



# Towards a critique of care fetishism: Social reproduction feminism and the ethics of care

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## Abstract

Recently, there has been a notable rise in scholarly publications, research projects and public discussions engaging with care ethics and social reproduction feminism. However, despite their shared focus on caring activities, these two feminist traditions diverge significantly in their theoretical foundations and political implications. The primary distinction lies in their conceptualization of care itself: whereas care ethics emphasizes the affective and moral dimensions of caregiving, social reproduction feminism understands care as labour essential to sustaining life and reproducing labour power. In addition, they differ in their interpretations of interdependence – care ethics views it as an inexorable part of the human condition, while social reproduction feminism examines it through the relationship between production and reproduction. This article analyses hitherto under-scrutinized differences between these traditions. More specifically, it brings to the fore misinterpretations of social reproduction feminism by care ethics scholars while addressing underexplored dimensions within social reproduction feminism itself, including the role of affect in care labour, and Marx's concept of social relations of production. Ultimately, the article argues that the ethics of care tends to idealize caring activities as a moral good, detached from social and economic contexts. Using Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, it thus contends that care ethics risks treating care as a fetish, obscuring the systemic inequalities and inherent contradictions embedded in caregiving.

## Keywords

care fetishism, commodity fetishism, ethics of care, radical care, social reproduction feminism

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## Introduction

In the past five years alone, the number of scholarly publications, research projects as well as public discussions drawing on the concepts of care ethics and social reproduction feminism has grown exponentially. This newfound popularity is due, in part, to the centrality of the issues that these concepts address in the wake of the greatest health crisis of the last one hundred years. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 forced us all to interrogate the state of care and the organization of social reproduction worldwide, when millions of people were dying due to lack of access to quality care infrastructures. However, I contend that this renaissance of sorts is the result of a new generation of feminist scholars, activists and policymakers now being increasingly forced to confront what Nancy Fraser calls the global care crisis. This crisis, which has been unfolding at least since the late 1990s, consists of neoliberalism's inability to address a set of urgent global challenges: namely, the increasing need for care of an ever-growing ageing population, the need of an expanding female workforce to do less unpaid care and the pressing question of caring for the planet in a context in which the human species' reproductive needs and even own survival are in doubt.

Some scholars use care and social reproduction as synonyms or as interchangeable. Yet, there are important differences between these concepts, the theoretical traditions that inform them as well as their political implications. The key difference between them – and the one mostly noted in the literature – lies in their understanding of care as either affect or work. While the care ethics literature foregrounds the practice and attitude of caring as imbued mostly with 'positive' affect, social reproduction feminists see care, above all, as work which reproduces labour power as well as life itself. A second important difference between these two traditions, which has not received much attention, pertains to their understanding of interdependence. For care ethics scholars, interdependence describes the human experience of interconnectedness; hence interdependence counters liberalism's independent autonomous individual, or the self-sufficient monad, who is considered the main unit of society. Social reproduction feminism, instead, looks at the concept mostly from the angle of the interdependence between production and reproduction, and thus it examines how individuals relate to each other on this basis.

Against this background, I have two main aims in this article. The first aim is to show that the limited debate between proponents of care and social reproduction feminism has been inadequate, leading to important oversimplifications. As somebody whose work has been strongly shaped by social reproduction feminism, I will focus here on some of the critiques made by care ethics scholars about social reproduction, which seem to me to be mostly misplaced. In so doing, I also contribute to theorizing dimensions of social reproduction feminism that have not been fully developed within this feminist tradition. More specifically, the under-theorized dimensions that I will flesh out include how social reproduction feminism understands the role of affect within care labour, as well as the importance of Marx's concept of the social relations of production. In a nutshell, I contend that a key distinction between social reproduction feminism and care ethics is not whether care is mainly work or mainly affect, but the type of affect that these feminist approaches valorize as part of caring. While the ethics of care operates with an ideal type of caring,

which is fundamentally positive affect, social reproduction feminism underscores the multiplicity and ambivalence of affects within the caring experience under capitalism.

My second aim is to unravel the abstract kernel within the seemingly concrete shell of the concept of caring within most care ethics literature. I contend that this feminist tradition is underpinned by an idealization of care as a moral good, which fundamentally abstracts caring from concrete social and economic relations, and thus operates as a fetish. To put this argument forward, I draw on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which maintains that capitalism leads to the illusion that commodities have a life of their own, eliding the actual people behind those commodities (i.e. the workers who made them). My contention is that something similar, albeit in reversed form, happens in the world of caring under capitalism: while we do see the real people involved in the caring relationship, we overlook the commodities behind those relationships. This is what I call the 'fetishization of care' that capitalism generates, which is deployed rather than challenged by the ethics of care when it emphasizes caring as primarily affect, or that which is in 'excess' of socially reproductive labour. Such a fetishization of care does in fact stem from the capitalist devaluation of caring activities as non-work, which is precisely what social reproduction feminism endeavours to explain. In other words, I claim that rather than contextualizing caring practices and the meaning of care within the concrete formation of capitalist social relations, care ethics postulates the caring relationship as a universal human experience of positive affect, ostensibly grounded in the ontological reality of interdependence between individuals. Such a postulate, however, effectively works as a fetish, which represents caring as an object of desire whose pure and idealized appearance hides relations of oppression and exploitation.

