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The Ethics and Politics of Care: Reshaping Economic Thinking and Practice

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ABSTRACT

As the Covid pandemic and unprecedented ecological change unsettle our lives, the growing public awareness of care is reshaping economic thinking and practice as we emerge from the pandemic but find ourselves in deepening social reproduction crises and the ongoing climate crisis. Feminist economists have long identified that unpaid care work forms the basis for social reproduction or the unseen work through which capitalist economies and societies are reproduced. Even if the act of care is central to relationships and fundamental to our survival and wellbeing, it is too often taken for granted, invisible, not counted as productive or profitable, and carried out mostly by women, people of colour, immigrants, or other marginalised groups. This article reviews some current feminist economic thinking and practice that call for paying greater attention to ethics and practice of care as a way to build economies based on social justice, environmental sustainability, and collective well-being. It shows how this vision of better welfare, healthcare, care for children and the elderly, education and housing by neighbourhood networks and sustainable ecological practices is necessary for greater economic wellbeing and equity.

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Introduction: In Memory of G.C. Harcourt

I am grateful to have been invited to contribute to this special edition of *ROPE* in honour of my father, G.C. Harcourt. As many have written (see Boianovsky 2022), my father was a man committed to social justice and campaigned in and off campus to end oppression of all forms. He was an outspoken left winger and a man who cared greatly about people. He showed profound care for his family, his colleagues, friends and students. He was known for never forgetting a face or name, and for taking time to listen and advise. Right from my early student days in Adelaide, he encouraged me to follow my feminist and environmental activism, whether as a student or an international advocate or, later, an academic. At his eightieth birthday celebrations, organised by his students at Robinson College, Cambridge, I was invited to speak about 'The Future of Capitalism'

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(Harcourt 2014) to both his and my great enjoyment. I feel my father is still with me, looking over my shoulder as I type, as I reflect further on feminist economic thinking and practice, the ethics and politics of care. Writing this article, as the world seems to be facing increasing levels of social inequality, seems timely and appropriate given my father's great concern for economic and social justice and his personal and political work of care for others.

On a methodological note, I am intentionally following Donna Haraway's call for feminist writing that is 'situated and embodied knowledge that is partial, locatable, critical … sustaining the possibilities of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemologies' (Haraway 1988, p. 584). Therefore, I refer to my personal feelings, academic teaching and feminist advocate positioning in the politics and ethics of feminist struggles around care. In making my personal and political position explicit, I wish to underline my necessarily partial but engaged contribution to understanding the embodied and situated theorising around practices of care. I see knowledge around care emerging from reflections on the doing of care, including conversations in the classroom, feminist collaborations, policy advocacy and activism. In this approach, I take up feminist standpoint theory that makes visible and accountable the author's positioning. The article then looks at care in terms of 'views from somewhere' (p. 590), where the experiences, concerns and agency of people producing the knowledge are explicit (p. 592).

I also follow in my father's footsteps by acknowledging that research is informed by the historical, political and social context in which we are embedded. My 2014 paper was written in the years following the economic crisis of 2008/09. It looked at how to redefine capitalism whilst being aware of social and ecological limits as learnt from feminists and post-development scholars. This reflected my engagement at that moment with transnational civil society networks and my focus on gender and development. I write the current article as we are emerging from the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and are becoming daily more and more aware of climate disaster and the major problems of the world economy relying on fossil fuels and changing geopolitics in Europe due to the Ukrainian war.

I have moved from working with civil society to becoming an academic teaching and researching feminist political ecology (FPE) (Elmhirst 2018; Harcourt and Nelson 2015; Harcourt et al. 2023). In this article I employ FPE to open a discussion on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care and gender relations in both the Global South and North and how society and nature are continuously negotiated in social, political and economic processes (Harcourt and Nelson 2015). Learning from FPE, I look at care as part of the 'complex and shifting relationships to the natural world, embedded in place and shaped by interactions of gender, race, class, caste, culture, age', moving towards environmental and social justice (Resurrección 2017, p. 74). In the following, I reflect on the impacts of Covid-19 and environmental change by reviewing feminists' understandings of care based on feminist political economic and ecological studies. I explain how care can be seen as the gendered work of social reproduction; a form of solidarity; and interspecies reciprocity and more-than-human relations (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018). I argue that the acts of caring about, caring for and caring with play a central role in socio-ecological production and reproduction. I am also interested in what we can learn about care from the communities who are on the margins of capitalism, particularly in the Global South that are fighting every day for environmental and social justice.

