Kathleen Lynch, *Care and Capitalism: Why Affective Equality Matters for Social Justice*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021. ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-43847

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The critique of capitalism is a mainstay of sociology from its foundations to the present: Kathleen Lynch’s work adds to this immense literature by focusing on care. This is a vital move, as it articulates a clear positive value, not just an abstract ideal, but a concrete practice which sustains society – care makes meaningful human life possible.

For Lynch, care is central to society, even part of human nature, and drawing on feminist scholarship from Hochschild to hooks she outlines how caring relationships sustain individuals, families, neighbourhoods, communities and even global interconnections. Perhaps the central chapter of the book is on care as ‘love-labour’, not restricted to intimate romantic relations or even family, but all kinds of attentive support. Crucially, Lynch claims that care is both inalienable and non-substitutable, two conditions which resist the expropriative and exchange mechanisms of capitalism. While labour can be managed and manufactured – even in care-giving settings from creches to nursing homes – care itself is integrally about personal relationships. Furthermore, while labour – and all other things – are substitutable in capital, caring relations cannot easily be marketed, up-scaled, maximised or financialised.

Yet, although care persists despite all the predations of capitalism, it can be eroded – Lynch’s vision of care is no Pollyanna, rather closer to Polanyi. Capitalism has a parasitic relationship to care, relying on its unique capacity and sustaining power to reproduce the labour force, to foster social trust, run the welfare state and even to support market relationships. Furthermore, capitalism slowly erodes care relationships, in a myriad of ways, from colonising the time which people can dedicate to caring for each other to undermining solidarity and care within workplaces.

Having moved through several chapters on topics such as capitalism, neo-liberalism, hyper-masculinity and colonialist legacies, Lynch dedicates two chapters to violence – from environmental degradation and inhumane treatment of animals to structural violence of inequality up to warfare. Initially this seemed a departure from the main theme of the book, but Lynch interweaves her diagnosis of the lack of care in capitalism
with the callous dehumanisation of violence – even in its subtle forms of marginalisation or administrative cruelty. Thus, the category of care reconfigures the debate – rather than simply another critique of capitalism for its injustice and inequality, a wider landscape appears. While justice and equality are clearly important and feature strongly in Lynch’s analysis as they do elsewhere, these can tend to be somewhat abstract demands, almost negative figures – if injustice and inequality were tackled, what would justice and equality actually look like? For Lynch, it would be a society animated by caring relationships.

This book covers a vast terrain and different readers will find their own interests and concerns within it. For instance, I particularly enjoyed the chapter on meritocracy which focuses on how the proliferation of publicly visible rankings and incessant performance evaluations serve to create a world of winners and losers in constant competition. Threaded through the book is a concern for how capitalism legitimates inequality, through religious hangovers of personalised salvation through work and the moral condemnation of the poor, which offers a cultural interpretation of the peculiar allure of capitalism.

Occasionally, this breadth feels somewhat breathless; areas which could be explored at much greater length are dealt with in a sub-section. Ironically, there is a great deal more analysis reserved for capitalism and its problems than elaborations of the theme of care. When the pace slows down, for instance in the chapter on Care Relations, the thesis shines through, as readers get a sense of the power and vulnerability of care. Elsewhere, the book rushes through well-rehearsed critiques of capitalism, eye-opening but perhaps leaving the reader wanting more.

Over time this book and Lynch’s wider project around care should have an impact. An immediate challenge which the book highlights from its outset to its conclusion is how academics deal with care. Too often, caring social relations are relegated to the periphery of scholarship, considered uninteresting and unimportant beside the supposedly more serious matters of public life, politics and the economy. Lynch challenges her academic readers to acknowledge and address this imbalance and realise the potential of feminist thinking, from their empirical research to their theorising to their teaching.

Furthermore, this is a hopeful book, which maintains that people are not naturally self-interested and competitive as expressed in the model of homo economicus. Rather, they can be kind, nurturing, generous and empathetic, in a model of homo curans – or even homini curanis, a caring humanity. What matters decisively is which model is cultivated in our society, from homes to political discourse through to education. This is immediately relevant for most academics. We can teach our students to be selfish, career-focused entrepreneurs of the self, or encourage them towards solidarity and co-operation. Similarly, emerging from years of lock-down and restrictions, academics can plough their own furrow and burnish their CVs, or they can engage in projects together to pursue the common good. In the short term, perhaps selfish strategies win, but eventually they lead to isolation and exhaustion in endless competition. Instead, the better path is care.

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