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ARTICLE

(Un)alienated Care

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Abstract

This paper critically engages with Marx's vision of unalienated production, understood as a form of production that is motivated by satisfying another's needs, through the lenses of feminist and critical race theory. It focuses on the practice of unpaid caregiving and argues that there exists a productive tension at the heart of this practice: unpaid caregiving harbours the potential to constitute unalienated activity in Marx's sense. The realization of this potential is, however, systematically undermined in dominant caregiving practices due to oppressive social meanings that are embedded in the political economy of capitalism. Social meanings, in addition to markets, present an obstacle to unalienated relations, yet one that tends to be overlooked by Marx and Marxist theorists of alienation. Understanding how dominant caregiving practices undermine the possibility for unalienated activity provides insights into the concrete conditions for realizing unalienated activity.

1. Introduction

Capitalism can be critiqued on different grounds: it exploits, it alienates, it makes the earth unliveable, and it freerides on the (care) work of women, queer people, and people of colour (the list is not exhaustive). Marx had a lot to say about exploitation and alienation, but less about the relation between capitalism and care—an omission that has been challenged and addressed by Marxist feminists and critical race theorists (among others).[1]

This paper critically engages with Marx's vision of unalienated production through the lenses of feminist and critical race theory. It argues that at the heart of the organization of unpaid caregiving lies a tension: while unpaid caregiving harbours the

[1]These thinkers and activists have critically engaged with Marx and Marxism to develop a materialist critique that speaks to feminist and anti-racist concerns. See for instance: Bhattacharyya 2018; Bhattacharya 2017; Brenner and Ramas 1984; Davis 1983; Federici 1975; Holmstrom 2002; A. Ferguson 1989; S. Ferguson 2019; Fraser 2014; Vogel 2013. This paper is indebted to these thinkers and activists and draws on their work.

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potential to constitute unalienated activity in Marx's sense, the realization of this potential is systematically undermined in dominant caregiving practices.[2] The paper demonstrates how oppressive social meanings, including gendered and racial meanings, present a key obstacle to unalienated production, thereby challenging the common Marxist view that markets are the main culprit of alienation.[3] Realizing Marx's vision of a socialist society where we relate to each other as humans, that is in a truly unalienated manner, requires a serious reckoning with how social meanings, in addition to markets, block unalienated activity.[4]

The paper proceeds in four steps. In section 2, I outline Marx's vision of unalienated production whereby productive activity is motivated by satisfying another's needs.[5] In section 3, I motivate the claim that caregiving harbours the potential to constitute a form of unalienated activity. Yet this potential is, as I argue in section 4, systematically undermined in dominant practices of unpaid caregiving, due to gendered and racial social meanings which are embedded in the political economy of capitalism. In section 5, I build on this critique to think about the concrete conditions that would enable and sustain unalienated care in practice.

Let me briefly say what this paper does and does not do. This paper does not have any stakes in exegetical debates around the right interpretation of Marx's concept of alienation. I follow an interpretation that I find both plausible and independently attractive due to its feminist potential. This paper, furthermore, does not offer a systematic normative argument for why we should care about alienated/unalienated production. It assumes that unalienated production is something worth striving for and it seeks to think through how it can be realized in practice. Finally, while I believe that the organization of caregiving raises serious distributive concerns, this paper puts forward an alienation-based critique. Alienation, as I hope to show, is a crucial, yet undertheorized concern when it comes to dominant practices of caregiving.

2. Unalienated production

Marx famously thought that wage labour under capitalism is inherently alienated. The commodification of labour power means that producers have no control over their product which is subordinated to the laws of market exchange; they are separated from their productive activity, which they experience as a mere means to stay alive; they are separated from other producers to whom they relate merely as exchange partners or competitors; and they are separated from their human essence, that is, their capacity for

[2]Marx only talks about alienated/unalienated *production*. Since I am concerned with activities that fall outside of Marx's understanding of production, I use the term alienated/unalienated *activity* in addition to alienated/unalienated production.

[3]One line of critique that extends Marx's alienation-based critique emphasizes that markets themselves are inherently gendered and racialized. While I agree with this critique, my concern in this paper is different and focuses on obstacles to unalienated relations even when markets are out of the mix.

[4]Some Marxists might not see the relevance of thinking about social meanings in addition to markets, as they understand social meanings to be downstream from markets. While I agree that social meanings are embedded in the political economy of capitalism, the focus on markets in grounding social meanings is too narrow. Instead, focusing on the relation between production and social reproduction provides insights into the gendered and racial nature of the political economy of capitalism and explains the relevance of social meanings for alienation beyond the market.

[5]I rely in particular on Jan Kandiyali's interpretation of Marx's vision of unalienated production which he develops in his paper "The importance of others" (Kandiyali 2020).

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creative and communal production (Marx 1844b, 270–82).[6] Production under capitalism is fundamentally egoistic, unfulfilling, instrumental, and lonely. As Marx states, under capitalism:

> I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me. In itself, the result of my production has as little connection with you as the result of your production has directly with me. That is to say, our production is not man's production for man as a man, i.e., it is not *social* production. (*Comments* 1844a, 225).

