

# **Covid-19 and Care: the Limits of the ‘Market Society’ and the ‘Machine Age’ as a Turning Point towards New Care Responsibilities?**

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## **Abstract:**

Modernity and capitalism have given rise to careless instead of caring societies. Sustaining livelihood as a purpose in its own right is neither part of the modern idea of man and progress nor part of the capitalist economy. Care and care work are subordinated to economic objectives and, in the ‘machine age’, compete with the belief in scientific and technological control of the contingency of life. The first part of the lecture examines these contradictions between modernity, capitalism and care. The second part applies Karl Polanyi’s concept of ‘fictitious commodities’ and the ‘machine age’ to better understand the Covid-19 pandemic and how it affects the contemporary organisation of care and care work. In the third section, the lecture explores the extent to which the pandemic opens a window of opportunity and constitutes a turning-point to reorganise care.

## **Lecture:**

Care and care work are among those activities that have become particularly visible over the course of the past year, and have been described as ‘essential’ in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and for maintaining everyday life.

In Austria, care was labelled ‘essential work’ (literally, in German: ‘relevant for the system’) by both politics and the media, and those who performed (and continue to perform) care work in hospitals, care homes or private households—while being exposed to a high risk of infection and having to cope with the difficulty of social distancing when providing care—received a great deal of unprecedented attention in the form of public applause, TV interviews or bonuses.

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Was this attention that was paid to care and care work just a one-off that will be forgotten as quickly as it arrived? Or is it a sign that the economic liberalisation, which has taken place over the past decades and led us deeper and deeper into a Polanyian 'market society' (Polanyi 2001), and the modern notion of progress, which translates into the 'machine age' (Polanyi 2018) in the industrial context, have reached their limits when it comes to preserving human life? To what extent does the current situation represent an historical window of opportunity for rethinking society's responsibility to provide care? These are the questions that I shall address in my presentation.

To start off, I will outline my understanding of care and care work as well as the extent to which they manifest tensions with modernity and are subordinated to the capitalist economy (1). Next, I address the question of how the pandemic affects the field of care and care work in two ways: on the one hand, the pandemic is the result of capitalism's structural carelessness, which has become particularly pronounced under liberal economic conditions; this is accompanied by the primarily scientific and technological fight against the pandemic. On the other hand, it has occurred (and is occurring) in the context of a social organisation of care in which the requirements of the 'market society' and the 'machine age' have been ingrained and has increasingly been pushing the various care sectors to the limit of operability (2). Finally, I discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic may open a window of opportunity and constitute a turning point in society's responsibility to provide and organise care (3).

## **1 Fundamental Tensions between Care, Modernity and Capitalism**

The terms care and care work comprise relationships, activities and forms of work through which the contingency of life is dealt with (Aulenbacher/Dammayr 2014; Klinger 2013). The chance that we may need support, or face illness or infirmity during our lifetime, and the perpetually contingent vulnerability, as evidenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, testify to the unpredictability and uncertainty of life over its long course from birth to death. Human beings are needy and require care; this refers to self-care—i.e. mindful care for oneself—and care for others. Both these forms of care are a prerequisite for life and survival—not only in exceptional situations but in everyday life. In this sense, self-care and care may be regarded as indispensable preconditions of human life; humans, as social beings, are always reliant and dependent on one another—albeit to varying degrees at different stages in life. Hence, we may grasp care as an activity that is specific to us all as a species—much like Karl Polanyi regards labor as a human activity (2001, p. 75) or as Joan Tronto (2017) encapsulates in the term 'homines curans'. Self-care and care pertain to relations with the self, between humans and between the human and the non-human natural world, as well as to the

ways in which these relationships are shaped in the context of the activities and labour referred to as care work.

If we assume an empathetic understanding of care or utopian notions of its sustainable organisation, provision and performance based on the principle of solidarity, then care and care work comprise relationships, activities and forms of work which, from a social-ecological perspective, ideally serve the preservation of life for its own sake (Klinger 2013). At the same time, care relationships require particular prudence and caution if they are to serve and sustain life, as their specific nature represents a challenge for the considerate treatment of humans and the natural world.

