

Expanding Social Reproduction, Criticalizing Care: Two Models of Philosophical Under-labouring in the Global Crisis of Care¹

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Abstract: Social scientific researches, many undertaken with a feminist or gender lens, have sought to understand the root causes of inequalities and provide solutions to the care crisis caused by the precarious migration of domestic work from the Global South to the Global North. We ask what the distinct contribution of philosophical research has been to care crisis scholarship and suggest two models—from social reproduction theory and care ethics. We argue that the expansion of social reproduction by Nancy Fraser (Part 1) and the criticalization of the concept of care by Fiona Robinson (Part 2) became engaged in conceptual clarification, conceptual reconstruction, and second-order analysis. These two thinkers undertook philosophical under-labouring as a necessary first step in their critical-emancipatory interventions in the transnational care chain. Traditional and contemporary usages of the Lockean notion of the philosopher as under-labourer and its manifestations in second-wave feminist analysis are discussed in the Introduction. The Conclusion integrates the implications of Fraser’s and Robinson’s clarification and reconstruction of reproductive work and care, which are key analytical concepts in care crisis studies not only for research, discussions, and debates in the global crisis of care but also for policy formulation and transformative action.

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Second-Wave Feminism and the Philosopher as Under-labourer²

Theorization of women's unpaid housework and caring roles is as old as feminism itself. Already incipient in the first wave's demand for equal work opportunities in the public sphere, women's domestic and caring work became foundational to two theories borne out of the second wave's calls for the rethinking of Marx's economic theory of productive labour, i.e., the underpaid and exploited labour by the working class that fuelled capitalism: 1) social reproduction theory in political economy, which assigns equal value to women's domestic and child-rearing activities known as reproductive work, and 2) care ethics in moral philosophy, which radically reorganizes culture based on women's differential values and competencies for caring.

Second-wave feminists radically shifted focus from first-order demands (rights to suffrage, paid jobs, freedom of expression, equality) to second-order interrogations of deep-seated causes of women's oppression under the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism. Philosophical under-labouring was manifested in feminist conceptual clarification and reconstruction and in digging up sedimented ontological, epistemological, and moral presuppositions that were the conditions of possibility of the oppressive system as well as in working out what concepts and presuppositions, in turn, would make an emancipatory alternative possible.

It was John Locke, confronted by the tremendous scientific progress in the 17th century and the comparably lacklustre achievements of philosophy, who first suggested philosophy's much humbler role of serving as under-labourer for science.³ Locke's plea for philosophy's task as that of clearing the ground a little from rubbish that obfuscated knowledge was a far cry from the royal ambitions of speculative metaphysicians and system builders of the time. Inspired by Locke, philosophy as conceptual and language clarification eventually characterized 20th century analytic and

² The hyphenated and British-English word, "under-labourer" was used by John Locke and Roy Bhaskar and is adopted as well in this article.

³ John Locke, "The Epistle to the Reader," in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 10–11.

ordinary language philosophy viewing philosophy as therapeutic, as elucidation,⁴ or as descriptive of the underlying structures of reality.⁵

At the turn of the 21st century, Roy Bhaskar re-animated the under-labouring task of philosophy for science and the human sciences, but this time not just for academic but also for critical-emancipatory ends.⁶ In his earliest work, *A Realist Theory of Science*, he aimed at a philosophy that has greater relevance to the current scientific practice: “a philosophy *for* science,” so to speak, rather than a philosophy *of* science. He wrote: “For I willingly confess to Lockean motives. That is to say, I believe it to be an essential (though not the only) part of the business of philosophy, to act as under-labourer, and occasionally as the mid-wife, of science.”⁷ Reiterating a division of labour between philosophy and the sciences, in *The Possibility of Naturalism*, he wrote, “philosophy is distinguished by the kinds of considerations and arguments it employs.”⁸ Philosophy’s distinct argumentative method is transcendental-realist, such that vis-à-vis the sciences, philosophy’s task is “to show what must be the case for the ensemble of scientific activities to be possible.”⁹ This transcendental question has the form “what must be the case

⁴ The epitome of a philosopher who performed philosophical under-labouring not only for the sciences but upon philosophy itself was Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued that there are no genuine philosophical problems but only pseudo ones arising from logical or linguistic confusion. And this is a common thread uniting his early and later works.

Wittgenstein wrote in the *Tractatus*: “Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical” as they “arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 19.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, he wrote, “What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle,” in support of the idea that philosophical problems are not real but are invented in the mind of the philosopher as they take language from its daily use to a holiday “for philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 103, 19.

⁵ See, for example, Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1959). Strawson distinguished descriptive metaphysics from the prescriptive one of traditional system-builders who ordered reality from preconceived ultimate principles.

⁶ The two books authored by Bhaskar where he argues for critical-emancipatory under-labouring are *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (1979), all republished by Routledge. While Bhaskar’s founding of critical realism and naturalism were the objective of his philosophical writings, this article is limited to his methodology, specifically, his deployment of the method of philosophical under-labouring. We believe the method can be explicated effectively for the purposes of this paper, without delving into his philosophical positions or his critical-emancipatory projects.

⁷ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), xxxi.

