigler, *Trends in Employment in Service Industries* (Princeton: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1956), 47.

⁴ Victor Fuchs, *The Service Economy* (Princeton: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1967) 1

⁵ Fuchs, *The Service Economy*, 2.

things it transported did not become realized as (physical) commodities without it. What about a janitor at a steel plant? Her labor did not produce tangible goods, though without her could the tangible goods be produced at all? As Jeanne Boydston's classic study *Home and Work* made clear, even the forms of work that have since taken on the moniker of *reproductive* labor can easily be accounted as integral parts of the tangible production process should one desire, a point to which I will return later. More importantly for my purposes at the moment is that with a few key exceptions, there was a broadly shared understanding from the moment of this "transition" that an important and meaningful divide existed between service and manufacturing, intangible and tangible commodity production, and the labor that each entailed.

Indeed, by the time that Congress held its first hearings on the matter in 1982, the idea was widely held that such the U.S had moved from one economic stage to a new one. Echoing Fuchs, economist Ronald Schelp told Congress in 1982 that

[t]he dramatic shift of the U.S. economy to services is broadly recognized but little understood. More energy is spent on maligning than interpreting the most important economic transition since the Industrial Revolution. I doubt if we would be noticing this shift even today if the deteriorating state of America's manufacturing industries had worried us in recent years, and the perceived bust in manufacturing contrasted with the boom of services.

To be sure, this explosive transformation in the experience of American work is the poorly understood backdrop the growing economic inequality of the past four decades. Obama, Kuhn and other are correct that the jobs that what could be called the normative American working class have performed since the postwar period have been increasingly those of intangible commodity production and have been done for almost unheard of low real wages in the postwar industrialized world. By way of brief example, consider the table of projected twenty fasted growing jobs between 2016-2026.

2016 National Employment Matrix title and code	Employment		Change, 2016–26		Median annual wage, 2016 ⁽¹⁾	
	2016	2026	Number	Percent		
Total, all occupations	00-0000	156,063.8	167,582.3	11,518.6	7.4	\$37,040
Personal care aides	39-9021	2,016.1	2,770.1	754.0	37.4	\$21,920
Combined food preparation and serving workers, including fast food	35-3021	3,452.2	4,032.1	579.9	16.8	\$19,440
Registered nurses	29-1141	2,955.2	3,392.2	437.0	14.8	\$68,450
Home health aides	31-1011	911.5	1,337.0	425.6	46.7	\$22,600
Software developers, applications	15-1132	831.3	1,084.6	253.4	30.5	\$100,080
Janitors and cleaners, except maids and housekeeping cleaners	37-2011	2,384.6	2,617.7	233.0	9.8	\$24,190
General and operations managers	11-1021	2,263.1	2,469.0	205.9	9.1	\$99,310
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	53-7062	2,628.4	2,829.2	200.8	7.6	\$25,980
Medical assistants	31-9092	634.4	819.0	184.6	29.1	\$31,540
Waiters and waitresses	35-3031	2,600.5	2,783.0	182.5	7.0	\$19,990
Nursing assistants	31-1014	1,510.3	1,674.4	164.0	10.9	\$26,590
Construction laborers	47-2061	1,216.7	1,370.0	153.3	12.6	\$33,430
Cooks, restaurant	35-2014	1,231.9	1,377.2	145.3	11.8	\$24,140
Accountants and auditors	13-2011	1,397.7	1,538.0	140.3	10.0	\$68,150
Customer service representatives	43-4051	2,784.5	2,920.5	136.0	4.9	\$32,300
Market research analysts and marketing specialists	13-1161	595.4	731.4	136.0	22.8	\$62,560
Medical secretaries	43-6013	574.2	703.2	129.1	22.5	\$33,730
Landscaping and groundskeeping workers	37-3011	1,197.9	1,321.2	123.3	10.3	\$26,320
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	53-3032	1,871.7	1,985.5	113.8	6.1	\$41,340
Maintenance and repair workers, general	49-9071	1,432.6	1,545.3	112.7	7.9	\$36,940

