

# Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism

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We hear a lot of talk today about “the crisis of care.”<sup>1</sup> Often linked to such phrases as “time poverty,” “family/work balance,” and “social depletion,”<sup>2</sup> this expression refers to the pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities: the capacities available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally. Historically, this work of “social reproduction” has been cast as women’s work, although men have always done some of it too. Comprising both affective and material labor and often performed without pay, it is indispensable to society. Without it there could be no culture, no economy, no political organization. No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long. Today, however, a new form of *capitalist* society is doing just that. The result, as I shall explain, is a major crisis—not simply of care, but of social reproduction in this broader sense.

I understand this crisis as one strand of a general crisis that also encompasses other strands—economic, ecological, and political, all of which intersect with and exacerbate one another. The social reproduction strand forms an important dimension of this general crisis, but it is often neglected in current discussions, which focus chiefly on the economic or ecological strands. This “critical separatism” is problematic. The social strand is so central to the broader crisis that none of the others can be properly understood in abstraction from it. However, the converse is also true. The crisis of social reproduction is not freestanding and cannot be adequately grasped on its own.

How, then, should it be understood? My claim is that what some call “the crisis of care” is best interpreted as a more or less acute expression

of the *social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism*. This formulation suggests two ideas. First, the present strains on care are not accidental but have deep systemic roots in the structure of our social order, which I characterize here as financialized capitalism. Nevertheless, and this is the second point, the present crisis of social reproduction indicates something rotten not only in capitalism's current, financialized form but in capitalist society per se.

These are the theses I shall elaborate here. My claim, to begin with the last point, is that *every* form of capitalist society harbors a deep-seated *social-reproductive* “crisis tendency” or “contradiction.” On the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies. This “social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism” lies at the root, I claim, of our so-called crisis of care. Although inherent in capitalism as such, it assumes a different and distinctive guise in every historically specific form of capitalist society—for example, in the liberal, competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century, the state-managed capitalism of the postwar era, and the financialized neoliberal capitalism of our time. The care deficits we experience today are the form this contradiction takes in that third, most recent phase of capitalist development.

To develop this thesis, I first propose an account of the social contradiction of capitalism *as such*, without reference to any specific historical form. Second, I shall sketch an account of the unfolding of this contradiction in the two earlier phases of capitalist development I just mentioned. Finally, I shall propose a reading of today's so-called “care deficits” as expressions of capitalism's social contradiction in its current, financialized phase.

#### SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM “AS SUCH”

Most analysts of the contemporary crisis focus on contradictions internal to the capitalist economy. At its heart, they claim, lies a built-in tendency to self-destabilization, which expresses itself periodically in economic crises. This view is right, as far as it goes, but it fails to provide a full picture of capitalism's inherent crisis tendencies. Adopting an economic perspective, it understands capitalism too narrowly, as an economic system *simpliciter*. In contrast, I shall assume an expanded

understanding of capitalism, encompassing both its official economy and the latter's "noneconomic" background conditions.<sup>3</sup> Such a view permits us to conceptualize and to criticize capitalism's full range of crisis tendencies, including those centered on social reproduction.

My argument is that capitalism's economic subsystem depends on social-reproductive activities external to it, which form one of its background conditions of possibility. Other background conditions include the governance functions performed by public powers and the availability of nature as a source of "productive inputs" and a "sink" for production's waste.<sup>4</sup> Here, however, I will focus on the way that the capitalist economy relies on—one might say, free-rides on—activities of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free. Various called *care*, *affective labor*, or *subjectivation*, this activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move. The work of birthing and socializing the young is central to this process, as is caring for the old, maintaining households and family members, building communities, and sustaining the shared meanings, affective dispositions, and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation. In capitalist societies, much, though not all, of this activity goes on outside the market—in households, neighborhoods, civil-society associations, informal networks, and public institutions such as schools; relatively little of it takes the form of wage labor. Unwaged social reproductive activity is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value, and the functioning of capitalism as such. None of those things could exist in the absence of housework, child-raising, schooling, affective care, and a host of other activities that serve to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings. Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production in a capitalist society.<sup>5</sup>

Since at least the industrial era, however, capitalist societies have separated the work of social reproduction from that of economic production. Associating the first with women and the second with men, they have remunerated "reproductive" activities in the coin of "love" and "virtue," while compensating "productive work" in that of money. In this way, capitalist societies created an institutional basis for new, modern

forms of women's subordination. Splitting off reproductive labor from the larger universe of human activities, in which women's work previously held a recognized place, they relegated it to a newly institutionalized "domestic sphere," where its social importance was obscured. In this new world, where money became a primary medium of power, the fact of this work being unpaid sealed the matter: those who do it are structurally subordinate to those who earn cash wages, even as their work supplies a necessary precondition for wage labor—and even as it also becomes saturated with and mystified by new, domestic ideals of femininity.

