

On the question of cheap care: Regarding *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* by Raj Patel and Jason W Moore

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Abstract

One of the most engaging claims of Patel and Moore's book is that abstract ideas have played a powerful role legitimating the exploitation of swathes of humanity, through distinguishing ontologically and epistemologically between nature and society. As most women, and indigenous people, were defined as part of nature, their labours and lives, including their care labour, were deemed to be part of nature and thereby legitimately exploitable. The authors claim that the cheapening of care arose from the separation of spheres between care work and paid work, between home and the economy, arising from the development of enclosures and the demise of the commons. What the book does not address, however, is how the exploitation of women's domestic and care labour was not only beneficial to capitalism: men of all classes were and are beneficiaries of women's unpaid care labour. The authors also suggest that the primary purpose of caring is to reproduce people for capitalism. But caring is not undertaken simply at the behest of capitalism. Nurturing and caring for others are defining features of humanity given the lengthy dependency of humans at birth and at times of vulnerability. The logic of care is very different to market logic.

Keywords

Care, capitalism, patriarchy, gender, exploitation

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Cheapening things: The role of ideas in framing care as natural to women

In *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, Patel and Moore trace the exploitative character of capitalism, demonstrating its close alignment throughout history with the project of colonisation. Care is framed as a profitable good within the capitalist, patriarchal project. While the commercial dividend that drove colonisation and exploitation, including the exploitation of care work, is shown to be paramount, the role that ideas played in both framing and legitimating the cheapening of things was also crucial.

One of the most engaging claims of the book is that abstract ideas have played a powerful role in enabling and legitimating exploitation globally through distinguishing ontologically and epistemologically between nature and society. Drawing on historical evidence from the 16th century onwards, the authors demonstrate how, what became defined as *nature* was deemed to be exploitable and open to domination. The social binaries of mind–body and nature–society emanating from the time of René Descartes, and the claims of influential scientists, such as Francis Bacon that the purpose of science was to dominate nature, though purporting to be abstract concepts, were ontological statements about *what is*, and epistemological statements about *what we know* and *how we should get to know* the world (pp. 45–55). Once ontological distinctions were simplified in binary terms between what was fully human and what was not, what was there for man’s (*sic*) use and service, it was morally justifiable to exploit those things that were natural or non-human.

To the European coloniser, the world was divided between human, thinking beings and non-human, extended things: indigenous peoples, most women, slaves, and colonised people were reclassified as nature rather than society. As Frantz Fanon (1967[1961]: 32) observed over 50 years ago, these hierarchical binaries led to ‘natives’ being defined as ‘a sort of quintessential evil’ that had to be eradicated. Defined as less than human, they became things to be used by powerful men for their own ends. The two laws of capitalist ecology, one distinguishing between man and nature, and the other classifying nature as *a thing* to be dominated and controlled by man, provided moral justification for the exploitation of swathes of humanity and the destruction of much natural life.

To justify making care cheap in the patriarchal capitalist calculus, Patel and Moore note that it had first to be defined as worthless, part of nature rather than society. This was achieved through the equation of care labour with femininity and womanhood. As women were exploitable things, then by default their caring ‘nature’ was exploitable. Care is not defined as productive work in this calculus; it is a given entity. Like water, trees and clean air, care is defined as freely available from the *nature* of women. It does not require effort to produce it; it is just there and presents itself to be exploited and used.

Gender relations and capitalism

While the book is a welcome contribution to the debate regarding the colonial basis of capitalism, and is especially helpful in exploring how gender, care work, colonialism and capitalism are deeply interconnected in a reinforcing exploitative system, the authors do not engage with the vast literature on care in feminist, political and sociological scholarship. They make some sweeping generalisations about the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism that are never fully explored. If patriarchy ‘...is not a mere by-product of capitalism’s ecology...’ but ‘...fundamental to it.’ (p. 31), this begs the question as to how and why women have been exploited historically prior to capitalism. As the ground-breaking research by Gerda Lerner (1986: 212–229) demonstrated, while male dominance over women is not natural or biological, patriarchy, as a social system of norms, values, customs and roles preceded capitalism by a few thousand years. The historic subordination of women as a social group originated in the shift from a matrilineal/matrilocal (mother-right) social structure to one that was patrilineal/patrilocal (father-right). And while women were again domesticated and subordinated much later in history arising from agricultural enclosures and the divisions that ensued between unpaid and paid labour (as the book suggests), their original subordination was not generated in capitalism. Women were used as a form of family currency in marriage arrangements; they were frequently offered as a peace offering, or to create alliances, between warring tribes, initially with consent, but later without consent. While men were often killed after conquests, women were taken as slaves for reproduction and sexual work. Their sexual services were part of their labour although their children were the property of their masters. The ‘...enslavement of women combining both racism and sexism preceded the formation of classes and class oppression’ (Lerner, 1986: 213). While patriarchy is facilitative of capitalism, as are other hierarchies, including racism, it did not originate within it. The ending of capitalism would not necessarily bring an end to patriarchal care relations within classes.

