

Capitalism's Crisis of Care

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In an interview, Nancy Fraser contends with liberal feminism's troubling convergence with contemporary capitalism, and offers a radically different vision of gender justice.

[Sarah Leonard and Nancy Fraser](#) ■ [Fall 2016](#)



Photo courtesy of Nancy Fraser.

Nancy Fraser is a professor of philosophy and politics at The New School for Social Research and one of the most respected critical theorists working today. In her latest book *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Fraser contends with liberal feminism's troubling convergence with capitalism, and the ways in which feminism can provide a veneer of liberation for a system of relentless exploitation. Advancing a critique of capitalism and a radically different vision of feminism, she shows how gender justice must lie at the heart of any struggle for an egalitarian society. Lately,

Fraser has turned to address what she calls a “crisis of care.” Her essay of that title appears in issue 100 of *New Left Review* (July/August).


Sarah Leonard: What is social reproduction, and why does it lie at the core of your feminist analysis?

Nancy Fraser: Social reproduction is about the creation and maintenance of social bonds. One part of this has to do with the ties between the generations—so, birthing and raising children and caring for the elderly. Another part is about sustaining horizontal ties among friends, family, neighborhoods, and community. This sort of activity is absolutely essential to society. Simultaneously affective and material, it supplies the “social glue” that underpins social cooperation. Without it, there would be no social organization—no economy, no polity, no culture. Historically, social reproduction has been gendered. The lion’s share of responsibility for it has been assigned to women, although men have always performed some of it too.

The rise of capitalism intensified this gender division—by splitting economic production off from social reproduction, treating them as two separate things, located in two distinct institutions and coordinated in two different ways. Production moved into factories and offices, where it was considered “economic” and remunerated with cash wages. Reproduction was left behind, relegated to a new private domestic sphere, where it was sentimentalized and naturalized, performed for the sake of “love” and “virtue,” as opposed to money. Well, that was the theory at least. In fact, social reproduction was never situated exclusively within the confines of the private household, but has been located as well in neighborhoods, public institutions, and civil society; and some of it has been commodified. Nevertheless, the gendered separation of social reproduction from economic production constitutes the principal institutional basis for women’s subordination in capitalist societies. So for feminism, there can be no more central issue than this.

Leonard: In your judgment, we have entered a crisis of care. What does that mean and how have we arrived here?

Fraser: In capitalist societies, the capacities available for social reproduction are accorded no monetized value. They are taken for granted, treated as free and infinitely available “gifts,” which require no attention or replenishment. It’s assumed that there will always be sufficient energies to sustain the social connections on which economic production, and society more generally, depend. This is very similar to the way that nature is treated in capitalist societies, as an infinite reservoir from which we can take as much as we want and into which we can dump any amount of waste. In fact, neither nature nor social reproductive capacities are infinite; both of them can be stretched to the breaking point. Many people already appreciate this in the case of nature, and

we are starting to understand it as well in the case of “care.” When a society simultaneously withdraws public support for social reproduction and  conscripts the chief providers of it into long and grueling hours of paid work, it depletes the very social capacities on which it depends. This is exactly our situation today. The current, financialized form of capitalism is systematically consuming our capacities to sustain social bonds, like a tiger that eats its own tail. The result is a “crisis of care” that is every bit as serious and systemic as the current ecological crisis, with which it is, in any case, intertwined.

To understand how we got here, I would contrast this form of capitalism with previous forms. It is a common idea that the history of capitalism consists of a succession of different regimes of accumulation—for example, liberal capitalism, state-managed (or social-democratic) capitalism, and neoliberal financialized capitalism. Scholars usually distinguish between these regimes in terms of the distinctive ways in which states and markets are related in each. But they have neglected the relation between production and reproduction, which is equally consequential. That relation is a defining feature of capitalist society and belongs at the center of our analysis of it. We can go a long way toward understanding capitalism’s history by focusing on how social reproduction is organized in each of its phases: for any given era, how much of “care work” is commodified? How much is supported through state or corporate provision? How much is located in households? In neighborhoods? In civil society?

