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The 5 to 9 before the 9 to 5: The Paradoxical Invisibility of Care Labour under Neoliberal Capitalism

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Abstract

Many feminist economists have spent their careers conducting research and theorising about the role of care work in the economy. Some, like Silvia Federici, have taken a Marxist approach to the analysis of the capitalist economy, and have placed the focus on the role and positioning of social reproduction in the economy. This requires a departure from Marx's writings, which often left social reproduction on the sidelines. This thesis focuses on the care work aspect of social reproduction, meaning it explores not human reproduction under a capitalist productive society but rather the less objectively defined concept of care. It delves into how capitalism relies on the perpetuation of cultural beliefs surrounding aspects such as gender and productivity to continue existing. This way, it explores the concept of care work, its role in society and how it is (or is not) accounted for in both public and corporate policy. The central argument is that established relations of power and cultural beliefs perpetuate one another under capitalism. This thesis expands the understanding of care work beyond productivity and reflects on human values and wellbeing under capitalism. This will be done through an analysis of existing academic and non-academic literature on the topic, as well as the analysis of cultural artefacts connected to the theme. This thesis contributes to this debate by focusing on care work that involves non-productive members of society such as some disabled people and sees care work as a crucial aspect of human existence.

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Introduction: Why care?

The word ‘care’ is repeated over three hundred times among the thousands of words laid out in this document. It is a very adaptable word, used in many different contexts and realities. When I explain the topic of this thesis to curious people, I am often met with not just understanding, but also stories of their own relationship with care. Some people speak of their grandparents, their experience raising a child or a scary medical procedure. Every single human being – regardless of their ability to verbalise it – not only has a relationship with care but has also had their life heavily shaped by this very relationship. Care is everywhere: in the Mother’s Day marketing efforts, in public playgrounds, and the reserved seats in public transport, meant for the pregnant, disabled, or old. Yet, for something as crucial and prevalent to humans, public and private conversations regarding care seem rather rare. Even rarer are mentions of care in the context of mainstream economic analysis.

As care work is essential for human survival and the continuation of humankind, having an economic system that acknowledges the role care work plays in society is crucial to human wellbeing. This thesis attempts to answer the following question: Why is care work a marginalised aspect of neoliberal economies, despite the system’s necessity for care work to sustain itself? The marginalisation of care work in society has two main sides, which despite not being often brought together, are central to this thesis. One is the unequal distribution of care work amongst the population, whereby informal carers are often overworked, impoverished, and suffering negative consequences in other areas of their lives as a result of their caring responsibilities. This mostly affects women and femmes¹. The other side of this is the neglect of those in need of care, be that children who do not have their basic and developmental needs met, or older and disabled people who do not live a dignified life. Lack of care can have extremely detrimental effects on individuals, from trauma to even death. Addressing the role of care work in society is then crucial for the wellbeing of every individual, as every person needs care work at any point in their lives.

This thesis is an interdisciplinary project, which brings together several sides of academia and the human experience. It is a love letter to care, softness, and kindness, especially in the face of a world that labels these as weaknesses. I write these words in a form of rebellion. Here, I wish to tear apart the idea that academic discourse, writing, and research are opposite to human feeling and emotion. Not just through my arguments, but also through this very project, I wish to challenge the concept of economics as a rational field, filled with cost-benefit analysis and supply and demand graphs. I refuse to accept that we must serve the economy, and instead feel the economy should serve us. I am not the first to do this. Across academia, literature, and journalism, there are many other individuals whose beliefs align with mine. This thesis builds on their work, research, and reflections, combining and building upon them to better understand what care is, and what it could be.

¹ The term ‘femmes’ is used throughout this thesis to reflect the way many non-binary transgender people, as well as the more femininely perceived people in non-heteronormative relationships are still disproportionately affected by an unequal share of care responsibilities (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018).

Each chapter of this thesis begins with a description of a film, documentary or series which, in one way or another, connects with the topic of care work at large and the specific theme of the chapter. This helps the reader understand the approach taken in this thesis, and connect these themes to experiences outside of academia. Care is everywhere, embedded into all aspects of human life and imagination. The first chapter, *Defining Care*, explores the concept of care and provides further insight into the theory surrounding care, thereby answering the question “What is care?”. The second chapter, *Providing Care*, delves into the question “Why do humans care?”. Here I explore themes connected to love and commitment to community. The third chapter *Commodifying Care* goes into how neoliberal capitalism engages with care and how it uses care to further commodify human life and generate profit. The fourth and last chapter, *Nurturing Care*, looks at the role of the state and community in care. It addresses the question “How do we care for each other?”. This thesis is, at its core, a critique of neoliberal capitalism and its relationship with care. But it is also an exercise of imagination of what a society which centres care and human wellbeing could look like and what changes can contribute towards such a world.

Research Design: Care to Explain?

This thesis was originally inspired by the 1980 American comedy film *Nine to Five*, which tells the story of three women who, for a few weeks, take over leading their department in the company for which they work. The movie stars Dolly Parton, Lily Tomlin, and Jane Fonda who play three women in their thirties and early forties, Doralee, Violet, and Judy (respectively), working for 'Consolidated Industries', a big company with unspecified purpose or market. They work under Mr. Hart, the company's Vice President.

Violet has been working there the longest, having trained Mr. Hart herself, but constantly being denied promotions due to sexism. She is a widow with four children, who is constantly patronised by Mr Hart, doing menial tasks for the boss which are not a part of her role, many of which comprise care work. Doralee is his assistant, whom he constantly sexually harasses through physical and verbal sexual advances, despite Doralee's persistent rejection and reminders of them both being married. With Hart telling other employees they are having an affair, Doralee is cast aside in the office. Judy is a new hire and is recently divorced, leading to her having to sell her labour in the market, as she no longer was a housewife.

In a humorous and unlikely chain of events, the three women form a friendship over their shared hatred for their boss and end up accidentally kidnapping the man. They keep him locked in his house for about a month, while successfully avoiding anyone noticing his absence, including his wife. In the office, while (continuing) to run things by themselves, the women start implementing several measures which Mr Hart would oppose if present, due to his strict and conservative approach to managing the workplace. These measures included flexible work hours, the possibility of part-time work, and a nursery in the office. The film ends with the breaking free and return of Mr. Hart, which happens on the same day as a visit from the head of the company, who promptly congratulates Hart for the increase in productivity and employee satisfaction in his branch due to the changes implemented, and conveniently ships him off to Brazil for the company's expansion there.