I position the article in today's tumultuous times in which many in the scientific and social scientific community now agree that the Covid-19-related upheavals are testimony to the unsustainability of present socioeconomic, political and ecological arrangements on the planet (Büscher et al. 2021). There is an ever more insistent dialogue that we must take seriously if we are to find new economic thinking that enables us to live together sustainably on our fragile planet and negotiate a convivial socio-ecological transformation. What is emerging in these debates is the need to pay attention to relations of care and solidarity (Kaul et al. 2022; Tsing et al. 2017). As environmental justice scholar Giovanna Di Chiro argues, if we are to move towards a just transition to more equitable and liveable futures, we need to recognise the critical connections required for interdependence and collective care (Barca et al. 2023; Di Chiro 2019).

Reflecting on this ongoing set of discussions among intellectuals and activists, many on blogs and listserves,[1] I explore in this article how the Covid-19 pandemic together with climate change foregrounds the importance of feminist economic thinking and practice in relation to the politics and ethics of care. I review some of the salient feminist debates on care in the context of how the crisis of social reproduction foregrounded by Covid-19 and the climate crisis are reshaping economic thinking and practice. This article asks, 'What do feminist perspectives bring to economic thinking and practice around the deepening care crisis, the exploitation of nature and the strategies of collective care?'

In order to answer that question, I first review feminist analytical understandings of care and the impacts of Covid-19 and climate change on care work, particularly learning from experiences in the Global South. I then consider feminist proposals to pay greater attention to the ethics and practice of care to build an economy based on social justice, environmental sustainability and collective wellbeing. I conclude by looking at how this vision for better welfare, healthcare, care for children and the elderly, education and housing by neighbourhood networks and sustainable ecological practices could lay the foundation for economic thinking and practice for wellbeing and equity.

Feminist Understandings of Care

Feminist economic theorists have long argued that care is central to the economy and to life on this planet (Banks 2020; Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018; Budlender 2010; Benería 2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Elson 1991; Folbre 2012, 2014; Fraser 2016, 2018, 2020; Mezzadri 2019, 2022; Razavi 2007; Todaro and Arriagada 2020; Waring 1988). Feminist economic theory sets out how care for self, for families, for communities, for nature and for the Earth, are central to relationships and fundamental to our survival and wellbeing. They have also shown how care has been taken for granted by society and economies, is invisible and not counted as productive or profitable.

As Folbre (2014, p. 3) points out, '[e]conomists have taken care for granted as an expression of natural or biological altruism — quite separate from the individual self-interest in the marketplace'. Understanding gender blindness (to women's care work, paid and unpaid) in economic relations looms large in feminist explanations of inequalities under capitalism (Elson 1991). Revaluing care is central to this critique. Unpaid

[1]For example, The Great Transition Initiative, Pedagogies, Undisciplined Environments, FADA and the WIDE-Network.

work, typically done mostly by women, people of colour, immigrants or other marginalised groups, is the basis for social reproduction or the unseen work through which capitalist economies and societies are reproduced (Benería 2003; Waring 1988). This includes the birthing and raising of children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining emotional and loving connections. Some of the research aims to measure and give monetary value to care (Folbre 2012; Waring 1988); however, what I am more interested in here is how feminist economists have established that paid and unpaid care work is crucial to human wellbeing and a driver for wellbeing and economic justice (Agostino et al. 2023). Since the 1990s, empirical as well as analytical studies have established that mostly women's unpaid care work is the glue that holds human lives together (Bauhardt 2014). The necessary labour of birthing and caring for children, making and serving food, house cleaning and taking responsibility for the elderly is taken as required for the economic system to continue (Budlender 2010).

In a foundational article based on a series of global empirical studies, Razavi (2007) conceptualised the connection between market-based capital accumulation (the commodity economy) and that of non-market-based social reproduction (the unpaid care economy) through a care diamond model linking family/household, markets, the public sector and the not-for-profit sector (including voluntary and community provision). Others have looked at global patterns of care work as global care chains (Yeates 2004). Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004) speak of the 'care deficit' between the industrialised and developing worlds, arguing that middle-class families in the First World now depend on migrants from poorer regions to provide elderly-care, child-care, domestic cleaning and sexual services. For example, in their study of Latin American care chains (Chile–Perú and Costa Rica–Nicaragua), Todaro and Arriagada (2020) highlight how unfair gendered distribution of care work is mostly imposed on immigrant women in their discussion of unequal distribution of care work in homes as well as in the labour market. Collantes (2016), in her study of care chains, details the gendered personal, economic and reproductive dilemmas of Philippine migrant workers over the generations.

