

Translating Labor History for Television

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Abstract: This article considers the challenges and advantages of translating academic historical research into popular television formats. It traces key moments in the development of televised history programmes in Britain from the 1950s to the present and explores the impact of two significant recent shifts: the fragmentation of traditional academic expertise; and the empowerment of audiences. The article moves on to discuss how these and other shifts helped to shape the making of two major BBC history series on women's labor, both presented and co-written by the author (*Servants*, 2012 and *Shopgirls*, 2014). This article is adapted from a keynote address by the author to the Worlds of Labor conference in Porto Alegre in 2018.

Keywords: public history; labor history; gender; television; empathy.

Resumo: Este artigo considera os desafios e vantagens de traduzir a pesquisa histórica acadêmica em formatos populares para a televisão. Traça momentos-chave no desenvolvimento de programas de história televisiva na Grã-Bretanha dos anos 1950 até o presente e explora o impacto de duas mudanças recentes significativas: a fragmentação da expertise acadêmica tradicional e o empoderamento das audiências. O artigo avança para discutir como essas e outras mudanças ajudaram a moldar a produção de duas grandes séries históricas da BBC sobre o trabalho das mulheres, ambas apresentadas e coescritas pela autora (*Servants*, 2012 e *Shopgirls*, 2014). Este artigo é adaptado de uma palestra da autora para a conferência Mundos do Trabalho em Porto Alegre em 2018.

Palavras-chave: história pública; história do trabalho; gênero; televisão; empatia.

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Introduction

I have spent much of my career moving between the disciplines of history, sociology, and criminology. This has meant that I have spent a lot of time moving between past and present day challenges. That movement, that dialogue – between disciplines, between past and present, between different audiences – has depended on translation.

I have chosen translation as my theme in this talk and I want to explore it through my recent experiences making television (TV) history programmes for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): *Servants: The True Story of Life Below Stairs* (2012) and *Shopgirls: The True Story of Life Behind the Counter* (2014).

We are familiar with the idea that things get ‘lost in translation’, that messages or meanings can be diminished when they move between languages or formats. Certainly, things do get lost in translation when academic research is turned into TV. I will address that here. However, I want to concentrate on what we can *gain* through translation. I want to argue that good TV history can not only greatly enrich research but also remind us why we do that research in the first place.

Before I embark on that, I’d like to start by placing TV history in the wider context of public history. My examples are drawn from a British context but I hope they will also speak to other contexts, including the Brazilian one.

Consuming public history

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We live in a period of unprecedented public appetite for history. In Britain, and many other parts of the world, the heritage industry continues to expand. More people (over four million) belong to a heritage organization called the National Trust than belong to all our political parties combined. Sales of historical books are soaring. History festivals now operate alongside literary and cultural festivals. Hundreds of people spend their weekends in historical re-enactments. Tracing our family histories has become a national past-time and traffic on sites like Ancestry.com is intense. Even in the world of computer gaming, many of the most popular first-person-shooter (FPS) games reconstruct historical conflicts and battles – albeit with much creative license.

Much of this terrain is set out by Jerome de Groot in his book *Consuming History*¹ – an expansive survey charting how the popular consumption of history has been transformed in recent years and arguing that professional historians have played little part in this transformation, other than to decry it for ‘dumbing down’ the discipline. For one reviewer, the book ‘serves as a manifesto for the re-engagement of scholars with public history’.² De Groot’s ‘mass market’ approach extended established work on public and community history³, a field that continues to expand.⁴ Public history is now a sub-specialism in itself within

1 DE GROOT, J. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2008.

2 FLEMING, N. C. “Review of ‘Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture’”. By Jerome de Groot. *Twentieth Century British History*, 20:2, 2009, p. 270–272.

3 See, for example: SAMUEL, R. *Theatres of Memory: Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. London: Verso, 1996; SAMUEL, R. *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain. Theatres of Memory: Volume 2*. London: Verso, 1999; TOSH, J. *Why History Matters*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

4 See, for example: CAUVIN, T. *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*. London: Routledge, 2016; GARDNER,

the wider historical discipline, with strands spanning policy, diplomacy and cultural consumption.

