

# **Don't throw out the baby with the bath water!**

## **The role of altruism in unpaid care work**

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### **Abstract**

There is a wide consent around the idea that unpaid care work is characterised by a certain degree of altruism. Nonetheless, it is still difficult to identify what, from an economic point of view, is altruism, both in general human relations and within the family, in particular.

In the economic literature, relations within the family were analysed by two relevant and ideologically opposed figures. In the neoclassical school of thought, Gary Becker studied the allocation of time within the household and the role of altruism in the sharing of resources. In the Marxist school, Friedrich Engels analysed the evolution of the family through history and inequality in the modern capitalist household.

The works of both authors were widely discussed and criticised by feminist scholars. On the one hand, the “domestic labour debate” in Marxist theory mostly focused on the relationship between domestic work and capital accumulation, though it often overlooked the gendered aspects of the division of domestic work. This lack was later recognised and discussed in what was called the “patriarchy debate”. On the other hand, the work of Becker and the New Household Economics was continued, but also fiercely criticised, by feminist economists, especially with respect to issues pertaining to bargaining models.

The aim of this article is to present the ideas of Engels and Becker about caregiving within the household, correlated with feminist economists' contributions to the debate on unpaid care work, focusing on its altruistic aspects. Even though feminist economists even turned these theories inside out, we believe that they contain ideas too that deserve to be saved.

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## **1. Introduction**

Unpaid care work represents a relevant part of what is meant as domestic work, nevertheless in economic theory its role is often overlooked and it is impossible to find an unambiguous and univocal definition of it. If, from an economic point of view, we interpret the meaning of ‘caring’ as one person provides a helpful service to another (Grossbard 2014), we can start to figure out how relevant care work is when we consider domestic work. Moreover, care work, especially, when it is unpaid, could be defined “as work in which concern for the well-being of the care recipient is likely to affect the quality of the services provided” (Folbre 2012). And, this additional definition can help us to understand the extent and the inherent aspects of this kind of work.

We can find the roots of the analysis of unpaid care work, even if it was not yet conceived in this sense, in two important figures of the history of economic thought: one among Neoclassical economists, Gary Becker, and the other one in the Marxist school, Friedrich Engels. Both of them included unpaid care work in the economic theory. And, feminist thinkers evoked both of them when they developed their theory on unpaid care work. On one side, in his theory of the household, Becker analysed the division of labour within the household, and the role of altruism in child rearing. On the other side, Engels highlighted the exploitation of women in the modern capitalist family and the necessity to socialise child-care in order to free women from their care responsibilities, and to allow them to reach sexual equality with men. But, despite the distant starting points, the antithetic goals and the different historical periods in which they wrote, both of them ended up presenting unpaid care work as something that pertains to women.

Between the seventies and the eighties the works of Becker and Engels were fully investigated by feminist scholars, who underlined the weaknesses on which their theories were based. On the one hand, the “domestic labour debate” in Marxist theory pointed out how the social relations of production in the family are different from those of wage labour and need separate investigation. On

the other hand, the work of Becker was fiercely criticised by feminist economists, who demonstrated that the household is not a single harmonious unit.

The result of these processes, especially in the case of Becker's theories, was often that of rejecting *in toto* the original theories, sanctioning them as preposterous, or even as a harm for talented academics that getting diverted into the elaboration of this variety of theories might waste their energy (Bergmann 1995).

The intent of the following pages is that of presenting first the contribution of Engels and Becker to the advancement of the concept of unpaid care work in economics, and then to review the main contributions by feminist economists on the conceptualization and analysis of unpaid care work in terms of developments and of criticisms to Engels' and Becker's theories. In this context, altruism has a fundamental role, and I will try to show how it takes a different shape when it is related to women or men.