In general, then, capitalist societies separate social reproduction from economic production, associating the first with women and obscuring its importance and value. Paradoxically, however, they make their official economies dependent on the very same processes of social reproduction whose value they disavow. This peculiar relation of separation-*cum*-dependence-*cum*-disavowal is a built-in source of potential instability. Capitalist economic production is not self-sustaining, but relies on social reproduction. However, its drive to unlimited accumulation threatens to destabilize the very reproductive processes and capacities that capital—and the rest of us—need. The effect over time, as we shall see, can be to jeopardize the necessary social conditions of the capitalist economy.

Here, in effect, is a "social contradiction" inherent in the deep structure of capitalist society. Like the economic contradiction(s) that Marxists have stressed, this one, too, grounds a crisis tendency. In this case, however, the contradiction is not located inside the capitalist economy but at the border that simultaneously separates and connects production and reproduction. Neither intra-economic nor intra-domestic, it is a contradiction *between* those two constitutive elements of capitalist society.

Often, of course, this contradiction is muted, and the associated crisis tendency remains obscured. It becomes acute, however, when capital's drive to expanded accumulation becomes unmoored from its social bases and turns against them. In that case, the logic of economic production overrides that of social reproduction, destabilizing the very social processes on which capital depends—compromising the social capacities, both domestic and public, that are needed to sustain accumulation over the long term. Destroying its own conditions of possibility, capital's accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail.

## HISTORICAL REGIMES OF REPRODUCTION-CUM-PRODUCTION

This is the general social-crisis tendency of capitalism as such. However, capitalist society does not exist “as such,” but only in historically specific forms or regimes of accumulation. In fact, the capitalist organization of social reproduction has undergone major historical shifts—often as a result of political contestation. Especially in periods of crisis, social actors struggle over the boundaries delimiting economy from society, production from reproduction, and work from family—and sometimes succeed in redrawing them. Such *boundary struggles*, as I have called them, are as central to capitalist societies as the class struggles analyzed by Marx.<sup>6</sup> The shifts they produce mark epochal transformations. If we adopt a perspective that foregrounds these shifts, we can distinguish (at least) three regimes of social reproduction-*cum*-economic production in capitalism’s history.

The first is the nineteenth-century regime of liberal competitive capitalism. Combining industrial exploitation in the European core with colonial expropriation in the periphery, this regime tended to leave workers to reproduce themselves “autonomously,” outside the circuits of monetized value, as states looked on from the sidelines. But it also created a new bourgeois imaginary of domesticity. Casting social reproduction as the province of women within the private family, this regime elaborated the ideal of “separate spheres” even as it deprived most people of the conditions needed to realize it.

The second regime is the state-managed capitalism of the twentieth century. Premised on large-scale industrial production and domestic consumerism in the core, underpinned by ongoing colonial and postcolonial expropriation in the periphery, this regime internalized social reproduction through state and corporate provision of social welfare. Modifying the Victorian model of separate spheres, it promoted the seemingly more modern ideal of “the family wage”—even though, once again, relatively few families were permitted to achieve it.

The third regime is the globalizing financialized capitalism of the present era. This regime has relocated manufacturing to low-wage regions, recruited women into the paid workforce, and promoted state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare. Externalizing care work onto families and communities, it has simultaneously diminished their capacity to perform it. The result, amid rising inequality, is a dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay

for it, privatized for those who cannot—all glossed by the even more modern ideal of the “two-earner family.”