Of America's 20 fastest growing occupations—personal care aides, fast food workers, home health aides, janitors and cleaners, moving and stock laborers, waitresses and waiters, nurses assistants, cooks, and groundskeeping workers can all expect to make at or around poverty level wages—itsself a category of deep debate but currently around \$25,000 for a family of four. Customer service reps, medical assistants, and medical secretaries can all expect to do a little bit better but still be within 20% of the poverty line. Those groups constitute fully twelve of the twenty largest growing occupations. Of the remaining eight—we can identify four groups—nurses, software developers, accountants, and marketing analysts as what we might define as jobs requiring usually some relatively long period of skills training and in the cases of nurses and accountants, a national certification board, professional structure, and in the cases of nurses specifically, substantial and powerful unions that links all members of that occupation into something akin to a class that is able to effectively engage in politics for itself. Of our remaining four categories, three are truck drivers, maintenance workers, and construction workers making slightly more than the thirteen lowest earners. Depending on the definition one uses, the first two are also sometimes understood as service workers depending on the definition one uses. What all three have in common vis-a-vis our thirteen lowest earners is a

substantially higher union density. The last category, general and operation managers can best be described in terms of the labor they do as the managing the thirteen lowest earners as well as that next group of three.

Returning to our group of 13 lowest earners, by this estimate they will constitute 25 million people by 2026 and make up more than 1/7 of the US labor force. To this group we can add occupations that are growing but at lesser rates than these jobs like day care providers (around 600,000), retail clerks (around four million), household cleaners and maids (around 1 million), private security guards (around 1.1 million workers), and a host of other smaller groups that in total will add up to more than one quarter and perhaps as much as one third of the American workforce by 2026. And, unless the most surprising and dramatic shift in American labor history and quotidian economic history occurs, each of these occupations—traditionally classified as service—will pay an average of around poverty wages.

This broad transformation in the kind of work done by Americans, both structural and quotidian, occurred within an extraordinarily fecund, if poorly understood and analyzed, history of the meaning of service in western life. The women and men, families and communities, social movements and labor unions, economists and planners, scholars and business managers, politicians and state agencies that encountered and made possible the skyrocketing capitalization, profitability, standardization, and numerical growth of these jobs in the half-century after 1945 did so within a largely unrecognized cultural inheritance. The episodic debates about the economic, political, and cultural meaning of America's transition to a so-called service economy that erupted like clockwork every half decade or so in the postwar era largely took for granted the assumed, and frequently metaphysical, categorical differentiations of labor that dated back to the birth of political economy in the eighteenth century, and the values—cultural and economic—assigned to the rarely questioned category of service work since the birth of market culture in the seventeenth century Anglo World.

This inheritance overwhelmingly—though for virtually every analyst, unproblematically—has colored how Americans understand service as a distinct category of human labor. As should be clear by now, this study rejects the meaningfulness of the category except insofar as its very invocation is part of the degradation of such labor. That being said, for the purposes of analytic and literary clarity, it's worth delving a bit deeper into the broadly accepted definition of such work with an eye toward the long-term consequences of this definition.

Beginning in 1905 and led, like most labor statistical gathering in the United States, by the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics, American demography, statistics, and economics aggregated a plethora of job categories into the category of service.⁶ By the early 1920s, the National of Bureau of Economic Research and Department of Labor had accepted this aggregation in their statistical reporting and most states that had not already followed Massachusetts' lead fell quickly in line.⁷ The occupations included in this aggregation ranged from cook to teacher, lawyer to nurse, advertising executive to janitor, maid to scholar, etc.. While various agencies published subcategorical statistics dividing the broad classification of service into subsets such as personal service or professional service, American culture and thought has accepted the tripartite division of human labor into the categories of manufacturing, service, and agriculture that arose directly out of this statistical aggregation. This aggregate definition of service is by no means philosophically new. In fact, it mirrors that of the Scottish Enlightenment and first two generations of classical political economy. As Adam Smith wrote, "the labor of the manufacturer fixes and realizes itself in some

⁶ Charles Ferris Gettamy, *The Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics, 1869-1915: A Sketch of Its History, Organization, and Functions* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1915).

