

13. Of Feminists and Their Cleaning Ladies

Caught Between the Reciprocity of Care & the Desire for Depersonalisation

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Housework cannot be reduced to a series of chores. "I was often surprised to realise that I was 'lovingly' cleaning the little girl's room, and had to say to myself: "I'm not at home," writes Sylvie Esman in an article in which she analyses her activity as a cleaner. What do the female employers perceive of this caring aspect of cleaning work? How do they respond to it? This is one of the main issues

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that I have tried to explore by bringing together feminist women who employ cleaners for three three-hour sessions.

According to Teresa de Lauretis, feminists are in an *excentric* position in relation to the gender system, in that they are both *outside* of it, since they are equipped with a critical awareness without which feminism would not exist, but also *inside* it, insofar as no-one can attempt to live, work and love without a degree of collusion in established institutions and cultural systems. Gender "sticks to the skin like a wet silk dress". The analysis of what "resists" to it – not just in terms of men or women who would not define themselves as feminists – forms the basis for exploring the subversive potential of feminism as well as its capacity to act at an individual or more political level. This was the gamble that this discussion group was making: accepting entanglement, embarrassment, privileging "bad conscience" as an access route to something which is not normally given public expression. Seen through this prism, the relationship with the cleaner displays a *psychological tension* between the desire to be served without needing to think about it – in which we find what Joan Tronto refers to as the "irresponsibility of privileged people" – and the desire to create a reciprocal link which "domesticates" this relationship (see Martin-Palomo, here). This tension is not specific to the relationship between female employers and their domestic employees, it interrogates our relationship with care more widely, in that we all benefit from it.

Having a Domestic

The discussion group (formed using the so-called "snowball" method) is very homogenous: 7 women, white and heterosexual, between 37 and 60 years old with university educations, most of them intellectuals, some with professional preoccupations connected to female work. The issue is located on that famous boundary between *private* and *public* life which second wave feminist movements have all tried to break down. We all know the phrase: *the personal is political*. The cleaner comes and applies pressure right where it hurts: in the contradiction between theory and practice, between ideals and compromises.

The bitter words of Nadège are a good way of summing up the situation:

"I hate housework! I really hate household chores. I think I got a cleaner before my daughter was born. I can see myself pregnant and opening up an empty fridge. The cleaner was the answer to the fact that he just wasn't doing anything. It was about getting rid of that tension."

Pacifying the relationship within a couple is, in this group, apart from one exception, the main reason for which a cleaner eventually becomes necessary. Of course, having been brought up with cleaners or nannies helps the decision to employ one oneself, especially before the children are born. The cleaner is a middle-class solution to effectively (but never completely) reduce the conflict with a partner who is reluctant to share the housework. From this point on, even though the participants claim to

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strongly resist masculine injunctions of the "you'll tell the cleaner that..." variety, they become responsible for household management and the feeling of unease connected to it.

"Laid-back" Female Bosses for Politically Correct Employees

Maité refers to her middle-class mother-in-law and her "little maids", as she used to call them. What would be the appropriate model for the feminist boss? Precisely not to be exploitative, *not being a boss*. We are all "laid-back bosses" adds Maité.

The group participants unanimously acknowledge that housework is a real job. In fact, it is rather paradoxical to observe that it is more *their own work* which does not appear to be considered, in their home, as a "real" job. Reading a book, writing, is supposedly not seen as such, be it by their children (who interrupt them while they are doing it), or, as they suppose, by their cleaners. Unless they are projecting a sense of embarrassment onto the latter, of which we might wonder if it is not of a specifically feminine nature: the guilt of being engaged in an intellectual activity while another woman is carrying out *their* household chores? The participants all limit "orders" and instructions as much as possible. It is sometimes preferable for the work to be done badly than for it to be a source of conflict with the employee and of additional hassle (making a detailed list of chores, checking the work behind the cleaner's back, trying to find a way of convey-

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ing criticisms without hurting her feelings). They give a favourable description of situations where the employee has a level of domestic expertise that is higher than theirs. This is not just a guarantee of quality work, it also appears to tend to make the relationship more equal, with each woman having their area of expertise, their "skill". However, this "equality" remains a relative one, as Audrey points out:

"She (the cleaner) would rather be doing a different job. If she had stayed in Algeria, she wouldn't have been doing this job. She invests a lot in her daughters' education, tells me about what they do, which is the only subject which she considers me to be an expert on (Audrey is a teacher). It makes me feel less guilty that it will stop at her."