Care and gender

The authors suggest that the cheapening of care arose from the separation of spheres between care work and paid work, between home and the economy, arising from the development of enclosures and the demise of the commons. They outline the well-known Marxist–feminist argument that the onset of industrialised capitalism led to a spatial differentiation between places of home and employment: women, as the presumed ‘natural carers’, were forced out of employment, segregated and confined to types of work that were not marketable, thereby becoming the unpaid reproducers of wage workers of both the current and future generations. They observe that the devaluation of care work as a private, unpaid ‘natural activity’ of women was also conterminously endorsed by major world religions,

including various strands of Christianity, all of which are patriarchal in their institutional formation.

The claim that capitalism benefits greatly from cheap, mostly female, care labour within and without the family has been well rehearsed and well documented by feminist scholars for many years (Federici, 2012; Finch and Groves, 1983; Fineman, 1995; Folbre, 1994; Fraser, 2016; Hartmann, 1981; Hochschild, 1997). However, the exploitation of women's domestic and care labour did not only benefit capitalism, as *men of all classes* were and are beneficiaries of women's unpaid care labour (Delphy and Leonard, 1992).

The unhappy marriage between Marxism and Feminism (Hartmann, 1981) arises precisely from this contradiction, a subject that is not addressed in this book. While the ideological binaries that colonisers promulgated, distinguishing ontologically between man and nature, undoubtedly played a role in subordinating and cheapening care, making care an exploitable *thing*, like the women who did it, generated a material patriarchal dividend for all classes of men (Connell, 1995: 67–86). It is women's unwaged care labour that enabled men to take public power (be it in politics, trade unions, sport, academia, business or the arts), a power they could and did use, relative to their class position, to domesticate and control women (Badgett and Folbre, 1999; Folbre, 2012).

The authors do not analyse the family as a social system, yet there is a family economy within and through which household goods and services (cooked food, clean clothing, washing, family organisation, etc.) are produced (Folbre, 1994). The relations of production, consumption and the transmission of goods within households are discrete social processes. They operate by different rules of exchange from market production, being differentiated by age, gender and marital status in ways that are quite unique given the structure of nuclear families (Delphy and Leonard, 1992). Without recognising the unique and highly unequal gendered dynamics of household economies, and the materialist gains that ensue for men of all classes from these, there is misrecognition of the interests of men, *qua men*, in upholding a capitalist system from which they are net beneficiaries, relative to women of their class.

Care as social reproduction?

Patel and Moore define care in social reproductive terms. While they rightly equate care with the work of nurturing, raising and making human communities, this work is defined as if it were a burden, its primary purpose being to produce workers for the capitalist economy. And they claim care work is unpaid because paying for reproductive care work would make capitalism unsustainable: wage labour would simply be too expensive if workers were paid *both* for the goods or services they produce, and for the time and work it takes to reproduce themselves for the capitalist economy (p. 116).

While it is true that care work is, like all work, both burdensome and pleasurable, and is vital for social reproduction, caring is not undertaken simply at the

behest of capitalism. As the authors themselves observe, the ‘work of cooking, teaching, nurturing, healing, organizing and sacralizing predates capitalism’ (p. 114); the survival of the human species depended on it. The form that care takes under capitalism may be unique, but it is not driven by capitalism per se. Nurturing and caring for others are defining features of humanity; without care people would not survive given the high dependency of humans at birth and at times of vulnerability (Kittay, 1999). Moreover, care is irreducible, as the logic of care is very different to market logic: it is a process rather than a transaction; it has no clear boundaries and is based on what people need, not on what the market can offer or what pays a dividend in financial terms (Mol, 2008). Care produces much that capitalism does not need or want.