In his 1844 "Comments on James Mill, Élémens d'économie politique," Marx develops a vision of unalienated production under communism. One way to interpret what Marx had in mind there, is to understand unalienated production as productive activity that is carried out with the motivation of satisfying another's need. Jan Kandiyali develops this interpretation in his paper "The importance of others" and argues that "[u]nalienated production involves realizing oneself through providing others with the goods and services they need for their self-realization" (Kandiyali 2020, 557).[7] The central thought underlying this is the following: self-realization entails both an individual and a communal dimension (Kandiyali 2023, 8). As an individual, I strive for self-realization, that is, I seek fulfilling work through which I can manifest my individuality. However, as a communal being, I am also motivated to produce in a way that satisfies your needs. That is, your needs figure as an intrinsic reason for my productive activity. These two ends, individual self-realization and communal self-realization, are interlinked. This satisfaction of your needs contributes to your flourishing as well as mine, since satisfying your needs is part of my ends. And you recognize that I produce to satisfy your needs (and I know that you recognize this) and feel grateful for the fact that I have produced for you in this way (Kandiyali 2020, 565). In short, unalienated production is characterized by (1) individual self-realization; (2) the satisfaction of another's need; (3) the motivation of satisfying another's need; (4) recognition of that other.[8] Markets, however, undermine unalienated production, as they are incompatible with the intrinsic motivation of satisfying the needs of others.[9]

Markets are not, however, the only concern, as I argue in what follows. To understand why that is, we need to take a closer look at the role of recognition in

[6]There is some ambiguity about the source of alienation under capitalism. While some interpret Marx to say that markets as such are the source of alienation (see e.g. Cohen 2009), others have argued that *capitalist* markets are the real culprit and proposed a version of market socialism (see e.g. Miller 1990). My aim in this section is to show why unpaid caregiving, which is not directly market mediated serves as an example for unalienated activity. This does not require a stance on the question of whether markets *as such* or *capitalist* markets are the problem.

[7]For a similar interpretation see Brudney 2010.

[8]Unalienated production so understood is furthermore free production. Your needs constitute a constraint, insofar as I produce to satisfy your need. Yet, since the end of producing for you is mine, and I relate to the constraint in a voluntary and affirmative way, this production is nonetheless free, (Kandiyali 2020, 569).

[9]Barry Maguire (2022, 6) argues that the incompatibility between markets and the non-instrumental motivation of satisfying others' needs is twofold: on the one hand, market motives are exclusionary, meaning that the non-instrumental motivation to satisfy another's needs does not constitute an *additional* reason for engaging in market exchange. On the other hand, market motives are fetishist, meaning that market motives themselves do not manifest the non-instrumental motivation to satisfy another's needs.

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unalienated activity. First, note that recognition on this interpretation cannot merely be understood as *epistemic* recognition. That is, unalienated activity requires more than just *understanding of, or knowledge about* my productive activity. The reference to gratitude points to an understanding of recognition as an act of *expressing appreciation*. This understanding shows why recognition is central to unalienated activity. According to Daniel Brudney (2010, 153), recognition is a condition for the success of my self-realization.[10] My activity of producing for you (with the intention of producing for you) fails if you do not recognize that I act with that intention. Only if you register and care about the fact that I produce for you, can your recognition complete my activity. This process of producing for someone and being recognized in that activity, constitutes, on Brudney's view, a "social-recognition activity" that has an expressive function (Brudney 2010, 153). I take this expressive function to consist in communicating a commitment to a specific social practice; one where we acknowledge that we are dependent on one another and commit to reciprocally sustaining each other. In other words, in the context of unalienated production, recognition plays the role of communicating how we relate to each other as interdependent social beings that care for one another.

There exists an interesting overlap between this interpretation of unalienated production and some forms of caregiving. Caregiving is a paradigmatic example of an activity that is directly aimed at the satisfaction of another's need. In the next section, I show that there are reasons to think at least some forms of caregiving harbour the potential for unalienated activity. Yet the realization of this potential is tied to several conditions that, as I argue in section 4, are missing from dominant caregiving practices.

3. Caregiving: an example of unalienated activity?

Carers change diapers, read bedtime stories, console in times of despair, or help someone getting dressed when they are unable to do it by themselves. Caregiving is an inherently relational activity that seeks to create, maintain or increase wellbeing (physical and mental) in somebody else. This activity is part of a broader process of care. According to Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher (1990), this process entails in the first place attention to and awareness of the needs of others ("caring about"). Second, the identification of the needs of another requires that someone assumes responsibility to meet those needs ("caring for"). Caregiving, as the third phase in this process, consists in "the actual material meeting of this caring need" (Tronto and Fisher 1990). Finally, caregiving invokes some kind of response in the care recipient that signals whether the needs have been met and thus whether caregiving was successful ("care receiving"). Consequently, care "refers both to a mental disposition of concern and to the actual practices that we engage in as a result of these concerns" (Tronto 1998, 16). This is also echoed by Nancy Folbre's (1995, 75) claim that caregiving is a "labour undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for other people." This does not preclude the possibility that there are other motivations present as well, perhaps some more self-interested. Yet it does suggest that the motivation to satisfy someone else's need is a key factor in this activity.

Care, as Marxist and socialist feminists have long argued, plays a crucial role in the reproduction of any capitalist society and is thus directly woven into the fabric of

[10]There exists productive overlap between this point and (feminist) speech act theory, insofar as the latter is concerned with the ways in which uptake (or lack thereof) lead to the success/failure of specific speech acts. See for instance, Kukla 2023.

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capitalism.[11] Starting with Marx's insight that human labour is central for capital accumulation, they ask about the conditions of possibility of human labour which moves them beyond the sphere of production to the sphere of social reproduction. This is where the worker is brought into life, fed, clothed, educated, socialized, and emotionally sustained (Fraser 2016, 101; Glenn 2012, 12). Tithi Bhattacharya (2017, 1) puts this succinctly when she asks "if the workers' labour produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker"? The response is: social reproduction is still overwhelmingly carried out by women and people of colour, which brings to the fore capitalism's reliance on a gendered and racial division of labour. No society can survive without social reproduction. Understanding care as a social reproductive activity, an activity that is directly aimed at creating and sustaining life, highlights the central role that care plays in keeping the capitalist economy running.[12] It also highlights that the meaning and the organization of care are fundamentally shaped by the logics of capitalism.