Thus, even women who consider housework to be "a real job" could not ask just anybody to do their cleaning. According to Nadège, some feminists tend to reduce their sense of unease by employing a male cleaner, a strategy she views as hypocritical. She justifies herself by calling on the services of an organisation which rehabilitates women from difficult backgrounds and which guarantees decent levels of pay and working conditions, while also offering training opportunities and a sense of independence for both parties.

Elsa relates that a "very liberated Moroccan woman" usually cleans the family holiday home. Last time, she was not available. It was necessary to go to a remote village and fetch her sister, who did not speak French well, wore a veil and was accompanied by her little eight-year-old sister,

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both to help her communicate and "probably to keep an eye on her". "It all depends on the individual and how she lives her life," comments Elsa, who could not bear to ask this woman, who for her embodied "total imprisonment", to do what she would happily ask her "liberated" sister to do. It is as though too much asymmetry shattered the possibility of establishing a relationship on a morally acceptable basis.

The feeling that they are being "exploitative" seems to depend to a large extent on the *representations* which the participants have of their employees' social trajectories. Women being rehabilitated, the daughters of Audrey's employee, the "liberated Moroccan woman" embody supposed forms of social mobility in which doing other people's housework is just a *moment* in a person's or a family's biography. Other situations however are deemed unacceptable due to a high level of qualification: a Polish woman was a qualified optician, a woman from Burkina Faso was a history teacher. Elsa wonders if getting out of the village, seeing people, would not be beneficial to the "veiled sister". Her perplexity is interesting: there is no politically correct profile of the cleaner. Each cleaner's situation can only be evaluated in terms of its singularity, which implies that *first* a bond must be created.

In Praise of Transparency

"I'd like things to be done the way I want them but without having to tell her."

"If I have to break down the tasks before she does it, it's more work for me."

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(Nadège)

"What I wanted: for it to be done without me and perhaps even for me not to see it..."

(Véronique)

Housework, as we know, if it is well done, should not be seen and should not disturb the daily life of whoever is benefiting from it, otherwise it has failed. Nadège believes she currently has the perfect employee. She is "transparent". "She puts everything back exactly where it was. It must... take more time...". But more often, employees make themselves visible through a style or objects which carry the mark of their own aesthetic tastes, of their culture. The failure of discreet work thus finds its most obvious expression in the error of "bad taste". Maïté, having said at the beginning of the session, "I love this woman, we cook together, we garden together..." adds:

"But there are some things that bother me. Every year, she goes to Portugal, she brings stuff back, last time it was a porcelain plate... this really ugly thing. Now in my kitchen, I've got this artwork which a friend of mine made, and I mean you can think what you want... She (the cleaner) says: "We're getting rid of this" and puts the Portuguese plate there instead. What do we do? We put back our... We ended up getting rid of the plate. Another time, it was a little Fatima virgin as a good luck charm, really ugly. She insists that it be visible. She thinks it's pretty. It's to mark out her territory."

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Even though Maïté fights against it through gestures of reciprocity and shared tasks, social and cultural asymmetry is brutally expressed in a prejudice which opposes beauty which can be the object of value judgements and debates (the friend's work of art) and ugliness which is given an irrevocable negative judgement (it's ugly) between people who share the same life style and sense of aesthetics (highly qualified Western women).

It can also happen that the employees' initiatives are met with a positive aesthetic judgement, which then leads to the sense of a threat of intrusion:

"I had a seat, she thought the material covering it wasn't very pretty, I was a bit worried as to how it would turn out, but she brought me a great piece of (oriental) material and we used it. I'd like it if that didn't happen again. Does it open up a door? It is our home, after all."
(Audrey)

The participants thus particularly value their employees' discreet know-how. However, their comments highlight an important point: not only must the work disappear, the physical person and personality of the employees must disappear with it. However, any intervention in the world implies a process of *subjectifying activity*. To be effective at your work, you must be *as one* with your environment, the subject perceiving his/her surroundings as *an extension of him / herself*. Housework, like any other work, requires this kind of physical appropriation of the environment. The care which we bring to a domestic space – even if it is not our own – is *personalised in our own image*. The participants agree in thinking that cleaners act "as they

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would at home". Hence a major contradiction: to be successful, housework must be discreet, but it cannot be done without being marked with one's own lifestyle and personal and cultural characteristics. Can it therefore never fully satisfy those it serves?