⁸ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (Brighton Sussex: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1979), 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*

for Φ to be possible?”¹⁰ or what must the world be like for the ensemble of activities (Φ) to be possible? For Bhaskar, while both philosophy and science produce knowledge, the knowledge produced by philosophy is “knowledge of the necessary conditions for the production of knowledge—second-order knowledge, if you like.”¹¹ By 2013, Bhaskar’s critical-realist emancipatory project has been solidified and widely adopted, and he reiterated: “philosophical under-labouring is most characteristically what critical realist philosophy does.”¹² In sum, for Bhaskar, philosophical under-labouring for science and the human sciences consists in a transcendentalist “movement at any one level from knowledge of manifest phenomena to knowledge of the structures that generate them.”¹³ Bhaskar’s ultimate aim is to found critical emancipatory projects, such that the transcendental movement takes the form: Given oppressive systems in the real world, what are the second-order structures that make them possible, and once overcome or transformed, will result in emancipation?

In the case of social reproduction theory, the system to be challenged was capitalism in its various historical mutations. In contrast, in the case of care ethics, Western European ethical systems—whether of the utilitarian or deontological kind—were challenged, because they were symptomatic of questionable presuppositions, such as androcentrism and individualistic ontology that needed to be scrutinized and supplanted with assumptions and concepts friendlier to the notion of caring as the true north of the ethical compass. The following sections will discuss these theories in two parts.

Part 1: Nancy Fraser’s Expansion of Social Reproduction

Arguably, Nancy Fraser has woven the most expansive theory of social reproduction resulting from her 1) more encompassing reconceptualization of a) political economy into cultural political economy, b) capitalism from a solely economic to an entire social system, and c) socialism from a transitory stage to the classless society to democratic socialism; 2) widening the axes of capitalist exploitation from class only to gender, culture, and nature imbricating upon each other. This “expansionist” project, if we may, likewise entailed refinements but a more encompassing reach of reproductive work, because it is always the indispensable life

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Roy Bhaskar, “Prolegomenon: The Consequences of the Revindication of Philosophical Ontology for Philosophy and Social Theory,” in *Engaging with the World: Agency, Institutions, Historical Formations*, ed. by Margaret S. Archer and Andrea M. Maccarini (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

support system in the contradictory productive–reproductive chain. The discussion that follows explicates these expansions in Fraser’s selected writings, lectures, and interviews, focusing on the concept of women’s social reproductive work.

From Physiocratic Origins to a Feminist Analytical Concept: Social Reproduction Redefined

The gradual expansion of the concept of social reproduction from its origins until its current status as the underbelly of production are well documented in feminist historical accounts.¹⁴

Excavation work by socialist feminists in 1970s to 1990 surfaced a form of exploitation heretofore unrecognized by all revolutionaries, whether Marxist or anarchist: capitalism did not only extract cheap labour from the working class to sustain itself but also, and worse, from “the workday of millions of unwaged house-workers as well as many other unpaid and unfree labourers.”¹⁵ Silvia Federici, writing half a century later in 2019, recalled that the concept “social reproduction” was redefined by socialist feminists as “work reproducing the worker” from its original usage by physiocrats, like Quesnay, as “the processes by which a social system reproduces itself.”¹⁶ Federici then outlined the implications of social reproduction as an analytical category, what the crisis of care is, and the vision that propelled it. Social reproduction “made possible a new understanding of the mechanisms by which capitalist society has been reproduced,”¹⁷ that is basically through the “crisis of social reproduction” caused by the defunding of social services, the “politics of extractivism” (nature’s exploitation as capital), and the “permanent state of warfare.”¹⁸ The end goal was to revive Marx’s vision of unalienated and humanizing labour that placed life at the centre.

In that same year, 2019, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Battacharya, and Nancy Fraser issued a manifesto in *Feminism for the 99%*, laying down the contours of the reproductive crisis, its underlying conditions of possibility, and the feminist agenda required:

¹⁴ Historical accounts of social reproduction are found in Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Battacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*. (London: Verso, 2019); Tithi Battacharya ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Silvia Federici, “Social Reproduction Theory: History, Issues and Present Challenges,” in *Radical Philosophy*, 204 (Spring 2019), 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

As feminists, we appreciate that capitalism is not just an economic system, but something larger: an institutionalized social order that also encompasses the apparently “noneconomic” relations and practices that sustain the official economy. Behind capitalism’s official institutions—wage labor, production, exchange, and finance—stand their necessary supports and enabling conditions: families, communities, nature; territorial states, political organizations, and civil societies; and not least of all, massive amounts and multiple forms of unwaged and expropriated labor, including much of the work of social reproduction, still performed largely by women and often uncompensated. These, too, are constitutive elements of capitalist society—and sites of struggle within it.¹⁹

The statement has become a standard description of social reproduction and its crisis: social reproduction is work done mostly by women to maintain and reproduce humanity, and yet it is drained and devoured by the very system it reproduces, leading to the anomalous condition called “crisis of care,” i.e., the “tendency to commandeer for capital’s benefit as much ‘free’ reproductive labor as possible,” without any concern for its replenishment, exhausting women, ravaging families, and stretching social energies “to the breaking point.”²⁰

At the same time, capitalism is widened from a mere economic to an entirely social system. The manifesto pointed to the work done by Fraser in expanding the concepts of capitalism and capitalist crisis under which the crisis of social reproduction formed one strand.