This takes different forms depending on how care is integrated into the economy and how it is embedded in specific social and political contexts. Shahra Razavi's (2007, 20–23) framework of the "care diamond" is helpful to understand the structure of care provision in capitalist economies. The care diamond describes the systematic connection between the institutions involved in the provision of care, including the family/household, the market, the public sector, and the not-for-profit sector which includes voluntary and community provision. How the diamond is configured, that is, which of these institutions has relatively more weight, is context specific and shapes the organization of care in specific ways. For example, how care is organized in the household/family depends significantly on the role of the public sector in the provision of care, e.g. the availability of affordable/free public childcare, access to paid care, e.g. the possibility to "outsource" caregiving to migrant domestic workers, as well as communal structures of caregiving, such as mutual aid networks. The UK is one example where the relative decrease of the public sector's involvement in the provision of care over the last decades, as well as the increased marketization of care, have tilted the care diamond towards the household/family and the market. This has produced a care system where low-income families/households absorb the public care deficit, mainly through the unpaid carework of women, whereas higher earning households pay for care in the market. In short, independent of whether carework is done outside of the market or directly implicated into the circuit of value, it is embedded in the political economy of capitalism, which is itself inherently gendered and racialised.

Despite care being systematically caught up in the gendered and racialized logic of capitalism, there are nonetheless reasons to think that some forms of caregiving could serve as an example for Marx's vision of unalienated production outlined above. Marx intended his vision of unalienated production to function as a yardstick for a better society beyond capitalism. If unalienated production is to play that role, we need a better understanding of the conditions that need to be in place to enable and sustain it in practice. While unpaid caregiving did not fall within the purview of Marx's concern with alienation, I believe it harbours both a potential and a tension that needs to be explored

[11]See for instance Bhattacharya 2017; Brenner and Ramas 1984; S. Ferguson 2019; Fraser 2014; Glenn 2012; Vogel 2013.

[12]I understand care as a *specific type* of social reproductive relation, which entails an affective dimension—a concern for somebody else's needs—and a direct response to this need through the act of caring. Not all social reproductive activities are caring activities in this sense.

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to gain a better understanding of the possibility of unalienated activity.[13] My focus on *unpaid* caregiving does not imply that caregiving is in some sense outside of capitalism. Yet unpaid caregiving is, by definition, not marketized.[14] Focusing on non-market relations within capitalism helps to neutralize direct market effects to some degree and brings into view the concrete conditions under which unalienated activity becomes possible (or is undermined).

The case for thinking about caregiving as an example of unalienated activity in Marx's sense rests on the assumption that caregiving, at least in its ideal variant, entails a different type of social relation that stands in stark contrast to the instrumental and egoistic relations constitutive of alienation. Caregiving expresses a direct concern for the needs of others *because of them*. That caregiving embodies and responds to a different way of envisioning human relations is an insight at the heart of feminist care ethics. In contrast to the independent, autonomous subject that so often is the protagonist in liberal theories, feminist care ethics starts with the acknowledgement of fundamental human dependence. This is aptly summarized by Eva Kittay (2020, 34):

> [w]hile conditioned in fundamentally significant ways by cultural considerations, dependency for humans is as unavoidable as birth and death are for all living organisms. We may even say that the long maturation process of humans, combined with the decidedly human capacities for moral feeling and attachment, make caring for dependents a mark of our humanity.

This quote highlights not only the fact of general human dependency, but also the imperative of care in response to this fact. According to Virginia Held (2005, 10), "the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility." While caregiving involves a concrete relation of meeting the needs of specific others, the fact of fundamental interdependence means that no one is ever free of giving or receiving care.[15]

But relations of care are not only a necessity. They also express a distinct way of valuing human connectedness and interdependence that stands in sharp contrast to the instrumental relations that typically govern market relations. Where market exchanges make the provision of a service conditional upon what I can get in return, care relations

[13]One reason for why Marx does not talk about unpaid caregiving when he talked about unalienated production can be found in the distinction between productive and unproductive labour. On a technical reading of this distinction, unpaid caregiving is unalienated, simply in virtue of not being productive labour. Contrary to unproductive activity, productive labour is directly integrated into capitalism's circuit of value, mediated by the market. Since on Marx's view markets are the main culprit when it comes to alienation, unpaid caregiving is not an alienation concern. For an interpretation of Marx along these lines, see e.g. Jaggar 1983, 218. Note, that Jaggar herself, as a socialist feminist, thinks that housework can be alienating. See for instance her discussion of alienation (1983, 307–17).

[14]There are long-standing debates in Marxist feminism about the exact relation between caregiving and capitalist production. While some argue that even caregiving outside of the market is directly capitalistically productive (e.g. Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa) others hold against this that caregiving produces use value, not exchange value (e.g. Lise Vogel, Alison Jaggar).

[15]To say that we are never free of caring relations does not deny that caring needs and the capacity to give care vary across the course of a life.

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take the needs of (particular) others in and of themselves as a reason.[16] Caregiving is, in its ideal form, the paradigmatic activity that is directed at someone else, *because of them* and not because of what I can get in return. As such, it expresses a social relation that is constitutive of the vision of unalienated production outlined above. Yet, while unpaid caregiving harbours the potential for unalienated activity, this potential is systematically thwarted, as I show now.

4. Undermining unalienated caring

While unpaid caregiving expresses a social relation that is significantly different to market-based relations, we should heed the call of feminist thinkers not to romanticize or to idealize it.[17] Instead, taking seriously the potential for unalienated activity inherent in caregiving requires thinking about the conditions that currently undermine and thwart the realization of that potential. In this section I zoom in on the specific obstacles to unalienated caregiving.

4.1 Caregiving, a social practice gone wrong

Caregiving, even when organized outside of markets, is grounded in the gendered and racialized political economy of capitalism. As such, things are not going particularly well: caregiving is systematically undervalued, made invisible, and unequally distributed. To show why and in which sense unpaid caregiving constitutes an alienated activity, it is insightful to understand caregiving as a social practice. I follow Sally Haslanger (2023, 56) in her understanding of social practices as

> patterns of learned behavior that enable us (in the primary instances) to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource (or multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas.