Part of this specificity is that care relationships are commonly asymmetrical (Tronto 2013). In terms of social exchange and compared to what is regarded as fair social exchange in other domains, care relationships do not necessarily entail the exchange of equivalents, they include reciprocity only to a limited extent and consist of essentially irreversible positions of care recipients and caregivers, respectively (on the principles of exchange, see Becker-Schmidt 1987). Rather, there is a web of mutual dependence between those in need of care and those providing it, such as children and parents, patients and nurses. Neither autonomy nor equality—two of modernity's great promises—are naturally given in care relationships. These dependencies and asymmetries inherent in the exchange in care relationships simultaneously make care and care work prone to power issues: such dependencies are not necessarily handled thoughtfully, nor are they always managed in a way that allows for autonomy and equality. They may just as well lead to paternalistic, parochial or even violent treatment, to name but three exemplary patterns pointed out by Joan Tronto (2013). In this sense, organising care and care work in a way that serves and sustains life—in terms of being mindful about one's own care needs, those of others and those of the non-human natural world—represents a very unique kind of challenge.

And in fact, under the current social conditions organising care in such a way may well be unfeasible in the first place. A number of tensions can be identified between modernity, capitalism and care (Aulenbacher/Dammayr 2014; Aulenbacher 2020), only some of which I shall address in the following with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The notion of need and dependence in particular, as a basic feature of human existence and in the relationship between the human and non-human natural world, contradicts the modern understanding of progress and concept of humanity which is perpetuated in industrialism and capitalism in accordance with their inherent material production and economic order. Although this notion of progress and concept of humanity also pertain to coping with the contingency of life, they do so primarily in the sense of containment and control of this contingency through scientific and

technological means and reliance on the human capacity for self-care, with humans being conceived as autonomous subjects and individuals. In the words of Karl Polanyi's critique of civilisation: modernity, industrial society and capitalism aim less at 'habitation' so much as at 'improvement' (Polanyi 2001, p. 35) in accordance with economic imperatives.

Karl Polanyi's economic, social and cultural history of industrial civilisation (2001)—the emergence of the 'market society' and 'machine age'—helps us see modernity and capitalism as the very epoch in which the economy has taken on a life of its own entirely independent of society. Historically speaking, these divisions between economy and society—in all their various manifestations: between social production and social-ecological reproduction, between the economic and the political sphere, etc.—are constitutive of the modern industrial and capitalist social formation, that is, if they allow for the relative autonomy of the distinct sectors to begin with (Aulenbacher/Dammayr 2014; Becker-Schmidt 1998; Klinger 2013, 2014; Fraser 2018). They emerged alongside the modern dichotomies—nature/culture, mind/body, rationality/emotionality, public/private, man/woman and so forth—and have been inscribed into social and economic life.

Within this dichotomous value and world order, the need for care and the contingency of life are located on the side of nature, body, emotionality, the private sphere, woman, whereas the control over life's contingencies and the capacity for self-care are associated with culture, mind, rationality, the public sphere, man (Aulenbacher/Dammayr 2014; Klinger 2013). In this configuration, the care for life and its contingencies is secondary to the control thereof, not least in combination with scientific-technological progress through which modernity rids itself of tradition (deemed to be pre-modern) (Weber 1992). At the same time, this provides the foundation on which the structurally careless industrial-capitalist economy was able to emerge.

Proceeding from Marx, who places the capitalist social formation centre stage, I understand structural carelessness as a mode of production driven by accumulation and—simultaneously proceeding from Polanyi, whose focus is on the triumph of economic liberalism—a market-driven economy which is indifferent to its social and ecological conditions of existence to the point of accepting their destruction. This implies three ways of dealing with the need for social-ecological self-care and care: firstly, the common view among economic actors is to disregard such needs as long as they can be met in another functionally adequate way (*abstraction*). Secondly, all other forms of self-care and care are functionalised in pursuit of economic interests (*functionalisation*). Thirdly, care, care work and the provision of care are valorised, i.e.

they themselves become the object of profitable economic activities and are subjected to the requirements of the market (*valorisation*) (Aulenbacher 2020).

As I intend to show in the following with reference to Karl Polanyi, the relation between the Covid-19 pandemic and care and care work can be examined and understood in terms of all three aspects.

