



Social reproduction and the family: contradictions of childcare and eldercare in Germany

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Abstract

At the heart of capitalism is a contradiction between capital's need for value-producing labor, including the commodification of care work and care products, and capitalists' pursuit of profit at all costs, including the value of wages and the life and wellbeing of workers. The family is entangled in this contradiction insofar as its members, and particularly its female members, are encouraged to care for their children and for their dependent parents without (adequate) compensation out of love or duty, at the same time as they are immersed in and held up to standards of autonomy and self-care. In this article, I unpack this entanglement with respect to men and women's care for their children and for their dependent parents in Germany. I argue that family members live out a structural contradiction in the reproduction of capitalism as a personal and family conflict and assume its fallouts as their personal failures. This makes the family relationships that center on care singularly excessive and family members prone to questioning their commitment, sensibility, and competence as mothers and fathers and as daughters and sons.

In small-scale societies, kinship was structured in a way that connected with broader networks of power and served as the link through which other relationships and services were activated. Classic anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and Meyer Fortes have accordingly prioritized its study: they wrote about kinship as a building block of society, its form crystallizing political and economic organization (Carsten 2004). But anthropologists found that they could not extend the same logic to large-scale societies. Exploring kinship in their own countries, they observed dissonance where synchrony once reigned. David Schneider (1980) wrote about American kinship that, far from reflecting social institutions such as power and ownership, it was sharply distinguished from them. And with respect to British kinship, Raymond Firth (2006) noted how family obligations were lived out as onerous, whereas Marilyn Strathern (1992) identified individualism as overshadowing the family's sense of belonging.

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Noting the difference, Michael Lambek (2013) clarified that while ‘kinship’ is, by definition, a form that structures its society, the modern ‘family’ is understood to be private. Like others (e.g., Cannel and McKinnon 2013; Collier and Yanagisako 1987), he contested this separation of domains, holding that the assumed privacy of the family downplays the state’s role in regulating the means by which people related to one another as parents and offspring and spouses and siblings. And yet, it is within the bounds of its perceived privacy that the family stands out among other institutions that make up modern society as immoderate and excessive. Families may embrace sacrifice just as they may reproduce hierarchy. As Lambek put it, the often-inexhaustible demands of love and care placed upon the family infuse it with superfluity and excess.

In this article, I want to take a closer look at the dissonance that makes family sentiments and demands appear singularly excessive. My goal is to trace at least part of it to the family’s role in the reproduction of capitalist society. Raising, socializing, and caring for the future workforce, as well as sustaining those who have left it, had once been communal undertakings, arranged in a variety of ways by a wide cast of social actors. But in capitalism, these tasks have largely been ‘privatized’ in the sense of being assigned to economically self-contained households. And the family, as Rayna Rapp (1978) famously put it, is the ideology by which individuals are recruited into such private households and by which pressures on the reproduction of private households are handled and absorbed. Individuals feel they must work for the sake of their family, must care for its members, and that the meaningfulness of family life is to justify their investments and compensate for the difficulties of their waged and care work.

Feminist theorists view the privatization of socially reproductive tasks within the family household critically. They see it as a source of social impoverishment, as peoples’ investments are redirected towards one’s family members to the exclusion of all else; of inequality, as household resources vary and subsequent inequalities between them grow; and of oppression, as family members grow more dependent on each other and mainly on the breadwinner. They describe how it harms primarily women, who bear the brunt of house- and care work, just at this burden intensifies and their capacity to carry it diminishes; and who are identified with it, just as it is devalued. This has led some of them to conclude that the (privatized) family should be abolished (Barrett and McIntosh 1982; O’Brien 2019; Weeks 2021).

Other critics have expressed concern over the reverse process: that many of the tasks that have long been the charge of the family household such as care, education, and cultivation are being ‘socialized’ in the sense of being turned over to capital and to the capitalist state. They zone in on the legal and educational apparatus, as well as on commercial enterprise (commodification) as taking over individuals’ constitution as useful members of society. They see these forces as undermining the authority of parents while exposing children directly to the dictates of capital. These critics decry the socialization of the household and the commodification that underlies it, as leaving the family colonized (Donzelot 1979) and besieged (Lasch 1995) to the detriment of its members’ autonomy and wellbeing.