The resource to be distributed, managed and maintained is care. But how should we make sense of the "shared meanings/cultural schemas" and their role in social practices? For Haslanger (2015, 21), social meanings include "concepts, attitudes, dispositions, norms etc. that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought and affect."[18] This means that social meanings are effectively tools that allow us to navigate the social world. They offer common and publicly available points of reference that structure our relations to other human beings as well as our relation to the non-human world. For instance, the social meaning of "friendship" involves shared expectations about what it is to be a friend, e.g. someone who is loyal, who is supportive, someone with whom I share a bond of intimacy, etc. These shared expectations enable us to relate to each other as friends. In that sense social meanings constitute a frame for

[16]Care relations express a kind of reciprocity that can be captured in the following claim by G. A. Cohen (2009, 39): "I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so but because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me."

[17]Silvia Federici (1975, 1) expresses this aptly in her critique of feminized labour: "They say it is love. We say it is unpaid work."

[18]Haslanger uses the terms "cultural schemas" and "social meanings" interchangeably.

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socially meaningful action in a specific context.[19] Importantly, social meanings are not reducible to what individuals intend or believe. They are embodied in our social practices and can persist even when individuals do not explicitly endorse or believe them. For instance, social meanings of femininity, e.g. that women are naturally caring, place expectations on how women should behave. I might reject these meanings, but they still hold normative power.[20] Social meanings are not free floating. They are embedded in broader social structures, including the way in which society organizes production and reproduction. They find their expression in concrete social practices.

Caregiving practices are culturally and historically specific. My focus here lies on unpaid caregiving practices in the household/family.[21] Since the nuclear family remains the dominant mode of organizing unpaid caregiving, my argument primarily speaks to this form of organizing care. Dominant caregiving practices share certain features that systematically undermine the potential for unalienated activity (even if they do so in specific ways depending on the context).

First, while we all rely on care to various degrees at different stages in our lives—to grow into personhood, to relate to others, to pursue our projects—the responsibility for caregiving is generally privatized. That means that the bulk of caregiving is still relegated to the so-called private sphere where it is carried out disproportionally by women.[22] This is not to deny that states, in particular functioning welfare states, take on caring responsibilities, e.g. through the public funding of childcare or eldercare. Yet over the last decades we have seen an increasing shift from the public provision of care to the private provision of care. The social meaning of care as a private responsibility expresses a lack of appreciation for the fact of interdependence and the crucial role that care plays in producing and reproducing life and ways of life. It expresses the idea that the ideal subject of modern capitalism is independent and self-sufficient; they do not have caring responsibilities, nor do they rely on care to go through life. While feminist and critical race theorists have made crucial interventions to shift the debate, this ideal is resistant to change and remains a reference point for political and social theory. Importantly, those involved in the practice of caregiving need not and typically do not believe in the ideal of independence—caregivers tend to know that their activity is crucial—for the social meaning to shape the practice, e.g. through a lack of support and resources.

Second, and relatedly, the privatization of caring responsibility and the associated failure to take seriously the importance of caregiving also shapes the very meaning of caregiving as something that is in some sense gratuitous, "a labour of love." Understood as a labour of love, caregiving is taken to be an activity that is intrinsically rewarding and performed as an expression of love and compassion.[23] Needless to say, that this ideal is inherently gendered and racialized (more on this below). Characterizing caregiving as a labour of love not only glosses over the skill, energy, and time required for providing

[19]As Haslanger (2019, 8) notes, social meanings are specific to concrete cultural context. They "do not form a coherent framework and are constantly being altered, repurposed, discarded."

[20]It is a complicated (and partly empirical) question how social meanings get reproduced and what role individual beliefs play in this reproduction. Since my focus in this paper is not on what social meanings are and how they are reproduced, I will not discuss this further at this point.

[21]I speak of "dominant practices of caregiving" in the following.

[22]Caregiving is also privatized in the sense of being marketized and organized in for-profit caring institutions. Since my focus is on non-market relations, I do not discuss marketized care here.

[23]This ideal has been forcefully criticized by feminist thinkers, e.g. the Wages for Housework campaign, a group of activists and thinkers founded in the 1970s that became famous with their demand of wages for housework. See for instance Federici 1975.

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care, it also contributes to an understanding of caregiving as a private indulgence, rather than a social contribution.

Third, (eco-)feminists have drawn attention to the link between understanding care as an expression of (feminine) love and understanding it as a natural resource.[24] The conflation of care and natural resources invokes the idea that there is an abundance of care that is freely available, which need not be replenished. While this idea is as misguided for care as it is for actual natural resources, it finds expression in the lack of material compensation and appreciation of caregiving. As Nancy Fraser (2016, 101) argues, while capitalism depends on caregiving to produce and reproduce the workers who then go on to produce surplus for the capitalist, it nonetheless externalizes the costs of caregiving to families, friends, relatives. It thereby freerides on the caregiving activities of women and people of colour. Freeriding also takes a global form realized in global care chains: poorer women migrate to provide care for wealthier families in the North, and leave their dependants behind, resulting in the extraction of care from poorer to wealthier nations (Parreñas 2015; Kittay 2025).

Addressing the following objection helps to clarify the concern about the conflation of care with love and nature. In the concluding passage of his comments on James Mill, Marx suggests that unalienated production constitutes an expression of my human nature, in which I know myself to be "confirmed both in your thought and your love" (Marx, *Comments*, MECW 3: 228). If love and nature are essential constituents of unalienated activity, why should we be concerned with the social meaning of care as a labour of love or a natural resource? In response to this, we need to clarify the specific way in which Marx uses these terms to emphasize the mutuality and reciprocity of "truly human" production, that is unalienated production: I produce for you with the motivation of satisfying your need, you recognize and appreciate that I produce for you, and I recognize that you appreciate my production for you. Since satisfying your needs is part of my ends, your recognition contributes to my self-realization. My activity expresses my human nature, that is my *communal* nature. Your love expresses a recognition of our fundamental interdependence as humans. Contrary to that, the dominant social meanings of care as a labour of love and a natural resource lack a reference to our mutual dependence. Love is one-sided and unrequited, while the meaning of nature is tied to extraction, rather than an expression of our interdependence as humans.