Social Reproduction in the Grand Scheme of Things

While critiquing Marx, social reproduction theorists retained a fidelity to Marx’s vision of unalienated work or the notion that labour is an expression of human creativity, thus, humanizing and liberating. This vision undergirds Fraser’s works on social reproduction. But alongside her Marxian lineage, Fraser too deployed the method of analytic philosophy. As Caitlín Doherty noted in her 2023 essay on Fraser’s critical theory, Fraser has deployed her training in analytic philosophy in “positing sets of conceptual distinctions—shorthand terms for complex strategic perspectives or political-

¹⁹ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

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philosophical ideas, whose logics she then unfolds.”²¹ For Doherty, Fraser’s conceptual schemas and analytical distinctions, notwithstanding they are abstractions, are heuristic necessities that illuminate complex realities.²²

Critical Theory and Women’s Reproductive Work

Fraser’s thematization of social reproduction begins with her bid to problematize women’s reproductive work for critical theory to be truly critical. She begins her essay “What’s Critical about Critical Theory?” by recalling Marx’s 1843 definition of Critical Theory as ‘the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’.²³ In operationalizing Marx’s criterion, Fraser looked for indicators of compliance or noncompliance of any thinking claiming to be a critique by posing questions that are mindful of women’s self-clarifications, and wishes of the critic’s time. Crucial inclusions of a critical theory worth its name are empirical testability, research frames, analytical categories, and explanatory models that are situated within contemporary liberation movements (such as women’s movements) and demystified from ideological-androcentric bias.²⁴

Fraser’s examination of how these questions play out in Habermas’s critique of the Western welfare state demonstrates the power of second-order philosophical analysis in catching a cat by its own tail, so to speak, in the case of Habermas’s gendered blind spots in *Theory of Communicative Action*.²⁵

²¹ Caitlín Doherty, “Topographies of Capital,” in *New Left Review*, 143 (September–October 2023), 34.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory: The Case of Habermas and Gender,” in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. by Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 253–276. The work of Marx cited by Fraser is Karl Marx, “Letter to A. Ruge, September 1843,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), 209.

²⁴ *Ibid.* The original text is: To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx’s 1843 definition of Critical Theory as “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.’ What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. A critical theory, it says, frames its research in the light of the contemporary social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification. For example, if struggles contesting the subordination of women figured among the most significant of a given age, then a critical social theory for that time would seek to shed light on the character and bases of such subordination. It would employ categories and explanatory models that revealed rather than occluded relations of male dominance and female subordination. And it would demystify as ideological rival approaches that obfuscated or rationalized those relations. In this situation, then, one of the standards for assessing a critical theory, once it had been subjected to all the usual tests of empirical adequacy, would be: how well does it theorize the situation and prospects of the feminist movement? To what extent does it serve the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of contemporary women?,” 253.

²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

The essay is long and very detailed, and it cannot be given a fair presentation here. In line with this section's objective, we focus on Fraser's critique of the elisions of reproductive work, which in those times meant child rearing, underpaid work, and the stereotyping of women as welfare dependents. In the process, Fraser has unburied the unthematized gendered subtexts of Habermas's critique of the welfare state by showing an intrinsic link between major themes, on the one hand, and the ideology of androcentrism, on the other. To mention one of these linkages: Habermas's distinction between the family as "a socially integrated, symbolic reproduction domain" and the paid workplace as "a system-integrated material reproduction domain" obliterated household labour which was as exploited like paid work, except that it was unrecognized and unpaid.²⁶ As a result two facts about women's work in the paid sector are uninterrogated: 1) household women are automatically assigned "distinctively feminine, service-oriented and often sexualized occupations" and 2) in both public and private spheres "women are invariably subordinated to men."²⁷ Fraser's gender-sensitive unfolding of Habermas's omissions reveals among others that: 1) male dominance, like all ideologies, is not accidental, but rather intrinsic to classical capitalism. Exploitative practices based on gendered roles are not natural kinds, and like other exploitative practices, they are ideological; 2) critical theories have treated gender as only incidental to politics and political economy, and thus failed to topicalize the way "gender norms structure paid work, state administration and political participation"²⁸; and 3) concepts like "worker, consumer, and wage are not strictly economic concepts. Rather, they have an implicit gender subtext and thus are 'gender-economic' concepts."²⁹ Similarly, "the concept of citizenship is not strictly a political concept; it has an implicit gender subtext and so, rather, is a 'gender-political' concept."³⁰ These Fraserian hybrid concepts highlight "the need for a critical-theoretical categorial framework in which gender, politics, and political economy are internally integrated."³¹

Social Reproduction and the Crisis of Care under Financialized Capitalism

In her 2016 essay "Contradictions of Capital and Care," Fraser reaffirms her dismal prognosis that at the core of the materialist-economic

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 264.

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analysis is the economic bias that has neglected to theorize the social.³² The worsening impact of the economic system on our general way of life has become more ubiquitous and pervasive under the third and latest stage of capitalist development: the global financial economy or financialized capitalism, the first stage was the “liberal competitive capitalism” in the 19th century and the second was the “state-managed capitalism” of the 20th century.³³ Globalized financial capitalism has created a new class: the most precarious class of migrant workers and subclass of migrant women, due to 1) the relocation of manufacturing to low-wage regions, creating local migrancy at the national and regional levels; 2) the recruitment of women into the paid workforce both in the North and in the South creating two-breadwinner households, and 3) the subsequent need for migrant domestic labor. Under these circumstances, the built-in source of instability in all regimes of capitalism, which is the dependency of profits on the “very same processes of social reproduction whose value they disavow,” is by far the worst.³⁴ Fraser claims, this “social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism” lies at the root of the so-called crisis of care.³⁵ It must be noted that while Fraser employs the term “care” in crisis of care, she is quick to remind her readers that this appellation is not her coinage. She is dismissive of the ways in which “care” has been sentimentalized and romanticized, thus occluding the pernicious implications of the term, and making it inept to capture the political, cultural economy of reproductive work.

