Krisis

The Politics of Vulnerability and Care: An Interview with Estelle Ferrarese

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Abstract

In this interview, Estelle Ferrarese elaborates on her account of vulnerability and care to highlight its political and social, as opposed to its ethical, dimensions. Drawing on, amongst others, Adorno, Tronto, Castell, and Laugier, she argues that vulnerability and care should not be understood ontologically, as an antropological exposure of the body, but rather socially, as the normative expectations and material conditions under which care work takes place. Situating her approach in anglophone and francophone discussions on vulnerability and precarity, she discusses her approach to normative expectations and how it informs her account of vulnerability of living at the mercy of someone else's agency, as well as the politicization of vulnerability. She also discusses the political implications of her account of vulnerability and care with regard to a range of contemporary issues, such as the Men's Right Movement, the posthuman turn and the Antropocene, and mutual aid and the neoliberalization of the welfare state.

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Liesbeth Schoonheim & Tivadar Vervoort: In your work (2016a; 2016b), you sketch various genealogies of the concept of vulnerability. You refer to the American strand of Butler's notion of grievable lives, which of course builds on a Levinasian notion of ethics, but interestingly you also refer to a French strand that starts from the sociological analysis by Robert Castel. Precarity, in this latter approach, indicates a process (rather than a social position) that is shared by the precariously employed and unemployed, that is, by the poor and the middle class. How would you position yourself in this genealogy? And in addition to that, keeping in mind the topic of this special issue, could you elaborate on your understanding of how vulnerability relates to care?

Estelle Ferrarese: At some point, maybe about seven-eight years ago, the very idea of vulnerability was all over, and a lot of people were trying to deal with this concept. So, I wanted to figure out where it came from and why it was so important at that time to think in terms of vulnerability. More specifically, I tried to identify the different lines of thought that had produced this focus. My aim was both theoretical and political.

In addition to the lines you mentioned, there is a very old, Christian account of vulnerability, to which I did not want to be bound. The history of vulnerability within this tradition is actually very rich. But it also explains why there is so much reluctance when it comes to vulnerability: although this concept has been met with success, it is also met with some kind of allergy, especially from people from the left. My assumption was that it was mostly because of this Christian past that the concept of vulnerability was considered to be totally apolitical. With the figure of a merciful God who becomes man, *inasmuch as he* assumes a vulnerable flesh sensitive to suffering, it casts vulnerability as an anthropological feature. I wanted to address this issue. My aim was to identify and to build on lines of thought where vulnerability was always-already political, where the term does not only refer to a shared ontological precariousness, but to the exposure to threats that are socially determined. This social determination encompasses our bodies, that is, even when we talk about bodily vulnerability, there is something which is social. And this socially determined vulnerability is not limited to a gradual difference between bodies, where some of us are much more exposed due to, for instance, disability or race-based violence. The historical and social texture of vulnerability is not limited to an ordering of bodies – some are more exposed than others because of a collective and institutional past and present. This texture characterizes each singular body. We should not understand our bodies as immutable, and instead our biology is completely historical and socially determined, technologized, and so on. This, more thoroughly social, account can be found in Adorno. In other words, I was looking for these approaches that conceptualized vulnerability in terms that were free from traces of ontology.

And I found some interesting possibilities. None of them completely satisfied me. This is why I try to borrow from different threads. One of them, of course, was Butler's, especially because they were at the time trying to conceive of a politics of

vulnerability that would arise from bodies (Butler 2013 [1997]; 2016 [2009]). But I was not convinced by what they proposed. Another possibility was care ethics. And as it happens, I started to engage a lot with representatives of this tradition in France in the mid–2010s. For some reason, there was a renewal of the idea of care in France, which took place almost twenty or fifteen years after all the developments in the States around Joan Tronto and others (Tronto 1993; Held 2006).

This was a group of several feminist thinkers around Sandra Laugier, who came, strangely enough, from an analytical background, primarily Wittgensteinean scholarship. They tried to think through, Laugier especially, what care means in terms of ordinary life (Laugier 2020; Paperman and Laugier 2020 [2006]; Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman 2009). And they started to invite me a lot to their workshops because I was using this idea of vulnerability. In my discussions with them, I was assessing what I could accept from care ethics and what I would need to abandon. So that was the second, big trend with which I engaged. There are elements of care ethics that I found really valuable, especially in Tronto. But I had a big difficulty with her, and with care ethics more broadly, namely that the issue of capitalism was completely out of sight. While capitalism was not really considered, they were, of course, talking and thinking of care as some kind of work. And hence this work did not seem to be determined by capitalist imperatives, it seemed there was no inherent relationship between the distribution and performance of care on the one hand, and the meaning of the market and of production on the other hand. For me, coming from the Frankfurt School, it was of course not possible to think about work as something that could be thought independently from the capitalist form of life.