The social meanings that organize caregiving practices are inherently gendered and racialized. The stereotypical caregiver, for whom this type of activity comes naturally, is a woman and caregiving is taken to be an expression of her femininity. Not only does this rely on a set of essentializing assumptions about women's nature and the gender binary, it is also steeped in racial meaning, whereby different aspects of care are linked to different standards of femininity.

Caregiving as a type of self-rewarding, self-realizing, loving activity generally remains the prerogative of white middle-class women. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992, 2012) documents the historic continuities in the organization of care along racial lines. She shows how care historically has been structured by racial hierarchies, whereby women of colour and immigrant women take on the most precarious and demanding tasks in carework. Similarly, Dorothy Roberts (1997, 51) argues that the racialized organization of carework is fostered and supported by an ideological division of carework into

[24]For instance, Plumwood (1997) argues that there is a parallel between the denial of dependency on women's (reproductive-) work and the denial of the dependency on nature, whereby classifying something as "natural" justifies exploitation and expropriation.

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spiritual and menial tasks, with the former involving the nurturing, self-realizing, non-material aspects of care and the latter involving the messy, material, embodied aspects of care.

While the spiritual part of carework is currently dominated by privileged white women, the menial part is associated with women of colour, immigrant women, and working-class women.[25] The ideological division between menial and spiritual aspects of care has implications for understanding and recognizing care. First, care is simultaneously valued and devalued: aspects of it are elevated—the "spiritual" parts—and taken to be "true" care and other aspects—the "menial" parts—are devalued. This, according to Mara Marin (in Woodly et al. 2021, 898), "continues to condition our misperception of care work and to justify the contradictory tendencies to sentimentalize care while materially undervaluing it." Second, it denies the capacity of women of colour for the spiritual aspect of care, of performing "true" care, thereby sustaining an image of Black mothers as "unfit, uncaring and immoral—just the opposite of the spiritual mother" (Roberts 1997, 62). This image is, according to Roberts, historically rooted in the portrayal of Black slave mothers as unfit for motherhood. It finds its expression in the ongoing conflation of Black motherhood with neglect and abuse, as Roberts documents in her book *Torn apart* (2022, 22–23).[26] The racial coding of care consequently makes unintelligible certain acts of care as care.[27] Finally, the link between white, middle-class femininity and the spiritual aspect of care means that the caregiving that white women do is valued as an expression of a specific type of femininity, one that is realized in the nurturing and loving of dependants. Paradoxically, it seems to be the case that the very fact that caregivers (read "women") are seen as inherently other-directed also mitigates against understanding caregiving as a social contribution.

In short, the social meaning of care—what it is, whether it can be recognized *as* care, how it is valued—crucially depends on who performs it. Gendered and racial social meanings of care that are embedded in the political economy of capitalism undermine the possibility of social relations constitutive of unalienated activity.

4.2 How the possibility for unalienated activity is undermined

Imagine we produced as human beings. Imagine I took your needs to be the reason for my productive (or caring) activity. And both you and I would recognize and affirm this.[28] Many Marxist thinkers argue that this type of social relation is undermined by markets.[29] I believe they are right. However, when it comes to alienation, markets are

[25]The ideological association of menial carework with women of colour and immigrant women is historically and contextually specific and malleable.

[26]This book provides an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the caregiving of Black mothers in the US is systematically misunderstood and framed as neglect and abuse and thereby becomes liable to state interference (in particular by child welfare protection agencies). This point is similar to Alisa Bierria's (2022) argument about the conflation of Blackness and crime.

[27]For instance, Raghuram (2019, 624) gives the example of enslaved families, where caring for a child might mean to kill the child to prevent it from slavery. I thank the reviewer for bringing this example to my attention.

[28]One difficulty that arises in caring relations is that the person cared for is often not in a position to give recognition, e.g. because they are a baby or because they suffer from dementia. I deal with this concern when I talk about recognition requirements.

[29]See for instance Cohen 2009. For a recent discussion of the incompatibility of markets and care, see Maguire 2022.

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just one factor to be concerned about. The social relation constitutive of unalienated activity is demanding and comes with a set of preconditions. While markets are one significant factor in how these preconditions can be undermined, I will show that there are obstacles beyond markets, by way of engaging with unpaid caregiving practices. Things can go wrong at the epistemic level and at the level of recognition.

4.2.1 Epistemic requirements

In the previous section, it became clear that recognition is a necessary condition for unalienated activity. Only if you register and care about the fact that I produce for you (that is, you mark the endpoint of my production), can your recognition complete my activity. But what is needed for this kind of recognition to be possible and when is it (at risk of being) undermined? Different people have argued that recognition comes with a set of epistemic requirements, that is, you need to know and understand certain things to give recognition.[30] In that sense, you can only give proper recognition for what I am doing if my activity is intelligible to you. Alisa Bierria's discussion of the social dimension of agency and the social authoring of intentions can clarify this point. Agential action, that is action carried out with a specific intention, is not, on Bierria's account, solely down to the acting agent. Instead, "[t]he construction of our intentions and the execution of our actions are embedded in shared meaning on which we rely in an ongoing process of discerning one another's acts" (Bierria 2014, 131). We aim to communicate our intentions through our actions and we rely on others to decipher the meaning of our actions, such that there is a correspondence between what we aim to communicate and what others think we communicate. To that end, we rely on a set of shared social meanings through which the intentions and actions of others are interpreted and become readable (Bierrie 2014, 131). A lot can go wrong in that process. Bierria discusses the example of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Different news agencies published two photos of residents in flooded New Orleans seeking food. One photo shows white people carrying food captioned "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store . . . " The other photo is nearly identical. But this time the person looking for food is a Black man, and the caption reads "A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans." The finding/looting distinction, on Bierria's view, demonstrates how the intention of the Black man to find food is read through the social meaning that associates Blackness with crime. If, as in this example, the interpretation of intentions draws on racist social meanings, recognition of the act can misfire (in this case, the Black man is recognized as a criminal and not as someone who provides for his family).

