



Book review: Care and Capitalism by Kathleen Lynch

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In 1993 Joan Tronto, in a seminal book on care and politics, wrote that if taken seriously, care would quite fundamentally ‘shift the terms of political [and economic] debate’; and that the ‘world will look different if we move care from its current peripheral location to a place near the center of human life’ (Tronto, 1993: 175). Thirty years later, despite an expansion of research about care, it is still largely a peripheral concern, both in politics and in academia.

Care and Capitalism by Kathleen Lynch lays out the forces that keep marginalising care, but it also demonstrates the radical potential of care that Tronto referred to. It is an ambitious book that speaks incisively about the fundamental ideological underpinnings and contradictions of contemporary society, economics and politics related to care. Lynch draws from an impressive breadth of theoretical and empirical literature to provide a critical analysis of the predicament we find ourselves in with crippling inequalities and the many crises of care. She argues that a radical ideological and political shift is required if we want a ‘care-centric’ society, which, for Lynch, goes together with values and wider principles of social justice and affective equality – themes which have been central in the long career of this esteemed scholar (e.g Lynch et al., 2009; Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2020).

Examining care in various forms and contexts ranging from intimate care and care homes for the elderly, to work-life balance and unpaid care work, to education, climate change and care’s nemesis violence, Lynch exposes the domination, hostility and destructiveness of some of the key organizing principles and elements of late-stage capitalism. The examination in Chapter 7 of metricization, competitiveness, and the ideals of meritocracy is particularly enlightening, as Lynch covers issues such as the creation of oligarchic and managerial elites, and the role of non-meritocratic factors and the myth of exceptional

talent in these processes, vis-à-vis care and caring. In this light, the values and practices of care appear as counter-hegemonic, even revolutionary. Indeed, Lynch argues that on a cultural, political and ideological level, the predominant liberal and individualistic thinking is 'care-harming'. Pretending we care while prioritising those neoliberal, capitalist principles, is hypocritical and leaves care a residual value.

Care and Capitalism contains ten chapters which explore a wide range of concerns and dimensions of care and capitalism. The chapters are structured into three parts, and conclusions. The organisation of the parts, entitled Care Matters Inside and Outside Capitalism (I), Challenges (II), and Violence – The Nemesis of Care (III), feels somewhat arbitrary, and at times the book feels almost like a reference book, as it covers such a wide terrain, and the arguments made are so numerous, ranging from well-rehearsed critiques of capitalism to specific points about the different forms of care as non-commodifiable love labour. However, one could say that this reflects the ubiquitous nature of care relations: they permeate so much of our lives and structure society so fundamentally, that it is no wonder a theorisation of this totality is of a kaleidoscopic nature. Interestingly, while Lynch opens the book with a definition of *capitalism*, as the dominant political-economic system where profit-oriented companies own and control production and resources, and class-based economic inequalities are institutionalised, she does not explicitly define *care*. Rather, care is discussed in terms of relations, and *caring*, and as a value, embodied practice, work and ethic, related to the affective domains of nurture, love and solidarity. Theoretically the book draws from a rich literature, ranging from the 'founding mothers' of care research to a wide array of social and political theory.

The book examines why the 'social' issues of care are so often disregarded as political, economic and academic concerns. Lynch relates care's subordination and marginalisation to the 'abject' status of care in neoliberal culture where death, bodily fragility and the universal need for embodied care, are seen as problems to be eradicated. Those, often racialised migrant women, who do the hands-on work of bodily caring with people who are highly dependent, become abject by association. Furthermore, through marketisation and commodification care is made abject by being reduced to a package of marketable, measurable products, in which time for relational work (prerequisite for good care) is not

named or granted. Thus the lack in status and power for care work is produced by cultural overvaluation of ostensible independence and fitness, and by material practices which discourage and undermine dignified and respectful caring.

