

# Taking care of each other is essential work <sup>[1]</sup>

As coronavirus shows us the value of care, theorist Nancy Fraser asks us to imagine a more socialist feminist future.

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## EXCERPTS

In 2016, a few months before Donald Trump's election, Nancy Fraser, a professor of philosophy and politics at the New School and acclaimed critical theorist, argued that the country was facing a "crisis of care." Care work, which Fraser defined more broadly as "social reproduction," included everything from raising children and caring for friends and family to maintaining the social bonds that bring communities together. Fraser contended that our capitalist system devalued this type of work, despite the fact that we all depend on such care every day—paying very little for it or taking it for granted and subsequently making it more and more difficult to do.

During the pandemic, the essential nature of care work has been made more clear. The value of the work that was being done in the shadows, by the nannies and cleaners who can no longer come into our buildings, is now suddenly obvious as we try to live without it. The infrastructure that we don't usually define as "care," from our public school system to our grocery stores, is now apparent as such. The connections that we didn't know existed, like those made among strangers offering each other mutual aid, are now our lifelines. But to Fraser's point, we're also seeing how our system has devalued that work—whether it's the precarious conditions for teachers and domestic workers or the lack of universal child care to help essential workers do their jobs right now.

VICE called up Fraser at her Vermont home, where she was waiting on a grocery delivery in social isolation. While we were in this care crisis long before coronavirus came along, Fraser said that this pandemic is like a "lightning flash," illuminating all of the failures in our capitalist system. We also spoke about the new visibility of care work, what we can learn from this current moment, and whether or not she sees the potential for a more socialist feminist future after coronavirus.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

**You've argued that we've long been in a "crisis of care." Can you talk about that crisis and the ways in which this epidemic has reinforced it?**

What I would have said before is that there's a deep bias in capitalist societies against the whole aspect of the care economy that is unwaged and often much less visible. Capital, which is a huge center of power in our society, is kind of primed in its DNA to try to avoid paying for that absolutely necessary care work. It wants to help itself to the fruits of that activity—the workers that get birthed and raised and educated. It wants the benefits of all of that, the home-life where workers can rest and replenish before they go back the next day, without paying for it. A huge aspect of class struggle in the history of capitalism has been over that care work and who's going to pay for it.

I would say that our current form of capitalism, which many people would call neoliberal capitalism, is a perfect storm of this kind of care crisis even before COVID-19. On the one hand, it has massively recruited women into the paid workforce—not just young unmarried women, but everybody. And at the same time, the whole financial sector puts enormous pressure on governments to cut social spending to institute what they euphemistically call austerity.

So we now have women being expected to devote many more hours to waged labor, while the government's providing less and less of the social provision that would conceivably take up some of the slack. Then you add in real wages being driven downwards despite the huge rise in profits, which means every household requires more and more hours of waged labor in order to just end up with the same amount of income to support the household. This is a kind of time crunch, if you see what I mean. Who's going to provide unwaged care work under these conditions? We've been seeing this long before coronavirus came, this huge squeeze on the whole social reproductive sector.

**So how are we seeing this play out in the current moment?**

What coronavirus does in a way is it shows us the huge costs that we've incurred—let's say the unpaid bill for social reproduction—that has been accumulating for decades, if not longer. Decades of unreplenished energies and costs including those questions about disinvestment in the infrastructure of public health, which is so consequential right now. What was a simmering of a crisis, now it's become really explosive in a way.

We were already facing a crisis of care before coronavirus hit because of this under-investment in social reproduction and the shifting of more and more energies and resources and human capacities into the for-profit sector. I would say coronavirus in the age of neoliberalism

is a textbook lesson of the absolute imperative for a socialist feminist reorganization of society. It gives new meaning to the idea of disaster capitalism. It's not that the disaster comes from outside and [capitalism] is not able to deal with it so well. It is the disaster itself.

**Care work under capitalism is defined by its invisibility. Yet as coronavirus has forced everyone to socially isolate, children are being sent home from school, domestic workers can't come to work, and families staying home, all have to take on care duties now. Do you see this pandemic as a moment when care work seems more visible than ever?**

Yes I do. Or at least, a great deal of it. It puts the spotlight on people's interior lives and what it takes under these conditions to keep a household running. In theory, those who are staying home now have time for the domestic front of care work. But on the other hand, they have whole new burdens, such as disinfecting everything, homeschooling, or dealing with children who are not normally home. Many people are working from home, they're still juggling. And then you add the stress level that everybody's under, including being in a confined space with people you're not used to spending 24 hours with, and all the worry—that is also part of care work.