On this basis, we can trace a historical path from the so-called liberal capitalism of the nineteenth century to the state-managed regime of the mid-twentieth and on to the financialized capitalism of the present day. In a nutshell: liberal capitalism *privatized* social reproduction; state-managed capitalism partially *socialized* it; financialized capitalism is increasingly *commodifying* it. In each case, a specific organization of social reproduction went with a distinctive set of gender and family ideals: from the liberal-capitalist vision of “separate spheres” to the social-democratic model of the “family wage” to the neoliberal financialized norm of the “two-earner family.” Let me explain.

The case of liberal capitalism is pretty clear. States largely looked on from the sidelines as industrialists dragooned newly proletarianized people, including women and children, into the factories and mines. The result was a crisis of social reproduction, which prompted a public outcry and campaigns for “protective legislation.” But such policies could not possibly solve the problem, and their effect was to leave working-class and peasant communities to fend for themselves as best they could. Nevertheless, this form of capitalism was culturally generative. Recasting social reproduction as the province of women within the private family, it invented the new, bourgeois imaginary of domesticity, “separate spheres,” “the haven in the heartless world,” and “the

angel in the house,” even as it deprived most people of the conditions needed to realize those ideals.

Wracked by crisis, the liberal regime gave way in the twentieth century to a new, state-managed variant of capitalist society. In this phase, which was based on mass production and mass consumption, social reproduction was partially socialized, through state and corporate provision of “social welfare.” And the increasingly quaint model of “separate spheres” gave way to the new, more “modern” norm of the “family wage.” According to that norm, which had the strong support of labor movements, the industrial workingman should be paid enough to support his whole family, enabling his wife to devote herself full-time to their children and household. Again, only a relatively privileged minority achieved this ideal; but it was aspirational for many more—at least, in the wealthy North Atlantic states of the capitalist core. The colonies and post-colonies were excluded from these arrangements, which rested on continuing predation of the global South. And there were built-in racial asymmetries in the United States, where domestic and agricultural workers were excluded from social security and other forms of public provision. And of course, the family wage institutionalized women’s dependency and heteronormativity. So state-managed capitalism was no golden age, but still quite different from what we have today.

Today, of course, the family wage ideal is dead. It’s a casualty, on the one hand, of the fall in real wages, which makes it impossible to support a family on a single salary (unless one belongs to the 1 percent); and on the other hand, of the success of feminism, which delegitimized the idea of women’s dependency that was built into the family wage. As a result of this one-two punch, we now have the new norm of the “two-earner family.” Sounds lovely, doesn’t it—assuming you’re not single? Like the family wage ideal, however, this too is an obfuscation. It mystifies the steep rise in the number of hours of paid work now required to support a household, and if the household includes children or elderly relatives or people who are sick or disabled and cannot function as full-time wage earners, then so much the worse. And if it’s a single-parent family, it’s even worse than that. Now add to this that the two-earner ideal is being promoted at a time of cutbacks in state provision. Between the need for increased working hours and the cutback in public services, the financialized capitalist regime is systematically depleting our capacities for sustaining social bonds. This form of capitalism is stretching our “caring” energies to the breaking point. This “crisis of care” should be understood structurally. By no means contingent or accidental, it is the expression, under current conditions, of a tendency to social-reproductive crisis that is inherent in capitalist society, but that takes an especially acute form in the present regime of financialized capitalism.

Leonard: Can you talk more about feminism’s role in this crisis? Feminists were

not aiming for a struggling two-earner household.

Fraser: No, of course not. But there's still a deep and disturbing question about what role feminism has played in all of this. Feminists rejected the ideal of the family wage as an institutionalization of female dependency—and rightly so. But we did so at just the moment when the relocation of manufacturing kicked the bucket out from under the idea economically. In another world, feminism and shifts in industry might not have reinforced one another, but in this world they did. As a result, even though feminist movements did not in any way *cause* that economic shift, we ended up unwittingly supplying some legitimation for it. We provided some charisma, some ideological ballast to others' agendas.