Each of these evaluations, while pinpointing genuine predicaments in contemporary family life, creates a false impression of one-sided pressure inflicted on a preexisting family model from without. This, while the shifting conditions social reproduction in here in family relations and are reproduced along with them. Mobilizing a vast array of historical and anthropological evidence to debunk classic theories of kinship as the building block of society, Maurice Godelier explained that, on the contrary, concrete realities subordinate family relations to their own reproduction. Materially determined social content, he concluded, is the very stuff of kinship, variably bringing family members together and dividing them (Godelier 2011).

Taking my cue from Godelier, I want to examine this ‘social content’ in contemporary Germany. My starting point is that at the heart of capitalism is a destabilizing contradiction between the socialization and the privatization of social reproduction. It operates, *inter alia*, through the care of the unwaged: children who will one day enter the workforce, and the elderly who have left it. These two groups, removed from the wage nexus, are a significant part of society that cannot reproduce itself through the market-mediated exchange of wage with goods. The family household is a key site in which their subsistence is managed. I argue that family members in societies like Germany, where both fulltime employment and family care are the norm, live out the contradiction in social reproduction as a personal and inter-family conflict between love and duty on the one hand and autonomy on the other. I further argue that the family’s implication in this contradiction makes family sentiments around care feel dissonant and excessive, a veritable hotbed of anxiety, resentment, and guilt. I will try to establish this argument through the lens of people’s care for their children and for their dependent parents, as I have encountered them in Germany.

I spent about a year interviewing a wide range of family caregivers in different parts of Germany, participating in social gatherings and support groups for parents and family eldercare givers, and following exchanges in online forums dedicated to family-based childcare and eldercare.¹ In what follows, I will set the stage by describing how a dissonance in caregiving is experienced as a conflict within oneself or between family members. Next, I will unpack this dissonance by describing the regulation of family care in Germany and by tracing the capitalist contradiction between the privatization and socialization of social reproduction, and its expression as an inner conflict between a sense of autonomy and self-care on the one hand, and a push of and towards love and duty, on the other. Finally, I will explore the negative emotions emerging out of love and duty’s ideological concurrence with autonomy.

¹ I cannot speak to the social profile of participants in the online forums as their identities are anonymous, but my interviewees, as well as the participants in the social gatherings (playgroups, parent get-togethers and support groups for elder-caring relatives) varied widely in terms of income, family situation and ethnic/migration background. Still, as far as I could tell, they all had at least high school education and jobs that would label them as “professionals.”

Conflicts of family-based caregiving

Every parent I spoke to professed an anti-authoritarian parenting style that emphasized children's autonomy and self-determination and feared exercising too much influence and burdening them with expectations.² These parents were nonetheless aware of the limitations that society itself places on their children's flourishing. Anticipating the social and material challenges their children would face as adults, parents were unsure about how to best prepare them to face these challenges while also honoring and cultivating their freedom. They criticized institutions of care like the public school system for inadequate support, not least against the backdrop of pressures exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Still, they considered preparing their children for happy adulthood to be their personal charge, and their success in navigating it a testing ground for their competence as parents.

When I asked parents about their satisfactions, most mentioned seeing their children learn to do things for themselves. But this cherished autonomy led to impasses. One father told me how his daughter had a fight with her friend at kindergarten earlier that week. The daughter was upset, and he and his wife tried to figure out how to help. On the one hand, you want to make sure it does not happen again. On the other, you want to treat her like an independent person who has to learn how to handle such situations herself. They tried both: talking with the kindergarten staff and with the other child's parents, but also talking with their daughter about what she could have done differently and how she could react in the future. And it resulted in the daughter getting so worked up that they felt they were just making matters worse.

One mother recalled solving a similar problem at her son's kindergarten by involving the staff. She, too, trusted her son and wanted him to be autonomous. But she also had to protect him from other children, whom she could not trust. It was easier now, with the son in grade school in a part of town with fewer bad influences. This mother, like every other parent I spoke to, wanted her children to grow up and stand on their own two feet. In her words: to complete their studies, maybe travel a bit, then have a good, solid profession that would allow them to live well. At the same time, the mother noted that housing prices in their neighborhood were on the rise and that even she and her husband, who had such professions, were struggling. She was often overwhelmed by having to prepare her children for this reality.