Since the 2010s, feminist economist theorists focused on the growing crisis of care under neoliberal global economies. Studies have looked at the complex class, gendered and racialised intersections among occupational and social lives, and the real problem of understanding how to divide commodified and uncommodified reproductive labour due to the emotional, intimate and affective overlap. Radical feminist theorist, Alessandra Mezzadri, argues that social reproduction of the mostly informal and majority world in the household, village and community are where all unpaid work systematically subsidises capital-shaping, capitalist relations that 'impose unpaid, wageless work and life as a direct subsidy to capitalism' (2019, p. 38). In a later article, she goes on to argue that the Covid-19 pandemic is a planetary crisis of capitalist life and analyses it through the feminist political economy lens of social reproduction. Her social reproduction-centred reading of the pandemic underlines how care, as 'life sustaining work … is extremely racialised, gendered and performed by migrants or minorities who have shouldered the externalisation of reproductive costs (2022, 385).'

Fraser (2016) describes the crisis of care in capitalist societies as occurring where 'the capitalist economy relies on — one might say, free rides on — activities of provisioning, care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords

them no monetised value and treats them as if they were free. Variously called 'care', 'affective labour' or 'subjectivation', such activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move' (p. 101).

Fraser (Curty 2020) speaks of an 'unpaid bill for social reproduction — that has been accumulating for decades' (p. 3) and calls for a reorganisation of society on that basis. One of the most insightful feminist understandings of care comes from feminist philosopher Joan Tronto, writing with Berenice Fisher, who sees caring 'as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Tronto and Fisher 1990, p. 40).

Tronto's examination of ethical and political dimensions of care is foundational for feminist theorising about care. She sees care as a series of processes: caring about; taking care of; care giving; care receiving; and caring with. Understanding care as a process underlines that, in order to place care as central to economic and social transitions, we need to take into account changes in people's bodies, environmental contexts, relationships, interests, capacities, and material and systemic conditions. Caring can be transformative if seen in relation to action, practice, vulnerability and solidarity. It requires changes at all levels of care, from the privileged male-dominated places of politics and economics to the places where life is reproduced: the communities, kitchens, home gardens, hospitals, fields, farms, nurseries and care homes (Tronto 1993, 2010).

As the recognition of different types of care by Tronto suggests, care involves (and relies on) unequal gender, race and class power relations. So, while care is life-giving and nurturing, it can also be violent and oppressive and about disciplining and controlling bodies, often vulnerable, poor, racialised female bodies (Gaard 2011).

Given these inequalities, feminists politicise the association of care (giving, receiving and care with) in order to argue that care both sustains and subverts communities in visceral and political ways while feminists reclaim different bodies' needs, vulnerabilities, capacities to sense and feel, to move and express, to resonate with others, to nourish each other, to suffer, age, grow and transform. In this way, care is a source of power and possibility. Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) reminds us that, 'the politics of caring have been at the heart of concerns with exclusions and critiques of power dynamics in stratified worlds' (p. 86). She describes the act of taking care as both ethical and political: 'As an *ethical* obligation, to care is to become subject to another, to recognise an obligation to look after another … as a *practical* labour, caring requires more from us than abstract well wishing, it requires that we get involved in some concrete way' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 4).

Murphy (2015), in her provocative article on unsettling care, cautions us against the romanticising of care and the simplistic conflation of care with affection, happiness and attachment. She reminds us that care of others, with others, by others is physically and emotionally hard and difficult work, which is mostly unappreciated and unvalued. I agree with Murphy that it is important to recognise that care work is hard and often unrecognised, however it is vital. In the feminist discussions about the social reproductive crisis in response to the pandemic combined with increasing awareness of the impacts of

climate change, there is now a serious need to analyse how care work undergirds our economic and ecological systems.

This growing awareness of climate change, caring for and with others is also extended to the Earth through concepts such as Earthcare, where caring acts connect humans with more-than-human others such as plants, soils, forests, rivers, deserts and animals (Barca 2020; Gaard 2011; Plumwood 1993). The concept of 'Earthcare', first coined by ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant in 1995, is the defence of and care for more-than-human others. This term has been developed further by Barca (2020) in her work on forces of reproduction, as I elaborate below.

