

CHAPTER FOUR

Cheap Care

We don't know enough about Christopher Columbus's wife, Filipa Moniz Perestrelo. We know that her father, Bartolomeo, had been given Porto Santo, off the coast of Madeira, by Portugal's Prince Henry the Navigator.¹ Although her inheritance had already been spent, she brought family nobility to her wedding. She was nineteen when she married Columbus, in 1457 or 1458.² He had met her at a Mass in Lisbon, in a church run by nuns associated with the Order of Santiago, a crusading fraternity.³ Perestrelo had a son in 1479 or 1480 and died in 1484, and little else is certain.⁴ We know that Columbus took a mistress (whose cousin he left to die in the New World). As soon as Columbus saw his Indigenous hosts, he noticed that "they go as naked as when their mothers bore them, and so do the women, although I did not see more than one young girl."⁵ A month later he kidnapped half a dozen women, thinking that the men he'd already abducted would be more servile with female company.



Figure 1. William Blake, *Europe, Supported by Africa and America*, 1796.
Source: Stedman 1796, 394.

On his second voyage, the now Lord Admiral Columbus was accompanied by an Italian aristocrat, Michele de Cuneo, who wrote,

While I was in the boat I captured a very beautiful Carib woman, whom the said Lord Admiral gave to me, and with whom having taken her into my cabin, she being naked according to their custom, I conceived desire to take pleasure. I wanted to put my desire into execution but she did not want it and treated me with her finger nails in such a manner that I wished I had never begun. But seeing that . . . I took a rope and thrashed her well, for which she raised such unheard of screams that you would not have believed your ears. Finally we came to an agreement in such manner that I can tell you that she seemed to have been brought up in a school of harlots.⁶

Even though there's little explicitly about women in Columbus's diaries, they contain a great deal about gender—about how a differentiation by sex mattered in the order of things, about how workers might be managed, about how women might be owned. The language of sex and sexuality cropped up on Columbus's third voyage when he wrote to the Spanish monarchs that the world was not a sphere but more breast shaped, with Paradise on the nipple.⁷ Sailing around the world, the resources and people of the "other world" succumbing to him, Columbus conquered virgin lands for his king and queen. There's no necessary reason why the language of sex should also be the language with which silver mines were acquired.⁸ Yet as some humans moved across the surface of the planet, bringing it under the reign of property, they compassed it as they would a sexual conquest. The reign of cheap nature and cheap work was, from the beginning, a transformation not just in how and what humans could own but also in who could own and work, how they would be born, and how they would be cared for.

The work of cooking, teaching, nurturing, healing, organizing, and sacralizing predates capitalism. Modern humans' first large-scale ecological transformations were caused by the work of care, particularly through the application of fire.⁹ But at capitalism's frontier, care activities underwent dramatic changes, reflecting and amplifying early modern Christian ideas of sex and power. Almost from the beginning, sex mattered in the colonial encounter. The word Columbus used to talk about the Arawak men was *mancebo*, suggesting adolescence and presexuality. Indigenous men were emasculated in Columbus's telling of them, and future colonial wars were characterized by the notion that the defeat of Indigenous warriors by the Spanish involved their sexual as well as military subjugation.¹⁰ Consider, for instance, the 1519 letter to King Charles V of Spain from the council of Veracruz suggesting that he seek the pope's permission to punish Indigenous People because "such punishment [might] serve as a further occasion of warning and dread to those who still rebel, and thus dissuade them from such great evils as those which they work in the service of the devil. For in addition to children and men and women [being] killed and offered in sacrifice, we have learned and have been informed that they are doubtless all sodomites and engage in that abominable sin."¹¹

Yucatán Mayan sexuality scandalized Spanish colonialists. This isn't because Mayan society was an egalitarian bacchic love-in. On the contrary, sex was subject to well-defined hierarchies, circumscribed in ways Spanish colonists might have recognized had they not been overwhelmed by unfamiliarity. In place of Adam and Eve's shame at their own nakedness, Mayan gods stabbed their own penises. Instead of putting Communion wafers in their mouths, Mayan noblewomen ran rope through

their pierced tongues. In Mayans' belief in the possibility of knowing gods carnally, Spanish colonists saw only the promise of sedition and shame.¹²

Some Yucatán Mayans used colonial prudishness against their colonizers. In his highly original work, Pete Sigal has uncovered stories such as one in which an anonymous local accuses four Catholic priests of having sex in a church:

Father Díaz, squad corporal, has a woman from Bolonchen called Antonia Alvarado, whose vagina he repeatedly penetrates before the whole community, and Father Granado bruises Manuela Pacheco's vagina all night. . . . If a good commoner does that, the priest always punishes him immediately. But look at the priests' excessive fornication, putting their hands on these whores' vaginas, even saying mass like this. God willing, when the English come may they not be fornicators equal to these priests, who only lack carnal acts with men's anuses. God willing that smallpox be rubbed into their penis heads. Amen.¹³

What was normal under Mayan religious codes was retold in imperial cadences as a scandal that demanded swift action by the Spanish. These priests may have been placed elsewhere as a result, but such acts of resistance and subversion weren't able to stop the policing of which bodies did what. In her studies of colonial history, Ann Stoler observes a long line of European colonial fantasies and fears about Indigenous sexualities that sat atop some very rigid ideas about order and power: "Who wedded and bedded whom in the colonies of France, England, Holland and Iberia was never left to chance."¹⁴ Recent archaeology has suggested just how central the policing of sexuality and bodies was to the imperial project. As Barbara Voss notes, the "violent suppression of two-spirits and same-sex sexuality was only part of the program of sexual control implemented by missionaries and

military officials. With military support, missionaries also targeted premarital and extramarital sex, polygamy, and the use of birth control. As much as 25 percent of the annual mission budget for the Californias was used to purchase clothes to cover the Native [Californians'] 'indecentcy.'¹⁵

What does this have to do with world-ecology? Everything.¹⁶ Indigenous systems of gender were far more capacious and inclusive than the ones brought from Europe, but they were incompatible with capitalism's ecology.¹⁷ For the order of cheap nature and cheap work to be created, other work needed to happen without being paid at all—most of all, the creation and management of bodies to do that work.¹⁸ This chapter looks at what's called reproductive labor, the work of caring for, nurturing, and raising human communities. Such work is overwhelmingly unpaid because it makes the whole system of wage work possible. Without unpaid work, especially care work, wage work would simply be too expensive.

At the origins of capitalism, strategies used to corral Indigenous Peoples into the pen of Nature were also used to create and manage a category of humans who would perform unpaid care work: women. Human bodies were forced, sometimes medically and always juridically, into one of two inescapable categories: man and woman. The resulting entangled binaries—of Society-Nature, Man-Woman, and paid work–unpaid work—have left us with a way of thinking that has committed humans in capitalism's world-ecology to making spectacular oversights: we continue to think of “real work” solely as wage work and forget the care work that makes it all possible. Note that this is not to make the equation that all women do care work or that care work is done only by women. It's to illuminate the history of how capitalism's world-ecology has tried to make such confla-

tions seem normal. Writing a history of work without care work would be like writing an ecology of fish without mentioning the water. It'd be possible, in a limited fashion, but, once you'd realized the omission, hard to continue. From the beginning, capitalism's ecology has had a keen interest in sex, power, and reproduction—and it's a mark of the importance of that interest that knowledge of it and its history has been so thoroughly suppressed, and too easily forgotten. This history is only just beginning to be rediscovered.¹⁹

THE GREAT DOMESTICATION

There's no set way for humans to take care of one another.²⁰ The extraordinary diversity of community forms and population dynamics in human history underscores the point.²¹ At every turn, systems of tending to, caring for, and reproducing human life are connected with extrahuman natures. This existential connection not only encompasses the material and biological but extends to our belief systems and modes of thought. Every rite of passage, every springtime fertility ritual, from maypoles to bloodletting, signals the range of ways that human and extrahuman life form through each other. But when we talk of reproductive labor under capitalism, we're referring to a very specific set of arrangements, ones that were rearranged through world-ecology and persist today.²² Under these arrangements, some humans were confined to new political, social, and ecological units—households—the better to engage in care work in capitalism's ecology. Call this the Great Domestication.

Consider what appear to be entirely independent sets of observations. Between 2010–2014, the Vienna-based World Values Survey received a range of responses to the statement “When

jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.” In Iceland, 3.6 percent of people agreed, but in Egypt 99.6 percent did.²³ Why the difference? The easy explanations are culture, religion, tradition, income level. Yet a study in the prestigious *Quarterly Journal of Economics* points the finger at none of these things. Examining data over the past two hundred years, controlling for everything from religion to war to the presence of oil, the authors found that somehow, across a range of countries, a key factor associated with gender inequality is the introduction of a specific agricultural technology: the plough.²⁴ Individuals who grow up in a society with a tradition of using ploughs aren’t just more likely to perpetuate gender inequality at home—it even sticks with them when they migrate. Like good economists, the study’s authors haven’t a clue why. It’s clear that problems of gender, inequality, and discrimination wouldn’t disappear if we were now to replace ploughs with some other agricultural technology. The deeper challenge is understanding not just how a particular way of tilling the soil comes to naturalize divisions between men and women but what might be done to move toward equality.