A father who described his trial-and-error attempts to find the perfect kindergarten and school for his two sons recounted how stressful it was. He found that the sense of control it was designed to be illusory. Both his sons had difficulties at the kindergarten and school they were at now, which he had apparently misjudged. 'The end effect is that, as a parent, you're never fully satisfied and always guilty,' he concluded. He also told me about his own professional and personal challenges, in which doing things 'by the book' had not paid off. This in mind, he was nervous about his sons' future. After insisting—as virtually every parent had—that he would

² While I do not believe this to be unique to Germany and have anecdotally observed it elsewhere, Germany does have a reputation of raising children to be independent and self-reliant, as popularized by Sara Zaske's (2018) bestseller *Achtung Baby*.

like his children to do and be whatever made them happy, he added ruefully that he only hoped what made them happy fit society.

Managing so fortuitous a fit was a common strain on marital relations. Parents often admitted that the birth of their children put a strain on their relationship. They also evaluated their relationship with their partners through the lens of its effect on their children. Different parenting skills and sensibilities were judged as either detrimental to their children's flourishing or as contributing to it in a complementary way. On a parenting forum, a father complained that his 'super-mom' wife expected no less of him. Others objected that one parent cannot do it all and that they needed to be able to rely on their partner to know their children were in good hands. And at a mothers' get-together, a woman shared how upset she gets when her husband tells their kids to do things without explaining his reasoning to them. The other mothers were sympathetic, but also pointedly inquired whether they fight about it in front of the children. The conversation turned to how hard it was to coparent as a team.

Eldercare, unlike most cases of parenting, is not a life choice and often happens unexpectedly. Only then does the son or daughter have a choice to make, intensifying the dissonance around autonomy. German law does not oblige adults to care for their parents, but the prohibitive costs of institutional care combined with cash-for-homecare policies encourage it. They provide gradated (according to dependency criteria) yet, per frequent critique, insufficient public financial support for employing care services such as nursing, housekeeping, supervision, and companionship, at the dependents' home. Consequently, many adults and especially adult daughters do care for their dependent parents, at least in the sense of overseeing the parent's homecare.³

They insist, however, on their caregiving being a choice. They express their wariness of doing 'too much' and maintain that they cannot be good caregivers if they do not take care of themselves first. Yet, they manage this eldercare despite extremely high personal costs. They frame this choice as either aligned with their feelings toward their parent or as overriding them: some cite their love or their debt of gratitude for their parent while others mention the social norms or moral values that guide them despite a troubled relationship.

I interviewed one woman who, after managing her mother's homecare for 3 years, placed her in a nursing home. She explained that she felt duty-bound towards her mother, who had always been there for her, but she resented her as well. She appreciated hearing from others in her support group that they too had such negative feelings. Through these conversations, she realized that a nursing home would restore the mother-daughter relationship that the caregiving damaged. She explained: 'I was no longer the daughter. I was the cleaning lady, the one who made sure my mother takes her medicine, the shopper, the cook. And I went there because I felt I had to, never thinking, I'll spend a nice day with mom. Now I can visit her because I feel like it, and simply tell her something nice.'

³ 76% of those in need of care in Germany are cared for at home by formal carers and family caregivers. Of those, 58% are the dependent's children or children-in-law (Plamper 2019).

A younger woman had been caring for her father alone and resented her brother for not helping. 'I hate that it's always the daughters who have to do everything' she told me: 'especially since it is at the expense of my own life.' Before her father's early-onset Alzheimer's, she had traveled abroad, but now she was back in her hometown, estranged from the life she was leading. When I asked if her responsibility towards her father had always been clear to her, she replied that it had not: it just kind of happened. But she was adamant about not expressing herself as a victim, either, not even of the gender norms she criticized. She added: 'I'm the one who made these decisions. No one forced me. I decided to do it. I felt that I couldn't abandon him, but it is true that I have certain values inside myself, I wanted to do it.'

Both women subsumed the pressure to care for their parent under the opposite pressure, to exercise choice. By aligning duty or sentiment with choice they owned the care role forced upon them. The same attitude encouraged caregivers to come to terms with a sibling that did not pull their weight. At one support group, a man complained that his brother, who lived further away, took for granted that he would do everything for their dependent mother. When the family met at the mother's home for Christmas, the brother commented on a lamp being broken, simply assuming that he would fix it. He fumed over it for weeks. A woman in the group responded that she would simply replace the lamp without even bringing it up with her siblings, but she reminded the group of her 'helper syndrome' which made her do 'too much'. The group went on to discuss how each person had a different relationship with their parent and different care capacities. Hard as it was to accept, they agreed, no one could force a sibling to care for their parent if they did not want to.

