

# Democracy and Care Unbound: On Feminism's Abiding Political Value

By Michelle Rossi

Today, most of us are only too painfully aware of leftists' worldwide difficulty in winning and exercising power. Capital's enhanced global mobility, legal challenges by undemocratic transnational bodies like the World Trade Organization, and the explosion of service jobs that offer little chance for wage and revenue growth sabotage states' tools for safeguarding their people, firms, and environment. Governments starve for funds to implement the policies we socialists love, and our forebears fought bitter struggles to achieve: universal programs that prioritize human needs for food, shelter, health care, education; and regulations that protect humans and the planet and allow people a life outside of work.

Given the dire circumstances, it is heartening to see that over the last ten years segments of the US left and labor movements have grown savvier in identifying the dynamics behind these recent assaults on freedom and wellbeing, and more vocal in decrying them. While the labor movement's leaders have not exactly dusted off *Das Kapital*, some have stepped up efforts to make union members, and wage earners and voters more broadly, aware of the extent of their losses. Labor and its supporters have publicized declines in wages, pensions, health care benefits, safety regulations, and environmental protections, and fingered global capital as the culprit. Indeed, the US labor movement deserves special praise for adopting an internationalist rather than protectionist stance and stepping up its commitment to grassroots electoral mobilization. (Direct action is fun, but eventually all but the most hardcore anarchist activists realize demonstrations are no substitute for goals and a strategy with regard to the state. It still takes the hard work of coalition-building and boring old electoral politics to deliver the changes progressives want.)

What worries me, however, is a tendency on the left to assume that pointing to shrinking paychecks is sufficient to win elections. It is not. Identifying threats to working people's economic security can help to sway their votes, but anyone who has watched the Right's political successes knows that people get more fired up by a profound sense of loss, anger, and panic over what is happening to them outside of work. Of course

the two are related – the market has grown so powerful that it now corrodes areas of life supposedly immune to its logic – but in the US, the Right has been especially clever at keeping this connection out of the mind of voters. People do not readily pin their deteriorating quality of life off the job – fatigue, fear, crime, lack of time to spend with family and

friends, and frenzied consumption as the chief means to express affection and bond with others – on global capitalism fueling greater inequality. (A columnist in my hometown newspaper blamed an increase in rudeness and stress and a decrease in volunteering for Little League, the PTA, and church bazaars, on Americans' watching too much TV!)

And the left is hardly doing its best to help people make this connection. Confused and hampered by their own unexamined nostalgia for a way of life associated with traditional, authoritarian “family values” as much as economic security (think Mom in the kitchen baking pies as the kids come home from school), many on the left are tongue tied. We are uncomfortable or clumsy applying democratic and egalitarian principles to resolve conflicts in intimate life, so we prefer to remain silent on such questions, and cede the ground to the Right. Small wonder, then, that many working people follow the Right's lead and blame working women, poor mothers, people of color, and queers for our society's decay.

The Right will continue to trounce the left in public debate and elections if we think we can ignore the “social” or “moral” issues of intimate life and stick to economic analysis, where we feel confident. On the contrary, for the left to win on economic issues we must tackle moral issues. And to do that successfully we need to take advantage of insights from decades of feminist thought and organizing. To that end, I offer the following crash course in feminist analysis.



Socialists have long decried how humans' dazzling ability to create things from the world's resources leads to misery – when those who perform this work lack control over the product, production process, or profits, and the abundance they create by laboring together goes to someone else. In the case of industrial societies, that someone else is the capitalist, who uses profit to further diminish those who must work for a living, by making any one person's labor power less necessary, and turning fellow laborers into hostile rivals for a shrinking number of jobs and smaller rewards. Under such desperate conditions – sing along with me now – men only feel human off the job, while eating, drinking, and, uh, procreating.