But what is driving the mass cultural consumption of history? In part, it is driven by our desire to place ourselves in (post)modernity. Who are we? How did our lives come to be the way they are? How could our lives be different? The stories we tell ourselves – about ourselves, our communities, our country – define who we were, who we are and who we want to be. They are part of a wider project of self-identification and self-projection. These stories are all the more crucial because many of us feel that we live in de-historicised times, no longer rooted within traditional structures and apparent certainties.

Our passion for public history is perhaps driven by a desire – conscious or otherwise – to escape the present, to lose ourselves in other times and cultures. Sometimes we mourn the passing of worlds that we have lost. Sometimes, we are glad to have left those worlds behind. That raises interesting questions about the connections – the empathy or antipathy – we might feel towards those who lived in the past. I will return to this theme later in the talk.

TV history as part of public history

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TV history is just one element of this rich and varied public historical landscape and – of course – it has a history of its own. I found it useful to consider this within my research for *Servants* and *Shopgirls* because it helped me to understand the evolution of distinctive styles of historical storytelling, narration and visualization.⁵

You may know AJP Taylor as one of Britain's leading historians of diplomacy and international relations. He was also arguably Britain's first TV historian. No props, no gimmicks – just one brilliant academic in a bow tie offering a straight argument, straight down the camera. His format, which I term the **expert address**, finds an echo today in the TED talks of our own times. A former journalist used to writing catchy headlines, Taylor's talks had bold titles like 'Why do Wars Start?' and 'Why do Wars End?' and presented public history as a form of unashamed public education, edification and provocation. His very successful TV series were broadcast intermittently over two decades, from the 1950s to 70s.

Then the 'expert address' went outdoors. Art historian Kenneth Clarke's epic TV series, *Civilisation* (1969), offered grand narratives on a grand scale through its sweeping history of European art, architecture and culture. Here, the **expert presenter is always on location** (and never in a TV studio), and tells an over-arching story by journeying through visually rich locations. *Where* things happened (as opposed to *why* they happened) became central to the signification of authenticity within the historical narrative. Space became as important as time as a driver and framer of this kind of historical storytelling. The TV historian's journey between spaces would later become a key (and increasingly clichéd) element within these kinds of programmes.

J.B.; HAMILTON, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

5 For overview, see also: BELL, E. "Television and memory: history programming and contemporary identities". *Image and Narrative*. 12:2, 2011; GRAY, A.; BELL, E. *History on Television*. London: Routledge, 2013; HUNT, T. "Reality, Identity and Empathy: The Changing Face of Social History Television". *Journal of Social History*. 39:3, 843-858, 2006.

Clark's singular take on European civilization has been subject to much criticism over the years which typically questioned his right as a privileged white man to craft this very particular grand narrative. Recently, the BBC commissioned an equally epic but markedly pluralistic sequel – over 40 years on from the original. This series was entitled *Civilisations* (2017) and featured three diverse presenters covering intertwining global cultural narratives. Mary Beard, David Olusoga, and Simon Schama addressed challenging subjects in their histories of creative expression, weaving in stories – frequently overlooked by Clarke – of cultural exploitation and expropriation through colonialism, genocide, slavery, persecution and gendered power.

In the wake of, and perhaps as a reaction against, Clarke's *Civilisation* series (1969), a new style of TV history emerged in the early 1970s. The presenter disappeared altogether, replaced by a new **archive-led and interview-led format** with a narrator but no central presenter. The classic British example of this format was *The World at War* (1973-4), a series telling the story of the Second World War over 26 episodes – at the time the most expensive TV series ever made. This format would go on to influence what was beginning to emerge as 'people's history' that combined oral history, testimony and archive footage. In terms of research methods, this form of history was directly shaped by sociologists in my own university department – Paul Thompson,⁶ Thea Thompson⁷ and later Michael Roper⁸ – all of whom helped to pioneer the use of qualitative interviews and memory work as cultural data. At the turn of the millennium, one particular series championed this format. Called *People's Century* (1999), it sought to depict and explain the broad social, economic and political changes shaping twentieth century life, combining macro events with micro experiences.