In sum, parents struggled to navigate a system that promotes their children's autonomy while offering no guarantee that it will be rewarded. They felt their success would attest to their love and competence and to their good cooperation with their coparents. And people who cared for a dependent parent learned to live with what they considered an inevitable battle between self-fulfillment on the one hand and love or duty on the other. Sometimes they projected it onto siblings who did less, and sometimes they experienced as conflicting desires to be negotiated. Both groups lived these tensions out as personal and family conflicts despite their criticisms of gender expectations and inadequate public support.

The contradictions of social reproduction

Individual autonomy and the capacity to exercise choice are tenets of (Western) modern life and morality. As such, they stand in tension with family relationships, often conceived quite explicitly as freedom-defying 'bonds'. This holds particularly true with regard to the relationship between parents and their offspring, which, per Marilyn Strathern, offers a two-way apparatus for reimagining the gradation of autonomy (Strathern 1992: 14-15). Accordingly, individual autonomy vis-à-vis one's children (for example, the age of leaving one's parental home) and parents (eldercare) have served as the measure for cross-country comparisons of the strength of family ties (Reher 1998). The principle of autonomy conflicts so starkly with

family members' need for care that even when care is provided, those who provide it are liable to view it as morally ambiguous (Firth, Hubert, and Forge 2006 [1970]).

A common strategy for dealing with this tension is to try and align family relationships and responsibilities with the logic of autonomous choice, as my interlocutors described. This strategy also inspires the adoption of friendship—the paradigmatic voluntaristic relationship—as the idiom for family relations as well ('my mother is also my best friend'). It becomes common parlance insofar as modern sensibilities, even with respect to family relations, eschew obligation and see authenticity in voluntaristic sentiment alone (Miller 2017; Miller and Garvey 2022).

But spontaneous affection is not always there and, even when present, it is notoriously fickle, itself a source of unease. Against the unreliability of sentiment, social and legal pressures to care for family members are put in place in countries that aspire to cut on public care costs. Whether spontaneous or legally enforced, these acts of care end up shaping family relations. Indeed, contemporary anthropology of kinship proceeds from the assumption that, far from family relations inevitably leading to care, the practices of care are those that create and transform relatedness (Amrith and McKearney 2021; Carsten 1997, 2020; Thelen 2014). The revived importance of the family, then, has everything to do with the contemporary crisis of care and the activation of family members to tackle it. In the USA, for example, neoliberal policies cutting back on public care go hand in hand with a reaffirmation of the family and of 'family values' as an instrument for policing those who might otherwise lay claims on the public purse (Cooper 2017).

The legal regulation of family care follows a different trajectory in Germany. During the Nazi era, the family formed a constitutive element of nationness, indexing categories of belonging that were essential to a state's claim to legitimacy in representing a nation. John Borneman (1992) studied the afterlife of this notion in the divided Germanies. He explained how, given the association of Nazism with authoritative family models, postwar reconstruction of the family domain has been a politicized affair. Eastern Germany sought to change the context in which the family was constituted by colonizing public space, whereas western Germany relied on market forces to stimulate private desires. And where guaranteed work and care institutions in eastern Germany supported fulltime paid employment for women, social entitlements in western Germany (such as joint taxation for married couples, parental leave for up to 3 years, and private pension support for unemployed spouses) helped generate a conservative male-breadwinner and female-homemaker model.

After reunification in 1990, eastern Germany assumed the western German political and juridical system, including its family policies. But, as Tatjana Thelen (2006) described, east German women remained quicker than their western counterparts to return to work after having a child, with the active support of grandparents. At the same time, unified Germany introduced policies to aid the integration of caregiving women into paid employment, such as an earnings-related parental leave benefit, expanded childcare facilities for under-threes, entitlements to time off and protection against dismissal for family caregivers (Correll and Kassner 2018; Fleckenstein 2011; Plamper 2019).

Despite this support, growing inequality in Germany combined with precarious jobs that increase mothers' dependence on their partners' income, and a

long-term-care insurance with insufficient cash-for-homecare policies, de-facto encourage caregiving at home by (mostly female) family members (Keck and Saraceno 2009; Knauth et al. 2021). This trend is facilitated by a policy shift over the past two decades towards “activation”: individuals in Germany are now urged to take responsibility over themselves and their dependents in terms of finance, education, employability, and health, in their own as well as in the public interest (Lessenich 2015). Particularly during the COVID pandemic, the family has been remobilized as the central institution of care and as a safe haven to which everyone should retreat, even as actual families buckled under mounting pressures (Laufenberg and Schultz 2021).

