

Caring Relationships as a Catalyst for Social Change?

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essay

10 min

We need relationships based on mutual care and equality, not subordination. The change must happen at the level of the state, but we can also start as individuals.

It is hard to think about the future nowadays, when our present, as we know it, is collapsing in front of our nose, with a speed that is hard to follow. We could take it for granted until now that there is a future, and our life is an ongoing progress towards certain points in the future. But what if we are progressing towards nuclear disaster or even war, climate catastrophe, economic crisis that will have a bigger impact on our lives than the ones before, and recurring waves of deadly diseases? And all at the same time. It is hard to fathom what kind of a future that might mean, as death and destruction on a planetary scale is not part of our concept of future. But for the sake of this reflection, let me assume that there *is* a future.

Futurity is coded in most of our personal, educational and professional relationships. So if we want to have a future it is urgent to think about and try to reconceptualize our current forms of relationships of all kinds, but let me limit myself here to think about personal relationships. I would like to propose that two main points are required in order to make this reconceptualization possible. On the one hand, the strict normative boundaries of relationships, the rigid definitions of what makes up a given type of relationship should be relaxed, and non-normative relationships of consenting adults should be recognised as equal ones in a diverse range of relationships. Especially those personal relationships that have been restricted or even sanctioned by legislative measures and social institutions and attitudes. Non-heteronormative romantic relationships, for example. On the other hand, more care, solidarity and responsibility has to be involved in our already existing and future relationships.

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I was thinking about this when I came across the notion of 'caring relationships' and the idea of legalizing them, in a certain party program in a certain European country. This is a controversial idea, especially if we consider that it can signify neoliberal intentions to further withdraw from providing state-care and leave it up to individuals to care for themselves and their loved ones without state support. Still, it is worth pondering the idea in the framework of the transformation of our relationships for the future. Obviously, many of our personal relationships are caring ones, and they are already regulated. However, in my understanding, the idea refers to adult partnerships, based on two or more individuals' wish to care for each other, as opposed to a romantic relationship based on erotic love. What if the erotic component of a partner relationship is not central or non-existent, and instead, the mutual drive for the relationship is to care for each other? Is this possible only between friends or relatives, or also between adult individuals not related in such ways? Is it possible to imagine that two or more people decide to get

involved in clearly definable ways of caring for each other? In the case of elderly people living alone and/or needing regular help, this is an existing form of relationship, but a subordinate one, likely with a younger person, with a clear sense of give-and-take (the younger person cares for the elderly, ill or unfit person in return for inheriting some or all of the properties of the older person in the future), in which the elderly person physically depends on the younger person.

To dedomesticate and de-gender care

Can we imagine another type of consensual caring relationship, in which the people involved are not erotically attached but provide care for each other on an equal, not subordinate basis? Can it be an alternative to erotically based relationships which may eventually get codified in marriage or – at least for certain people in certain countries – in other legally registered forms of relationship? ‘Caring relationships’ could be established between people of any genders, which is highly important because of the urgent need to de-gender caring.

Non-heteronormative caring relationships could be flagships in this de-gendering process. In my understanding, caring relationships mean mutual caring on equal terms; they are not meant as an institution for officially recognizing women’s extra workload (although that would be a great achievement in currently prevailing relationships) but for distributing care equally.

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I don’t want to get lost in the imaginary details of how this would work. There are a million questions to ask. But one thing is sure: we have to care for each other more in our relationships, be they based on erotic attraction or other kinds of bonding. A general caring attitude is required, which can be manifested towards our human and natural environment. Ethical care for our dependent ones (children, elderly, disabled people, pets, etc.) is evident (or should be), but it should be extended towards those who do not depend on us or are not engaged in exclusive and close relationships (like marriage) with us. People and the natural environment are organically connected. To refer back to Judith Butler’s keynote speech at the Festival last year, we are interconnected globally, both with people and the natural world, and how we handle this interconnectedness will determine how liveable our lives and how inhabitable our planet will be in the future. I propose that it is necessary to adopt a holistic notion of care for ourselves, other people and our non-human environment. To expand caring for people over to nature and the environment. To consider our relationships as part of our natural environment. Care has to be “de-domesticated”, says Butler, and de-domestication is part of the de-gendering of care.

The seeds of social change

Closely related to ‘care’ is ‘responsibility’. Recently a friend of mine who works in a caring profession and is a caring mother of three sons told me how she broke down crying in front of them the other day, telling them she had not meant to bring on such a bleak future for them. She was referring to the current political situation in Hungary and her formerly voting for the party that has imposed this authoritarian regime on us. Her sons responded telling her that they are afraid of the future. This was a shock for her, a moment of realising the

immediate need for better caring and taking responsibility for the future of the next generation. Young people are afraid, they feel robbed of the future they and their parents have imagined for them. My friend got inspired and, with some of her friends, designed and introduced a whole-year program to educate children about caring in the local primary school whose managing board she sits in. Just one example of what individuals can do to initiate transformation in caring relationships, if they are in a position to do so. Many people are not, but many others are in situations where they can contribute to the transformation of relationships. Of course, individual attempts will not solve the problem, but if many of us act, our actions can add up to create the ground from which social change can emerge. We should pressure our elected politicians but not wait for them to initiate this work because these are longer processes with longer-term impacts than their elected term.

As an activist working in groups of like-minded, committed people active in the field of women's and LGBT+ people's rights, I see some changes happening in the ways we relate to each other, both personally and in terms of how we fight for our causes. In the LGBT+ and human rights activist community, the deterioration of LGBT+ people's rights in the past years of the autocratic Orbán regime, which has taken to targeting sexual minorities, has brought us closer together than ever before. Our coalition has grown stronger, and solidarity has been growing. Our community is reaching out to other social groups and communities who are struggling with the exclusionary and oppressive social and economic politics of the regime, and other disadvantaged communities and people who may not be members of a minority but they care and feel responsible for justice and equality are reaching out to us. This caring attitude can be a foundation and trigger for long-term social transformation, including the transformation of our relationships for a better future. This future will not just come about, we need to actively work for it.

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