

Valuing Care: A Feminist Critique of Global Capitalism

by Nancy Folbre

Professor of Economics, University of Massachusetts, USA

Most economics focuses on the “production of commodities by means of commodities” and largely ignores the “production of people by means of people.” Obviously, feminist economics needs to look more closely at the care of young children, the sick, and the elderly—the work of “social reproduction” sometimes termed “caring labor.” But HOW should we look at it? Through what lenses? Should we wear rose-colored glasses? Do we need dark shades? Are we near-sighted or far-sighted? Should we get out our microscope? Do we need an X-ray machine?

The lenses we should use depend, of course, on who we are and what we are looking for. In my talk today, I want to use a combination telescope combined with a time machine. I want to look at what the French historian Fernand Braudel referred to as the “longue duree,”--the great sweep of history and the mysterious swirls of possibility that lay ahead. I want to look at what I think I could persuade Karl Marx, if he were here today, to call “the laws of motion of patriarchal capitalism.”

I will build on the talk I gave yesterday that emphasized the important role that non-market work plays in the efficient functioning of a market economy. I will argue that the relationship between the non-market and market realms, between social reproduction and production, is shaped in decisive ways by the interaction between patriarchy and capitalism.

Patriarchy provides support for childrearing and other forms of non-market work at the cost, to women, of subordination to men. In its precapitalist forms, it was more successful at promoting population growth than economic growth. Capitalism resists support for any form of non-market work, channeling resources into economic rather than demographic expansion. It offers women opportunities for economic independence that can help them challenge patriarchal power. Yet it also creates competitive pressures that penalize both individuals and nations that devote resources to social reproduction.

In other words, patriarchy values care but subordinates caregivers. Capitalism liberates caregivers but devalues care. To use an American expression, one could say that we are “caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.” The devil is warm but cruel. The sea offers a freedom that is too icy to enjoy. My presentation is divided into three parts: 1) the origins of patriarchy 2) the unhappy marriage of patriarchy and capitalism 3) global capitalism and the devaluation of care.

The Origins of Patriarchy

Voluntary exchange plays an important role in modern economies. But political, economic and cultural power largely determines who owns the assets that are exchanged, as well as the terms under which exchange takes place.

Karl Marx lectured that the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle. So much depends on what we mean by “class.” John Roemer offers a clear and compelling mathematical formulation (one that jettisons much of traditional Marxism, including the labor theory of value) in his book *Free to Lose*. Yet he clings to the Marxian conviction (or perhaps one could call it a hope) that class can be reduced to ownership of means of (male) production.

Modern institutional economists emphasize that many different types of groups engage in forms of behavior designed to improve their collective position, including war. Even conservative economists like Jack Hirshleifer point out that neoclassical economics—with its emphasis on market exchanges that take place by mutual

agreement—ignores the “dark side of the force”—the use of organized violence to seize resources and establish advantageous property rights.

This point is powerfully illustrated by Jared Diamond’s important comparative history, *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Diamond argues that many accidents of geography set Europe on a path of technological change that allowed it and its offshoot colonies such as the United States to achieve economic dominance in the twentieth century. Yet the underlying theme of his account is basically that wealth buys power and power helps steal other peoples’ wealth.

These new approaches to collective action have important implications for feminist efforts to conceptualize patriarchy, efforts that seem to have gone into abeyance since the publication of Gerda Lerner’s classic book *The Origins of Patriarchy*. The question of “origins” seemed too speculative to many feminists, perhaps even embarrassing in a world in which a more practical approach could yield immediate gains for women. But the question of origins holds answers to our future as well as our past, and the argument that Lerner brilliantly synthesized from anthropological evidence is consistent with new institutionalist approaches to collective conflict and with the emerging insights from evolutionary biology.