These policy trends have taken shape in the context of the contradictory process whereby capitalist society gets reproduced. A Marxian understanding of capitalism is one that considers it, not as an economic system operating alongside (social and cultural) others, but as a society whose every aspect is subordinated to the imperative of accumulation, or the production of surplus value. Social reproduction theorists working in this tradition attend to the ways in which men and, more often, women, are implicated in this imperative (Bhattachayra 2017; Gimenez 2018; Vogel 2013; Weiss 2021). They underscored how the privatization of social reproduction as the responsibility of the household has encouraged the care for children and for the elderly being the charge of family members, who would perform it as a calling and thus without compensation. This inclination reduces the costs, for capitalists, of socially necessary care work. This is so because, instead of it being financed by society’s aggregate capital, care work is performed by de-facto volunteers. The exploitation of paid work can thereby be increased through reductions in public support.⁴ Additionally, if family members had to pay for this care work, they would also need higher wages, thus cutting into the rate of capitalists’ profit. Finally, the expectation that they care for their family dependents pushes men and women to be better and more docile employees, for fear of losing their income. All of this works to the advantage of the capitalist class, which is in the position to pocket more of society’s surplus value.

At the same time, however, capitalism cannot have all of its products and services provided by volunteers: it needs waged work in order to reproduce itself. This is so because capitalism operates on the principle of an exchange of equivalents: barring theft and violence, things are exchanged on the free market with things of the same value. The only possible source of additional (‘surplus’) value in such a system, then, is surplus labor. After the worker has sold on the free labor market their capacity to work in return for a wage, their employer can squeeze more (‘surplus’) value out of this work than the value that is represented in the worker’s paycheck. Waged surplus labor, then, is the engine of accumulation, and perforce of

⁴ This also holds true for volunteers who are not family members but are encouraged to care for their dependents in the spirit of familial sacrifice, as Andrea Muehlenbach (2012) demonstrates for Italy, and as Silke Van Dyk and Tina Haubner (2021) describe for contemporary Germany. The subsidy to capital is multiplied when scaled up to the global economy, where the majority of people labor work in the informal economy (Mezzadri 2019).

capitalism's reproduction. And so, the reproduction of capitalism relies on as much activity as possible, including childcare and eldercare activities, becoming commodified as waged (surplus-value-producing) labor. What is more, commodified labor and services energize profit-generating consumption, create business opportunities, and allow more women to enter the workforce and create, perforce, more surplus value.

Accumulation is augmented, in other words, when more activity is commodified. Capital tries, therefore, to include as many kinds of activity as possible under the value form. This is what is meant by 'socializing' social reproduction: subordinating social and individual activities of various kinds, including the care of children and of the elderly, under the surplus-value accumulation logic of capitalist society. Such a feat is accomplished by transferring ever more childcare and eldercare products and services (among others) onto the market. To repeat, capital acts in the world through competing capitalists, and the capitalist class does strive to cut costs as employers and to increase profits as investors by privatizing care work in the household and thereby making it cheaper or free for themselves. But there is constant counterpressure to fuel accumulation by activating value-producing care work as a paid service and care products as commodities. This is one of the contradictions that accounts for the inherent instability of capitalism (Best 2021).

The family is malleable enough to accommodate both the privatizing and the socializing tendencies of capitalism, but the tension is nevertheless felt and must somehow be negotiated in family members' self-understandings. To do so, they draw on the normative repertory that capitalism itself provides. This repertory is divided along the same lines as social reproduction. To wit, the capitalist class gains from workers having a strong sense of love and/or duty towards their family. Such sentiments, or at least the expectation that they pertain, encourage even workers with limited resources to take responsibility over family members' care in a way that reduces wage-costs for employers and welfare costs for the state that represents the interests of capitalists. Hence, the valorization of family love, responsibility, duty, and obligation (Cooper 2017; Federici 2004; Rapp 1978). At the same time, capital inspires in workers and in consumers, structurally isolated from each other in their work and consumption, a sense of autonomy and individualism. These dispositions encourage workers and consumers to work and consume optimally, willingly, and dividedly, that is, as individuals directly linked to market-mediated commodities through which they realize and express themselves, as well as to sources of income for which they must compete with each other, hence the valorization of freedom of choice, self-realization, and self-care (Dowling 2021; Feher 2009; Weiss 2019).