⁷ Joseph P. Goldberg and William T. Moye, *The First Hundred Years of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985). For a powerful critique of the gender ideology that such labor statisticians brought to bear on a variety of labor categories, see Nancy Folbre, *Greed, Lust, and Gender: A History of Economic Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

particular subject or commodity, which lasts for some times after the labour has passed.⁸

Service labor on the other hand,

does not fix or realize itself in any particular subject or vendible commodity. His services generally perish in the very instance of their performance, and seldom leave any trace of value behind them.⁹

David Ricardo came to implicitly echo Smith's view. In his 1817 *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Ricardo argued that the consumption of services represented a decidedly feudal mindset, a throwback economic outlook that privileged social status over capital accumulation. For Ricardo, the wealthy that used their disposable income to purchase goods and physical commodities were responsibly placing capital back into circulation, and thus contributing to a nation's growth. On the other hand, those who spent it on services were, from the perspective of national or worldwide capital accumulation, literally watching it perish. Smith and Ricardo condemned the service relationship because it was removed from the world of production and based in concepts like sincerity rather than interest.

For Jeremy Bentham, service was defined as "the object on which the acts in question were to have their termination, or their commencement, was a human creature." That is, service was marked by the labor of one human upon another, rather than upon a physical object. Unfortunately, according to Bentham, this relationship between laborer and labored-upon tended to necessarily involve an asymmetrical relationship of legal rights and was thus anathema for his liberal capitalism.

By the middle of the 19th Century though, these definitions were looking increasingly problematic in the face of rising classes of clerks, scholars, professors, experts, accountants, actuaries, and a variety of other professional service providers. Both their wages, their class, and their cultural respect did not mesh with the supposed relative valuelessness of their labor

⁸ Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* (1776 Repr. London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1852) 135.

⁹ Ibid.

as theorized by classical political economists. In response to this problem, John Stuart Mill reformulated Smith's definition while staying true to the Smithian conception that argued economic value only came from fixed commodity production.

For Mill, society was composed of three distinct occupational classes. The first were laborers and capitalists who make physical things and add to the wealth of society. The second were professionals, teachers, lawyers, clerks, and statesmen who effectively created the social relations and training that allowed the former to produce physical goods. For instance they taught the population new, more productive skills, organized society in such a way that more people are able to produce, enforced the contracts that were the hallmark of capitalist freedom, helped to rationalize markets, etc.. In opposition to this category of value producing service workers stood a third group. This was the labor of "utilities not fixed or embodied in any object but consisting in a mere service rendered; a pleasure given, an inconvenience or pain averted, during a longer or shorter time, but without leaving a permanent acquisition in the improved qualities of any person or thing."¹⁰ Mill's view represented a culmination of the previous century of political-economic theorizing service work. On the one hand, he kept the sharp divide between producers and servers that Smith, Ricardo, Bentham, and at times, Marx argued for. Mill though, wanted to clarify that the production of wealth did not necessarily imply that everyone had to make physical things directly. Rather, anyone whose labor was metaphysically related to increases in the production of physical commodities could be considered productive workers whose labor had value at both the micro- and macroeconomic levels. Thus, the second class was productive. These people invested money that allowed capitalists to purchase more productive fixed-capital, researched science and mathematics so that future generations could invent better machines, taught generations the laws and history

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (1848 repr., New York: Longman's Green, and Co, 1909), 43.

that undergirded modern society, tallied the balance sheets of emergent corporations, enforced contracts that allowed producers to be safe in their investment, etc.. The third class of people, those who performed “a mere service,” were laborers whose work “ends in immediate enjoyment, without any accumulated stock of permanent means of enjoyment,” and were thus economically unimportant, valueless in relationship to macroeconomic progress, and in fact parasitic.¹¹

