

Cleaning (in) the Swedish Black Market

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ABSTRACT: Hiring home cleaning is a contested phenomenon in Sweden and increasingly so when informally recompensed. During the last decade, *pigdebatten* (the maid debate), a proposal for subsidized, paid home cleaning has divided the public debate along political lines as well as in terms of gender and class. Drawing on the historical notions of what type of work an economy includes (and excludes), this article addresses the contestation of paid home cleaning as a transaction of work. How do buyers negotiate and justify *svart* (black market) cleaning as an acceptable transaction in time and space when separating the public from the private? This case study is based on interviews with a group of women indicted for having bought cleaning services from an immigrant without a working permit, a case that created a heated media debate in 2003 and 2004.

KEYWORDS: cleaning, domestic services, exchanges, informal work, '*pigdebatten*', Sweden

Introduction

In spring 2003 there were headlines in the Swedish press¹ about six women in an affluent suburb who had been caught paying a woman to clean their homes for two hours every other week. The woman, here called Sonia, was from Lithuania and the indictment was for an infringement of the Aliens Act (Dom B4011-03, Göteborgs tingsrätt). The newspapers displayed an array of views; the tabloids expressed moral indignation at upper-class abuse of a poor illegal immigrant whereas the morning papers reported a more multifaceted case referring to laws and regulations. Most letters to the editors seemed to support the Swedish women and there was a renewed interest in *svart arbete* as a subject in radio and television programmes discussing the event.

For a large majority of Swedes, cleaning is a do-it-yourself job and if purchased it is usually considered *svart*. In 2003 it was a legal

purchase only for the few who said they could afford it or if provided as a fringe benefit by an employer. From 1 July 2007, paying for domestic services, *hushållsnära tjänster*, are subject to tax subsidies by 50 per cent.² Although legal purchases have increased, the debate has not abated and the leftist opposition has promised to do away with the subsidies should they return to power.³

Svart arbete literally translates as black market work and refers to informally recompensed work. Research often refers to the phenomenon in different shades of economy – shadow, black, grey, hidden, subterranean and so on – whereas in Swedish the main emphasis is put on work, *arbete*. As the headlines suggest, not only is *svart arbete* a contested subject in Sweden, but so is paid home cleaning. *Svart arbete* is a common occurrence in Swedish society and almost half of the population regards both purchasing and supplying such services as a minor offence (Skatteverket 2006: 30). Purchasing

home cleaning has deeply divided the public debate along political lines (Platzer 2004) and there are usually two types of arguments proposed. Both have moral undertones: on the one hand in terms of gender, class and immigration and, on the other hand, as an economic discussion. The focus is then on the increased growth of the *svarta* sector, the impact on employment or the unfair competition amongst providers.

This article intends to shed light on this issue as an illustration of a Swedish 'regime of living' (Collier and Lakoff 2005). This means that the purchases will not be judged in terms of normative moral values, neither in terms of gender, ethnicity or class. Instead we will explore the context, the reasoning techniques and the institutions in which they take place (ibid.: 29). As will be shown, this article is also an attempt to illustrate one aspect of the critical challenge for anthropology today – how to deal with the relationship between the private and the public spheres (Carrier and Miller 1999: 24).

We will see how informally recompensed home cleaning is part of the handling of life amongst a few middle-class Swedish women, each with their own jobs to negotiate. To illuminate this, emic definitions of work between public and private realms situated in the contemporary Swedish welfare state will be explored. In particular, two aspects are singled out. Firstly, how is home cleaning defined as work? Secondly, how is a fair price negotiated for paid home cleaning, between doing tasks oneself or of working extra to pay for them?

These women did not originally intend to hire a cleaner. It was an opportunity offered as they tried to cope with everyday life: work, children and tasks at home. Susanne reflected on her situation when she had returned to work after her third maternity leave:

Well, it would be nice to have a cleaner, but on the other hand no, you don't have that, no I did not want someone unknown who is in my home while I am away. But, anyhow, it was very nice and also cheap. It was wonderful to come home

to a clean house. You got to arrange everything the night before, but I did not need to clean the toilet or wipe the floors. It was wonderful, I really miss that.