In the past, other scholars presented combined reviews of the feminist critique to Becker and Engels. Folbre (1986) presented the feminist critique to neoclassical and Marxian theories of the household on bargaining models. Humpries and Rubery (1984) presented the methodologies used for the analysis of production and reproduction in neoclassical, Marxist and feminist schools. Himmelweit and Mohun (1977) and Molyneux (1979) presented a review of the domestic labour debate focussing the firsts on the role of domestic labour in non-commodity production, and the second on the discussion around women subordination. But, in none of these works the focus was on unpaid care work, which was most generally included in domestic work. The aim of this review will be, instead, that of highlighting unpaid care work. In order to do that, the first section will present the evolution of the concept of family from the Marxist family as a superstructure to the neoclassical household as an economic unit. Then, in the following sections, we will use the

concept of altruism as an analytical tool that will help us to have a common ground for the analysis of unpaid care work in different schools of thought.

## **2. From Family to Household**

The analysis of unpaid care work should start from the family, because in the family we can find the answers to the first two questions: where? and who? In fact, unpaid care work takes place mainly within the family and involves its members. But, the very concept of family is different in Engels and Becker. Following a chronological order we will start from presenting the concept of family in Engels.

First of all, Engels introduces his analysis of the family as a bequest from Karl Marx (Engels 1909, 9). In the Marxist theory the family is a historical concept. In fact, the family and its activity are strictly connected to a certain historical period, and in capitalism the role of the family is that of providing the maintenance and the reproduction of the working class. In this context, the family becomes a superstructure. Therefore, the nuclear family, and its economic nature, emerged for the sake of the capitalist system. However, Marx considered the modern nuclear family only as a unit of consumption, assuming that the family can respond to all its needs by the consumption of goods available in the market. He considered the work performed within the family as unproductive from a capitalist point of view (Marx 1982, 171). In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels 1909), Engels examines the three different forms of family which took place along the path of humankind towards civilization -group marriage for savagery, the pairing family for barbarism and monogamy for civilization- and he analyses the rise of the nuclear monogamous family in capitalism according to the materialistic conception.

“According to the materialistic conception, the decisive element of history is pre-eminently the production and reproduction of life and its material requirements. This, implies, on the

one hand, the production of the means of existence (food, clothing, shelter and the necessary tools); on the other hand, the generation of children, the propagation of the species. The social institutions, under which the people of a certain historical period and of a certain country are living, are dependent on these two forms of production, partly on the development of labor, partly on that of the family. The less labor is developed, and the less abundant the quantity of the production and, therefore, the wealth of society, the more society is seen to be under the domination of sexual ties. However, under this formation based on sexual ties, the productivity of labor is developed more and more.” (Engels 1909, 9–10)

For Engels, the origin of the nuclear monogamous family was founded on economic conditions, and it originated with the appearance of private property from the will of the men to leave his wealth to his offspring alone. For this reason there was no equality between husband and wife within the family, not from the social point of view and neither from the sexual one. The supremacy of the man over the wealth of the family determined also the sexual inequality. In fact, the endeavour to bequest the wealth to the children of the man necessitated monogamy from woman’s side, but not from man’s (Engels 1909, 91).

Engels anticipates that a social revolution that will transform the means of production – and, therefore, the inheritable wealth – into collective property will transform the family (Engels 1909, 91). The family will cease to be the economic unit of society, and the woman will no longer be forced to surrender to a man.

The work of Becker is situated in a different historical period and in another school of thought. Becker is a neoclassical economist from the Chicago school, but his work about the theory of the household overcomes the previous neoclassical theory.

One of the fundamental ideas of neoclassical theory was that all individuals have to choose how they allocate their time between work and leisure, and the main determinant of this allocation is the salary. The result of a change in salary is that, for any individual the labour force participation is the outcome of two effects: the income effect and the substitution effect. Neoclassical economists (Marshall, 2013) extended this individual analysis to the household and maintained that the income

effect usually prevails inside the household, hence, if the income of the husband would rise, the wife would consequently be encouraged to stay at home.

Therefore, when time series (Mincer, 1962) demonstrated that from the end of nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century women's employment continued to increase despite the concurrent rise of (men's) salaries, neoclassical theory proved to be false in its household analysis. In fact, neoclassical theory had not taken into account the work performed inside the household – because it is not productive of a salary; thus, for its scholars, all the time that is not spent in the labour market was considered leisure time.