This film is an outstanding piece of commentary about the role of women in the workplace and has remarkably, despite the over four decades since its release, aged well, without any distasteful jokes and with the themes approached still ringing true. Today, while there are more women in leadership positions, the successful measures put in place in the film which addressed employees' care responsibilities remain fairly uncommon. *Nine to Five* poses an important and arguably revolutionary argument that not only highlights the marginalisation women face in the workplace, through sexual harassment and blatant misogyny, but also displays the ways that management by women can transform the culture of a workplace.

This importantly outlines that just the absence of discrimination in its most 'traditional' way is not the only issue with the way employment is set up. Most employers set up workplaces with an average man as the idea of the standard worker, and workers falling outside this established 'normal' need to adapt themselves to these expectations if they want to be successful. The market created around care arises due to this as well, where other (mostly migrant) women are hired to fulfil the care responsibilities of 'career women'. This way, rather than adapting the workplace so that care responsibilities can be fulfilled

by employees, women joining the workforce led instead to the externalisation and subsequent commodification of care responsibilities.

While this film highlights the way women are marginalised by these working conditions, this thesis uses the established 'average worker', marked by normalcy dictated by a capitalist ideal of productivity, to highlight how these measures (or lack thereof) marginalise and harm a wider portion of the population of varying identities and relationships to care. The structures surrounding care work and reproductive labour are just one of the paradoxes created by the modern world and its underlying economic system, neoliberal capitalism, embedded in the organisation of society. Neoliberalism, as defined by Harvey (2005) is

“(…) in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.”

Harvey's definition is widely used in academia and explains how neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic practices, but also political. The depoliticisation of neoliberalism is a tool to present the system as natural instead of socially constructed and imposed.

The increasing marketisation of human life is one of the consequences of neoliberal capitalist policy. That is, neoliberal capitalist policy makes it so that increasing aspects of human life such as healthcare, transportation, and education, are ruled by the free market for profit rather than by the state for the common good. Over the past century, care work, simply defined as the labour connected to caring for another human being's needs, has too been marketised, through nurseries, nursing homes, and private rehabilitation centres, among others. The lines between the marketisation of health and education and the marketisation of care work are impossible to draw since education and health are inherently connected to care. Markets built around human care needs are increasing not just in number but also in size (Bunting 2020).

However, despite care being exploited by corporations for profit, workers' care needs and responsibilities are not often accounted for by their employers. Most, if not all, rights connected to care work for workers, such as parental leave, are dictated and enforced by law. Further, care work is indispensable for the perpetuation of the workforce. Corporations need workers to reproduce and care for children so that these people can become workers in the future. They also need their current workers to be cared for, so they can continue being productive and generating profit.

This thesis explores this paradox, addressing how cultural beliefs are embedded in the relationship of the formal economy with care work, thereby placing care at the intersection between culture and economics with both being key to perpetuating the existing power dynamics under neoliberal capitalism. Mainstream economics creates the idea that the discourse underlying neoliberal capitalism is apolitical and intrinsic to society and human nature, rather than a political approach. Critical political economy literature offers the questioning of the assumptions embedded in neoliberal capitalism. Many works of critical political economists such as Silvia Federici and Tithi Bhattacharya offer reflections on the paradoxes and harm created under this system. This thesis combines a critical political economy approach with a cultural

studies perspective, particularly focused on feminist and disability justice stances, to create a more all-encompassing view of the issue at hand. This way, neoliberal capitalism is not seen as just an economic system, but rather a political, social, and cultural ideology. This is based on the belief that for the population at large to accept the marginalisation of some members of society, there needs to be a mainstream narrative that justifies this marginalisation in some way, which then allows for the perpetuation of systems of power.

The central argument of this thesis is then that neoliberal capitalism, in order to perpetuate itself and the power dynamics embedded in it, relies on the marginalisation of individuals as both a principle and a consequence. That is, the marginalisation of some groups is required to maintain the belief in neoliberal ideology as fair and deserved, and neoliberal policies also result in the marginalisation of some groups. To substantiate this argument, the thesis examines what constitutes care and how it affects individuals. The refusal of a systemic acknowledgement of the importance of care work and its role in society is a tool for, beyond cutting costs, maintaining the illusion of the separation between human needs and profit-generating labour. In the field of health and healthcare, this ideology pushes for the idea that individual health outcomes are dictated by individual choice rather than a collective responsibility (Julie Avril Minich 2016).

The system also requires workers to be consumers, so that they have to sell their labour in the labour market, to produce output that generates profit. If work that happens outside of the market economy realm is recognised as such, this breaks the logic at the very centre of neoliberal capitalism. Under this logic, the ability to sell one's labour for a wage is the only way to contribute to society in a meaningful way. This line of thinking leads to the marginalisation of disabled people who are unable to sell their labour for a wage. Seeing these individuals as burdens to their communities and society in general reduces humans to their ability to generate profit for another. This is actively challenged in this thesis, as it sets out to establish the notion of care as much wider than often conceptualised in academia.

Further, this thesis applies the concept of reserve labour to both women and disabled people under neoliberal capitalism. Reserve labour refers to the part of the population which is not currently employed, but might be used if the market so requires. The notion of an unlimited labour reserve was brought forward by Arthur Lewis in 1954, in a paper which talks about women and the population growth experienced through economic development as an unlimited source of labour at subsistence level. Applying the notion of a theoretically unlimited labour reserve, unlimited economic growth is possible. This notion proved useful in the context of the industrialisation of the economy since there are groups such as women, farm workers, children, and migrants, who are willing to take these employment conditions to improve their lives. Theoretically, for them to accept this employment, wages offered by employers need to be more attractive than their current income. As we are talking about groups which are marginalised and have access to very little forms of income, this means workers will take any compensation to ensure their survival. Beyond poor working conditions for little pay, this economic approach also implies that there are people who are left to starve and die with no income, stuck in this 'reserve army' in moments when the market does not require their labour (Li 2010). This concept is still applied to many Global South economies in countries with little social welfare structures in place but is also useful to many Global North countries.