Let me recap these briefly before going on to outline my own formulation and extension of these:

The early historical record—as well as anthropological studies of hunter/gatherer societies--shows that competing groups often engage in forms of warfare designed to capture women. The capture of women offers several important advantages for a group: in addition to weakening the competition for resources (a goal which could obviously also be served by simple murder) it offered an important way of increasing a group’s economic and demographic capital—women are more easily enslaved than men because, once captured and impregnated, they can be held hostage by their affection for their children, making it difficult for them to flee. Further, their childbearing capabilities themselves are valuable, especially in a world in which military power is largely determined by available manpower. On a more subtle level, the enslavement of women from outside the tribe weakens the relative position of women from within the tribe—reducing their own ability to bargain over the terms of marriage and childrearing.

This interpretation of conflict between men and women—overlaid on conflict among groups—was (and is) dismissed by many scholars on the grounds that men and women share common interests in the wellbeing of their offspring. The economic assumption that parents maximize their “joint utility” was paralleled by a biological assumption that kin-based altruism linked the interests of men, women, and children in families.

The notion that kin-based altruism obviates any conflict within the family was decisively challenged by Robert Trivers and other evolutionary biologists in the 1970s. Yet it is only recently that anthropologists such as Sarah Hardy and Bobbi Low have explained their implications in terms that make them accessible to feminist economists. Differences in the size and quantity of gametes males and females produce, combined with the physiological cost of gestation, nursing, and prolonged nurturance have significant implications. Mothers have more invested in individual offspring and more to lose than fathers (in terms of reproductive fitness) from loss of a child. Women also lose their reproductive capacity at a much younger age than men. Mothers bond more closely and more quickly with offspring than fathers do. As a result, fathers are in a stronger position than mothers to make a credible threat to abandon offspring.

The biology of gender differences implies that a different set of evolutionary pressures operates on males and females. In economic terms, females stand to gain more from investments in the “quality” of children than in their “quantity.” Mothers gain more from raising a small number of children to successful maturity than from conceiving a large number of children who are less likely to survive to become parents themselves.

Natural selection rewards males who improve their mating effort, increasing their sexual access to females and increasing quantity of offspring. But natural selection rewards females who increase their parenting effort,

improving the quality of their offspring, Men and women may bargain over the quality/quantity tradeoff, and female parenting effort may take the form of efforts to persuade males to provide more support for children.

Evolutionary pressures may also have implications for the broader development of male and female capabilities and preferences. Physical strength becomes an advantage for males in competition with other males. Selection for mating effort tends to place males in “winner-take-all” games that reward risk-taking behavior. If they fail to mate, their long-term success helping nurture offspring becomes irrelevant.

Selection for parental effort places females in strategic environments more likely to reward cooperation. Rather than facing a shortage of potential partners, they face the difficulty of raising dependent children to maturity, a task that often requires collaboration with other mothers. In economic terms, mothers may have different “time preferences” than fathers—they may be more willing to sacrifice present consumption for the future welfare of their existing children.

In other words, evolutionary biology suggests that men have been “selected” for success in short-run competition to sire children. Women have been “selected” for their success at long-run cooperation in raising children. Such cooperation may even entail collaboration with males who subordinate them.

This is an argument about RELATIVE, NOT ABSOLUTE preferences. Men also have stake in the survival of their offspring, and women can be fiercely competitive with one another. Also, to suggest that biology has important implications for gender conflict is not to say that it DETERMINES such conflict. Both economics and culture clearly play an important role in mediating it. As we become more aware of biological propensities, we may become less likely to act upon them. (Indeed, we are gradually acquiring the capability to modify our own biology, a process that may prove frightfully easier to master than the capability to modify our culture.) Still, I believe that motherhood has paradoxical implications for women—it weakens their bargaining power, because they become “prisoners of love.” But it also strengthens their resolve, their willingness to bargain with men—because they have something bigger than themselves to bargain FOR.

Here’s another way to put it: males will never pay 100% of the costs of raising children, because once males can bear and nurse children themselves they will no longer be defined as males. Nor will women ever pay 100% of the costs, because some male contribution (even if relatively tiny—a single sperm) is required. But the distribution of the costs of children between women and men represents an important source of conflict between them. Since women devote more time and energy to reproduction relative to production, they are strongly affected by what might be called “the terms of trade” between reproductive and productive services.

