



ENFORCED CHILDBIRTH IS SLAVERY

Nobody likes abortion, even when safe and legal. It's not what any woman would choose for a happy time on Saturday night.

But nobody likes women bleeding to death on the bathroom floor from illegal abortions either. What to do?

Perhaps a different way of approaching the question would be to ask:

What kind of country do you want to live in? One in which every individual is free to make decisions concerning his or her health and body, or one in which half the population is free and the other half is enslaved?

Women who cannot make their own decisions about whether or not to have babies are enslaved because the state claims ownership of their bodies and the right to dictate the use to which their bodies must be put.

The only similar circumstance for men is conscription into an army. In both cases there is risk to the individual's life, but an army conscript is at least provided with food, clothing, and lodging. Even criminals in prisons have a right to those things. If the state is mandating enforced childbirth, why should it not pay for prenatal care, for the birth itself, for postnatal care, and – for babies who are not sold off to richer families – for the cost of bringing up the child?

And if the state is very fond of babies, why not honor the women who have the most babies by respecting them and lifting them out of poverty? If women are providing a needed service to the state – albeit against their wills – surely they should be paid for their labour. If the goal is more babies, I am sure many women would oblige if properly recompensed. Otherwise, they are inclined to follow the natural law: placental mammals will abort in the face of resource scarcity.

But I doubt that the state is willing to go so far as to provide the needed resources. Instead, it just wants to reinforce the usual cheap trick: force women to have babies, and then make them pay. And pay. And pay. As I said, slavery.

If one chooses to have a baby, that is of course a different matter. The baby is a gift, given by life itself. But to be a gift a thing must be freely given and freely received. A gift can also be rejected. A gift that cannot be rejected is not a gift, but a symptom of tyranny.

We say that women “give birth”. And mothers who have chosen to be mothers do give birth, and feel it as a gift. But if they have not chosen, birth is not a gift they give; it is an extortion from them against their wills.

No one is forcing women to have abortions. No one either should force them to undergo childbirth. Enforce childbirth if you wish but at least call that enforcing by what it is. **It is slavery:** the claim to own and control another's body, and to profit by that claim.

Margaret Atwood
Author of 'The Handmaid's Tale'

Your Debt Is Someone Else's Asset

The American dream used to be owning your own home. Now it's being debt-free. Altogether, Americans owe a record-breaking \$15 trillion and counting. Sold as a lifeline, debt is too often an anchor, dragging people down with compounding interest and fees, pulling wealth and resources from the working class to bloat Wall Street's bottom line.

Every debt we hold is someone else's asset, with our monthly payments providing steady revenue streams for greedy creditors. Households with credit card debt pay around \$1,155 a year in interest alone. Americans now die owing an average of \$62,000, much of it credit card debt.

A significant amount of the \$770 billion of credit card debt slushing around is medical bills – ambulance rides, doctor's visits and surgeries paid for with the swipe of a little plastic card. Then there's the additional \$140 billion of medical debt in collections combined with an estimated \$50 billion in back rent and \$1.4 trillion in auto loans.

Much of this debt didn't exist a few generations ago. Consider the \$1.8 trillion in student loans this country now holds, which wasn't a problem in the 1960s, when college was often free or close to it. Ronald Reagan helped change that. He made his name by demonizing protesters on the University of Berkeley campus. In 1967, as governor of California, he pushed the university system to start charging students tuition so they would, quote, “think twice” about whether they wanted to pay to carry a picket sign.

During his career as senator, Joe Biden advanced Reagan's project, working to expand student lending. As a senator from Delaware, the credit card industry capital, Biden was a devoted servant of the financial sector. He fought relentlessly for 2005 legislation that weakened borrower protections and made bankruptcy more difficult for regular borrowers, strengthening the hand of the student loan and credit card industries and helping cause a wave of home foreclosures.

But debt is not just about money. It's about power. Debt has long been both a source of profit and a tool of social control and racial domination. The Founding Fathers knew this. Thomas Jefferson argued that debt should be canceled after natural limits, which he took to be about a generation – but only for white men like himself. In 1803, he wrote that debt should be used as a weapon against Indigenous people to steal their territory. “We shall ... be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands.”

Sharecropping, redlining, predatory lending all continued this trend, deepening racial inequities. As a result of the 2008 mortgage crisis, Black and Brown families lost upwards of 50% of their collective wealth.

For regular debtors, even a late payment can spell disaster. A tanked credit score can make it impossible to rent an apartment or get a job. Default on your student loans? The government can seize your wages, tax refunds and Social Security. Debtors' prisons are technically unconstitutional, but, in practice, people struggling to pay medical bills or court fees can wind up in jail.

But not all debtors are treated so cruelly. Rich people regularly walk away from their obligations, and companies engage in strategic defaults. The banks that crashed the economy in 2008, they got bailed out. Donald Trump, the self-professed king of debt, left a string of corporate bankruptcies in his wake. And don't forget that during the COVID pandemic the federal government spent hundreds of billions of dollars buying up bad corporate debt belonging to entities including Exxon and Walmart and offering companies, including payday lenders, forgivable loans.

It's time regular debtors got a break, too. It's time for a jubilee, the erasure of debts and a rebalancing of power between regular people and elites. It's not a new idea. Jubilee was described in the Bible, and many ancient civilizations had periodic jubilees to avert social and economic collapse. Our earliest recorded histories are stone tablets inscribed with credit ledgers. Nearly as long as debt has existed, debt cancellation has existed, too.

Throughout history, debtors have risen up to demand relief. In the early 6th century BCE, a debtors' riot helped nudge Ancient Athens towards democracy. The reforms, known as the shaking off of burdens, included debt absolution and an end to debt bondage. Something similar happened in Ancient Rome after debtors mounted the world's first general strike. In the United States, indebted workers and farmers revolted in the colonial era and then again during the Great Depression. Later, the call for debt cancellation rang out at Occupy Wall Street. In recent years, striking debtors helped force the government to cancel billions of dollars in student loans.

Abolishing medical debt, back rent and student loans would free up money now spent on debt servicing for other things. People could buy homes and start families, and the racial wealth gap would narrow. Research estimates that canceling student debt alone would boost the economy by up to \$108 billion a year and create a million jobs.

Under pressure from activists, President Biden campaigned on a promise to cancel an immediate minimum of \$10,000 of student debt per borrower. Thanks to the Higher Education Act of 1965, he has the power to cancel all federal student loans. With the single signature on an executive order, President Biden can free people from student debt, giving tens of millions of people their lives and futures back. Now we need to make him do it and much more. We deserve nothing less than a jubilee.

Astra Taylor

This is the transcript of an animated short film made with illustrations by artist **Molly Crabapple**.
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debtcollective.org