This has implications for the possibility of recognition in productive/caring activities. There are two related ways in which epistemic requirements come into play. On the one hand, for something to be recognized as an *x* it needs to be intelligible as an *x*. In that sense the activity of caregiving and the intention to satisfy the need of another needs to be intelligible to be recognized as such. The social meanings that organize care are inherently gendered and racialized. That means that what is intelligible as care and as a caring intention also depends on who performs it. The conflation of Black motherhood with neglect, or the characterization of some caring activates as menial (and thus not

[30]The edited volume *Epistemic injustice and the philosophy of recognition* brings together different positions on this relation, Giladi and McMillan 2023.

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"true" care), means that these acts fail to register as acts of care in the dominant understanding.[31]

On the other hand, the recognition relation in unalienated activity demands more than merely understanding that you produce for me with that intention. We need to understand (and recognize) the activity as part of a social practice where we mutually rely on each other's care to flourish. In that sense, your care for me is an expression of this mutual interdependency, and you and I both need to understand it as such. This is, however, undermined by the social meanings that structure caregiving practices. First, the social meaning of care as a private responsibility directly interferes with understanding care as a social necessity, one that responds to interdependence. Importantly, this is not to say that those who directly provide or receive care necessarily fail to understand its necessity. While they might have internalized dominant social meanings and thus perceive of their act of caring as a private act of love,[32] social meanings persist (to some degree) independently of what individuals believe. Second, the understanding of care as a labour of love links care to the performance of a particular type of femininity—one that is expressed through the nurturing and loving of others. In that sense caregiving is understood simultaneously as the right way of doing gender and a feminine indulgence, but not as a social contribution. Third, the conflation of care and nature fails to acknowledge the conditions of reproducing the caring relationship. Care is not self-replenishing. It takes energy, time, and resources and those need to be sustained.[33]

These overlapping epistemic failures to understand care *as* care or as a social contribution have implications for recognition. Skewed social meanings, like the gendered and racial meanings organizing care, can undermine the possibility of recognition and hence the possibility of unalienated activity.

4.2.2 Recognition requirements

Beyond the epistemic preconditions, there are also conditions that attach to recognition itself. Recall that recognition plays a central role in unalienated activity, insofar as it is a condition for the success of the activity itself and has an expressive function. What kind of recognition can fill these roles?

If recognition plays the role of completing my productive activity, then whether I in fact care for you depends on whether *you recognize* that I care for you. This is somewhat bad news when we look at the relationships typical of caring relationships. Consider, for instance, a caring relationship between a daughter and her elderly mother who suffers from severe dementia. The daughter's caring activity is directly aimed at maintaining and increasing the wellbeing of her mother and she is directly motivated by this. Yet her mother is no longer in a state to recognize this. This is a feature that generalizes across many care relations (think for instance about caring for a baby). Apart from the question of whether those cared for can give recognition, there is also a question of whether *they should* be the ones on whom recognition depends. Caregiving relations tend to be

[31]They might, however, be intelligible as care by the specific communities within which they are performed. See Mühlebach's (2026) discussion of the role of communities in recognizing the intentions of agents under oppressive conditions.

[32]Since the carer is not a fully knowing subject and draws on social meanings to interpret their actions, they might misperceive what they are doing. I thank the reviewers for pointing this out.

[33]Kittay (2020, 46) shows how the care relation creates secondary dependencies whereby the caregiver relies on the support (emotional, material, social) of others to sustain the care relation.

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asymmetrical relations, where the care recipient depends on the caregiver and is vulnerable to them.[34] While asymmetric relationships do not undermine recognition per se, the underlying power relationship risks distorting genuine recognition.[35] This raises the broader question of who *can and should* give recognition.[36] The specific features of caregiving relations, namely that care recipients are often in no position to give recognition, and that the caring relationship tends to be asymmetrical, suggest that recognition should not depend on specific others. Rather than being individualized and direct, it should be embedded in broader social practices of recognition, where recognition of my productive or caring activity is recognized by relevant social actors besides you. I say more about how this could look like in the next section.

In the context of unalienated production, the completion of productive activity through recognition has an expressive function, as I argued above. It expresses a commitment to a specific social practice; one where we acknowledge that we are dependent on one another and commit to reciprocally sustaining each other. In other words, recognition expresses our commitment to participate in a shared social practice guided by the idea that we take care of one another. This places further constraints on the type of recognition required for this kind of practice to be sustained. The form of recognition in some sense needs to *fit* the practice of which it is an expression.[37]

To make this less abstract, consider cases where there is a misfit between the type of recognition and the practice it is meant to express. During Covid, our mutual dependence was brought into sharp relief and there was a broadly shared agreement that careworkers were essential for keeping us alive and (at least somewhat) well. Careworkers received a lot of recognition and gratitude for their work (we have all been there clapping for carers). And yet, recognition remained by and large at the symbolic level. For instance, in the UK, caregivers did not receive any meaningful financial support or pay rises, many got severely ill from Covid or died of it, and they were left alone to deal with the emotional trauma and stress of working through a global pandemic. Recognition, in other words, exhausted itself in empty gestures. Gestures generally do not keep people alive and well. Nor do they sustain people in their roles as caregivers. Sustaining individuals in their role as caregivers requires, according to Eva Kittay (1999, 72), "a socially supported situation in which one can give care without the care-giving becoming a liability to one's own well-being." By assuming the responsibility of caring for vulnerable others, the caregivers themselves become vulnerable and in need of support (both economically and emotionally). This according to Kittay places demands on those beyond the direct relations of caregiving to support the caregiver in their needs.