From these feminist understandings of care, what emerges is that how people are involved in care for and with others is central to economies, ecologies and societies. Care is not an invisible act but a vital one that holds communities together, and in this sense is a community responsibility that requires social recognition and economic resources. In order to move towards economic and social justice, it is important to elevate this capacity to care in economic thinking (MacGregor 2006). A focus on care means looking at changes in the conditions of care work, understanding the impact of the privatisation of social services, the deregulation of industries, the erosion of environmental standards, the weakening of local governments, and the impact of free trade agreements on labour standards and workers' rights. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed that care is far more important than neoliberal economic thinking allows. The dependence on care and the precariousness of its rewards along with the breakdown of community responsibility in the face of climate crisis emerged as major failures of today's neoliberal economic system.

Covid-19 and the Revelation of the Importance of Care

There is now ample data gathered during the last three years on the impact of the pandemic and climate crisis to show how the vital care labour that kept society together was done by women (largely poor and racialised). The pandemic revealed how deep social inequalities and gross economic disparities shaped the experience of care work and the unevenness of responses to the pandemic. The unequal workloads, economic hardships and risks were borne differently according to gender, race, class, ableness and age, with a steep divide between the Global South and North. A study of 112 countries (Kabeer, Razavi, and van der Meulen Rodgers 2021) documented how women from the lowest-income households, racialised and marginalised groups were most affected by the Covid-19 crisis in the form of loss of jobs, income and increased work in the home and subsequent health issues, with migrant workers particularly vulnerable. A series of studies by feminist economists Agarwal, Venkatachalam, and Cerniglia (2021) in *Economia Politica* on 'Women, pandemics and the Global South', along with the discussion papers of the Global South feminist research network Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), show how the pandemic led to an intensification of care work in and outside the home, carried out mostly by women (DAWN 2022). They record the increased care work in homes and in service jobs such as nursing, teaching, domestic work, and caring for children and elderly people, performed particularly by working-class women, migrants and women of colour. The special issues of *Feminist Economics* (2021), *Gender and Society* (2021) and *Feminist Studies* (2020) all provide strong

conceptual and empirical insights into the gendered impact of Covid-19 and the impact of working hours and emotional labour on women. They document both the 'visible dimensions of the impact and the hidden dimensions … and on the medium and long-term effects which are now starting to emerge and could worsen with time (Agarwal 2021, p. 31).

The pandemic revealed the deep-seated inequalities of the existing organisation of care and the distribution of care responsibilities and care labour among families, communities, government and the private sector, as well as among women and men. It also showed how abruptly states could exclude and harden borders. According to a DAWN discussion paper, 'The pandemic as a portal: policy transformations disputing the new normal' (Blanco and Cuervo 2021, p. 4), the pandemic intensified demands for reproductive labour, paid and unpaid in the form of health care, cleaning and cooking, most of which relied disproportionally on the labour of women and girls. Fraser, in an interview with Curty (2020, p. 1331), points out that social, political and economic reliance on care labour is part of 'an "institutionalized social order" [where the economy is] 'dependent on "non-economic institutions and zones of social life" — above all, social reproduction, ecology, and polity'. Agarwal's (2021) study in India outlines the kinds of gendered effects of the pandemic, and the 'need to enhance women's economic recovery and provide social protection from the worst outcomes of the pandemic' (p. 31). Among the DAWN (2022) discussion papers is a study of Argentina, which reveals that its care system coincidentally put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic was the result of years of work on this agenda within academia, civil society, the women's and feminist movements and public policy spaces. DAWN shows how the state system acknowledges the centrality and essentiality of care, in its attempt to mitigate and change unjust social organisation of care (Fraga and Rodríguez Enríquez 2022).

What the pandemic also revealed is that care work consists not only of cooking, cleaning and nursing but is also emotional or affective labour. This type of care is the glue that holds people together in times of crisis. Emotional care sustains and nourishes communities, producing and reproducing shared meanings and values that enable resilience. As Fraser (2020) states in an online interview, affective labour in civil society groups can be seen in the solidarities, social meanings and value horizons which they embrace. Care as love, warmth and friendship that is given freely is crucial to wellbeing in life.[2] Covid-19 revealed the complex need for care resulting from increased stress within families, loneliness and poor mental health in all types of communities in the Global South and North. Covid changed the conditions of child-rearing, eldercare, household relations and community bonds, and made visible what Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) label as care deficits, made even worse by climate change and vagaries of democracy.