Patel and Moore deploy the word ‘care’ as a generic noun, to denote ‘reproductive labour’ which they treat as a singular and commodifiable entity. Because they do not distinguish between the different *forms of* care involved in nurturing and producing human communities, the dimensions of care that can be commodified, and those that cannot, are not disaggregated. Yet, the care that can be provided as a paid service is separate from the non-transferable and inalienable work of love labouring, and from informal care, and solidarity (Lynch, 2007; Lynch et al., 2009; Cantillon and Lynch, 2017; Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2018). The love labour that produces a sense of support, solidarity and well-being in others is voluntarily given; it is relationally specific, and chosen to some degree, and because of this it is inalienable and non-commodifiable. The relational engagement involved in loving someone intimately cannot be assigned to another by a commercial or even a voluntary arrangement without undermining the premise of mutuality that is at the heart of intimacy (Strazdins and Broom, 2004). There is an internal break in the logic of affective relations that defies and challenges the logic of capitalism (Mol, 2008; Oksala, 2016).

People do love and care work regardless of capitalism’s requirements as they may need it, want it, enjoy it or are compelled by other cultural, moral and political logics to undertake it (Lynch et al., 2009; Crean, 2018); care and love exist because the ‘... quality of being *needy*¹ is shared equally by all humans’ (Tronto, 2013: 29). Even if people are relatively independent at times in their lives, interdependency and dependency is endemic to the human condition.

Patel and Moore claim that ‘To ask for capitalism to pay for care is to call for an end to capitalism’ (p. 135) and that ‘... to imagine a world of justice in care work is to imagine a world after capitalism’ (p. 137). This may or may not be right and only empirical research and experience can prove or disprove these theses. However, what is true is that to have social justice in care relations there needs to be an end to patriarchal relations (Bubeck, 1995). Capitalism can and does survive not only by cheapening care but also by ignoring its very existence, as the lack of a statutory entitlement to maternity leave in the US (Zagorsky, 2017),² and the organisation of wage labour in China demonstrate (Du and Dong, 2013; Qiao et al., 2015). Care (and especially love) can be treated as so peripheral that there is no formal arrangement put in place to undertake it; women and men can and are drawn into

the market economy out of economic necessity regardless of how vulnerable people, including children and vulnerable adults, are cared for. While this leads to internal contradictions and tensions within capitalism (Fraser, 2016), whether the tension between care needs and market demands will precipitate the demise of capitalism is an open question, as cultural and political contexts influence the resolution of these conflicts. Capitalism can and does pay for basic care through taxation, as is evident in state investment in child care and elder care in the Nordic capitalist states in Europe in particular, albeit at declining rates.

Concluding remarks

By not distinguishing analytically between the different forms of care, and particularly not identifying the forms of care that are non-substitutable, the authors underestimate the complexity and multidimensionality of the care world. To reduce all care labour to economically useful reproductive work for capitalism is to deploy the logic of capitalism to the evaluation of care. Yet, as noted above, the internal values and logics of love and care are distinct from the logic and values of capitalism, even when compromised by them (Bryson, 2013; Wærness, 1984).

Given that most books on capitalism, especially those written by men, rarely mention care as an exploitable gendered resource within the political economy of capitalism, this book represents a significant breakthrough in this respect. Even though we contest some of the book's conclusions about care, gender and its relationship to capitalism, by making care an issue of social justice, this book has broken new ground. It has signalled clearly that social injustices are deeply intersecting, and that to fully understand the dynamics of capitalism and colonialism, the exploitation of *both* women and care must be part of the analysis.

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Notes

1. Emphasis in the original.
2. The United States is one of the few countries that does not give all women a right to maternity leave after childbirth. A 2007 analysis found that out of 173 countries, only four lacked paid maternity leave: Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland and the United States. The same study found that 98 countries require working women to receive at least 14 weeks of paid time off when a child is born. In the US, the Department of Labor estimates that only 12% of private sector workers have access to paid family leave through their employer. Zagorsky (2017: 460).

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