The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Capitalism

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A Feminist Critique of Political Economy

Neoclassical economic theory is too market-centric and Marxian economic theory is too capitalism-centric.

Neither pays sufficient attention to the social organization of care.

Collective conflict over the distribution of the costs of caring for dependents cross-cuts conflict over the distribution of “surplus.”
Outline

• Human capital, capabilities, and care
• The logic of patriarchal systems
• The evolution of patriarchal capitalism
• Gender inequality and the care penalty
Human Capital, Human Capabilities, Social Reproduction, and Care

Capabilities—human functionings of intrinsic value and the opportunity to develop them.

Human capital—a set of capabilities that yield a flow of economic benefits.

Social reproduction—the process by which human capabilities and capital are reproduced—requires care for dependents.
Implicit Collective Bargaining

Who Pays for the Kids—and other Dependents?

Care for adults who are sick or disabled, including the frail elderly, is part of the overall cost of maintaining human capabilities, including human capital.
Why Caregivers are Economically Vulnerable

1. Care for human dependents is costly.

2. Asymmetric investment in individual offspring by caregivers puts them at a disadvantage.

3. Caregivers can be “held hostage” by their emotional attachment.

4. Children are “non-excludable” in consumption (public goods).

5. Contractual arrangements for control of children or even partial “payback” are difficult to enforce.
Neoclassical Reasoning

- Tastes and preferences are exogenously given.

- Some individuals have a “taste” for altruism.

- Individuals invest in their own human capital.

- They make efficient choices, which largely determine their earnings.

- Markets efficiently reward successful human capital formation.
Imagine that corporations do not hire workers but purchase androids, which require new batteries every week.

The purchase price of an android would be at least as high as the costs of producing that android (which might require 18 years of time, money and effort).

But what if some people were willing to produce androids for free, because they enjoyed doing so?

Then employers would need only pay for the batteries that the androids require (and desire) to operate. In other words, they would need only to pay “wages.”
Collective Identity and Conflicts

Employers try to minimize the cost of producing and maintaining labor power and human capital.

Dominant groups based on class, citizenship and race try to gain maximum advantage for their children.

Men try to minimize the costs and risks to them of caring for dependents.
The Paradox of Human Capitalism

Human capital can win a high rate of return in a competitive capitalist economy.

But much effort devoted to the production and maintenance of human capital is poorly rewarded by the market.

Market competition creates incentives for empowered groups to offload the costs of care onto less empowered groups.
Commitment to weakens women’s relative bargaining power.

The patriarchal “bargain”: women’s subordination in return for support of children.

Children’s assistance in old age provides some “payback” for reproductive labor.

Patriarchal societies generate more rapid population growth than egalitarian ones, advantageous in a labor-intensive warfare or agricultural production regime.


Pablo Picasso, *Rape of the Sabines*, 1963
Nicholas Poussin,  
*Rape of the Sabine Women* (1637)
Women are Forced to “Over-specialize” in Care

Patriarch as “residual claimant” -- owes wife “subsistence” but his share of the residual determined by her bargaining power, a negative function of her specialization in reproductive work.

Therefore, he has an incentive to encourage her to “overspecialize” in reproductive work.

Folbre and Braunstein, “To Honor or Obey,” Feminist Economics 2001
Bargaining Models

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE AVERAGE WOMAN'S STANDARD OF LIVING DROPS 73% DURING THE FIRST YEAR AFTER A DIVORCE?

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE AVERAGE MAN'S STANDARD OF LIVING IMPROVES 42% DURING THAT SAME YEAR?

I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU.

Ted Rall is a great cartoonist and I hope he considers this fair use.
Patriarchal Capitalism

Capitalism emerges in a patriarchal context.

Undermines some aspect of patriarchy and weakens other.

Women gain “permission” to participate in capitalism gradually, in the face of ideological and political resistance from men (see Greed, Lust, and Gender).
The Unhappy Marriage of Patriarchy and Capitalism

Paralleling Heidi Hartmann’s 1979 essay, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism”

Marxist theory has become less class-centric.

And feminist theory has moved toward “intersectionality.”

But not much specific theorizing on logic of patriarchal capitalism.
Wage employment is based on individual market work, not family work. Both wage employment and fertility decline empower women.

Women engage in collective political action.

Women Gain “Self-Ownership”
Declines in Paternal Obligation

Increase in non-marriage and divorce—and in percentage of families maintained by women alone.

In the U.S.—relatively low levels of public support for care work.

Women have higher income but more financial responsibility for care of dependents.

Much of current gender difference in pay is related to costs of care for family members and costs of specializing in care occupations.
“Self ownership” is not sufficient to establish gender equality because women continue to specialize in producing and maintaining things (like the capabilities of others) that they cannot own.

Women gain opportunities but mothers and other caregivers become more economically vulnerable.
Gender Inequality and the Care Penalty

Asymmetry: easier to demand rights than to impose obligations.

Class and gender interact:

College-educated women seem to have the class bargaining power needed to obtain some work/family flexibility and to persuade husbands to do more child care.

But many women are faced with a choice: either they must renounce caring commitments OR assume a disproportionate share of care responsibility.
Increased public support for care—better social insurance for children, the sick, and the elderly provides an equitable and sustainable alternative.

But it sparks distributional conflict.
Capitalism is Depicted in Masculine Terms…
...the Welfare State in Feminine Terms
U.S. Political History of the Twentieth Century

Evolution of the Nanny State

Laissez-faire  16th Amendment  New Deal  Great Society  Nanny State

Government takes care of us now - All it cost was our Liberty
The “Welfare State” DOES Fulfill a “Feminine” Role

Much entitlement and discretionary social spending is devoted to care of dependents.

There is nation-based, race/ethnicity based, gender-based, age-based and class-based conflict over who should pay the costs of care.

Globalization is increasing class conflict, because national boundaries are becoming less relevant. Why grow and educate your own workers when you can free ride on the efforts of other families/nations?
Globalization and Family Policy

Capitalist institutions need families but would prefer not to pay for them.

International competition intensifies pressure to offload or externalize costs to non-market sectors.

Transnational corporations have less to gain than national corporations from investments in home-grown human capital.

Immigration, trade, and outsourcing increase ability to rely on care provided in other countries rather than paying for our own.
Summary

Feminist economics helps explain:

Collective conflict along lines of citizenship, class, race/ethnicity, age, and gender.

Intensified contention over the future of the welfare state

The disruptive impact of increased globalization and immigration.

But it also helps explain why Americans have much to gain from a more cooperative and egalitarian economic system.
Factors Affecting Potential for Progressive Collective Action in the U.S.

On the negative side:

Fear and panic about declining economic growth in the U.S.

Increased racial/ethnic diversity especially in the younger generation.

Increased corporate political power, as a result of increased concentration of wealth, increased capital mobility, and political influence (the Citizens United Decision).

Globalization increasing the bargaining power of employers.
On the positive side:

Increased global supply of educated labor is likely to decrease premium for highly-educated workers, subjecting them to some of the same forces that have affected less-educated workers and increasing class solidarity.

Efforts to cut government spending through fiscal austerity are now targeting universal, rather than means-tested programs, and are likely to meet more resistance.

Global financial and ecological stresses require collaborative democratic solutions.

We can show that public commitments to better development of human capabilities and human capital can increase economic efficiency as well as fairness.
Thanks for your attention.

I welcome any questions or comments.