Methodology

Susanne is one of three of the women indicted in the above case who agreed to be interviewed for this article. The interviews were performed in fall 2003 and were part of a pilot study for a dissertation on purchases of *svart arbete*.⁴ My assumption in interviewing these women was that they had thoroughly reflected on their acts and transactions in relation to their views on various work tasks. Lena, Susanne and Thea are all women in their forties,⁵ quite different in appearance but busy with work and family life. One of them is newly separated and the other two are married. Instead of the luxury villas imagined by the headlines 'upper class', I found the setting very ordinarily Swedish, as if taken out of the sitcom 'Svensson, Svensson'.⁶ The red-painted boarded row houses they lived in were copies of each other, organised around courtyards with lawns, bushes and benches. Traces of children were everywhere to be seen – strewn outdoor toys, bicycles and footballs indicated days full of play and activities on the common yard as well as outside each row house. The indoor layout of each house was identical, although the different tastes of each family made the atmosphere slightly varied.

Their purchases of cleaning are here seen as part of a contemporary Swedish 'regime of living' as they express a 'situated form of moral reasoning' (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 23) in 'processes of reflection and action in situations in which living has been rendered problematic' (ibid.: 22). In essence illegal purchases created contradicting opinions amongst politicians, union representatives, police and the public in the media. The women's narratives of the actual events were very similar and the cleaning lady was the same. However, their expla-

nations and excuses for buying those services diverged, and so did their views on work.

Svart Arbete: Illegal Informal Work

Phenomena like *svart arbete* are global and usually described in terms of an informal economy. In the Swedish context it encompasses all work that is recompensed and subject to tax, but where the latter is never settled. The state is left out of the transaction when the supplier ‘forgets the invoice’, ‘offers a nice price’, ‘is shading’, ‘works stainless’,⁷ and so on. *Svart arbete* is usually considered a short-term economic gain both for the suppliers and providers as no taxes are paid. However, the concept covers everything from the outright and systematic abuse, for example of immigrants without working permits forced to work for a pittance just to survive, to those occasionally consumed services which the households could perform themselves. Examples of such services include car maintenance, smaller home repairs, transport, refurbishing, cleaning, childcare and so on. This case illustrates the difficulties of a moral discourse understanding *svart arbete* as one concept, but enlightens the connection of the relatively new phenomena of exploiting immigrants without working permits and the everyday cheating (such as common exchanges of services between people of closer relationships where tax payments are omitted, cf. Isacson 1994).

On a societal level, there are concerns with the devious immoral circle of increasing amounts of *svart arbete*, expressed as declining morals and the greed of Swedish citizens. If citizens are perceived to buy or provide these type of services, thereby avoiding taxes, official regulations and union agreements, the so-called power of such institutions as well as the solidarity within the community decrease (cf. Smith 1989). From an economic viewpoint, transactions escaping taxation result in lower tax revenues than otherwise planned, and

thereby force authorities to raise taxes. These increments worry authorities as they are believed to reinforce the informal sector in a vicious circle, both morally (Mars 1982: 220) and economically (Riksrevisionsverket 1997: 59; Skatteverket 2006: 4). On the one hand, the *svart arbete* generated is fraudulent as the money made will not be subject to tax, but it cannot on the other hand entirely be regarded as a swindle, as much of it would never have taken place due to the increased cost level had it been performed within the formal sector (Skatteverket 2004: 211).

The boundaries between *arbete* (work) and *svart arbete* (black work) used by authorities and in the media seem clear-cut and non-negotiable as if there were nothing in between. Taking a closer look, there are many instances where work falls into a greyish area. In an alternative description of the Swedish economy, it is envisaged as if it were made up of four colours (Ingelstam 1995). Yellow and blue, images of the Swedish flag, represent the public and private monetary economy respectively. *Vitt* (white) is all productive work not performed for money while black, *svart*, is the criminal and illegal economic activities. According to Ingelstam’s analysis, help yourself work takes place in a white-grey sector. These are smaller purchases acquired for private use, an easy and personal way to get help with everyday needs (ibid.: 102).

Formal work is distinguished from the informal by economists and also by the media as services that are sold and bought on a market (Wadel 1979: 367). Formal work is easy to quantify and measure and is used in calculations and economic forecasts. The remaining, uncompensated work is thus informal: all household work, voluntary contributions, flea markets and barter as well as *svart arbete* and outright criminal activities (cf. Sampson 1986: 24–25; Leonard 1998: chapter 2; Hart 2001: 845). Separating economic sectors into formal and informal does not clarify the issue and this division has been described as oversimplified

(Fernández-Kelly and Garcia 1989: 251). They are thus now recognised as having a complex relationship (Williams and Windebank 1998: 30). Although a global phenomenon, the informal economy is difficult to categorize as it 'cut[s] across the whole social structure' (Castells and Portes 1989: 12; cf. Williams and Windebank 1998: 39). Often considered in opposition to a level of economic development (Portes and Haller 2005: 404), these transactions are rather adaptations to the constraints of everyday living. It has been aptly stated that 'informality is an intrinsic element of formality as it is an answer to the deficiencies of formalisation. It is an adaptive mechanism that simultaneously and in a vicious circle, reinforces the defects of the formal system' (Adler Lomnitz 1988: 42). This is of course what worries authorities and this case is thus an illustration of this point.

