

Who Cares? Capitalism and the Reproduction of the Working Class

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Abstract

The concept of “caring labor” obscures the process of surplus extraction in the capitalist mode of production. In particular, the government’s provision of services such as pre-school child care needs to be understood as having the effect of *substituting* for the care provided by the household rather than *adding* to it. In doing so it serves to increase the proportion of wage labor in the total labor of the working class, in particular that carried out by women. The resources “saved” by this “more efficient” form of child care from that required for the reproduction of the working class are thus appropriated by the capitalist class, thereby increasing the rate of exploitation.

Introduction

The concepts of “caring labor” and a “care economy” are used today to describe the process of providing for the maintenance and generational reproduction (or “reproduction” for short) of the working class in a capitalist society. The term is used to describe not only the work that takes place within the household but also that provided by government employees, such as in those employed in the fields of health care and education. The term “caring labor” is thus very similar to the term “reproductive labor” used within Social Reproduction Theory to distinguish it w-from the “productive labor” that takes the form of wage labor.(See, for example Tithi Battacharya (1022 and Susan Ferguson (2021).

The major problem is that this concept of “care” has the effect of excluding from consideration the contribution to this reproduction of the commodities purchased by those engaged in wage labor. The members of the working class who substitute hours of wage labor for household labor do so in order to “care” for their households by earning money that can be used for the payment of rent, food, clothing etc.

An increase in monetary income, whether in the form of higher wages or monetary transfers from the government, would indeed increase the resources used for the “care” of household members and thus the reproduction of the working class. This would, however, conflict with the capitalist goal of profit-making, or, in Marxist terms, the extraction of surplus value. In a capitalist society this takes place mainly through the payment of wages that are less than the value produced by their labor.¹ The labor embodied in the wages paid must, however, be such as to ensure the reproduction of the working class. It therefore *supplements* the use-values created by household members in the form of household production as well as petty-commodity production. (For simplicity, the latter will be ignored in this paper.)

This paper thus explores the relationship between *three* categories of labor, household labor, the labor of government-employees that contributes to the reproduction of the working class, and wage-labor. The first two of these together constitute what is now termed “care

¹ Other forms of surplus extraction include the rent extracted from agricultural producers by landlords. This is not addressed in this paper.

labor.” In order to do this, the paper makes use of the distinction in Biden’s Build Back Better (BBB) proposal between the provision of monetary transfers in the form of tax credits based on the number of children in a household, and the provision of government-provided universal pre-kindergarten and subsidies to other forms of child-care. Several components of the initial proposal that would have directly provided for increased “care” of both adult and children within the working class, starting with the raising of the federal minimum wage to \$15, were quickly dropped, and the length of time proposed for family and medical leave was cut from twelve weeks to an almost laughable four weeks (although still better than nothing!) But there was almost no opposition to the provision of universal free pre-school programs or increased subsidization of child care in general. (Several states, such as New York, have already put in place systems of free pre-K for children aged 3 and 4 years.)

Both of these can be understood as involving an initial transfers of resources to the working class from the capitalist class (assuming no increase in the tax burden on working class families). As such they constitute part of the ongoing process of class struggle that includes not only that between capitalists and the wage-laborers they employ (including that over the intensity of labor) but the political process through which taxes are collected and allocated between alternative uses. It is not only possible but necessary for the working class to understand not only each individual component of this class struggle but their totality. To obtain a monetary transfer of funds that is accompanied by an increase in taxes assessed on wages would leave the working class no better off. Thus the struggle over the BBB proposal took place on many different levels (leaving aside for now the issue of climate change).

It is therefore striking that while monetary transfers, such as the child tax credit were vehemently opposed by many politicians, including Senator Manchin, the funds allocated for universal pre-kindergarten received universal support. This was based mainly on the effect that it was presumed to have on the labor force participation of women, rather than as a way to improve the well-being of children. This was then presented as a step forward in the “liberation” of women from the “drudgery” of housework.

In fact, the provision of government-provided pre-kindergarten care constitutes a continuation of the historical process within the capitalist mode of production through which wage labor has increased as a substitute for household labor. But this wage-labor, the “care labor” that contributes to the reproduction of the working class, is increasingly carried out by those employed by the government rather than by those employed by capitalists.