## Social reproduction feminism

Social reproduction feminism refers to a large body of Marxist and socialist feminist theorizing that focuses upon the nature and role of unwaged (mostly female) household work and its relationship to waged (mostly male) work outside the household (Bhattacharya et al., 2021). Analyses of women's unpaid work go back to at least the early 20th-century socialist feminists (Ferguson, 2020), but social reproduction theory has experienced renewed interest and significant growth in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

Albeit rooted in older debates on women's domestic work, contemporary social reproduction feminism stems from two more recent traditions. The first tradition's point of departure is Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Selma James's (1975) *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, which represents the key text for feminists who mobilized around the 'Wages for Housework' campaign in the 1970s. Overall, those drawing on this tradition argue that women's unwaged work in the household and/or community produces capitalist value because it is essential to the daily (re)production of the most important capitalist commodity, namely the capacity of workers to produce, or their labour power (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Fortunati, 2005; Mezzadri, 2019; Mezzadri et al., 2021). The second tradition primarily uses the work of Lise Vogel's (2014) *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* as its point of departure (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016; Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Rodríguez-Rocha, 2021).

Even though Vogel considers women's socially reproductive work within the household to be essential to capitalism, she – as well as the feminists who follow in her footsteps – does not regard it as value producing from a capitalist viewpoint. According to this Marxist feminist tradition, in other words, the commodity labour power is not governed by the same rules of production as other commodities (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2020; Smith, 1978; Varela, 2021).

While the question of whether reproductive labour in the household and/or community is, or is not, value producing is the main point of contention between these two traditions, they agree on the importance of centring an analysis of reproductive activities for a fuller understanding of capitalist production, and that such activities are to be understood primarily as work (Rodríguez-Rocha, 2021: 3). But what activities can be considered to be socially reproductive? And in what sense are these activities to be regarded as 'work'? In a widely cited article, Laslett and Brenner addressed the first question, proposing that social reproduction includes:

How food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the social organization of sexuality. Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of *work* – mental, manual, and emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation. And the organization of social reproduction refers to the varying institutions within which this *work* is performed, the varying strategies for accomplishing these tasks, and the varying ideologies that both shape and are shaped by them. (Laslett and Brenner, 1989: 382–383, emphasis mine)

The key point in the passage above is that all the activities involved in the reproduction, repair and replenishment of life are social reproduction, regardless of the location in which they take place and the presence/absence of a wage. As such, caring for children or older people, for instance, are crucial social reproductive practices, even as they do not exhaust the realm of what falls under social reproduction. Having established that social reproduction includes 'the care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation', as well as to reproduce labour power (Laslett and Brenner, 1989), what does it mean to consider these activities as work? Or to put it differently, what is captured specifically when we regard the unwaged or waged caring that reproduces and maintains life as work?

For Tithi Bhattacharya, social reproduction feminism conceives of work in the original sense in which Karl Marx meant it, namely as 'the first premise of all human history' (Bhattacharya, 2017). For Marx, the concept of labour writ large describes any practice that involves a metabolic exchange of humans with nature, an exchange which is planned and directed at satisfying needs or desires, and in which human beings form their subjectivity (Starosta, 2021). In the specific context of the capitalist mode of production, Marx distinguished between 'productive' labour as that which produces surplus value for the capitalist, and 'unproductive' labour as labour that is exchanged for a wage – as in the case of service labour – but does not produce surplus value for capital (Gough, 1972).

Social reproduction feminism emerged as an immanent critique of such an understanding of productive labour under capitalism as mainly waged, commodity-producing labour. According to social reproduction feminists, such an understanding led – wittingly or unwittingly – to the framing of women’s unwaged reproductive work in the household not only as unproductive but not even as work (Ferguson, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Social reproduction feminists, that is, criticize Marx for not having fully developed the insights that he himself had laid out in his definition of labour before and within capitalism, for he omitted the crucial labour performed within households as an essential yet unrecognized and unwaged component of the capitalist totality (Bhattacharya, 2017: 2).

By arguing that reproductive labour is equally important for capitalism as commodity-producing labour, social reproduction feminism, however, also recognizes its specificities. Whether waged or unwaged, the work that goes into caring for children, cleaning, preparing meals and maintaining a household is what re-produces that most unique commodity under capitalism: namely, labour power. Social reproduction feminism points to this unique role of reproductive labour in order to demonstrate its necessary albeit contradictory relationship with capitalism. The historical representation of reproductive activities, such as caring, as unproductive, unskilled and thus not proper work, social reproduction scholars argue, led to their monetary compensation being portrayed as unnecessary and has historically been at the core of women’s oppression under capitalism. At the same time, even in a waged form socially reproductive jobs have continued to be represented as ‘unproductive’ and ‘unskilled’, and thus reserved for ‘low-status’ workers such as working-class and/or racialized women. Indeed, historically, poor and migrant women were hired as servants, nannies and carers by middle-class and wealthy families that could afford to externalize social reproduction to others (Glenn, 2012; McDowell, 2015). These practices continue today in the context of the massive marketization of caring, cleaning and other reproductive tasks, which are outsourced to poorer and/or migrant women from the Global South (Farris, 2015; Marchetti, 2022; Parreñas, 2001; Plomien and Schwartz, 2023). Social reproduction feminism builds on this historical background to argue that, first, the ways in which social reproduction is organized in societies is not grounded in nature, but has been socially, culturally and historically manufactured. Secondly, they point to the fact that capitalist devaluation and stigmatization of socially reproductive activities only serve to hide their crucial role in order to better profit from them. According to social reproduction feminists, capitalists need the labouring capacity of workers to be replenished on a daily basis as well as prepared for the future (i.e. workers need to be born, to eat, rest, be clean and cared for as well as trained to be able to perform their work, day after day). However, capitalists are generally reluctant to collectively resource these reproductive activities as it would require their recognition through (higher) wages, employers providing additional services themselves (as in the case of workplace creches, canteens, free training, etc.) or corporate taxation.

