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From carewashing to radical care:

The discursive explosions of care during Covid-19

By The Care Collective - Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, Lynne Segal

Care, in all its permutations, is the buzzword of the moment, its meanings frequently drained in its constant evocation. Who doesn't care, in the midst of a global pandemic, when acts of carelessness – literally – cost tens of thousands of lives? This is brought home to us at every turn, even when our governments try to hide it, as when releasing elderly patients with Covid-19 from hospitals back to care homes without testing them. We are reminded daily of just how vital the provision of all our essential services are, whether tending the sick or the myriad other tasks helping to keep us alive. No wonder the Covid-19 crisis is becoming firmly established as above all a *crisis of care*.

Of course, the whole arena of care should have been seen as in crisis long before this coronavirus hit us. For decades so many have resolutely ignored ongoing environmental calamities, and the ever-mounting refugee crisis, alongside the abject misery caused in this prolonged period of austerity capitalism, especially for those with significant caring responsibilities. Yet, suddenly, at least on the rhetorical level, we are seeing our governments being forced to put people before profits, however temporarily.

Perhaps more profoundly, however, the Covid crisis has finally foregrounded 'care' as a keyword of our time – one that hitherto had remained largely peripheral in the lexicon of the left, despite the persistent efforts of a long line of feminist theorists. 'Care' was absent, for instance, in both editions of Raymond Williams' formidable *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1985). Yet, however neglected, the meanings and practices of 'care' have always constituted an inescapably pivotal cultural arena, one in constant flux and negotiation. For instance, definitions of care and care work in the media have recently been extended at times to include not only the traditional hands-on modes of care provision in hospital wards and care homes, but also other forms of labour – from shelf-stacking to bus driving – that also sustain our everyday care infrastructures (*The Guardian*, April 7, 2020). Meanwhile, a range of societal actors – from the government to the media, celebrities to corporations – are actively trying to show why and how they care by, for instance, encouraging us

to clap for the NHS workers. Yet, underlining these representations and proclamations are often disturbing assumptions about what counts as meaningful care.

From leaders' addresses to the nation, to corporate market packaging, or Facebook's new care emoji, there has thus been a discursive explosion of care across the global landscape. In this short commentary, we map a few of the contemporary struggles over the meanings of 'care' and 'care work,' beginning with feminist understandings and then moving to how care has recently been taken up across the media and by corporations as well as politicians. We then relate these different meanings to our urgent call for a politics of care as outlined in our *Care Manifesto* (The Care Collective 2020). The manifesto advances our notion of 'universal care', arguing for a capacious understanding of the complexities of the term, while insisting that care needs to be put front and centre at every scale of life.

Old and New Meanings of Care

Care, at least in the English language, has always been a flexible, expansive term. Joan Tronto (2013), for instance, distinguishes between 'caring for', which includes all the physical aspects of hands-on care; 'caring about', which describes our emotional investment in and attachment to others; and, 'caring with', which describes how we mobilise politically in order to support others and help transform our world. Etymologically, the word 'care' comes from the Old English *caru*, meaning care and concern, but also anxiety, grief and sorrow. This reflects a reality where attending fully to the needs and vulnerabilities of any living thing, and thus confronting frailty, is often both challenging and exhausting. Care, like all other human practices and emotions, always fluctuates, and is frequently at odds with other needs and affective states, such as the desire for personal gratification and recognition. Caring (whether for, about, or with) is also often entangled with expressions of guilt or shame over whether the care being offered is being done well, or even adequately.

Historically, many forms of care and care work have been strongly associated with the 'feminine.' Caretaking has been and, despite endless permutations in our labour markets, still remains understood as women's work. It has always been linked, first and foremost, to the 'private' or domestic sphere, and with women's centrality in reproduction. In the past decades, neoliberal capitalism has drawn on

this longer history of devaluation, whilst reshaping and deepening it. The conception of familial space as a separate sphere of reproduction from that of the more traditionally masculinised terrain of production can help us understand why caring labour is routinely and increasingly exploited by the market, either in its continuing reliance on women's unpaid labour in the home, or through grotesquely underpaying care workers. Numerous care economists and feminist scholars – from Nancy Folbre (2001) to Nancy Fraser (2016) – have also illustrated how broader processes of structural devaluation, expropriation and exploitation of care work apply to all realms of social reproduction: not only the home but also our community, health and educational infrastructures. Like us, they have therefore called for the 'ungendering' and 'deracialising' of care, urging its radical reevaluation.

The current crisis has produced a moment of profound rupture with previous understandings of care, highlighting the elusiveness of all that care encompasses. First of all, we have seen how the boundaries between what has been traditionally understood as "care work" and "essential work" are increasingly and significantly blurred. Millions of people around the world clap for nurses and doctors, but also for cleaners and garbage collectors, recognising how vital their care orientation and work commitment has proved to be in our everyday post-Covid lives (*The Guardian*, April 7, 2020).

We have, in other words, experienced a much-needed shake-up of our belief systems. "We clapped for carers - now boo for bankers", as *The Guardian* (April 3, 2020) put it. That sentiment has continued to grow, along with distrust of government handling of the corona crisis, particularly in Britain and the USA, who, at the time of writing are the two countries with the highest numbers of deaths in the world. Not only is care work in all of its myriad forms being acknowledged as indispensable to society's continued existence but it has also been rendered visible, culturally important, and socially valuable. As Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood (2020) put it, the pandemic has created greater awareness that we have been complicit in subordinating moral and cultural values to the capitalist notions of market value and commoditised labour.