But let's not forget, meanwhile, that there really are neoliberal feminists who are completely on board with this agenda, who represent the 1 percent. Dare I say it looks like we're about to elect one of them as president of the United States. Neoliberal feminists *are* feminists, by the way; we can't say they're not. But in that strand of feminism we see feminist ideas simplified, truncated, and reinterpreted in market-friendly terms, as for example, when we come to think of women's subordination in terms of discrimination that prevents talented women from rising to the top. Such thinking validates the entire hierarchical corporate imaginary. It legitimates a worldview that is fundamentally hostile to the interests of the majority of women, indeed of all people throughout the world. And this version of feminism provides an emancipatory veneer for neoliberal predation.

Leonard: Can you say more about how the distribution of care work in our financialized economy pits women against one another?

Fraser: Absolutely. We now have a dual organization of care work in which those who can afford domestic help simply pay for it, while those who cannot scramble to take care of their families, often by doing the paid care work for the first group, and often at very, very low wages with virtually no protections. We're starting to see campaigns for rights and living wages in this sector. So clearly, that is a direct pitting of interests against one another. I always thought that Sheryl Sandberg's "lean in" idea was ironic; it is only possible for her readership to envision leaning in at the corporate boardroom in so far as they can lean *on* the low-paid care workers who clean their toilets and their homes, diaper their children, care for their aging parents, and so on.

And we have to talk about race here. It is, after all, chiefly immigrant women of color, African-American women, and Latino women who are doing this work. You need only go to any park in a middle-class neighborhood of New York City to see this—it's crystal clear. There are countries whose entire so-called "development" strategy is to facilitate emigration of women to wealthy countries and regions for this purpose. The Philippines, for instance, depends

very heavily on remittances from the domestic workers it sends abroad. And this is a state-organized labor exchange—it's the state strategy of development. The states in question have been subjected to structural adjustment. They are indebted, cash-strapped, and in need of hard currency, and they have no way to get it other than sending their women out to do this work, leaving their own kids and families behind in the care of other poor people. I'm not suggesting, by the way, that care work should never be a paid job, but it makes a big difference how it's paid, how it's organized, and by whom.

Leonard: Is there specific organizing work that you see addressing these problems in a way that gets to their root?

Fraser: There's a tremendous amount of organizing and activism going on, a lot of creativity, a lot of energy. But it remains rather dispersed and doesn't rise to the level of a counter-hegemonic project to change the organization of social reproduction. If you put together struggles for a shorter work week, for an unconditional basic income, for public child care, for the rights of migrant domestic workers and workers who do care work in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals, child care centers—then add struggles over clean water, housing, and environmental degradation, especially in the global South—what it adds up to, in my opinion, is a demand for some new way of organizing social reproduction.

Struggles over social reproduction are virtually ubiquitous. They just don't carry that label. But if it came to pass that these struggles did understand themselves in this way, there would be a powerful basis for linking them together in a broad movement for social transformation. And if they also understood that the structural basis of today's crisis of care is capitalism's inherent drive to subordinate reproduction to production, then things could get really interesting.

Leonard: Given the growing interest in socialism among young Americans, do you relate a struggle over social reproduction to a struggle for socialism?

Fraser: Absolutely. I call myself a democratic socialist, just as Bernie Sanders does, but we're living in a time where we have to frankly admit that we don't know exactly what that means. We know that it doesn't mean anything like the authoritarian command economy, single-party model of Communism. We know it means something deeper and more robust and egalitarian than social democracy. We know that it can't be nation-state bounded in a world where exploitation and expropriation and extraction are thoroughly transnational. We know all the things that it can't be, in other words, but we have a hard time defining the positive program.

One piece that I would insist on is that reimagining social reproduction must be central to any form of socialism that we could claim as desirable in the twenty-

first century. How should the reproduction/production distinction be reinvented today, and what can replace the two-earner family? It's interesting—if you look at the history of socialism, even the old utopian socialism that Marx and Engels famously rejected, there was a great focus on what I'm calling social reproduction: how to organize family and community life and so on. It was utopian in ways that are not workable for us, but the problematic was there, and even in the history of modern industrial socialism, Marxian socialism, and non-Marxian industrial socialism, this problematic has flitted in and out of view. For the most part it has been treated as secondary to the problem of how to organize industrialization and plan production. But if you focus on one pole of the production/reproduction dyad alone the other will come back and bite you in ways that are unintended and that will vitiate the whole project.