So why might a farming implement ancient enough to be depicted in 2600 BCE Egyptian hieroglyphics be responsible for twenty-first-century chauvinism?²⁵ At the sixteenth-century frontier in what is now Peru, the chronicler Inca Garcilaso de la Vega reported something that might solve the plough-sexism conundrum.²⁶ Indigenous People widely viewed the domestication and then harnessing of oxen as bizarre behavior, both for its interruption of the order of nature and for what it said about the domesticators. The Indigenous explanation was that the Spanish were too lazy to till the land themselves and had to train animals to do it for them while they sat around picking food from their

teeth. The Spanish were also considered odd because of the land they chose to farm and the way they occupied it. Colonialists preferred the relatively flat plains for their haciendas, while Indigenous People embraced the terracing technologies that can still be seen in and around Cuzco.²⁷ You can't plough a steep hillside that everyone owns—physics and social convention both exert strong forces against it. It's much easier to plough on large, contiguous, privately owned haciendas. In other words, it wasn't just the plough that was odd—it was the constellation of transformations in work, relations to extrahuman life, and property into which the plough fit. And central to those ideas were newly forming ones around animal and human domestication.

The modern household and its membership have their origins in ecological changes in European capitalism. In *The Working Lives of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, Alice Clark argues that the nuclear household of husband, wife, and children emerged through shifts in the economic geography of care and production on the commons.²⁸ Recall that women's work on the commons included fuel gathering and gleaning, which made subsistence possible and sometimes provided a marketable surplus. If anything went wrong, social insurance came from networks of support—religious, personal, social—across the community. These arrangements were incompatible with the kinds of agricultural innovation that brought about the widespread use of the plough: larger and larger enclosed landholdings, monocultures, exclusive private property arrangements, and the creation of a workforce motivated by the threats of starvation and imprisonment.

Enclosure made it impossible for peasants to survive on their meager landholdings. Peasants became wagedworkers forced to sell their labor to survive. This also set women and men into

competition in the labor market. With the commons, dairying had been a way for women to engage in agriculture, sustaining the household through milk and dairy sales. Without a commons, no cattle could be grazed. The market for dairying skills became tight—sheep’s wool was far more lucrative than cows’ milk, and shearing was gendered as men’s work. Women were required only for the paid work of milking and calving cows in the spring. Spring ploughing and autumnal harvesting involved heavier labor and were also often coded as men’s work. This division of labor led to different prices for men’s and women’s employment. It is in the fields that we find the origins of today’s global wage gap, a phenomenon in which relations with nature were involved from the beginning.

For modern models of the household to stick, economics wasn’t enough. Women and men needed to be schooled and disciplined in their new household responsibilities. Early modern Europeans could agree that the archetype for all human social relations was the relationship between God and man. Kings embodied God’s rule over their subjects, and within the family, husbands assumed an analogous role.²⁹ It is unsurprising that just as papal power declined during the Reformation, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe saw a burst of writing about the church’s power and the sovereignty of kings and simultaneously the publication of a number of manuals on the arts of household management. These guides offered instruction to those confused by the new social order fanned by urbanization and industrialization. Among the most influential was William Gouge’s *Of Domesticall Duties*, which begins with a quote from Ephesians 5:21: “Submit your selves one to another in the fear of God.”³⁰ It urges submission on women in households by exploring the theme of a wrathful Old Testament God tempered by a New

Testament mercy. In the home, women were to submit to men and servants to their masters, and men were to follow the model of authoritarianism offered by the Heavenly Father.

The hegemony of the modern household wasn't made purely through instruction manuals. It was also made by force. As with cheap work, the bodies of certain kinds of humans needed to be disciplined for the strategy of cheap care to work. Transforming women's bodies into compliant machines of reproduction took force and fear and social policing.³¹ The institutions of this policing included the prison, the school, the clinic, the madhouse, and the management of public and private sex and sexuality through violence and shaming.³² Women heretics were accused of being supernatural, above the order that decreed their place in nature. Witches, those who defied the new order, were subject to dreadful public torture, conducted as pedagogy, lectures in new ways of behavior for those women who were outside the bourgeoisie and unable to read the instruction manuals and who might be tempted to join the resistance.³³ As Silvia Federici notes, the forms of violence that Michel Foucault was interested in—the disciplining of individual bodies to work and reproduce and behave in particular ways—appear on the historical stage only as part of the strategic needs of early capitalism.³⁴