The 1990s also saw other innovations within TV history in Britain. There was the rise of the **celebrity presenter**. Here, professional historians were replaced by celebrities – typically actors, writers, politicians, artists and comedians – in an effort to boost audience reach and numbers. This format was pioneered by *Time Team* (1994-2013), a series based around archeological quests. It broke new ground in many ways. It was presented by a well-known comedy actor, Tony Robinson, working as part of an expert archaeological team. It was the first series to depict an **historical team** fully engaged in 'hands on' history, and literally getting their hands dirty. It was also the first to structure its narrative – its historical story-telling – around jeopardy: would the team succeed in solving their chosen historical mystery, and would they complete their archaeological dig before the developers bulldozers moved in and the credits rolled?

The celebrity-led format continues today. *Who Do You Think You Are* (first broadcast in 2004 and still on air) uses a celebrity's personal history to tell a wider social history. The most popular episodes are typically those involving a celebrity with ancestors who had lived through personal tragedy, hardship or scandal – typically crime, poverty, abandonment or persecution. Those with more 'regular' ancestors rarely make it through the edit. Here, the past is presented in terms

6 THOMPSON, P. *The Edwardians: the remaking of British society*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975; THOMPSON, P. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978; THOMPSON, P.; BORNAT, J. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 (fourth edition).

7 THOMPSON, T. *Edwardian Childhoods*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

8 ROPER, M. "Oral History". In: *The Contemporary History Handbook*, eds. B. Brivati, J. Buxton and A. Seldon. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996; ROPER, M. "Private Lives, Public History". *Australian Historical Studies*. 48 (2), 310-311, 2017.

of a personal journey of (historical) tragedy to (contemporary) triumph – an assemblage of the celebrity self over time and against the odds.

A further innovation of the 1990s came in the form of **historical reality TV**. This involved the live filming of ordinary present-day people living in historical conditions. The first example, *1900 House* (first shown 1999) showed a late 20th century family struggling with early 20th century domestic life – their ‘1900 house’ had few of the comforts of modern middle class living. Significantly, this was arguably the first reality TV show of its kind and influenced the wider rise of this now global format – from *Big Brother* to *Love Island*. Historical reality TV has had many spin offs in Britain, including *Edwardian Country House*, *Victorian Farm*, *Edwardian Farm* and *Turn Back Time*. Here, the narrative is driven by a quest for public empathy, asking ordinary TV viewers (rather than academic experts) to imagine how ordinary people might have felt in the past.

The final innovation in TV history formats from the 1990s and early 2000s was **audience participation**. In the first example of this, *Great Britons* (2002), the TV audience was invited to take part in a telephone poll to cast their vote. The case for ten candidates was made by ten celebrities. The list was eclectic and included Elizabeth I, Princess Diana, William Shakespeare and Isaac Newton. The eventual winner was Winston Churchill. In *Restoration* (2003), the audience voted on which of a selection of endangered historic buildings should be restored with lottery funding. The winner of the first series was the Victoria Baths, a 19th century public bath house in Manchester. With the rise of this format, we see a significant shift from expert to audience opinion and new efforts to center and enfranchise the audience. It continues to be popular: the BBC recently launched a new series of this kind, *Icon* (2019), which invites the audience to vote for the individual they believe to have made the most influential contribution to twentieth century global life.

At the same time as these new innovations took hold, however, professional historians remained part of TV history. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the **expert on location** format was re-invented through the work, first, of men historians (notably David Starkey, Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson) but then increasingly, through that of women historians and classicists (Amanda Vickery, Bettany Hughes, Mary Beard, Amanda Foreman and Lucy Worsley). Questions of gender and intersectionality are still much debated in relation to public history, particularly on television. Women’s right to offer a grand narrative rather than a sectional one remains much contested, along with their right to drive (inter) national cultural debate.⁹

One further TV history format that must be mentioned here is the **historical or period drama**. From the 1950s to the present, this has been a staple element of British programming and spanning film to long-running series. The commissioning of my own BBC history documentary series owed much to the success of two particular period drama series airing on a rival commercial channel: *Downton Abbey*, a series following the early twentieth century fortunes of a fictional wealthy British family and their servants, and *Mr Selfridge*, a drama charting the rise of one of London’s most famous department stores, Selfridges.