The New Home Economics, founded by Gary Becker and Jacob Mincer, developed the neoclassical theory where the latter failed to completely clarify the correlation existing between substitution and income effects within the household. Actually, it started to consider the household as a unit of production of goods and services as well as a unit of consumption, and introduced a 'household decision model' (Becker, 1965).

Becker abandoned the idea of family as a single harmonious decision-making unit, in order to explore the allocation of time by married couples. He considered the 'traditional' gender division of labour within the household – with the husband devoting his time to the labour market and the wife to domestic duties and childrearing – and, using a model of rational choice in which family is trying to maximize joint utility with the constraints of income and time, he theorised a number of advantages supporting the specialization of its members in one of the two kinds of work.

But, despite Becker's recognition that, within the household, one person's consumption might depend on another person's time input, he considered the household and not the individual as the subject of decision-making process. Indeed, he contended that within the household a benevolent decision maker is managing the labour allocation in the constraints of income and time on the basis

of a principle of joint utility. In this context, the traditional gender division of labour was explained as a rational decision linked to a different investment in human capital (Becker, 1964).

Concluding this brief analysis of the family (or household) in Engels and Becker, it is relevant to highlight that they have more than one element in common. For both the family is an economic unit. And, they also share the idea that within the nuclear family the productivity of labour is developed. But there are important differences, too. First of all, in Engels' theory the family is only a unit of consumption – and reproduction. While for Becker the household is both a unit of consumption and production. Second, in Engels' modern capitalist family the husband and the wife cannot be considered as equals, and there is an oppression of the man over the woman. Instead, in Becker's household the partners are equal and allocate their time on the basis of the principle of productivity maximization. And finally, and most importantly, in Engels the form of the family and the relationships within it are strictly connected to the historical period. Instead, the household described by Becker represents a universal model that is always true.

### **3. The role of altruism in household's dynamics**

An analysis of unpaid care work through the lenses of economic thinking poses the challenge of conceptualizing a situation of human interaction quite different from the typical exchange situation (Joachimsen 2003). Caring implies reciprocity, altruism, and responsibility for others (Zachorowska-Mazirkiewicz 2015). For this reason, and in order to perform a simultaneous study on antithetical theories, we need to find a common analytical key. That key is altruism.

Altruism is not alien to the neoclassical theory. It is true that at the basis of the neoclassical theory there is the concept of self-interest, which is apparently in contrast with the idea of unpaid care work. But, to understand that self-interest and altruism might not be always in contrast, we should briefly recall what was stated by Adam Smith in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*. First of all,

Smith suggested that self-interest cannot cross the borders of the moral, recognizing that “tough the ruin of our neighbour may affect us much less than a very small misfortune of our own, we must not ruin him to prevent that small misfortune, nor even to prevent our own ruin” (Smith 2002 96–97). Moreover, that sympathy -that we can consider as a precondition for altruism- is not opposed to self-love, because there is not greatest happiness as to be beloved (Smith 2002, 132) thanks to a generous action (Smith 2002, 99–100). As a consequence, taking care of the others can even become an action of self-interest, which best suits neoclassical economic theory.

For what concerns Marxist theory, there is a shift from personal interest to universal interest. This means that each member of the community take an interest in the interest of their fellow citizens non-instrumentally (Jenkins 1995, 95). And, in a situation of scarcity of resources, "the individuals will sacrifice some of their self-realization for the sake of the community, that is for the sake of the self-realization of others" (Elster 1985, 524).

Both concept of altruism, even if they were not developed around the idea of unpaid care work, could be usefully adapted to our analysis. But, within the family it is possible to point out two kinds of altruism. On the one side, there is the altruism meant as self-sacrifice in putting the well-being of the members of the family before our own. On the other side, it is possible to refer to altruism as to the decision to share our own resources with the family’s members. First, we will analyse how this second form of altruism was developed.

### 3.1. “Masculine” altruism

The dual concept of altruism present in Smith, as a mix of generosity and self-interest, is embedded in neoclassical economics, which cannot think at altruism in other terms than as a transfer (Stark 1995) -whose nature entails the necessity of receiving something in exchange. This is the kind of



altruism that can be found in Becker when he analyses the behaviour of the male head of the household.

