

The Broom or
Wages for Housework
By Michelle Standley
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Though it began as an agrarian society, by its "Golden Age," most male citizens of ancient Athens defined liberty as freedom from toil. Outside of sport or war, sweat and dirt were the domain of slaves, servants, and women. A liberated being devoted his time to thought, to discourse with other liberated beings, and to creative and intellectual pursuits.

Having settled into the lifestyle of a graduate student, moving back and forth between Berlin and New York, and living off of research grants, fellowships, and loans, I fancied myself a nascent intellectual and free being in the spirit of an Athenian philosopher or Central European intellectual.

Yet, throughout my marriage, I was, like most women, responsible for all of the housework, the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and so forth. The one task which my husband performed was washing the dishes. Early in our co-habitation I had learned to adapt to his way of doing them. He might not have washed them very well, glasses usually remained covered in fingerprints and plates flecked with stubborn crumbs, and he might wait a few days to wash them, but I accommodated these conditions. It was, after all, the only thing he did, and I preferred his flawed execution, to doing them myself. Those dirty dishes preserved my dignity. They maintained the fragile line between servitude and partnership.

There were certainly moments when I complained, when I voiced frustration that he did not help more. But these bursts of honesty were rare and never got off the ground. I preferred harmony to dialogue. Then the urge to speak began to simmer when one uncharacteristically hot afternoon in our high-ceilinged, tidy Berlin-apartment, I discovered an essay, "Wages for Housework as a Perspective of the Women's Movement." In it the German historian Gisela Block describes a long-since abandoned movement to pay women for their domestic labors.

There is one central power relation at the root of power relations in our society (and not just in ours): the one between paid and unpaid work, between men and women (and children); there is a corresponding double work ethic--work done for money/work done for love. To define services performed for love as work, to stop taking them for granted and demand payment for them, is an equally central attack on these power relations [...] Once a price tag is placed on housework it can no longer be expected as natural and taken for granted. The new visibility of unpaid women's work has consequences of tremendous significance: it makes clear how this society actually functions.¹

¹ Gisela Block, "Wages for Housework as a Perspective of the Women's Movement," in *German Feminism: Readings in Politics and Literature*, edited by Edith H. Altbach, et al, Albany: State University of New York Press (1979).

Looking up from the essay, my eyes settled on my husband's white back, which was then hunched over the computer. He was typing at a furious pace. I glanced back at the page. The words made me flush with heat, not with anger but with embarrassment. Gisela Block had just called me a coward. Lacking a ready defense, I closed the book.

When we separated several years later, I rediscovered the joy of housecleaning. I kept the Castle immaculate. With pride of ownership, I swept the dust that I (and my toddler) had tracked in from outside into the cracked black dustpan, scrubbed the tomato sauce clinging to the bottom of the saucepan, and schlepped the soiled laundry to the basement. I was proud. It was my dust, my dirty dishes, and my stinky laundry. Housework was still menial labor, unpaid and undervalued by society. The work conditions were still poor, long hours without hope of paid sick days or vacation. Yet, the terms of my service had changed. Separation had made me my own boss, self-employed: free to wash, or not to wash, my own dirty dishes, to sweep, or not to sweep, my own wood floors.

The immaculate Castle and the phase of joyful housecleaning are long since past. I've moved several times since and had a temporary relapse when I fell in love and inevitably ended up washing his dishes and doing his laundry. Those phases are now behind me as well.

In my current apartment, I have a broom closet. You won't find a broom in there. My green-handled broom with the white plastic handle and dark gray synthetic fibers is mounted on a bright white wall in the kitchen. It's a work of art, an icon, a reminder, and a declaration of independence. It's a link between my past and present selves, between my mother, my mother's mother, her mother and other women, slaves, and servants, living and dead.