## **2 The Covid-19 Pandemic as the Result of Capitalism's Carelessness, and the Challenges for Care and Care Work**

Karl Polanyi's work is guided by the question of how human kind can survive industrial civilisation. The topicality of this question becomes clear when we consider the causes and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Polanyi's concept of 'fictitious commodities' and his reflections on the 'machine age' (Polanyi 2001, 2018) are particularly instructive in this context. To Polanyi, the industrial age, on the one hand, marks the epoch in which the 'liberal creed' in combination with the notion of the 'self-regulating market' has for the first time been implemented as the economic principle that supposedly corresponds most adequately to the human character, or rather to the needs of the utility-maximising 'homo economicus' (Polanyi 2001, pp. 141ff.)—as humans are commonly imagined in (neo-)liberal thought. Polanyi argues that in the market society, with its primacy of a market economy over all other economic principles, even those production factors become commodities which were never produced or intended as objects of trade in the first place—above all: labour, land (nature), and money. They become 'fictitious commodities' that are destroyed when markets are permitted to trade them entirely based on the mechanisms of supply and demand and regulated 'according to the signals of prices, costs and profits' (Deutschmann 2019, p. 22). This leads to the 'demolition of society' (Polanyi 2001, p. 76)—at least if this 'movement' of a market-fundamentalist commodification of labour, nature and money is not matched by an antagonist 'countermovement': 'Undoubtedly, labor, land, and money markets are essential to a market economy. But no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions even for the shortest stretch of time unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill.' (Polanyi 2001, pp. 75f.)

On the other hand, according to Polanyi, the assertion of the 'self-regulating market' as the dominant regulatory force of the economic order and subsequently as the pacemaker of society as a whole was accompanied by the pursuit of a scientific-technological development path that also harbours destructive potential: 'The fundamental fact is, then, that the machine created a new civilization. If plough agriculture is credited with giving rise to the first civilization, the machine gave rise to

the second, the industrial. It spread over the planet, creating the perspective of the ages to come. Such an event transcends by far the economic field; only time will unfold its powers and perils and spell out its implications for the existence of man. Machine civilization has invested the frail frame of man with the effectiveness of lightning and earthquake; it has moved the centre of his being from the internal to the external; it has added hitherto unknown dimensions of the scope, structure, and frequency of communication; it has changed the feel of our contacts with nature; and, more important than all else, it has created novel interpersonal relations reflecting forces, physical and mental, that still may cause the selfdestruction of the human race.’ (Polanyi 2018, p. 256).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, both moments—the economic liberalisation of past decades and the consequences and promises of scientific-technological development—converge in a specific way with respect to care and care work.

## ***2.1 The Pandemic, its Causes and the Fight Against it***

Regarding the destructive commodification of the ‘fictitious commodities’ of labour, nature and money and the implications of the ‘machine age’, the Covid-19 pandemic can be understood as a disease of civilisation and a civilisational catastrophe. Its origins lie in the careless treatment of the very foundations of social-ecological reproduction, and the fight against it need not necessarily abandon the chosen paths as far as a modern, industrial, capitalist notion of progress is concerned, either. Let us take a closer look at the matter:

In terms of its causes, the emergence and spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus can be understood as a zoonosis—i.e. the transmission of a virus from wild animals via intermediary host animals to humans (Mukerji/Mannino 2020, pp. 26ff.). It is linked to the disregard for social-ecological care requirements and the overexploitation of nature that Karl Polanyi (2001, pp. 76f.) describes in the context of the ‘commodity fiction’, on the basis of which land (nature), labour and money are traded just like commodities. With regard to the natural world, he writes: ‘(...) Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed.’

Hence, economic and technological development has played a major role in diminishing the habitat of wildlife through ecological destruction—the keywords here being deforestation, urbanisation, climate change, and so forth—as a result of a technology-based global economy that is primarily driven by financial markets, and which has thereby facilitated the transmission of the Sars-Cov-2 virus. Moreover,

varying and unequal transmission risks and vulnerabilities are being produced—in part as a result of the way in which the ‘fictitious commodities’ of labour and money are commodified and the unequal opportunities in life this produces for various groups of people (Polanyi 2001, pp. 71ff.); in particular, people living in precarious conditions are unable to sufficiently care for themselves and others. The Covid-19 pandemic is an example of the careless ‘demolition of society’ (Polanyi 2001), resulting from the fact that nature, labour and money have been turned—based on the scientific and technological infrastructure of the industrial age—into a commodity like any other.