Patriarchal power affects these terms of trade. In general, patriarchal power lowers the share of the cost of social reproduction born by men. Historically, the consolidation and intensification of patriarchal power is associated with the advent of agricultural systems based on private property that give men both the means and the incentive to intensify their control over women and children. Forms of hierarchy and domination outside the household were modeled on male authority—the king or emperor as the ultimate “father” and his subjects as children.

Patriarchal property rights emerge in specific historic and cultural contexts that vary in important ways. But powerful forms of patriarchy often encourage high fertility and demographic expansion. Men seek to father many children and to increase the size of their dynasty or lineage. Women are forced to “overspecialize” in providing care for men and children—their access to other activities is restricted. Specialization in care, in turn, increases their economic dependence. However valuable their contribution to society, women themselves do not capture a very large share of the gains. (For more details on this argument, see my article with Elissa Braunstein in *Feminist Economics*, “To Honor and Obey: The Patriarch as a Residual Claimant”)

Patriarchal societies often achieve successful population growth—one could say that population growth is to patriarchy what economic growth is to capitalism. Their demographic expansion helps explain their tendency to crowd out, overwhelm, and often subjugate more egalitarian societies.

Population growth itself may create pressures for technological change—as the ratio of population to land rises, simple demographic expansion loses its ability to provide social benefits. Increases in the quantity of the population become less important than increases in efficiency and productivity. Importantly, such increases in productivity often require increases in effort devoted to education—a shift away from quantity of children to quality of children. This shift itself favors the position of women. But for now, set aside the many possible reasons for the advent of capitalist relations of production and focus instead on how capitalism constructed itself upon patriarchal foundations which it then gradually began to undermine.

The Unhappy Marriage of Capitalism and Patriarchy

Patriarchy and capitalism are abstractions. Neither has ever existed in “pure” form. Gender inequalities have been present in the history of most recorded societies, as have the signal characteristics of capitalism—production for market profit through wage employment. No bright line separates the many combinations and hybrids that emerge historically. Still, we see movement along a continuum. In general, capitalist development entails steady shifts away from family-based employment towards dependence on an individual wage.

In most areas of the world this process of “proletarianization” first transforms the lives of young adults, both men and women. They leave home and seek jobs that pay a wage that offers a better subsistence than continued work on a family farm. In the process they escape the warm authority of the patriarchal family but become subject to the cold authority of the capitalist employer. In the initial stages of wage employment, they often remit a significant share of their wages to their parents. Gradually, however, the economic independence afforded by individual wage employment tends to undermine parental authority and transfers from the young to the old become “voluntary” rather than “obligatory.” Over time, they dwindle.

Education tends to become more important as a condition of employment. Parents know they must invest in the development of children’s capabilities in order to ensure their success. Yet they also know that they may be unable to capture the benefits of this investment, because it renders their children even more economically independent. Education not only raises the direct costs of children; it also tends to reduce the share of adult income that is returned to parents. (Note that if the absolute gains in children’s income are sufficiently high, even a reduced share offers benefits—in developing countries today remittances from adult children who have successfully emigrated to high-wage countries are often quite significant).

State policies often help resolve this problem by “socializing” some of the new costs—taxing the population as a whole to finance public education. At the same time, they “socialize” many of the benefits of this education by taxing working-age adults to provide for old-age security. The so-called welfare state takes over one of the traditional functions of the patriarchal family, coordinating an intergenerational transfer. The working age population as a whole helps educate the young; the young can “repay” them by providing income security in old age through public pensions. These pensions are typically set up on a “male breadwinner” or “family wage” model that links benefits to wage employment. Women receive benefits in old age primarily by virtue of marriage to a male breadwinner.

In this initial stage, the nation-state takes on a patriarchal function—the organization of social reproduction—that promotes the functioning of the capitalist economy. Far from a “burden” on the process of capital accumulation, the so-called “welfare state” plays a crucial role—at least in the now-developed countries—as I will later emphasize, the transition may be very different for less-developed countries in an emerging capitalist global economy.