If in the past some parts of the US left and labor movement were indifferent to this tune, today they are not. What has been less commonly absorbed – yet is vital for the left to improve its skill at handling “moral” questions – are the insights sparked by feminists, who drew attention to an array of oppressions in addition to economic ones. Socialist feminists in particular revealed how women are exploited, alienated, and coerced not only as wage laborers, but also in the very processes that permit men to enjoy eating, drinking and procreating. These efforts paved the way for later waves of feminists to examine how gender, race, and geography infect nation building and economic exploitation.

Most significantly, feminists of all stripes insisted that what goes on in private, personal, “emotional” life is as deeply political as what happens in the “rational” public sphere of economic production and formal government. Thanks in part to their

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research and activism, we better comprehend how they all intertwine – with one another, and with unequal, gendered divisions of labor and power. Distinctions between “public” and “private,” “work,” “family,” and “government” have been exposed as unstable and contestable; they vary according to place and time. Furthermore, within any society only certain groups recognize and practice, let

alone benefit from, them. In fact, the US left and labor movement built and consolidated their gains upon such separations, to the detriment of women and ultimately their own movements. Today's dilemmas can be traced to yesterday's betrayals; the contemporary left's difficulty in beating the Right on moral and economic issues stems from unfinished revolutions.

To be specific, in Europe and the US, as production of material goods increasingly moved out of the home, and liberal democracy spread, both men and women were forced off the land, out of the home, and into desperate wage labor in order to survive. Yet as Heidi Hartmann noted decades ago, in many cases male trade unionists found retaining control over women, especially their sexuality, care giving and domestic labor, more compelling than advancing working class interests as a whole. They often opposed women's struggles for the vote. And rather than organize female workers to prevent them from becoming cheap competition, many trade unions pursued agreements with capitalists that specified a family wage for male workers and hiring policies and practices that excluded women.

Establishing the family wage as the standard payment for male workers was an advance; it allowed some working class people to increase their level of consumption and to begin to adhere to a middle class ideal of separate spheres, public and private, for men and women, respectively. Now some working class men, too, could forego care giving and domestic responsibilities entirely, and devote their energies to participating in the contentious public world of wage labor and politics. Meanwhile, some working class women could withdraw from wage labor and confine their concerns to the private: caring for home and children, and replenishing husbands and sons when they returned from the fray.

But left and labor movement aficionados often miss the down sides to this victory, particularly in the United States. As compliance with the notion of separate spheres for men and women moved down the class ladder, many women found themselves worse off. Women's working for wages lost respectability.

Union hostility and employer discrimination closed down the possibility of wage labor offering viable alternatives to women's trading limitless affection, sex, childcare, and domestic labor for men's economic support. Any woman not attached to an upper class man or an employed member of the male labor aristocracy – unmarried women, divorcees, widows, and women of color, especially African

American women – had to hustle between public and private, between low wage labor and domestic duties, and expose themselves to extreme exploitation in both. The New Deal and subsequent welfare state expansion offered these women little relief (which recent welfare reform – the switch from AFDC to TANF – snatched away).

Meanwhile, other kinds of problems festered among those who enjoyed enough distance from economic hardship to maintain a male breadwinner/female caregiver division of labor. Feminist thinkers like Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin pointed out that the two parent nuclear family in which the woman is responsible for raising young children – and by extension, any domestic arrangement with a rigid separation of male and female activity, and where caring for young children is primarily women's work – predisposes human relationships to confusion and strife. At a most basic, personal level,

Instead, the liberal wing of the feminist movement that survived and became feminism's dominant political voice avoided such radical reconfigurations. Liberal feminists made it easier for certain women to choose to move into the public arena, but on capitalist terms. They struggled to remove barriers to equality in the marketplace, allowing middle class white women increased access to education and professions, and to contraception and abortion. These advances should not be derided, simply kept in perspective. Freed to concentrate on more profitable endeavors, elite women could join many men in keeping distance from the labor that cares for frail bodies and cleans up messes – usually by hiring a more economically vulnerable woman to do it.