In other words, social reproduction feminism demonstrates that the capitalist profit-making logic depends on the labour-making and life-making logic of social reproduction, but it tends to downgrade the latter to avoid paying them their dues (Bhattacharya et al.,

2021; Gago and Cavallero, 2023; Mezzadri and Majumder, 2020; Stevano et al., 2021). Ultimately, by pointing to the essential link between capitalist production and (women's) labour- and life-making activities, social reproduction feminism offers a powerful explanatory framework to make sense of the devaluation of the latter in capitalist profit-orientated societies. Furthermore, social reproduction feminism understands such a capitalist devaluation as one of the key drivers of gendered, racial and class forms of oppressions and exploitation to this day.

## The ethics of care

The ethics of care refers to the feminist philosophical tradition whose roots are to be found in the works of moral psychologists and philosophers of the early 1980s. Even though it has a more recent history than social reproduction feminism, the impact of the ethics of care upon different fields has been tremendous.<sup>3</sup>

Conceptually, the ethics of care draws on the work of developmental psychologist Carole Gilligan. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) argued that girls' responses to moral dilemmas in most experimental studies were different from those of boys because the former approached moral questions by emphasizing relationships and responsibility instead of abstract principles. This finding led Gilligan to conclude that girls were indeed expressing distinctly gendered ethical attitudes centred on caring. Gilligan's work was of great inspiration to feminist scholars such as Virginia Held and Nel Noddings who were working on alternative approaches to the individualist ethics that dominated moral philosophy. Held played a particularly important role in this context as she attempted to systematize this body of reflections in a book entirely devoted to clarifying the tenets of a new 'ethics of care'. In *The Ethics of Care*, Held (2005) used Gilligan's findings to highlight that the private domains of family and friendship were just as central and relevant to morality as the public domain. While dominant theories in moral philosophy centred on the abstract individual of the public sphere as the unit for ethical considerations, she argued that such theories missed out 'the moral issues that arise between interconnected persons in the contexts of family, friendship, and social groups' (Held, 2005: 13). Challenging the hegemony of individualist moral paradigms, Held thus developed a sophisticated ethics of care that centres on individuals as 'relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories' (Held, 2005: 13).

The ethics of care was thus born out of the fundamental attempt at understanding care as a 'gendered' attitude that takes shape and is nurtured in the private sphere. Such an ethics maintains that care as a moral value is opposed to the dominant liberal ethics based on the individual as independent and autonomous. In her words:

To the ethics of care, persons are not just imagined to be relational and interdependent. This is the way they are seen to actually be. They start out in need of vast amounts of actual caring labor and continue to need it at various times. Some persons need it continuously. The ethics of care appreciates that care is not only an empirical necessity. Moral values are embedded in practices of care. (Held, 2005: 8)

On these premises, Held maintained that an ethics of care would offer better moral grounds to organize caring societies for which the needs of individuals would be put first. According to this perspective, care is both the ontological foundation of human societies as it is embedded into the daily and practical organization of the species' needs, and a moral realm in which specific ethics are developed.

Similarly building on Gilligan's work but pushing its arguments into the political realm, Joan Tronto (2011) in the 1990s developed a comprehensive and sophisticated political theory of care, or what she later called a 'feminist democratic ethics of care'. The latter was an attempt both to acknowledge care as a political category in its own right and to identify the normative criteria that would derive from such an acknowledgement. Tronto's work has been instrumental not only in putting forward a new reflection on politics centred on care but also – and especially – in translating the ethics of care into a political-normative register. Tronto's intervention has been very influential on subsequent care ethicists, who began to include more explicitly political principles and considerations in their theorizing.

In one of the earliest and most renowned formulations, Fisher and Tronto defined care as:

a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40)

Based on this general framing, Tronto thus provided a detailed definition of care as a practice, a relational process and a strategic political goal. First, care is not an innate attitude but a practice that can and must be learned (Tronto, 1996: 143). Second, for Tronto care is also a complex process entailing several phases. These are:

*caring about*, that is, becoming aware of and paying attention to the need for caring; *caring for*, that is, assuming responsibility for some caring; *caregiving*, that is, the actual material meeting of the caring need; and *care-receiving*, that is, the response of the thing, person, group, and so forth, that received the caregiving, and the assessment of this response. (Tronto, 1996: 143)

Furthermore, each phase of the caring process is accompanied by a specific ethical attitude, which is attentiveness, responsibility and responsiveness. Accordingly, good care takes place when all four phases occur alongside their ethical components. Finally, care is a strategic political goal insofar as a focus on care enables us to redefine and redraw the boundaries between the public and the private sphere. While recognizing that care is highly contradictory, potentially conflictual as well as context/culture dependent, Tronto maintains that care is what can transform our unequal and individualist societies into 'caring democracies' (Tronto, 2013) and allow us to reconceive equality in terms of mutual interdependence (Tronto, 1996: 149).

As I stated at the outset of this section, the ethics of care has been incredibly generative in spite of its short history. Building in particular on the work of Tronto, but also

Sevenhuijsen (1998) – both of whom embedded the ethics of care within a paradigm of political equality – many scholars have continued to develop multiple aspects of the concept of care (Carter, 2025). While important differences have emerged, those who subscribe to the ethics of care writ large maintain three key dimensions. Firstly, they conceive of care as ‘exceeding’ labour because of the moral features embedded in any form of caring. Such features are simultaneously understood to be an almost natural consequence of the ‘reality’ of human interconnectedness, and learned and built through caring practices. Secondly, the ethics of care sees interdependence as the reality of the human condition and recognizes vulnerability as a human experience that can affect some more than others, continuously or at different stages of life (Williams, 2001). Finally, ethical care is a moral compass and thus a normative principle that should guide the public and political organization of our societies.