The pandemic impacted individuals, homes and families in many ways. On a personal note, I had to navigate diverse Covid regulations and restrictions to visit my father for the last time, travelling from Europe to Australia in 2021. He was isolated in hospital, several times unable to receive visits during his last illness. But we were relatively lucky. The impact varied hugely according to where and with whom you lived and what work you did. In my travels during Covid, I realised at a visceral level that it made a huge

[2]Here, I do not go into the literature that links the paid effective labour expected of nannies, domestic workers, etc., with its historical roots in colonialism, segregation, and empire (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2002).

difference if you were a citizen living in a small but well-serviced apartment in a European or Australian city with a salaried job, so you stayed home and 'went on-line' and ultimately saved money, so you could afford the exorbitant price of a ticket from Amsterdam to Sydney. This was not possible if you were a migrant worker separated from family, who had no way to travel home and no steady source of income. The pandemic situation underlined how much it mattered which state governed your lives, which resources you could access, including health care, and others could not. The breakdown of families, the loneliness of the elderly, and the deterioration of mental health particularly among students, even in richer countries, underlined the importance of care as emotive and affective labour. And lastly, many of us realised that economic and social justice, more than ever, demanded that we expand circles of solidarity and the lines separating 'us' from 'them' and how important it was to notice the effects of climate change in the place where we lived.

Earthcare: Taking Up Responsibility for the Environment

My father introduced an issue of the *Economic and Labour Relations Review* in 2014, in which he argued that the 'climate challenge' calls for a 'new economics'. Summarising the contributions of the issue (to which I also contributed at his invitation), he suggested that we need a blueprint for what is required — one that would regulate global capital, restrict fossil fuel use, encourage renewable resources and organic farming, protect small island nations, ensure a redistribution of resources through legislated minimum wages, ensure gender equality in education and health care, and enact pro-peasant land reforms and communal models of property rights for forest-using people.

This is one of the few places in which he wrote about the environment or climate change; most of his work concerned economic policy and social and economic justice. As I can attest from our many conversations over the years, my father was a strong believer in economic growth and economic development, with robust government redistributive policies. He did not focus on environmental impacts. But his 2014 introduction shows that he was aware of climate change and what it could mean for new economic thinking. Now, eight years later, it is commonplace to describe industrial manufacturing powered by fossil fuels, profit-driven agriculture, industrial technology and global trade as ushering in the era of 'the Anthropocene,' in which human activity decisively impacts the Earth's ecosystems and atmosphere. As expressed by Gibson, Bird Rose, and Fincher (2015), in the Manifesto for the Anthropocene state: humanity's actions have become a new planetary force with accelerating effects on the biosphere. This new era, known as the Anthropocene, calls for new ways of thinking and knowing, and for innovative forms of action. Their manifesto is a call to explore multiple pathways toward alternative futures, 'harnessing the creativity of human potential to reduce harm and promote a flourishing biosphere' (p. i).

The Manifesto is part of an expanding literature by ecological economists, degrowth scholars, political ecologists and critical development scholars whose work points to extractivism, lack of sustainability and the limits of resource use (Dengler and Lang 2021; Kallis et al. 2020; Kothari et al. 2019). What is interesting for new economic thinking is how care and the ethics of care are part of this increasingly loud and urgent call for new ways of knowing. This is where FPE, and specifically the concept of Earthcare, is

contributing to the discussion. As Barca (2020) poetically suggests, Earthcare is about the everyday politics of securing the conditions for the regeneration and flourishment of our own and future generations. The source of Barca's theorising on Earthcare is her observations of the Praialta Piranheira, an agroforestry settlement in the Brazilian Amazon. She looks at how local people survive by continuing to care for the Earth and each other, even in the midst of their struggles against the attacks on their land and culture by Bolsonaro's government. She argues that they continue to thrive in their territory because of the relevance and value they afford to care work, not only in the home but also for the land and non-human environment (Barca et al. 2023). If we are to deal with climate crisis, Barca suggests that we can learn from the attention given to Earthcare labour — care for the soil, water, non-human animals and plants — and from the Latin American experience of land/body/territory being fundamental to social reproduction, which includes relations with the environment. Lang (2021), a researcher working in Ecuador, adds to this analysis of Earthcare in her study of the Kichwa ethic of *sumak kawsay* of Cayambe county, Ecuador.[3] The first indigenous kayambi mayor of Cayambe has revived the *sumak kawsay* practices of assembly-based decision-making, collective labour and collective land titles and indigenous gender relations. She describes how community care includes care for the local ecosystems, especially soil fertility and water sources. Putting into practice *kichwa* care ethics has strengthened collaboration and reciprocity between humans and nature, created more resilient ecosystems and transformed interpersonal relations in Cayambe, which has led to greater intergenerational, intercultural and interepistemic justice (p. 1296).