In each regime, therefore, the social reproductive conditions for capitalist production have assumed a different institutional form and embodied a different normative order: first “separate spheres,” then “the family wage,” now the “two-earner family.” In each case, too, the social contradiction of capitalist society has assumed a different guise and found expression in a different set of crisis phenomena. In each regime, finally, capitalism’s social contradiction has incited different forms of social struggle—class struggles, to be sure, but also boundary struggles, both of which were entwined not only with one another but also with other struggles aimed at emancipating women, slaves, and colonized peoples.

#### SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS OF LIBERAL CAPITALISM

Consider, first, the liberal competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century. In this era, the imperatives of production and reproduction appeared to stand in direct contradiction to each other. Certainly that was the case in the early manufacturing centers of the capitalist core, where industrialists dragooned women and children into factories and mines, eager for their cheap labor and reputed docility. Paid a pittance and working long hours in unhealthy conditions, these workers became icons of capital’s disregard for the social relations and social capacities that underpinned its productivity.<sup>7</sup> The result was a crisis on at least two levels: a crisis of social reproduction among the poor and working classes, whose capacities for sustenance and replenishment were stretched to the breaking point, and a moral panic among the middle classes, who were scandalized by what they understood as the “destruction of the family” and the “de-sexing” of proletarian women. So dire was this situation that even such astute critics as Marx and Engels mistook this early head-on conflict between economic production and social reproduction for the final word. Imagining that capitalism had entered its terminal crisis, they believed that, as it eviscerated the working-class family, the system was also eradicating the basis of women’s oppression.<sup>8</sup> But what actually happened was just the reverse: over time, capitalist societies found resources for managing this contradiction—in part by creating “the family” in its modern, restricted form; by inventing new, intensified meanings of gender difference; and by modernizing male domination.

The process of adjustment began, in the European core, with protective legislation. The idea was to stabilize social reproduction by limiting the

exploitation of women and children in factory labor.<sup>9</sup> Spearheaded by middle-class reformers in alliance with nascent workers' organizations, this "solution" reflected a complex amalgam of different motives. One aim, famously characterized by Karl Polanyi, was to defend "society" against "economy."<sup>10</sup> Another was to allay anxiety over "gender leveling." But these motives were also entwined with something else: an insistence on masculine authority over women and children, especially within the family.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the struggle to ensure the integrity of social reproduction became entangled with the defense of male domination.

Its intended effect, however, was to soften the social contradiction in the capitalist core—even as slavery and colonialism raised it to an extreme pitch in the periphery. Creating what Maria Mies called "housewifization" as the flip side of colonization,<sup>12</sup> liberal competitive capitalism elaborated a new gender imaginary centered on "separate spheres." Figuring woman as "the angel in the home," its proponents sought to create stabilizing ballast for the volatility of the economy. The cutthroat world of production was to be flanked by a "haven in the heartless world."<sup>13</sup> As long as each side kept to its own designated sphere and served as the other's complement, the potential conflict between them would remain under wraps.

In reality, this "solution" proved rather shaky. Protective legislation could not ensure labor's reproduction when wages remained below the level needed to support a family, when crowded, polluted tenements foreclosed privacy and damaged lungs, and when employment itself (when available at all) was subject to wild fluctuations due to bankruptcies, market crashes, and financial panics. Nor did such arrangements satisfy workers. Agitating for higher wages and better conditions, they formed trade unions, went out on strike, and joined labor and socialist parties. Riven by increasingly sharp, broad-based class conflict, capitalism's future seemed anything but assured.

Separate spheres proved equally problematic. Poor, racialized, and working-class women were in no position to satisfy Victorian ideals of domesticity; if protective legislation mitigated their direct exploitation, it provided no material support or compensation for lost wages. Nor were those middle-class women who *could* conform to Victorian ideals always content with their situation, which combined material comfort and moral prestige with legal minority and institutionalized dependency. For both groups, the separate-spheres "solution" came largely at women's expense. But it also pitted them against one another—witness nineteenth-century

struggles over prostitution, which aligned the philanthropic concerns of Victorian middle-class women against the material interests of their “fallen sisters.”<sup>14</sup>