State policy takes shape between the poles of socialization and privatization, which it has to negotiate through laws and institutions that support both paid employment and family care at ratios that vary according to the shifting needs of capital. In other words, policy mediates these pressures for the population. And, as anthropologists have noted, the laws and institutions that dictate the conditions of care influence the relations between the family members that this care activates. Families meet the exigencies of social reproduction through work, care, and education institutions that appear to invoke their agency and choice. The real boon for capitalism is that they live out the structural contradiction at the heart of capitalism

as a self-generated personal and family conflict. Specifically, they experience it as conflict within their own conscience or among family members such as siblings, between a responsibility to care, on the one hand, and a strong sense of choice and autonomy on the other. This personal and family conflict looms larger, in their lives, than any assessments they might have of public care. Family members unwittingly contribute to the stabilization of capitalism, then, by taking the contradiction at its core upon their own shoulders.

Parents in Germany voice many criticisms against institutions of childcare they perceive as problematic. Even so, they navigate the pitfalls of a system that promotes their children's autonomy but offers no guarantee that it would be rewarded as a test of their love and competence. They foresee that their children's misfortunes will broadcast to the world their own parenting failures. In turn, those who care for their dependent parents often fault the inadequate support they receive from the state. Yet, they experience a system that pits their joy and self-fulfillment against their familial love or duty, as an inevitable inner battle. It is variously projected onto siblings who do less and variously felt as one's own conflicting desires and values. Formally employed individuals who also care for their children or for their parents live out a structural contradiction in the reproduction of capitalism as if innate to the care relationship. They see its resolution as an expression of their sensibility, competence, and moral compass. This tendency, which in reality is the outcome of the role that contemporary capitalism assigns to the family, generates a unique set of tensions among family members, to which I shall now turn.

Predicaments of family caregivers

What struck me most throughout my fieldwork was the extent to which my interlocutors were united in the value they placed on autonomy. No one spoke about the care they gave their child or parent without highlighting their own autonomy as a caregiver and the autonomy of the child or parent they cared for. These autonomies almost always clashed with each other, as well as with the realities of care. It is by now a truism in the critical analysis of capitalism that it undermines the very autonomy it celebrates by limiting the resources required to exercise it. With respect to the topic at hand, it creates a compulsion to care alongside material difficulties in providing this care and limits on caregivers' liberties (Bakker 2007; Bhattachayra 2017; Fraser 2016; Gimenez 2018). But this is not what my interlocutors experienced in these clashes. Rather, they experienced these clashes as strains on their own commitment, competence, and resolve as autonomous actors.

Much has been said about today's intense parenting norms and the strenuous demands they place on parents and particularly on mothers who are expected to embody them. Although globally considered a middle-class phenomenon, in Germany parents of lower social-economic status, including those of migrant backgrounds, emulate these standards as well (Betz et al. 2017; Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022). I can confirm from my own fieldwork that parents tried to embody these norms and were duly exhausted. The fatigue I witnessed stemmed not merely from the time and effort that anti-authoritarian parents put into what many described as

endless negotiations to get children to do things of their own accord. It was also a byproduct of trying to fashion themselves as the kinds of parents who might inspire or lead by example. In toddler playgroups and parent get-togethers, they were always comparing these feats of self-fashioning, from changing their own eating habits so that their children develop healthier ones, through curbing their internet consumption so as not to set a bad example, to forcing themselves to sing or socialize or play sports lest their children be turned against such activities.

What seemed to weigh on parents most was the worry that their failures to check their impulses might negatively impact their children's emotional life. 'I remember thinking how terrible my friends' dads were, so stressed out and angry all the time,' told me one father: 'and I was sure I'd be completely different. But am I? Most days I'm too exhausted from work to really be playful with my kids.' When I asked parents about their greatest fears, many mentioned having their children develop the same hang-ups that plagued their own childhoods, such as eating disorders, perfectionism, a quick temper, conflict-aversion, and emotional withdrawal. They made concerted efforts to absolve their children. So, one father prided himself on the tolerance he showed for his gifted 12-year-old's laziness. It was hard, since he was brought up to believe that if you did not do your best, you were wasting your capacities. What troubled him even more was recognizing his insecurities in his children and not knowing how to nurture in them a higher self-esteem than his own.