This brief tour of TV history reflects **two major social shifts**: first, the fragmentation (or dividing or sharing) of traditional academic expertise; second,

⁹ For overview of past and present efforts to silence women, see: BEARD, M. *Women and Power: A Manifesto*. London: Profile Books, 2017; BELL, E. “‘No one wants to be lectured at by a woman’: Women and history on TV”. *Women’s History Magazine*, 4-12, 2008.

the empowerment of audiences. For me, both shifts are part of a much wider social change. The age of the end-user or citizen-consumer has been created by the kinds of large scale social processes that historians and sociologists pore over – changes in the divisions of labor, production, consumption – changing definitions of rights, trust and authority. I would argue that both shifts – the sharing of expertise and the empowerment of audiences – are positive. Some may disagree, linking this shift to the rise of cultural and political populisms. But for me, it is important that, like customers in the high street, students in a university or patients in the NHS, the opinions and preferences of TV audiences matter more than ever before – although of course they don't always get what they want.

Of course, if they don't get what they want, traditional TV audiences can now – and do – create and share their own content on social media. On an average evening in Britain, Youtube, Vimeo, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat combined probably pull in more 'viewers' than terrestrial TV channels, especially among those under the age of 18. Anyone making any kind of TV programme in these times – and especially those aiming to translate history for television – has to cut their cloth accordingly. When we make public history today in Britain, we do so in the context of cultural and political populisms and in an era of unprecedented audience choice.

Making *Servants* and *Shopgirls*

Many of these TV history trends helped to shape the making of the two series with which I was involved: *Servants* and *Shopgirls*. At one level both series work as an expert lecture on location. But they also set out to share/distribute expertise – through interviews with other researchers (some academic, some not) and former servants, shopworkers or their descendants. Both are indebted to women historian presenters who, between them, have carved out a vital female presenter voice. Both were very mindful of the audience. From the outset we wanted to reach beyond the core TV history viewer (mainly older, mainly male) by appealing to devotees of historical drama (*Downton Abbey*, *Mr Selfridge*) and also to fans of what might be called 'historical features' programmes on history of the home, design, gardens, food, health, shops, clothes – the stuff of everyday life and a staple of many women's magazines.

What did we gain by translating labor history for television by making *Servants* and *Shopgirls*? I believe we gained three things by moving beyond conventional textual formats.

i. We were able to tell hidden histories by bringing these two groups of workers into the public historical frame

More people in Britain worked in domestic service at its height than worked in any other single industry. Many people in Britain today – including me – are descended from servants. This is because servant keeping was extremely common. It was not confined to the grand country houses but extended right down the social scale, as it still does in Brazil and many other countries today. Servant-keeping was built into Britain's everyday architecture – from the basements and attics of Victorian terraces to the side entrances of interwar suburban semi-detached properties. Anyone who could afford domestic help employed domestic help in Britain until well into the 1930s and beyond.

So why had historians ignored them and why had programme makers preferred making master/servant drama, like *Downton Abbey*, over documentary?

Before I address that, I need to acknowledge some important exceptions here. Feminist social historians had pioneered studies of domestic service,¹⁰ although most would agree that their work was met with initial indifference from the wider academic history community, particularly from labor historians focusing on larger industries and associated labor struggles, and feminist labor historians focusing on the role of women workers with these. So, labor historians were sadly guilty of neglecting the stories of millions of domestic service workers that did not fit prevailing epistemological frameworks of the time – namely that exploited workers would, in time, become conscious of, and mobilise to resist, their exploitation. Similarly, social historians – working in the tradition of Harold Perkin, Dorothy Perkin and Asa Briggs – were more critical of Marxist frameworks but shone their analytical light on the experiences of middle class male professionals and, thus, also overlooked domestic servants.

Other factors contributed, too, to the neglect of domestic service workers by social and labor historians. The archival records of service, if kept at all, are kept in private hands, rather than in archives. This can make them very hard to trace and assemble. Further, the nature of domestic service work itself is a factor here. Cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, mending, polishing, caring – create no lasting ‘end product’. The blazing fire, the clean sheets, the cooked meal are all transitory. The work that goes into them has all has to be done again – often the same day. It also has to be done ‘invisibly’ – the good servant is the one who works behind the scenes and leaves no trace, literally wipes their own history from the record.

