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Review Article:

The Cost of Living

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In the Epilogue to her latest book, Nancy Fraser highlights Covid 19 as 'a textbook example' of the perils of global capitalism: 'the point where all cannibal capitalism's contradictions converge' (2022, p.160). As she sees it, this 'lethal binge' has also produced profound consequences for care, turning 'already destabilised ... social reproduction into an acute care crunch' (p.162).

This broadly echoes the conclusions of *The Care Manifesto*. Produced in the wake of Covid-19, its radical prescription is to reframe care as 'a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life' (p.5). Co-authored by a collective of academics from a range of disciplines, it calls on us to reassess our relationships, not only to each other but to the planet. Divided into six chapters (Caring politics, kinships, communities, states, economies, and for the world) the Manifesto addresses the relationship between macro, meso and micro dimensions of care in theory and practice. And the timing of this radical vision to 'put care at the very heart of our lives and politics' couldn't be more appropriate.

As the authors observe, the pandemic forced many of us 'to adopt new forms of taking care - from mutual aid to social distancing and self-isolation' (p.2). It reminded us, as if we needed it, just how interdependent we are, for good and ill: 'different decisions made at state level and shaped by distinct national priorities ... affected both the global life of the virus and our own life chances' (p.84). It also shone a floodlight onto the manifest 'carelessness' of 'prioritising the interests and flows of financial capital while ruthlessly dismantling welfare states and democratic processes and institutions' (p.3), highlighting how this kind of 'colonising market rationality' (p.10) has been responsible for much of the 'social carelessness' of recent years. As the

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authors point out, 'neoliberalism is uncaring by design' although that reality can be disguised, at least for a time, by the kind of familiar psycho-babble evident in the early stages of the pandemic.

As cases grew exponentially and deaths mounted up, we were persuaded or shamed onto our doorsteps weekly by government to clap for those heroic, essential key workers like NHS staff, care workers, transport workers, bin workers, postal workers and others as they laboured selflessly on our behalf. And global corporations joined in the applause. Embarking on what some have called 'care-washing' programmes, 'they declared "We Care", with every commodity they delivered' (Segal and Chatzidakis, 2020), despite their shameful record in caring for either the conditions of their own workers or the environment. In other words, whilst '*talk* of care is ... everywhere' (p.2) 'carelessness' is manifest everywhere.

And yet, as the Manifesto dares to hint, in spite of such crass hypocrisy it may just be that this carefully choreographed version of 'conditional solidarity' (Gandenberger et al, 2022) has produced unintended consequences, activating what the Manifesto calls 'caring imaginaries' well beyond the immediate crisis (p.7). For example, as those same keyworker 'heroes' we applauded on our doorsteps began to take industrial action to improve working conditions that we'd witnessed for ourselves as unacceptable or dangerous, attempts to portray them as greedy and self-serving were simply not credible. In fact, according to a recent Opinium poll, public solidarity around industrial action has been steadily growing partly *because* of the communal care shown during Covid. And union membership and action has grown exponentially over recent months: analysis by *The Guardian* of data provided by 16 unions in November 2022 shows that 'almost 1.7 million workers, most of them in the public sector, are either being balloted ... or have already voted to support stoppages' (Stewart and Inman, 2022).

It could be argued that, in highlighting public dangers as much as inadequate incomes, and the connection between the two, union action is increasingly seen as an act of care for others as much as legitimate self-interest. 'All for one and one for all' has taken on

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an urgent new meaning. At the same time, as Nesrine Malik (2022) observes, the solidarity necessary to survive the pandemic has seen the emergence of 'an informal parallel system of support - one in which people share resources and donate their time to help each other out'. For *The Care Collective*, such potentially counter-hegemonic activities as these might be just the ingredients necessary for the development of 'radically democratic social ecologies of care' (p.56): a more 'promiscuous' way of thinking about care in which 'all forms of care between all categories of human and non-human should be valued, recognised and resourced equally, according to their needs or ongoing sustainability' (p.40). The Covid context has unarguably exposed the disastrous limitations of 'care' as a (mostly private) service, but it also exposes the limits of such a narrow conception, raising profound questions about 'the politics of interdependence' - the Manifesto's sub-title. Perhaps what current developments indicate is that the language of care is in the process of being re-appropriated from the market in order to challenge taken for granted assumptions about how society is organised. As Tronto (2013) succinctly puts it 'surely... the purpose of economic life is to support care, not the other way around'.

The 'crisis of care' discourse has become ever more commonplace in recent decades though the nature of the crisis may have changed. For example, the structure of state provision - the 'duty of care' from 'cradle to grave' (Hennessy, 2022) - which was integral to the post-war welfare settlement, has been the subject of sustained critique from across the political spectrum, most compellingly perhaps from those too often objectified or stigmatised in the process. According to Peter Beresford (2018) and others in the wider disability movement, it was the failure of the welfare state to really engage people, to take account of their experience, that allowed the flourishing New Right and its think tanks to associate notions of paternalism and bureaucracy with state provision and to cast themselves as the champions of choice; transforming 'client' into 'user' into 'customer'. And, as successive governments have increasingly 'accepted neoliberal capitalism's near-ubiquitous position of profit-making as *the* organising principle of life' (p.3), 'choice' has been even further commodified. The 'corporate seizure of care homes from the public sector' (p.15) has advanced so

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dramatically that it has become normalised. According to Fraser (2002, p.72), one overlooked outcome of such commodification has been the '(cannibalisation of) ... the capacities available for sustaining social connections'. This is critical to the concerns of the Care Collective. The consequences for those with specific care needs have always been particularly acute. Care, as Ryan argues, (2022) should be primarily about 'having choices .... the chance to have a life, just like anyone else': social connection, not deepening divisions and pathologised dependency.