The question remaining is how to learn from these contextually specific examples of Earthcare and amplify such visions in a new economy based on community care for others and nature. Recalling Tronto's different types of care mentioned above, Earthcare is 'caring with' others. It requires communities to put into practice an ethics of care. A new economic thinking needs to reclaim care as solidarity and as a collective practice that can also value care for neglected and damaged ecologies (Arora et al. 2020, p. 248).

As we acknowledge and learn from inspiring Earthcare practices in rural and indigenous Latin America, we can also see practices of care and solidarity in the Global North. Convivial caring relations among people and their environments can be found in urban municipalities and rural areas. This micropolitics of care happens in established neighbourhoods and communities, as well as in marginal out of the way places such as abandoned buildings, factories, parks and farms, which form the ruins of the neoliberal restructuring of both cities and rural areas (Tsing 2015). Environmental activists occupy and reclaim these spaces, cleaning, repairing and making them inhabitable and productive spaces.

For example, Zechner's *Commoning Care & Collective Power* (2021) describes childcare commons in Barcelona as another example of micropolitics of care; the network of mothers and commons nurseries illustrating how feminist commons of care can function in modern cities. A personal example is the squatting movement in Amsterdam (with which my daughter and G.C. Harcourt's granddaughter has been actively involved

[3] *Sumak kawsay* is one meaning of *buen vivir* (good life) in the Latin America and Caribbean region (LAC). The understanding of *buen vivir* — also *küme mogñen* (Mapudungun), *sumak kawsay* (Quechua) and *suma qamaña* (Aymara) — stems from the indigenous cosmologies of the original peoples of southern Latin America, intertwined with ways of being among indigenous movements of the Southern Cone (Cabnal 2010, p. 123).

since 2019),[4] which reclaims abandoned factories and rebuilds them with discarded materials found on the street. Members make living spaces that are open to the neighbourhood for political discussion groups, art workshops and communal kitchens. During the pandemic these reclaimed spaces were havens for undocumented migrants and refugees. Other examples of community care in urban spaces can be seen in recycling and repair shops, local flea markets, community kitchens distributing locally grown produce and outdated food from supermarkets, the selling of artisanal products and the provision of community fitness classes in parks. These caring community practices are what make communities thrive; they build on the time given, skills and a shared vision of wellbeing.

The Global North-based community economies research network (CERN), inspired by the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008, 2011), examines already-existing community economies based on values of care as communities seek sustainable ways of living. CERN actively supports communities constructing their economies and ecologies with a strong ethics of care in research processes that value local economy practices such as gleaning, food banks, recycling and clothes swaps (Burke and Shear 2014).

Strategies for Collective Care

As these examples suggest, collective caring is a complex practice that involves intentional engagement with other bodies and worlds in ongoing relationships. It is visceral, material and emotional, linking selves, communities, natural and social worlds. Learning from feminist theory and practice, collective care is based on understanding connections that recognise the work of social reproduction and the intersectionality of gender, race, class, ablebodiedness, and age. It is about collective survival within a world where many lives are more precarious than others. It is about solidarity and collaboration, where caring is an ethically and politically charged practice (Banks 2020; Dengler and Lang 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Zechner 2021).

Following on from my discussion above, I propose that feminist thinking and action concerning relations of care are important if we are to transition to an economically and socially just society. By placing care at the centre of economics, society and our relations with the environment, we can move towards positive ways to achieve planetary survival. I am aware that speaking about collective care can seem impossibly utopian, just as the opposite — dark messages of crisis and doom — can paralyse. This is why the sharing of small stories of possibility is important. Stories can produce tangible evidence of where care matters, of how relations of care can and will change and the importance of valuing care as an ethical and political practice.