A different dynamic unfolded in the periphery. There, as extractive colonialism ravaged subjugated populations, neither separate spheres nor social protection enjoyed any currency. Far from seeking to protect indigenous relations of social reproduction, metropolitan powers actively promoted their destruction. Peasantries were looted, their communities wrecked, to supply the cheap food, textiles, mineral ore, and energy without which the exploitation of metropolitan industrial workers would not have been profitable. In the Americas, meanwhile, enslaved women’s reproductive capacities were instrumentalized to the profit calculations of planters, who routinely tore apart families by selling their members off separately to different slaveowners.<sup>15</sup> Native children, too, were ripped from their communities, conscripted into missionary schools, and subjected to coercive disciplines of assimilation.<sup>16</sup> When rationalizations were needed, the “backward, patriarchal” state of pre-capitalist indigenous kinship arrangements served quite well. Here, too, among the colonialists, philanthropic women found a public platform, urging, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, “white men to save brown women from brown men.”<sup>17</sup>

In both settings, periphery and core, feminist movements found themselves negotiating a political minefield. Rejecting coverture and separate spheres while demanding the right to vote, refuse sex, own property, enter into contracts, practice professions, and control their own wages, liberal feminists appeared to valorize the “masculine” aspiration to autonomy over “feminine” ideals of nurture. On this point, if not on much else, their socialist-feminist counterparts effectively agreed. Conceiving women’s entry into wage labor as the route to emancipation, they too preferred the “male” values associated with production to those associated with reproduction. These associations were ideological, to be sure. But behind them lay a deep intuition: despite the new forms of domination it brought, capitalism’s erosion of traditional kinship relations contained an emancipatory moment.

Caught in a double bind, many feminists found scant comfort on either side of Polanyi’s double movement, neither on the side of social protection, with its attachment to male domination, nor on the side of marketization, with its disregard for social reproduction. Able to neither reject nor embrace the liberal order, they needed a



third alternative, which they called *emancipation*. To the extent that feminists could credibly embody that term, they effectively exploded the dualistic Polanyian figure and replaced it with what we might call a *triple movement*. In this three-sided conflict scenario, proponents of protection and marketization collided not only with one another but also with partisans of emancipation: with feminists, to be sure, but also with socialists, abolitionists, and anticolonialists, all of whom endeavored to play the two Polanyian forces off against each other, even while clashing among themselves.<sup>18</sup>

However promising in theory, such a strategy was hard to implement. As long as efforts to “protect society from economy” were identified with the defense of gender hierarchy, feminist opposition to male domination could easily be read as endorsing the economic forces that were ravaging working-class and peripheral communities. These associations would prove surprisingly durable long after liberal competitive capitalism collapsed under the weight of its (multiple) contradictions in the throes of inter-imperialist wars, economic depressions, and international financial chaos—giving way in the mid-twentieth century to a new regime, that of state-managed capitalism.

#### SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS OF STATE-MANAGED CAPITALISM

Emerging from the ashes of the Great Depression and World War II, this regime tried to defuse the contradiction between economic production and social reproduction in a different way—by enlisting state power on the side of reproduction. Assuming some public responsibility for “social welfare,” the states of this era sought to counter the corrosive effects on social reproduction not only of exploitation but also of mass unemployment. This aim was embraced by the democratic welfare states of the capitalist core and the newly independent developmental states of the periphery alike—despite their unequal capacities for realizing it.

Once again, the motives were mixed. A stratum of enlightened elites had come to believe that capital’s short-term interest in squeezing out maximum profits needed to be subordinated to the longer-term requirements for sustaining accumulation over time. For these actors, the creation of the state-managed regime was a matter of saving the capitalist system from its own self-destabilizing propensities—as well as from the specter of revolution in an era of mass mobilization. Productivity and profitability required the “biopolitical” cultivation of a healthy, educated

workforce with a stake in the system, as opposed to a ragged revolutionary rabble.<sup>19</sup> Public investment in health care, schooling, child care, old-age pensions, supplemented by corporate provision, was perceived as a necessity in an era in which capitalist relations had penetrated social life to such an extent that the working classes no longer possessed the means to reproduce themselves on their own. In this situation, social reproduction had to be internalized, brought within the officially managed domain of the capitalist order.

That project dovetailed with the new problematic of economic “demand.” Seeking to smooth out capitalism’s endemic boom/bust cycles, economic reformers sought to ensure continuous growth by enabling workers in the capitalist core to do double duty as consumers. Accepting unionization, which brought higher wages, and public-sector spending, which created jobs, these actors reinvented the household as a private space for the domestic consumption of mass-produced objects of daily use.<sup>20</sup> Linking the assembly line with working-class familial consumerism, on the one hand, and with state-supported reproduction, on the other, this “Fordist” model forged a novel synthesis of marketization and social protection, projects Polanyi had considered antithetical.