And then finally, there is Castel, whom you mentioned and who is a sociologist. As opposed to many of the other theorists that I mentioned before, and who are often in between philosophy and the social sciences, or were completely in philosophy, he was a sociologist who was recognized for his empirical work. In the period I am mentioning, around 2015, he had already passed away, but some ten to fifteen years earlier he had used this idea of vulnerability in regard to the question of poverty. That was his prime focus, and he was arguing that vulnerability should not be thought of as a state but as something that was to be grasped as a certain temporality, as related to time. Vulnerability evolves and is the result of past events and must be envisioned in relation to the future. I found that really interesting. The other thing I found intriguing was the unusual way he was dealing with the idea of risks. When he was talking about groups that are vulnerable to poverty, he was describing risks. He showed that if you have previously been exposed to poverty, you have more chances to become poor again or even become poorer. He would also think of risk in questions, such as, do you still have a strong network of relationships, acquaintances, and family or not? In other words, he was trying to list those different risks, suggesting that if you're losing one asset after the other, then you would become even more vulnerable. What I found most fascinating, however, was that his purpose was not to assess vulnerabilities by calculating risks, which is part of the mathematical way of thinking typical for sociology. His aim was not so much to add one item to another to anticipate a kind of logical development of someone's life; what he was actually trying to think with this idea of vulnerability was some sort of

an existential condition: when you are vulnerable it actually encompasses your way of dealing with the world. It transforms your psyche. It is really a total experience. I learned from Castel that when we talk about risk, we should avoid thinking of that as something that affects you from the outside and makes you the prey of different sociological logics. It's also something that becomes you, and as you become more vulnerable, you embrace your own vulnerability, even if it's against your own will, of course.

This is, in short, the constellation within which I developed my account of vulnerability.

LS&TV: Could you elaborate on your notion of the body as fully socially determined, which is also central to your current research. If we understand you correctly, the issue is not just a social constructivist point, such as Judith Butler's, where the body is situated beyond discourse and yet not accessible except through discourse. New Materialists have criticized this position quite extensively, and brought to our attention specific practices of care as transformation of the body. Some, such as William Connolly, have suggested that an experimental, playful practice of self-care might alter our affective and bodily reactions, which are initially sedimentations of power relationships (Connolly 1997). Would such a notion of care of the self as transformative, corporeal practice have a place in your social–constructivist account?

EF: My point is that the body is not only determined, but it's really constructed. I want to avoid a dualism where a body is perceived as pure biology, that it encounters different social items, where this encounter involves some kind of violence, and modifies an until-then natural core. My point is that actually our bodies are always–already historical and socially framed, shaped, and formed because biology has a history − first of all, a species history but secondly also a personal history. Everything is interwoven from the beginning. For instance, we have bigger bodies then 500 years ago. Most, if not all, of our bodies are technically or medically modified right now: most of us have had surgeries, many of us take hormones on a daily basis, etc. To speak about history of the bodies does not amount to endorsing an evolutionary perspective, it is not a question of envisaging a slow mechanical capitalization of an optimum, on the contrary, it is of how practices and techniques modified the bodies, in ways which can be contradictory. And it does not do any good to try to think of vulnerability as something that would be related to a kind of weakness of the body with a big "B", a body that would be without protection, and where threats that are so-called external would activate or disactivate exposure differently according to the class or the gender you belong to.

So that's my point. But you might be right that there is a way we can experiment with our bodies. The history of individual bodies is also a history of self-care in the Foucauldian sense. The late Foucault talks about self-care as what you owe to yourself and which is related to the body, as the ancient Greeks used to think (Foucault 1986; 2012). So of course, you can modify your own body through some forms of care.

LS&TV: Could we go back to your genealogy and more specifically the position of Butler and Castell? Your combination of these two authors brings to mind Isabell Lorey's

work on precarity. Lorey describes precarization as the neoliberal government of risks, so drawing on a Foucaultian analysis of neoliberalism, but she also builds on Butler's account of precariousness as well as Castel's sociological analysis of precarity and risk. But whereas in your work there seems to be a tension between Butler's work on precariousness and Castel's work of precarity, in Lorey's work these themes are brought together. More specifically, Lorey seems to differ from you in that she claims to follow Butler in understanding precariousness as "the term for a socio-ontological dimension of lives and bodies" rather than "an anthropological constant," or again, "a transhistorical state of being human, but rather a condition inherent to both human and non-human being […] it is always relational and therefore shared with other precarious lives" (Lorey 2007, 11-12). So the question that emerges is that, if we understand precariousness not as an anthropological constant but as a relational account of vulnerability, could such a relational account prevent the abstraction of vulnerability into a trans-historical anthropology? How, and if, can a relational understanding of vulnerability prevent vulnerability becoming an anthropological constant in your account?