Much of this also applies to the history of shop workers and explains why they, too, had been largely neglected by social and labor historians. Shop workers made up a further huge proportion of workers in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Like domestic service, this was field of employment that became feminised over time. In 1900, a quarter of a million women worked in shops. By the 1960s, the number was over one million, nearly one fifth of the country’s female workforce. Like domestic servants, their labor did not create a lasting end product. More particularly, they were located between in the liminal, transactional space between producers and consumers. They frequently moved between jobs and, as transitory and often part-time workers (especially those who were working mothers), their stories can seem inconsequential. I offer a more detailed account of their neglect by historians in my article for *Revista Brasileira de História*.¹¹

One of our challenges, then, in making the two series was to put servants and shop workers back in the frame by finding ways to visualize that ‘invisible’ work in a respectful way. Some of the ways in which we did this will be familiar to academic historians. In the *Servants* series, for example, we did this through the diaries of servants and servant keepers; through interviews with former servants and their descendants; and through the statistics of the census. In other words, through texts and numbers. But some of the other ways in which we did this will

10 DAVIDOFF, L. *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Class and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1995; HORN, P. *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*. Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990; DELAP, L. *Knowing their Place: domestic service in twentieth-century Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; LIGHT, A. *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: The Hidden Heart of Domestic Service*. London: Penguin, 2007; STEEDMAN, C. *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

11 COX, P. “Garotas de loja, história social e teoria social”. *Revista Brasileira de História*. São Paulo, v. 37, n. 75, p. 243-271, 2017; COX, P. “Shop Girls, Social History and Social Theory”. *Revista Brasileira de História*. São Paulo, v. 37, n. 75, p. 243-271, 2017.

be a lot less familiar. And here lies the particular value of a range of subtle film-making techniques used by the creative teams behind the scenes – all of which were vital in the process of translating labor history for TV.

The opening sequences of the final episode of *Servants* serves as an exemplar of the many different techniques used by the creative team:

- substituting me for a servant by allowing the camera to follow me as I took their routes through different houses upservant staircases, through servant tunnels, into bleak servant living quarters;
- re-constructing the physical and sensory elements of servants' daily work – feeling the weight, and imagining the bad smell, of bedchamber pots and slop buckets, or the great smell of baking bread;
- colour grading: capturing the dimness of servants' quarters, and the brightness of the employers' living rooms;
- using sound – the opening title music suggests unstoppable change; Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach* soundtrack 'counts' us up servant staircases;
- disparate images of fragmented stories – using postcards of unknown servant portraits and placing them on railings and street corners;
- bold graphics – the opening graphics of the series used a graffiti-style mural image of servants spreading over the whole façade of a country house.
- using vignettes and graphic sequences to identify and present the skills involved in a particular 'invisible' labor process – for example, preparing a complicated dish, repairing an expensive garment, anticipating customer anxieties or desires.

All these creative techniques had their own sensory element. They were inviting the audience to experience the world of the servant using all their senses. We wanted to bring servants into view in many different ways – not just through the texts and numbers that still structure most academic output.

The creative teams making both series used all these sensory tactics to engage the audience and immerse them in the world portrayed. They used other techniques to more directly engage the audience's emotions. This may be contentious for those wary of emotional 'manipulation' but I would agree that this emotional engagement is the second benefit offered by TV history.

ii) TV history engages emotions

In both series, we wanted to show that the stories of domestic service and shopwork are highly emotional ones – a story of how people negotiated hierarchy, loyalty and deference and also how many celebrated when they broke through social boundaries. In both series, we wanted to trace the struggle of many servants' and shopworkers' for respect as workers and as women – some through their efforts to create trade unions but others through more informal means. We wanted the audience to empathise with that struggle but also to understand why others were not drawn into it.