Magic Disappearing Powder

In *La société décente*, Margalit also uses the term of "transparency" to discuss the humiliating relationship with indigenous people. He refers to "'the magic disappearing powder' which is so to say thrown over the Arabs of the occupied territories who work in Israel – a magic powder which makes them invisible: 'A good Arab should work and not be seen'". Here, the territory has not been unduly occupied - "it is our home, after all". However, for the work to be appreciated, the person doing it must also disappear. "We expect our servants," Margalit also writes, "to make the necessary effort for their masters to easily and safely ignore them." This is what the employee so valued by Nadège succeeds in doing, her transparency being the result of a combination of her know-how and of Nadège's absence. We can however wonder whether this *depersonalisation* of the relationship should not also be connected to the wearing down which Nadège also mentions: "There is a cycle with the cleaner from an organisation. She starts really really well. Once you've got past the second year, things get progressively worse..." As Elsa points out: "We can tell that they need to see us. It's not much fun on your own."

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In longer term relationships, the presence and the expressions of the employee sometimes cause embarrassment. According to the different stories, they can be experienced as a threat of invasion ("it is our home, after all") or of fusion-confusion. Thus Elsa refers to "a certain taking of power over my space," before saying: "She does the same thing as me. If I'm having the bathroom redone, she does so too, it makes me feel guilty..." Nadège exclaims with a kind of horror: "Oh she's identifying with you! But I would find that very worrying!"

Véronique remembers a past situation where she "took advantage of moving house" to "let go" a woman who was doing the housework and looking after her children. "She was an isolated woman," she says. "Her solitude was handy for me..." Véronique then corrects this initial picture: "But that's not true! There was a man she was living with. This man died, she resented the fact that I didn't go to his funeral." "It was heavy, a real weight," says Véronique to describe the period during which this woman already knew that she "wouldn't be coming along." "What was oppressive was feeling more or less mean for not bringing her along, for not continuing a relationship which had lasted ten years. For not giving her all my recognition, for letting her go." But at the same time, "letting her go was a relief... She was always promoting what she had done. She loved my parents, my parents-in-law... She resented me. She was angry not to be the nanny of my third child, as she was for the previous two, she saw it as an initial betrayal." Véronique then recounts how, when her first-born was a baby, when she came home from work she would ask if things had gone well: "yes, yes." Many years later, the employee revealed that in reality the child

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would cry for very long periods of time. "I understand the fact that she didn't say anything because she needed this job, but if I had known... I could have explained things differently to the child..." "She was a bit shifty," she concludes, "an image which gets a bit fuzzy, a personality you can't get a hold of..." Véronique's story reveals an *opacity*: a psychological thickness, motives which you aren't aware of, a presence which "weighs you down", "a kind of hold on you", she adds.

We cannot say that the desire for the employee to disappear as a person is the product of a will to humiliate her in order to subject her, as is the interpretation in traditional analyses of relationships between master and servant, colonised and coloniser. However, we do in fact observe *depersonalisation* and *isolation* here, two major traits of the "all-purpose maid condition" which was theorised in the 1950s by the psychiatrist Louis Le Guillant for whom this condition illustrated "with particular force the psychological and psychopathological mechanisms connected to these elements of the human condition which are servitude and domination."

Depersonalisation consists, in Margalit's terms, in creating the conditions which allow you "not to see people in detail", to neutralise the expressions of their individuality, as though they were part of the scenery. The desire that the employee make herself transparent sends us back to an unconscious wish which Jean Cocteau poetically rendered in *La Belle et la Bête*: the wish for a subjectless care in which servants are reduced to candelabra arms or hands pouring jugs, a faceless availability which does not expect any reciprocity.

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On two occasions, the group participants dwelled on their cyclical irritation with the symmetrical ordering of objects – cushions arranged in a row, ornaments placed at four corners of a table, a rug folded into a square. This ordering upsets and contests the *bo-bo* aesthetic of a falsely neglected, destructured space. We might see here nothing more than anecdotal evidence of the irreducibility of class relations. However, if we agree to grant these statements the same level of importance as the participants themselves did, we find ourselves faced with a real theoretical difficulty: the very particular *scene* on which domestic antagonisms are played out: the house in that it is *the body*, *the psychic space*, which interrogates "the close relationship between the order of things in the world we live in and the internal structure of this order". A good employee is therefore one who does not upset the psychic order of things.

At home: this term should be considered as a key concept in the analysis of the sharing of domestic care. Employees want to "mark out their territory". This metaphor can be understood as particularly pejorative, as if domestic employees were animals. But we can also think that "territory" hearkens back, *for the employer as well*, to archaic dimensions which are connected to the preservation of one's own integrity. As we have already pointed out, fantasies about threats of intrusion and confusion were clearly expressed in the group.