Lynch discusses at length the gendered relations that characterise care and caring, also in the context of academic research. That care is largely seen as the province of women, who are socialized to take on the responsibility of caring, and whose care labour is assumed to have almost infinite flexibility, is a repeated argument in research on care and social reproduction (e.g. Bakker 2007). But Lynch makes some interesting observations about the gendered nature of the research fields of care and violence, which are largely separated fields, even if they are interlinked, and both somewhat new themes of sociological, (and political, one could add) investigation (pp. 174-175). The natural proneness to care and to be violent, as well as the social and political processes that engender both, are related and intersect, but typically they are not examined together in research. While both care and violence are deeply embedded in various institutions, and dominate much of our social life, their peripheral place in academic research is connected to the misrecognition of the role of emotions such as fear, hate, altruism and solidarity in politics (p. 176).

The numerous topics covered in the book include the role of gender and race in capitalism and patriarchy, the role of men and the division on (care) labour in homes, and the nature of bureaucracy and time in care work. Referring to a wide array of research, Lynch demonstrates how in all these fields and contexts, the practices, values and logic of care seem to go against the mainstream trends and neoliberal ideology (see also Mol, 2008; Hoppania and Vaittinen, 2015). Lynch further extends her discussion to how we treat and value, care or neglect the environment and non-human animals. This seems to be a growing research field (e.g. Greenhough et al., 2023; Moriggi et al., 2020), but it is not a new concern in care research as already Tronto and Fisher's definition of care entailed the maintenance of the life-sustaining web of our 'world' which includes the environment (Tronto and Fisher, 1990).

Lynch further focuses on the key role of education, where a Gramscian 'war of position' (p.9) is unfolding. The mind too, is a site of political struggle, so the cultural and intellectual

spheres, 'the means of understanding' are fundamentally important, raising the question of which values are nurtured culturally. Science and research can be dominated by competition and control, or by cooperative learning, and the creation of new narratives requires both formal and cultural education. Analysing the wider trends and tensions in education, Lynch notes how affective educational objectives have been subordinated to the rationalist tradition which leads to most students leaving college without a paradigm for care and social justice in either intellectual or experiential terms (pp. 210-211). *Care and Capitalism* is also a call to action to defend caring values and practices, in education and in the arts and media, and beyond. These sites are replete with ideological contradictions and offer possibilities for resistance.

Lynch's understanding of care rests on an underlying relational ontology, which she discusses explicitly quite briefly (p. 100-102), but which informs her wider outlook on affective relations. Her overall approach directs attention not only on individuals needing or giving care, but to the wider networks of relations of vulnerability, interdependency and solidarity. The recent discussions on ailment (Zechner et al., 2023) would offer a fruitful point of dialogue here, as Lynch also covers emotional dimensions related to care, such as indifference and guilt, and discusses the dualistic ethics of the dichotomy of public and private, in terms of existence of both *homo economicus* and *homo relationalis*, and *homo curans* (pp. 113-116), whereas with Zechner and others (2022) we have introduced the idea of *homo aegrotus*, positing that politics is also characterised and driven by *ailing* which operates beyond and irrespective of these distinctions.

The key contribution of *Care and Capitalism* is in how it explains in great lucidity, and with reference to ample evidence, the ideologies and practices that characterise the mainstream of contemporary societies and politics. It shows very concretely how they are hostile to the values and practices of care that our political classes at least rhetorically also subscribe to. The book is indispensable reading to understand and build resistance to the hegemonic order that valorises hierarchical social relations, glorifies competition as the proper way of relating, and pushes consumption as indicator of 'success'. Taking into account the moral and psychic impacts of competition and referring to Rosanvallon (2013), Lynch discusses these trends in terms of a neoliberal 'society of generalised competition' which exacerbates

status anxieties, generates distrust and erodes meaningful political engagement. The importance of resisting this order extends from the concerns of providing adequate social policy and care services, to maintaining and re-building meaningful political engagement through which we can ‘care about’, and exercise caring values democratically as ‘relationally engaged caring citizens’.

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