At the same time, the fight against the pandemic shows that there is no need to abandon the approach of letting market forces act without restraint and relying on scientific-technological progress to control the contingency of life. Although the pandemic may represent a warning sign in this regard, it need not be understood as a more forceful wake-up call. Indeed, it has shown that the modern industrial, capitalist economic mode and forms of work and life have exceeded the boundaries set by human and non-human nature. Yet this has not automatically led to a broad-based social, economic and political course correction. Except for those viable alternatives proposed by civil society—namely by what could be called Polanyi-type ‘countermovements’ such as Fridays for Future, care disputes, and others—and in opposition to Polanyi’s substantivist understanding of the economy as ‘an instituted process of interaction between man and his environment, which results in a continuous supply of want-satisfying material means’ (Polanyi, 1957, p. 248), the modern idea of being able to control the contingency of life persists. An issue that is paradigmatic of the notion of progress, which Max Weber refers to as ‘conviction’ (2004, p. 12), and the fiction of rationalisation, according to which ‘we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*’ (p. 13, emphasis in the original), is the development of the Covid-19 vaccine.

The strategy of combatting the pandemic mainly by inoculating people—which is certainly important, despite all conspiracy theories in this regard—is linked to government funding of vaccine research and development. At the same time, then, it is linked—entirely in line with the political creation of markets—to the competitive international marketisation of vaccines. Affluent countries are able to pursue testing and inoculation strategies. However, the hope that the vaccine will become a global public good or commons, a freely available product—and thus a response to the pandemic that would limit the fundamentalist free-market approach to the treatment of nature, labour and money—will most likely be disappointed (Randeria 2020). The actual postal address of Biontech-Pfizer in Germany is: ‘An der Goldgrube’ (which literally translates as ‘At the goldmine’). It is difficult to imagine a more apt encapsulation of the development and marketing of Covid vaccines and thus the way

in which self-care and care are being organised economically and politically during the pandemic—namely guided by the precepts of the ‘market society’ and ‘machine age’.

## **2.2 The Pandemic and the Care Sector**

The pandemic is not only paradigmatic of the carelessness that characterises the market-fundamentalist commodification of nature, labour and money in the context of the scientific-technological development over the past decades; it also additionally impacts a care sector—healthcare, childcare, senior care, social care etc.—which has been undergoing far-reaching changes for decades. Over the course of the economic liberalisation that began in the 1970s and was further accelerated during the 1980s and ‘90s, the organisation of care and care work in society has exhibited a tendency towards ‘commodification, marketization, corporatization’ (Farris/Marchetti 2017) instead of or in combination with public and familial responsibilities. This tendency merges the functionalisation and valorisation of care with the efforts to increase efficiency in the care sectors in accordance with market requirements. Moreover, we are witnessing a gradual increase in the scientification and technologisation of care and care work (Aulenbacher 2020). While these tendencies are accompanied by the individualisation of care responsibilities (Tronto 2017), there are also new, collective, even collaborative or community forms of care emerging that fill the gaps left by the state and families (Dyk 2019) or coincide with the marketing of care in the sense of ‘countermovements’ promoting alternative care concepts (Aulenbacher/Décieux/Riegraf 2018).

Although care services in the new care markets are often embedded in welfare-state provisions and (co-)financed, cost, price and profit factors do play an increasing role in the design of the services for a solvent demand in the context of growing national, transnational and international competition—or lead to the reduction of services where such strong demand does not exist. Another important aspect related to the valorisation of care—after more than a decade of the ‘cascading of the crisis’ (Walby 2015, p. 71) from the financial to the real economy and on to the public service—are the supra-national and national austerity policies that have had a major impact on the public care sector. As a result of both these developments, childcare facilities, hospitals and nursing homes have been streamlined in a market-oriented manner to such an extent that they can neither guarantee decent or good care services nor decent or good working conditions—regardless of the new blend of managerialism and professionalism that comes with this market orientation (Klenk/Pavolini 2015).

This valorisation and, simultaneously, destructive commodification of care—which itself has become a ‘fictitious commodity’—and care work can come into conflict with the functionalisation of caring. From a Polanyian perspective, one illustration of this,



for example, is in childcare, which, on the one hand, has shifted from care to education in line with the (neoliberal) orientation towards 'human capital' and the labour market, while, on the other hand, childcare facilities lack sufficient resources to fulfil this task given that the size of groups are too big and the facilities are short of staff (Décieux/Becker/Kutlu 2020). Another example is when brokering agencies for live-in carers promise a wealthy client high-quality care, while this is made utterly impossible by the poor working conditions going along with the commodification of labour on highly competitive international markets in this part of the care sector (Aulenbacher/Leiblfinger 2019; Aulenbacher/Leiblfinger/Prieler 2020; Aulenbacher/Lutz/Schwiter 2021).

