

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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1 Fundamental Tensions between Care, Modernity and Capitalism

■ Care as 'essential' work in the pandemic:

- Public recognition: unprecedented attention in the form of public applause, TV interviews or bonuses given to care workers in hospitals, care homes or private households because they continue to care for other despite the risks for their selfcare in terms of health risks as well as poor and exhausting working conditions
- Is this just a one-off that will be forgotten as quickly as it arrived? Or is the pandemic a warning sign or wake-up call that the 'market society' (Polanyi 2001), and the 'machine age' (Polanyi 2018) have reached their limits when it comes to preserving human life? Does it open a window of opportunity for rethinking society's responsibility to provide care?

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1 Fundamental Tensions between Care, Modernity and Capitalism

■ Care and care work:

- Relationships, activities, forms of labor dealing with the contingency (unpredictability, uncertainty, vulnerability) of life
- Prerequisite for life and survival and species activity of humans as social beings: reliant and dependent on one another
- Self-care and care as relations with the self, between humans, between the human and the non-human natural world
- Empathetic/utopian understanding of care: serving the social-ecological preservation of life for its own sake

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■ Care, modernity, capitalism

- Modern, industrial, capitalist understanding of progress: control of the contingency of life through scientific and technological means
- Modern concept of humanity/idea of man: capacity for self-care of the autonomous subjects and independent individuals
- 'Improvement', not 'habitation' (Polanyi 2001, p. 35) as primary aim in accordance with economic imperatives
- Structural carelessness of capitalism and the 'market society': abstraction from human needs or functionalization and valorization of care and care work

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

■ The industrial age as 'market society':

- Implementation of the 'liberal creed' in combination with the notion of the 'self-regulating market' as the economic principle corresponding to the idea of man as 'homo economicus' (Polanyi 2001, pp. 141ff.) and primacy of the market economy over all other economic principles
- Commodification of those production factors never produced at all or intended as objects of trade: land (nature), labor and money – adding: care – as 'fictitious commodities'
- Destructive dynamics of market exchange entirely based on supply and demand, price, costs, profit and 'demolition of society' (Polanyi 2001, p. 76): *'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.)

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

■ The industrial age as 'machine age':

- Scientific-technological development related to the 'market-society' and also harboring 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)

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2.1 The Pandemic, its Causes and the Fight Against it

- The pandemic: civilizational catastrophe caused by the careless treatment of the very foundations of social-ecological reproduction
- Emergence and spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus: zoonosis linked to disregard for social-ecological care requirements in the context of the 'commodity fiction': *'(...) 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.'* (Polanyi 2001, pp.76ff.)
- Technology-based, (finance) market driven global economy: diminishing the habitat of wildlife facilitating the transmission of the Sars-Cov-2 virus and producing social inequalities and vulnerabilities by the destructive commodification of land, labor, money
- Fight against the pandemic – notwithstanding Polanyian 'countermovements' –: in line with the 'machine age' and the 'market society': scientific and technological progress to control the contingency of life (inoculation/tests) and market creation instead of the accessibility of the vaccine as global public good or commons

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2.2 The Pandemic and the Care Sector

- The care sector since the 1970s: tendency towards marketization and technologization of care and care work (valorization) combined with declining responsibility of the state and changing relevance of family, community, individual care
- The care sector after the finance crisis 2007-9: supra-national and national austerity policies with major impact on the public care sector.
- Care and labor disputes of the last decade as Polanyian 'countermovements' in face of the commodification of labor and care: motivated by the contradiction between the market driven organization of care in childcare facilities, hospitals and nursing homes and the increasing tasks by demographic change and social investment policies (functionalization of care) promising decent care without decent work
- The pandemic: additional care requirements driving the care sectors to the limits of operability, resulting in a failure to guarantee adequate care for children, senior citizens and the sick
- Recognition of care and care work as 'essential' on the brink of collapse

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3 After the Pandemic: Back to Normal?

- Care and care work as 'essential': a window of opportunity and turning-point towards new care responsibilities in face of the social-ecological care requirements?
- *'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)
- *'(...) 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.)
- *'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).

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3 After the Pandemic: Back to Normal?

- The tasks: to subordinate industrialism 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 by transcending the 'commodity fiction' and by 'planning', 'regulation' and 'control' as appropriate means instead of the market-driven organization and technologization of care and care work
- First: the current visibility and symbolic recognition of care work as 'essential' as window of opportunity to emphasize the significance of care and care work and encourage care disputes
- Second: the experience of the pandemic as turning-point towards new collective care responsibilities instead of the market-driven organization and technologization of care work and towards the development of new care infrastructures
- Third: the turn of the corona-crisis into an economic crisis as starting point to rethink economy in the light of human needs by relating state and political interventions to the social-ecological transformation of the economy initiating a shift from 'improvement' to 'habitation' (Polanyi 2001) and from the 'market-society' to a careful society

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THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

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