To bring this back to the language of world-ecology, the paired discovery of humankind and nature was less anthropocentric than manthropocentric—to borrow Kate Raworth's pointed turn of phrase.³⁵ The household's violent education was enforced through the law, property law in particular. Although this discussion is best postponed until the examination of cheap lives in chapter 7, it's worth foreshadowing with a little of the urtext of modern capitalist ownership: John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, first published in 1689. This document outlines

both what can be owned and who can do the owning. It encloses the domains of the new capitalist state from other kinds of human hierarchies. So the *Second Treatise's* second paragraph states, "The Power of a Magistrate over a Subject, may be distinguished from that of a Father over his Children, a Master over his Servant, a Husband over his Wife, and a Lord over his Slave."³⁶ This cements a distinction between a public sphere, in which some men might participate as free and equal citizens, and a private sphere, in which slavery, patriarchy, and the legal representation of a wife by her husband can prevail. In other words, the liberal subject was born a man. He was born through violence and the transmission of a particular kind of production system, the global extension of capitalist agricultures, producing new lived realities of what counted as Nature and what as Society.

The social turmoil this propagated is hard to imagine, but in places it looked a lot like the scene shown below. This painting was once viewed as a delightful country landscape. Closer looks by successive critics have shown much more.³⁷ In his *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, now hanging in the National Gallery in London, Thomas Gainsborough painted a tableau of capitalist world-ecology. Let's start on the left, with the most relaxed person: Robert Andrews. He's part of the 1 percent, yet his clothes are as informal as they were ever likely to be when he was in public—Mr. Andrews wears the 1750s equivalent of a "Kiss the Chef" apron. He owned everything you can see here—the Auberies, his family's estate in Sudbury, Essex, as viewed from "a hundred yards to the south-east of the house looking towards Cornard Wood on the Suffolk side of the Stour valley."³⁸

This estate was the result of inheritance and investment. Robert Andrews's father, also named Robert Andrews, was an enormously successful silversmith and banker. Of the many in



Figure 2. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, circa 1750. The National Gallery, London.

Andrews the elder's debt, the one in the deepest was Frederick, Prince of Wales, for whom Andrews had guaranteed a loan of £30,000 (today that would be \$6.4 million).³⁹ Gainsborough's painting is a trace of the relations of cheap money, of the transformation of cash into war and then back into cash, a portrait of ownership, bought with the spoils of Potosí pulled from the ground a century before. The Auberies was a merger of property from the Andrews family and the family of his wife, Frances Carter. By the time Gainsborough was at his easel to paint this work, his commissions came not only from the nobility but also from a new class of moneyed city dwellers, unrelated to the aristocracy, whose riches had been created by the new cycles of accumulation and plunder begun barely three centuries before.

Many commentators have observed that the painting is unusual in being a study of both the Andrewses and their land. This is a picture of a farm at the frontier of agricultural technology.

Robert Andrews was a published agronomist, appearing in the *Annals of Agriculture* with titles such as “On the Profit of Farming” and “On the Smut in Wheat.”⁴⁰ The cereal here is in straight lines. It may have been planted using a seed drill,⁴¹ invented by Jethro Tull in 1700 although only becoming popular in the middle of the 1800s. This technology works to solve problems that emerge when agriculture in the countryside looks increasingly like industry in the city: trying to optimize the balance among labor, machinery, inputs, and markets.

Gainsborough offers us another insight, into the relationship between Robert and his wife Frances. While he’s the owner of all he surveys, slouching against a tree with his rifle propped against him, she is upright, her hands in her lap over an unfinished part of the painting. Some have suggested that Gainsborough planned to include a pheasant shot by Mr. Andrews and retrieved by his dog.⁴² Others have hazarded that this is where a baby Andrews might have been added later.⁴³ Either way, Frances Andrews is here likened to property, as enclosed as the land her husband owns, as domesticated as the dog by her husband’s side.

Gainsborough would have known Robert Andrews the younger, having grown up in the same area and likely attended the same grammar school at the same time. He would have been aware of the elder Andrews’s wealth and may even have received patronage from him, knowing that command of such a fortune was forever beyond his own reach.⁴⁴ Perhaps that is why some commentators have seen in his representation of Mrs. Andrews a contempt in her look toward the viewer, which says, property though she may be, that we are below her station.⁴⁵

It is these relations of power that accompany the traditions and technologies of cereal-driven capitalist monoculture, hall-

marks of the Great Domestication. Gainsborough's painting not only offers a history lesson but is contemporary news: it's a description of social changes being enforced, and contested, around the world today. The Danish economist Ester Boserup, discussing the social relations that then arose, noted an Islamic quote "ascribed to the Prophet himself that a plough never enters into a farm without servitude entering too."⁴⁶ Comprehend the destruction of the commons under enclosure, understand the new relations between human production and reproduction, and as a bonus you can solve the mystery of the misogynist plough.⁴⁷ It's just that you have to go back not two hundred years but many more to discover how ploughing first became a tradition, fed by the bones of the social systems it destroyed.