EF: That's a good question. What I would like to highlight is that I, for sure, support shifting the idea of vulnerability from a form of ontology to a relational form. However, I am also a bit wary about focusing too much on this idea of relations because the idea of relations brings to the fore the face-to-face model and it makes vulnerability a matter of intersubjectivity: what can happen when someone is in the hands of someone else. Instead, what I try to think is really the fact that this scene of intersubjectivity is shaped by a lot of things, but mostly by normative expectations that make us vulnerable to some set of threats. In other words, it is precisely because there exists some set of normative expectation regarding what should be done on this scene that you are made actually vulnerable. Vulnerability necessarily appears at the same time as a horizon of obligations (fulfilled or not). Maybe this is a totally constructivist way of thinking, but I would say that we cannot use that idea of vulnerability to think about the kind of exposure that one might have experienced in other times. I think that is not the right way to think about vulnerability. It does not acknowledge the fact that vulnerability is instituted. Vulnerability materialises at the level of interactions and social interactions but is instituted by normative expectations which are not mental phenomena but are situated between subjects, and must even be conceived as institutions. And this is something that the focus on the relational does not allow us to think.

LS&TV: Like your work on care and vulnerability, Butler has taken up elements from Adorno's reflections on morality in their reflections on vulnerability. In their Adorno-lectures (Butler 2005, 103), they interpret Adorno's account of humankind as pertaining to "a double movement, one in which we assert moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion." Still, Butler utilizes notions such as relationality, precariousness, and grievability that seem to define essential characteristics of humankind. You have criticized Butler's work for this tendency, as well as for lacking an account of how the performativity of precariousness would imply an emancipatory politics. Elsewhere, (2016, 152), you suggest that the denial of the

political importance of vulnerability in the literature (which you define, very broadly, from Foucauldians to other post-foundational thinkers such as Rancière and Badiou), unfolds along four themes, of which its "possible anthropological character" is one. You write that "the reaffirmation of the ontological, anthropological, or constitutive status of vulnerability raises problems that are categorical as much as political, that is, are of political pertinence: how could an ineradicable, universal phenomenon pertaining to human nature become the object of a critique, or be the wellspring of emancipation? How does the idea of a fundamental human vulnerability enable us to account for socially produced or configured forms of vulnerability?" (ibid, 153). Could you elaborate on your account of vulnerability (and care) with relation to the anthropological assumptions, and its consequences for a politics of vulnerability? This massive question could perhaps be split into two: firstly, how does your account of care and vulnerability relate to these kinds of anthropological assumptions, and what is your critique of these assumptions?; and secondly, what does this mean for a politics of vulnerability?

My definition of vulnerability is a living at the mercy of someone else's agency. I use this definition first because I think this idea of "mercy" is very important: it stresses the fact that something actually might happen or might not happen, but either way you are still vulnerable. It also encompasses the idea of a power, of a huge power, which is placed upon you, which does not depend on you, while I insist that it doesn't mean that you don't have your own agency.

It just means that on your own you do not have the efficiency or the efficacy to protect yourself from the risk of these threats. All the same, you can have very strong agency in other parts of your life.

Now, as I said before, this idea of living at the mercy has to be understood as something which is determined by normative expectations. And this is where maybe I should mention someone who is also important to my work, and that is Castoriadis, from whom I borrow some ideas, even though he is not at all a theorist of vulnerability. He actually helped me to think about the strength and the density of normative expectations again, which are not only shared beliefs, but something much more important. He has this strong idea of institutions as something that is both instituted and instituting. This is exactly what I have in mind when I talk about normative expectations as institutions. They are instituted in that we receive them and they are in front of us. But at the same time, they are instituting, as they institute the scene of interaction. And they institute the subject, they make us subjects that appear on the intersubjective scene. I mean, we are made of normative expectations and they create us as a subject.

Once you think about vulnerability in these terms, then politics becomes a matter of making normative expectations explicit, making them reflexive, making them the object of debates, of perhaps also conflicts and struggles in a society.

From this observation, you can go both ways. You can say that there are a lot of exposures that should count as vulnerabilities, that should be taken care of by the state, for instance. But you could also see that actually there are some vulnerabilities that should stay under the radar and that should not be addressed because it is okay if they stay in the private sphere. I think I mentioned that during our discussion in Leuven,[1] when I was talking about love. Love is typically a form of vulnerability, where we are

exposed to the other's lack of love for us. This vulnerability is terrible to the point of being a threat to life, as some people commit suicide because they were abandoned by their partners. But at the same time, as a society, we don't want laws ruling the end of a feeling or a relationship, and we don't want the state to take care of this. So, if one thinks about vulnerability as instituted by normative expectations, a politics of vulnerability is about making them explicit, reflexive, and being the objects of debate. I don't necessarily mean the polite and rational, Habermasian, debates, but really making them explicit and then seeing what happens in terms of justifications, critiques, claims, etc. It is about making disagreement possible and visible.