But it was above all the working classes—both women and men—who spearheaded the struggle for public provision, acting for reasons of their own. For them, the issue was full membership in society as democratic citizens—hence dignity, rights, respectability, and material well-being, all of which were understood to require a stable family life. In embracing social democracy, then, working classes were also valorizing social reproduction against the all-consuming dynamism of economic production. In effect, they were voting for family, country, and lifeworld against factory, system, and machine.

Unlike the protective legislation of the liberal regime, the state-capitalist settlement resulted from a class compromise and represented a democratic advance. Unlike its predecessor, too, the new arrangements served (at least for some and for a while) to stabilize social reproduction. For majority-ethnicity workers in the capitalist core, they eased material pressures on family life and fostered political incorporation. But before we rush to proclaim a golden age, we should register the constitutive exclusions that made these achievements possible.

Here, as before, the defense of social reproduction in the core was entangled with imperialism. Fordist regimes financed social entitlements in part by ongoing expropriation from the periphery (including the

periphery within the core), which persisted in forms old and new, even after decolonization.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, postcolonial states caught in the crosshairs of the Cold War directed the bulk of their resources, already depleted by imperial predation, to large-scale development projects, which often entailed expropriating “their own” indigenous peoples. Social reproduction, for the vast majority in the periphery, remained external, as rural populations were left to fend for themselves. Like its predecessor, too, the state-managed regime was entangled with racial hierarchy. US social insurance excluded domestic and agricultural workers, effectively cutting many African Americans off from social entitlements.<sup>22</sup> The racial division of reproductive labor, begun during slavery, assumed a new guise under Jim Crow, as women of color found low-waged work raising the children and cleaning the homes of “white” families at the expense of their own.<sup>23</sup>

Nor was gender hierarchy absent from these arrangements, as feminist voices were relatively muted throughout the process of their construction. In a period (roughly from the 1930s through the 1950s) when feminist movements did not enjoy much public visibility, hardly anyone contested the view that working-class dignity required “the family wage,” male authority in the household, and a robust sense of gender difference. As a result, the broad tendency of state-managed capitalism in the countries of the core was to valorize the heteronormative male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model of the gendered family. Public investment in social reproduction reinforced these norms. In the US, the welfare system took a dualized form, divided into stigmatized poor relief for (“white”) women and children lacking access to a male wage and respectable social insurance for those constructed as “workers.”<sup>24</sup> By contrast, European arrangements entrenched androcentric hierarchy differently, in the division between mothers’ pensions and entitlements tied to waged work—driven in many cases by pronatalist agendas born of interstate competition.<sup>25</sup> Both models validated, assumed, and encouraged the family wage. Institutionalizing androcentric understandings of family and work, both of them naturalized heteronormativity and gender hierarchy and largely removed them from political contestation.

In all these respects, social democracy sacrificed emancipation to an alliance of social protection and marketization, even as it mitigated capitalism’s social contradiction for several decades. But the state-capitalist regime began unraveling, first, politically, in the 1960s, when the global New Left erupted to challenge its imperial, gender, and racial exclusions,

as well as its bureaucratic paternalism, all in the name of *emancipation*; then, economically, in the 1970s, when “stagflation,” the “productivity crisis,” and declining profit rates in manufacturing galvanized efforts by neoliberals to unshackle *marketization*. What would be sacrificed, were those two parties to join forces, would be *social protection*.

#### SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS OF FINANCIALIZED CAPITALISM

Like the liberal regime before it, the state-managed capitalist order dissolved in the course of a protracted crisis. By the 1980s, prescient observers could discern the emerging outlines of a new regime which would become the financialized capitalism of the present era. Globalizing and neoliberal, this new regime is now promoting state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare while recruiting women into the paid workforce. Thus, it is externalizing care work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it. The result is a new, *dualized* organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide care work in return for (low) wages for those in the first. Meanwhile, the one-two punch of feminist critique and deindustrialization has definitively stripped “the family wage” of all credibility. That ideal has given way to today’s more modern norm of the “two-earner family.”