Household Work and Its Worth

As recompensed work moved away from homes during the different phases of industrialization, home has been reinforced as the typical place for informal work. Household work is driven by necessities and traditions 'fundamental to individual and social reproduction' (Gregson and Lowe 1994: 79) consisting of cooking, cleaning and care but also maintenance of existing properties. Although those services are necessary to uphold the multifunctional characteristics of a household they are unrecompensed, deemed economically unproductive and not contributing to societal wealth.

Many emic definitions of work encompass the economic emphasis on productivity as established by Adam Smith in the late 1700s. In the quest to define societal growth, he defied the ineptitude of earlier types of economic systems such as house holding and mercantilism. As a solution he proposed the division of labour as the engine for increasing societal

wealth. Smith's focus on different types of work was on how it was used. Any making of exchangeable items was productive and part of an economy. Services at home, regardless of whether they were produced by a member of the household or a paid domestic labourer, were not exchangeable and therefore not seen as fruitful for society at large (Smith 1982 [1776]: 430). This view still penetrates the modern economy with its unwillingness to include productive work outside monetary exchanges or household work (e.g. Ingelstam 1995: 89). Obviously, if conventional housework were to be included in gross domestic product (GDP) calculations it would affect them significantly (e.g. Leonard 1998: 94). Lena, who works in healthcare, can exemplify this when she defines work as all tasks that are not pleasurable. 'I also work at home,' she says, 'although I don't get paid for it'.

Cleaning Homes: Paid and Unpaid Work

Cleaning is usually part of hidden or informal work when it is not recompensed and thus remains unrecognized as proper work (Wadel 1979). Cleaning is an indispensable task as too much dirt is unhealthy, but it is also a type of work which most people abhor doing. It is often done alone, a solitary and also repetitive task. Cleaning does not produce anything visible, but is a return to the status quo; the material result, if any, is a bag of dust and other unwanted disposables (e.g. Mackintosh 1988: 393). It is a removal of something alien, 'a matter out of place' (Douglas 1997 [1966]: 44). Most individuals appreciate a clean space, but many would rather see someone else doing the work (e.g. Ernsjö Rappe & Strannegård 2004). As such, it is a subject for discussion and dispute in many Swedish households. Still, home cleaning is often part of a woman's realm and not recognizing it as proper work confirms gender inequality in society (Gregson

and Lowe 1994: 131; Leonard 1998: 125; Öberg 1999; Ernsjö Rappe and Strannegård 2004: 143ff.).

Cleaning in Swedish homes becomes more complicated when it is paid for. It is sociologically contested as a phenomenon (cf. Öberg 1999; Ehrenreich and Russell Hochschild 2002), but is still an accepted fact and means for survival in many places of the world. Getting your office cleaned in Sweden is perfectly acceptable and usually done by contracted professionals. The task is as essential at home as at work and is a type of work most people can do, a fact which doubly emphasizes the complicated relationship between activities taking place in private and public respectively. One way to cast light on what makes the opposition against having a house cleaner so widespread in Sweden is to examine how the professionalization of Swedish home servants and thus the Swedish 'maid debate' developed.

Professionalizing Cleaning

Cleaning as an occupation has undergone many name changes in Sweden, reflecting societal transformation as well as efforts to better its status. This historical evolution illustrates the development of the worker's status from that of a domestic servant to an independent professional, even an entrepreneur. There has been a terminological transformation from *piga* (maid), *husa* (housemaid), *städerska* (house cleaner), to *kontors- and lokalvårdare* (caretaker of offices or premises), *hygientekniker* (sanitary technician) and to *att ge företagsservice* (provider of business services).⁸ This movement illustrates a change from dependency and hierarchy towards more equal and professional relations between principal and provider. From exclusively referring to a hierarchical domestic world, the terminology nowadays alludes to the industrial world. Cleaning is in a double sense proper work informed by a professional relationship between provider and purchaser,

although the activity itself has remained the same.

