

## Lynne Segal: The Politics of Care

Monday 08 March 2021

### Q&A

Q: The range and depth of material in this presentation is amazing Lynne. Do you have any comments ways of addressing the assumption that unpaid family carers will just carry on, compromising their own health and wellbeing because they have no choice but to care?

A: I think they will just carry on. All the evidence suggests that they/we will, even in cases where lack of respite relief and other resources causes significant levels of depression, especially among poorer carers. We know that carers are most likely to be women until very old age, when there are actually more men than women who become full-time home carers, because of slightly higher rates of cognitive decline in women. It is certainly the case that most people will end up shouldering the majority of care for those who depend on them today, whoever they are, which is why building up our social infrastructures of support are so crucial

Q: How do we raise/represent the voice of the marginalised but ever increasing BME workforce providing care?

A: This is a crucial issue, and those working on care in whatever capacity – researchers, council workers and unions – do raise it, increasingly, today. It was so obvious throughout the pandemic, that it was the BME workforce so predominantly in the front line as carers. But the struggle to do something about the often-appalling conditions BME workers face is obviously a question of tackling racism overall, in all its horrifying multiplicity, everywhere. I don't think it's lack of knowledge. It's that we still have a mountain to climb in beating back racism, at all levels, beginning with the State's and media's appalling xenophobia, and lack of concern, indeed more common desire to ignore *if not* find ways to *blame* or *abuse* all those who are least powerful for our everyday miseries. A mountain to climb, but some are trying. It's crucial we support those

who are, such as prominent new voices today, including the United Voices of the World (UVW), which is a non-hierarchical grassroots trade union established in 2014, now apparently with 3,000 members, formed to represent mainly migrant low-wage outsourced industries, who are mainly BME workers, fighting for such elementary conditions as a living wage and holiday pay.

Q: No more billionaires?

A: Indeed, but of course we are seeing the opposite, inequality only worsen, as it has been for decades, but especially over the past 10 years of austerity. The rich apparently made another 27% over the last year of the pandemic. *Disaster Capitalism* writ large. Sadly, there are not yet any signs of turning this around. *We had a chance in 2019*, but instead people voted for more of the same, *only worse*. Tragic, as I see it! The only slight comfort is I am not alone in seeing this, however distant we now seem from the levers of power, and disappointing to me the current labour leadership. The only tiny consolation was Trump being defeated, but then one sees his support in the USA remains high. At present, we can only dream, and shout when we can.

Q: So many of your ideas were embodied by the leader of the labour party until recently. Where do we go now to find hope in future governments? How do we change agendas when the market-driven right is still leading the polls after all they have done?

A: That's funny, it's what I just said answering the previous question before I saw this one. I agree it can be hard not to despair at so many people failing to recognise their own basic interests, in believing there is simply no alternative to the inequality and miseries we live with, where literally one in four are likely to be suffering from depression at any time. One problem is clearly the *role of the media* in always framing the agenda to suit the rich and powerful, and the grip of markets-driven ideologies – loosely called neoliberalism – still so prevalent everywhere. We know it's meant the invasion of the commercial sector into every area of life, which is STILL happening apace today – as in health care right now.

We can only keep ourselves as informed as possible, help support or form our own alternative media and keep ourselves informed, for example by reading, say, Allyson Pollock of healthcare, along with the knowledge produced by any progressive NGOs, such as New Economic Foundation (arguing for universal basic care, shorter paid working hours etc), Women's Budget Group, Leap Manifesto, various unions, such as Unison, which has a care Agenda, and any number of other human rights and justice groups who are always providing us with useful information and policies we should be arguing for.

It's interesting to see the work of the [Good Law Project](#), a group of radical lawyers trying to use the law to attack some of the worst abuses of government. But how to push the current Labour Party back to the Left, that is for me also a crucial project, along with supporting all progressive

movement politics on the outside. Yes, more than one mountain to climb, so as I see it, we must cleave always to those who join us on the journey, despite what might be the small, or even significant, differences between us.

Q: Thank you very much Lynne. I'm just wondering how we can foster these principles of care in higher education and specifically in a Business School context? I'm just aware that many institutions would describe themselves as 'caring' as if care is merely a brand. How do we hold power to account in terms of their responsibilities of care without them hijacking the 'care' narratives to further their own ends?