FINANCIALIZATION AND WOMEN'S INHERITANCE

New traditions of control put bourgeois women in a bind, particularly in England. The law there enshrined coverture—the status of a married woman, including the placing of her person and property under her husband's authority. Whereas most of Europe recognized three kinds of property in a marriage—his inheritance, her inheritance, and property acquired during the marriage—English law saw only two kinds: her freehold land inheritance and everything else, of which a widow could inherit only one third. Coverture persisted from the Middle Ages into the nineteenth century. So great was its power to rob women of rights and identity, campaigners against it called it "civil death." It is from this institution that a wife's taking of her husband's name originates. True, middle-class wives had power over their

domestic staff and other life. (A seventeenth-century slogan found in household manuals: “England is a woman’s paradise, a servant’s prison, and a horse’s hell.”)⁴⁸ Parents of bourgeois daughters were nonetheless worried. What would happen to the wealth and way of life they’d accustomed their daughters to after their daughters married? What if the husbands were feckless? What if, even if decent, the husbands died young?

The answers to these questions go some way to explaining modern high finance, as a forceful analysis by Amy Louise Erikson suggests.⁴⁹ At a time of witch-hunts, open rebellion against coverture was risky. To survive and resist it less overtly, the English developed and accustomed themselves to laws of contract that allowed widows to prepare for their financial security, children under coverture to have an income, and families who’d have to support widows to be assured of a return of their wealth. While these arrangements weren’t themselves financial instruments, Erikson argues that they “helped to establish a climate in which the concept of legal security for notional concepts of property became commonplace.”⁵⁰ This was particularly significant for unmarried bourgeois women—their access to money enabled them to participate in the speculative transactions through which capitalism developed. There’s even evidence to suggest that while men were losing their shirts in the South Sea financial bubble, the women who joined this speculative frenzy more often came out ahead.⁵¹ While it’s important not to make too much of this—the equities market wasn’t terribly big—it’s worth observing that the legal and cultural infrastructure of today’s financial instruments, of options and derivatives, was laid down to hedge bourgeois women’s losses through the household. Unmarried women’s participation in finance markets wasn’t, of course, the goal of the new nuclear household. We

offer it as an example both of the irreducibility of class to gender and, once again, of how the quirks of historical contingency mattered in shaping modern capitalism.⁵²

For women who weren't to become part of the investor class, marriage offered other possibilities. As unemployment in the 1600s increased, so did incentives for women to marry to avoid poverty.⁵³ Yet even as the economic imperatives for women to choose marriage increased, so did the covering philosophy describing this choice as *uncoerced*. This, of course, mirrors the relations of workers under capitalism, who needed to appear free agents at least in theory, even if their freedom boiled down to the choice of working for a pittance, starving to death, or serving in a debtors' prison. A central theorist of this new world was, of course, Adam Smith. He also had thoughts about families and marriage, even if his practical experience was limited. Smith neither fathered children nor married. He lived with his mother, Margaret Douglas, who tended to him through most of his adult life as his dependent. Smith's father had died before his birth, and Douglas had inherited only a third of the property. Smith came into his father's estate aged two. The laws of coverture explain why Douglas was financially dependent on her toddler after her husband died.⁵⁴

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published in 1759, Smith drew on his knowledge of North American Indigenous marriage, a contract arranged by elders rather than entered into freely by husband and wife. Why didn't Indigenous People marry freely? Because, Smith reported, echoing Columbus's gendered language, "the weakness of love . . . is regarded among savages as the most unpardonable effeminacy."⁵⁵ It's an odd logic, but it served to make his point: the best kind of marriage was the kind that happened in Britain, where women and men chose

each other as equals in love. It's no surprise that the man most frequently cited as the bedrock of free-market liberty should have celebrated liberty in private love, or that he justified this model by appeal to the inferiority of savage, natural civilizations. But it's still a little ironic that his life's most loving relationship was with his mum.