The concept of reserve labour, despite being conceived decades before neoliberal capitalism became the dominating political and economic ideology, is based on what is the most central pillar of neoliberalism: individualism. This theory implies a political system where the interests of capital, i.e. labour availability, dictate the wellbeing and survival of the population. This comes paired with an increased disfranchisement of people from access to land and food production systems. In The Netherlands, like other countries around the world, foraging is criminalised. This way, human life is reduced to the capacity to perform labour, creating a system that prioritises the perpetuation of itself rather than the perpetuation of human wellbeing and life. European Union policy on disability, strongly reflecting neoliberal values, pushes for the employment of disabled people as a measure to combat their marginalisation, rather than the creation and maintenance of strong welfare support structures (Folmer, Mascini, and Van der Veen 2020). This further pushes the idea that survival is an individual responsibility which needs to be accomplished by selling one's labour in the labour market.

There are many models used to explain disability, but the two most influential in both policy and cultural perception are the social and medical models. The medical model of disability, the widely accepted view of disability for the majority of the 20th century, views disability as an individual issue, which is caused by an abnormality in one's body or mind. This reduces disability to an empirical medical issue, with physicians having the role of 'fixing' disabled people, by identifying this difference and rectifying it to the best of their ability. The social model of disability, made mainstream by Disability Rights activists, Disability Justice advocates and Disability Studies scholars, centres disabled people in a definition characterising disability beyond a medical issue, but a social experience as well (Linton 1998).

This way, disability is understood to be about the experience of navigating an inaccessible world with an impairment rather than a purely medical experience. This means it is not one's body or mind which disables them, but rather the lack of capacity for their environment to accommodate them (Linton 1998). This model also highlights disability as a cultural experience. In many Native American societies, the entire population was fluent in sign language, which would then make deaf people not disabled, as they would be able to navigate their community and live their lives without limitations, despite their impairment (Davis 1995). Similarly, someone with myopia or another condition requiring the use of glasses or contact lenses for focused vision is not disabled in a society where these are easily accessible. However, blind people are largely considered to be disabled, as they face many challenges as a result of an inaccessible environment.

A recent incident with my close friend who is a wheelchair user in her student housing gives another great example of these models of disability. When my friend moved in, the front door had to be made automatic so she could use it. However, this door keeps breaking, and the housing company does not effectively solve this issue. In the group chat with all tenants, this company defended itself by stating: "We want to replace it very badly but unfortunately it needs to be automatic since we have one tenant in a wheelchair who is not able to open this heavy door on her own." Beyond the unkindness and inappropriateness of sharing this information publicly, the rationale behind this argument is very individualistic and reflects deep-set ableism.

If there was a problem with the water, the company would not make a statement about wanting to fix the problem, but not being able to because some tenants require the water to get warm. It would be illogical to place the blame for a maintenance issue on tenants who need warm water, portraying their needs as an inconvenience in the way of the comfort of tenants who take cold showers. Warm water is considered a basic amenity that is required for the company to provide, so should be a working automatic front door for a building that houses hundreds of students. This shift in perspective is what the social model advocates for – my friend is not disabled by her condition, but rather by the inaccessible environment around her.

The terms applied throughout this thesis are very intentional, including the use of ‘care work’ over ‘social reproduction’. While the term social reproduction is more commonly used in academia, and especially in critical political economy, than care work, the latter encompasses the argument of this thesis best. Mohandesi & Teitelman (2017) describe social reproduction “Under the capitalist mode of production, [...] whether waged or unwaged” as “the totality of those activities required to create, maintain and restore the commodity labour power”. This definition and understanding make a lot of sense from the perspective of criticising neoliberal capitalism and recognising its need for this unpaid labour to perpetuate itself, but it fails to acknowledge the full spectrum of activities which fall under what is meant in this thesis. The care for disabled people, for example, falls outside of the definition put forward by Mohandesi & Teitelman.

Here, care work is understood beyond capitalism and can be simply defined as the paid or unpaid labour, be it physical, mental, or emotional, put into attending to another’s needs. The following chapter, *Defining Care*, delves into the specifics of this definition and provides examples. It is also important to centre ‘care’ in this discussion. While not all care work is performed from a place of love, most of it comes from an intrinsic human motivation to attend to needs beyond their own. Despite intrinsic to humans, the execution of this motivation is mostly shaped by culture, in the way that care is associated with femininity and professions connected to care tend to be female-dominated. While placing care work in the context of neoliberal capitalism is essential to the improvement of the current paradigm surrounding care, it is also to be highlighted that care work has existed long before capitalism, and it shall exist as long as humans (and even other animals) inhabit this earth. This way, it is important to understand care work beyond labour under capitalism.

As I draw a complex and multilayered view of care work, this thesis is not focused on drawing strict lines between carers and those who need care, or who is and is not disabled. Disability Justice in this context is focused on creating a world that removes barriers built around an ideal of a ‘normal’ body and mind.

For instance, spaces more physically accessible for wheelchair users also help parents using a stroller, individuals without cars carrying groceries, and movers, among many others. Similarly, workspaces designed around care responsibilities and needs help a very varied group of people, if not every single employee, as flexibility in the workplace helps any individual with responsibilities, needs, or challenges in their “private” life, beyond medical appointments and caring for children. Here, challenging the notion of the ‘normal’, ‘average’ worker mentioned at the beginning of this section, put forward by disability feminist theory is crucial to understanding who these policies and practices protect and benefit.

Instead of trying to make care work (or reproductive labour) included in the economy in the same way as waged labour is, there should be a shift in priorities and perception of care work as a central part of human existence. Embracing care means understanding humans are not independent beings, but rather dependent on one another since birth, to different degrees depending on each individual and their current stage of life. Further, this should be seen not as a burden on communities or societies, but rather as an integral part of life. In line with this, this thesis aims to centre the increasing marketisation of care negatively and imagine a different world, where care is organised and seen differently. Here, again, the works of disability studies scholars prove incredibly useful, as they highlight the care structures existing within marginalised communities, which differ significantly from formal and stereotypical care structures.

Methods and Positionality

To successfully and holistically tackle the research question laid out in this thesis, a collection of different methods and approaches are used throughout. Most evidently, this thesis provides a critical analysis of neoliberal capitalism, based mostly upon the work of Marxist, Feminist, Critical, and/or Disability Studies scholars and scholarship. The objective of this thesis is to bring together these fields of study, which despite overlapping do not often come together in discussions about care. Marx's writings made no significant reference to care work (Federici 2021). Discussions and research on care most often focus on the marginalisation of carers but tend to neglect the individuals with care needs these carers attend to. Conversely, writings on disability which touch upon care tend to focus on the marginalisation of disabled people in shortages of care or negligence and abuse towards them. To be clear, these are incredibly important analyses and research works of themselves, which have largely informed this thesis. The existence of such works is what has allowed for work connecting the two to be successful.