The stories of service and shopping are also very intimate ones. They touch on very personal aspects of our lives – how we organise our homes, what we eat, what we wear, how we keep clean, how we meet each other's needs and how we

interweave desire, pleasure and guilt in doing so. Seeking to engage with these stories at the emotional level was not to *impose* an emotional framework on them. Instead, it was to draw out – to make visible – their innate emotional dimensions. Recent sociological work on the service sector has greatly enriched labor history through its exploration of emotional labor – forms of labor that require the management of feelings.¹² Emotional labor is often highly gendered and, when it takes the form of domestic labor or caring, can be seen as an innate or essentialised facet of femininity. In other words, for a woman to perform a domestic or caring role is, for many, simply for her to enact a normative female role. This helps to explain why such tasks, when undertaken by women, and particularly by unpaid mothers, aunts, grandmothers or sisters, are not viewed as ‘work’ so much as expected acts of love or duty. The intertwining of (low-paid) emotional labor with the (unpaid) social reproduction of labor has been much explored by feminist sociologists and historians.¹³ In the Brazilian and other contexts shaped by colonialism and slavery, this dynamic is further complicated by ethnic as well as gendered hierarchies. Just as an African-Brazilian slave was expected, in the more distant past, to work without formal rights or remuneration, so an African-Brazilian domestic worker may yet have been expected to work in a similar way up until the recent past.¹⁴

Returning to *Servants* and *Shopgirls*, how did these TV history series depict and explore these challenging elements of women’s work in the service sectors?

One way was to encourage direct contributions from former servants and shopworkers and offer them the chance to present their own testimony about their experience of, and preparation for, undertaking emotional labor within their wider work. Some reflected positively on their willingness to ‘go the extra mile’ for respected employers while others recounted their dismay at some employers’ expectations. In both cases, the routine blurring of their work boundaries was evident.

Another way in which the series aimed to engage emotions – this time those of the audience rather than the participants – was for me, as presenter, to find ways to connect with that audience. My camera training was technical; I was to be advised how to stand, where to look, how to walk, how to simplify and remember things, but it was also emotional. My trainer was an actor and director from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). His message was simple: if I wanted to get through to a diverse audience, I would need to think about what I wanted them to *feel*, not simply what I wanted them to *learn*. When I was preparing my ‘pieces to camera’, I had to think hard about what I wanted the viewers to feel in any one scene: surprised, shocked, amused, shamed, outraged...?

In one scene in the final episode of *Servants*, I was filmed standing in a country house – Brodsworth in Doncaster, now turned into a heritage attraction – as visitors walked around me, and I reflected on what they see of the servants’ contribution and what they do not. The aim in that scene was to challenge viewers who made such visits to look, and think, differently next time.

12 HOCHSCHILD, A. R. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

13 See, for example: HARTMANN, H. “The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union”. In: SARGENT, L. (ed.). *Women and revolution: a discussion of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981, p. 1-42; OAKLEY, A. *The sociology of housework*. Oxford, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1974; DAVIDOFF, L.; HALL, C. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class*. London: Hutchinson, 1987; GLUCKSMANN, M. “Why ‘Work’? Gender and the ‘Total Social Organisation of Labour’”. *Gender, Work and Organization*. 2:2, 63-75, 1995.

14 Economist. *Maid in Brazil: Domestic Workers in Brazil*. 23 June 2014. <https://www.economist.com/americas-view/2014/06/23/maid-in-brazil>.

Some people might regard this as manipulation. It is. But it is also one of the keys to telling powerful stories and creating compelling narratives. And it's those stories and narratives that give our lives shape and meaning. They are also the basis for empathy – for our ability to reflect on our own lives and extend that reflection to the lives of others.

Debates on empathy in history and social science are nothing new. In fact, they form a rich seam around which history, social science and many other disciplines are structured. They take us right back to Enlightenment discussions about the tensions between reason and sentiment and forward into the future. Philosopher David Hume famously went as far as to claim that morality itself was derived from moral sentiment – from sympathy and empathy with others – rather than more detached or abstract reason. Social theorist Max Weber developed the concept of *verstehen* as a way of capturing our need to understand, perceive and know the world; to grasp the meanings intended or expressed by another. Historian R.G. Collingwood believed empathy to be the key to what he termed the 'historical imagination'. Sociologist C. Wright Mills thought it similarly central to the 'sociological imagination'. Psychologists today see capacity for empathy as the bedrock of pro-social behaviours. Progressive movements around the world build their politics on empathetic identification with Others.

