

# Caring Societies? Feminist Lessons for the Foundational Economy

## Keynote at the 6<sup>th</sup> Foundational Economy Conference

Corinna Dengler

It is really a great honor for me to open the second day of the Foundational Economy Conference with this keynote on care. The title of my keynote is “Caring Societies? Feminist Lessons for the Foundational Economy”. The question that is guiding my talk is: How do caring societies and a foundational economy resemble each other and what can foundational economy scholars learn from feminist perspectives on care. So, I will start by briefly outlining what I mean when I talk about “caring societies”, then discuss some common denominators between caring societies and the foundational economy, and finally make some propositions that can give some food for thought for the rest of the conference on what foundational economy scholarship can learn from feminist research on care.

When asking "What are caring societies?" that is obviously a very broad question, and I would like to start with the basics by reminding us of what care is. It is useful here to distinguish narrow from broader definitions of care. More narrow definitions of care – which are the definitions of care as care work – are what we usually deploy in feminist economics. When feminist economists talk about care work, they talk about work that entails an interpersonal caring relationship mostly defined as a caring activity provided by a caregiver to a care receiver. Examples would be care for the elderly or childcare – both resembling each other in the content of this work. The work contains some very specific characteristics that distinguish care work from other kinds of work. One of the characteristics is the limited autonomy of the care receiver, if we think, for example, about a child that clearly cannot provide for itself. Not being able to care for yourself also has to do with vulnerability and with asymmetrical power relations between the person that gives care and the person who receives care. It has to do with emotionality and more than anything it has to do with dependency. A person who needs to receive care depends on the care given. In her 1993 book (i.e. "Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care"), feminist philosopher Joan Tronto distinguished four phases of care. The first one is “caring about” which is about noticing a care need, the

second one is “taking care of” which means assuming responsibility for the care needs that one has noticed, and then the actual “caregiving” and the “care receiving”. Regarding narrow definitions of care, I think one thing that we should remind ourselves is that the term “care work” does not say anything about whether care work is paid or unpaid, or whether it is provided in the markets, the state, in a community or a household. What defines it as “care work” are the aforementioned characteristics, such as limited autonomy, vulnerability, asymmetrical power relations and emotionality. Broader definitions of care go beyond narrow definitions and regard care, for example, as a cornerstone of a social-ecological transformation. The Care Collective (2020: 6) defines care broadly as an “individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow a vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive – along with the planet itself”. This broader definition also shifts the focus, so we now talk about caring societies, a caring economy, or caring cities. Care has certainly become a bit of a buzz word – everything can be caring. In those broader definition, the fundamental dependency of narrow definitions is somewhat replaced with a notion of interdependency. In her 2013 book "Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice" Tronto adds a fifth phase to the four phases of care: a phase that she calls “caring with”. “Caring with” focuses on mutual aid, reciprocity and solidarity – thus, foregrounding interdependence.

Keeping those two definitions – the more narrow and the broader ones – in mind: What do I mean when I talk about caring societies? Thinking about caring societies always starts from the status quo and the care crisis, which is a crisis of, on the one hand, paid care work where paid care workers face overwork, underpayment and precarious working conditions. But it is, on the other hand, also a crisis of unpaid care work, where care work is basically not regarded as work at all. So, starting from the care crisis and the interlinkages with all other forms of crises, like ecological crises or the crisis of democracy, what does a caring society actually look like? Caring

societies more than anything have to acknowledge that “the foundations and the wealth and well-being of the world rest upon the sphere of social reproduction and the labor of care” (FaDA 2020), as we have written in the 2020 Covid statement of the Feminism and Degrowth Alliance. Caring societies follow broader definitions of care that focus on interdependency and relationality but – and this is really one of the main messages I want to carry across – it cannot be a caring society if it does not embrace actual care dependencies. It cannot all be about interdependencies, if it is not acknowledged that there are a lot of people that actually depend on care, and these care dependencies need to be collectively take care of. Moreover, caring societies are highly stratified and venture beyond communities. I have done research on caring commons and emphasize their potential but do acknowledge that caring societies moreover require a multi-level perspective. Such a perspective analyzes different actors that provide care and suggests policies that create the social and spatio-temporal infrastructures for people to care. Lastly, it is important to say that a focus for caring societies has to lie on the question of how to provide good care for all with in planetary boundaries and without reproducing intersectional inequalities. I think this last part is important because good care for all does not only mean good care on the receiving side, which is already far beyond what we have now, but it also requires us to ask who provides care and under what conditions. Recent data from the Chamber of Commerce here in Austria shows that 98 percent of the 24-hour nurses in Austria do not have Austrian citizenship. More than half of them are from Romania, which makes the fact that Austria currently blocks the accession of Romania to the Schengen zone even more cynical.