In her latest book, *Cannibal Capitalism*, Fraser further extends her critical feminist theorizing to include capitalist predation of nature.³⁶ Her employment of “cannibal” is a powerful metaphor of how capitalism eats its own flesh, in the way productive work survives on the flesh of reproductive labour. This idea is demonstrated globally, traversing differently situated societies, classes, genders, races, including nature. A concrete case of cannibalism is how third world countries cope with debts, structural adjustments, and balancing of dollar reserves, through the exportation of migrant women, which results in care deficiency at the home front. In an interview a few months ago, Fraser was asked if the term “cannibalism”

³² See Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” in *New Left Review*, 100 (July–August 2016), 99–117.

³³ *Ibid.* 101–102. Note that Fraser has consistently traced the historical mutations of capitalism to three stages in other writings, as part of her project of historicizing capitalism, see Fraser “Can Society Be Commodities All the Way down?,” *Cannibal Capitalism*, and *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*.

³⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Can Society Be Commodities All the Way down? Post-Polanyian Reflections on Capitalist Crisis,” in *Economy and Society*, 43 (2014), 541–558.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do About It* (London: Verso Books, 2022).

might not evoke racist imageries of “primitive peoples” eating human flesh, and she responds that the term rather refracts on the very civilization that proliferated it, in the sense that White, colonialist capitalism devours care work, the working class, social services, political energies, and natural resources.³⁷

In a 2025 lecture, Fraser broadens her theory of reproductive work by identifying three types of labour that have been commodified as reserve labour force for capitalism’s historical evolutions from feudal to industrial and now to the global economy of care. In the lecture, Fraser explores the fusion of class, race, and gender under what might be a unified theory of social reproduction. Her conceptual schema illuminates three types of reproductive labour that are mutually constitutive and imbricated unto each other: exploited, expropriated, and domesticated.³⁸ Exploited labour consists of cheap labour of wage-earners created by capital accumulation; expropriated labour is work extracted from the colonized races who in some cases are transported to places as slaves; and domesticated work is not so much “tamed” but refers rather to the consignment of women in the home of unpaid and submissive work. Here demonstrated once again is Fraser’s expansive project implicating more axes of exploitation. On top of class are race and gender which are not only analytically distinct but are also in the real world co-constitutive and co-imbricated unto each other.

A Grand Theory of Critique Grander than Marx’s

In 2018, Fraser conversed with a fellow critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi, where she admitted to having spent decades on her project of constructing a large-scale social theory of capitalism suitable for the times.³⁹ Jaeggi pointed out how this ambitious task, long forgotten by most forms of social criticism, would be a daunting task, considering the much larger historical processes, systemic conflicts, deep-seated contradictions, and crises than in Marx’s time. Fraser responded that, commensurate to this challenge, one would need to use a multi-perspectival framework no longer confined to economic and financial but also ecological, political, and social. Critique has to accommodate now those that it has intentionally, or unintentionally excluded, by integrating insights from feminism, ecology, and

³⁷ See “Workers Are Cannibalized by the Capitalist Class: Nancy Fraser | UpFront,” YouTube video, 24:58, posted by @AlJazeeraEnglish (14 February 2025), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLoRoWrYo4E>>.

³⁸ See “Nancy Fraser - Three Faces of Labor: Uncovering the Hidden Ties Between Gender, Race, and Class,” YouTube video, 45:00, posted by @WesternUniversity (15 February 2025), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJcNdZJpB6w>>.

³⁹ See Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, ed. by Brian Milstein (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

postcolonialism, with the proviso that their respective blind spots are not recuperated. Fraser insisted that the unifying analytic of these engagements has to be “crisis,” tantamount to the construction of a grand crisis critique. However, Fraser warned that social criticism has distanced itself from crisis critique due to its “inherently mechanistic, deterministic, teleological, functionalistic—you name it” tendencies.⁴⁰ But since at no time in history had we lived worse, Fraser declared, “we are living in the throes of an epochal crisis of capitalism,” and we have therefore “an urgent need to reconstruct crisis theorizing today.”⁴¹

It is worth noting that the most powerful and latest addition to Fraser’s expansion of the capitalism–socialism pair is her adoption of “ecological crisis critique.” Fraser’s adoption of the concept of ecological crisis into her crisis critique is deemed paradigmatic for it pays attention to another dimension neglected by Marx, despite the massive extraction of natural resources during his time. On the practical side, Fraser’s inclusion of the environment among the exploited categories puts an objective rein upon human capitalist extraction, treating nature as inexhaustible and malleable resource.

Summing up, Fraser’s grand theory of social reproduction is a trenchant reminder that critical-emancipatory projects, while taking off from particularly situated experiences of social pathologies, are obligated to be thoroughgoing in their critical analyses and all-inclusive in their vision. Awareness of the intersection and co-imbrication of social categories and experience, such as class, gender, and race, with environmental degradation can ensure thorough analysis. Likewise, being sensitive that one’s emancipatory vision jives—not conflicts—with that of others can ensure inclusivity.

Part 2: Fiona Robinson’s Criticalization of Care

First-generation care ethicists in the 1960s to 1970s, like Sara Ruddick among them, engaged in the laborious task of interrogating the moral, ontological, and epistemological presuppositions of mainstream ethical systems, which belittled women as moral subjects and excluded women’s values from the desiderata of what is moral. Care ethics is better appreciated when situated under radical feminism, which like socialist feminism, was one form of second-wave feminism. It can be recalled, a singular achievement of second-wave feminists was the identification of the linchpin of women’s oppression, which was at the same time posited as the liberating concept,

⁴⁰ Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

provided that the reigning anti-women mentalities and practices be radically transformed. For radical feminists, women's oppression was founded on their alleged biological or socially constructed identification with nature. The task at hand was to reverse the hierarchical dualism guided by male-centric or patriarchal ideology that privileged culture over nature, reason over the senses, man over woman. To this end, Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) affirmed there were natural differences between man and woman.⁴² Thus while woman is one with nature, she hears the voice of nature, man sets himself apart from nature, he cannot hear woman speak, he is incapable of any dialogue.⁴³ It thus made sense, that the reclamation of woman's nature whether socially constructed or real, became the precondition and substantive grounding for women's liberation.