As Margalit stresses, "humiliation does not require a humiliator," and we do not know how the employees perceive and feel about the "magic disappearing powder" strategies adopted by their "cool" employers. For Le Guillant, the maids' resentment was integral to their condition, and we

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can wonder if irritation and the feeling of being invaded are not integral to the psychic centrality of "living in a space". Things would always *heat up*, and on both sides. The expression of the excessive presence of the employees takes on cultural forms due to their social origin. The employers' irritation is then tinged with condescendence, with class and racial judgements, even if they claim it is not.

Where Domination Softens

The care in the work carried out by the employee is expressed with more or less success and discretion in the care she lavishes on the domestic environment. But who is taking care of her? Care, taken as the attentiveness of the employer to her employee, stands in contradiction to the desire for depersonalisation and this tension underlies most of the relationships described by the participants. Care, attentiveness, are expressed in gifts exchanged, in gestures of reciprocity, of prohibition or sharing of unpleasant tasks. Several participants also describe ritualised reciprocity strategies, such as coffee, sometimes served by the employer, whether it is drunk together or separately depending on the situation.

The dimension of caring for the other is explicit in the attentive tone of Elsa's comments, the only one who refers to her cleaner using her first name. She describes a very close and emotional bond. "When she says your sofa is rotten, I listen to her. Her shoulders hurt, I'm worried about her future, she's 54 years old but she's in bad shape, I try to find work that's not too hard for her." Elsa refers

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to the transformation of her *home* as being connected to care, to attentiveness tinged with affection. "It's done with loads of care, with a professional conscience. It's endearing. She tries to leave her aesthetic imprint on my home." The domestic employee's work is then fully acknowledged in its aesthetic and ethical dimensions: creating a pleasant environment so that people can live well within it (see also Audrey's oriental sofa). The interpretation in terms of an "endearing" feeling, of small details which could be irritating – objects that have been moved or arranged differently – suggests that Elsa also admits that her *interior space* bears the personalised mark of Rachida, as she seems to accept a certain permeability between their personal lives without (too much) fear of confusion: imitation in works done to the home. Finally, Elsa describes a relationship in which what remains an enigma to her is precisely the emotional implication on both sides of a relationship in which each individual feels responsible for the other. "I've often thought," she adds, "that since I live alone, if anything were to happen to me she would be the person who found me."

Whereas, for Nadège, the moral conflict of "exploitation" is solved by using an organisation and by her low level of domestic requirements, in the relationship between Rachida and Elsa it seems that the moral conflict is always ready to be reactivated in concrete situations where the limits of what it is acceptable to require or to do are renegotiated. Elsa tells the story of having asked Rachida one day to serve in a baptism that was bringing together forty *pieds-noirs* from her family. The origin of the guests made the situation more servile, which was the reason for an initial refusal which Elsa managed to overcome

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by suggesting they serve the guests together. Elsa also suggests that it would not always be easy to evaluate why a task is experienced as more difficult or servile than others. Rachida does not like cleaning brass, especially the outside handle of the door, because, according to Elsa, this is perceived as "extravagant" and not simply useful work. Elsa thus implies that she understands that "extravagant" work could be humiliating. The participants emit an additional hypothesis: it may not just be because the door handle is made of brass that the employee is reluctant to clean it, but also because it is located outside the apartment. People can see her doing the devalued job of a cleaning lady, which would increase the humiliation.

If It's Mummy...

The dilemma of the "letting go" recounted by Véronique and Elsa's story both suggest that the employer-employee relationship is only bearable *in the long-term* if it is "domesticated", if it becomes emotional and moral. Regarding her works in the bathroom, Elsa comments:

"These are works which everyone always postpones, you need an impulse to do it, so at the end of the day it's a good thing. She's also doing that to fight against the same things as me, to fight against subservience. She also often compares me to her son. So when she puts my little cushions on my bed, when usually they're all over the place, that endears me. If it's mummy then there's no more issue of subservience."

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"To deal with the issue of exploitation, we introduce a family relationship, which avoids making us feel guilty," adds Elsa. "If it's mummy" however hides the fact that the "mummies" could also be exploited by their children! We *also* love our mothers because they serve us discreetly, and we hate them, especially as teenagers, when they do not respond ideally to the confused and contradictory web of our expectations. Joan Tronto is right to criticise the reduction of all care situations to the mythical one of the mother-child dyad. The concealment of the care work in maternal love nevertheless constitutes the main matrix for fantasies of unlimited availability which underpin the requests made by the beneficiaries of care to its purveyors. And the perspective of care would in fact probably not have emerged without the exasperation of some mothers rebelling against the naturalness of their position as a subordinate in their own family.