This historical process has taken place within both the public and the private spheres of production. The substitution of off-the-rack garments for clothing produced within the households is well documented. From the sowing of flax seed to the spinning of yarn, from the weaving of cloth in hand-loom without households to the power looms in textile mills, to the garment factories involved in the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothes, the entire process can be understood as the substitution of wage-labor for household labor. Less well-recognized, but of at least equal importance, is the reduction in necessary household labor that resulted from the provision of water and sewage systems, initially on a municipal level, that dramatically reduced the household labor required for the collection of water and the appropriate disposal of potentially hazardous human and animal waste. These constituted part of a governmentally - constructed infrastructure that included the later provision of some measures of health care (such as vaccinations) and led to the institutions of universal health care in almost all

“developed” countries (with the notable exception of the United States). This can be understood as the substituted of the labor of paid medical workers for a portion of the labor formerly carried out in working class households, while at the same time reducing ed the total resources required for a reduction in infant mortality and an increase in life expectancy.

The process is a complex one and cannot be understood at the level of individual decisions on the composition of production. The capitalists who developed infant formula, as a substitute for breast milk, or disposable diapers that did not require the extensive laundering of cloth diapers, did not expect those “freed” from this labor to constitute, in person, the wage-laborers that they themselves employed in this production. Nor were they motivated by a desire to increase the surplus value of the capitalist class as a whole. Nonetheless these developments had their effect on the labor force participation of the women who had formerly carried out this household production.

The most recent process of substitution is, however, easily recognizable in the dramatic decrease in the household provision of child care over the past half-century. In the United States, the labor force participation rate for women with children under the age of 3 increased from 34.3% in 1975 to 63.8% in 2019. For women with children under one year of age, it was 60.0% in 2019, of whom three-quarters worked “full-time” i.e., 35 hours or more per week.² Many mothers “go back to work,” i.e. substitute wage-labor for the home care of new-born children, within a month of giving birth. The provision of free (i.e., tax-payer funded) pre-kindergarten will undoubtedly contribute to a continuation of this process, and is intended to do so.

Whether this development is itself a good or a bad thing depends, of course, on two things. One is the change this leads to in gender relations within the working-class household. To the extent that women contribute a greater proportion of monetary resources to the household, this can, but does not always, reduce their material dependence on men. It certainly makes it more possible for women to leave destructive relationships without resulting in dire poverty for themselves and their children. Whether it reduces gendered violence is less certain.

But this change in the allocation of labor must also be understood as part of the complete “package” of proposals in such measures as BBB as well as the changes that result from it. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the monetary allocation of funds for pre-K and subsidized child-care is completely matched by an increase in taxes on capital so that there is no *initial* redistribution of resources between capital and labor. What does it mean for the children in pre-K programs, and what happens to the time newly “freed” from the necessity of caring for them?

Enrolment of children in pre-K and other child-care programs is not compulsory, unlike attendance at elementary and secondary schools. Those households that choose to do so must be presumed to see this as at least as good as the option of caring for these children at home. Breast-feeding of infants is generally impractical for women engaged in full-time wage labor and thus causes an actual reduction in children’s health, but this may, at least theoretically, be compensated for by the material benefits that result from the mothers’ increased monetary income. If the alternative to taking on such a job and sometimes foregoing breast-feeding is to avoid eviction for non-payment of rent or the crying of hungry children, wage-labor may indeed

² All data is taken from the publications of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.(bls.gov)

be preferable. The ever-present threat of poverty can be presumed to lead household members (women, in particular) to take advantage of the reduction in the labor required for child-care. Thus the time "freed" from child care will lead to an increase in the allocation of that time to wage labor. There can be no *presumption* that the resulting combination of wage-labor, household labor and the labor of government employees will have the effect of increasing the overall standard of living of the working class. There can also be no presumption that it will contribute to a reduction in the oppression of women. These two presumptions must be addressed separately.