My argument here is that we should not confuse sentiment with sentimentality or empathy with irrationality. Rather we should see them as underpinning a morally-informed sociability. And, of course, in a modern multi-mediated society, television and other media play a big part in framing this. This brings me to the third gain that we make by translating labor history for television.

iii) TV history attracts active audiences and creates space for progressive practice

In total, each episode of each series attracted over a million viewers. They were also previewed, reviewed and discussed on radio and across print media. The book I co-wrote with executive producer, Annabel Hopley, to accompany the *Shopgirls* series sold in supermarkets, not just academic book stores.¹⁵

Many of our viewers and readers have had a very active dialogue with us. They have been very direct in telling us exactly what they thought of our efforts. They have corrected us on several points. Indeed, Annabel always imagines the audience looking over her shoulder as she edits a sequence. Respect for the audience drives rigour in TV history – at least in the TV history in which I have been involved.

Viewers did not just contact us to offer corrections. They also offered new research stories and access to personal archive material. They also tweeted all the way through transmission thereby taking engagement to wider levels. Through Youtube, both series reached a more global audience and that, in turn, sparked more global comment and suggestions. Indeed, the reason I am here in Porto Alegre today is because Gino Negro¹⁶ (Federal University of Bahia and editor of *Revista Brasileira de História*) saw the *Servants* series on Youtube, emailed me to discuss it and later introduced me to Clarice Gontarski Speranza¹⁷ (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and one of the organisers of the Worlds of Labor conference).

¹⁵ COX, P.; HOBLEY, A. *Shopgirls - The True Story Of Life Behind The Counter*. London: Hutchinson, 2014.

¹⁶ Editor's note: Antonio Luigi Negro, professor of the Department of History and the Postgraduate course in History at UFBA, and editor of *Revista Brasileira de História* between 2015 and 2017.

¹⁷ Editor's note: Clarice Gontarski Speranza, professor of the Department of History and the Postgraduate course in History at UFRGS, and president of the Brazilian network "Worlds of Labour Workgroup" between 2016 and 2018.

In my experience, the TV history audience is very willing to be part of wider conversations on all sorts of issues. Public history is a very much a two-way street. And that brings me to the final part of I want to say today.

I have shown how the practice of translating history for TV itself has a long history and outlined that two significant shifts within this in recent years: the sharing of expertise and the centering of the audience. I have also argued that academic history does not have to be dumbed down by TV. It does not have to lose quality in translation but can actually stand to make many gains from the process. I have suggested that history as discipline stands to make three specific gains: through TV's power as a visual medium, through its power for emotional engagement, and through its power to command truly mass audiences.

Central to all three is **empathy**. But is empathy enough? There is a common criticism very often leveled at TV and other visual media – that, despite their capacity to generate empathy, they actually encourage public passivity and indifference.

Many commentators have argued that modern media whip up empathy but then waste it. Susan Sontag argues in a classic account of documentary photography that atrocity photographs reduce suffering to a spectacle.¹⁸ Michael Ignatieff argues in an essay on ethics and television that TV can create moral causes but that their 'shelf-life' tends to be 'brutally short.' He goes on to say that presenters asking 'how people feel' too often serves to emphasize the distance between the audience and the subjects of the programme – pointing to a "chasm" that empathy "cannot hope to cross".¹⁹ Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) argues that although we feel empathy for strangers on screen this will always be empathy at a safe distance. Suffering on the glass screen remains firmly *behind* the glass screen.²⁰

This raises the question as to what TV history could – or should – do with the empathy it generates – especially around past suffering. Audiences might feel empathy with a celebrity's workhouse ancestors but are they willing to extend that empathy for people queuing in food banks today? Similarly, they might feel empathy with the hardships of domestic servants in the past, but how do they view those of their present-day successors? Is it possible to channel that empathy into social change?