And this may bring us to another point, since once you do that, or rather in the process of doing that, new political subjects might appear. Subjects who transform themselves by the very fact that they are putting forward some claims about the reality, the scope of their exposure and the kind of collective organization it requires. There is no politics without the birth of new political subjects. Here too, when a person or a group excavates and challenges an existing normative expectation, we witness a political transformation which is at the same time self-transformation. I do believe political subjects can emerge from a condition of vulnerability, as opposed to what many authors assume whom I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, such as Rancire or Badiou (Rancière 2006). For Badiou vulnerability enables the substitution of politics for ethics and blocks the path to all emancipatory politics (Badiou, 2001). I would say no, quite the opposite, and stress that being vulnerable is also the *possibility* to make explicit our own normative expectation, or the kind of normative expectations in which we are entangled. Our political agency can be deployed *against, on the basis of* a vulnerability, as emancipation can be a task engendered by *the trial of* vulnerability.

And if I could add a last part to my reflection: there is also a threat inherent to the place of vulnerability in politics; it sometimes seems that the use of the idea of vulnerability would per se suffice to receive some kind of satisfaction for our claims. I mean that vulnerability is such a strong focus in politics and philosophy that the argument "I'm vulnerable" sometimes seems to be enough to prove or to justify some kind of claim. For instance, there is a new masculinism that has now arrived in France, coming from North America. I don't know if you have that in Germany, too, but you probably do. It is evidenced by the struggles of fathers who did not obtain the custody of their kids. Which vocabulary do you think they use? That of vulnerability: they described themselves as vulnerable fathers who are actually at the mercy of unjust states. And it's interesting that they actually use the idea of vulnerability to describe an exposure to very old, patriarchal patterns that would not take into account their love for the kids.

That is why vulnerability not only has a political relevance, but must have one: politics is a matter of disagreement, including strong disagreement. I think that what politics allows is precisely an encounter – which can even be difficult – between different discourses, and this encounter actually, and hopefully, might be necessary to judge and assess all the claims.

That focus on disagreement produces another set of questions, because this raises the whole issue of who is heard by whom in politics on the political scene. And it is tragic for some people who cannot provide the proof of what they are exposed to.

It's very complicated. But I want to stress that we need this movement of explication and conflict when we talk about vulnerability, because of this threat that vulnerability becomes an argument per se. This is why we need politics.

LS&TV: The manner in which you describe how the language of vulnerability almost directly invites a language of reparative justice, and how these can be co-opted by the right, such as the Men's Rights movement, is very instructive. Could you return, however, to your discussion of love? Just to clarify, your position sounds almost Arendtian, in that romantic love entails its own forms of vulnerability, and that it should be kept out of politics and out of the control of the state (Arendt 2013, 242; 2003, 207–8). This is a position, of course, that has been subject to feminist critiques of love, where there is a long history of contesting, interrogating, and fighting the normative expectations of romantic love. Love, we might argue, is always-already under the purview of the state, insofar as they take shape in specific institutions – typically, marriage – that are sanctioned by the state. Or, in a more Bourdieuian sense, we could say that love relationships often take place between people with a similar social capital, which has been converted in one way or another by the state. We might say that the assertion that love is to be kept outside of politics and, perhaps more narrowly, outside of the state, runs counter to the feminist critique of love that has brought about massive changes in civil and criminal law with regard to the institutions in which 'love' takes place, but also to the observation that love is always-already political.

Thank you for raising this question, which is indeed very important. When I was talking about love, I was precisely thinking about the fact that discussing it and the kind of collective organization it legitimates is political. The claim that the state should not address all vulnerabilities arising from love is a political one. I was not saying it is not political at all. Quite the contrary. I was saying let's make this the topic of discussion. And probably – that was my anticipation – most of us would say no, we don't want the prohibition of divorce on the grounds of the pain one can experience in a break-up. But again, that would be the result of a discussion, which means that actually divorce, marriage, partnership, etc., is political. We saw that in a different way in the last ten years all over Europe with the same-sex marriages struggles. So, you and I agree about love. I like very much Adorno's notes on love, which you can find in *Minima Moralia* (§11, 21, 104, 107, 109, 122) precisely because he understands it not as the tumult of an interiority, but as having from the start a content and social effects. He suggests that love is pressing in the direction of something which is outside of the capitalist form of life because it is completely external to any idea of commensurability, and it coincides with some form of truly caring for someone etc. But at the same time, it is something totally bourgeois. It is this hilarious aphorism in *Minima Moralia* where he is discussing divorce. The truth of love is exposed in the pathetic divorce by intellectuals and the way they end up struggling in a very petty way about, you know, furniture and taxes.

So the political texture of love can be observed from different aspects, in addition to feminist theories that have articulated a critique of love. We could think, for instance, about the fact that the chances of loving and being loved are unequally distributed.

Patrick Pharo, a French sociologist, showed in the 1980s how it was complicated for farmers to find love because women didn't want to live this very harsh life anymore – I mean, the life outside on the fields, the absence of vacation, etc. In this sense too, love is thoroughly social and political in the sense that the fact of failing in love is not only a matter of contingency and bad luck, but can be the result of social determinations. We should not reduce love to this pure feeling coming from nowhere that would save us against greediness and violence and hate.