A: Yes, you are right there is so much 'care-washing' as we call it, from firms abusing the very name of "care", such as Amazon and Primark, pretending to be caring – there commodities all delivered "with care", while known to be notoriously uncaring of their workforce. It makes me shiver, genuinely turning around the very meaning of care. But while cognisant of this, it still remains a crucial question, how can we genuinely be more caring? Fortunately, more people are asking this today, especially after this terrible year of loss and anxiety.

One place we have to begin is by trying to beat back that relentless market metrics, by which we are all currently still encouraged to judge ourselves. It means looking around to see who we can work with in more collectively and supportively ways, as we did in forming our Care Collective, though I'm aware how pressed for time so many of us are. Others are doing this working in the media and cultural industries, genuinely trying to do outreach work which is empowering to their local communities.

I think the point is that for many more people 'care' really has become one of the main topics of the moment – post Covid, as it needs to be, given the neglect and carelessness that has been building in the UK for decades. It means that there are a few more attempts at developing more inclusive and sustainable economies at municipal levels, as I mentioned in my talk. And some of this involves outreach cultural work, trying to empower people in diverse ways, through theatre, crafts and other recreations activities, as were developed in project such as Creative Dundee, using different avenues for engaging residents in creative work, reaching out to poorer residents through theatre and other activities. I also heard of this involving a craft project in Birmingham, involving of migrant Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Then there were attempts to sustain other creative, caring hubs, as ongoing in Stirling. None of this easy, given the continued and continuing slashing of council budgets, but there is much food for thought here.

Q: How can we hold power to account in terms of care responsibilities and how we can challenge attempts by power to re-brand and hijack notions of care to serve their own ends?

A: Well, I mentioned the Good Law Project, above. But really, we all just have to keep trying, in all the ways so many others are suggesting engaging with ideas for a better present, and future. There is obviously all those involved in environmental politics, as well as all other justice and equality movements. The point is, as Joan Tronto says, we need to see that we cannot have a genuine democracy without adequate care for all, one which enables, even encourages, everybody's participation in society. This means not just having enough food to eat (an end to food banks!), or good housing (the significance of renters struggles right now; the need for more public housing), and so on, which are the basic requirements. But we need everyone to feel empowered to have a voice, which they can use to try and engage with the world – even knowing they may not always be progressive voices. This was also what Hannah Arendt emphasized as essential to the human condition. Let's keep reading, and talking, about what a caring, sustainable world would look like. We can but try if we are to have any liveable future.

Q: Neo-liberal policies have created a very individualistic mentality - I wonder how we gain the courage to come together to work toward change, despite the risks? What can we learn from the past in this regard? How can we organise our unions, for example, to support us?

A: Well, being the last question, I have said much on this already. But you are right that there is so much to learn from the past. In my book [\*Radical Happiness\*](#), I said much about this in two chapters on utopian thinking. But by utopian thinking I mean not some future perfect, but how people have tried to live in the present, not just dreaming but working to create more caring and equal societies. Over a century ago, for instance, William Morris was engaged in what has been referred to as projects to “educate desire”, to want to create better worlds.

Sheila Rowbotham writes endlessly about this, not just in covering the practices and achievements of second wave feminism (all so important in its early years in transforming so much we now take for granted), but a century before, in her book [\*Dreamers of a New Day\*](#), discussing Charlotte Perkins Gilman and a swathe of other first wave feminists. As I mentioned in my talk, we have much to learn from gay politics, and the ACT-UP movement, during the main crisis years of HIV-AIDS, which Matt Cook and others have addressed. Then there is the work of Kate Soper, as in her recent [\*Alternative Prosperity\*](#), which assures us that, even at this eleventh hour, we can do better. She argues that not only can those in richer countries build a more egalitarian and sustainable future by shifting our consumer patterns to embrace the expanding green renaissance but, she suggests, with many examples, we will all find greater meaning, well-being, and enjoyment in the process.

Keep reading, talking, acting, and thereby at least we help to keep hope alive. As I quoted Heaney saying, *"If you have the words, there's always a chance that you'll find the way"*, anyway it's always worth trying.