THE INVENTION OF WOMEN

For the new, capitalist order to flourish, the old order needed extirpation. Kin networks that had supported women, men, and children beyond the nuclear family were destroyed no less than the commons.⁵⁶ The extended family and relationships that could sustain families were transformed and professionalized. Rather than perform the work of education in schools, women were corralled to the nursery. Surgeons—always male—replaced midwives.⁵⁷ Women's economic activity, insofar as it was permitted, was confined to the domestic sphere, a domain from which politics was correspondingly banished. Women fought back. The French Revolution began with women leading protests for bread, for instance. But the logic of capitalism's ecology demanded that women's history, activism, and resistance be minimized and muted. Men ruled the roost at home, and citizens ruled the public sphere—and to be a citizen you had to be a white male property owner.⁵⁸

To make this system work, the state developed a keen interest in enforcing the categories of man and woman. Humans whose bodies didn't neatly fit were surgically altered to fit one category or the other.⁵⁹ Where such categories didn't exist, they had to be invented. Central to the British colonization of Nigeria, for instance, was the transformation of domestic arrangements, the

creation of the domestic sphere, and the invention of the juridical category of woman. Although consanguinity is a vital part of Nigerian and many other societies—and comes with its own hierarchies that muddle and sometimes elevate women to a position higher than they would have in a nuclear family—the kinship that matters most in law for liberal citizens is that of conjugality.⁶⁰ As Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí notes, “There were no women in Yorùbá society until recently. There were, of course, *obìnrin*. *Obìnrin* are anafemales. Their anatomy, just like that of *okùnrin* (anamales), did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their access.”⁶¹ Oyèwùmí continues:

The creation of “women” as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state. . . . It is not surprising, therefore, that it was unthinkable for the colonial government to recognize female leaders among the peoples they colonized, such as the Yorùbá. . . . The transformation of state power to male-gender power was accomplished at one level by the exclusion of women from state structures. This was in sharp contrast to Yorùbá state organization, in which power was not gender-determined.⁶²

Just as Spanish colonists had bridled at Mayan sexual adventures, so the British demanded allegiance to their own version of sexual order and power, one that created the legal category of woman and set her in the household, the workshop of reproductive labor.⁶³ But, of course, to use the term *workshop* is to mischaracterize how housework was viewed. It was considered precisely beyond the domain of wage work, a favor that women did for men, akin to the free gifts that nature offered enterprise.

The cultural foundations for this understanding of women were laid, as Jennifer Morgan and others have documented, in the transatlantic enslavement of African women.⁶⁴ Slavers and

explorers followed the logic of De Cuneo's reports from Columbus's second voyage, representing Indigenous women as both preternaturally sexual and outside the domains of proper Society—closer to Nature. Central to this idea was a monstrous fecundity. John Atkins, an abolitionist, reported of Guinean women that they engaged in bestiality and had breasts so big that “some could suckle over their shoulder.”⁶⁵ Other colonists reported women who gave birth without pain. With slavery, fascination was mixed with new imperatives—such as the production of more slaves. Female slaves became financial instruments not only for discharging debt but also for generating interest: some women in Barbados in the 1650s were designated as “increasers,” bodies through which more slaves would be produced, thus recompensing the financial burden of sustaining them. Further, this fertility naturally conferred a predisposition to raise other children, a skill that found its way into many an advertisement for slaves sold to white bourgeois families looking for domestic workers.⁶⁶

Always, there was the possibility of resistance. Early in the settler colonist project in North America, Indigenous women straddled the frontiers of the Canadian fur trade—mediating contact, replacing husbands who had paid a bride-price for them with new ones, evading fur-trading companies' attempts at regulation.⁶⁷ Their households wouldn't conform to the dyadic, patriarchal model in which men kept women and women kept house. There were, similarly, spaces for women in the United States to engage in entrepreneurial activities—taking in lodgers, for instance—as long as this was for the good of the household, under the ultimate authority of a man somewhere.⁶⁸ In Europe, Dutch women from rural areas became domestic workers in cities, formed congresses, and unionized.⁶⁹ Yet this resistance always happened in the con-

text of other fights. When emerging nationalists in the Global South fought European empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they enforced boundaries of sexual politics with increasing vigor. Race, class, and gender were produced simultaneously at these frontiers, in ways that affected both men and women.⁷⁰ Like the study of whiteness, investigations of masculinity and its legal cognates are still relatively new, but it's a growth industry, and there's a great deal to learn about the transformations and resistances around kin relationships under hegemonic masculinity.⁷¹

AFTER THE PLOUGH

What are we to say to those who insist that ploughs aren't destiny? It is possible for a society to recover from the effects of the shift toward capitalism and, under certain conditions, to see a kind of equality flourish. This view was summarized by the IMF in a 2016 report which shows that the lot of women is improving worldwide, based on a range of indicators including health, economic and parliamentary participation, and education.⁷² The IMF associates increased gender equality with rises in national income, and the prejudice remains that wealth brings women's lib.