### A missed dialogue?

As the ‘canonical’ definitions above by Laslett and Brenner on the one hand and Tronto and Fischer on the other hand testify, social reproduction feminism and the ethics of care are grappling with the same ‘object’, i.e. the set of activities mostly (though not exclusively) undertaken by women that make, remake and repair life itself. And yet, these two feminist traditions, or more precisely the concepts of care and social reproduction that they centre, have rarely been discussed together. To my knowledge, there are only a few exceptions to this missed dialogue (Mahon and Robinson, 2011).

For instance, in her germinal work on the ethics of care, Virginia Held briefly addressed how care should not be ‘reduced’ to reproductive labour. In her words: ‘If one accepts Marx’s distinction between productive and reproductive labor, and then sees caring as reproductive labor [...] one misses the way caring, especially for children, can be transformative rather than merely reproductive and repetitious’ (Held, 2005: 32). Drawing on Ruddick’s definition of care as imbued with maternal values, Held maintains that care is above all a relationship that is in ‘excess’ of labour. ‘So we may want to reject a view that equates care entirely with the labor involved’ (Held, 2005: 33). Marxist-feminist sociologist Emma Dowling somewhat echoes Held’s view when she argues that care is:

not reducible to the labour of social reproduction. Using the term ‘care’ invokes the relational and affective, but also the ethical dimensions of looking after ourselves and others [...] Care is therefore *more* than the necessary labour of reproducing a healthy workforce. (Dowling, 2021b: 50)

Similarly, albeit more implicitly, migration scholar Nina Sahraoui maintains that while social reproduction feminism allows us to understand care as pertaining to economic equality/inequalities, the ethics of care foregrounds care as a problem of social and political justice (Sahraoui, 2019: 246).

By contrast, sociologists Eleonore Kofman and Rachel Rosen invite care scholars to include the insights of social reproduction feminism in their analyses of care. For

Kofman, the concept of social reproduction is more capacious than care, allowing us to engage in discussions on the interconnected activities undertaken (mostly by women) to reproduce life across different realms of waged/unwaged labour as well as transnationally. As she put it:

engaging with the concept of social reproduction enables us to place care work within a wider landscape of activities and sites and to connect supposedly disparate circuits of migration, in particular labor, family, and education, which are usually analyzed separately, but which are in fact interconnected. (Kofman, 2012: 144)

Sociologist of childhood Rachel Rosen similarly emphasizes social reproduction feminism as an essential corrective to approaches that understand care mainly as a set of fulfilling, intimate and loving activities, ‘as opposed to the dirty and repetitive labor involved in making lives’ (Rosen, 2019: 5). The risk in focusing on care as ethics for Rosen is that it disconnects the more emotional and fulfilling tasks involved in caring for others (reading bedtime stories, keeping company to a frail older person) from the more menial, or ‘dirty’ tasks (i.e. cooking, cleaning, feeding). Such a disconnect in turn begs the question of *who* is valorized when we foreground care as a loving relationship, and *who* is instead undervalued by virtue of their association with ‘dirty work’. Rosen’s answer, quoting Mignon Duffy, is straightforward: ‘A theoretical focus on [care as] nurturance privileges the experiences of white women and excludes large numbers of very-low-wage-workers’ (cited in Rosen, 2019: 6).

Finally, theories of ‘affective’ labour and ‘emotional’ labour seemingly stage a sort of dialogue between the political ethics of care and social reproduction feminism, although not openly engaging in a comparison between these two theoretical traditions. The concepts of affective and emotional labour, in effect, incorporate ‘affects’ and ‘emotions’ into their analyses of commodified care in the new service economy. In the early 1980s, Arlie Hochschild pioneered a tradition of studies on the role and nature of emotions in the performance of a range of jobs under neoliberal capitalism. Building on a groundbreaking study of flight attendants and other categories of service workers, Hochschild highlighted the ‘intimate’ demands placed on these workers whose main task is to make customers feel safe and well cared for. She thus defined *emotional labour* as ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (Hochschild, 1983: 7). In the early 2000s, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2000, 2004, 2009) introduced the notion of *affective labour* to argue that all forms of labour in contemporary capitalism reproduce social life and thus are part of biopolitical production. Through this concept, Hardt and Negri effectively maintained that capitalism had colonized all forms of labour and, in so doing, affects themselves had become reproductive labour. Such an argument ultimately meant that the Marxian (and classical economists’) distinction between productive, unproductive and reproductive labour was no longer tenable (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

By acknowledging the centrality of emotions in care work and by foregrounding the role of reproductive activities for capitalist ‘valorization’, the concepts of emotional and affective labour seemingly reach across both the ethics of care and social reproduction

feminism. However, I would argue that these concepts in fact fall short of addressing the central concerns of both traditions. On the one hand, concepts of emotional and affective labour do not meet the ethics of care's demand to acknowledge caring emotions as in 'excess' of work. By arguing that emotions in the current landscape of service jobs have been commodified, concepts of emotional and affective labour subsume affect under the rubric of work performance. Similarly, by disavowing the distinction between productive and reproductive labour, which is central to understanding the specificity of care work and other reproductive activities under capitalism, emotional and affective labour paradigms conflate activities that are essentially different and that – as social reproduction feminists maintain – must be recognized as such (on this, see also Oksala, 2016).