The Manifesto revisits another familiar critique in arguing that care must be valued and shared, no longer tolerated as an exploited form of labour, shouldered mainly by women and the poor, increasingly provided by an uber-precariat of displaced foreign women working with little security in the gig economy. Feminist critiques of care have consistently questioned longstanding assumptions about the 'natural' role of women (eg Finch, 1964). Conflating notions of 'caring about' with 'caring for' has been systematically deployed over time 'both as a means of privatising responsibility [and] reinforcing the hegemony so necessary to sustain women's role as prime carers' (Shaw, 1996:94). By contrast, 'the caring state cultivates *everyone's* capacity to care by providing relevant education *and* [my italics] the necessary conditions for mutual thriving' (p.63). This vital dialectic between the potential for human agency, and the reality of social and economic structures is at the core of the Manifesto.

At popular level, the vocabulary of 'care' has always assumed largely positive connotations, whatever the reality. Who could argue against care? But, as Raymond Williams in *Keywords* (1976) reminds us, it is crucial to look at the 'work' that language does in particular contexts, and in whose interests. Socially significant concepts such as 'care' are capable of bearing interlocking yet contradictory and contested meanings. Without the kind of scrutiny advocated in this Manifesto, the meaning of care goes uncontested even whilst its practice has long been experienced by many as anything but caring. Indeed, for too many people 'in care' or cast in low- or unpaid caring roles, the cost of living is proving literally too high.

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Writing this review in the (hopefully) post-Covid autumn of 2022 at the start of what is predicted to be the worst cost of living crisis in over 50 years (Resolution Foundation, 2022), and in which extreme weather patterns brought about by global warming are destroying the planet and the lives of millions of people worldwide, the Manifesto extends the lens of care to what is painfully obvious. We are all interconnected, despite the 'deeply corrosive role' (Ward, 2022, p.4) of the corporate world in shaping politics, policy and personal experience: 'Defensive self-interest thrives'. Turning the social consequences of economic decisions into personal pathologies to be fixed by the growing self-care industry has become so familiar that it goes almost unremarked.

Touching on broadly the same territory during the Thatcher era in the 1980s, NHS clinical psychologist David Smail (1993, p.3) sought to establish 'a theoretical perspective which actually makes sense of individual experience ... in relation to the operation of social influences at the very margins of our awareness'. Put simply, his argument was that those factors which affect us most are often the most difficult to see in our own lives. He reported becoming increasingly unable to see the people who consulted him as having anything 'wrong' with them, and more and more aware of the constraints placed on their ability to escape the distress they experienced. His increasing concern with 'brand name' approaches to psychotherapy chimes with Eilis Ward's (2022, p.5) current critique of 'therapy culture' through which 'neoliberalism's deceitful emancipatory claims ... force us to embrace our servitude as though it were our liberation' alongside the 'resilience' discourse of self-care 'which we buy for ourselves'.

For the Care Collective too, much of the misery of our times is inextricably linked to 'the entrenchment of neoliberalism, the gig economy and a growing sense of precarity among the 99 per cent' (p.63). The concept of 'social murder' has even been revived by some commentators, as deaths linked directly to austerity measures reach dramatic proportions (eg Walsh et al, 2022). In such circumstances, we need a sociological voice to name what are increasingly framed as private matters. Mindfulness has its

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place, and appropriate therapeutic resources should be freely available to all who need them but, as Smail and Ward both suggest, we surely need to cultivate 'outsight' as well as insight.

For the authors of the Manifesto, this means an uncompromising call for 'care' to be completely reframed in the public imagination and in policy - to start from the place we begin and not end our analysis of modern society: a caring state 'will always begin by valuing care-taking over profit-making'(p.62). In any case, as Richard Humphries (2022) reminds us: 'care work is the work that makes all other work possible: if anything, recent events strengthen the case for social care investment as an integral feature of economic and social reconstruction and recovery'. The caring economy advocated in the Manifesto would comprise everything that enables us all to take care of each other, 'working towards caring exchange arrangements that are infinitely more democratic, solidary, and based on egalitarian modes of ownership, production and consumption' (p.72).

Perhaps one of the less obvious but potentially fruitful connections for educational practitioners is that between 'care' and democracy. The authors argue that public provision in a 'seriously caring state' would enable everyone to cultivate the 'strategic autonomy and independence' advocated by the disability movement and others, creating the conditions for more democratic participation (p. 64). 'Care', like democracy, is both a 'practice' and a 'value' (Held, 2006), necessarily producing tensions and ambivalence. A caring state is one that creates the conditions for differences to be expressed and negotiated in enlarged public spaces of deliberation and decision-making and 'subjected to continual debate and reflection' (p.67). Creating communities with the capacity to care means 'amplifying the spaces that are public... held in common .... shared and co-operative, rather than those designed for or hijacked in the interests of private capital.' (p.51). Crucially, this involves 'providing the necessary sharing infrastructure, giving communities a greater role in planning their locality and its services, remaking the relations between the state and local levels to deepen collaborative decision-making (or 'co production') (p.56/7)'. Such a capacious view of 'care' offers real scope for 'build[ing] that vital sense of solidarity,

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agency, community and belonging (p66/7)' which should surely be at the heart of genuine community engagement. *The Care Manifesto* provides an invaluable resource for this increasingly vital task.

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