Sara Ruddick's valorization of caring practices arising from and honed by mothering ensued from the woman's nature thrust of radical feminism in that period. Providing philosophical justifications for her stance, Ruddick argued that mothering was not merely a biological but as well a cognitive task, having its own logic, epistemology, and ethics.⁴⁴ The ramifications of Ruddick's prescient reflections on mothering were based on relational ontology, challenging the predominant view of persons as rational and self-maximizing individuals as well as on a type of moral epistemology known as "ethical naturalism" or the view that what ought to be (moral valuing of care) is based on what is (caring nature of mothers). In philosophy, the favoured perspective in moral epistemology has been termed "ethical non-naturalism," or the view that moral judgements are functions of the will and not dictated by the state of things.⁴⁵

Reconceptualizing Care for a Critical Theory of Care

Feminist theorizing of women's distinctive capacity and socially constructed predisposition to care has been critiqued and improved upon by what may be called "second-generation care ethicists" (a term employed by Fiona Robinson) to the extent that care ethics has now been shorn of its exaggerated valorization of the feminine, graduating into a feminist analysis. Robinson's reconceptualization of care and those of other care ethicists are the preconditions of her project, i.e., a critical theory of care, specifically her incorporation of care in international labour rights. This project can be done by seriously "observing certain minimum labor standards in the production

⁴² Note at the same time the universalization in the singular nouns and pronouns.

⁴³ Excerpts from Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, 1978, in Maggie Humm, ed., *Feminisms: A Reader* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 76.

⁴⁴ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

of goods and services imported to northern countries” as well as “the ILO’s ‘core’ standards of rights—the right to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced or compulsory labor, the abolition of child labor and the elimination of discrimination at work.”⁴⁶

Care ethics has evolved from a norm developed from mothering practices, expanding to moral problems in the personal, social, political, and global realms.⁴⁷ With Rianne Mahon, Robinson identifies transformations in the care concept and their implications.⁴⁸ First, care has been dissociated from its narrow application to the experience of White privileged women to persons of different genders, class, and race. Second, care has been rid of its connotations exclusive to personal, intimate, and face-to-face relationships that ideally happen in private spaces. As a result, care has been extended to public spaces such as hospitals and offices, care work in the economy, and in concrete activities of real people in the context of webs of social relations. Third, the concept of care has been politicized in ways that would distance caring practices from its sentimentalized and romanticized origins. Fourth, the concept and activity of care was raised to the level of the community, national, and global or transnational level so that action at these levels will be saturated with the value and politics of care. Elevating the relevance of care in the global arena, women served as frontliners of this feminized contract-based transnational migration.⁴⁹ And as the traditional notion of caring sprouted from a normative view that it is better attuned to the affectionate and loving personality traits of women,⁵⁰ this, in turn, gave birth to a commodified nature of care, which illustrates a dangerous liaison between global capitalism and feminism. This is because attributing care work to a feminine practice will devalue its status on the global scale of the economy.

Integrating Care with Social Reproduction

Robinson envisioned her critical theory of care as a productive integration of research on care and social reproduction. Care ethics, with its emphasis on relational ontology, is entrenched in the interactive aspects of

⁴⁶ Fiona Robinson, “Beyond Labour Rights: The Ethics of Care and Women’s Work in the Global Economy,” in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8 (2006), 329.

⁴⁷ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9–12.

⁴⁸ See Rianne Mahon and Fiona Robinson, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Ethics and Social Policy: Towards a New Global Political Economy of Care*, ed. by Rianne Mahon and Fiona Robinson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

⁴⁹ See Brenda S. A. Yeoh, Bittiandra Chand Somaiah, Theodora Lam, and Kristel F. Acedera, “Doing Family in ‘Times of Migration’: Care Temporalities and Gender Politics in Southeast Asia,” in *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 110 (2020).

⁵⁰ Robinson, “Beyond Labour Rights,” 322.

human labour, which is typically a major concern in feminist philosophy.⁵¹ This project is necessary so that care ethics can be productively integrated with international relations and international labour rights as well as become more inclusive of nuanced models and more effective in analysing complex interactions between care and inequalities. As a normative framework, the work–care perspective analyses the collective responsibility and mutual dependence of persons living in networks of care; thus, it is gender-responsive as it highlights existing gender imbalances with respect to the giving and receiving of care.⁵² Furthermore, the care–reproductive work partnership involves a careful analysis of actual policy developments in particular national contexts. Most importantly, the collaboration may result in innovative theorizations of gender and race relations, global justice and neocolonialism, and care and masculinities as they relate to the development of a global ethics and social politics of care.⁵³

Mahon and Robinson have identified Virginia Held, among others, as her inspiration in theorizing care, recalling that, for Held, the term “care” has two related meanings. The first refers to a set of activities and form of labour focused on social reproduction, including child care, elder care, care for the sick, and those with disabilities as well as other forms of household and domestic labour. The second involves the understanding of care as the basis for a system of ethics. Robinson adopted Held’s views that the central theme of care ethics is “the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of particular others for whom we take responsibility.”⁵⁴