The Uncanniness of the Ordinary

Male resistance to the sharing of housework is not confronted through to the end by the women in this group, but strategically worked around by employing a subordinate woman. The recourse to *female* domestic help in order to avoid *having a domestic* is part of a displacement activity which allows the woman to maintain her feminist posture in an individualistic feminism, but without any social change, by upholding a culture which continues to favour men and implies the supply of a non-qualified female workforce. Even if they sometimes argue against this, the participants know it, just as much as they know

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what kind of model they are passing on to their children. And the "wet silk" continues to stick to their skin. Whether the connection is gotten rid of in favour of an impersonal register (Nadège) or overinvested with a pseudo-filial register (Elsa), in both cases, the opportunities to reflect on one's own compromising with the gender, class and colonial heritage system are reduced. For, if colonial history inevitably "weighs" on the relationship between the daughter of *pieds-noirs* and the Moroccan woman, it is one of the invisible linchpins around which are constructed most of the domestic employer and employee relationships in France today. In the discussion group, all the women in fact spoke only of women coming from the third world or from European countries that are poorer than France: Portugal and Poland.

From taking notes to interpreting them, throughout this work, I felt an enduring feeling of insecurity and scepticism in the face of this "evanescence of the real", a reality that is so close and quotidian that we could relate it to what Stanley Cavell calls "the uncanniness of the ordinary". This strangeness is doubtless better served by cinema and literature, whether we think of *La Porte* by Magda Szabo or of the short stories of Grace Paley. But what of it in terms of a psychological or sociological analysis? What is the point, for example, of noting that Dominique had to give up on using environmentally friendly cleaning products, because the cleaner refused to use them on the basis that she had to scrub harder? This fading in itself constitutes an important data of this incursion into the domestic world. On the condition that we take care seriously, the question is: How can we be environmentally conscious without worsening the musculo-skeletal

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problems of the cleaning lady? More widely, what theoretical framework can we use to formulate in a pertinent or significant manner the issues raised by care? As Sandra Laugier points out, care does not invite us to reveal the invisible, but rather to see the visible, the one that is just there, right under our nose. To take it into account ethically and politically. Now that these products under the sink and this burnished brass ball on our entrance door have been *defamiliarised*, are we going to be able to see them more... *precisely*?

- S. Esman, « faire le travail domestique chez les autres », *Travailler*, 2002, 8:45-72. The investigation was carried out together with Valérie Moreau, an occupational psychologist.
- T. de Lauretis, *Théorie queer et cultures populaires*, Paris, La Dispute, 2007 (see chapter "La technologie du genre"). All first names have been changed. Audrey describes a couple which shares household chores equally, but where the cleaner is necessary due to this reconstituted family's five children. Some women (same profile) have told me that they gave up on employing a cleaner because they would clear up and clean everything before she came.
- F. Böehle, B. Milkau, *De la manivelle à l'écran. L'évolution de l'expérience sensible des ouvriers lors des changements technologiques*. Paris, Eyrolles, 1998.
- S. Esman (op. cit.) notes: Two expressions which I often hear sum up this ambiguity: "Do like you do for yourself" and "put yourself in my position..."

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- A. Margalit, 1996, *La société décente*, Paris, Flammarion 2007. Using the "magic disappearing powder" also means leaving before the cleaner arrives, so that one neither has to see her nor speak to her, a strategy which was employed by several members of the group. The third being domestics' resentment which supposedly generates a "swallowed hatred". Véronique's story suggests her former employee's resentment.
- L. Le Guillant, 1957, « Incidences psychopathologiques de la 'condition de bonne-à-tout-faire' », re-ed. in *Le drame humain du travail*, Toulouse, Eres, 2006. For example through wearing a uniform. Translator's Note: The term "bo-bo" ("*bourgeois-bohème*") is commonly used in France to designate members of a social class that lays claim to a bohemian lifestyle, while in fact tending to be relatively well off financially.
- R. Kuhn, « L'errance comme problème psychopathologique ou déménager », *Présent à Henri Maldiney*, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 1973. It is a question of know-how, but not just that. In Nathalie Kuperman's novel, *J'ai renvoyé Marta* (Folio, 2005), the heroine's madness starts when she employes a cleaner who, as well as various other coincidences, has the same name as her grandmother and her daughter. Translator's Note: The term "pieds-noirs" refers to French nationals who were born in Algeria during the period of its colonisation by France.

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- See Lise Gagnard, in « A plusieurs voix autour de Teresa de Lauretis », *Mouvements*, 57, 2009, p. 148-154.