It is both a professionalization of sorts and a way to separate the tasks from the provider. However, this 'home work' is still mostly contested unless provided by the state for the handicapped or elderly. As the saying goes, '*man skall ta hand om sin egen skit*' ('you should take care of your own dirt'). Privately, the opposite expressions can be heard – to have someone clean one's house is almost a status symbol. Paying for such services today is in the public debate on one hand considered as an upper class phenomenon, but on the other hand a possibility for more equal career opportunities for women in Swedish working life (as Thea suggested). In this view, cleaning should be a job like any other and having help with it would be a way for women to obtain equal possibilities with men (cf. Bowman and Cole 2009).

Pigdebatten: The Swedish Maid Debate

Throughout the twentieth century, the Swedish welfare state developed, as did the unions and the rights of workers. Excluded from this development were paid domestic labourers and maids (Öberg 1999: 198) who did not have a union and experienced an exceptionally weak juridical protection. Öberg explains this as an historical phenomenon, part of the institutionalisation of the Swedish welfare society. As social-democratic women fought for workers' rights throughout the last century, they depended on servants taking care of their children and homes due to the lack of public childcare. House servants were thus utterly necessary for those involved in building the welfare state, but a thorn in the side to their idea of sisterhood solidarity. But increased welfare services made house servants increasingly redundant and as a result they were the last professional group in Sweden to obtain the right to a 40-hour working week in 1971.

In 1993 the issue of paid domestic work placed itself heavily on the political agenda as economist and Member of Parliament Anne-Marie Pålsson suggested societal economic gains by proposing tax deductions for paid domestic work. From a tax perspective, it suggests a view of the household on equal terms with an enterprise. Union economist Villy Bergström strongly reacted against this proposal, evoking the historical idea of the *piga* (maid) which carries historical and emotional associations of dependence between people. He thus reconstructed the picture of former Swedish class society, an upstairs–downstairs society (Öberg 1999: 191). *Pigdebatten* (the maid debate) was born. The debate was not clearly divided along political lines. For example, a government investigation⁹ led by Dan Andersson, the former chief economist at 'LO', The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, also recommended tax deductions for services aimed at households, amongst them cleaning services (SOU 1997). Economic rationalizations stood against historical connotations of inequality and the debate has continued since.

Tax deductions or subsidies for home cleaning have been introduced in neighbouring Denmark and Finland. In the Swedish election campaign during fall 2006, the issue continued to be contested with the alliance parties proposing tax-deductions for *hushållsnära tjänster* (literally services close to the domestic sphere – an example of disassociating the work from the producer) and the left being against this, referring strongly to the discourses of formerly abused *piga* (cf. Öberg 1999: 196). In addition it was a question of economic equality where only those already well off were thought to benefit from the proposed tax-deductions. It was thus argued that it would run against the aim of an equal society. Opinions were even pronounced at political top level, which underscores the importance for Swedes of '[taking] care of your own dirt'. Fredrik Reinfeldt, the leader of the alliance, stated publicly his liking for cleaning his home, although his fam-

ily employs an au-pair girl.¹⁰ Göran Persson, the social-democratic leader and prime minister at the time, said that everybody should be able to clean their own house, omitting that his residence got cleaned five hours a week (Garme 2006).

Definitions of Work in Time and Space

Work is a necessity – a possibility to survive and pay for food, housing and clothing. Regardless of the definition of work, recompense is usually the rough division between formal work and all other activities and tasks individuals have to perform. In the Swedish discussion there is *arbete* (work) and *svart arbete* (black work), but Swedes seldom talk of *vitt arbete* (white work).¹¹ The norm is *arbete*, a regular job carried out in the public sphere, following rules and regulations and recompensed accordingly. *Arbete* is paid work, usually employment that can also be freelancing or running one's own business. Most work is regulated in contractual terms with a publicly recorded recompense. This makes the job genuine, entangled with the state through income taxes, social security fees and pension savings.

Sonia, the cleaner, was said to be in Sweden to earn more money than at home. She clearly saw the cleaning as work for an income. Thea, Lena and Susanne also start out defining work in terms of income, but modify their view when discussing different tasks to be performed at home and at 'work', in private and in public. When and where work is performed illustrates the division between these spheres. We go to work, a public space, regardless if it is an office, a university, a factory, a stable or visiting a client. The worksite is one of identification, for many a second home where one's desk, locker, tool or tractor is. The location and design of the workplace is a factor helping to establish the identity of the employee. But work has also become more individualized

(Allvin 2004) and also directly intrudes into many employees' private space, exemplified by the supply of mobile phones and intranet connections. These technologies have again made it possible for some (also) to work from home, which complicates another factor that often defines work from other activities – time (Ortiz 1994: 898).