Leading over to the topic of this conference, how do caring societies and foundational economy relate to each other? I think there are many commonalities that we can draw upon. For example, the foundational economy perspective basically regards economics as a study of provisioning goods and services to fulfill societal needs and this is something that has also been core to the social provisioning approach in feminist economics. Moreover, the focus of foundational economy scholarship lies on collective consumption and infrastructure, and this resembles care research. Andrew Sayer (2019: 42) stresses that „we must depend on others to provide for us, as we must, in turn, care for them“. There are more common denominators between caring societies and foundational economy scholarship: For example, foundational economy policy frameworks are also interested in the paradoxical relationship between societal relevance and underpayment of foundational work which is a phenomenon that in eco-feminist literature has been called “housewifization”. Both foundational economy scholarship and feminist research on care talk about a shift to more localized, contextualized, embedded, and embodied forms of provisioning. So, I think there are really a lot of synergies and common denominators.

However, I also see some gaps in foundational economy scholarship and would like to suggest that it has quite a bit to learn from feminist research on care. Arguably, the biggest blank spot is the strong focus on the monetized economy. Bertie Russell and colleagues (2022: 1073) summarize it as follows: “Given the FE’s concern with those parts of the economy that support everyday life (education, healthcare, eldercare, childcare, food etc.) there is an intersection with debates on the work of social reproduction. Yet FE literature currently has a blind spot when it comes to unwaged work, which remains overwhelmingly performed by women. Current framings of the providential FE mostly limit their understanding to public services provided by the welfare state (such as unemployment benefits) or para-state (such as elderly care homes or sports facilities), and indeed to work that is predominantly waged.” There are some exceptions to this, for example one of the articles by some of the conference organizers refers to the foundational economy as a cornerstone for a socio-ecological transformation and puts a large focus on unpaid work. Also, this conference – not only in, but also beyond this keynote – establishes care as a cross-cutting theme throughout. So, I really think that there is a lot of synergies that we can draw up on. Now, I want to make some propositions on how to integrate care and feminist research more into the foundational economy framework. The first thing I want to talk about is what foundational economy scholars refer to as the core economy. As many of you will know, foundational economy scholarship distinguishes different zones: The core economy, the foundational economy, the overlooked economy, and the tradable competitive economy – with the foundational economy being the core interest.

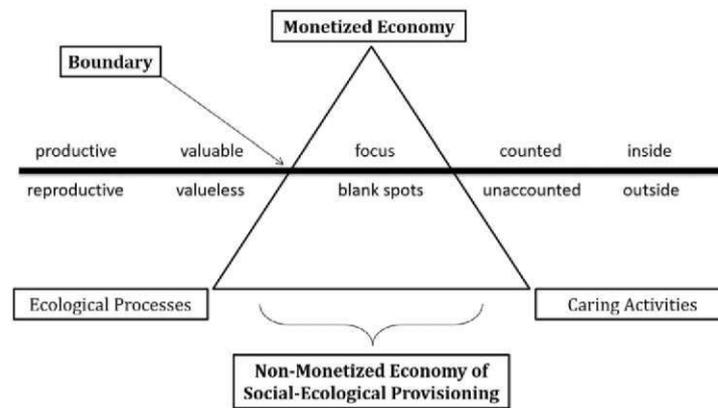
We see some main distinction between the “core economy” and the “foundational economy,” as displayed in the table 3, which is based on the paper "Foundational Economy and Foundational Politics" by Joe Earle and colleagues (2018). On the one hand, we see the “core economy”, with its form of consumption being characterized as “non-economic because ‘we must love one another and die’”, examples for it being parenting or voluntary action. On the