In his theory of altruism, Becker (1981) introduces it as the most efficient way for sharing resources within the family. He underlines that he wants to give “a definition of altruism that is relevant to behaviour -to consumption and production choices- rather than a philosophical discussion of what "really" motivates people” (Becker, 1981, 2). Therefore, he links altruism to the utility function, and presents the many reasons -maximizing utility, protecting against uncertainty, maximizing family income- that make altruism the most efficient choice in the family. Becker applies this last idea to all the members of the household, building around it the “Rotten Kid Theorem” (Becker, 1976). In Becker’s opinion, a father is altruistic toward his children, because he wants to provide an incentive to his children for considering his well-being later in life.

But, altruism is also an important factor in specialization within the members of the household. Becker (1981) states that the division of labour in the household, between women who bear and raise children and men who participate in the labour market, may lead to shirking of responsibilities and other efforts to improve own well-being at the expense of other members. But in an altruist’s family altruism encourages the division of labour and an efficient allocation of resources in the family, because the members of the household want to maximize family income and do not shirk their responsibilities or increase their well-being at the expense of others.

In general, for his theory of the family Becker was criticised because his theory is too simplistic, and concentrates most attention on the “Victorian ideal of the family” (Bergmann 1995, 142). But, Becker was criticized by feminist economists also because in his theory of altruism within the household he restores the figure of the “benevolent dictator” (Evenson, 1976), and because in his theory an altruist derives positive utility from the increase in another’s consumption, that does not necessarily mean a propensity to favour equal sharing (Bergmann 1995). In the “Rotten Kid

Theorem”, it is evident that the only one to have power within the household is the altruist/father, while the beneficiaries -wife and children- might be selfish but powerless at the same time. Thus, as altruism might take different forms, selfishness is kept in strict boundaries (Folbre, 1986). Bergmann (1995) presumed that it was more convenient to Becker to treat the family as being driven by one will, so as not to have to consider the separate interest of different people. The defence of Becker on this point is built around the concept of caring. Analysing caring (Becker 1974), he highlights that since marriage is encouraged by (and does encourage) caring, there is a justification for the economist’s usual assumption that even a multi-person household has a single well-ordered preference function. That is to say that if “the ‘head’ [of the household] cares enough about all the other members to transfer resources to them, this household would act *as if* it maximized the ‘head’s’ preference function, even if the preferences of other members are quite different” (Becker 1974, 16).

Secondly, analysing the process of sharing resources within the household Becker was criticised because he was unable to distinguish between true altruism and reciprocity (Folbre 1986). Again, in the attempt to analyse altruism exclusively through rational choice, Becker overlooks the real motivations of this behaviour. But, without a complex and complete analysis of what prompt the members of the family to act altruistically it is impossible to make a correct analysis.

From the critique to the theory of altruism derives a wide range of feminist studies focusing on bargaining models within the household. They question the idea on the household as a single harmonious unit, and introduce, in different forms, a household where cooperation and conflict coexist. The outcome of this reinterpretation of household’s dynamics can be represented by the “cooperative conflicts” approach, developed by Sen (1987) and Agarwal (1997). The assumptions of this approach are that the members of the household gain from cooperation, but also that they are in conflict over the division of the resources, and the result will depend from the fall-back position

of each member of the household. But, the real innovation of this approach stands on the fact that it refuses a mathematical modelling, whose simplicity is achieved at considerable sacrifice of informational sensitivity (Sen, 1987), because it wants to include also qualitative aspects, which are able to capture “the complexity and historic variability of gender relations in intra- and extra-household dynamics” (Agarwal, 1997, 2).

Moving into the analysis of the concept of altruism in resources’ sharing in Marxist school of thought, as we pointed out previously, we have to shift from a situation of personal interest to one of universal interest. The idea is also a more philosophical one, and it is difficult to transform the concept of this non-instrumental interest for the interest of the fellow citizens into practical terms (Jenkins 1995). But, if we want to look at the individual perspectives of the members of the family, in Engels, we can find an analysis of the sharing of resources within the modern capitalist family.