Even in a modern welfare society many people make their living working from home. It provides flexibility (Hakim 1988). To work from home saves time used in commuting and other household chores can be done almost simultaneously. Many people working from home are overqualified for the task, but have chosen this work as a way of dealing with everyday life even if the income is less than what traditional employment away from home can generate (*ibid.*). Individuals from all walks of life work from home.¹²

For home workers, it can be difficult to separate working time from other activities. During the development of the welfare state, an important issue was to regulate working time. Restrictions were applied and employees were not allowed to work more than a certain amount of time per day and per week – thus, leisure time was legislated (Sayers 1988: 737; Ehmer 2001: 16573). Leisure time is a positive phrase, an opportunity to do things of free will. However, this spare time is often occupied by other duties imposed by social structures and norms (Gregson and Lowe 1994: 95). Leisure time is not simply time off, it consists of everything from daily household chores to voluntary maintenance of schools and day care to tax returns – tasks which can feel more demanding than paid work.

Different setups of recompense, time and space thus distinguish work in private from that in the public sphere. When choosing to buy a service on the public market for private use, a task that can usually be done by oneself, it seems at the outset not to be much different from buying a sweater instead of knitting it by oneself. However, when looking at the content

of the work performed and especially how it is defined in relation to the idea of the Swedish state, the problematic nature of paid home cleaning can be better understood.

A Fair Price for Cleaning

Thea, energetic and decisive in appearance, talked about work as an exchange of time for money. Other tasks in life can be divided between the fun ones, such as hobbies and what you do for pleasure and leisure, and those tasks that are necessary but a nuisance – such as cleaning. The contradiction is that the work she is paid for is much more interesting than certain tasks she has to do in her free time. Thea justified her purchase of cleaning assistance with the argument that she bought time. It is a consumption priority, she says – she could have been a smoker and spent the money on cigarettes: instead she bought cleaning. Thea morally justified her illicit purchase and compared it with an idea of something worse, both for society at large and for her own health. Still, she also puts her purchase in terms of economic rationality, paying for a piece of work she could do herself, but which costs her less when bought *svart* than what she earns net. 'They [society] have to boost the status, making it real work', making cleaning comparable to any other type of work.

In today's context, Thea's argument could make the household comparable to an enterprise that can deduct any VAT paid from VAT earned. Thus, house cleaning would resemble any other type of work. Susanne touched upon another economic aspect of the private–public division when she pointed out that an end consumer pays with taxed money whereas a company pays for office cleaning as part of the regular expenditures and in addition deducts the VAT of 25 per cent. The difference between white cleaning costs for a company and a private person are thus multiple. Having a company registered at home means that

when the home office is cleaned professionally the service can easily be expanded to include most of the private part of the house as well. The 'white' office cleaning and 'black' home cleaning within a house becomes a 'greyish' variety.

The reasoning of these women could be traced back to the view of Aristotle, which includes household work as part of what makes up an economy. In this view, both work at home and away from home is comparable and should be exchangeable in terms of time. Susanne emphasises this thought in the Swedish context of equality, when she adds that rich people, namely those who earn more on an hourly basis, should be able to pay the formal cost. To exchange an hour of 'white' cleaning for an hour of net income demands an executive pay level due to the tax wedge.¹³ These women feel responsible for and have previously been doing most of the cleaning at home. When they compare costs, it is in relation to their own pay, not their husbands' pay or additional family income. They would thus have to work three to four hours in order to pay for one hour of *vitt*.

Thea talks about the current situation of Swedish women, where most have full-time employment but the majority are nevertheless still responsible for and perform the household cleaning. She thus rationalizes her purchases of cleaning services by relating time to money, erasing differences between her work performed in public and in private, respectively. By uplifting the status of cleaners and simultaneously subsidizing the work they perform, the authorities could really do something for gender equality, she argues. One hour of work should be exchangeable for another: Thea would work one hour and a cleaner one hour. It would be like bartering, although settled with money and thus within economic reach for most people.