### **Care as affect, or care as labour?**

The question whether care is labour, or in 'excess' of labour, is the dividing line between the political ethics of care and social reproduction feminism, as I briefly reconstructed above. For the former, care is not merely work, insofar as the emotions that constitute the kernel of caring cannot be reduced to an 'economic' category. For the latter, caring activities in the context of capitalism are better understood as work insofar as, like any activity, they are acts of metabolic exchange with nature and the world that operate (directly or indirectly) to reproduce capitalist social relations. One could see, then, how approaches informed by the ethics of care would charge social reproduction feminism with economic reductionism (Arruzza, 2016), whereas social reproduction scholarship would criticize care ethics for 'naturalizing' abstractions (Gawel, 2023). Inevitably, these distinctions are also rooted in the different political traditions to which proponents of both camps identify, be they Marxist or other left-leaning positions.

Yet, while a focus on care as labour/not-only-labour does constitute the pivotal point of contention between the two feminist approaches, I argue that such a distinction is an oversimplification. What is left behind and unscrutinized when we fail to interrogate this distinction in more depth is the actual meaning of labour and the role that affects play particularly within the Marxist feminist tradition of social reproduction. Furthermore, an uncritical focus on labour that does not consider its meaning risks concealing the nature of affects themselves for both the ethics of care and social reproduction feminism.

As I discussed above, social reproduction feminism draws its concept of labour from the young Marx, who understood it as the active exchange that human beings carry out with nature to renew the conditions for their existence (Bhattacharya, 2017; Jaffe, 2020; Marx, [1844] 1992). By organizing and regulating their activities in a conscious exchange with the world that surrounds them, individuals express and develop their cognitive powers and build their subjectivity (Arruzza, 2014; Starosta, 2021). Labour for Marx is the intentional pursuit through which human beings satisfy their needs, which include affective emotions as much as objects, and which are modified historically alongside the changes in the material world in which humans operate (Sayers, 2007). While aiming to recover this fundamental insight of the young Marx in particular, social reproduction feminists also criticize Marx for having overlooked the labouring activities that

go into reproducing life and labour power. When social reproduction feminists then demand to recognize life-making activities as labour, I would argue that they do not mean to obfuscate or minimize their affective and emotional dimensions. Insofar as the Marxian definition of labour that is invoked in the work of Bhattacharya, Ferguson and others understands labour as the wilful interaction with the world through which humans build themselves as subjects, it is simply impossible to separate labour from an affective experience. To make this point even clearer, the intrinsically ‘emotional’ nature of labour was so central to Marx’s theorizing that he placed alienation, or the estrangement of the worker from the products of their labour, at the centre of human misery under capitalism (Dowling, 2021a, 2021b; Øversveen, 2022).

To foreground care as work, then, is not meant to take away from its emotional aspects, or to demote them. By insisting that the caring activities of looking after children, for instance, are essential labour for capitalism, social reproduction feminism is pointing out that these activities (whether waged or unwaged) are enmeshed in capitalist social relations that they unwittingly reproduce. Not only is putting a child to bed, feeding them and educating them the labour of reproducing the future generation of workers, but also the extent to which that child can be more or less well-fed, rested, loved and educated ultimately depends upon the time, means and abilities available to the carer in the context of the material, social and cultural constraints in which capitalist demands place them. The central distinction between the political ethics of care and social reproduction feminism, then, is not whether care is merely labour or merely affect, but the type of affect that these two traditions acknowledge as part of the caring experience.

### *The affects of care and the affects of social reproduction*

For the ethics of care, as noted above, the ‘excess’ that care is maintained to represent as opposed to simply labour amounts to love, attentiveness and a sense of responsibility, all qualities that are epitomized by the mother–child relationship. This feminist tradition, thus, fundamentally conceives of care as that activity and practice that brings together individuals through ‘positive’ affect. Virginia Held, for instance, makes it very clear that the attitude that one has towards care is crucial for the quality of the caring relationship. As she put it:

I suppose a strict utilitarian might say that if the child is fed and clothed and hugged, the intention with which these are done may be of no moral significance. But to me it is clear that in the wider moral scheme of things, though I cannot argue it here, it is significant. A world in which the motive of care is good will rather than ill will [...] is a better world. (Held, 2005: 32)

That is, a caregiver who provides care to a child or an elderly person without feeling a positive emotional bond to them cannot really be a good carer. Several scholars have pointed out that the framing of care as fulfilling intimate and emotional engagement as opposed to the ‘dirty and repetitive labor involved in making lives’ (Rosen, 2019)

disavows the asymmetries of power and the relations of inequality that characterize caring activities (Baraitser and Salisbury, 2020; Bowlby, 2012). Gender, care and migration scholars in particular have unravelled the abuse and imbalances that pervade the world of care workers across the world, a large number of whom are migrant and racialized women (Farris, 2015; IOM, 2024). Framing the uncommodified mother–child relation as the epitome of good care also disavows the negative feelings of discontent, isolation and exhaustion that mothers themselves may feel towards their children (Baraitser, 2008). The complexities of affects involved in care then are denied when caring is measured against standards of righteousness that are idealized and thus impossible to meet. Several scholars within the political ethics of care have noted the problems with identifying care with notions of virtuousness or authenticity. Selma Sevenhuijsen, for instance, maintained that the ethics of care stems from ‘a recognition of connection and dependence as part of human life and moral subjectivity without, on the other hand, reifying them as “natural”, or glorifying them as sources of moral goodness’ (Sevenhuijsen, 1998: 63). Others also clarify that relations of care cannot be assumed to be always good as they can be influenced by relations of inequality and power imbalances. These complications notwithstanding, this tradition is fundamentally underpinned by an ideal type of care as moral good (whether that moral good is intrinsic to care or achieved through practice is irrelevant here), which means that the task of care ethicists is to identify the conditions under which care can in fact operate as morally pure (Nguyen Minh et al., 2017; Robinson, 2018).