LS&TV: Your recent work centers around the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory on the one hand, and questions around the ethics of care and vulnerability within the feminist tradition on the other. Taken at face value, the two traditions do not seem to have much in common: recently, it has often been pointed out that the writings of the first generation of the Frankfurt School tend to neglect gendered forms of social domination. Or even worse, as far as gender and sexuality are discussed, the recourse of authors like Adorno to Freudian clichés can even be said to reproduce rather than problematize gendered social norms. In *The Fragility of Concern for Others* you develop a fascinating counterweight to these divergences by pointing out that both Adorno's "minimal" morality and contemporary theories of care ethics find a common ground in taking issue with the coldness and suffering that is caused by subsumption of the particular under the general. What implications do these resonances have for emancipatory politics in general, and the tradition of critical theory more specifically?

EF: These two theoretical constellations do have a few things in common. First, they apprehend the body as the level or the reality at which morality should be thought and envisioned. There is this strong idea of the body, of a materialist morality that you have in Adorno, and especially in *Negative Dialectics,* when he says that what is left, after Auschwitz, is only the kind of disgust that the body can experience confronting the possibility of harming someone else. So, in Adorno, you have this corporeal moment that would be the last resource in order to avoid evil. On the other hand, care ethics is all about bodies that actually perform work for other bodies. Moral life is made of the weary bodies of caregivers; the insistent or resistant bodies; the failing, heavy, or repulsive bodies of care receivers; the sexualized bodies of both receivers and givers, etc. Morality is to be understood in its materiality, and taking care of others has to do with something which is very corporeal, even more so than in Adorno.

Secondly, and Adorno might even go further at the theoretical level on this point, both traditions think about morality as something that is impure, which I find very enlightening. Morality and making moral choices is not a matter of a mental experiment that you should and could have by abstracting yourself from the context in order to determine what is just and what is unjust. Both Adorno and care ethics made a great deal of criticizing Kant's model of the categorical imperative and recasting the idea of moral judgment, in its content and form, so that it is not measured by references to general principles.

But more importantly, a judgment or a moral act is not invalidated because it is born in a concrete situation, hindered, or determined, precisely because there is no such

a thing as an abstract moral judgement. For Adorno all the incarnations of morality, i.e. all moral philosophies, but also all forms of moral life, are historical, and bear the mark of a social group. So you can have forms of morality that are determined by a history of violence. Freedom is not the condition of possibility of the moral gesture. Therefore, the fact that certain moral gestures are born in and from a general organization – generated by a reifying totality – of work and affects, is not enough to invalidate them.

And this is the case in the history of care. The point we can make with Adorno, which is not totally explicit in the ethics of care, is the fact that the way you take care of vulnerable others is something which was born in a history of domination of women by men, but also, nowadays, the domination of women, and sometimes men, coming from the Global South by men and women coming from the Global North. So you have this completely unequal, unfair distribution of work and of an affect, which is both the result and the tool of a system of domination. But that does not mean that the normative content of care is wrong. I like that idea very much. In *Negative Dialectics* he says that asking the question of the origin of something is a question of a master, that "the category of origin is 'a category of dominion'. It confirms that a man ranks first because he was there first" (1990, 155). As a master, you are in the position to ask proofs of a purity that suits your interests; the reference to origin reinforces the position of one with a past that is neither shameful nor humble.

So care ethics and critical theory have some orientations in common, but I also think that one can be used in order to highlight a lot of things that are completely dismissed by the other. For instance, Adorno is not a feminist, and the moments when he is most masculinist are precisely the moments when he tries to be a feminist. We find such clichés about women in *Minima Moralia*; also, he is talking about general coldness as a characteristic of our capitalist form of life. He does not see that this coldness is also intertwined with, and articulated by, forms of care that are produced by capitalism. Nor does he see that the care produced by capitalism is gendered, so the logic of gender remains completely out of sight in his analysis. This perspective can come from the background of care ethics.

In the other way, as I mentioned at the beginning, care ethics does not really think about capitalism. In this tradition, work is work, and is not examined as a labor shaped by a particular economy. It thus misses the many ways in which the gender order and the capitalist form of life are intertwined. So I think that you can build some bridges, some of them might be complicated, but I think it is useful to do so.

LS&TV: They are both in dire need of each other.

EF: Absolutely. That's a very good way to put it. Yes.

LS&TV: Your reading of Tronto in The Fragility of Concern for Others stresses the gendered distribution of care as an affect (disposition) and activity, with occasional references to other dimensions of oppression – an emphasis which is legitimately considered the aim of your argument. What I found most striking in Tronto – and what makes her a profoundly political or social theorist – is that she shows how the "morality" of care that

Gilligan essentialized in gendered terms, can actually be found among other groups that have been coerced or expected to take up care work, for instance Black men. Drawing on Black feminism, we could perhaps develop this insight in order to problematize the link between disposition and activity, which is at the heart of the convergence between Adorno and care ethics as being concerned with coldness and suffering. I am thinking in particular of the figure of the Black domestic as the "outsider within", whose care work and close attention to the white psyche enables them and their communities with information crucial to Black survival (Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks). Could you elaborate on the possible implications of this critique for your analysis?