However, exchanging work in terms of time means omitting intermediaries. Susanne considers the behaviour of those who abuse work-

ers in order to get their services cheaply to be despicable. Both she and Thea condemned the amount of pay some Polish cleaners were reported to have received in a case pursued by the police at the same time as their indictment. The hourly pay for those clients was about the same or even less, but the money did not go straight to the Polish women. Instead there was an organising intermediary, which the newspapers called 'the pimp', who took half of the pay. Thea and Susanne found both the payment distribution between the pimp and the cleaners as well as the cleaners' recompense appalling. But Thea adds, as an afterthought, 'who knows who is abusing whom? Maybe even the Polish women were happy as the pay they earned in Sweden is better than what they would have been able to earn at home'.

If there was not such a big difference between the legal pay level for domestic work and the net income earned by these women, all three say that they would have preferred to hire the cleaning services *vitt* – legally. But paying for *vitt* cleaning services was out of the question. Instead they argued in favour of different ways of exchanging an hour of their formal work for an hour of cleaning. They paid about the same amount for the cleaning services as they themselves made for working an hour. In their terms, it was almost a bartering arrangement and compared to the legal price, it was like a commodity on clearance sale. Lena, Susanne and Thea all advocated a fair 'exchange rate' for cleaning services compared to 'do-it-yourself'. They judged the amount Sonia received in cash by their own hourly net pay. They can perform the job themselves, given that they do not work full-time or use the time with their children as Susanne does. Therefore the pay Sonia received was sufficient and slightly better than what they earn themselves net. Besides, an employee in a cleaning company would get 70 *krona*¹⁴ an hour before taxes, Lena told me, having checked this after the indictment.

A Professional Relationship in the Private Sphere?

Susanne expressed confusion and astonishment that she was in the media's spotlight. An illustration of this is what happened when she told her sister about it. Susanne asked her sister if she had read about the cleaning case in the papers. 'You mean those rich bitches?', her sister had asked. 'That's me', Susanne admitted, and added with a laugh that her sister almost fainted when told.

Susanne works part-time with Mondays off. She calls these her 'social Mondays', days that she dedicates to her three children instead of using the time to clean the house. The paid cleaning was only to help her out when the kids were small. Susanne defined work as those tasks she receives compensation for and thus pays taxes on. She added as an afterthought that she also works at home, but as it is neither recompensed nor taxed she does not consider it real work, just inconvenient tasks which take time. If she instead chooses to pay for some of the home tasks, the task transforms into real work. Susanne wants to keep a distinction between the private and the public and if she pays for cleaning services, the relationship with the provider should be professional. During her last pregnancy, she had an acquaintance who needed money who helped her clean her home. But the friend came too close when she started taking things out of the drawers and decorating Susanne's home. 'She got inside my skin', Susanne said.

All three women noticed Sonia's lack of personal touch, having wished to see that she cared a little bit extra for their homes. Susanne told me that Sonia did not arrange household items properly. For example, if there were toys on the floor she just threw them on the bed instead of arranging them neatly. Thea did not mind this at all: that Sonia never went into drawers emphasised the professional and impersonal nature of her work. The day before Sonia came to work, the family had to ensure

that the house was in order and all personal items were packed away. Sonia would perform only the actual cleaning: dusting, wiping the floors and the bathrooms.

Thus, on one hand the women wanted Sonia to care for their homes as she worked, and treat it as they treated it themselves: to show somehow that their home was a special place. On the other hand, these women bought a service to be performed professionally. As they were away while she cleaned, they needed to trust her. Paying for cleaning *vitt* makes the transaction transparent and official, and any abuse of this professional relationship can be prosecuted. But Susanne had heard of someone who had used a cleaning firm. Their house was later broken into and the suspicion was that someone in the cleaning company had passed on the keys. Susanne thus argues that a professional provider is not a warranty for trust.

The police questioned the women's behaviour in the interrogations and pointed out the risks of leaving their keys under a flowerpot and letting an unknown woman into their houses while they were at work. But Lena did not feel insecure: she had hidden their cheque books. Lena also felt that Sonia was reliable as she had many clients in the neighbourhood and a steady income she would not risk losing. *Svart* cleaning services are not available on an official market, but go by word of mouth between neighbours and friends and through other loosely connected networks. Lena could find inexpensive cleaning by chance in a phone call with a neighbour using the 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1983) and these weak ties were the origin of trust in the relationship with Sonia. The trust is not established directly with her, but through the relationships they have with her other customers. No one is at home when Sonia cleans, instead keys are hidden in the garden or on the porch and money is left on the kitchen table as recompense. At times when Sonia did not arrive for work, Lena just cleaned herself and left the keys hidden in the agreed place the next time around.