Yet the story is hardly straightforward. Look, for instance, at countries with oil in the Middle East and elsewhere for evidence that income growth inhibits women's rights.⁷³ Look too at a country like India, a site of gross and persistent inequality despite a 500 percent increase in real per capita income over the past forty years. Certainly, increased access to clean water and health care has helped women,⁷⁴ but women and girls continue to work more than men, for less pay and less food.⁷⁵ The daily

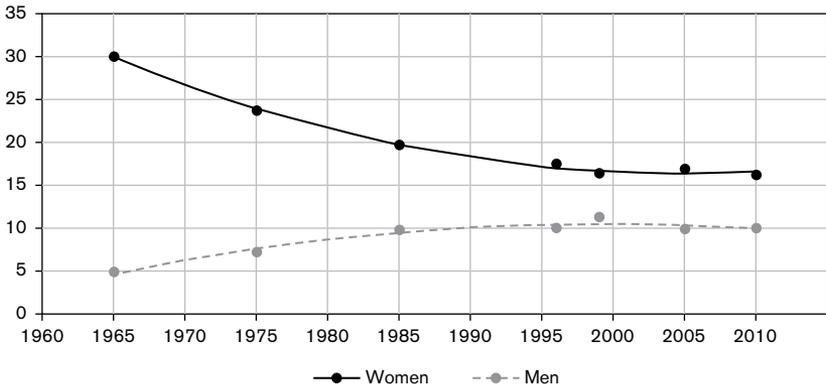


Figure 3. Trends in average weekly housework hours in the United States by gender for individuals aged 25–64. Source: Bianchi et al. 2012, 57–58.

calorie intake of rural Indians has fallen by five hundred over the past forty years, with anemia rates for girls rising over the past ten years.⁷⁶ One of the ways to peel this apart is through a time-use survey. Indian time-use surveys show that women and girls are doing far more work in the household than appears in the national system of accounts, with women spending six times more hours collecting food and fuelwood and performing household maintenance than men. While low-income men and women often have multiple, very low-paying jobs, the lowest-paid workers remain women, who also sleep less and have less free time, particularly if they live in rural areas.⁷⁷ This isn't just a case of "If only they were richer, they'd be better off." The nation *is* richer, but its poor and working classes are hungrier, and its women are more likely to be overweight or underweight than its men.⁷⁸

In the United States, scholars looking at reproductive labor have noted generally positive trends in the twentieth century, as the figure above suggests. More men have been pitching in with

domestic unpaid labor than had been the case previously—though with a ceiling of ten hours per week. Although it was often thought that laborsaving devices like washing machines and dishwashers were technologies to reduce the burden on women, things didn't happen that way. Initially, washing machines didn't reduce the time spent washing. They just raised men's expectations about how often clothes should be cleaned—by women.⁷⁹ It took the US women's movement to shift expectations about the domestic division of labor, and even then, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan notes in *More Work for Mother*, the work that men ended up doing was precisely that which was more mechanized. Women's work, meantime, has continued to be more mentally demanding, with multitasking more intense than in men's work in the household, even if over similar durations of time.⁸⁰

In the discussion of cheap work in the previous chapter, we connected rural and urban economics in the link between global farms and global factories. The availability of proletarian labor was possible only because of the transformation of care work into unpaid work, available as one of Nature's "free gifts"—which, as we have seen, are neither free nor gifted. Capitalism not only continues to take care work for granted but also expects the skills developed through this work to be available for sale in the world of commodity production. So it is that gendered ideas lead to women being sought—and cheapened—for their nimble fingers, caring attitudes, and supportive miens (for example) by those looking to hire cheap workers for *maquilas*, call centers, and nursing care industries, those workers having been trained through a lifetime of cheap care and expected to have certain skills *because they are women*.⁸¹

There are gendered expectations not only of skills transferred from care work but also of flexibility. It might appear that

the precariat—workers who lack the job security, pensions, and organizing bodies normally associated with mid-twentieth-century industrial workers in the Global North—is experiencing something new.⁸² But mobility, flexibility, and permanent availability have long been hallmarks of care work. Precarious employment has its roots in advances in capitalist workplace logistics as well as in previous regimes of unpaid care. The freelance economy can be read as an extension of the disciplines of care work spread across the entire working world.