	Form of consumption	Examples
<b>Core Economy</b>	Non-economic because „we must love one another and die“	Parenting, voluntary action etc.
<b>Foundational Economy</b>	Daily essentials via infrastructure of networks and branches	Material e.g. food, and utilities; Providential, health and care, education, social housing

Source: Earle/Froud/Johal/Williams: *Foundational Economy and Foundational Politics* (2018: 41)

**Table 3:** Form of consumption in the core versus the foundational economy

**Source:** Presentation by Corinna Dengler



**Figure 6:** The “iceberg economy”

**Source:** Presentation by Corinna Dengler

other hand, we see the “foundational economy”, which is regarded as “daily essentials via infrastructures of networks and branches” like “the material or the providential foundational economy.” An analysis of the gendered nature of the core economy or the acknowledgment that the core economy is foundational for production processes and other economic zones is not really part of how the core economy is conceptualized here. So, this is quite different from how feminist ecological economics would conceptualize the economy, as can be seen in figure 6.

What you see here can be thought of in terms of what Maria Mies has called the iceberg economy. So, basically when talking about economics, what is referred to is almost exclusively the tip of the iceberg, the monetized economy, all that what is counted in GDP. That, which is seen as productive is the focus of economic analysis. Then on the other hand, we have all the parts under the water surface, which here you can see is the “non-monetized economy of social-ecological provisioning”, which consists of unpaid care work and ecological processes that sustain and basically enable every production process in the monetized economy. No production process at all would be possible in the monetized economy if it wasn't for unpaid care work. Such a reading of unpaid work is quite different from the conceptualization of the core economy in foundational economy scholarship because it really challenges a framing of the core economy as non-economic and emphasizes that non-monetized care work is an integral part of the *oikos*. Against this background, my first proposition is that we should regard unpaid care work in the core economy, which socially reproduces human livelihood, as a cross-cutting rather than a separate zone, which constitutes the foundation and the *infra*-structure of all other economic zones. Again: Nothing could be produced in the monetized economy from nine to five if it wasn't for the social reproduction happening from five to nine.

This also links to the second proposition I want to make, which has to do with the question of what we regard as infrastructures. Here, I want to tell you an anecdote.

Last year I was at the “urbanize!” festival taking place here in Vienna at an event that discussed cultural and social infrastructures as the glue that holds together neighborhoods. The workshop was opened with a short documentary, which was about so-called “Häuser der Begegnung” (houses of encounter), which were multifunctional buildings built in Social Democratic Vienna from 1960 to 1980. The documentary took a refreshingly unconventional approach: Instead of portraying the convivial encounters taking place in these houses, the filmmakers Markus Rupprecht and Laurenz Steixner zoomed in on what is commonly invisible. They portrayed the building technicians of three of the houses to guide us through the infrastructure, i.e. the structures that lie below and eventually enable coming together in those houses of encounter. But the people who sustain the space in this documentary, three of them, were portrayed as rather homogenous: they were all men, according to their dialect all from Austria, responsible for the pipes, the heating systems, and the technologies that uphold the system. Well, it is nice that those men uphold the space and eventually enable coming together in the houses of encounter, but only partly so, because how about the cleaning person, quite likely a migrant woman, without which none of these encounters could have happened. How about the people and structures that take care of the caring responsibilities of those people who want to attend events in the houses of encounter and thus enable their participation in the first place. I think what the anecdote reveals is that it is very easy to fall prey to a technocratic understanding of what infrastructure is, for it to be all about pipes, cables, roads and men. My second proposition has much to do with a paper I really liked by Sarah Marie Hall on social infrastructure as social reproduction, where Hall (2020) says that from a feminist perspective, infrastructures not only concern physical infrastructure or social infrastructure defined as “social spaces [...] such as community centers, parks and libraries” (ibid.: 89). Rather, they should embrace “social infrastructure as social reproduction” (ibid.: 83) and foreground questions of labor, gender, and care.