“In the great majority of cases the man has to earn a living and to support his family, at least among the possessing classes. He thereby obtains a superior position that has no need of any legal special privilege. In the family, he is the bourgeois, the woman represents the proletariat.” (Engels, 1902, 89)

Therefore, for Engels the support that a man provides to his family -as he says, at least among the possessing classes- entails a situation of inequality between husband and wife. Not only Engels recognises inequality within the family, but also he adds that:

“The monogamous family is founded on the open or disguised domestic slavery of women, and modern society is a mass of molecules in the form of monogamous families.” (Engels, 1902, 89)

Engels (1909) recognises that at the centre of such inequality stands the sexual relation between woman and man and the procreation of children. He highlights how a girl is bound to “surrender unconditionally to the beloved man” (Engels 1909, 92), and within the monogamous family the burden of the care and education of children falls on the mother, who for this reason is excluded from all participation in social production. For this last reason, in particular, he foresees that the

emancipation of women will primarily depend “on the reintroduction of the whole female sex into the public industries” (Engels 1909, 90), and on the end of the monogamous family as “the industrial unit of the society” (Engels 1909, 90).

In their analysis of the capitalist family, Marx and Engels point out the patriarchal gender relations which take place within this kind of household, and which can be considered as “the first class oppression with that of the female by the male sex” (Engels 1909, 79).

In the 1970s and 1980s some feminists developed these ideas in what was called the *Patriarchy Debate*. They argue that women constitute a distinct class and that there is a domestic mode of production, which is separate from the capitalist mode of production (Delphy, 1980). Here, the altruism of the male head of the household is seen from reverse. It is, in fact, in the interest of the husband to provide for his wife’s basic needs in order to maintain her labour power. The domestic mode of production is distinct from the capitalist one in the fact that those who are exploited in domestic work are not paid but maintained (Delphy, 1980).

The debate took different forms and it involved also the role of patriarchy in reproduction and childbearing. Mackintosh (1977, 119) highlighted “the inadequacy of an analysis of the family which centres attention on the necessity of housework for capitalism, while failing to give an adequate characterisation of the social relations under which women work in the home, social relations generated by the reproductive role of women”. And Folbre (1983, 261) adds, “however, distinctive women's biological capacities may be, it is the social and historical context of childbearing and childrearing that largely determines their structure and meaning. [...] The social relations which govern human reproduction often reinforce the domination of women and the exploitation of women's”.

Feminists, also, extend the notion of patriarchy from the family to society in general (Elson and Pearson, 1981). The process of subordination of women as a gender starts from “the social invisibility of the training that produces these [women’s] skills of manual dexterity and the lack of social recognition” and ends up in “the exclusion of women as a gender from certain activities, and their confinement to others”.

### 3.2. “Feminine” altruism

On the other side, it is possible to look at altruism as one of the elements included in caring -together with reciprocity and responsibility for others (Zachorowska-Mazirkiewicz 2015). Unpaid care work, in particular, is considered as an activity characterised by a certain degree of altruism (England 2003; Grossbard 2014).

Nonetheless, in Becker altruism and caring are expressed in terms of sharing resources (Becker 1974), while he explains the involvement of women in caring activities, and, in particular, in the care of children, as a biological advantage (Becker, 1993). The biological commitment that they have in producing and feeding children is transformed in a comparative advantage over men in caring activities and in the household sector in general, because for a women is more simple taking care of other children or doing domestic work while she is bearing a child than doing other kinds of work (Becker 1993, 39). Thus, Becker acknowledges that becomes difficult to disentangle biological from environmental causes.