In many ways, Mill’s tripartite definition has survived almost wholly intact through our present day. On the one hand, most analysts and commentators subscribe to the aggregation of service workers theorized by the classical political economists and socially enshrined by the popularization and bureaucratization of labor statistics. The ninety percent or so of us that are service workers, whether we practice law or clean houses, teach or empty bedpans are epistemologically more alike as workers than anyone who cuts steel, works on a farm, or manages a factory. Lurking beneath the surface though, we also completely accept Mill’s intervention, at both the level of culture and within the labor market. *Some* service jobs, those that in the modern world map remarkably well onto Mill’s second and new category of labor are worthy of economic and cultural value. Their value derives not from labor market intervention or political power from their “skills” and their “human capital.” At the same time our social understanding of Mill’s third kind of service work has suffered remarkably little revision. Today, like 1848, these are the “unskilled” who lack the “human capital” to do anything other than perform “a mere service.” While somewhat akin to Mill’s second category in the way they labor, they are at once thoroughly divorced in terms of the value, in all its forms, assigned to their work. American politics, culture, and thought’s simultaneous acceptance of both the aggregation of all service workers and the Millian disaggregation is not necessarily contradictory. On the contrary, it performs the immensely

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 49.

important ideological function of at once reifying the valuelessness of Mill's third category in relationship to "skilled" service work and industrial labor while ensconcing the idea of a movement toward a "post-industrial" or "service" economy as a natural, unstoppable, and worthwhile world-historical development.

I also want to suggest that Mill's third category of work more or less maps onto the idea of a service economy as causative of inequality and economic dislocation. Obama's usage of Galesburg as a stand-in for this story depended on a division amongst so-called service workers. He was not linking the kinds of service work where people directed community affairs at a hospital or taught law school to inequality (such jobs fit into Mill's second category). Rather, it was the replacement of jobs in Mill's first category with jobs from his this. In such a schema, it is pointless to try to raise the conditions of this group. The only thing politics can do is try to save or replace as many of the jobs in the first category as possible or provide avenues for people to enter into the second.

This categorical inheritance of the contemporary equivalents of Mill's third class was bolstered by two other traditions that have continued to aid in our devaluation of such labor and economy in which large pluralities of people work in such jobs. The first tradition was grounded in gendered conceptions of work and the political economy of the household that far predated the growth of market values and the transition to capitalism of the 17th-19th centuries. When divorced from the market and considered at the level of labor activity, 20th Century updates of many women's "traditional" household work chart well onto Mill's conception of the third category of labor as well as versions of many of the fastest growing jobs of our era. Men's ownership of women's household labor entailed a necessary devaluation of service labor via the inability of women to exchange household labor for anything other than marriage and dependency. Thus, at the historical moment when the value

of labor was being adjudicated by the market, “reproductive” labor—to use a contemporary term—was being excluded and thus rendered economically valueless.

At the level of accumulation, the household economy was in fact a demonstrable bulwark of wage-labor and industrial capitalist production—rendering incoherent any normative conception that treats labor resulting in physical commodity production as *sui generis*. In her classic study *Home and Work*, Jeanne Boydsten argued that “the ideology of spheres . . . veiled the reliance of the family on resources other than those provided by wage-labor.”¹² For Boydsten and others, the work done within the home—cleaning, cooking, boarding, childcare, basic health care, indeed, *servicing*—while unpaid in a monetary sense, functioned as both an added wage and an added input of productivity. After World War II though, many of the jobs traditionally performed within the home became, on a grand scale, jobs that needed be performed and consumed as wage-work outside the home. Thus, besides the fact that women have represented the majority of low-wage service workers over the course of the postwar era, ranging from roughly sixty-five percent of hospitality and food service workers to nearly ninety percent of health and nursing aides, the physical jobs they were performing were often akin to the unpaid labor traditionally performed by women in the household and outside of the logic of wage-labor and the market.

Thus, the hugely disproportionate number of women in low-wage service jobs was a consequence of a historically long-standing political economy of gender. Women’s work left the family and entered the market, but upon its removal from the household it did not shed its devalued cultural and economic nature. In this way, the growth of the so-called service economy represented an economic shift of women’s work from largely unpaid household

¹² Jeanne Boydsten, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

labor to paid market labor. Women still did the vast majority of society's "mere services"—such jobs had just become socially more ensconced in the market

To the economic and gendered understandings of service we can add a third tradition that has understood it as a wholly distinct category of labor and shaped the way culture and politics has approached it as distinct. First elucidated in relationship to Calvinist allegories of men and god, its continuation through the contemporary era owes much to service labor's so-called human aspect. Because service has often involved a labor relationship between humans beings rather than between a human being and a machine or the earth, it has provided both a useful way to metaphorically think about social hierarchy and as such, has also created an ongoing cultural problem both undivorceable from its often (though not always) gendered character and particularly prevalent in a nation rhetorically devoted to republican egalitarianism.

