

# The real politics of housework

By Pat Mainardi

Adapted from the Guardian

Reprint from Excalibar

Liberated women — very different from Women's Liberation! The first signals all kinds of goodies, to warm the hearts (not to mention other parts) of men. The other signals — housework. The first brings sex without marriage, sex before marriage, cosy housekeeping arrangements, ("You see, I'm living with this chick") and the self-content of knowing that you're not the kind of man who wants a doormat instead of a woman.

On the other hand is Women's Liberation — and housework. There the fun begins. Equal partners, often both working, and sharing household maintenance. Sounds simple... but the game is on. Here are some of the most common male moves, and their interpretations, in the real politics of housework.



### Evasion tactics

I don't mind sharing the housework, but I don't do it very well. We should each do the things we're best at.

Meaning: Unfortunately, I'm no good at things like washing dishes or cleaning floors. What I do best is a little light carpentry, or moving furniture. (How often do you move furniture?) Also meaning: The lower class (workers, blacks, and you) are trained to do menial jobs, why waste manpower training someone else? Also meaning: I don't like the dull stupid boring jobs, so you should do them.

"I've got nothing against sharing the housework, but you can't make me do it on your schedule."

Meaning: Passive resistance. I'll do it when I damned well please, if at all. If my job is doing the dishes, it's easier to do them once a week. If washing the floors, once a year. If you don't like it, do it yourself oftener, and then I won't do it at all.

### Guerilla warfare

"I don't mind sharing the work, but you'll have to show me how to do it."

Meaning: I ask a lot of questions and you'll have to show me everything, everytime. Don't try to sit down and read while I'm doing my jobs because I'm going to annoy the hell out of you until it's easier to do them yourself.

"We have different standards and why should I have to work to your standards? That's unfair."

Meaning: If I begin to get bugged by the dirt, I will say something like "This place sure is a sty." I know that all women have a sore called "housework is ultimately my responsibility," if I wait long enough, you'll do the work. Also meaning: I can provoke innumerable scenes over the housework issue. Eventually, doing it all yourself will be less painful to you than trying to get me to do half.



### Deterrent attack

"I hate it more than you."

"Housework is too trivial to even talk about."

Meaning: Housework is garbage work. It is beneath my status. It's degrading and humiliating for someone of my intelligence to do it. But for someone of your intelligence...

### Myth and propaganda

"This problem of housework is not a man-woman problem. In any relationship between two people one is going to have a stronger personality and dominate."

Meaning: That stronger personality had better be me. "Man's accomplishments have always depended on getting help from other people, mostly women. What great man would have accomplished what he did if he had to do his own housework?"

Meaning: Oppression is built into the system and I as a white male receive the benefits of this system. I don't want to give them up.

"In animal societies, wolves for example, the top animal is usually a male even where he is not chosen for brute strength but on the basis of intelligence and cunning. Isn't that interesting?"

Meaning: I have historical, psychological, anthropological, and biological justification for keeping you down. How can you ask the top wolf to be equal?

### Special tactic for radicals

"Women's Liberation isn't really a political movement."

Meaning: The revolution is coming too close to home. Also meaning: I am only interested in how I am oppressed, not how I oppress others. Therefore, the war, the university are political, women's liberation is not.

Despite the sometimes funny, sometimes annoying strategy of men in this all-too-real situation, it is important that women keep their reactions within an understandable framework. Here are a few things to remember.

### Study the problem

He is feeling it more than you. He's losing some leisure and you're gaining it.

Most middleclass men are not accustomed to doing monotonous repetitive work which never results in any lasting or important achievement. If human endeavours are like a pyramid with man's highest achievements at the top, then keeping oneself alive is at the bottom. (Sounds strange...) Men have always had servants (you) to take care of this bottom strata of life while he has confined his efforts to the rarefied upper regions. It is thus ironic when they ask of women — where are your great painters, statemen etc. Mme. Matisse ran a millinery shop so he could paint. Mrs. Martin Luther King kept his house and raised his babies.

It is a traumatizing experience for someone who has believed himself to be against the oppression and exploitations of human beings to realize that he is doing the same thing to you, whom he loves, in his daily life: to



understand that his rationalization ("Women don't mind") is basically the same as that of the racist who says "Niggers don't feel pain."

### Be prepared

Arm yourself with some knowledge of the psychology of oppressed people everywhere, and a few facts of the animal kingdom. Playing who runs the gorillas is silly, but as a last resort men bring it up all the time. Talk about bees; if you feel really hostile, bring up the sex life of spiders: He fucks her, she bites his head off.

Jews, immigrants, blacks and women have all employed the same psychological mechanisms to survive — admiring, glorifying, those who are harming them, and wanting the oppressor to like them. Remember that blacks and Jews at one time felt whites and Germans really were superior.

### Life - contact

In a sense all men everywhere are slightly schizoid — divorced from the reality of maintaining life. This makes it easier for them to play games with it. It is almost a cliché that women sending a son off the war feel greater grief because they bore and raised him. The man who foment these wars did not have that kind of contact, and have a more superficial view of the worth of human life. One hour a day is a low estimate of the time one spends 'keeping' oneself. By foisting this off on others, man has seven hours a week, one working day more to play with his mind and not his human needs. Over the course of generations it is easy to see whence evolved the horrifying abstractions of modern life.

### Check up

Keep checking up. Periodically consider who's actually doing the jobs. These things have a way of backsliding. Use timesheets if necessary. Also remember which jobs are worst, must be done every day or are dirty. It's more pleasant to pick up books, newspapers etc., than to wash dishes. Alternate the bad jobs.

Make sure you don't have the responsibility for the housework with occasional help from him. "I'll cook dinner for you tonight" implies that it's really your job and isn't he a nice guy to help.

Beware of the double whammy. He won't do the little things he always did because now you're a 'liberated woman', right? Of course, he won't do anything else either.

