

Review

Emma Dowling (2022) *The Care Crisis: What Caused It and How Can We End It?*

London: Verso, paperback 288pp, ISBN 9781786630353 £9.99

University of Vienna professor of sociology Emma Dowling presents a cogent exploration of how austerity measures and the privatisation of social welfare and health services in the UK have resulted in a lack of suitable options for those in need. She notes that women are more likely than men to lose income as a result of caring for children; that people of colour are disproportionately harmed by government cuts in spending on social care; and that migrants make up a significant proportion of care workers and are often paid below the minimum wage. Since the 1990s, Dowling explains, local authorities have been encouraged to contract out care services to private providers, supposedly with the goal of offering more personalised care. Corporate takeovers, however, have resulted in a focus on shareholder profits rather than effective provision. Her proposed solutions include reducing privatisation, “publicly funding new and innovative models for care,” and improving working conditions for health-care employees. Blending sociological research and in-depth interviews, Dowling touches on many issues faced by both the recipients of care and the providers of care in the UK and the US, presenting a lucid and alarming picture of how political decisions have placed obstacles in the way of progress towards better care. Readers on both sides of the Atlantic will appreciate this passionate and persuasive call for reform.

This book is a call to arms to any scholar, activist or practitioner - a call to us all, who give or receive care in these contemporary neoliberal times.

The feminist underpinnings of this account are stark in their understanding, providing a lens through which to view such sobering and sombre detail, when considering the role of women, not only in the care giving process, but in the capitalist machinery in which the structures of institutions of care operate.

Women are traditionally used as the bedrock of, and support system for, capitalism – even working women employ (other) women, who are almost always poorer and often from immigrant/migrant backgrounds. These women (or ‘domestic workers’) regularly face the decision of working abroad and leaving their own children - a heart-breaking yet common approach to the unfairness of privatised personal and family care in the 21st century.

Dowling writes with tenacity and force, stirring the reader to want to act against the imbalanced socio-economic structures and society in which we find ourselves. She senses an apathy which is discussed in relation to making and creating social change: It is easier to imagine the end of care as we know it (in its meaningful form)- than it is to imagine the end of late-stage capitalism.

The introduction is followed by consideration of a range of so-called ‘Care Fixes’. These are discussed in relation to various aspects of the ways in which care in the UK is delivered. Considering these care-fixes through the lens of austerity, and the covid-19 pandemic, such approaches may actually be seen to position social care as a form of economic development which is based on unregulated market behaviour. Dowling offers a dystopian reality for readers to understand not only the theory, but also provides empirical research to evidence these points.

The book is structured in six parts, with each chapter introducing the topic of care framed through a socioeconomic-determinist lens. The underbelly of Dowling’s writing refers initially to the austerity climate of EU/UK and US politics which is engulfed by the historical context of rampant consumer capitalism.

The Care Crisis is a welcome contribution to the underrepresented arenas that care exists within and pervades – making it clear that this is, in fact, every aspect of our lives. Care, and caring for others, holds a different meaning for those who engage within those spaces where care is given or received. Dowling makes a strong case for such spaces to be recognised as workspaces; places where unpaid care work is carried out. These domestic duties, which happen within the home and family life, historically and normatively, are carried out by women, a point returned to by Dowling throughout her writing.

There is an optimistic and anticipative approach taken here, whereby the research seeks to encourage the potential to disrupt dominant paradigms and hierarchies, constructing the opportunities to challenge and flourish in spaces for authentic and well-delivered care that nurtures alternative ways of knowing and being.

The question for our times is – will it happen, and when?

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