"Service is a state of subjection, grounded partly in the curse of God for sin, partly in civil constitution; for though it be not a sinful condition, yet it is a miserable condition." These were the words of a relatively obscure Calvinist theologian and Cambridge scholar named Paul Baynes, sometime in the first decade of the seventeenth century.¹³ In a long discussion on the relationship between masters and their servants, Baynes elucidated the popular conception of the central problem of service in the years before the triumph of capitalist social relations. In a world where the contract and the wage had yet to become hegemonic markers of the labor relation, servitude was not understood as an employment relationship in any modern sense. For Baynes, servants should trust in their master's benevolence while masters must always be godly toward their servants. As a "state of subjection," the relationship

¹³ Paul Baynes, *An Entire Commentary on the Whole Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians* (1643; repr., Edinburgh: James Nichol., 1866) 365. Baynes was a fellow at Cambridge from 1597 until 1608. Upon his death in 1617 he remained unpublished. The whole of his *Entire Commentary* first appeared in print 1643, though the first chapter had been published in 1618. For a brief biographical sketch, see Thomas Alexander's preface to the above cited edition.

between master and servant was understood to approximate the relationship between God and man.

The danger in this relationship, and thus the broader threat to Christian faith, came from what Baynes called “counterfeit service.”¹⁴ “Counterfeit service” was a service that was done only for the server’s gain, monetary or otherwise rather than out of devotion. “Counterfeit” thus implied that the key quality for good service was its sincerity or lack thereof. While “one may have some consideration of himself, yet when principally or only he looketh at this, he serveth with a hollow heart.”¹⁵ Proper service was performed outside of market considerations, it was done for motives other than economic. To serve insincerely was to engage in the rankest form of guile and hypocrisy. It was “compounded of pride and untruth,” both abominations and when multiplied together, especially egregious. As Baynes rhetorically chastised, “how many are there that serve their masters only for their own advantage?”¹⁶

“Counterfeit service”—self-interested and insincere—was closely connected to further problems in the social ethics of servitude; namely those of motivation and compulsion. “Eye-service,” a term that entered the English lexicon during Baynes’ era, has come to refer broadly to the practice of only working when one is in the sight of a master or boss. Such service was not just a problem of the work ethic for Baynes but also one of interest. Even worse than its insincerity was the fact that “most damnable is when a man maketh...the measure of his service the eye that his governor hath over him.” “Eye-service” implied that the motivation for one’s service derived from pleasing a master rather than an inner, godly compulsion. Baynes’ intuitively Calvinist interpretation of the master-servant relationship inspired a few antislavery biblical readings on the other side of the Atlantic. The Salem judge

¹⁴ Paul Bayne, *An Entire Commentary*, 367.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Samuel Sewall found in Baynes the inspiration for a denunciation of slavery.¹⁷ If slaves worked because of external compulsions (whether it was the whip, the law, the contract, or their master's pleasure matters little here) then their service was counterfeit. Because slavery entailed the rankest form of external motivation—the whip—the service of slaves was by nature counterfeit. Proper service—be it slavery or any other form of service—was neither counterfeit nor eye-service. It was authentic, sincere, and performed out of an inner, natural devotion rather than any sort of fear *or* calculated interest.

Baynes was writing at a historical moment just as all sorts of sins were being transformed into market and capitalist virtues. That is, at a time before Christian theologians, philosophers, and economists had successfully posited calculated interest as a perfectly acceptable and even ethical basis for human behavior, particularly behavior that occurred within the labor relation and the market more broadly. As Albert Hirschman has shown, during the time of Baynes' writing and over the succeeding centuries; lust, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy, pride, and greed were transformed into, respectively, desire, consumption, leisure, repayment, competition, self-confidence and profit.¹⁸

As capitalist social relations triumphed across the United States, in our normative understandings of the labor relation the ideas of Baynes have fallen by the wayside. In their place has arisen variously contract, interest, profit, double-freedom, and class as the central problematics of this relation. Yet in the contemporary era, authenticity, sincerity and inner direction still color the way so much of American culture and politics understands the labor we call service. Serving is a problem because it ties the server to the will of the master. In his invented psychohistorical parable of the house slave versus the field slave, Malcolm X suggested that black false consciousness arose directly from the labor relation—be it slave or

¹⁷ On the Baynes and Sewall connection, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966) 342-43.