This is asking a lot of TV. We might want TV history to help effect social change but we have to recognize that this is a shared responsibility – that many others have their part to play – communities, corporations, political parties, activists, faith groups – and professors and others in universities. I would argue that if we want TV to contribute to social change and social justice, we need to undertake another set of translations – and develop dialogues with the others I have mentioned here.

Let me offer some modest examples. In 2014, I helped to set up a campaign for a new Working Women's Charter – 40 years on from the original drawn up by a group of women workers in Britain 1974. The campaign, hosted by the organization History and Policy and involving the representatives from the Trades Union Congress, was inspired by research for the *Shopgirls* series – especially research for the final episode that brought the story up to the present. The story doesn't have a happy ending. Retail is the UK's largest private sector employer. Two thirds of its 2.7 million workers are women and a large proportion of them are on part-time or flexible contracts and on low pay.

18 SONTAG, S. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

19 IGNATIEFF, M. "Is nothing sacred? The ethics of television". *Daedalus*, v. 114, n. 4, p. 57-78, 1985.

20 BAUMAN, Z. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

In the final episode, I interviewed a group of women workers in a national supermarket chain, *Sainsbury's* (in the same store where I worked as a teenager in the 1980s). The women in the clip are upbeat about their working conditions. But many of them explained that they only undertake this kind of low-paid retail work because it's still the only way they can juggle paid work with unpaid domestic or caring responsibilities. That all-too common scenario is one of the major factors contributing to continuing gender inequality today – 40 years on from second wave feminist efforts to combat it.

Our call for a new Working Women's Charter gained some momentum and received national newspaper coverage. I raise it here as one small example of how it might be possible to channel empathy generated by a TV series – in this case empathy with the challenges facing women workers in the past AND the present – into more direct calls for social justice and social change. Labor history needs to be linked to labor activism if it is effect change. Public history and, within this, TV history can play its part but cannot deliver alone.

Domestic service workers around the world continue to work in precarious conditions. Brazil has the highest number of domestic workers in the world: 7.2 million people, 93 per cent of them women.²¹ There have been many studies of their situation and their hard-won yet still limited labor rights – including the basic right to be recognized as workers. Conde, for example, argues that Brazilian domestic service is rooted in histories of colonialism and slavery, where the poor worked for free, often within firm social and racial hierarchies. In February of this year, Brazil ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 189 covering conditions for domestic workers – an important step forward. Meanwhile, domestic workers' unions in Brazil continue their fight for rights and recognition.²² In 2012, in part as a result of their campaigns, the Brazilian government granted domestic workers health insurance and other benefits. In 2013, Gabriel Mascaro's documentary film *Doméstica (Housemaids)* won much acclaim. These are all significant developments, all of which are playing a part in helping domestic workers to move, to draw on bell hooks' powerful phrase, 'from silence into speech', and thereby 'from object to subject'.²³

In Britain, the battle for the rights of domestic workers is now currently focused on the rights of migrant workers employed in this field. The 'Overseas Domestic Worker Visa' system, for example, allows overseas employers to bring their domestic workers with them when visiting the United Kingdom for up to six months. Domestic workers in private households can include cleaners, chauffeurs, gardeners, cooks, nannies and carers. However, this system is open to abuse, with many such workers – mainly women – becoming victims of modern slavery and domestic exploitation. The 2015 Modern Slavery Act seeks to address this but continues to face challenges in so doing, including secrecy, intimidation and extortion.

21 DORCADIE, M. "The precarious status of domestic workers in Brazil". (14.03.2018) <https://www.equaltimes.org/>.

22 CONDE, C. M. Le travail domestique au Brésil. Une étude à la lumière de la Convention n° 189 et de la Recommandation n° 201 de l'OIT. Mémoire présenté à la Faculté de Droit en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise en Droit international, Université de Montréal, 2015.

23 HOOKS, B. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989, p. 5-9.

Conclusion

In British universities today, academics are encouraged – indeed, required – to define this kind of activity as ‘academic impact’. For me, it is a form of activism – a very direct kind of politically-driven public history, public sociology – and even – public service. Like the making of TV history, the making of connections across disciplines, this kind of activism depends on the power of communication, of story-telling – and ultimately, on the power of translation.

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