By contrast, many working class, poor women and women of color had long been in the labor market, and at low wages. If not, they were soon pulled

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such childcare arrangements incline boys to grow up to see the world in terms of difference and separation and to prove their masculinity by denying emotion, interdependence, and nurturance. Simultaneously, they encourage girls to grow up to see the world in terms of similarity and connection, to be uncomfortable with independence, and to learn to anticipate and respond to others' wishes and needs more than their own. From the start, male-female interactions are set up to be dysfunctional.

Women's movements caught fire because they promised to address the power inequality, coercion, waste of talent, and mutilation of selves required for women and men to fit into and maintain rigid, distinct, recognizably heterosexual roles within separate spheres. It is a pity that, for a variety of reasons scholars are still trying to untangle, radical political movements of all kinds died down or disappeared before they could (or would) digest the analyses or fight for the kinds of changes socialist feminists and their successors advocated. The boldest feminists sought to redistribute power and resources democratically across structural (public, economic, institutional) as well as personal (private) arenas.

into it. Global economic restructuring according to capitalist imperatives meant the family wage for their male counterparts vanished during the 1980s. No one rushed to assist these women with meeting their unpaid caregiving obligations. In the US, a liberal women's movement and an embattled labor movement were painfully slow to recognize these women and acknowledge their problems: a need for quality child care, assistance in caring for aging parents, access to health care independent of wage labor, revaluation of wages for jobs where women predominate, a shorter work week for men and women, and a need for men to take on more caring labor at home

Today, we all feel the consequences from feminism and labor's unfinished revolutions. The advent of separate spheres for men and women, facilitated in industrialized nations by working class men selling out working class women for a family wage, preserved a non-market logic – an ethic of care, a kind of morality – by assigning it to women to exercise in private. Nurturing was saved, but it was also thereby contained, made scarce and essentially banished from the public realm. Public institutions such as the state could be excused from providing

care; any that attempted it were vulnerable to attack for overstepping their bounds and delivering inferior results.

Indeed, as society accepted self-interest, competition, and ruthless individualism everywhere, and in everyone, else, women in the home became a sort of “nurture preserve.” Minor concessions to liberal feminism aside, women provided the emotional grease and (unpaid and invisible) caring labor to keep everything running, especially “the market.” And now, largely thanks to global capitalism, this nurture preserve is fast disappearing everywhere, leading to widespread panic over women’s “carelessness.”

In advanced industrial societies, almost everyone suffers from what sociologist Arlie Hochschild identifies as the “care deficit.” Men and women move through their days drained and hostile from pursuing (increasingly hard to get) wage labor, with diminishing financial returns. Short on resources, time and energy to replenish ourselves and our loved ones, we can hardly bother with the unpaid labor of caring for anything, or anyone, else. Those who can afford it contract out, satisfying their and their dependents need for nurturance through the market. The rest of us do without.

The Right seizes on this wretched situation and frames it as a moral crisis. And it is. But what is being violated are values that recognize and support caring labor – values that ought to be claimed as part of the left’s democratic, feminist, and egalitarian impulses, in defiance of the Right’s desire for

rigid order, hierarchy, and brutal defense of (male) privilege. Moreover, we on the left can reveal how this “moral” crisis has structural (i.e., political and economic) components. We need to deliver the message loud and clear: the culprits behind our discontent are global capitalism and sexism. Our society’s crisis is not due to a lack of personal responsibility or “family values” among those who want an independent, adequate income, democracy, and respect

in all relationships: women, lone mothers, wage earners, the poor, people of color, and queers.

At the moment, the left may not command the state, but we do have the power to promote an honest, accu-

rate, pro-labor and pro-feminist discussion of our society’s shortage and devaluation of nurturance in all spheres. That is a first step toward winning elections and ultimately enhancing democracy and the quality of life: by creating and financing public goods like universal health care, child care and elder care; and by reassessing the value of the caring jobs women, especially women of color, are paid so little to do, expanding workers’ rights to organize, insisting men share in nurturing labor, and reducing the length of the work week. Otherwise, if we on the left fail to make use of our democratic moral resources, the Right will see to it that the market is the only thing that is “free.”

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## Liberal feminists made it easier for certain women to choose to move into the public arena, but on capitalist terms.

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