Large parts of the care sector were therefore already in deep crisis when the pandemic hit last year. The latter then aggravated the predicament and exposed the sector's problems. Given that the pandemic has resulted in additional care requirements, which is impossible to fulfil with the existing resources, it has driven some of the care sectors to the limits of operability, resulting in a failure to guarantee adequate care for children, senior citizens and the sick. Moreover, the existing care infrastructure is not equipped—in terms of rooms, care units, group sizes—to comply with counter-pandemic measures, such as social distancing, nor is there adequate capacity for medical assistance or sufficient staff to do so. The recognition of care and care work as 'essential' thus occurred against the backdrop of the provision of care services being on the brink of collapse (Lichtenberger/Wöhl 2020).

This raises the question of whether the pandemic is not only a warning sign but could actually be a wake-up call for making a complete break with capitalism's carelessness.

### **3 After the Pandemic: Back to Normal? Care and the Economy**

To conclude, I would like to discuss the question of whether the reference to care and care work as 'essential', which emerged during the pandemic, might be more than mere rhetoric and could in fact help open a window of opportunity to address social-ecological care requirements and rethink society's care responsibilities more generally. We can pursue this question with regard to the social organisation of care, but also in terms of how the latter is determined by the organisation of the economy and vice versa. To do so, I would like to return to Karl Polanyi once more.

In his critical perspective on civilisation, Karl Polanyi considers economic liberalism to be the main problem: 'The congenital weakness of nineteenth-century society was not that it was industrial but that it was a market society. Industrial civilization will continue to exist when the utopian experiment of a self-regulating market will be no more than

a memory.’ (Polanyi 2001, p. 258) Karl Polanyi’s perspective is characterised by the fact that he assumed an imminent abandonment of economic liberalism—owing not least to the experience of fascism and war resulting from the economic liberalisation of the 1920s. Following the consolidation of financial capitalism, even throughout the financial crisis, it is currently an open question as to what extent the pandemic will mark a turning point in present day liberal economic thought. Fierce criticism of economic liberalism as the cause of a series of crises, of which the corona pandemic is only the most recent, has come up against the argument that it represents the solution to the crisis, not only within academic discourse (Feld 2020, Ötsch 2020).

With regard to Karl Polanyi’s vision of a society that could in fact be ‘just and free’ (2001, p. 165), two aspects merit our attention. Firstly, the ‘machine age’ is indeed ineluctable—if for no other reason, because history is irreversible. This entails a need for intervention: ‘(...) this new civilization (...) should be expected to continue over a long period. It has come to stay. It is our fate. We must learn to live with it, if we are to live at all.’ (Polanyi 2018, pp. 255f.). Secondly, whether or not we will be able, in future, to look back at the pandemic as a turning point, will be determined by the extent to which it helps initiate a new configuration of the relation between economy and society. In Polanyi’s vision of a ‘just and free’ society, this is expressed as follows: ‘After a century of blind “improvement” man is restoring his “habitation”. If industrialism is not to extinguish the race, it must be subordinated to the requirements of man’s nature. The true criticism of market society is not that it was based on economics—in a sense, every and any society must be based on it—but that its economy was based on self-interest.’ (Polanyi 2001, p. 257).

Hence, the task at hand is nothing less than to subordinate industrialism—which is historically irreversible, but nonetheless modifiable and thus potentially surmountable—to social and ecological requirements and to put the economy back in its place in society, and the market in its place within the economy. In Polanyi’s view, this ultimately means withdrawing the ‘fictitious commodities’ of labour, land and money from the market, transcending the ‘commodity fiction’ and economically and socially re-embedding the market. ‘Planning’, ‘regulation’ and ‘control’ all represent what Polanyi considers to be adequate tools for achieving this. Against this backdrop, I would like to conclude by proposing three thoughts for discussion.

First: For more than a decade—that is, in the wake of the financial crisis and under conditions of austerity—we have been witnessing care protests and labour conflicts in the care sectors, some of which may well be classified as ‘countermovements’ (Polanyi 2001) criticising the ‘commodification, marketization, corporatization’ (Farris/Marchetti 2017) of care and care work and the impact this is having (Artus et al. 2017; Aulenbacher/Leiblfinger/Prieler 2020; Décieux/Becker/Kutlu 2020; Völker/Amacker