The traditional gender division of labour within the household is explained by Becker (1965) as a rational decision, which allows the maximization of the well-being of the household. But, the idea of the efficiency of the gender division of labour falls under the empirical evidence. The profitability of women’s specialization for the household production, indeed, is easily negated by the observation of family dynamics. In fact, the advantages of women’s specialization in household

duties, which reach their peak when there are young children in the household, are reduced as children grow up. There is evidence that the returns of household specialization are not increasing with time but instead are decreasing (Ferber and Birnbaum, 1977). Therefore, there is no economic explanation to the allocation of time within the family following a traditional breadwinner model. Secondly, Becker's model of allocation of time does not do anything more than proposing from a theoretical point of view the traditional breadwinner model of household, with the result of consolidating the naturalization of the gendered division of labour (Barker and Feiner, 2004). And, as many other economists, he is victim of the desire to analyse everything through the boundaries of rational choice (Sawhill, 1977), when, instead, preferences are very often shaped by social norms and individuals, who, as theorised by sociology, do not really have any choice to make.

Caring assumes a completely different meaning when presented by feminist economists. Increasingly, when economists write about caring, they mean that one person provides a helpful service to another (Grossbard 2014, 487). More precisely, care work is work in which concern for the well-being of the care recipient is likely to affect the quality of the services provided (Folbre and Olin Wright 2012). Moreover, much of the caregiving that economists analyse is provided by family members for altruism (Grossbard 2014, 487–88). Grossbard (2014) combines the idea of altruism in caregiving with Becker's (1973) second demand and supply model in marriage, and presents her theory of demand and supply in 'Work-in-Household' – as she calls a service that one spouse performs for the benefit of the other and possibly gets compensated for by the other spouse. So, the matching of the partners is regulated by the demand (by one sex) of Work-in-Household (provided by the other sex) and by the price of the Work-in-Household of one type of spouse (man or woman). But, she calls for more research on the field of family behaviours to separate self-interest from altruistic motives relating to the caregiving by spouses and to the monetary transfers that often accompany them.

If it is certainly true that one of the best example of self-sacrifice for the self-realization of others is represented by women paying the cost of caring for ourselves, our children, and other dependents (Folbre 1994). And, even if Engels (1909, 91-92) acknowledges that all the care and education of the children falls on the mothers, he never describes this sacrifice as moved by altruism. Rather, Engels (1909) finds the origin of the gender division of labour within the family in the capitalist mode of production, which leaves the fulfilment of the maintenance and reproduction of the working class to the labourer's instinct of self-preservation (Marx, 1982, 718). In such context, monogamy "develops the welfare and advancement of one by the woe and submission of the other" (Engels, 1902, 80). While man can earn a wage, woman is confined in the household. This means also that until there is a capitalist mode of production women should take a step backwards with regard to employment, because a traditional family structures guaranties higher wages for men. Therefore, "the supremacy of man in marriage is simply the consequence of his economic superiority and will fall with the abolition of the latter" (Engels, 1902, 99).

The figure of an exploited female kind is, therefore, well drafted, but Engels does not answer to the question why are women in charge of unpaid care work?

"The status of women is clearly inferior to that of men, but analysis of this condition usually falls into discussing socialization, psychology, interpersonal relations, or the role of marriage as a social institution. Are these, however, the primary factors? In arguing that the roots of the secondary status of women are in fact economic, it can be shown that women as a group do indeed have a definite relation to the means of production and that this is different from that of men. [...] If this special relation of women to production is accepted, the analysis of the situation of women fits naturally into a class analysis of society." (Benston, 1969, 1)

Other Marxists economists took over the idea that unpaid labour performed by the member of the household, and in particular by working class women, represents a form of exploitation (Benston, 1969; Bowles and Gintis, 1977) or "an immense expenditure of energy and self-sacrifice in a thousand little tasks" (Luxemburg, 1976, 215 cited in Gardiner, 1997, 64), but they were unable to perform any analysis of economic self-interest within the family (Folbre, 1986). Instead, they

preferred to analyse the relation between the capitalists and the weakest groups - which compose the reserve army of labour. In this framework, they recognize that those groups which are least able to impose political and economic costs on the capitalists have to bear the most severe job insecurity (Bowles and Gintis, 1977).

With the progressive move of caregiving from family to the market, new models are needed. In order to explain care work, Folbre and Nelson (2000) argue for a model in which self-interest and altruism interact, and conclude that “the increasing intertwining of ‘love’ and ‘money’ brings the necessity -and the opportunity- for innovative research and action”.

#### 4. Conclusions

*In progress*

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