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Neoliberalism, Co-Production, and the Social Factory

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Excerpted from “Patience and Time: Timebanking and
Self-Organizing Networks of Eldercare in Greater Portland, ME”

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Understanding the problems around care requires us to look back and more nationally than just Maine. Many of the other elders I interviewed seemed to agree with Emma [pseudonym] about the importance of community and “care networks,” sharing a nostalgia for times when local communities and extended families cared for each other over and above both state welfare and corporate market consumption. 69-year-old Lucy (pseudonym), a core organizer in the Hour Exchange project and one of my interviewees, spoke to me about how “society used to work very much on this kind of basis of mutual aid but since modern capitalism and especially globalization, people are more isolated from one another.” Similarly, 64-year-old Peter (pseudonym), a long-time member of Hour Exchange I also interviewed, outlined how

nowadays people don’t grow up and work in the same place they live. So ya know, cousin Freddy is no longer in the next town. He’s three states away. So now you just can’t have cousin Freddy come over and mow the lawn ‘cause you’re sick or you broke your leg.

Even if there is an undeniable element of “rose-tinted glasses” (especially from a critical race theory perspective) in these assessments, the historical record bears it out in specific ways. For example, Roderick Long writes how “[i]n the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one of the primary sources of health care and health insurance for the working poor in Britain, Australia, and the United States was the fraternal society” or “friendly society.”¹ Maine in particular thrived through voluntary associations such as the Maine State Grange, which emerged after the Civil War from the Farmers’ Clubs Movement and helped rural farmers not only find community, discuss new agricultural techniques, and even get educational resources but also could provide insurance for members.² These sort of groups persisted until greater regulations and the expanding corporate economy displaced them. This movement away from voluntary or community organizations as a source of care was then solidified during the New Deal’s sweeping welfare expansion in response to the Great Depression (1929-1939), only to be torn down 50 years later by the Reagen administration (1981-1989).

The result of this abandonment of the supposed “common welfare” promises of the state has been theorized by queer, feminist, and disability theorists extensively. For example, Khiara M. Bridges observes that neoliberalism positions “the private family as the entity that provides (and is expected to provide) the social support that the state once offered in earlier political economic moments.”³ In the context of eldercare, this often takes the form of adult chil-

¹ Roderick Long, “How Government Solved the Health Care Crisis: Medical Insurance that Worked – Until Government ‘Fixed’ It,” *Formulations* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1993-1994): 16, accessed April 13, 2023, <http://www.freenation.org/a/F/1.2.pdf>.

² Stanley R. Howe, “To Improve the Farmer’s Lot: The Grange in Maine,” *The Courier* 34, no. 1 (2010), accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.bethelhistorical.org/legacy-site/THE%20COURIER,%20Vol.%2034,%20No.%201%20%282010%29.pdf>.

³ Khiara M. Bridges, “Reflection: Committing to Change,” 2013, in *Feminist Activist Ethnography: Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America*, ed. Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 131.

by a digital platform premised on creating economic value.¹⁷

Thus, Cahn’s approach goes further than a demand for wages in order to recognize unwaged work, and advocates for its immediate compensation *within* the “second economy” itself, thereby strengthening those community infrastructures. This resists the above issue or what Cahn calls the “colonization” of said economy by the capitalist money economy by “increasingly [taking] over functions previously performed by the family, kinship groups, neighborhoods and non-market institutions” while at the same time assuming the “continued contribution and support” of the networks and institutions being undermined.¹⁸ So how do you attempt this compensation without the capitalist state’s money? For Cahn, the answer is timebanking.

¹⁷ Mumby, “Theorizing Struggle,” 2.

¹⁸ Cahn, *No More*, 114-115.

dren or more able-bodied or able-minded spouses being unable to afford private in-home care or spaces in retirement homes and therefore being compelled to become full-time caretakers for the subject of said eldercare. As such a great deal of what we describe as eldercare occurs outside of the waged or even monied economy. On one hand that represents something very wonderful about human beings; that we care for each other and can do so without a (monetary) profit motive. This is the sort of cooperative basis of all societies that David Graeber calls “everyday communism.” The organization Community Economies—building off the work of feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham—argues, this is part of an “iceberg” of “actually-existing spaces of negotiation” distinct from the realm of wage labor and top-down workplaces.⁴ These “spaces of negotiation” offer the possibility of thinking outside of the hegemony of a “capitalist world” in favor of a view that there are many diverse economies existing simultaneously. As they put it:

When the economy is framed in terms of capitalism, and when capitalism is presented as spreading across the globe, it seems that it has to be matched by an equivalent anti-capitalist struggle organized globally. This diminishes the potential of the local as a site of economic politics. Framing the economy as comprising diverse practices...

can help us think about how these various practices “might serve as building blocks for community economies.”⁵

⁴ David Graeber, “Communism,” 2010, in *The Human Economy: A Citizen’s Guide*, by Antonio David Cattani, ed. Keith Hart and Jean-Louis Laville (London, UK: Polity Press, 2010), accessed April 13, 2023, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/communism>.

⁵ “Community Economies Research and Practice,” Community Economies, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.communityeconomies.org/about/community-economies-research-and-practice>.



takes place outside the so-called market economy,” GDP and other traditional economic metrics are unable (or unwilling) to measure positive non-growth impacts like keeping “seniors out of nursing homes,” “child-rearing (that isn’t paid care), elder care (provided by family and relatives), volunteer work, community work,” and more. But this “present operating system—family, neighborhood community—is in bad shape,” and is increasingly unable to “reliably perform basic functions such as transmitting values, rearing children, providing support, maintaining safety, generating consensus, preserving members, sharing limited resources.” Cahn comes to a conclusion similar to Federici and other autonomist feminists regarding the solution to this problem by arguing for compensation for non-waged work but not through wages, but through an approach he calls “co-production,” which “says: Pay for what you get by contributing what you can. It says, no more free rides. But it also says, We value what you can contribute; and we do not equate what you have to offer with how much money you can afford to pay.”¹⁶

The reference to “no more free rides” may at first seem like conservative rhetoric of faux self-reliance, but the point is not that people are not deserving of rides but rather that *someone* must provide that ride and should be compensated for that labor. The paradox of the social factory is that when unwaged work, like “free rides,” demands compensation, Mumby points out that this leads to a situation where

Uber, Lyft, Airbnb, and many similar platform-based companies capture everyday activities such as ridesharing and couch surfing in order to monetize them. What was once a social act between acquaintances has become an economic transaction mediated

¹⁶ Edgar S. Cahn, *No More Throw-Away People: The Co-Production Imperative*(Washington, DC: Essential Books, 2000), 48-49, 54, 57.

gests that if it were, it would be worth 1.9 trillion dollars in 2019 alone.¹⁴ But, as Italian autonomist feminist Sylvia Federici theorizes,

[b]y denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone. First of all, it has got a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life (the magic words: “Yes, darling, you are a real woman”)¹⁵.

If the social factory is indeed attempting to pervade all aspects of life, then it is homemakers who are pushed toward unwaged work in the familial production center, a fact Federici and other socialist feminists attempted to elucidate starting in 1972 through their *Wages for Housework*. Although the focus of this lens is generally on “wifing” and childrearing in particular, a similar point can be made with any unwaged care work—including eldercare in that there is an expectation for adult children, more able-bodied spouses, other elderly friends, and beyond to bear the brunt of care without compensation when elders are no longer considered profitable or efficient enough for the capitalist labor pool.

Edgar S. Cahn—often referred to as the “father of timebanking”—makes a similar argument regarding the presence of a “second economy” outside of the waged-monied-firmed economy without which the latter economy could not possibly function. According to Cahn, even as “at least 40 percent of all economic activity

¹⁴ Gus Wezerek and Kristen R. Ghodsee, “Women’s Unpaid Labor is Worth \$10,900,000,000,000,” *New York Times*, last modified March 5, 2020, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/04/opinion/women-unpaid-labor.html>.

¹⁵ Sylvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol, UK: Power of Women Collective & Falling Wall Press, 1975), 2, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://files.libcom.org/files/Federici-Silvia-Wages-Against-Housework.pdf>.