Social reproduction feminism, on the other hand, contends that the affects involved in caring for people are variable and inevitably regimented by capitalism, which dictates their nature, timing, quality and mode of expression, and whether they take place in waged or unwaged form. Sociologist Gutierrez-Rodriguez, for instance, examined the affects involved in the context of care and domestic labour performed at home in paid form and the very different meanings they assume for the employee and the employer. For the former, feelings such as love for the children they look after, affection for the elderly person they care for or sympathy for a good employer they might be lucky to have can go hand in hand with ‘disgust’, ‘unhappiness’ and ‘servility’. In her words, ‘affects are not free-floating energies [...] The expression and transmission of affects, occur in a space marked by historically produced, socially configured and culturally located power relations’ (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010: 132). For social reproduction feminism, therefore, the affects involved in care are not necessarily those of love and nurture because the conditions in which caring takes place are often conditions of exploitation, oppression and frustration. In the words of Silvia Federici:

in capitalist society reproductive work is not the free reproduction of ourselves or others according to our and their desires. To the extent that directly or indirectly it is exchanged for a wage, reproduction work is, at all points, subjected to the conditions imposed on it by the capitalist organization and relations of production. (Federici, 2009)

The murkiness of caring in a context of deep inequalities is what famously Katz refers to when she points out that ‘social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz, 2001: 711).

Ultimately, the ethics of care operates with an ideal type of caring as fundamentally positive affect; this typification enables it to produce normative claims for more caring societies, but in doing so the ethics of care struggles to describe power asymmetries in the caring experience, as well as the negative emotions that pervade the caring relationship both in waged and unwaged form. Social reproduction feminism, on the other hand, is underpinned by the fundamental Marxian insight that in capitalist societies relationships between people cannot really be abstracted from the very concrete material realities in which they take place, nor from the power imbalances between the individuals who are involved in the relationship.

### **Interdependence: Ontology vs social relations of production**

The idea of interdependence between individuals within the political ethics of care is perhaps even more important than the idea of genuine caring as equivalent to feelings of love, empathy and responsibility. The recognition of the human condition as one in which people ‘depend’ on each other, rather than one of independence and isolation, is in fact the fundamental assumption on which the ethics of care literature is based. Using Held’s words already quoted above: ‘To the ethics of care, persons are not just imagined to be relational and interdependent. This is the way they are seen to actually be’ (Held, 2005: 8). Tronto (1996: 150) reiterates the centrality of interdependence throughout her work, arguing that over the course of a human life everyone finds themselves ‘in different degrees of [...] interdependence’. Conceptually, then, the concept of interdependence is the ontological ground that distances the ethics of care from liberal ethics and theories based on the single individual as the fundamental unit of society. Yet, in spite of its centrality within the care literature, not only does the concept of interdependence appear to be unclear and under-theorized, but it is also haunted by the very premise from which it seeks to escape, namely that of the ‘independent’ subject as the cornerstone of liberal thought. In a recent article, Gordon and Rottenberg raise this point, arguing that:

Political scientists who engage the ethics of care and who argue for a political notion of care understand the subject as dependent and, importantly, as part of a wider social context; this subject, moreover, is always in relation to others. Nonetheless, in many crucial ways, the subject still exists as an abstraction before these relations (...) The starting point is precisely the dependent self, revealing that the liberal bifurcation between dependent and independent still haunts their descriptions of the human condition. (Gordon and Rottenberg, 2024: 329)

The crucial issue here that Gordon and Rottenberg seem to me to be raising is that the concept of interdependence in much of the political ethics of care tradition still assumes (wittingly or unwittingly) that interdependence takes place between (in)dependent individuals who are regarded as subjects before and beyond their interconnection with others.

I would also add that the ontological assumption of interdependence as the basic feature of the human condition still assumes, more or less explicitly, that interdependence as such equals to, or at least nourishes, an affective bond between people. The idealization

of interdependence as a positive affective experience, however, does not tell us much about the nature of concrete and socially situated relations of interdependence. Do individuals co-depend on each other in the same way? Or, to put differently, is the relation of interdependence one of equality or inequality? And what are the conditions under which those inequalities, if any, manifest themselves? In what ways do they influence the relation of interdependence itself?

Exponents of the disability movement have raised some of these questions when they have problematized the ethics of care's universalization of interdependence and vulnerability as a common human experience. According to Silvers (1995), such a universalization erases the important differences, for instance, between abled and disabled bodies. Additionally, scholars of disability point out the importance of the notion of 'independence' for disabled persons and the crucial asymmetries of power in the relationship between care givers and care receivers: in such a relationship, disabled people as those receiving care are at a disadvantage not only because they depend on carers but also because disabled bodies have been historically portrayed as defective and deficient, and thus they continue to be oppressed and marginalized (Silvers, 1995). The concept of interdependence, thus, returns us (wittingly or unwittingly) to the ideal type of care as the affirming emotional bond that seemingly springs from a relation of co-dependence between equals. In other words, in 'essentializing' the human experience of interconnect-edness as one of interdependence, the ethics of care risks neutralizing the concrete features of the relationship of interdependence itself and disavowing the concrete subjects involved.<sup>4</sup>

Within the framework of social reproduction feminism, the human reality of interdependence between people is framed and analysed through the social positions that they occupy and which place them within the connective chain of production and reproduction. In my view, political theorist Frances Fox Piven offers a fitting definition of interdependence for social reproduction feminism, even though she did not belong to, nor discuss, the latter tradition. In her words:

