The return of masters and servants

INTRODUCTION

For much of our history, there were aristocrats and other wealthy elites with large pools of domestic workers. In the twentieth century, economic and technological changes led to the demise of the society of masters and servants. If certain trends are not countered however, we might see the return of such a society.

OBSERVATIONS

- The 'experience economy' is a shift away from goods towards all kinds of services, events and leisure.
- Platforms facilitate the 'gig economy', in which people perform minor services for others like driving, delivery and small chores.
- Wealthy entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, George Soros and Elon Musk are not just reinvesting their money or funding charity, but are creating social institutions and research centers that attract talent, making them a kind of modern-day Maecenases.
- In 1899, Thorstein Veblen wrote The Theory of the Leisure Class in which he describes how social groups distinguish themselves through 'conspicuous consumption': elaborate rules and rituals surrounding food, clothing, entertainment etc. that show their standing.
- In popular media, there are many dystopic visions of a ruling class versus the exploited population, for instance The Hunger Games and Elysium. There is however also a genre that romanticizes the relationship between masters and servants. In the past there was The Nanny, but more recently series emerged about aristocratic manners like Game of Thrones, Downton Abbey and The Tudors.

ANALYSIS

In an interesting article, writer Ian Morris describes the historical development of the relationship between masters and servants in terms of their demand and supply. These two groups were common in agricultural societies and prevalent in the west until the beginning of the 20th century. There was a large supply of people willing to do housework for the elite. Technologies like washing machines, irons and microwaves however decreased the demand for house workers, while the rise of industries and urban services absorbed low skilled workers, decreasing the supply of servants. Things might now be reversing however, according to Morris. Technology is currently destroying many low- and medium-skilled jobs. At the same time, two-income families and busy lifestyles are increasing the demand for nannies, drivers and cleaners, as people have less time to spend in and around the house.

Other developments also stimulate this trend. Both the so-called experience economy and gig economy create demand and supply for all kinds of personal services, in shops, at festivals, for personal shoppers, drivers and masseuses. Yet another driver of this development is the rise in migration, which creates a large supply of low-paid laborers. Finally of course, high levels of inequality as discussed by Piketty, Murray and Putnam, also point towards a society of masters and servants. The super-wealthy are also positioning themselves as patrons of charity and arts, similar to the style of old families like the Borgias or the Sheremetovs.

This bifurcation is of course different than in the past. Rather than absolutely rigid categories, there seems to be a fluid domain in which many people are servants part of the time (driving a car for Uber or a bike for Deliveroo), while at other times being served like a master by a butler at a table in a club or a Sherpa on a mountain hike. As we often described, high inequality has all kinds of negative moral, social and political consequences. It now seems certain trends even point towards the growth of master-servant relationships throughout the west. We can counter this through a mix of mass education, redistributive and job-creating policies as well more egalitarian bottom-up use of technology.

POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES

- If the trend continues, platforms for personal and domestic services from cooking and cleaning to Personal Assistants; companies/events/shops that offer highly personalized services with an ‘aristocratic’ taste; institutions and endowments created by wealthy individuals.
- To counter the trend: lifelong learning programs and decentralized platforms.