Disability Studies is central to this thesis because it informs a view of human life and community that goes beyond productivity under neoliberal capitalism. While many disability studies scholars do not associate themselves directly with political economy, it is argued that their view of human life as inherently worthy is transformative and revolutionary under the neoliberal capitalist system. Disabled scholars and writers such as Alison Kafer, Marta Russel, Simi Linton, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha have contributed immensely to the insights and knowledge brought forward by this thesis. This thesis does not shine away from valuing human life, human emotion, and human connection above all.

The methodology used in this thesis is also that of Feminist Disability Studies and Critical Disability Studies. It builds on the social model of disability and exists not just in the combination of feminist and disability studies, but rather in the reimagination of both in relation to each other. In 'Toward a Theoretical Framework for Feminist Disability Studies', Kim Q. Hall (2011) delves into multiple instances and works where disability and feminist theory merge, often unnoticed, like reproductive rights, and the ethics of care.

Further, this work speaks of the connections between Feminist Disability Theory and Critical Theory, by highlighting how these methods merge in how the margins define the centre, in that normalcy is defined by the abnormal, the significance of relationships of power, prevalent in an ableist sexist society, and the

fact that all analysis and evaluation has political implications. In the article “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now.”, Julie Avril Minich (2016) writes:

“The methodology of disability studies as I would define it, then, involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations. (...) I argue for naming disability studies as a methodology rather than a subject in order to recommit the field to its origins in social justice work. Furthermore, when I locate the origins of the field in social justice work, I mean not only the widespread US disability rights movement but also other movements for the liberation of people with bodies and minds that are devalued or pathologized but who do not consistently identify (or are not consistently identified) as disabled.” (Minich 2016).

This thesis also uses autoethnography as a method. This thesis is the last step before my graduation and the beginning of my search for full-time employment as a disabled person. In 2019, after fracturing several vertebrae as a result of a fall, I was diagnosed with osteoporosis, a condition which makes bones fragile, common amongst post-menopausal women (I was a 19-year-old woman at the time). I have since developed chronic pain and fatigue which have severely impacted my life as a young student, as well as anxiety and depression. Since then, I have come to peace with my identity as a disabled person and have dedicated myself to advocacy and researching topics connected to disability. As I am originally from Portugal but have resided and lived in The Netherlands for my studies since 2018, I cannot rely on my family for support. This has led to me fully relying on my community for my care needs, from getting groceries to helping with laundry to supporting me during medical appointments. This topic is therefore influenced by my personal life experience and my knowledge and reflections on it stem, partially, from the aforementioned background, as well as the experiences of those in my community.

My life experiences and relationships with others are then central to every aspect of this thesis, from the methods used to the discussed pieces of media. Autoethnography is then embedded within the rest of the theoretical framework used in the thesis. This method is widely used within feminist and disability studies, as it allows marginalised people to frame their own experiences and unique perspectives in the context of their research. This thesis is then not to reject previous work and research on this topic, but to rather build upon, combine, and apply existing literature to my lived experience. This is also why I developed my definition and theoretical framework for the concept of care, which is explored in the first chapter of the thesis.

At its core, this thesis brings together Social Reproduction Theory and Disability Justice. Social Reproduction Theory provides insight into the massive economic impact and systemic societal dependence on care work. Disability Justice calls for restructuring and imagining a society where the idea of a ‘normal’ body is left behind, eliminating all marginalisation based on body differences. This is a framework for the liberation of all marginalised people, including, but not limited to, women, trans and other queer people, black, indigenous, and any racialised groups. Bringing together these two frameworks is logical, as the critique of the current system can then be coupled with the reimagination of a more just alternative.

To illustrate how care is embedded in every single aspect of life, and how the topic can be connected to almost anything, I have made a selection of English-spoken media (for simplicity) that connects with each

chapter in one way or another. I wanted to highlight different aspects of care which are reflected in the topic of the film and how it impacts different communities. This research design chapter begins with *Nine to Five* (1980), as the piece of media which inspired the topic of this thesis in the first place. It is not a film about care, but rather about women in a workplace performing a non-care related job, yet its conclusions are all about care. This resonated with the essence of this thesis – why care work is spoken of as ‘invisible’, while being abundantly visible in many situations. The second piece is *Scapper* (2023), which spoke to me due to the challenging nature of the story of a traumatised hyper-dependent emancipated child and their relationship with care. The third piece, introducing the chapter *Providing Care* reflects on the miniseries *Maid* (2021) in which the theme of care takes centre stage. This show provides a kind look into the challenges of caring for a child as a parent, especially with little support both from the state and one’s community. The third chapter opens with the film *I Care A Lot* (2020), which is again directly connected to care, but this time from a care industry perspective. This film reflects the nature of capitalism to turn all aspects of human life to profit, at any (human) cost. The concluding chapter introduces the documentary *Crip Camp* (2020) which documents part of the disability rights movement in the United States and some of the most prominent figures in the movement. This film allows us to look for the possibilities for an accessible future in the past and to reimagine the way we structure society. As mentioned above, almost any piece of media can be connected to the topic of care, so this choice was challenging. I believe these pieces show a wide variety of stories which connect to care and how the neoliberal approach to it affects human beings.

A note on Eugenics

It feels inappropriate to not address the concept of eugenics when discussing care work, especially concerning disabled people. Eugenics is the ideology behind the genetic improvement of the human species, through measures such as the policing of marriages, forced reproduction, or genocide. Eugenics establishes a “right” body and mind (one that is sane, healthy, able-bodied, white, cisgender, heterosexual, and so on), and advocates for the creation of more human beings of the standard, and the elimination of bodies outside of these strict parameters. Eugenics uses “scientific” arguments to build this ideal human (Levine and Bashford 2010).

Eugenic rhetoric sees disabled people as undesirable, useless to society, and a waste of resources. As this thesis critiques neoliberalism, which is based on ideals of individualism and productivity, eugenics then is very much connected to the topic. Around the time of the Industrial Revolution, biological explanations of disability and eugenicist rhetoric started becoming mainstream. Such explanations came paired with and justified by the mass institutionalisation of disabled people, ugly laws², the forced sterilisation of disabled people, and the beginning of the care industry (Linton 1998, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018).