All societies organize social life through networks of specialized and interdependent activities, and the more complex the society, the more elaborate these interdependent relations. Networks of cooperation and interdependence inevitably give rise to contention, to conflict, as people bound together by social life try to use each other to further their often distinctive interests and outlooks. And the networks of interdependence that bind people together also generate widespread power capacities to act on these distinctive interests and outlooks. [...] industrial capitalists depend on workers, the prince depends in some measure on the urban crowd, merchants depend on customers, husbands depend on wives, masters depend on slaves, landlords depend on tenants, and governing elites in the modern state depend on the acquiescence if not the approval of enfranchised publics. (Fox Piven, 2008: 20)

As made clear in the passage above, conceptions that understand people's interdependence from the interplay of the complex organization of capitalist societies – rather than from axiomatic assumptions about the innate needs and functioning of the human species – focus not so much on individuals but rather on the social relations

that precede, inform and surround them and upon which individuals themselves act in order to change those relations. I thus contend that here social reproduction feminism, like Fox Piven's theory, should draw its conception of interdependency from Marx's important notion of the social relations of production.

In the context of his discussion on the 'fetishism of commodities' in *Capital Volume 1*, Marx makes the somewhat provocative (and paradoxical) claim that the dominance of the commodity form, which is the cornerstone of the capitalist mode of production, gives rise to a 'peculiar inversion of relationality' (Floyd, 2018: 419). It is an inverted relationality in the sense that in the context of the commodity exchange, relations between people actually appear as if they were relations between objects. This occurs because capitalism makes us believe that the value of a commodity, or its price, is intrinsic to the commodity itself, rather than being the expression of the human labour that made that commodity. As Marx writes:

the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things [...]. T]he definite social relation between men themselves [...] assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. (Marx, 1976: 164–165)

In other words, Marx maintained that in a complex system with such an elaborate division of labour as capitalism has, people experience the social nature of their labours through the exchange of their products. To make these considerations clearer, we could use the example of boycott and divest movements that embargo certain companies' products in protest against their treatment of workers. When boycott campaigners ask people not to buy the commodities produced by a certain brand, they are de facto unravelling the social relation that links them as consumers to the workers as producers of those commodities. Boycotters, that is, are showing us the connection that places them in a relationship of interdependence with those workers through their consumption of the products of the workers' social labour, even though they never met and might never meet those actual workers.

While interdependence is thus pivotal to both feminist traditions, the ethics of care and social reproduction feminism understand it very differently. The former sees interdependence as the necessary and universal experience of interaction between humans who rely on each other to satisfy basic needs and who in doing so develop feelings of bonding and caring. The latter analyses interdependence not so much as a universal and immutable species experience – although it does certainly recognize that human beings as social beings are interdependent – but as a form of interconnection that is heavily influenced by the specific material circumstances in which people find themselves. In the context of capitalism, the nature of interdependence is mediated by the place that people occupy within social relations of production and reproduction and the social hierarchies that result from such relations. Social reproduction feminism thus explicates how for many, and perhaps most, people interdependence might not take the form only of mutual recognition and attentiveness but also – and sometimes simultaneously – the form of antagonism.

## On care fetishism

Marx's concept of commodity fetishism – as I outlined it in the section above – can help us throw into sharp relief not only the key difference between the understanding of interdependence by the ethics of care and social reproduction feminism but also the reasons for such a difference.

Marx developed his concept of commodity fetishism to explain the very unique type of sociality that takes place under capitalism; it is a form of sociality in which the relations between people do not appear 'as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx, 1976: 165–166, emphasis mine). In other words, Marx believed that the world of commodities deceives us into thinking that such commodities have a life of their own – just like fetishes – and into forgetting the real individuals who make them with their labour. On the other hand, commodities dominate people's lives to such an extent that people relate to each other through those commodities as buyers, sellers or producers. When Marx described the peculiar inversion of relationality – or 'asocial sociality' as Lohoff (2014) called it – induced by the world of commodities, what he had in mind was a world increasingly dominated by manufacture and productive labour within industrial factories. However, I would argue that something very similar, albeit inverted in type, happens to the world of caring and socially reproductive labour under capitalism: while in the world of commodities we see the 'objects' but not the real people behind them, in the world of caring we see the 'people' but not the commodities behind them.

The appearance of care as loving nurture – which is the ideal type on which the ethics of care builds its theoretical and normative claims – lures us into thinking that in a caring relationship individuals relate to each other primarily through their innate emotions, which do not seem to have much to do with capitalist commodities. As I argued throughout this article, those feelings of love and affection can be very real and important for the people involved in the relation, but the 'realness' of those feelings does not cancel out the capitalist constraints behind the scenes. Those constraints are what complicates those feelings in important ways. To illustrate this point, one could think of the ways in which care homes, for instance, represent the relationship between care givers and care receivers. Their advertising strategy is to show us images of tender glances and reassuring hands caressing between the persons giving and receiving care; this is because those images interpellate our expectation that care is tantamount to affection and nurture. Care homes' advertising strategy here illustrates what scholars call 'carewashing', namely the 'contemporary practices in which companies try to cleanse themselves from the connotations of corporate exploitation, and instead cathect their brand to a mood, an affect, an ethos, an idea of care' (Chatzidakis and Littler, 2022: 269).