Banks (2020), in her study on racialised women's unpaid collective work, theorises the community as a site of production and argues that black women's collective activism 'challenges racial, ethnic, national, caste, and class-based injustices' (p. 357). She traces the history of collective care provided by black women in the US, as well as other racialised groups such as First Nations and Mexican American women (pp. 350–351). She shows how black and other racialised women's collective unpaid care work to improve the wellbeing of community members addresses health services, day care, housing,

[4]For more on the squatting movement in Amsterdam, see: https://mokumkraakt.nl/.

recreation and education, and is vital to community wellbeing and survival (p. 348). Making women's collective unpaid care work visible

> enables us to theorize women's oppression and exploitation in a manner that is inclusive of the lives of racialized women. It allows us to more fully and carefully theorize social relations within and across the different sites of production or sectors of the economy and to have a better sense of the amount and type of work that people actually perform. (p. 357)

First Nation scholars have also pointed to the importance of collective care work in healing the historical and present violence experienced by indigenous communities as a result of erasure of culture (Moreton-Robinson 2009).

As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) observed, focusing on care requires us to change our views on virtually everything: ontology, epistemology, ethics and politics. On one level, care is a deeply gendered and time-consuming activity performed to support the bodily, emotional, and relational integrity of human (and more-than-human) beings. In a more profound sense, care is an ethical and political concept that recognises that care is everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world, even if it is merely cleaning up the rubbish in one's street or planting an urban garden in a vacated lot. In this deeper vision of care, to value care is to recognise our mutual interdependency and our need for sustainable and flourishing relations — not merely survivalist or instrumentalist relations. This echoes Tronto's (1993) view of care as a 'species activity'; in other words, an essential part of human and more-than-human life. These are beautiful visions that inspire us to think of care with others within our own context and life journey and to consider how to relate to others.

One example at the level of public policy is the 'Green New Deal for Europe' (2019), proposed by a coalition of European scholars and activists, some elements of which are being taken up by the Dutch and UK governments and the Green Party at the European Parliament. The Green New Deal proposes the establishment of a care income (CI) to compensate those who perform unwaged care work. *A Blueprint for Europe's Just Transition* (2019) proposes the creation of publicly-funded jobs in the fields of environmental restoration and social reproduction and funded income for unwaged carers in recognition of their key contribution to social and ecological wellbeing. In this way, care work done in homes, communities and/or urban farms is valued in the same way as other waged 'productive' public work. The pandemic reinforced public interest in and support for CI. In 2021, the Global Women's Strike (GWS) and the Women of Colour in the Global Women's Strike movements joined in an online campaign with the Green New Deal for Europe to support the work of all those, of every gender, who care for people, for the urban and rural environment, and for the natural world.[5] In this coalition, ecological and feminist concerns come together as part of a new economic thinking, which is building broad-based support in efforts to green Europe.

While I have been directly engaged in debates on the Green New Deal in Europe, many of my sources for new economic practice based on an ethics of care are provided by my students. Like my father, I treasure the opportunity to learn from students. At the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS), I have the opportunity to work with people who come mostly from the Global South and apply

[5]For more on the activities of the Global Women's Strike campaign, see: https://globalwomenstrike.net/careincomenow/.

what they have learnt when they return home. I would like to share a couple of examples. Argentinian, Lucia Cirmi Obon, after writing her MA thesis on parental leave and care penalties in 2017, joined the government to support reform of the care system in Argentina. In her thesis, she applied the work of Folbre (1994, 2001, 2017) looking at the link between gendered social norms, parental leave policy, the care burden and gender inequality. Cirmi Obon became National Director of Care Policies in the newly created Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity, wherein she could contribute to major changes in the Argentinian care system. Fraga and Rodríguez Enríquez (2022) describe how feminist thinking entered the public space in Argentina through a feminist and participatory approach that includes recognition of the existence of the community dimension of care. The new features of the care system include an Interministerial Board on Care, a Federal Map of Care, A Bill for a Comprehensive Care System with a Gender Perspective, and a Caring with Equality national campaign. The unique Argentinian care system has put into practice a feminist ethics of care involving a participatory construction of care policies and the strengthening of the community dimension of care (p. 5). It is exciting to see how feminist theory on care can be applied at the broad policy level.[6]