The belief that economic growth in capitalist society will automatically, if unevenly, result in an improvement in the well-being of the working class has been shaken by the experience of the half-century. While the US government's measure of productivity in the business sector shows an increase in labor productivity (real GDP/output per hour) of 152% from 1975 to 2019, real average hourly earnings of production and non-supervisory employees increased in that same period by only 8%. Over the past year (November 2020 to November 2021), average earnings of these workers in the private non-farm sector grew by 5.8%, but in the same period the Consumer Price Index rose by 6.8%, so that real wages fell by 1%. (This is, of course, a very incomplete picture of the historical development of capital-labor relations, but serves to illustrate how very minor is the transfer towards labor contained in the BBB proposal. It would take only a few years of wage-increases below the rate of inflation to completely wipe out the initial monetary benefits of government-provided child care.

An equally strong belief must also be challenged, namely that that women's oppression can be reduced by an increase in their participation in the wage-labor force. It is not surprising, but nonetheless regrettable, that a strongly-worded advocacy of incorporating consideration of "care" into the decision-making of international financial institutions expresses the hope that the substitution of government-provided care labor will reduce the "drudgery" of household production.

The feminist movement's struggle for recognition of the importance and complexity of the household labor (carried out disproportionately by women) has yet to do away with this idea that household labor is, in and of itself, "drudgery" when compared to wage-labor. This idea has two very different origins. One represents the perspective of ruling class women whose role in pre-capitalist societies was undermined in the transition to capitalism, and who sought the right to participate in the economic and political decision-making of the ruling class. This indeed required a feminist challenge to the structures and belief systems of their society and an assertion of moral and intellectual equality between women and men. But the "work" that they sought did *not* include the substitution of their own labor for that of their domestic servants. This work continued to be "beneath them," as was most of the actual work carried out by both women and men of the working class. Simone de Beauvoir is an excellent example of the disdain with which pre-second-wave feminists viewed housework. In [The Second Sex she wrote that](#) "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day."

This disrespect for household laborers was incorporated into understanding of women's oppression by a very different category of activists, namely socialists. The Russian socialist feminist Alexandra Kollontai wrote of women as "enslaved by a thousand menial household chores, bearing the whole burden of maternity." The traditional socialist approach to women's

oppression was to advocate the commodification of household production that would take women out of the “drudgery” involved in carrying out “menial” tasks at home, and integrate them the “wider” world occupied by wage-laborers, where they would (eventually) be freed from capitalist control and their production brought under the control of the working class as a whole. Early Russian socialists proudly pointed to the extent of women’s wage-labor as evidence of their commitment to ending women’s oppression.

This perspective continues today. Oxfam International argues (2021) for International Financial Institutions to support “care” projects that “promote drudgery reduction.” The economic component of the United Nations Development Program’s index of Gender Inequality (GII) is measured by the “labour force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years and older” (2010: 99). It thus continues the presumption that the hours spent in a capitalist workplace are *inherently* “better spent” than those used for household production.

This can be understood as representing the perspective of capital, for whom it is only wage-labor that is “important” since it from this that it extracts surplus value. The account books of capitalists include the wages paid to their employees and the results of their labor, and employers make attempt to follow or “account” workers’ activity after they have left the workplace. National Income accounting represents a continuation of this same form of record-keeping.

From the perspective of the working class, both women and men look forward to the end of their hours of wage-labor when they will be “free” of capitalist supervision, and able to use the remaining portions of their labor power, such as they are (albeit in decreasing amounts), for their own benefit, i.e., in household production. Among these possibilities is that of having and raising children, an option that is increasingly out of reach (Jenny Brown. 2019). The characterization of “care labor” as necessarily burdensome and thus to be reduced must be challenged.

Conclusion

The reproduction of the working class takes place through the allocation of resources in three forms: the government provision of free services, household labor, and the commodities purchased with the wages of household members. An increase in the government provision of “care” can only be celebrated if its effect is to *add* to these resources rather than to *substitute* for one of the other two components. Insofar as it results in an actual increase in *total* production (i.e., that carried out by all three sets of laboring people), this accrues, in the long run, in the capitalist mode of production to the capitalist class.

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