¹⁸ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

juridically free—of serving whites. Clarence Johnson, a radical Los Angeles Civil Rights activist from the 1940s through 1960s and longtime rank and file leader within the city’s Waiter’s Alliance remarked in the late 1960s that “a sizable portion of the community viewed us as . . . Uncle Toms, because we largely served whites.” This *problem* with service was not an exceptionally African-American phenomenon nor specifically of that era. 1950s sociological conceptions like C. Wright Mills’ “self-alienation” and David Riesman’s “other directedness” have evolved into more contemporary invocations regarding the social effects of what Arlie Hothschild labelled as the “commercialization of feeling.” What unites these accounts is that while some of them may be supportive of the upward labor revaluation of this kind of work, what made the labor a social and often psychological problem was what the worker did and with whom, not the conditions under which it was done.

In 1972, with an eye not towards activists and sociologists but rather business itself, the idiosyncratic Harvard business scholar Theodore Levitt suggested that,

The concept of “service” evokes, from the opaque recesses of the mind, time-worn images of personal ministrations and attendance. It refers generally to deeds one individual performs personally for another. It carries historical connotations of charity, gallantry, and selflessness, or of obedience, subordination, and subjugation.¹⁹

Levitt cared little as to *why* modern business and culture continued to view service in a manner that would have been recognizable to Baynes. He was much more interested in convincing managers that the way they looked at business was backwards and inefficient. For Levitt, the problem of profitability within a variety of so-called service providing industries and our broader cultural conception of service labor itself was that we “inescapably embrace[s] ancient, pre-industrial modes of thinking.” While most successful businesses look outside the labor relation in order to innovate via technology and new forms of organization, too many service businesses were mired in an obsession with the performance and performer of labor.

¹⁹ Levitt, “The Production Line Approach to Services,” *Harvard Business Review*, 1972.

They were, that is, stuck in imagining the category of labor people do as meaningful. As he wrote, “service thinks humanistically and that explains its failure,” Levitt’s goal was to inspire a kind of organizational revolution within the way management understood innovation across the so-called service sector. The corollary point though, namely that when we think about the kinds of labor we call service we obsess over the same kinds of things that Baynes did—was one that continues to haunt American political economy and culture.

Indeed, at the same moment that Levitt was attempting to convince American business to forget about whatever “category” of business they were engaged in and simply engage in business (“the business of business is business” as he was so fond of saying)—an uphill battle that would mark much of his career—Harry Braverman was making similar arguments directed toward Marxism and the labor movement. The obsession with categorizing labor and more broadly, categorizing the type of economy that existed at any given historical moment—agricultural, manufacturing, industrial, service, post-industrial, late-capitalist, *ad nauseum*—was one shared by both bourgeois economists and many within the traditions of labor, Marxism, and the left.

[T]he existence of a working class as such does not depend upon the various concrete forms of labor which it is called upon to exercise, but rather its social form... The variety of determinate forms of labor *may* affect the consciousness, cohesiveness, or economic and political activity of the working class, but they do not affect its existence as a class.²⁰

In other words, it is not what a working class does, nor is it what types of commodities (cars, refrigerators, computer chips, emptied bed pans, goods delivered on time, feelings, experiences, etc) are produced but the social relations under which they are produced that is the important point for Braverman.