The effect of capitalist development is highly gendered. For young women, the experience of capitalist employment is, at least initially, temporary. Upon marriage, they typically return to specialization in family care. But the potential for greater productivity in wage employment, often accompanied by a reduction in the viability of family-based employment, pulls married women into paid work. Their rates of participation in wage employment gradually increase, approaching those of men. Yet they are constrained by the fact that someone must continue to provide family care—even in the most advanced capitalist countries such as the United States about half of total work time continues to take the form of non-market work.

Many scholars, not just traditional Marxists, assume that the “transition to capitalism” has already occurred in most of the world. But in fact, such a transition has not really been accomplished anywhere—capitalism remains “married” to patriarchy. In an ironic, even humiliating reversal, one could argue that capitalism has become the dominant husband, while patriarchy plays the role of subordinate—but indispensable wife.

This marriage serves important purposes—but it is neither happy nor stable. Let me just point to the most obvious contradiction—the one that has already received considerable attention at this conference because it is increasingly evident in Korea today. Both capitalist production and the patriarchal welfare state reduce the incentives to high fertility. Parents can no longer capture any economic returns from their own children. Because capitalists seek to minimize the taxes that are levied on profitable production to pay for social reproduction, they generally do not provide public support adequate to defray the increased costs of raising children. Furthermore, the “socialization” of the benefits of childrearing through public pension systems provides rewards based on wage employment, not on family work. Individuals need to raise any children of their own in order to benefit from transfers from the young in old age. Men as well as women have incentives to reduce fertility.

Both fertility decline and increases in female employment have the effect of empowering women. Less heavily specialized in providing care, women enjoy increased bargaining power in the home. They can choose their own marriage partners; they can leave marriage if it becomes unhappy or unsatisfactory. They have more power to express their own preferences for quality over quantity of children, and can push men to pay a larger share of the costs of educating and caring for children—although this entails a high risk that they will become single parents. (One could interpret this bargaining process in terms of a “birth strike”—note that strikes are often costly even dangerous for those who conduct them).

Changes in relative prices also encourage fertility decline—new opportunities available for women increase the opportunity cost of their time. Men, as well as women, see the economic advantages—indeed, often the economic necessity—of lower fertility. Fertility decline leads, initially, to a higher rate of economic growth. This is true by definition, since the time, money and effort that families devote to children is not counted as part of Gross Domestic Product, while the labor power they devote to wage employment IS counted. But of course, when fertility abruptly declines below replacement level—and stays there—it reduces the future supply of labor in ways that pose the threat of economic disruption—especially in countries that are unable or unwilling to rely on labor imported from other countries at an earlier stage of capitalist development.

In my humble opinion—and that of many other feminists--the solution to the problem is to provide more public support for childrearing ALONG WITH a restructuring of paid employment that allows both men and women to find a balance between paid work and family care. Resistance to this solution is immense for obvious reasons. It would impose high costs on both capitalism and patriarchy. It would require capitalists to pay for a higher share of the costs of reproducing their labor force. It would also require men to assume greater responsibilities for the work of care.

I think this resistance will eventually be overcome, because, to return to the beginning of my story, human beings wouldn't be here today if we weren't pretty good at figuring out how to successfully reproduce ourselves. And frankly, patriarchal capitalism is simply not going to be able to do the job. I think this is why we have some

groups that impulsively want to return to a more purely patriarchal system—a gloomy prospect, even for men, since it would involve a huge reduction in our actual and potential standard of living. We have others that think that capitalism itself, rid of its patriarchal remnants, can solve the problem. This argument grows out of the neo-liberal presumption that all problems can be solved by market forces—that markets themselves can efficiently organize social reproduction.