Theorizing the Global Care Crisis

The global shortfall in care provision is rooted in the gendered framing of caregiving, which obscures its true economic significance. Caregiving, in essence, has long been associated with femininity; it is typically regarded not as labour but as a natural instinct of women—freely extended out of affection for family and loved ones. Even as demand for care labour advances within globalized contexts, it remains constrained by this gendered bias, persistently undervalued and relegated to the domain of “unproductive” work despite its essential role in sustaining both social and economic systems. Some lawmakers understand the contributions of stay-at-home wives in maintaining the household running smoothly. In the

⁵¹ Christina Clark-Kazak, “‘Why Care Now’ in Forced Migration Research? Imagining a Radical Feminist Ethics of Care,” in *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 22 (2023), 1152.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Mahon and Robinson, “Introduction,” 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

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Philippines, House Bill No. 668 intends to provide a modest ₱2,000 allowance to stay-at-home mothers who are living below the poverty threshold. This is a way of giving recognition to their contribution in maintaining the family's stability and productivity. However, despite the small financial support it offered, the proposal ultimately failed to become law.⁵⁵ The proposed bill took an inspiration from article 142 of the Civil Code of the Philippines, which states:

conjugal partnership of gains, the husband and wife place in a common fund the fruits of their separate property and the income from their work or industry, and divide equally, upon the dissolution of the marriage or of the partnership, the net gains or benefits obtained indiscriminately by either spouse during the marriage.

This protection of the wife from the civil code under conjugal partnership seems to positively count the housekeeping duties of wives as a significant contribution, giving wives the right to obtain merit in the partnership. However, this remains to be contested in actual situations when a dissolution of marriage is undertaken. So long as there is no specified law concretizing the reconceptualized meaning of housework as a form of special labour that contributes to family stability and social harmony,⁵⁶ there remains a possibility for the law to be gender-biased in solving marital disputes involving the division of conjugal properties.

In seeking to address deeply embedded gendered inequities in caregiving, Robinson advocates for a normative framework grounded in a feminist ethics of care. This framework offers a more nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of how caregiving responsibilities are disproportionately allocated along gender lines, while providing a moral and policy-oriented basis to redress these imbalances.⁵⁷ This emphasis on the need to find an adequate framework or theory for analysing care work results from a failure to take into account the relational aspects of this type of labour. Thus, in a book chapter, Robinson problematizes “what kind of moral perspective is required in order to make sense of the ethical dilemmas that arise in a situation in which millions of women from income-poor, peripheral states

⁵⁵ Gabriel Pabico Lalu, “Bill Eyes to Give Stay-at-Home Moms P2K Monthly Subsidy,” in *INQUIRER.net* (3 August 2022), <<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1639976/bill-eyes-to-give-stay-at-home-moms-p2k-monthly-subsidy>>.

⁵⁶ See Miao Chungang, “A Study on the Reasonableness of Housework Compensation from a Comparative Law Perspective,” in *Journal of Global Research in Education and Social Science*, 18 (August 2024).

⁵⁷ Robinson, “Beyond Labour Rights,” 321–322.

migrate to more affluent countries to do the work that is ‘associated with a wife’s traditional role—child care, homemaking and sex’.⁵⁸ Robinson links this situation to social and demographic transformations in the nature, extent, and location of paid work, notably the increase in women’s labour force participation.⁵⁹

Beyond Labour Rights

One might contend that the challenges confronting care workers globally constitute a significant human rights concern. Robinson critically assesses the shortcomings of dominant human rights scholarship in adequately representing the emotionally grounded dimensions of labour, thus underscoring the need to integrate care as a central analytical and normative consideration. She argues that care ethics becomes the foremost consideration in the labour rights of women working in the care economy.⁶⁰ She believes that the problematic framework of the *rights-based approach* is evident in its overreliance on a liberal-individualistic moral ontology incapable of analysing the crucial normative dynamics of relational power involving the real needs of the working class. In addition, the rights-based approach is gender-biased in its disregard of the nature and context of the work being performed.⁶¹ A *care-based approach*, on the contrary, offers a clearer picture of the actual and relational aspects of care work. The inadequacy and gender bias of rights-based ethical frameworks in law and institutions prodded Robinson to argue for a realistic assessment of the political, economic, and social conditions that will provide the conditions for workers’ rights to be realized.⁶² The normative aspect of the care-based approach makes us recognize the reality that “free speech and adequate nourishment do not just materialize out of thin air; they are realized as a result of debate and dialogue about individual and social responsibilities in the contexts of families, communities, states, and, now, at the level of global governance.”⁶³

It is in this regard that important steps have been taken by feminists seeking to reevaluate and redefine the concept of rights. For instance, rights may be reconceptualized to take into account gender differences and relationality by giving due fidelity to the entire network of relationships in

⁵⁸ Fiona Robinson, “Care Ethics and the Transnationalization of Care: Reflections on Autonomy, Hegemonic Masculinities, and Globalization,” in *Feminist Ethics and Social Policy: Towards a New Global Political Economy of Care*, ed. by Rianne Mahon and Fiona Robinson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 127

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ See Robinson, “Beyond Labour Rights.”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 329.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 329–330.

which human beings are integrated. Robinson believes that “if we regard the self as relational and seek to understand the existence of rights from within the context of social relations, we are more likely to end up with a rights system that can best protect the real interests and needs of women and all persons.⁶⁴ Doing so will offer a potent solution to the inadequacy of a rights-based approach in conceptualizing a sound policy and legal framework to protect women’s rights in the globalized care work.