Leonard: Many of the questions that you raise about social life and the family have come to seem utopian again, like some remnant of the 1960s, and not necessarily central to a socialist program. And yet, you argue that we're actually at a crisis point—these issues *must* be central. The challenge of social reproduction is so fundamental to everyone's lived day-to-day experience that it's been surprising to me that it's often absent in the current revival of socialism.

Fraser: I agree very strongly with that. Given the acuteness of this crisis of social reproduction, it would be utopian, in the bad sense, for the left not to be focusing on this. The idea that we could somehow bring back manufacturing, that's what's utopian—again, in the bad sense. Unlike the idea that you could build a society that assumes every adult is a person with primary care responsibilities, community engagements, and social commitments. *That's* not utopian. It's a vision based on what human life is really like.

Leonard: Do you see a positive role for technology in all this, or does mechanizing domestic labor just lead to more leaning in? We've heard a lot lately about egg freezing at Google, which is designed to allow women to work longer before having kids. Since we tend to think that lots of mundane industrial work should be mechanized, do you see care work in a similar way? Or is it too intimate for that?

Fraser: I'm certainly not a Luddite. I very much appreciate having an electric light to read by at night, being able to Skype with you from far away, and so on and so forth. I'm not against even those technologies that I've written critically about, like egg freezing or mechanical breast milk pumps. The question is context: how they're produced and used, by whom, and for whose benefit. So I could easily imagine a context in which the availability of those things could be a legitimate choice. I'm not at all in the business of trying to shame anybody for the very constrained choices that we make between very bad and limited options.

I also think that activities oriented to sustaining social connection contain an ineliminable personal element. They are by definition interpersonal, involving intersubjective communication and in some cases, physical touching. And that militates against the idea of a total mechanization of care. But then again, I doubt we can envision the total automation of anything, if that means the elimination of all human input.

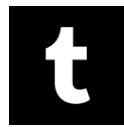
Leonard: Right, because in a way we're just talking about time. We mechanize things like care to save ourselves time, because we don't have enough. And only in a situation in which you have ample time do you really figure out what you want to mechanize anyway.

Fraser: I feel quite sure that I don't want to be washing all of my laundry by hand and I already know there are lots of things I don't want to spend my time doing. I'd love to have more time to do other things, including have talks like this.

Sarah Leonard is a senior editor at the *Nation* and an editor at large at *Dissent*.



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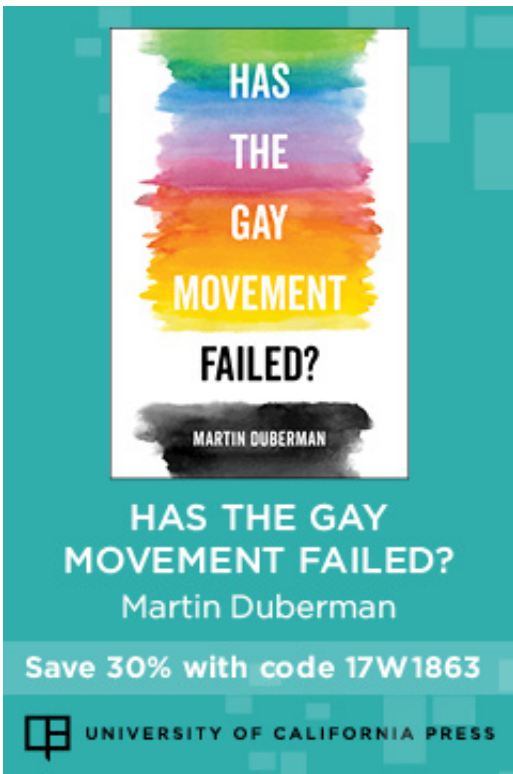
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