Global Capitalism and the Devaluation of Care

Perhaps it seems obvious to most attendees of this conference that capitalism cannot organize social reproduction on its own, that we cannot rely on the forces of supply and demand to provide the labor power on which our economy relies. If it does seem obvious to you, imagine trying to explain it to a group of male economists representing the World Bank. Imagine (and this is the fanciful part) that they would actually listen to your concerns.

Markets do not represent the economy as a whole. They are limited in scope. Children do not participate in markets. They do not engage in exchanges with their parents. There is no supply curve of children waiting to be born at such and such a price. The unborn do not call from us prior to birth saying “if you will just bring me into existence I will gladly provide you with such-and-such in return.” Children rely on the altruism and affection of their parents, particularly their mothers. Children’s dependence is really only a metaphor for the dependence of the future—not just future humans, but also future animals, future plants, the future spirit of Gaia, goddess of the earth. All of these go unrepresented not just in markets, but in the polity. Their voices do not register.

Even in the present, market processes are relevant only to goods and services that are bought and sold, goods and services to which individual property rights can be enforced. No one owns our oceans, or our air. No one owns the stability of our climate or the sustainability of our culture. No one owns the sum total of human knowledge. In short, no one owns the most important part of the legacy that our children stand to inherit.

Competitive markets can provide efficient means of structuring many important economic activities. But they often fail to deliver the best possible results when consumers lack sovereignty, or when quality is difficult to monitor or measure. In the care sector of the economy—in health, education, child care, and elder care, incentives to cut costs often create incentives to lower quality (For a more expanded version of this argument see my recent paper “Demanding Quality” delivered at the conference on Caring Labor sponsored by the Harry Bridges Labor Center at the University of Washington in May, 2005).

Competitive markets can also have the effect of intensifying economic inequalities, with unfortunate consequences for the next generation. An economic system that rewards individuals for their merits elicits both creativity and effort. An economic system in which inequalities among parents create grossly unequal opportunities for children does not. It gradually morphs into what can only be termed a hereditary meritocracy, in which merit-based competition takes place only among those from families sufficiently affluent to provide young children with the education that is a prerequisite for upward mobility.

All these problems bear upon the *efficiency* of the world capitalist system, not merely upon its injustices (none of which are elaborated above). Why don’t the economists of the World Bank seem to worry about them? Perhaps because these problems are not so likely to affect their children. Perhaps also because the advanced capitalist countries have a great deal more time to deal with these problems than the less-developed countries. They are enjoying the tastiest fruits of capitalist development, even as they dump the greatest quantities of carbon waste into the global atmosphere. Mostly importantly, they enjoy a large—though by no means infinite—supply of cheap labor from the developing countries.

They can—and do—rely on workers raised and educated in other countries to keep their economies in good health. A shortage of software engineers? No worries, increase the supply of visas for Indian programmers—or,

better still, outsource via the web. A shortage of nurses? No worries, change the immigration rules just enough to allow more Filipinas in. Child care too expensive? Illegal Mexican immigrants make excellent nannies, cheap enough even for the middle class. The countries of the global South, like the wives within a patriarchal marriage are the ones who are, to use the colloquial term, getting screwed.

Conclusion

The feminist analysis of gender inequality is important in and of itself, but also as a metaphor for other types of exploitation. It helps explain why patriarchal capitalism encourages forms of competition that reward short-run success at the expense of long-run viability.

We live in a world in which patriarchy and capitalism are intertwined, dependent on one another but writhing in conflict. I believe the tensions between these two systems, on some metaphysical level, help explain the violent polarization we are witnessing between religious fundamentalism and neoliberal reliance on market forces. We must find a better balance, reconfiguring patriarchal and capitalist institutions with democracy and respect for human rights. We should strive to provide both equal opportunity and a social safety net within an environmentally sustainable global economy.

The language I use implies that patriarchy and capitalism cannot be magically transcended. They are a part of our history, a history that teaches us that we are not gods and may even be utter fools. But the gradual empowerment of women and unambiguous gains in women's rights around the world should give us hope. Our parents committed themselves to us, and we owe them, in turn, commitments to generations of the future.