



An ethics of care will be required if we are to overcome this crisis

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The emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic has jolted us to an immense sanitary and civilization crisis. In the midst of it, the Brazilian government took to saying that the population should decide between saving either the economy or their lives. In a market economy, profit is the objective, not people. However, the economy is made by people and cannot exist but with them. If we are to overcome this crisis, we will have to have life as a central concern and to remake a community web of care, which has been destroyed by neoliberalism.

The economy is made by people and will only exist with them

This is one of the pillars in the economic outlook proposed by feminists. Feminism sees the economy as a mode of social organization underlined by an interdependency of people among themselves and between themselves and nature.

An economy just cannot develop independent from people. The mere fact that the economy / life relation can be presented publicly as a dilemma provides a clear image of the challenge we have at hand. COVID-19 forces us to face how brutal neoliberalism actually is.

Let's suppose, for the sake of rhetoric, that we can hear the clash between economy and life, thus presented as rivals, in which case what seems to be at stake is a forced conversion of popular sensitivity to a faraway realm of ideas such as solidarity and dignity. The extreme right wishes to destroy whatever is social.

In financial capitalism, the economy impinges upon life—our life—as corollary to an old mechanism of subordination: debt. Lo and behold that debt allows for consumption that is permanent and necessary, if capitalism is to work! It is no longer chains and whips, material things that come to bind us, but a fettering debt that trains relations.

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Neoliberalism has increased the number of people living beyond the borders of state

During the pandemics, the emptiness of streets or, otherwise, the image of bodies pushed by absolute necessity to move about them shows that neoliberalism has increased the number of people living beyond the borders of state, with virtually no access to any social protection mechanism.

In the 20th Century, labor was the cornerstone whereupon the state could build the structure of social assistance policy. But the wage crisis (the truly Chinese component of this crisis) and increased informality created a protection gap we haven't been able to bridge. For the time being, results have been nothing but peril, bereavement and bleak.

The social drama brought about by the coronavirus flags a warning: reviewing last century's concept of labor is a matter of urgency. We need to understand, as feminists, that defining labor that is not valued as such—household chores, for one—puts forth the terms of updated forms of exploitation. This means that the way in which labor is undermined and rendered invisible, as is the form of putting minorities down, eventually overflows to the remainder of society.

Oppression against women is a laboratory for the oppression against society in general. Precarization of work is a continuous movement that affects the whole of society. We will only be able to offer some response to the various configurations of labor if we focus on the dynamics of how it is multiplied. There is no form of labor, but rather an ever growing proliferation of work modes.

Under neoliberalism, the state moves to the border of legality

Under neoliberalism, raids to democracy have been as deep-rooted as the destruction of its underpinning institutions. It's not only a matter of extinguishing ministries or stifling actions and policies by withdrawing resources. We are in the midst of gross warfare on ideas and values. Lo and behold the shifting sands between legality and illegality!

Neoliberalism has been in place to normalize practices that were once considered immoral or illegal. This is the case of new forms in which labor is exploited, as we were just mentioning, or debt is imposed upon individuals or families as an instrument of surveillance and control ("don't think of crises, just work").

Since the government's role is, now, to rule the economy in strict correlation with the corporations, by shaping the business environment to favor the rich, the state needs to adapt to and partake in illegality. This is where legal and illegal reveal their intrinsic connection with the realm of power that defines them. Because the fluidity in concepts of illegality utterly reveals who is in command.

When it moves towards the border of illegality, the state allows for the development of what we call “capitalism of illegality”. Illegality is a trace of deregulation. At the same time, it cannot be reduced to dismantling social policies. What this new legality/illegality framework does is to create a new perimeter for the definition of human, which eventually establishes what bodies/territories must be cared for and the ones that must be exhausted. Violence has been part and parcel of capitalism, as Silvia Federici has taught us.

We now witness increasing collusion among institutionality, financial capital and a number of offense mechanisms that range from cap and gown mobsters to political militia or the paramilitary. This is why recouping the state’s role involves climbing through a misty and somber stage. Narcopolitic affiliates are not only amidst leaderships within the *Planalto* (the national congress in broad terms, as Brazilians would have it); it rather pervades the entire state as the underlying logic behind the bureaucratic operation.

This is a crisis of social reproduction, the solution to which is an ethics of care

As Mariarosa Dalla Costa put it so well in 1995, the sphere of the social reproduction of life reveals “all original sins in the capitalist mode of production”³. From then on, capitalism has confirmed and enhanced this perspective. The ever so dramatic element in the COVID-19 crisis is the frailty—or absence in some cases—of life supporting policies.

With no care related protocol, even a vaccine or medication, let alone any cure, this disease has rendered the frailty of life insurmountable and exposed the difficulty of governments, after decades of austericide policies, to respond to humanitarian urgencies. At the same time, this is why we now have room to discuss a new social pact lined by an ethics of care.

Back in the 1980’s, when it brought about the relentless need to “put life in the center”, the feminist economy did no more than to bring care to the everyday scene, bidding time and the pace of life, tipping the profits first logic upside down. We, the feminists, disputed the then current economy and reassigned it as a social science that could look into potentially better pathways that would suffice to the needs of the people.

This is the true dilemma that emerges in the current scene, when world leaders like Trump, Boris Johnson or Bolsonaro render the idea of saving the economies somewhat acceptable by prioritizing corporate interests and justifying a hyper exploitation of people. Inventing an altogether new world is now a matter of life or death.

³ Dalla Costa, Mariarosa: translated from “*Capitalismo e riproduzione*”, in “Capitalismo NaturaSocialismo”, n. 1 January/April 1995 (“Capitalism and Reproduction”, in Bonefeld, Werner et al (eds.), 1995)

We need to resume discussions around an ethics of care. The importance of broad public policy systems for collective care has never been so clearly outside the rim of formal labor. It is therefore high time we recognized the multiple forms of labor, redefined ideas and insisted upon whatever forms of community organization that works, as we have learned from ecofeminism, where we are challenged to find local solutions for the everyday toil of life.

This pandemic can be the tragic opportunity for us to dispute the current productive and governmental model so that we can, at last, embark on a change movement that will cater to the logic of care. If we are to overcome this crisis, we must face the vulnerability that comprises human beings, and the ecodependence that unites us to nature.

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