The broader point here is that merely symbolic recognition is ill fitted to express a social practice that is grounded in the acknowledgement of our fundamental dependence on one another and the commitment to mutually care for one another in response

[34]While Eva Kittay speaks about the possibility of *reciprocity* rather than recognition, she also takes asymmetrical dependency to be a common feature of caring relations. She further complicates this relation by thinking about how the dependency of the care recipient on the caregiver extends beyond the direct caring relationship and is nested in further dependency relations (2019, 154).

[35]One insight we can draw from republican theories of domination is that those who are in position of vulnerability vis-à-vis the more powerful, are incentivized to play by the rules of the powerful, to flatter them, to please them, etc. This is different from genuine recognition.

[36]This is also a challenge for generalized relations of production which Brudney (2010) discusses.

[37]This thought bears some similarity with Anderson's (1993) pluralist theory of value. According to Anderson, goods differ in kind and require different modes of valuation appropriate to the nature of the good.

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to this dependence. Instead, recognition needs to have a material dimension where gratitude and appreciation are coupled with providing those who care for us with the means necessary to sustain them physically and emotionally. This entails securing the economic position of caregivers through a proper income (or in-kind provisions). It also entails emotional and psychological support, including mentoring, training, as well as securing that carers have proper time to rest and recharge. This, as I argued above, is a social task and does not rest on the shoulders of the specific individuals who receive care.

Consequently, in order to play the role of completing my activity and through the expressive function being the social glue that holds the practice together, recognition needs to be socialized and materialized. Current caregiving practices do not incentivize this kind of recognition. As I argued above, as a result of the individualization of caring responsibilities, and the assumption that caregiving is an expression of femininity and akin to a natural resource, recognition is individualized and largely symbolic.

In sum, to play its role in unalienated activity, recognition is demanding and comes with epistemic requirements as well as requirements regarding the form of recognition that can do the job. Dominant caregiving practices systematically undermine this kind of recognition. As a result, the potential for unalienated activity is not realized. We do not, however, need to end on a gloomy note. Understanding just how dominant caregiving practices undermine the possibility for unalienated activity provides insights into what is needed for realizing unalienated activity in practice. The next section provides some (tentative) considerations towards this end.

5. The possibility of unalienated caring

5.1 Underlying theoretical assumptions

Enabling and sustaining social relations that constitute unalienated caregiving requires nothing short of a radical change. Providing a satisfactory account of social change is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to make explicit the theoretical assumptions that underlie my thinking. My discussion has focused on caregiving practices in the family/household. These practices and the gendered and racial social meanings that organize them are embedded in the capitalist economy. They are organized through and shaped by their relation to other care institutions, as discussed in section 3. That means that changing oppressive social meanings requires changing the practices of caregiving and their relation to each other.[38] In that sense, challenging the gendered and racial social meanings that organize unpaid caregiving requires challenging the very structure of care provision of capitalist economies. I suggest in the following that this turns on the de-privatization of care, that is shifting care responsibility from the household/family to the public sphere (including the state and the community). There is no one size fits all solution, and the question of how practices should be organized to realize the potential for unalienated caregiving needs to be answered by looking at the specific economic, political, and social context. Offering some ideas towards this end, is not, however, a task in utopian theory. Instead, (somewhat) unalienated caregiving practices already exist within and at the margins of current societies. These practices can provide a glimpse into what unalienated activity could look like in a post-capitalist, non-patriarchal, anti-racist society.

[38]I here follow Sally Haslanger's understanding of social change. See Haslanger 2015, 2021. See also Jaeggi 2014.

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5.2 Unalienated care in practice

Recognition is a condition for unalienated care. It completes my activity of caring for you, and it expresses a commitment to a practice of mutual care. But recognition is also demanding and comes with a set of epistemic preconditions and requirements with regards to the type of recognition. The epistemic requirement is that caregiving is intelligible as a social contribution. The requirements for recognition are that recognition should be social and material. Grounded in this critique is a case for the socialization of caregiving.

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in theorizing and putting into practice proposals to socialize caregiving. Proposals to socialize caregiving were at the heart of early Marxist-/socialist-feminist thinking. Revolutionary feminist Alexandra Kollontai (in Holt 1980), for instance, is famous for demanding the abolishment of the traditional family through the collectivization of social reproductive activities. In a communist economy, activities like raising children, cleaning, laundry, food provisioning, etc. were to be taken on and organized through state institutions. The demand for socialization comes in various forms and degrees. It ranges from demands to extend the public provision of care to support families—in which case the state/public sector would play a central role—to a revival of the demand to abolish the traditional family—which often focuses on the communal organization of care and hence assigns a central role to the community.[39] A thorough discussion and evaluation of the different proposals and institutional designs goes beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I discuss two examples, one that highlights the role of the state, and one that highlights the role of community. These examples challenge the privatization of care and illustrate ways to understand care as a public good rather than a private responsibility.[40] In doing so, they also show how the epistemic-and the recognition requirement can be addressed.

I first turn to Ingrid Robeyns's (2011) epistemic argument for sharing carework, which she develops in her paper "A universal duty to care." Robeyns proposes a universal moral and political duty of all citizens of a certain age (permitting justifiable exceptions) to spend some time caring for those who need care.[41] Such a duty would, according to Robeyns (2011, 288), have significant epistemic benefits, as "it would give all a lived-through experience of caring, which would weaken the problem of misrecognition of care work."[42] The idea that our social positions and the experiences we have enable and shape our access to knowledge is familiar from some versions of feminist epistemology. The specific thought expressed by Robeyns is that performing care will allow people to better understand the nature of care and guard against misperceptions of care as a labour of love that need not be reproduced. While Robeyns does not explicitly talk about this, performing care would also be beneficial for fostering an understanding of care as a social contribution. The experience of being responsible for meeting the needs of someone who is directly dependent on you will make it very hard to maintain the dominant social meaning that caregiving is just a private feminine

[39]For recent demands to abolish the family, see for instance Lewis 2022; Weeks 2023; O'Brien 2023.