Trust in Sonia was (re)produced through this network of neighbour and/or friend relationships, knowing that she had much to lose.

Helping Others and Yourself

On the individual level, these women talked about their purchase of cleaning services as getting help and giving help. Lena was not the only one who said that she paid well and in a way helped this woman who could not earn money otherwise. The cleaning help was a temporary arrangement: the women bought themselves help in a gendered society where the husbands, due to their larger paycheques, were mostly excused for not participating in the home cleaning. Although all the members of the three women's families benefited from Sonia's cleaning, it was the women who were indicted.¹⁵ Thea meant that this was just an example of that women still perform 90 per cent of household work. If losing at the next legal instance she said she would go public, debating the right for subsidized home cleaning as a true feminist issue.

The issue does not only involve gender. Lena is angry and disappointed at society after the indictment and how the services of the welfare state, such as childcare and healthcare, seem to deteriorate. She considers most activities work, but also makes a distinction between the paid and the unpaid. What is of gain for society is work in public and, as such, she thinks that society actually benefited from her paying for home cleaning. She works full time, has two small children and felt on the verge of being burnt out when she learnt about Sonia. Lena earns less per hour than what she paid for the cleaning services. Instead of being on sick leave, as a burden and cost to society, her purchase made it possible for her to continue to work and pay income taxes. Getting Sonia's cleaning service was a help yourself purchase, not only for private gain but also in economic terms for society at large. In addition,

as an extra benefit she helped someone in need. Lena has to work full-time and pay her taxes, but the welfare state does not seem to be there for her. Everybody at work seems stressed and so are the children in schools and daycare centres. The people who need help do not get any, she argues, so by putting the blame on society's lack of care, she decides for herself how best to care for her family's needs, regardless of what the legal rules are. It is her way of defining a regime of living (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 23) as her decision posed a situated configuration of ethical problems when living her life.

Sonia cleaned in Sweden without a work permit, thus illegally, and she could not be paid the regular way which would have included taxes, retirement savings and so on. Implicit in these three women's argument is that Sonia had chosen to come to Sweden and work illicitly, instead of staying in Lithuania and working for less than what she receives in Sweden (according to Susanne, Lithuanian monthly average pay is the equivalent of 800 *krona*). In the police interrogations, Sonia said she sent money home monthly to her family, at each instance 3,000 to 4,000 *krona* in an envelope, together with some postcards. Sonia was in a sense helped by her 'employers' and at the same time, they got a good deal for themselves as cleaning services from a company would have cost about 250 to 400 *krona* per hour.

Both Thea and to a certain extent Susanne relate work in public with the tasks that have to be performed in private, thus translating one hour of their paid work into one hour of paid cleaning. It is a professional exchange in the private sphere, hidden from the public market, an example of managing one's life within a given context, 'a regime of living' (Collier and Lakoff 2005). Susanne's reasoning is full of contradictions, in strictly legal terms, in relation to what she ought to have paid. A regime of living is not always lucid and characterized by an internal logic (*ibid.*: 33), but still has a certain coherence (*ibid.*: 31).

On a societal level, this help was illegal. Sonia, a woman without a work permit, cleaned homes without paying taxes and those who should have paid them omitted taxes and social fees from the transaction. These women argued that they hired cleaning services to be better off in the short term: Lena so as not to become burnt out, Thea in order to have more time and Susanne in order to be able to spend more time with her children. Sonia's story is not known, other than that she was fined and sent home.¹⁶ As laws and rules were not followed, society on a macro level was said to have lost out.

Conclusion

Svart cleaning is, in a twofold sense, informal work. On one hand, home cleaning is not recognized as productive work: a public economic activity contributing to the GDP. On the other, *svart* cleaning is also informal as the compensation is paid in cash, outside the established payment routines and beyond the state's view, omitting due taxes and fees. However, it cannot in the above case be considered lost income for the state. The option for these women was not to buy the service from a firm, which they considered too expensive, but instead to do-it-themselves. A view of an economy which recognises that it consists of both formal and informal economic activities helps understand why *svart arbete* is seen as an acceptable act.