2015). Furthermore, scientific and technological developments are regarded as ambivalent with regard to the demands and requirements of decent or good care and care work (Aulenbacher/Dammayr 2014). Seeing as the pandemic has exacerbated the already tense situation in the care sectors, while their 'essential' significance has become the subject of public debate, we should not rule out the possibility that this could have positive implications for care protests and labour disputes. We may actually see a rise in solidarity with those working in the care professions and care recipients, and the debate about society's responsibility to organise adequate care, which has been ongoing among activists and scholars for some time, may finally extend to society more generally. The appreciation and revaluation of care work and care professions in a way that would do justice to their importance for individual and social life has been a long-standing issue for the women's movement, professional associations, organisations of relatives of care recipients, etc. and is increasingly on the agenda of trade unions, too (Artus et al. 2017; Völker/Amacker 2015). The current visibility and symbolic recognition of care work as 'essential', however, must be considered in light of the fact that the pandemic, for a brief moment in history, has made the preservation of life and health a priority (Dörre 2020). To what extent this really is a window of opportunity for the social appreciation and upgrading of care and care work in the long term and beyond political symbolism remains to be seen.

Two: The pandemic has highlighted problems that are related both to the previously existing care situation in the streamlined care sectors and the disregard for care needs wherever they seem to be of little economic relevance, that is to say, the functionalisation and valorisation of care work in which economic interests come first and the preservation of life is secondary. This is particularly clear if we consider care infrastructures. Childcare facilities, for example, have reduced group sizes during the pandemic—a move that had already been called for under 'normal' conditions but was impossible to implement at the time (Becker/Décieux/Kutlu 2020). Similarly, the individualisation of aging in phases of frailty through self-isolation and the isolation of old persons in nursing homes or their own private homes (Graefe/Haubner/van Dyk 2020), which is the norm in capitalist, achievement- and performance-oriented society, has reached its limits under the conditions of the pandemic. The pandemic has, on the one hand, clearly demonstrated the limitations of existing care infrastructures, while, on the other, it has also illustrated how changes were implemented that, under 'normal' conditions, had been declared impossible due to all kinds of constraints. At the same time, it appears to have contributed substantially to the acceleration of the technologisation—particularly the digitalisation—of the care sector. The question of whether or not the pandemic can open up a window of opportunity to redefine care needs and the satisfaction of those needs through the reorganisation and adjustment of care work in the sense of the Polanyian triad of 'planning, regulation and control', and to do so in a way that needs-based care infrastructures are created as society

assumes responsibility for organising care, remains unanswered. The challenge would be to break with the 'commodification, marketization, corporatization' (Farris/Marchetti 2017) of the care sectors and the drive to streamline them, to withdraw the 'fictitious commodities' of labour and care from the destructive effects of the 'self-regulating market' and take social responsibility for care activities without descending (back) into the historical and still pervasive nostalgic, conservative or authoritarian patterns of individual and collective care responsibility (Karner/Weicht 2015).

Third, and finally: The historical moment in which the various care crises came to a head as a result of the pandemic coincided with large parts of the economy taking a tumble. The corona crisis has morphed into a full-blown economic crisis. Social inequalities, divisions and tendencies of social polarisation are on the rise, the state's authority is expanding and economic subsidies are fiercely contested (Dörre 2020). The future of care is affected by all this in several ways: on the one hand, seeing as subsidies have in part been financed through public debt, the future continuation of austerity policies in the public sectors, and thus in the care sectors, can certainly not be ruled out—at least not in the absence of debt relief measures and if the liberal economic orientation is maintained. On the other hand, the pandemic-induced decline in economic activity and changes in lifestyles have provided new stimuli not only for rethinking care infrastructures, but also for conceptualising the social-ecological transformation of the economy (Brand 2020). Moreover, with a view to economic development, the pandemic set in at a point in time in which alternatives were already being discussed and developed in many different areas, a rather broad topic which goes beyond the scope of this presentation. So, all scepticism concerning the partially anti-democratic tendencies of pandemic-related policies aside, the new-found weight of the state and government politics could have opened up a window of opportunity to impose social-ecological conditions for receiving economic bailout packages. This could have given a boost to the transformation of the economy and care activities in the sense of a shift from 'improvement' to 'habitation' (Polanyi 2001) and thus in line with the proposals advocated by the numerous civil society 'countermovements'. In my view, however, this window of opportunity was, unfortunately, not properly opened to begin with. That does not necessarily mean that we will soon return seamlessly to our pre-pandemic 'normality'. But, ultimately, the changes to and intervention into the relation between economy and society have been far more modest than would have been possible and indeed required with regard to care and care work.

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