Throughout this thesis, I refuse to engage with biological arguments regarding this topic, exactly because eugenics uses these arguments to further hate and suffering. Essentialist arguments about human nature based on the ‘survival of the fittest’ have no place in this thesis. I depart from the understanding that all

² Ugly Laws were policies forbidding visibly disabled people to appear in public, as their disability was considered an eyesore to the general public.

humans are worthy and that all human life is worth living and celebrating. Though I do not think the behaviour of our ancestral species or other animals has a place in justifying societal organisation, I choose to look at our ancestors with admiration for the way they cared for each other and formed communities.

Chapter 1: Defining Care

The 2023 Comedy/Drama *Scrapper* tells the story of 12-year-old Georgie, a British girl who starts living by herself after her mother's passing. The film opens with the words 'It takes a village to raise a child' on the screen, which are then scratched and replaced by 'I can do it myself, thanks'. This is followed by a shot of Georgie doing domestic labour – vacuuming, tidying up, and taking out the trash. Being a child, Georgie tells social services her uncle, Winston Churchill, is looking after her, in a humorous stab at the lack of responsibility taken by social services. She audio records the nearby shop clerk saying general sentences, which she then plays on the phone every time social services calls. To pay rent and buy groceries, she steals and sells bikes with her friend.

This system is interrupted by the arrival of Georgie's estranged father, Jason, who lives in Ibiza. As a hyper-independent child, Georgie does not trust her father at first, refusing his care in several ways. She does not accept food from him, refuses his money when he attempts to play tooth fairy and goes through his phone when he is asleep. Georgie repeatedly attempts to force her father out of her house but fails to do so under the threat that he will call social services on her. Throughout the film, Georgie and her father become closer, as she navigates the grief felt over the loss of her mother and only caretaker. Jason struggles with assuming the role of Georgie's parent, failing to address her having physically attacked another girl, and eventually running away after revealing that the reason he appeared in Georgie's life so suddenly was a voice message left by Georgie's mother. In this voice message, she explains she will pass away soon, and asks that Jason look after the girl.

The film ends with Georgie finding her dad after his running away and with the two agreeing to allow them to care for each other. Jason expresses he does not feel that Georgie needs him, and she explains that she did not think she needed him, but now he is there and she needs someone. This conversation ends with Georgie telling Jason he needs to start cleaning up after himself and start contributing to domestic labour in the house.

While the film is most often described as being about grief, themes of care and survival also ring true. *Scrapper* is a reminder that care can be about trust and that labour will not always be visible or simple. In *Making Care Count a Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work*, Mignon Duffy (2011) thoroughly explores the concept of care. In the book, she draws the difference between nurturant and non-nurturant care, with the former involving face-to-face labour that involves interaction, while the latter describes labour which is essential for human survival but does not depend on this personal connection. An example of nurturant care would be reading a child a story or assisting someone with bathing, and one of non-nurturant care would be cooking someone a meal or cleaning a toilet. In Duffy's writing, she gives examples of the two types of care in terms of job titles, such as nurse for nurturant care, and cleaner as non-nurturant care, rather than specific tasks.

Drawing on nurturant care theory, which pushes back against the market focus in terminology surrounding care work, this thesis takes it a step further to conceptualise nurturant and non-nurturant care in specific tasks, paid or unpaid, rather than paid position titles. This way, this thesis conceptualises care in a layered, complex way that cannot be defined in binaries. Paid-unpaid care labour and nurturant

and non-nurturant care can then be seen as spectrums rather than binaries. Most jobs do not contain themselves to one aspect of care, as a nurse can both support a patient in feeding themselves, but can also unpack and organise medical supplies, which would be examples of nurturant and non-nurturant care respectively. These concepts are then not meant to be used as hard definitions, but rather tools to help one understand the diversity of labour embedded within care work, and to exactly challenge a linear view of the concept.

This way, I propose a definition of care that is purposefully broad and draws on the definition brought forward by Duffy, as well as the work of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinh, Madeleine Bunting, and Alison Kafer as well as personal experience³. Drawing on the definition of care work proposed in the former section, as “the paid or unpaid labour, be it physical, mental, or emotional, put into attending to another’s needs”, it is then important to concretely understand what this means in practice.

Below, there is a diagram giving some hypothetical examples of care work being performed day-to-day. It is of course possible for the same action to find itself in another quadrant, especially on the paid/unpaid spectrum. Again, the goal is not to draw (metaphorical) hard lines between these quadrants, but rather see them as a spectrum within which these activities fall. A lot of these activities combine mental, physical, and emotional labour, despite the major recognition for remuneration being put on ‘physical’ aspects of care work.

In my personal relationships, particularly while living with a partner, I find that I tend to overcompensate in performing types of care labour that I am personally able to perform, to make up for the support I need as a disabled person. As I cannot lift heavy things, be on my feet for long, and require long periods of rest, I tend to take on the majority of the mental load, and often push my body to perform more domestic labour, to try and make sure I am not a ‘burden’ on my loved ones.

³ Note that the proposed definition for care is based on a holistic understanding of human needs and, particularly, Disability Justice and Rights, the result of years of reading, researching, and interaction with other disabled people.

	Paid	
Cooking at a restaurant		Teaching a first-grade class
Cleaning a hotel room		Doing a welfare check on a family
Packing orders at a pharmacy		Administering flu shots
Non-nurturant		Nurturant
Doing one's husband's laundry		Teaching one's child to ride a bike
Organising the shelves at the food bank		Listening to a friend going through a divorce
Delivering groceries to a disabled friend's house		Helping an intoxicated stranger get home
	Unpaid	

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Care, Own Work

Despite the borders in Figure 1, drawing strict boundaries in the classification of what constitutes care labour, or even labour, is not only unproductive but also impossible. Virtually every single task an individual performs throughout their day has involved the labour of hundreds of human beings around the world. Part of this phenomenon, or rather the increasingly complicated chains involved in the production of items, is typical of neoliberal capitalism, characterised by global supply chains. To minimise costs and maximise profit, companies produce and assemble their products in different parts of the world, often through subsidiaries or subcontracted companies. This phenomenon is well illustrated by The Toaster Project, conducted by Thomas Thwaites, who attempted to build a toaster from scratch, while also obtaining all the necessary materials himself. This proved to be an incredibly challenging undertaking, of course, which he admits to being especially difficult when it came to drawing boundaries. He writes on his website:

“yes I realise I cheated quite a lot! Though I really did naively set out with the intention of only using pre-industrial tools and methods, I soon realised that a) it was impossible, and b) by taking things like trains, or using wikipedia, or even not making my own shoes for walking to a mine, I was already in a sense ‘cheating’.”
(Thwaites, n.d.)