[40]There are different ways to de-privatize care, including the marketization of care. Since the market is an unlikely partner in the struggle for unalienated activity, I focus on non-market proposals.

[41]Robeyns does not go into the institutional specifics of what such a universal duty to care looks like. For different variants of the proposal to implement a universal care service see: Bubeck 1995; Bergès 2017; Hester and Srnicek 2023.

[42]Kandiyali (2022, 153) makes a similar argument about the way in which sharing burdensome work might increase appreciation for both the importance and the burdens associated with burdensome work.

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indulgence. A more equal distribution of caregiving responsibilities would change people's experience of care and might thus open access to a different understanding of care. In addition to the epistemic effect, the socialization of care might also be beneficial for materializing recognition. If everyone had to provide care (at least for some period in their lives), and if care was understood as a public good to be collectively organized, there would likely be a greater willingness to adequately fund and support it. Depending on how caregiving is socialized and on the specific economic, social, and political context, the requirements for funding and supporting it will differ. In the current situation, a basic income or a carer's income might go some way towards materializing recognition.[43] Yet, presumably, a radical socialization within a post-capitalist society would make available different modes of materially recognizing caregiving.

To my knowledge, there is currently no country that has established a universal duty to care, but variants of it have existed and continue to exist throughout history. One example is the Cuban Family Code (Código de las familias) that was approved by a vast majority of Cubans in a public referendum in September 2022. This new legislation marks a significant shift from previous legislation by strengthening LGBTQI* rights, protections against (sexual) violence, the rights of children, the disabled and the elderly, and social reproductive rights. One remarkable fact about the code is its explicit commitment to an equal division of caring labour. Article 4(f) demands the "full equality between women and men, equal distribution of time spent on domestic work and care among all members of the family, without overloading any of them."[44] While this falls short of a universal duty to care, it is one of the only legislations that explicitly demands the equal sharing of caregiving.

An example of the socialization of care that centres the communal organization of care rather than a state-mediated duty of care is M. E. O'Brien's (2023, 211) concept of "insurgent social reproduction" in the context of protest camps. Insurgent social reproduction, according to O'Brien, is a way of organizing the meeting of basic needs for food, shelter, community, etc. during periods of prolonged protest. From the establishment of canteens to the organization of childcare, to caring for disabled comrades, these practices of care are collective, shared, and subject to democratic participation, for example by setting up cooking rotas. There are multiple examples of this, including the Tahrir Square occupation, the Standing Rock Camps, Occupy Wall Street, the Gezi Park uprising, or the Palestine Protest Camps today.[45] Another example of communal and embodied care is the practice of *acuerpar,* a political concept in the decolonial feminist discourses and practices of resistance in Central America, which roughly translates to "giving one's body." According to María José Méndez (2023, 38), *acuerpar* "names the quotidian actions that bodies take to hold space for each other in the face of rampant gendered and racialized violence." *Acuerpar* thus refers to the concrete embodied practices of caring for one another and as such stands in sharp contrast to care that remains at the level of empathetic identification and feeling with the other. It demands the establishment of communal practices of caring grounded in the recognition of our inherent interdependence in the struggle against intersecting injustices. Méndez sees *acuerpar* materialized in the daily practices of the Viva Berta-encampment in Honduras

[43]For a discussion of feminist proposals to support care, see Gheaus 2020.

[44]Official Gazette of the Republic of Cuba, 2022, https://clarion.unity-struggle-unity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/goc-2022-o99_1.pdf.

[45]The book *Protest camps* provides an in-depth analysis of fifty protest camps with insights on how these camps organize social reproduction (Brown et al. 2018).

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in 2021. This encampment was part of the actions carried out in solidarity with COPINH, the indigenous organization that Berta Cáceres had coordinated before she was murdered.

Rather than seeing these care activities as private extensions of feminine love, they are the lifeline of the protest camp and understood as a collective task. In that sense, the recognition of care becomes a social rather than an individual task, one that requires everyone to show up (according to their abilities). These examples show that non-private ways of organizing caregiving already exist in our midst and can provide us with some pointers where to go.

6. Conclusion

Marx's ideal of unalienated production envisions radically different social relations that place the needs of others front and centre. This is exciting news for feminist thinkers who have long pointed out that we are not only dependent on one another for the fulfilment of our needs, but that this dependence should also be valued, and that it can give rise to a different relationality. It is at this point, that the feminist potential of Marx's vision of unalienated production becomes clearest. It speaks directly to the question of what it would mean to organize production *and reproduction* in a way that takes this dependence seriously and positively affirms it.

In this paper, I have argued that unpaid caregiving practices harbour the potential for unalienated activity. Yet this potential can only be realized under specific epistemic, social, and material conditions. These are undermined by the gendered and racial political economy of capitalism.

The argument of this paper has focused on the practice of unpaid caregiving. Caregiving relations are a very specific type of relation, insofar as they tend to be direct and interpersonal in a way that generalized production in a post-capitalist society would not be (at least assuming that a return to a direct barter economy is neither feasible nor attractive). Does the argument generalize to other forms of productive activity beyond caregiving? While anything approaching a response to this question goes beyond the space left in this paper, I conclude with one tentative thought on this. Marx's vision of unalienated production is a vision of a post-capitalist society where survival will cease to depend on one's ability to sell oneself or one's products in the market. The absence of market-induced instrumentality makes other forms of social relations *possible*. But, as the case of caregiving shows, this is not automatic. Recognition demands specific conditions. While these might differ in the case of generalized production relations, the discussion of caregiving directs us to where we need to look. Why not, for a change, take care as our starting point, and begin theorizing from there?

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