The growth in the care economy—estimated to be 70 percent from 2012 to 2022 in the United States, with similar trends globally⁸³—keeps care work structurally cheap. Yet it is possible for the US care economy to look the way it does only because of the movements of carers from other parts of the world. America's care economy has a long, global, and racialized ecology, from the sale of imported slaves as wet nurses to more recent migrations of health care professionals from the Global South to the Global North.⁸⁴ In some cases that labor is literally reproductive. Advances in fertility technology have produced a boom in the demand for pregnancy surrogates. The world's largest market for wombs is India, where a service that costs \$80,000 to \$100,000 in the Global North can be had for \$35,000 to \$40,000 in an industry expected to reap profits in excess of \$2 billion in India alone.⁸⁵ The frontier of cheap care has deepened and expanded, with vast international networks of care service providers remitting funds across borders to help sustain households elsewhere. The global household has always done the work that makes possible the global factory and the global farm.

One radical response to the fundamental devaluation of care work involves a jujitsu pricing move and the demand that house-

work be paid. As the 1970s Wages for Housework campaign argued, “Slavery to an assembly line is not a liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink. To deny this is also to deny the slavery of the assembly line itself, proving again that if you don’t know how women are exploited, you can never really know how men are.”⁸⁶ The irony here, of course, is that there’s a long history of women who were paid little if at all for their domestic labor: those working under slavery. The United States is not alone in this pattern, with carers from different classes, castes, and indeed nations suffering widespread exploitation in other countries too.⁸⁷ And even if payment were a route to recognition, there’s much further to go to reach dignity. As Angela Davis put it, “Psychological liberation can hardly be achieved simply by paying the housewife a wage.”⁸⁸ Yet the insight of Wages for Housework shouldn’t be forgotten. To ask for capitalism to pay for care is to call for an end to capitalism.

If introducing money into this ecological relation doesn’t guarantee success, perhaps more collective approaches might work. Although states have been there from the creation of the modern household, their role in managing care dramatically increased after the Second World War and the fight for the creation of the welfare state.⁸⁹ That welfare state—especially in Western Europe—delivered meaningful gains for working classes in health care, education, and pensions. But state management of care work isn’t the same thing as freedom from such work.⁹⁰ As Gwendolyn Mink observed, the battles for women’s rights have been fought on the terrain of motherhood, and the attendant “victories socialized motherhood rather than citizenship.”⁹¹ Karen Orren noticed that labor law in general and care work in particular are domains of “belated feudalism.”⁹² It was only in 2015, for instance, that US care workers gained

recognitions as workers under the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, as a result of union and cooperative organizing.⁹³ In other words, one of the requirements for taking the ecology of the plough out of capitalism's ecology is a commitment to engage in political struggle and not, as the IMF would have it, simply wait for incomes to increase.⁹⁴

The fight to have care work recognized, rewarded, and reduced under neoliberalism becomes yet harder under right-wing economic nationalism. In a number of countries in the Global North—not just in the United States—the difficulties of finding secure work under austerity programs have already led adult children to live with their parents well into their thirties. Austerity also coerces women into caring for not just their adult offspring but, increasingly, their elderly parents. US women now, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes, spend more of their lives caring for their elders than for their offspring (eighteen versus seventeen years).⁹⁵ The relations of care that they bear have been sharpened by the decline in the real value of pensions, concurrent with the asset stripping of the welfare state. Nationalism, as we'll see in chapter 7, always comes with attending logics of domesticity and homemaking. It is, sadly, entirely conceivable that the gains won by care workers over the past seventy years might be quickly reversed over the next decade.

Yet the struggles of liberation and resistance continue—fought by groups from sex-worker unions to home care collectives—against forms of domination that look strikingly similar to those at the dawn of capitalism's ecology. Studies of trends in international occupational growth in the wake of the latest recession point to a striking rise in gendered work—a move toward a world of soldiering for men and nursing for women.⁹⁶ That work is conducted under conditions in which violence

continues to be used as a pedagogy of cruelty—as recent surges in brutality against women attest.⁹⁷

If the struggles for the recognition, equal distribution, reduction, and compensation of care work are successful, it will be a hopeful sign of the end of cheap nature—and a shift toward valuations premised on care work, not exploitation. To imagine a world of justice in care work is to imagine a world after capitalism. But while capitalism persists, the cheapness of labor reproduction is based in turn on other cheap things. Just as capitalism's ecology requires cheap care to underwrite cheap work, it also requires fuel for the bodies of workers, to maintain social order. So it is to cheap food that we now turn.