The example of carewashing brings into play the fetish of care, or the idealization of care as selfless attention, which in fact conceals the capitalist stakes that lurk in the background. It could be objected that in the case of the salaried carer in a nursing home (or in the case of a corporate company that carewashes its exploitative practices), it is clearer to see how the wage form mediates the relation with a frail patient. In this example, that is, we can more easily recognize that the carer cares 'for the money', though the expectation

remains that they develop a bond with the people they care for. More difficult is instead to appreciate the mediation of capitalist social relations in the case of the uncommodified relation between a parent and a child. We cannot intuitively see how capitalism can make inroads into that relation because the latter epitomizes the quintessential bond between humans, one which we are inclined to think remains unspoiled by commodities. However, as I suggested earlier, the time and zeal that a parent might have to nurture that bond is very much dependent upon, among other things, their working hours, commuting time and the room their wage gives them to afford toys for their children. Similarly, the type of interdependent relation between an elderly and frail parent and an adult child who takes care of them might be marked by feelings of frustration and resentment, particularly if the adult child is compelled to take care of their parent because the family is unable to afford a nursing home or a full-time waged carer.

Social reproduction feminism lifts the veil off the image of the idyllic and unencumbered interdependence between loving subjects by reminding us that the tempo of capitalist production dictates the time, energy and also the very forms that people have available for caring, as well as our understanding of care itself. By focusing on caring as a form of labour that is influenced by, and necessary for, the reproduction of capitalist social relations, social reproduction feminism thus enables us to see how the experience of care and interdependence can differ so much between people, since it is largely contingent – among other things – on their social position in the continuum of production and reproduction. Importantly, social reproduction feminism also helps explain why we can be *mised* to assume that capitalism has no bearing on caring relations. As it departs from a critique of the capitalist representation of care as a ‘feminine’ vocation rather than a social and economic activity, social reproduction feminism demonstrates that caring is instead an essential component of the capitalist totality, which is shaped by capitalism as well as serving to reproduce it.

However, I would like to clarify that this does not mean that caring has been completely commodified and that uncommodified care no longer exists. On the contrary, social reproduction feminism insists that the labour which goes into replenishing life is different from productive labour precisely because it is life-making labour. As life making, it is also the life-affirming labour which allows us to see glimpses of alternative ways of organizing our social lives beyond the constraints of profit-making rationalities.<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps the site where social reproduction feminism and the ethics care can find a space for allyship, namely in the common pursuit of a political project that puts forward care as the practice of affirming life against the necropolitical drive of capitalism: a ‘practice of presence’ (Wilson-Gilmore, 2024). Such a political project does not need to rely on a fetish of care; the latter is based on a vision of the human which is fundamentally not social (Gordon and Rottenberg, 2024), but instead ethical, thereby setting care off as a normative criterion to which politics can never measure up. Instead, we need to acknowledge the capitalist context in which care operates as socially reproductive labour precisely in order both to experiment with everyday caring practices that are radically different (Hakim et al., 2020) and to overthrow the exploitative social infrastructure that continues to pose a formidable limit to our everyday experimentation.

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## Notes

1. The concept of social reproduction is now employed to analyse a variety of issues: from trans liberation (Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021; Raha, 2021) to sexuality and queer studies (Andrucki, 2021; Sears, 2016), contemporary racial oppression (Briggs, 2017), environmental justice (Di Chiro, 2008), education (Backer and Cairns, 2021), the financialization of infrastructures (Farris et al., 2024) and the Palestinian question (Bhattacharya, 2024; Taha, 2025).
2. The waged work of servants, for instance, was classed as unproductive but was also regarded by Marx's contemporaries and the labour movement of the time as a somewhat parasitic, counter-revolutionary force. As Laura Schwartz put it, 'although from a purely theoretical perspective Marx's distinction between productive and unproductive labour was an analytical category rather than a value judgement, a more historicized reading highlights the politically charged nature of this formulation. Marx's rhetorical flourishes implied some kind of alliance or shared interest between the capitalist class and the servant class. Servants within modern capitalism were not located in opposition or antagonism to the bourgeoisie but were its parasites, its cringing "lickspittles"' (Schwartz, 2019: 297).
3. We see its influence in sociology and social policy (Moore and Gagné, 2022; Williams, 2001), welfare studies (Dean, 2004), media studies (Mathewson, 2022), environmental studies (Gardiner and Thompson, 2019), international relations (Robinson, 2018) and many more. Furthermore, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed what the Care Collective termed a 'discursive explosion' of care, with the latter becoming the keyword of our time (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).
4. In this context, I would like to note that a focus on the constraining powers of capitalist relations enables social reproduction feminism's conception of interdependence to escape the pitfalls of ableism. This is because – as Jaffe (2024) argues – social reproduction feminism does not moralize, nor idealize the work of caring, educating or cleaning that goes into reproducing life and the commodity labour power. Social reproduction feminism, Jaffe maintains, invites us to focus on the ways that 'social dynamics organize the chances that powers can be developed and actualized', and refuses to accept 'existing determinations of what is considered an ability, even when such determinations claim or appear to be "natural"' (Jaffe, 2024).

5. Therefore, I find myself in disagreement with the idea that all aspects of life have been colonized, or ‘formally subsumed’ by capitalism, as proponents of ‘affective labour’ would argue. While a full justification of my disagreement goes well beyond the scope of this article, here I would simply state that I follow Joanna Oksala in arguing that even though capitalist commodification is the background to our caring practices in many, encompassing ways, it is crucial to resist and fight against such a commodification. In other words, we need to challenge the commodification of care every step of the way not as ‘a matter of defending private authenticity against social reification’ but rather as an attempt to shape our caring practices and to work ‘through freer and less exploitative social relations’ (Oksala, 2016: 296).

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