Mothers operated under the added pressure of having to combine parenting with standards of self-care. A veteran parenting councilor I interviewed named self-care as the main change she observed in her 30-odd years of experience: if once she'd have to urge women to cultivate a life outside of motherhood, mothers today were mindful about not neglecting themselves. But rather than a boon, she noticed it added to their pressure. Many questioned whether they were not 'losing themselves' to motherhood or 'letting themselves go.' The motto of one mothers' group I joined was 'we are not just mothers; we are also women.' A common benchmark for its participants was when they started reading books or doing yoga again. A different group I joined, for single parents, would deliberately schedule their monthly get-togethers on weekend nights so that, since they would have hired a babysitter anyway, they could go out clubbing afterwards.

Self-care was also construed as contributing to the children's autonomy. One mother told me how it burdened her and her siblings that their parents turned them into the center of their existence. She made a point of being different with her children, demonstrating to them that she had a meaningful social life. And a single mother described the strain of caring for her daughter alone. 'The hardest part is knowing that nothing will happen if I don't do it,' she said: 'if I don't cook there's no food. If I don't clean it stays dirty. We come home exhausted, and I have to do everything.' But when she puts her daughter to bed each night, she added, she feels that for all of her activities that day, she has done nothing: nothing for her professional development, nothing for her entertainment, nothing for her self-care. When I asked why it was so important, she explained that she wanted to inspire her daughter: 'to show her that you can be a mother but also have a job and a passion, something to do in the world. That for a woman, there is something besides motherhood.'

Parents who felt they had to restrict their children's autonomy were conflicted and defensive about it. This came up most frequently in conversations about schooling and screentime, two issues that were met with the most forceful resistance. 'I have to go against my own principles and be very controlling,' one mother told me: 'I like self-determination (*selbstbestimmung*) and feel it's important that my children have it too, but everything has its limits.' She went on to explain how kids can get overwhelmed and addicted. 'It's a very difficult balancing act,' she explained: 'I want to grant them this freedom, but I need to find the correct range because, as a mother, I am also responsible if something goes wrong.'

Even when parents divulged their difficulties with caregiving, they put a positive spin on them, perhaps in conformity with social expectations about parenthood. Still, their difficulties came through over time. One mother told me at the beginning of our conversation how she resented her childless friends perceiving her as a victim. 'It's an image I hate,' she said: 'I decided very consciously to become a mother.' But over the course of our conversation, she relayed how hard it was for her to inhabit the role of the responsible adult: 'When the kids fight, I just don't know what to do. I get dragged in and I'm so angry at myself afterwards.' Several months after our conversation took place, she took a leave of absence from her job, had withdrawn from her family, and was seeking treatment for burnout.

Men and women who cared for a parent often encountered the opposite expectation that they refrain from doing too much. Unlike parents of young children, they were under no legal obligation to provide care and had to rationalize it to other members of a society long marked for its relatively 'weak' family allegiance (Reher 1998) and which places a high value on individual autonomy.⁵ 'Everyone always asks me why I do as much as I do for my father,' a woman in her thirties told me: 'they tell me that I'm not taking care of myself, that I must be doing this for my own ego, to please my father or to be "the good daughter".'

Eldercare forums and support groups are replete with conversations about accepting, or making others accept, that caring for one's parents is a choice. Since many people choose not to do it, the choice becomes morally and psychologically loaded, the axis of family and internal strife. It was quite common for such caregivers to be accused of psychological hang-ups compelling them to do more than what others felt reasonable. And it was just as common for caregivers to assume the moral high ground over siblings or others who did less. But this meant that they also held themselves to very high standards and struggled to justify anything short of selfless devotion. One story I heard over and over again was about how they suffered from physical ailments or burnouts. In their minds, it was as if their bodies were forcing them to draw back when they were consciously conflicted about this choice.

A consultant at an eldercare information center told me that even though personal autonomy was well-entrenched in German society, and even as German law

⁵ An instructive comparison is Sarah Lamb's (2009) ethnography of aging among the Indian diaspora in the United States: the strong dependence of elderly parents in India on their adult children clashes with American notions that such eldercare is bad for caregiver's mental health, marriages, productivity at work, and the economy.

went to great lengths to protect it, her clients constantly inquired about the extent of their responsibility towards their dependent parent, and about the extent to which such a parent could oppose the care they felt was necessary. In this, she speculated, social expectations and personal sensibilities did not line up with the letter of the law.