In fairness, there is nothing inherently morally questionable about the complexity of production chains, nor are these practices exclusive to capitalism. Labour specialisation has existed for many more centuries (and millennia) than capitalism. Being self-sufficient is not in human nature, as we have always been dependent on the care of each other for survival. The point here is not to demonise the networks of collaboration that are required to make consumer goods, but rather make these explicit. For millennia,

humans have traded and specialised in certain types of labour. (Safe, visually appealing) toasters require the labour of hundreds of people to come to life, and not just the capital of an individual who chooses to invest in one. This way, the lines between care and non-care work prove to be even blurrier. This is not an attempt to relativise care work or make it a useless concept by arguing that all work can be seen as care work. Rather, I attempt to show how complex and interrelated life, and labour in specific, becomes under capitalism.

Therefore, instead of focusing on objective boundaries on what types of work constitute care work, I would propose shifting the focus to people's care needs. Care work cannot be simply quantified and maximised for effectiveness. In fact, the individualistic culture imposed by neoliberal capitalism creates quite ineffective approaches to care. When it comes to childcare, for example, designing housing with community and care in mind allows for spaces and social settings where neighbours can easily watch over children collectively instead of individually, which is a lot more efficient and safer (Criado Perez 2019). Caring in the context of a community rather than a nuclear family where one member takes overwhelming responsibility for care proves challenging for the carer, as well as those who need care.

An approach to care where care needs are centred and resources are directed to addressing them, rather than being governed by a free market, not only prevents unnecessarily precocious death but also adds dignity to the lives of those who rely on nurturant care for survival (Bunting 2020; Ryan 2019). Over the past few decades, thanks to relentless organising by disabled people, there has been a shift in policy away from the institutionalisation of disabled people. The social model of disability being more widely accepted has meant that independent living for disabled people is made possible through accommodations, rather than locking a portion of the population away due to their lack of ability to 'care for themselves'.

Technology is oftentimes referred to as the solution to care shortages, but human contact is a fundamental aspect of care. The British government centres technology in its policy response to the care crisis the country currently faces (Bunting 2020). In fact, the last few decades have brought forward technology that has facilitated independent living, medical monitoring, and less time-consuming or demanding work. Some of these innovations include, for example, emergency buttons and cords or fall-detection bracelets, power wheelchairs, glucometers, sleep apnea machines, robot vacuum cleaners, and dishwashers, among many, many others. With the widespread use of Artificial Intelligence, these prospects increase even more. Returning to the nurturant/non-nurturant spectrum, I would argue that technology can aid carers in their job, both by easing nurturant tasks and also facilitating or completely automating some non-nurturant care. However, technology cannot fully replace human care, as human connection is a fundamental part of nurturant care. Not only is it crucial for child development, but it is also central to the wellbeing of humans of all ages.

This 'inefficiency' of organisation of unpaid care work within the nuclear family does not concern neoliberalism and austerity supporters, as it is the leisure and rest time of domestic workers, rather than money, that is 'wasted'. However, when we look at the care of disabled people which happens under state responsibility, the neoliberal rhetoric pushes for the lowest costs possible, translated into impossibly short visits where carers are unable to provide proper care or attention, which often leads to situations of abuse (Bunting 2020). This has meant that some disabled people have to be institutionalised due to budget cuts

in attendant care (Kafer 2013). In other situations, these budget cuts have meant that disabled people are left in unsafe conditions, abuse, and neglect, which lead to further health complications and even death (Ryan 2019). The guilt of being a burden I speak of earlier is a logical consequence of such an individualistic society.

However, caring for others does not have to be a burden, but rather a joy or a mere neutral aspect of one's life. Under neoliberal capitalism, a transactional view of care reigns, based on the idea that children are to be cared for so they can later provide for their elders and that elders are cared for as a payment form for the 'debt' society has to them due to their contributions during their youth. The cultural perception around care, and needing care, is a deeply cultural experience, which across time and space has been very different (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Despite the high costs of bringing a child to the world in the Global North during the 21st century, many individuals still feel the urge to have children and to care for them. Even further, many people own pets without any expectations of labour to be performed by them. Relationships do not need to be transactional to be cherished. Love, affection, and connection are perfectly sound reasons to provide care to another without expecting things in return.

Returning to *Scrapper*, the portrayal of this relationship between child and parent challenges what caring is, but also what a need for care means. Care goes beyond providing for one's survival, cleaning, and feeding, but is also a feeling of belonging, comfort and safety. In *Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care*, Madeleine Bunting interviews and follows care workers (such as nurses, home care providers, and general practitioners) in their work. Repeatedly and across the board, these individuals express the negative impact of austerity and budget cuts in their work, due to the decreasing time they have with each person they care for. Most professionals did many unpaid extra hours, simply because they could not find it in themselves not to. They also spoke of the importance of the trust developed with individuals they cared for, and how time is so crucial in the development of that relationship of trust. In *Scrapper*, Georgie's mother serves as her only caretaker for her whole life, and upon the introduction of her father, despite his attempts to care for her, she refuses the care. With time, the two develop a relationship of trust and Georgie lets down her guard and invites her father to care for her. While Georgie was able to survive without a caring figure, the care from her father offered crucial support in her development and wellbeing.

In conclusion, care is, has always been, and will continue to be a crucial part of human existence, and the consequences of the devaluation of this aspect of human life prove incredibly harmful. Care work can be aided by technology or externalised, but it includes many different types of labour within it. It is essentially impossible to draw hard lines or create overarching solutions to care shortages because it is so essential and diverse. Studying, researching, and writing about care requires care. This way, this thesis does not attempt to present care needs as a 'problem', but rather build an understanding of care as a complex but important aspect of human life.

Chapter 2: Providing Care

The Netflix miniseries *Maid* (2021) tells the story of Alex, a young mother who leaves her abusive partner to bring their child to safety. Alex then faces a series of hurdles and challenges as she tries to re-enter the job market after being a Stay At Home Mother for the first years of her child's life. One major challenge she faces is finding childcare – she is reluctant to trust her careless mother or her abusive father with her child, Maddy, but needs to work to provide for her. Alex struggles to navigate the available, despite restrictive and bureaucratic, state support with the help of a social worker. She lives in a domestic violence shelter for a few weeks and starts working in house cleaning while managing to find a daycare for Maddy. She manages to secure social housing, which is mould-infested and makes her child extremely sick, which forces her to live with her mother in a camper. When this becomes impossible, Alex briefly lives at her abusive father's house, and afterwards at the house of an old acquaintance who is romantically interested in her. Alex is relentless and driven by her insurmountable will to provide Maddy with a safe and happy childhood. The series shows how incredibly complicated it is to navigate poverty and escape abuse under capitalism, and how important kindness and support are to survivors of domestic violence. Every aspect of this series is connected to care. Alex cares for her daughter and her mother. Alex needs care by social services and the community to survive and continue caring for others. For work, she cleans houses, engaging in paid care work. To work, she needs daycare for her child.