EF: I was very much influenced by bell hooks, even though I do not use her work at all in the book on Adorno. And I totally agree that the unequal distribution of care work relies on an unequal distribution of affects. Capitalism, including in its (post-)colonial logic and in its gendered dimension, produces the subjectivations it needs. It is not only that you are supposed to perform the gesture, you are also expected *to feel*, to experience the moral feeling allegedly behind this gesture.

Someone with whom I discussed a lot in France is Caroline Ibos, a sociologist who worked on nannies that bourgeois Parisian women hire to take care of their kids. Her field work shows the disappointment of these bourgeois women when they realize that their nanny was actually only driven by money, for instance because the nanny left and went back to West-Africa without further notice (in France many nannies come from there). They feel betrayed, thinking "how is it possible that she left without considering the wellbeing of my kids?" Despite the fact that the paid work hours have been completed, there is a feeling that the contract has not been fulfilled. So I agree that there is this pressure on affects which might also be the last stage of domination.

At the same time, I would also argue in a different direction. One could also say exactly the opposite, that actually that it is easier for some groups to be good, to be generous. This is something that Adorno talks about in Minima Moralia. When you are rich, it is so easy to be benevolent and refrain from some forms of violence, pettiness, and meanness because your form of life is so smooth that actually you are in the position that allows you to be kind: "Wealth insulates from overt injustice" (Adorno 2005, 186). So, you have this kind of affect that is possible with no effort precisely because you are protected from many kinds of resentment, powerlessness, etc., etc. Maybe we can make things even more complex by saying that, sometimes, experiencing certain moral feelings is the result of a privilege. Tronto sees only one part of the picture because she only talks about the indifference of the privileged. For her, the only result of privilege is indifference. But privilege can also produce some kind of concern, of decency, because you can afford it. There is no price to be paid.

LS&TV: One of the new ways in which Tronto is taken up is through posthuman approaches such as by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). She explicitly builds on Tronto's suggestion that care "is not restricted to human interaction with others. We include the possibility that caring occurs for objects and for the environment, as well as for others" (Tronto 1993, 103). Care, in Puig de la Bellacasa's reading, is no longer restricted to an

activity carried out by humans and towards humans but operates within and between sympoetic systems. While this account runs the risk of making the concept of care counterintuitively large, it has the great benefit of extending care to some of the most pressing contemporary problems – those connected to extractive capitalism such as the depletion of natural resources and mass extinction. Could you elaborate if and how your notion of vulnerability facilitates such a posthuman turn?

EF: Issues of care were and should be thought in ways that are related to non-humans such as animals, ecological systems, etc. It is striking that most thinkers who use the idea of care, concern, etc. always address it in a way of the question of non-human entities that are entitled to our care; such as Tronto, of course, but it is at the core of a lot of thinking, and again Adorno is an example of that.

I have been a vegetarian for twenty-five years, so I am totally sympathetic with what is going on in the younger generations and with this strong movement in the direction of taking care of what is nonhuman.

Now I developed my account of vulnerability without explicitly dealing with non-human exposures. They would fit with what I propose in as much as I am talking about vulnerability as something that cannot be disconnected from a set of normative expectations, and about politics as having to do with making those normative expectations explicit and rephrasing them. When it comes to the environment or animals we also have normative expectations. But then I am well aware that the usual issue arises: that we are confronted with entities with which we are in a relation of radical asymmetry, meaning that we can discuss our normative expectations, but they cannot.

I am not sure whether you can solve the issue with ethics of care either. There is an inherent violence in the act of care, because caring for someone is also defining what she or he needs. If there is no way to counterbalance what you believe through some kind of explicit claim that would be made by who actually benefits from your care activity, the violent moment of care will always be there. This is inescapable when it comes to environment or animals.

Although he comes from a very different background, I remember that Habermas tried to think what we would all owe to animals in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. He was not convincing at all because he argued that we owe some kind of consideration to animals because they are quasi-human beings that are capable of intersubjectivity and even of a quasi-language. So he tries to give them some kind of rights or entitlements to care because they are similar to us. But I think this is the totally wrong way of putting it. There must be a moment where you think about this entitlement in a way which is completely disconnected to what makes them possibly similar to us. At least theorists of care are not trying to avoid or disguise the problem of asymmetry.

Now how can you really engage in an activity of care without these radical movements of violent authority? I don't know. I really don't know. In France Bruno Latour advocates a parliament of things. But this parliament of things only works if there are some spokespersons, and politically speaking we know what spokespersons usually have made of the claims of the ones they are supposed to defend.

LS&TV: We indeed could deploy a similar move as Habermas does, starting from the observation that there is this specific form of inter-species intersubjectivity in attending to needs. That step can be made quite easily, to say that there are some forms of normative expectations between so-called higher developed animals. But what Puig de la Bellacasa does is more radical. She takes Tronto's definition fairly literally, understanding any activity, including the activities of worms and of fungi, as care. So, she not only addresses the care of humans towards nature but also the care that is exerted by nonhuman nature. It is really interesting in its radicality, as it questions the conjunction of affect and activity and opens up the concept of care. Still, we end up with the same problem that you highlighted with reference to Latour: it is not so clear anymore what the concept means and entails politically.