Another ISS MA student, Amparo Bravo Arias (2022), wrote her thesis on contested care politics evident during the Chilean referendum on changing the constitution, in which care was one of the major reforms proposed. Bravo Arias is both engaged in and researching how feminist networks are trying to change institutional processes to establish a new care system in Chile (inspired by the Argentinian and Uruguayan successes). She is examining the dynamics of feminist participation in the constituent process, with the opening provided by Gabriel Boric when he came to power in March 2020. A Comprehensive National System of Care is one of the Chilean government's proposed central policies and, as in Uruguay and Argentina, it has been shaped by the caregivers, feminist and women's organisations, some members of which are now in the new government. Domestic workers' unions and caregivers' organisations have taken up political positions in the government, creating possibilities for the Chilean state to assume responsibility for the social organisation of care. Bravo Arias analyses how fourteen organisations formed a coalition to push for 'care as the axis for the new constitution'. Despite the failure to establish a new constitution, on 4 September 2022, what Bravo Arias shows is the increasing visibility of feminist and other communities' visions of care and how they are negotiating to bring them into state policy. She documents the lively debate on social reproduction in Chilean public policy analysis based on the ethics of care presented by feminist networks emphasising the importance of community relations for care to sustaining livelihoods. What will be interesting now is how they follow up in the aftermath of the events of 4 September 2022.

A final example of learning from students comes from an EU-funded collaborative project on Well-being, Ecology, Gender and cOmmunities (WEGO-ITN),[7] which I coordinated from 2018 to 2021[8] — unfortunately during the two and a half years of the

[6]I was poised to visit Argentina in March 2020. However, the day before I was leaving for Buenos Aires, Covid-19 restrictions hit and I was not able to enter the country. I was forced to fly back to Europe before the lockdown. I have been following the reforms via personal correspondence.

[7]WEGO-ITN was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 764908-WEGO, 2018–2021.

[8]For more on the project, see: https://www.wegoitn.org.

Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a deep impact on our research on resilience in communities and everyday practices of social difference, environmental change and political economies. Many of the local communities were among the most vulnerable to the pandemic, enduring loss of livelihoods as well as health risks. And our own community of learning (fifteen PhD students and their supervisors and mentors) struggled to find ways to cope as we radically changed research plans and shifted locations and focus. The experience raised diverse questions around care in feminist and environmental justice research and politics. When Covid-19 hit we had to articulate, virtually, a collectively defined ethics of care, including putting in place an ombudsperson process and slowing down to listen to the experiences of loss and the changes in our research and also in our everyday lives. As we renegotiated how to be with different communities, including our own network, we found ourselves paying particular attention to affective care as the emotional and the embodied impacts of the pandemic seeped into our scholar-activist encounters and changing dynamics of socio-natural relations (Harcourt et al. 2023).

Conclusion

In answering the question set out at the beginning of this article, 'What do feminist perspectives bring to economic thinking and practice around the deepening care crisis, the exploitation of nature and the strategies of collective care?', I have reviewed a range of feminist theories and practices that call for paying greater attention to the ethics and practice of care as a way to build an economy based on social justice, environmental sustainability and collective well-being. While an ongoing debate, even conflict, concerns care systems and, in both the Global South and North, who pays for the costs of care provision (a debate that Folbre continues to see as crucial[9]), my article shows that not only must the matter of cost be addressed but we must also change our awareness of the need to resolve the crisis of social reproduction. We need to be caring about caring. The quality of care depends on the conditions of those who are performing it, recognition of the time that is dedicated to it and the labour that it implies, and recognition and inclusion of unpaid caregivers in our understanding of economic thinking and practice. As I have shown, 'caring about caring' has been evident in the micro-politics of collective care in Europe and in societal campaigns and public policies in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.

Care provision should be recognised as a basic human right — everyone benefits from care, and well-coordinated organised care provision will help prevent disasters, as we learnt during the pandemic; indeed, as Folbre argues, 'care provision offers not only social but also economic benefits to all' (2014, p. 29).

At the heart of the proposals mentioned in this article, is the importance of understanding care in terms of building relational processes at the community and policy levels. While some might see this as utopian, I would argue that these are deeply realistic propositions for survival of human and other life on this planet. 'Thinking with care' is

[9]See, for example, her blog, 'Care Talk — feminism and political economy', at https://blogs.umass.edu/folbre/, particularly the entries for 26 July and 18 August 2022. See also Folbre (2020) which underlines the need to pay attention to the cost of care.

vitally important for our collective resilience and ability to find ways to live sustainably, particularly given that the disruption caused by the pandemic, political instability and climate change is set to continue (Harcourt 2022; Puig de la Bellacasa 2012).

Finally, caring relations were at the centre of my father's academic, political and personal beliefs. I hope that this article builds on his legacy, adding a contemporary feminist and environmentalist perspective to his life-long striving for economic and social justice done with love, care and humility.

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