Robinson believes that “rights may be reconceptualized to take account of gender difference and relationality. Rather than allowing care to remain an ‘often unrecognized presupposition,’ it is imperative to recognize that women’s moral labor is essential to the operation of the system as a whole.”⁶⁵ Women—and, indeed, all individuals—are better understood as “working and caring citizens,” whose labour is diverse, dynamic, and deeply embedded in social norms, power structures, and the ongoing, reciprocal necessity of both giving and receiving care.⁶⁶ A feminist rights-based approach gives us a better understanding of what is required to secure the political, economic, and social conditions that make the exercise of rights possible. This will help address the needs of women as well—a good starting point from which to formulate progressive global social policy in relation to care work.⁶⁷

Human beings do not really experience equality in many respects. In a similar tone, care ethics recognizes the fact that human beings are dependent and vulnerable in many aspects of their lives—these conditions are not limitations that we should overcome but natural aspects of our lives that should be acknowledged and navigated through positive human encounters.⁶⁸ The idea of care is centred on relations and responsibilities known to be vital in human survival. Furthermore, Robinson argues that care should be treated as a public value that must be negotiated in many ways, from the household to the international community, where it recently became an integral part of the global economy.⁶⁹ It is in this light that care must be understood from a feminist relational (moral) ontology, a recognition that we exist through our relations of responsibility and care for particular others.⁷⁰ This leads to a very different understanding, especially when it enters international or global relations.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁶⁸ Fiona Robinson, “Stop Talking and Listen: Discourse Ethics and Feminist Care Ethics in International Political Theory,” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39 (2011), 845.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 847.

The consistent commitment of international bodies (e.g., the United Nations and National Government Organizations) and governments of host and source countries helps a lot in confronting the issue head-on. For instance, care work can be seen as a necessary economic stopgap or even a lucrative career for some workers. However, to foster respect and elevate its economic value in terms of the wage system and workers' safety, a serious professionalization of care work must happen. Feminist applications of care ethics to a political and social theory are important to expose failures, especially manifested in empirical studies that reveal great inequalities in the Global North and South relations.⁷¹

Philosophical Labour in Exposing Underlying Ontological Presuppositions of Moral Theories

Robinson's analysis consistently demonstrates her exercise of philosophical labour. Aside from her contributions to the conceptual clarification of care, she has unearthed philosophical presuppositions of dominant ideologies and arrangements that continue to resist care. Like her predecessors, she has offered solutions characterized by a relational ontology specific to care ethics. It starts with the assumption that "all persons exist in networks of relationships, and are fundamentally interdependent" and "a contextualized understanding of morality which arises out of relationships with particular others."⁷² Part of this relational ontology is the recognition that all persons need care and are, at the same time, capable of caregiving. The concept of care has no space in liberal-individualist, rights-based accounts of justice; otherwise, they are bound to hide their true nature in abstract theorizing.

Robinson, who dedicated many of her works to understanding care ethics, believes that politically, we should seek solutions to problems related to the giving and receiving of care that are nonexploitative and equitable as well. And since realistically, care has been relocated from the private into the public sphere, let alone its emerging presence in the global sphere, care policies should occupy a substantive focus in political deliberations. It is worth reiterating that in Robinson's view, care ethics is not simply a normative theory but a feminist critical theory as it fundamentally challenges the obfuscation of oppression by gendered ideologies.

Making moral judgments about the nature of social encounters, whether it is within the private realm of the household or the public and global political economy, cannot be analysed vis-à-vis abstracted moral or

⁷¹ Dela Cruz, Noelle Leslie G. "When Your Country Cannot Care for Itself: A Filipino Feminist Critique of Care-based Political Theories," in *Kritike*, 14 (2020), 131.

⁷² Robinson, "Beyond Labour Rights," 332.

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rights theories. Instead, we should put an emphasis on relations of responsibility and care as the basic foundation of our understanding of social reality; it is here where moral judgment should be formed, especially in a manner of contextualizing human relations.⁷³ In line with this, it becomes imperative to reevaluate these relations, whether they are healthy and nurturing or oppressive and exploitative. And in doing so, it is doubly important to bring to the core the inequalities that human beings may suffer from, especially since the ethics of care recognizes the fact that equality is a vague, if not a value that is hardly achieved. It is in this light that we argue that Robinson offers a very realistic analysis of what is truly happening in the area of care labour in the global context. Therefore, while the ethics of care is feminist, it is politically motivated, and so it demands redress of imbalances in the role of care in societies. As a result of this activism, we are enabled to cope with diversity and plurality and are enabled to make better and informed judgments in our moral and policy-making.⁷⁴

While the ethics of care cannot fully provide an adequate basis in explaining how exploitation and injustices in the care sector can be totally eradicated, it does give us a concrete focus for analysing how these injustices in the global scale exist by revealing the complex reasons why people lack adequate care, why people fail to give and receive care effectively, and why care labour remains unrecognized, exploitative, and taken advantage by many at the cost of marginalized sectors in our societies. A focus on care also helps us to recognize how socially constructed norms of race and gender are constitutive of the contemporary (unjust) global order. Foregrounding care reveals the negative effects on most of the world's population of the dominant structures and institutions of the contemporary global order, especially its hegemonic forms of masculinity.⁷⁵

To sum up, Robinson's critical theory of care engenders a responsible global political economy in the area of care work. She believes that it is likewise important that policymakers from the Global North recognize that they bear some important moral responsibility for the current state of the world and that the power and riches that they enjoy in the North are dependent upon the underpaid and unpaid work done by the world's majority in the South.⁷⁶ A critical ethics of care, in the way Robinson elucidates it, must begin with the thin but relevant claim, as supported by much empirical work, that the notion of care is a fundamental aspect of our everyday life and an essential element of the human condition. This, in turn,