While *Maid* is not based on a single true story, it is based on hundreds of true stories of parents, especially mothers, who navigate an abusive and uncaring world while doing their best to protect their children. Alex's story is the story of many people – particularly women and femmes – who live under neoliberal capitalism, where abuse and hardship run rampant and kindness and support are scarce and difficult to come by. In a way, Alex was part of the 'reserve army' I speak of earlier in this thesis. Before leaving her partner, Alex stayed home with Maddy while her partner worked at a bar. After leaving, Alex starts searching for employment, which she only achieves because of a personal contact of her social worker.

Alex joining the labour market is not a rational decision based on supply and demand, like the theory behind the reserve army would justify, but rather life circumstances of desperation and survival. Most people develop an intense survival and protective instinct towards their children, which pushes them to endure harsher conditions to be able to provide for them. This way, children under capitalism work not only as the workers of tomorrow but also as a way to keep the workers of today complacent and eager to work to provide for their children. As mentioned before, this reserve army then depends on desperation rather than availability. This is also a reason why reproductive rights are so closely regulated.

Despite love playing a major role in care and caring, part of what determines the way care is performed is dictated by one's culture and circumstances. While breastfeeding is universal even across species, helping a child with homework or ironing dress shirts are instances of care work which did not exist 400 years ago. This way, standards of what 'appropriate care' means, who is responsible for providing this care, and under what circumstances are very much dictated by social norms. This way, the feminisation of care work, as well as the heteronormative nuclear family, with the mother taking on the main caring role, are relatively new concepts which can be traced to purposeful cultural-political movements (Federici 2021).

While women's rights and emancipation are often presented as linear progression, the fact is that different interests are in play when it comes to legislation on women's ability to work, for example. Silvia Federici (2021) writes about the forced domestication of women after engaging in waged labour during the Industrial Revolution in the essay *'Origins and Development of Sexual Work in the United States and Britain'*. Federici explains how women were displaying disregard for domestic tasks and child care, which capitalists felt would lead to the extinction of the working class, leading to regulations on this matter. This way, night shifts for women were outlawed, and married women were prohibited from working in a factory. In addition to this, there was a cultural push to socially construct the woman and the mother away from sex or eroticism. Federici writes:

"For the housewife this reorganization meant that she would have to continue to make children, but she would have to worry that her hips might become too large (this is how the Calvary of diets began). She would continue washing dishes and floors but with polished nails and frills on her apron, and she would continue to slave from sunup to sundown but would have to spruce herself up to adequately greet her husband's return." (Federici 2021)

Not only is it impossible for a single person to perform all the labour involved in the creation of products consumed by the average individual, as established in the previous chapter through the example of the toaster project, but the expectations around care labour performance are often disproportionately placed on women and femmes. TikTok influencer and model Nara Smith, a 22-year-old mother of three, creates content mostly making food for her husband and children. In one video, she says her children asked her for a grilled cheese sandwich, which she then proceeds to make from scratch (the bread, butter, and cheese). In another, she makes homemade Cinnamon Toast Crunch for her husband.

Cooking, baking, and recreating complex processed foods in your own home can be enjoyable leisure activities but what is concerning about Nara's content is the aspirational nature of it. The comments on her videos are filled with young women hoping to have a similar life. Nara's content incentivises the viewer to not just demonise processed foods and attach moral value to them, but also think that caring for your children means dedicating all of your time to making them 'clean' foods from scratch. Nara always shows perfect hair, make-up, manicure, and luxury brand outfits and accessories. She films her content in her big beautiful house and spotless kitchen, but topics of wealth and politics are never brought up in her videos. Particularly, Nara only ever mentions her parents as help, and never any workers. The image of the aspirational tradwife⁴ that Nara presents is most likely dependent on the labour of domestic workers invisible to the viewer. Caring for three children under the age of three, while still working as a model, filming and editing multiple TikTok videos a week, and cooking her family meals from scratch in a massive house seems to be impossible to do on her own, and is, at the very least, impossible for the vast majority of women.

⁴ 'Tradwife' (short for traditional wife) is a term often used in online spaces to refer to "traditional wives". It is used in the context of conservative discourse (or by the critics of it) to refer to women who behave according to regressive gender roles, especially in the context of marriage and child bearing. It varies from the idea of a "stay at home mother", which tends to be used in the context of the choice made between partners for, in this case (and most often), the mother to care for the children during working hours.

It is a commonly held belief that women are “biologically” better suited for care and domestic work, an idea which I will not entertain. I refuse to do so not just because biological justifications for marginalisation, inequality, and oppression have been used throughout history for all kinds of communities, be that non-white people, disabled people, or queer people, but also because they are not very relevant to this discussion. The feminist perspective, taken from the Marxist historically constructed character of social reality, thereby rejects this naturalising identitarian concept (Federici 2021).

In truth, it does not matter if care work continues to be primarily performed by women and femmes in a society where care work is not considered inferior to other types of labour. While I trust that will not be the case, and have a strong belief that the gendering of care by society is what perpetuates this system, the goal here is not to make women stop caring. Rather, it is to give care the value it represents in how communities operate so that care is centred on how society is conceptualised and operated. I believe that in that process, care will be de-gendered which will lead to a more equal distribution of care responsibilities across different genders.