At the same time—and not surprisingly—we have seen how powerful business actors have also been keen to promote themselves as 'caring corporations' while actively undermining any kind

of care offered outside their profit-making architecture. This trend began before Covid-19, with corporations like the Irish multinational clothes retailer Primark—synonymous with ‘fast fashion’ and notorious for its past exploitation of child labour—producing branding strategies emphasising care. The ‘Primark cares’ initiative details how the company ‘cares for people and planet’ alongside a promotion of its new ‘wellness products’ (sweet-smelling candles and fluffy towels) in all its branches. Such forms of what we might term *carewashing* join a rich array of corporations trying to increase their legitimacy by presenting themselves as socially responsible ‘citizens’, while really contributing to inequality and ecological destruction. They go further by trying to capitalise on the very care crisis they have helped to create. In the wake of the pandemic’s exacerbation of structural inequality, this corporate trend has intensified, building on past examples of ‘commodity activism’ (Michal Carrington, Andreas Chatzidakis and Deirdre Shaw 2016, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopalu Mukerjee 2012, Jo Littler 2008), with corporations such as Instagram, Dove, Giffgaff, Airbnb, and Facebook all using the crisis to launch ‘caring initiatives’ in a way that deflects from the more profound unethical practices in which they routinely engage. These forms of corporate care are what Emma Dowling (forthcoming) calls a ‘care fix’ – they offer us a temporary comforting balm whilst failing to address the deeper structural crisis.

Reactionary models of ‘care’ have also been taken up by populist leaders such as Trump, Johnson, and Bolsonaro, who tout certain forms of care and caring as much worthier than others. Donald Trump, for instance, has consistently attempted to revive divisions between the young and the old (*The Guardian*, April 26, 2020), the West versus the East (by blaming China for the pandemic). His model of care is based on the idea that care is to be done exclusively for and about ‘people like us’. Populist leaders like him desperately try to strengthen themselves by producing spectacles of indifference and/or persecution of the other and the ‘different’. Behind the divisive models of care that populist leaders advocate lies a desperate struggle to ensure that the blame for the casualties of the Covid-19 crisis will be put on anyone other than their own mishandling of it, or that of their moneyed allies.

And, yet, in the wake of Covid-19 and the shifting significations of care, a significant quantity of the population has become more suspicious and critical about the role many of these actors play

in society. The widespread backlash to UK government advisor Dominic Cummings' breaking the 'Stay at Home' guidelines he helped create, and attempting to cling onto power through protestations of simply 'caring for his child', is one case in point. And despite corporations' eager attempts to present themselves as caring and, indeed, to appropriate their own branding of care as an ostensible means to show us the way out of this crisis, people are now more consistently calling them out on the basis of such "carewashing" (Andreas Chatzidakis and Lynne Segal 2020) and "coronawashing" (Oscar Rickett 2020).

Moreover, there are far too many people mobilized to fight, or simply manage, the Covid crisis – from informal carers to mutual aid group members and political activists – for us not to recognize that the effects of the coronavirus are very much inflected by class, race and age (Nana Afua Yeboaa Brantuo 2020, *The Guardian*, May 12, 2020). Even before Covid, there was a wealth of scholarship on health inequality that showed how statistics on health and mortality always expose the harmful effects of structural inequality. The graphic correlations between poverty, Covid and BAME citizens are testimony to this.

In all of these ways, the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically exposed not only the violence perpetrated by authoritarian leaders and the inadequate caring provision of capitalist markets, but also underscored our enduring *interdependence*, from cradle to grave. It should be clearer than ever that our shared vulnerability and need for care are fundamental to human life. The pandemic has thus laid bare the horrors of both progressive and authoritarian neoliberalism, along with the profound falsehood of its ideal subject – the self-sufficient entrepreneurial individual. But it has also initiated wide-ranging conversations about the scope and nature of care and care work.¹ This moment thus provides us with a critical opportunity: an opportunity to imagine and create a different world – not just in the immediate future, but also in the longer term. If the pandemic has taught us anything so far, it is that we are in urgent need of a politics that recognises this interdependence and puts care front and centre of life.

A Radical Caring Politics

In order to craft a genuinely caring politics, we must therefore first acknowledge the complexities of care: that both our need for care and our practices of care can generate anxiety and ambivalence,

alongside relief and pleasure. Only once we acknowledge the challenges of our shared dependence as human beings—as well as our vulnerability and irreducible differences—can we work to ensure we build and maintain the resources necessary to promote the capabilities of everyone. A caring politics, one that recognises the intricacies of human interactions, is also better poised to enhance democratic processes on all levels of society. After all, working with and through ambivalence and contradictory emotions are key to building democratic communities.

The vision we need at this moment is one that advances a model of ‘universal care’: where care is understood as an enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life. Care is our ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive —along with the planet itself.

Universal care means that we are all collectively responsible for hands-on care work as well as the work necessary for the maintenance of communities and the planet. It means teaching boys caring responsibilities and emotional literacy. It translates into reclaiming forms of genuinely communal life – from schools to public space to lending libraries. It means shortening the working week so that caring for children, for example, can be more easily shared. It involves reversing the corporate marketisation of care and caring infrastructures, both by ‘insourcing’ and by extending democratic alternatives to capitalist markets, which have never aligned well with the work of caring. It also means restoring and radically deepening our welfare states, both centrally and locally, through progressive forms of municipalism and strengthening or introducing universal basic services. Beyond this, it means mobilising and cultivating a radical conviviality, including more porous borders, and commitment to drawing up green new deals for a sustainable future at the transnational level.

The challenge we all face now is to organize together to ensure that the legacy of Covid-19 is not intensified neoliberal authoritarianism, but instead a new politics, where care – in all of its complexity and frequent ambivalence – becomes the organising principle on each and every level of society.

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¹ See, for instance, the many reports and webinars on The Women's Budget Group website, <https://wbg.org.uk/>; and the Pirate Care Project: <https://pirate.care/pages/concept/>