**Caring, not carceral expansion! We need to transcend carcerality and embrace a politics of care**

**Felicity Adams and Fabienne Emmerich**

The UK government’s initial response to the pandemic has included an increase in police powers as part of the [Coronavirus Act 2020](https://blogs.keele.ac.uk/coronavirus-and-the-homeless-why-increasing-policing-powers-is-not-the-answer-80c539083007) and a commitment to building up to [10,000 more prison places](https://medium.com/@f.e.adams/putting-more-people-in-cages-thats-how-we-build-our-way-out-of-the-pandemic-bb01d9664778) as part of a £2.5 billion programme. This year the Ministry of Justice renewed its [original commitment](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform-_web_.pdf) to expand the women’s prison estate by creating 500 new prison places in existing prisons for women. Reneging on their earlier promises in the [“Female Offenders Strategy''](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719819/female-offender-strategy.pdf), they justify this as a necessary shift in order to [“improve conditions”](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-funding-for-organisations-that-steer-women-away-from-crime). This is in response to the anticipated “[increase in the female prison population](https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4483/documents/45130/default/)” following their recruitment of an additional 20,000 police officers. These plans are followed by the [Police, Sentencing and Court’s Bill](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-factsheets/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-protest-powers-factsheet) that proposes to expand police powers that curb our abilities to engage in nonviolent protest and dissent and to target marginalized groups through criminalization.

The government’s catalogue of attempts to expand the carceral state comes at a time when many communities are experiencing loss, pain, and trauma in many forms, as well as increasing financial hardship and limited access to resources. Their continued investments in carceral tactics that inflict multilayered violence, above centralizing the material needs of those in need of care and nurture via community-based strategies marks an unsurprising, but particularly brutal move in the current conjecture of crises.

**“Our capacities to care are interdependent and cannot be realised in an uncaring world”**

During the first lockdown it became apparent very quickly that COVID-19 magnified systemic inequalities central to the functioning of capitalism. As the crisis grew the value of an economy based on the exchange of goods and services faded away to expose the importance of care and caregiving across the public and private spheres. Undervalued and underpaid labour suddenly became critical to the survival of many. Arguably, there had been a noticeable shift towards a public and collective revaluation of care, caregiving, and nurture.

In their book, *The Care Collective Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, The Care Collective prompts us to consider, “[What, we now ask, would happen if we were to begin instead to put care at the very centre of life?”](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto). Yet, as we know this challenges the roots of capitalism and neoliberalism, which centre atomization, exploitation, and colonialization. The Care Collective show us that:

[“[Capitalism] normalises endemic care deficits and abject failures to care at every level by posting them as necessary collateral damage on the road to market oriented reforms and policies”](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto) (11, 2020)

Neoliberal capitalism has conditioned us into sequestering people into spaces of violence and isolation in response to its devaluation of caregiving and nurturing. The government’s responses to the pandemic reflect neoliberal capitalist logics and deepen our attachments to carcerality. They centre othering, exclusion, criminalization and punishment: the increase of police powers, the [criminalizing of marginalized groups](https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Briefing-on-new-police-powers-PCSCBill-and-CJPOA-002.pdf), and the plans for moving [asylum seekers to third countries](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/18/asylum-seekers-could-be-sent-abroad-by-uk-to-be-processed) to process their applications and the plans for a recovery that includes prison expansion, mean sacrificing women, men and all people in prison and [immigration detention centres](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/15/new-covid-outbreak-harmondsworth-uk-immigration-removal-centre), to the capitalist project. The government’s proposals reflect a particularly painful move in the current [“reign of carelessness”](https://www.versobooks.com/authors/2499-the-care-collective) (2020: 18) that follows a revitalization of our understandings of nurturing and caregiving as critical and transformative forces at the mainstream public level during the initial period of restrictions.

Inspired by Hannah Arendt, The Care Collective reinforce the urgency of pushing back against the [“systemic level of banality [that] permeates our everyday carelessness”](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto) under capitalism and re-orienting ourselves around a politics of care that actively places [“the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life”](https://www.versobooks.com/authors/2499-the-care-collective) at the horizon (The Care Collective, 2020, 16-18). In adopting these politics, we must also understand the prison, and the broader carceral state as cogs in the harmful neoliberal capitalist machine that devalues nurturing and prevents us from caring with one another (The Care Collective, 2020, 49).