My third and last proposition is about the question: Which debates do we regard as foundational? One example I want to talk about here are debates on provisioning systems that have also informed foundational economy scholarship quite a bit. Marylin Power in 2004 has written a paper on "Social Provisioning as a Starting Point for Feminist Economics". Her social provisioning approach also serves as a point of departure for 50 chapters of the 2021 published "Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics". Within feminist economics, you won't find one person that hasn't worked with – or at least heard of – Power's social provisioning approach. Some major distinction between debates on provisioning systems on the one hand, and feminist debates on social provisioning on the other hand, is that the latter takes an intersectional approach to paid and unpaid as well as material and immaterial dimensions of social provisioning processes. However, as my friend and colleague Christina Plank and I have shown in a recent contribution to the provisioning systems debate, there is barely any literature on provisioning system scholarship that draws upon those chronologically much older debates of social provisioning in feminist economics. Another example that holds more for the German-speaking world is a resemblance of foundational economy thinking and insights that the "Netzwerk Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften" (network caring economy) has pushed for more than 30 years now. The networks principles on care, cooperation and taking the essentials of a good life as a guideline is among the first contributions at the intersections of feminism and ecology in the German-speaking world. However, it is barely ever recognized as such. On Wednesday, and some of you might have participated, we have organized the webinar "Towards a Caring Economy: Netzwerk Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften meets Foundational

Economy" as an informal kickoff to this conference. In this webinar, representatives from the foundational economy collective and from the network caring economy discussed commonalities and how an engagement with feminist research on care can strengthen foundational economy approaches. But again, such spaces are rare and should be fostered. Against this background, my last proposition would be that, while some feminist buzz words get increasing attention, feminist literature is often structurally excluded from academic and policy debates. When foregrounding care, these early contributions should be re-valued as foundational for FE thinking.

To conclude, I see a lot of overlaps between the foundational economy and feminist perspectives on care and I think that FE scholarship and feminist research on care, a caring economy, and caring societies share a general outlook and normative vision of the good life (and good care) for all within planetary boundaries. I think that the synergies are far from exhausted and I will just repeat those three propositions: I propose that foundational economy scholarship rethinks their concept of the core economy, and really, that's an open question for me too, is it a cross-cutting zone rather than a separate one? Second, I propose reframing physical and social infrastructures from the vantage point of the social reproduction that upholds and sustains them, and third, I propose critical engagement with and a re-evaluation of the historical and current significance of feminist contributions. I am really impressed with the centrality of care in the conference, and I think it is a great example of how foundational economy and feminist research on caring societies can come together!

## References

- Dengler, Corinna; Strunk, Birte (2018): The monetized Economy versus Care and the Environment: Degrowth Perspectives on reconciling an Antagonism. *Feminist Economics* 24 (3): 160–83.
- Earle, Joe; Froud, Julie; Johal, Sukhdev; Williams, Karel (2018): Foundational Economy as Foundational Politics. *Welsh Economic Review* 26: 38–45.
- FaDA (2020): Collaborative Feminist Degrowth: Pandemic as an Opening for a care-full radical Transformation. <https://degrowth.info/blog/feminist-degrowth-collaborative-fada-reflections-on-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-the-politics-of-social-reproduction> (accessed June 28, 2023).
- Hall, Sarah Marie (2020) Social Reproduction as Social Infrastructure. *Soundings* 76(76): 82–94.
- Power, Marilyn (2004): Social Provisioning as a Starting Point for Feminist Economics. *Feminist Economics* 10(3): 3–19.
- Russell, Bertie; Beel, David; Rees Jones, Ian; Jones, Martin (2022): Placing the Foundational Economy: An emerging discourse for post-neoliberal economic development. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 0308518X221098745.
- The Care Collective (2020): *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*. London: Verso.
- Tronto, Joan (1993): *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. London: Routledge.
- Tronto, Joan (2013): *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: NYU.
- Sayer, Andrew (2019): Moral Economy, the Foundational Economy and De-carbonisation. *Renewal: A Journal of Labour Politics* 27(2): 40–46.