⁷³ Fiona Robinson, "Care, Gender and Global Social Justice: Rethinking 'Ethical Globalization,'" in *Journal of Global Ethics*, 2 (2006), 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

will help us realize that care is important for human survival and is a necessary condition for human security and well-being.⁷⁷

Conclusion: Engendering Research, Policy, and Transformative Practice for a Critical Theory of the Global Crisis of Care

What we hope to have accomplished in this article is to demonstrate the utility of a task peculiar to philosophy which is conceptual clarification, accompanied by metatheoretical analysis. We looked into what we have proposed are instantiations, in fact models, of philosophical under-labouring, in ways reminiscent of John Locke's and Roy Bhaskar's conception of the unique task of critical philosophy. Selected works by two feminist philosophers, Nancy Fraser and Fiona Robinson, demonstrate furthermore, that philosophical under-labouring ought to result in policy and real-world transformations, in this paper's chosen topic, the precarious conditions of women (and men) in the current transnational care economy. But these projects, they insist, must be predicated on clarification and reconstruction of social reproduction and care, surfacing subtexts, and philosophical assumptions inimical to these projects.

Fraser's analysis and reconceptualization of social reproduction are integral to her grand critique of a viciously mutating capitalism, requiring expansion of the concept as well as the necessary expansion of socialism that is no longer a transitory phase to communism or the classless society but a more sustainable and realistic end in itself. Cognizant of categories of oppression other than class, such as race, gender, substantive cultural differences (recognition rights), and the non-human world, care crisis critique requires inter/trans disciplinary as well as intersectional research methods. Contextualizing research and interventions within a growing number of categories of "self-clarifications and wishes of the age", that in reality, co-constitute and co-imbricate each other in various ways through time, requires a theory that is broad enough, and yet attentive enough to differences in the transnational care economy. This is a tough job. Sociologists have bravely taken this challenge of balancing grand theory with local or regional variations. For instance, Elizabeth Uy Eviota's analysis of the sexual division of labor, in the Philippines from Precolonial to Colonial, and Post-Colonial Period employs the combined structuralist analytical lenses of political-economy, Marxist-socialist feminism, patriarchy, and colonialism.⁷⁸ Her prescient account of women's reproductive work is likewise attentive to

⁷⁷ Fiona Robinson, "Global Care Ethics: Beyond Distribution, beyond Justice," in *Journal of Global Ethics*, 9 (2013), 132.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Uy Eviota, *The Political Economy of Gender: Women and the Sexual Division of Labour in the Philippines* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992).

differential implications of region, age, family values, religion, and a host of other factors. Another Filipino sociologist that has effectively mobilized the combined powers of macro and micro analysis, in their researches and policy interventions, is Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. In her two seminal books, *Servants of Globalization*, and *The Force of Domesticity*,⁷⁹ social reproduction theory, transnational feminism, and intersectional theory subsume her empirical and ethnographic studies of the global care chain. Parreñas is acknowledged by peers to have coined the term international division of reproductive work, a new analytical category now deemed more relevant than the neoliberal term, international division of labor.

A viable form of the new socialism might be democratic socialism, or any form of post-capitalist or de-neoliberalized institutional frame, that will result from the choices and deliberation of the stakeholders, the 99%. In fact, for Fraser, freedom or emancipation is only the means, while parity of participation is the goal.⁸⁰

Robinson's conceptual clarification of care, including the reconstruction of the concept, is necessary to prefigure her project of a critical theory, research, and policy interventions, of care. An analysis of her selected works pertinent to the global crisis of care indicates a systematic synthesis of the several transformations in the concept of care, its subsequent reconstructions, and how she integrates these with her project of socializing, criticalizing, politicizing, and internationalizing the concept. More than Fraser, Robinson explicitly describes her excavation work in terms of ontology, epistemology, and ethics.

Social reproduction reconceived connotes a deep-seated and unrelenting commitment. It is a thread that stitches all social and ecological support systems of capitalism, whatever the historical juncture it is in. On the reverse side, social reproduction connotes hope that the time is not too distant for labour to be regarded once more as humanizing and human life to be at the centre.

The concept of care no longer connotes romanticization and universalization of a specific femininity. It has been rid of its sacrificial, nurturant, submissive, and intimate connotations. The concept now includes all persons capable of receiving care and of giving care; all possible venues aside from the private sphere are now venues of caring activities. Most importantly, it has been criticalized and thus expected to meet Marx's

⁷⁹ See Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, 2nd edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

⁸⁰ See Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* and Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*.

benchmark of the critical, as the self-clarifications of the struggles and wishes of the age.

As a result, Robinson is very critical of the effects of bringing care from the private realm into the public realm. Similar to Fraser, she argues that care extends beyond being merely an economic concern, as it is fundamentally a social, feminist, gender, race, and environmental issue. Around the world, the majority of care work is performed by women, and much of this work is unremunerated. Moreover, as women from lower-income countries in the global South migrate to wealthier nations in the global North, a “care deficit” phenomenon emerges, especially as more women globally enter the paid workforce. This situation is troubling because it reveals unequal power relations and exploitation within the economic system, where richer countries maintain stable household dynamics by relying on the social reproduction of care labor. Yet, care work remains undervalued and underpaid in most areas of the world. Care labour entering the global economy requires international policy coordination among countries that are part of the care-chain flow. Fiona Robinson’s central concern is that as care moves into the public realm and becomes part of the formal economy, it risks becoming commodified and exploitative. To address this, international policies on care labour must promote equitable working conditions, strengthen labour protections for migrant care workers, and establish ethical recruitment agreements between countries. More broadly, responding to the global care crisis requires comprehensive and coordinated policy approaches that recognize care as an essential component of the economy, rather than a feminized and marginalized form of labor.

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