EF: In some reflections on capitalism, in particular in Jason Moore's work, something similar is done in terms of work instead of care: we are invited to think about and measure the work which is performed by forests, inasmuch as that they clean the air, that they make our environment breathable. Or the work which is performed by bees insofar as they reproduce flowers and things like that. So there is the idea that what should be named "work" is not limited to what humans can perform. But that does not encompass the question of affect that you just mentioned. I don't think you can claim that bees have some kind of affect, at least when they take pollen from one flower and bring it to another. Even if something like an affect is involved, it is probably not directed towards human beings.

In order to act as a spokesperson, we might need to make a kind of mental and theoretical adjustment to translate what is done by non-human entities into categories that are human. Talking about care and work when it comes to some kind of non-human activities might help us in order to think about what we owe non-humans. But that does not solve the political problem of the very existence of a spokesperson, because in the end the only ones who speak – who discuss normative expectations – are us.

LS&TV: In conclusion, could we talk a bit more about how you situate care as a collective, political praxis within the context of the privatization of the welfare state? Emma Dowling, in *The Care Crisis* (Dowling 2022), shows very astutely for the British context how the neoliberal de- and underfunding of public services leads to crises, where care work is increasingly relegated down the "care chain", such that underpaid and unpaid care work is done by those who are marginalized based on residency and citizenship status, ethnicity, race, and gender. Dowling is quite critical of what she calls "care fixes", under which she also subsumes mutual aid projects, suggesting that public refunding is the only desirable solution. Yet there is a longstanding critique of the kind of normalization and coercion exerted by the welfare state, which we find in feminist analyses as well as anarchist-Marxist approaches. In fact, if we look at the discussion of mutual aid by someone like Dean Spade (Spade 2020b; 2020a), mutual aid is a political praxis that generates knowledge of social relations and transforms them from the bottom up. In fact, it might illustrate quite well your understanding of politics as having its own movement and immanent effect, as an "activity of transformation of relations to others and to the

social world, and insofar as the subject of praxis is constantly transformed through the experience in which she is engaged, an experience that she forges but that also forges her" (Ferrarese 2018, 39). Could you position yourself vis-a-vis this discussion?

EF: I come from a French background where the welfare state was and still is quite strong compared to other countries. We tend to think that the State has a burden when it comes to taking charge and taking care of some kind of vulnerabilities, disasters, social threats. And I too regard the State as assuming a primary responsibility to prevent or compensate for the harms individuals might suffer. To put it like Castel, beyond the intersubjective forms of care that render possible the exercise of an autonomy, every individual depends upon a "'social property' made of sufficient rights, resources and protections" (Castel 1991) and which should be offered by the State. Mutual aid can be, to be sure, very efficient. But their responsibility for the care of vulnerabilities is a responsibility by default, which raises if and when the State is deficient. I agree that experiments of mutual aid can be the place of some kind of personal transformation, some way of reorganizing communities and of giving voice to silenced groups. But they might completely jeopardize the whole idea of the welfare state, for two reasons, one is purely political, the other one is moral and cultural. First, forms of self-organization that seek to build their own care system can be counterproductive because they suggest that people can take care of socially produced injustices and social pathologies by themselves. By substituting themselves to it, they make State intervention unnecessary.

Second, there is also a slippery slope vis-à-vis what we owe each other within a political community. When we self-organize, do we still have collective discussions about who should take care of what?

Let me take the counter-example of nursing homes that actually are not real nursing homes, but places where elderly people organize care between each other. I think this is problematic. In a way it is really nice that people take care of each other, but on the other hand, it means that taking care of the elderly is an issue for other elderly. So in a way, they unburden the rest of us of a kind of work and concern that we should also carry.

LS&TV: There seems to be a tension between mutual aid projects that substitute for the state on the one hand, and quite the opposite, namely practices of mutual aid that do not replace the welfare state, but are a place where new forms of community and political consciousness emerge which could formulate demands towards the welfare state. With recourse to Rahel Jaeggi's work, Daniel Loick has called such projects the politics of forms of life (Loick 2017; 2018, Jaeggi 2018). Take, for instance, the care work done within the gay community when the state did not help those suffering from HIV/AIDS. To what extent can forms of care become a political project demanding the transformation of existing institutions? Or to what extent are practices of mutual aid on the contrary depoliticizing these very institutions and no longer demanding anything anymore? Perhaps geographical differences matter a lot. When we look at the US, UK, or even the Netherlands, the neoliberalization of the state is in such a stage that it has reached its apex and not much welfare state is left. Hence, the danger of mutual aid depoliticizing existing institutions seems minimal as the state already retreated from the

realm of care to such an extent that mutual aid projects offer more of a hopeful perspective for reestablishing something of a welfare state from the bottom up. In France, where there is still something of a welfare state, the opposite might be true. Still, I had to think of Édouard Louis' *Qui a tué mon père* (2018) which tells the story of Louis' dad who cannot work while the state already took away so many of his social benefits and forced him to apply for jobs he is physically incapable of doing. I wonder, whether even in France, we can still defend the existing welfare state. Should we instead aim for new projects of social transformation that start out from everyday practices of care? What should be our political wager?