Those among my interlocutors who received legal guardianship over their parent felt guilty about acting against this parent's wishes, for example, in removing them from a home that they could no longer maintain or in which they could no longer be cared for, or in confiscating a car or bicycle that had become dangerous for them to use. One woman told me about having to cut off her mother's access to money because the mother no longer understood its worth or what she was spending it on. It was hard, she said, and she was still unsure if she acted correctly. It was, after all, the money her mother had worked for and saved, she ruminated. Didn't she have the right to do with it as she pleased?

Virtually every person I spoke to who cared for a parent stressed the lengths to which they would go in order to spare their own children the need to care for them when the time comes. Typical in this respect is an explanatory booklet for sons and daughters of parents with early-onset Alzheimer's. It is full of testimonials by such sons and daughters about the guilt they felt for not doing as much as they could for their parent, while adding that 'what helps me overcome my guilt is knowing that my father would have wanted me to lead a good and fulfilled life' (Du bist nicht mehr wie früher 2022: 31-2). Similarly, by parents writing things like 'I do not want my children to one day say, I couldn't do that because my mother was sick' (ibid: 53).

Since everyone voiced their belief that no one should be obliged to care for their parent, the care situation was often laden with disappointment at oneself or at one's parent for not having prevented it. 'I remember my parents saying, when we grow old, we will find a nice senior residence to move into, you won't have to worry about a thing,' one woman told me. But they had not, and now she felt let down. Similarly, a man told me that he resented his father for acting in a way that showed that he was not at all concerned about his children. He explained: 'to be responsible, also for our feelings. For us, it's not good to know that he's suffering by being alone. He does nothing with the time he has left, and it makes us feel like it's all on us, to travel with him or whatever.'

Because the conflicting values of caregiving and autonomy were rooted in a structural contradiction in social reproduction, they could not be resolved. The incomplete application of each was a perennial source of tension in care relationships, provoking anxiety, guilt, and resentment. One woman told me about an incident in which she vented her frustration at her mother, who replied: 'but what are children for?' The woman jokingly commented, 'I hope you didn't bring me into this world so that I will care for you when you're old.' The mother laughed, but uncomfortably. Like my other interlocutors who cared for a parent, this woman sometimes reached the limits of her capacity, but was overcome by guilt for not doing enough. Like it or not, the woman concluded, there was a certain expectation, and living with this expectation was the challenge she, as many others, had to face.

Conclusion

The institution of the family has survived throughout capitalism, according to Martha Gimenez (2018), because the family remains useful for the daily and intergenerational reproduction of the workforce; its members optimally and cost-effectively caring for the young who will one day enter the workforce and for the elderly who have exited it. However, Gimenez adds, capitalist development also undermines the family through changes in productive forces, for example, when women who are assigned caregiving responsibilities must also work for a wage and when the resources that families have for caring for their members are insufficient. My argument has been that there is a further, ideological aspect to the undermining of the family. Namely that family members, entangled in the contradictions of social reproduction, take these failures upon themselves.

The failures are the outcome of a contradiction between individual capitalists' pursuit of profit at all costs, including the value of wages and the life and wellbeing of workers; and capital's need for value-producing labor, including the commodification of care work and care products. States are entangled in this contradiction insofar as they have to support waged employment, commodification, and family care. They do so through family policies and care institutions that mediate these pressures. Families operate in the space that states open up with possibilities, nudges, and incentives to combine waged employment with unwaged care work. Particularly female family members are encouraged to care for their children and for their dependent parents without (adequate) compensation out of love or duty, at the same time, as they are immersed in and held up to the values of autonomy and self-care.

The men and women depicted in this article assess their family relationships against ideals of autonomous choice, their own and that of the persons they care for, as well as ideals of love or duty. As the care situation strains these ideals, tensions bedevil their assessment of their actions, and their relations with family members such as spouses and siblings who fall short of their expectations. Living out a structural contradiction in the reproduction of capitalism as a personal charge, they assume its fallouts as their personal failures; prone to questioning their commitment, resolve and competence as mothers and fathers, and as daughters and sons. Because the social content that Maurice Godelier (2011) named as the stuff of kinship is itself an unresolved contradiction, then, it also makes families under capitalism necessarily troubled, dissonant, and excessive.

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