It has been argued that the Swedish *pigdebatten* not only has its roots in a structural work division ruled by gender and class, but also in the economic definition of which tasks are considered work. Regardless of how much household work is in demand, it continues to be overlooked and perhaps seen as too basic to be included in societal economy. The same is true of the cleaner. There are many women like Sonia who work hard every day in many Swedish homes. Not being recognized, she is

a 'nobody' without rights in public. 'Today's cleaner does not have low status, she does not even exist' (Ernsjö Rappe and Strannegård 2004: 166).

The purchasers' justifications highlight consumption choices in the sometimes confusing mix of society's legal construction of work in the public and private spheres. Susanne tries to keep a distinction in terms of recompense. When she cleans, it is not seen as work as she is not recompensed. Paying for cleaning transforms it into a sort of work, but as it is a task she can do herself, she is not willing to work for three to four hours in order to pay for one hour. The services she hired were not full-time, but consisted of occasional help which gave her more precious time with her children. Thea relates her transactions to the legal norms of society and has constructed a case of legality for paying for the cleaning services of an immigrant without a working permit. She sees an economy consisting of work both in private and in public. She argues that as work makes up a large part of the welfare system, the state should make it possible for anyone to hire cleaning services. Lena also relates work to society, not to the normative understanding, but rather to her idea of what a good society should be. For her it is not important who performs which job, the important thing is not to abuse others, neither as individuals nor as a collective. In a deteriorating welfare society with increased demands of efficiency and rationality on the individual, she thinks that families in particular need help. These individuals feel squeezed between society's norms, the demands and opportunities at work and managing life within a changing welfare state. As a response to the increased demands of working life, they construct their own justifications to get help with tasks that facilitate their private lives within the limits of their economic means. A Swedish regime of living.

Postscript: Lena, Susanne and Thea were convicted and sentenced to pay quite heavy fines

in the first instance, on a level with what a formal employer would have paid. Two of them appealed and were acquitted in spring 2004. The one who had already paid her fine still awaits compensation. However, the case is still considered *svart arbete* confirming the opportunities for informal exchanges due to legal ambiguities (Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1989: 247; Ingelstam 1995: 82–83), which Swedish European Union membership here confirms.

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Notes

1. Amongst many, 'Härövan med 'svart' städhjälp växer' (Larsson 2003), 'Det var rena slavarbetet' (Gustafsson 2003).
2. Including VAT up to 50,000 krona yearly, which can be retroactively deducted.
3. There are a few politicians amongst the Social Democrats who are in favour.
4. Published in 2010 as *Illegal Yet Licit: Justifying Informal Purchases of Work in Contemporary Sweden*.
5. This article has been written with their consent, but due to the ease of identification, their jobs, family relations or appearances are not individually disclosed.
6. *Svensson, Svensson* is about a seemingly 'ordinary' Swedish family – a man, wife and two children – whose work, interests and everyday happenings reflect on life in contemporary Sweden. It has been running in stints on Swedish television since 1994.
7. My translation for numerous Swedish slang expressions: *glömmer fakturan* – 'forgets the invoice', *ger ett juste pris* – 'offers a nice price', *mörkar* – 'is shading', *arbetar rostfritt* – works 'stainless'.
8. These words were all found in an Internet search. The spectrum of words calling a cleaner everything from maid to provider of corporate services reflects the urge to modernize this work and the attempt of a political transformation of the role of a lodged domestic servant to a professional cleaner.
9. *Tjänstebeskattningsutredningen* is the Official Investigation of Taxes on Services (my translation).
10. Interview with Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, Melin, Lena, in *Aftonbladet*, 21 December 2008.
11. Confirmed by 791 hits for *vitt arbete* (Google, May 2007), compared to 13,200 for *svart arbete*.
12. In Hakim's British example those working in service professions or with less education are rather underrepresented. It is thus a deliberate choice for many.
13. The relation between the total wage costs and what the worker receives net is referred to as the tax wedge, *skattekil*. The price a private person pays is much more expensive than what a similar service costs a commercial company. Paying in private as an end-consumer is done with money which has already been taxed, the tax wedge thus appraised. For estimates and further discussion about the Swedish tax wedge cf. Henrekson (1998) and SOU (2004: 46).
14. *Krona* is the Swedish currency, approximately 10 krona to 1 euro and 7 to a US dollar.
15. According to the police, it was because only the women's names were in Sonia's address book. A number of gender issues are available for analysis here, but for lack of space will not be pursued.
16. Trying to locate Sonia has unfortunately been to no avail. She was last known to have moved on to Great Britain, leaving no address.

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