EF: In France too, there is a neoliberalization of the state, and a lot of things that were obvious before are not anymore. I too think, and deplore the fact, that not only Macron, but before him the governments of the past thirty years, including the socialist governments, have dismantled a lot of systems of protections, have considerably impoverished hospitals, schools, universities. Now, compared to other countries, we still have maternity leave and relatively correct nursing homes (although very recently there was a scandal about some of them). We still have non-conditional minimum help benefits. They are very low but do still exist. Universities are still almost free.

But most importantly, the pandemics have changed a few things in the sense that we saw a strong return of the State, both in the good and in the bad way. The way the State did take care of vulnerabilities shifted, and I think we cannot have the same unilateral "neoliberal" reading of the political evolution that we had two years ago. In France, the state suddenly had money for so many things; whereas before it was impossible to get any kind of help and the budget was so constrained, in the last two years, anything was possible. Macron had this strange motto where he said "no matter what it will cost". And a significant part of the population got its normal salary while not being able to work for months and months, thanks to State funds. We were not in the situation of many neoliberal countries where millions of people just lost their jobs from one day to the next.

There is a lot of discussion about where that money was before, but the point here is that there is a strong return of the State. That is not to say that now we are back to a full welfare state (strangely, in the midst of the pandemic, the number of hospital beds continued to decrease), but that focusing on the withdrawal of the State from some spheres of society is to leave out new trends that are just as damaging from the point of view of the care of vulnerable people as from the point of view of gender.

As everyone has noticed, the return of the State could not do much about the gendered distribution of work – quite the opposite. Everyone was forced to stay at home, and everyone (or at least a significant part of the population) was paid, but in the end, care was performed in a very traditional way by women who were burdened with helping the kids with school, cooking, etc.

I would say that there is a strange kind of dialectics here. The return of a quite strong welfare state did not prevent, and in a way triggered, some kind of a neo-traditional distribution of care activities. And it did so not because of a certain neo-paternalism which would have conditioned state aid on certain practices but because it made the household exclusively an economic unit. Women were in a way both forced

and abandoned in their households. As soon as they were no longer in public spaces in the broad sense, such as companies, associations, etc., they lost the protections they used to enjoy thanks to the laws, norms, and public policies that framed their activity in the economic and political spheres, and even in the street. They had strong protection by the State in economic terms, and at the same time, large aspects of their lives were just left to agreements that would happen in households. But those agreements were not agreements, they were just reenactments of very old and oppressive forms of life. Hence, they were both super-protected and totally underprotected. Here again, you can see the limits of any kind of state organization of care as a collective activity as long as normative expectations are not politicized.

LS&TV: This brings us back to the politization of love, maybe not of romantic love but of parental love, which is another taboo that we still have to look at. We might have to distinguish between mutual aid projects that are some kind of neoliberal communitarianism set up by privileged social groups, and those forms of mutual aid which are galvanizing political consciousness. The typical example is the Black Panther Party which started a breakfast for children program that the FBI considered the most dangerous political action in the US. Still, it is often cited as the reason why there is a breakfast program in the US today. So, the very aim of taking up this need was not the collective change of ideas of what needs should be met, or what vulnerability is, but basically an effort to undermine the possibility of political consciousness. Might we say that the vulnerability of kids at the mercy of the Black Panther Party is preferable to the vulnerability towards a state-run program with its own risks, such as breaking up collective consciousness, or the paternalism which Tronto also highlights?

I totally believe that those kinds of non-mixed meetings, practices, and caregiving organizations have the potential to give rise to new claims, and to allow members of these groups to rethink and reformulate their own identities, to define what a threat is for them, etc. – this is what Nancy Fraser called subaltern counterpublics.

But then comes the second moment of your question, because at some point you need to assess between vulnerabilities. You mentioned kids, who might indeed be vulnerable to the way a group performs a certain form of care. How do you assess vulnerabilities? Well, I think there are no criteria. There is not one and only way to have a discussion about that. I don't think that there are ultimate principles that should be found out in order to say: if we go past this threshold, then it is not taking care of some vulnerability anymore, but pure violence or paternalism. It is always a matter, again, of normative expectations and normative expectations cannot be discussed only inside a group, notably because even the normative expectations of the group are shaped by something which is broader than the group, because the group was socialized within a larger political community; but also because claims must go through the trial of disagreement.

In short, I would say that when it comes to politicization, the moment of closure of the group upon mutual aid can only be thought of as a temporary step. It cannot be regarded as an emancipatory horizon. It is the tool, not the end.

Notes

1   Estelle Ferrarese gave a talk at the Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven on November 18, 2021.

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