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The other part about care work is that we should not only define it in these domestic familial terms. The whole public health system is also a part of care. The spotlight is really on that and on the ways it's been allowed to deteriorate through underinvestment. So I define care work broadly, not just doing the laundry and so on, but it includes education, health, all of the functions, some of which are done outside the home, usually by public employees.

The health part is where there is really a new kind of visibility, in that we think about health provisions too narrowly. We've been thinking who has insurance and who doesn't, who can go to a doctor and who can't, who has access to abortion and who doesn't. But what we're now seeing is the infrastructural side and that includes hospitals, clinics, personal protective equipment, ventilators. All of this is part of the material infrastructure that makes care possible, so it's not just the people who we usually think of performing the care, but all those who are keeping the supply chain going or failing to do so.

It's not just that care has become visible, which it has. But I think we're starting to see how production and reproduction are so intertwined that you can't care without this material infrastructure. And to the degree that that is organized on the basis of a for-profit production system, there are all kinds of gross irrationalities that cause a breakdown in the supply chain in the need for care. That's the most important insight I've gotten out of all of this. We socialist feminists in particular are always going on and on ad nauseam about the importance of care. You're right, that's becoming crystal clear. But I think we now see the other side of this; it's not just that the production system depends on the care work, the care work depends on the production system. At this moment, that's one of the key bottlenecks and irrationalities in how this all works under a capitalist for-profit system.

**And that extends beyond health care.**

Right. Just keeping the food system going and uncontaminated and who's an essential worker and who isn't—all of this is really crying out for a socialist feminist analysis.

**Some states have now made grocery workers essential personnel and are providing them free child care. When their labor is suddenly seen as valuable so is the need for their care, like their child care and health care. What does this have to say about how care under capitalism works?**

There are many lessons to be learned here, which have a much broader applicability than the specific case at hand. You give us a specific example about grocery store workers: Everybody understands under coronavirus conditions why their work is so essential and why we have to do whatever it takes to make sure they can do that work, including child care and so on. That becomes clear in a flash. It lights up a whole understanding. The key question though is how broadly we apply this flash of illumination.

What do we do after we get through the worst of this? Are we going to take what we learn and apply it to some significant social transformation? I mean, why do we have people doing work that is not essential. Why would we have non-essential work at all, why wouldn't we just have leisure? Why isn't everything that people do designed to be essential and therefore why isn't child care just taken for granted as an obvious thing that is available across the board?

These are the kind of lessons that you could learn, and of course there are lots of people on the left who have been entertaining these heterodox and scandalous radical ideas here and there for a while. Let's include Bernie Sanders in that category. These people are now getting a bigger audience. One thing about a crisis is it forces people to think outside the box. You can't fall back on the same old bromides that are so patently useless and harmful. So in times like this, it's possible to get a bigger hearing for very radical ideas. That's great. Then it's important that we all rise to the occasion and think together and try to develop some kind of vision for a new society, a new way of coming out of this on the other side. We need a set of strategies for how we convince broader strata that this is the way to go.

**Speaking of new understandings, we also have this situation where some people cannot reach their nuclear families and are relying on their neighbors, friends, mutual aid from strangers. Do you think this is a moment where we can redefine care as something that is not necessarily tied to the family unit and is valuable beyond the metrics of the market?**

I think the reality—before, during, and presumably after coronavirus—is that care was never confined within the walls of a private dwelling. It's never been an exclusively familial situation. But in the imagination, people always think of the home, the mother, the housewife. And I do think that this is another lightning flash, it's like coronavirus lights up the skies and shows us that. It calls on us really to depend on those who are at hand. That can forge relationships even if only through a window, like this woman who's getting my groceries.

*Why would we have non-essential work at all, why wouldn't we just have leisure? Why isn't everything that people do designed to be essential and therefore why isn't child care just taken for granted as an obvious thing that is available across the board?*

These networks of interdependencies can actually make people feel very much more connected, like their fates are tied together. This question of whether you observe social distancing is one kind of test of that. Whether you see how you can't take care of your own health or that of your family's without at the same time taking care of everyone else. Again, the connection between public health and individual health all becomes lit up in a way that is normally not clear in daily life. That's the nature of pandemic.

The impulse here is towards broader solidarity, but on the other hand you see this kind of survivalism. You have to figure out, how can New York get these ventilators instead of California. This is also on the personal, smaller level—how can I make sure I get the toilet paper, the masks. Both things are going on at once. The question, then, is how can we take the better impulses that are coming out and highlight them. We need to show where they might lead and show why the restrictive, self-protective forms of survival are irrational.

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