The major driver of these developments, and the defining feature of this regime, is the new centrality of debt. Debt is the instrument by which global financial institutions pressure states to slash social spending, enforce austerity, and generally collude with investors in extracting value from defenseless populations. It is largely through debt, too, that peasants in the Global South are dispossessed by a new round of corporate land grabs, aimed at cornering supplies of energy, water, arable land, and “carbon offsets.” It is increasingly via debt that accumulation proceeds in the historic core as well. As low-waged, precarious service work replaces unionized industrial labor, wages fall below the socially necessary costs of reproduction; in this “gig economy,” continued consumer spending requires expanded consumer debt, which grows exponentially.<sup>26</sup> It is increasingly through debt, in other words, that capital now cannibalizes labor, disciplines states, transfers wealth from periphery to core, and sucks value from households, families, communities, and nature.

The effect is to intensify capitalism's inherent contradiction between economic production and social reproduction. Whereas the previous regime empowered states to subordinate the short-term interests of private firms to the long-term objective of sustained accumulation, in part by stabilizing reproduction through public provision, this one authorizes finance capital to discipline states and publics in the immediate interests of private investors, not least by requiring public disinvestment from social reproduction. And whereas the previous regime allied marketization with social protection against emancipation, this one generates an even more perverse configuration in which emancipation joins with marketization to undermine social protection.

The new regime emerged from the fateful intersection of two sets of struggles. One set pitted an ascending party of free-marketeers bent on liberalizing and globalizing the capitalist economy against declining labor movements in the countries of the core, once the most powerful base of support for social democracy but now on the defensive, if not wholly defeated. The other set of struggles pitted progressive "new social movements" opposed to hierarchies of gender, sex, "race"/ethnicity, and religion against populations seeking to defend established lifeworlds and privileges, now threatened by the "cosmopolitanism" of the new economy. Out of the collision of these two sets of struggles there emerged a surprising result: a "progressive" neoliberalism that celebrates "diversity," meritocracy, and "emancipation" while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction. The result is not only to abandon defenseless populations to capital's predations, but also to redefine emancipation in market terms.<sup>27</sup>

Emancipatory movements participated in this process. All of them, including antiracism, multiculturalism, LGBTQ liberation, and ecology, spawned market-friendly neoliberal currents. But the feminist trajectory proved especially fateful, given capitalism's longstanding entanglement of gender and social reproduction.<sup>28</sup> Like each of its predecessor regimes, financialized capitalism institutionalizes the production/reproduction division on a gendered basis. Unlike its predecessors, however, its dominant imaginary is liberal-individualist and gender-egalitarian—women are considered the equals of men in every sphere, deserving of equal opportunities to realize their talents, including—perhaps especially—in the sphere of production. Reproduction, by contrast, appears as a backward residue, an obstacle to advancement that must be sloughed off one way or another en route to liberation.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its feminist aura, this conception epitomizes the current form of capitalism's social contradiction, which assumes a new intensity. As well as diminishing public provision and recruiting women into waged work, financialized capitalism has reduced real wages, thus raising the number of hours of paid work per household needed to support a family and prompting a desperate scramble to transfer care work to others.<sup>29</sup> To fill the "care gap," the regime imports migrant workers from poorer to richer countries. Typically, it is racialized and/or rural women from poor regions who take on reproductive and caring labor previously performed by more privileged women. But to do this, the migrants must transfer their own familial and community responsibilities to other, still poorer caregivers, who must in turn do the same—and on and on, in ever longer "global care chains." Far from filling the care gap, the net effect is to displace it—from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South.<sup>30</sup>

This scenario fits the gendered strategies of cash-strapped, indebted postcolonial states subjected to International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs. Desperate for hard currency, some of them have actively promoted women's emigration to perform paid care work abroad for the sake of remittances, while others have courted foreign direct investment by creating export-processing zones, often in industries (such as textiles and electronics assembly) that prefer to employ women workers.<sup>31</sup> In both cases, social-reproductive capacities are further squeezed.