Despite the protestations of people as diverse as Levitt and Braverman—and with some important exceptions—we continue to think about so-called service work in ways that

²⁰ Braverman, 284. Emphasis mine

often sound remarkably similar to Baynes and reify it in a manner akin to Mill. Our concern with authenticity and its absence in labor that we deem broadly as service and our categorization of it as distinct works to obscure the social relations in which that labor is performed. That is, we effectually place it outside the normative labor relation which most of us understand as defined by not just interest, contract, and double-freedom but also as embedded within and dependent upon the class relations that define the contours and character of the relation itself. Such contexts can range from the successful intervention in the labor relation via class politics at the level of the collective bargaining agreement or successfully enforced minimum wage laws for instance, or in the form of the social goods removed from the marketplace that thus impact the labor compulsion of double freedom.

It is on these points in particular that it is worth returning to the power of Obama's story of Galesburg. Just as *service* is not a causative feature of growing inequality, so too was *manufacturing* not a feature of the rising equality of mid-century. Rather, a relatively cohesive class and workplace politics exercised a modicum of power that was able to substantially shape labor relations. Expressed in labor organizations like the CIO—and despite much selective historical memory, not limited solely limited to manufacturing industries that were disproportionately white and male—it leveraged point-of-production solidarity and moments of strategic possibility like World War II to frequently make effective demands on employers through various forms of contentious politics, ranging from the picket line to the sit-down strike to the contract negotiation. Just as importantly, it made transformative political demands on the state by forcing the Democratic Party to pursue a variety of redistributive policies and demand the inscription of key labor rights.

Thematically, the goals this politics pursued can be understood along two different lines. First, it sought to *revalue* various kinds of work. Factory and assembly line production, extractive industries, municipal services, and various kinds of “unskilled” manual labor like

construction, transportation, and longshore work became, in many locales, avenues to a relatively secure and prosperous life. Without a longer vantage we forget just how radical this development was. In most of the aforementioned sectors prior to the middle of the twentieth century, such work was understood culturally and economically to be essentially without value. It was unskilled and dirty, fit for those whom bourgeois society would happily discard were a cheaper replacement to come along. Working conditions were atrocious, wages barely enough to get by, job security inexistent, and the notion of advancement within the workplace a cruel joke. That in a few decades such work could provide a relatively secure life, develop mechanisms to challenge the worst workplace abuses, and gain a certain cultural respect and pride is one of the most dramatic shifts within the long history of economic inequality and also indicative that the growing equality of the manufacturing economy was because of a political economy that had little to do with manufacturing *per se*.

At the same time that class politics forced the revaluation of certain kinds of human labor, it also became the political base for a process of redrawing the moral boundaries of the marketplace. One way to understand the long global history of capitalist social relations is to think about what has, and has not, become saleable over time. At its heart, capitalism is a moral system as well as a system of production: it is a set of political and social relationships that divides the collective fruits of human endeavor, based on certain ideological justifications—"skill," "initiative," "intellect," "usefulness"—while simultaneously relegating much of everyday life to commodity relationships. For most of the last three hundred years, in the wealthiest nations, more and more things have become commodifiable; that is to say that they have come under the moral purview of what can be exchanged in the marketplace. The great exception, of course, is the human body itself. The commitment to the eradication of unfree labor in various forms was also an ideological precondition for the absolute saleability and commodifiability of doubly free labor itself. What becomes striking,

then, about the mid-century moment when such a politics was able to exercise a modicum of power is the policy thrust to try to move basic human housing, health care, old age security, education, bottom-level nutritional needs, everyday welfare, and even in some places leisure and mass culture outside of the market. This was a political process of *disenclosure*: of removing some basic human needs from the risks, vagaries, and price fluctuations associated with the profit motive and the market as moral arbiter and ensconcing them as social goods. To return to the original point, the backdrop to the growing inequality and dislocation of the last decades is the defeat of a mid-century class politics that provided a political and point-of-production base in which some kinds of work were revalued and the moral boundaries of what was to be produced and distributed through the capitalist market contracted. And, this defeat had little to do with the fact that more and more people were working in so-called service jobs *per se*. Rather, the kinds of jobs and industries that have been rapidly expanding since World War II and by the mid-2020s will make up more than one quarter of the country's workforce were made to be low-waged and insecure by the defeat of this politics.