However, neither Community Economies nor Gibson-Graham are claiming that just because certain practices do not involve wages or even pay does not mean it is necessarily separate from the extractive logic of the dominant economy, but rather that there are “multiple sites as places of economic struggle” within which extractivism and hierarchy need to be constantly and consciously resisted.⁶ One of the best ways then, in my opinion, to conceptualize the problem faced by attempts to resist those elements outside of the waged economy was forwarded in 1962 by Italian autonomist Mario Tronti in the form of the “social factory;” whereby

the social relation is transformed into a *moment* of the relation of production, the whole of society is turned into an articulation of production, that is, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society.⁷

Where in Marx’s era the factory was the realm exclusively of the industrial proletariat, in the era of economic globalization the U.S. economy has seemingly exported the factory overseas. Especially in Maine, manufacturing jobs have been rapidly dwindling since the 1970s; leaving towns like Lewiston and Waterville with abandoned factory and mill buildings as dominant features of their urban landscape⁸. But the factory has not actually disappeared. Instead, as Dennis K. Mumby argues, “capitalism is no longer content

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mario Tronti, “Factory and Society (1962),” *Operaismo in English*, last modified June 13, 2013, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://operaismoenglish.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/factory-and-society/>.

⁸ “Manufacturing Jobs: Trends, Issues, and Outlook,” Maine Department of Labor, Center for Workforce Research and Information, last modified July 2012, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/publications/pdf/ManufacturingJobsTrendsIssuesandOutlook.pdf>.

simply to extract surplus value at the point of production from purchased labor time, but increasingly captures the (free) sociality of everyday life and turns it into surplus value”⁹. On the one hand this means the “social acts” have become increasingly commodified, not primarily in the sense that they are being acquired through a monetary transaction but in that they are mediated by platforms, devices, etc. intended to generate profit for others. On the other, the logic (and most importantly the *discipline*) of the factory, in line with the Marxist view that the mode of production (now a global phenomenon) influences the content of society, increasingly ingrained itself in our cultural institutions, our interpersonal relationships, our values, and even the way we think about reality.

Consider, for a stark contrast between life inside and outside of (or in between) the social factory, the treatment of elders in many non-industrialized cultures. Of course, sweeping generalizations that fetishize Indigeneity and the “non-west” are inaccurate and unhelpful, but it is absolutely true to say that there are better models for how we care for elders, with many appearing outside of Anglo-American cultural spheres. For example, some Aboriginal communities in Australia position elders as, to quote participatory research from Lucy Busija et. al, “citizens that the community looks to for guidance and whose standing in the community is” based on “community engagement, spirituality, physical and emotional well-being, and wisdom gained through life experiences” and, as such, elders are treated with great reverence.¹⁰ Contrast this with the hegemonic “deficit model of aging,” a term coined by psychologist Catherine Roland, which dominates most “western” societies and

⁹ Dennis K. Mumby, “Theorizing Struggle in the Social Factory,” *Organization Theory* 1 (April 2020): 2, accessed April 14, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341226490_Theorizing_Struggle_in_the_Social_Factory.

¹⁰ Lucy Busija et al., “The Role of Elders in the Wellbeing of a Contemporary Australian Indigenous Community,” *The Gerontologist* 60, no. 3: 514, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/60/3/513/5222719>.

holds that aging past a certain point is always a net loss because of its impact on the mind and the body.¹¹ These stigmas have only been exacerbated by capitalist globalization, where it underpins the “gray tsunami” narrative in the United States, which, according to [Ashton] Applewhite, asserts that “an aging population makes it impossible to compete in the global economy. A young labor force, on the other hand, attracts global businesses and investors” and so is required for a competitive edge.¹² In this way the whole domestic economy of the U.S. is being pulled toward being an enterprise competing in the *world* economy, with the matter of economic efficiency penalizing age and ability traceable back to the domestic factories of the 19th and early 20th century where, as Robert McRuer argues, because of the need for efficient and repetitive work, “able-bodied identities were . . . produced in the disciplinary space of the factory. That new public identity, in turn, would seem to ensure that disability was more of a concern in the private or domestic realm.”¹³

This “private or domestic realm”—usually consisting of the nuclear family unit—is often represented as separate from the capitalist economy, but in reality not only is it a way for capitalists to avoid as much as possible using surplus value to take care of workers but it is the very economic unit from which new workers are created. Considering the importance of this realm for the functioning of the rest of society, it *should* be alarming that housework—primarily performed by women—is almost entirely uncompensated in any way similar to other labor. One *New York Times* article sug-

¹¹ Catherine Roland, “Defeating the Deficit Model of Aging,” *Psychology Today*, last modified June 9, 2015, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/resilience-and-reframing/201506/defeating-the-deficit-model-aging>.

¹² [Ashton Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (Celadon Books, 2019), 48, epub.]

¹³ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2006), 88.