Two recent developments in the United States epitomize the severity of the situation. The first is the rising popularity of egg-freezing, normally a ten-thousand-dollar procedure but now offered free by IT firms as a fringe benefit to highly qualified female employees. Eager to attract and retain these workers, firms like Apple and Facebook provide them a strong incentive to postpone childbearing, saying, in effect, "Wait and have your kids in your forties, fifties, or even sixties; devote your high-energy, productive years to us."<sup>32</sup>

A second US development equally symptomatizes the contradiction between reproduction and production: the proliferation of expensive, high-tech mechanical pumps for expressing breast milk. This is the "fix" of choice in a country with a high rate of female labor-force participation, no mandated paid maternity or parental leave, and a love affair with technology. This is a country, too, in which breastfeeding is *de rigueur* but has changed beyond all recognition. No longer a matter of suckling

a child at one's breast, one "breastfeeds" now by expressing one's milk mechanically and storing it for feeding by bottle later by one's nanny. In a context of severe time poverty, double-cup, hands-free pumps are considered the most desirable, as they permit one to express milk from both breasts at once while driving to work on the freeway.<sup>33</sup>

Given pressures like these, is it any wonder that struggles over social reproduction have exploded over recent years? Northern feminists often describe their focus as the "balance between family and work."<sup>34</sup> But struggles over social reproduction encompass much more—including grassroots community movements for housing, health care, food security, and an unconditional basic income; struggles for the rights of migrants, domestic workers, and public employees; campaigns to unionize those who perform social service work in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals, and child-care centers; struggles for public services such as daycare and eldercare, for a shorter work week, and for generous paid maternity and parental leave. Taken together, these claims are tantamount to the demand for a massive reorganization of the relation between production and reproduction: for social arrangements that could enable people of every class, gender, sexuality, and color to combine social reproductive activities with safe, interesting, and well-remunerated work.

Boundary struggles over social reproduction are as central to the present conjuncture as are class struggles over economic production. They respond, above all, to a crisis of care that is rooted in the structural dynamics of financialized capitalism. Globalizing and propelled by debt, this capitalism is systematically expropriating the capacities available for sustaining social connections. Proclaiming its ideal as "the two-earner family," it recuperates movements for emancipation, who join with proponents of marketization to oppose the partisans of social protection, now turned increasingly resentful and chauvinistic.

What might emerge from this crisis?

#### ANOTHER MUTATION?

Capitalist society has reinvented itself several times in the course of its history. Especially in moments of general crisis, when multiple contradictions—political, economic, ecological, and social-reproductive—intertwine and exacerbate one another, boundary struggles have erupted at the sites of capitalism's constitutive institutional divisions: where economy meets polity, where society meets nature, and where

production meets reproduction. At those boundaries, social actors have mobilized to redraw the institutional map of capitalist society. Their efforts propelled the shift, first, from the liberal competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century to the state-managed capitalism of the twentieth, and then to the financialized capitalism of the present era. Historically, too, capitalism's social contradiction has formed an important strand of the precipitating crisis, as the boundary dividing social reproduction from economic production has emerged as a major site and central stake of social struggle. In each case, the gender order of capitalist society has been contested and the outcome has depended on alliances forged among the principal poles of a triple movement: marketization, social protection, and emancipation. Those dynamics propelled the shift from separate spheres to the family wage, and then to the two-earner family.

What follows for the current conjuncture? Are the present contradictions of financialized capitalism severe enough to qualify as a general crisis, and should we anticipate another mutation of capitalist society? Will the current crisis galvanize struggles of sufficient breadth and vision to transform the present regime? Might a new form of socialist-feminism succeed in breaking up the mainstream movement's love affair with marketization while forging a new alliance between emancipation and social protection—and, if so, to what end? How might the reproduction/production division be reinvented today, and what can replace the two-earner family?

Nothing I have said here serves to answer these questions directly. But in laying the groundwork that permits us to pose them, I have tried to shed some light on the current conjuncture. I have suggested, specifically, that the roots of today's crisis of care lie in capitalism's inherent social contradiction—or, rather, in the acute form this contradiction assumes today, in financialized capitalism. If that is right, then this crisis will not be resolved by tinkering with social policy. The path to its resolution can only go through deep structural transformation of this social order. What is required, above all, is to overcome financialized capitalism's rapacious subjugation of reproduction to production—but this time without sacrificing either emancipation or social protection. This, in turn, requires reinventing the production/reproduction distinction and reimagining the gender order. Whether the result will be compatible with capitalism at all remains to be seen.