In the chapters that follow this broad historical argument unfolds roughly chronologically. Section I charts how the growth of a so-called service economy was grounded in, respectively: urban and state reactions to changes in the metropolitan landscape brought on by residential dispersal and capital mobility; and the mass commodification of women's 'traditionally' unpaid household labor in the context of changing family economies. This section pays special attention to the ways in which employers—particularly hospitals, clinics, hotels, restaurants, and building service companies—in concert with local and state officials successfully beat back challenges from unions, extracted large financial incentives, and worked to undermine state and urban legal attempts to upwardly revalue labor. Indeed, contrary to popular memory and much historiography that has not bothered looking, a major thrust of mid-century American labor politics specifically and class politics more generally

was a general upward revaluation of all forms of paid labor, not just in factories and heavy industry.

Thus, Part II begins with the defeat of this political imperative, especially in industries that saw rapid expansion during the postwar era. From the late 1960s and through the present, the solution to economic inequality became understood within the mainstram confines of politics and culture as a function of some combination of: job (re)training and skill/human capital deficiency; labor market discrimination; industrial relocation and automation; and the cultural/economic backwardness of what Adam Smith labelled as “mere services.” Policy makers, influenced by Chicago School notions of human capital, centered job policy on retraining workers for whichever version of a “new economy” was in vogue that year. Those identified more with progressive impulses sought to combat discrimination in hiring and promotion on the basis of race and sex while tending to reify broader structural inequalities across job categories. Others tried to stem the tide of deindustrialization and automation via occasional attempts at protectionism and more frequently, the proliferation of upwardly redistributive tax incentives. At the level of meaningful political contestation, none of these reactions to declining economic equality sought to intervene in the labor market to raise the wages and benefits of the kinds of jobs that more and more Americans were working. Only a generation before, these were the kinds of policies that had given those who produced things like Maytag refrigerators an entry into middle-class economic security but were now off the table when it came to service work. Finally, a small but important part of the labor and broadly understood Civil Rights movements and distinct sections of American conservatism actively decried, often in very gendered ways, what they saw as the backwards, parasitic, and degrading aspects of service.

The politics that upwardly revalued work from the 1930s through the 1960s did so via both legislative/legal means and point of production organizing. *Servicing Inequality* concludes by reconstructing the two most sustained challenges—one legal/legislative and one on the shop floor and confined to a specific metropolitan area—to a service economy defined by poverty wages that arose in the last half-century. From the late 1960s through the middle of the 1980s, a cohort of feminists pursued and often won “Comparable Worth” rulings and legislation in courts and statehouses. “Comparable Worth” argued that wage differentials between jobs that required the same amount of training inherently reflected discriminatory practice. While the basis of the argument was in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and the fact that women were disproportionately employed in underpaid jobs almost always in so-called service, Comparable Worth lawyers and activists crafted their strategies in gender neutral terms. Thus, in various states and cities across the country, courts and legislatures equalized the wages and benefits of people like nurse’s aides (regardless of gender) with unionized truck drivers (regardless of gender).

Comparable Worth has remained strangely absent from secondary analysis of “second-wave feminism.” At its height in the early 1980s though, one federal judge correctly said of comparable worth that it is “pregnant with the possibility of disrupting the entire economic system of the United States.” Indeed, Comparable Worth demonstrated the political possibilities of a heretofore unheard of state intervention in wage rates at the level of occupational category via legal and legislative mechanisms. The successes of Culinary Union Local 226 in Las Vegas demonstrate service workers could be organized at the point of production on a scale even larger than Ford’s River Rouge Complex or U.S. Steel’s Gary Works. Contrary to many otherwise pro-labor Americans who argued that there is something inherently different in service and hospitality labor that makes it harder to organize, from the 1970s through the present, the disproportionately immigrant and female labor force of Las

Vegas hotels and casinos built the largest union local in a “right to work” state and transformed “Sin City” into a relative bastion of working-class municipal power and economic mobility within a nation where both were on a steep decline. Via a 20th Century update of the late-19th Century organizing strategy of amalgamation, the “Culinary” proved on the ground that the economic, political, and cultural distinctions between categories of work are at their heart ideological justifications for America’s exploding economic inequality, the results that is of a *political* economy, not a *service* or *manufacturing* economy.