We, and others recognise that decentering the carceral state is crucial to working towards our collective vision of care, caregiving and nurture. Understanding each of these government proposals as contributing to the existing carceral web helps us to resist playing into individualized capitalist logics that reinforce systemic harms. Until we transcend all violent systems of oppression, we impair our abilities to mobilize a politics based on caregiving and nurturing in real-time because as the Care Collective shows us [“our capacities to care are interdependent and cannot be realised in an uncaring world”](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto) (2020, 19). We must recognise the carceral state as one of the epicentres of the current crisis in caring and nurturing. We need to transcend carceral culture and embrace a politics of care.

**Shaping the Public Imaginary:** [**“To connect, to deliberate and to debate, to find joy and to flourish, and to support each other’s needs amidst the complexities of our mutual dependencies”**](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto)

A politics of care is not new. Many activists and grass roots organizations like [Sisters Uncut](https://www.sistersuncut.org/), [The Bent Bars Project](https://www.bentbarsproject.org/) and many more have been engaged in anti-carceral care work for many years. We have seen with [Black Lives Matter](https://blacklivesmatter.uk/) and more recently with [Sisters Uncut](https://www.sistersuncut.org/) how meaningful actions in multiple places that are amplified via social media can as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) puts it, “shake the ground. In other words, *movement* happens” (248).

In her ground-breaking book, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Gilmore (2007) writes about the Californian prison expansion and its effects on the spaces that are linked to incarceration either through labour or the absence of sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers. She highlights the power of community activism, through the work of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (ROC), that rejects incarceration and reclaims their loved ones and their community spaces centred on care and nurture. She highlights the importance of supporting agency at the community level, which can create the foundation for transformative justice activism more widely.

Abolitionism, care work and caregiving has been and continues to be a struggle to redirect public discourse and to counter neoliberal narratives of empowerment, individualization and exclusion under the guise of feminist and liberal rights movements. It is crucial to amplify this grassroots activism and labour, in order to encourage others to envisage a society without carceral institutions and punitivity. This can follow Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s call to see abolition as [“presence”](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html), to highlight and showcase the community building that is being undertaken predominantly by women of colour and other marginalized groups. This is crucial to shift the public imaginary towards the conception of a future centred on caring, nurturing and environmental sustainability without carceral institutions.

The Care Collective reinforce the importance of collectively dreaming and reimagining alternative modes of caring, caregiving and nurturing that challenge individualized capitalist regimes that exacerbate people’s suffering and deny us the ability to be in relation with one another:

[“To connect, to deliberate and to debate, to find joy and to flourish, and to support each other’s needs amidst the complexities of our mutual dependencies”](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto) (2020, 92).

As part of this, we must all consistently ask ourselves as, Angela Davis suggests:

[“How easy it is to reach for existing strategies and tools assuming that they alone can bring about change… recognise that racism and repression are not discreet problems can be removed by dissection but rather are integrally woven into the very fabric of carcerality”](https://www.facebook.com/BCRW.Feminism/videos/abolition-feminism-celebrating-20-years-of-incite/367419774199654/) (Incite! 2020).

In her pioneering book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis (2003) also suggests we conceptualize the prison as part of a network of interconnected coercive systems. This can help us think about alternatives to prison as a process of decarceration across a spectrum of different spaces:

“demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance” (Davis 2003, 107).

**“We must begin by recognising the myriad ways that our survival and our thriving are everywhere and always contingent on others”**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us our true collective potential when we centre caring and nurturing in our recovery. By peripheralizing the multi-layered harms perpetuated under carceral systems in the current crisis, we limit our abilities to centre care and be in relation with each other. We also detract from the complex social and political conditions that enable intersecting forms of violence and harm to manifest. Subsequently, we enable conditions of individualized carelessness to continue undisturbed, when history and the present shows us [“the myriad ways that our survival and our thriving are everywhere and always contingent on others”](https://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto) (2020, 53)**.** And we render all ensnared by the trap of carcerality as expendable.

Rather than surrendering to the force of carcerality, we must reflect on the kernels of hope offered by [Sisters Uncut](https://www.sistersuncut.org/), [The Bent Bars Project](https://www.bentbarsproject.org/) and [BLM](https://blacklivesmatter.uk/) and understand the intensely fulfilling nature of caregiving and nurturing when released from the micro to the macro-level.

In the current socio-political context, envisioning and enacting this is not an easy, quick, or simple process, but it is a necessary step if we are ever to transcend the snare of carcerality and build the nurturing communities that we deserve. As Audre Lorde reminds us, we seize on the promise of the kernel and we must resist the entrapment of mediocrity in order to envision more fulfilling, equitable worlds:

“[It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWmq9gw4Rq0)” (Lorde, 1984).