I would then argue that while care work is an intrinsic part of human life and experience, domestic labour can be constructed socially by political forces. In the essay, *‘The Construction of Domestic Work in Nineteenth-Century England and the Patriarchy of the Wage’*, Federici explains this exact phenomenon, which was orchestrated by the government, capitalists, and working-class men, with the assistance of unions. She writes:

“Complaints about the female workers' lack of domestic skills and wastefulness – their tendency to buy everything they needed, their inability to cook, sew, and keep a clean house, forcing their husbands to retreat to the “gin shop,” their lack of maternal affection – were staples of reformers' reports from the 1840s to the turn of the century.” (Federici, 2021)

This call for women to return to care for their families in the home and away from waged labour is then not done for the sake of women’s or children’s wellbeing, but rather for the maintaining of existing systems of power, but not explicitly. These conclusions bring me back to the content creator Nara Smith and the implicit message of her content, which is never articulated, but still effectively transmitted to a wide, and often young, audience. This becomes more evident when one delves into Nara and especially her husband’s connection to the Mormon Church, known for its regressive views on gender and race⁵ (Young and Gray 2015). Much like in Nara’s comment, where her parents, husband, and children are the only subjects of her blog, the ideal woman remains in this sphere. This way, a community approach to care, outside of the nuclear family, is dismissed, which again leads to more labour and dependency on a single individual.

This connects with the ideology of separate spheres, whereby there is a private home, where care takes place, managed by women, which is separate from the public sphere, where waged labour takes place. This way, domestic labour is constructed as a woman’s natural role and duty, thereby making it not only

⁵ The Mormon Church (also known as the Latter Day Saint Church), established in the 1830s by Joseph Smith has a history of excluding Black men and all women from priesthood and specific religious practices, as well as claiming dark skin to be a punishment from God. Mormon women are also taught to have a submissive relationship with their husbands and are discouraged from working outside the home (Young and Gray 2015, Brooks 2013).

unpaid but also constructed as unskilled (Duffy 2011). This is a crucial distinction in the understanding of the marginalisation of paid care workers. Beyond the nurturant/non-nurturant and paid/unpaid spectrums of care activities, there is an ideological spectrum created around “unskilled” and “skilled” care work, which runs rather in parallel with a spectrum of ‘poorly paid/extremely precarious’ and ‘well paid/secure’. This way, jobs like cleaner, cook, or nanny, would be associated with domestic labour (i.e. women’s labour) within the domestic sphere and other occupations, such as doctor, psychologist, or professor, associated with “skilled” care work, performed outside of the domestic sphere. In the middle one would find professions such as teachers, assistants, or nurses, careers which are still largely associated with women, but less associated with the private, domestic sphere, and more to the public sphere. In fairness, in the current state of neoliberal economies, due to austerity, even “skilled” professions which once used to be associated with economic stability and prosperity, are now precarious and poorly compensated in many Global North countries.

Industrialisation brought forward many of these norms surrounding labour, gender and remuneration. During this time, women used to provide for their families by working outside the home, oftentimes in sex work, or informal work (Federici 2021). During industrialisation, the gendering and dichotomy of paid and unpaid work, and domestic and market labour were introduced. Despite the ideological construction of these separate spheres of labour, with domestic labour being a ‘labour of love’, the fact is that paid care workers have a long history of contributing to domestic labour (Duffy 2011). I also do not believe that labour of love and paid labour are or should be opposed. Capitalism has created an association of labour with hardship and discontent, and joy with leisure with ‘free time’, through this separate sphere ideology, while attaching human survival to earning money.

Returning to *Maid*, the series illustrates how crucial to the wellbeing of survivors of abuse paid or unpaid care work is, and how its relationship with remuneration is complicated. The domestic violence shelter played a crucial role in providing Alex and Maddy with a safe space where Alex managed to find a more stable income through cleaning, also allowing her to apply to university. The labour of the people running the shelter, who are saving the lives of many, is also a labour of love, one that is hopefully remunerated. Similarly, in her job as a cleaner, especially as Alex starts to clean hoarder homes, a more challenging cleaning job, she showed great care towards her clients. While care is often connected and performed within familiar relationships, especially under capitalism, hard lines drawn between spheres of labour, be those regarding the physical location of where it takes place or the training or “skill” required for it, prove useless in the face of humanity.

Explaining why people care for others is simultaneously very simple and very complex, as it combines matters of philosophy, instinct, and evolution. As was established in the first chapter, care is central to humans and the very continuation of humankind, and caring is a fulfilling activity to many. Returning to the work of Madeleine Bunting (2020) in documenting and collecting testimonies from care workers, the passion felt by these individuals towards their work was remarkable. Despite very challenging tasks, little training, bad pay, and bad working conditions, these individuals always showed compassion and admiration for caring, exactly because of the feeling and the connection they felt with others. While societal expectations of who provides care (family, a larger community, a single parent, a paid carer), and the context in which this care is performed (in a hospital or institution, in one’s own home) change, the

experience of caring for another human being proves rewarding beyond material compensation. Returning to Figure 1, it seems nurturant care is particularly rewarding due to its face-to-face and developmental impact, regardless of whether it is paid or unpaid.

Chapter 3: Commodifying Care

The 2020 film *I Care a Lot* tells the story of a legal guardian, Marla Grayson, who makes a business of caring for elderly people. Marla, played by Rosamund Pike, is a queer woman operating this business in cooperation with her female partner, who by the end of the film, she is married to. She works together with doctors who report to the state that one of their patients is unable to care for themselves, which leads to an emergency court hearing without the elderly person present, where they are then placed under Marla's care. She then gains control over this person's entire life and assets, placing them in an elderly care facility controlled by individuals she works with, giving her control over the conditions in which these elderly people find themselves. This way, by taking possession of countless older people's assets, she accumulates great amounts of wealth, legally.

At the beginning of the film, one of Marla's clients passes, leaving a room available at one of the care facilities she partners with. She is then introduced by a doctor friend to an elderly woman, Jennifer, a retiree with no children and great assets, a "golden goose" in Marla's business model. Soon after placing the woman in the care facility, Marla starts receiving threats and notices there is someone powerful looking after this woman. It turns out this woman lived peacefully under a false identity and was the mother of a Russian mafia leader, Roman. The character is played by Peter Dinklage, a visibly disabled man, though his disability is never addressed in the film. The mother and son shared a close relationship, and Roman deeply cared for his mother, meeting with the woman in secret once a month. After a bloody conflict between Roman and Marla, they end up working together, building an empire led by Marla, caring for (or exploiting) thousands of elderly people. Marla ends up on the cover of magazines and talk shows, praised for her business achievements and for becoming a billionaire.

Under neoliberal capitalism, marginalised people are incentivised to pursue their individual interests despite being from a systematically marginalised group. Many of the characters in *I Care a Lot* visibly belong to marginalised groups, but still exploit others. Elon Musk, one of the world's richest men, is a disabled man (Saturday Night Live 2021). Identifying himself very publicly as an autistic person⁶ did not, however, stop him from sharing ableist discourse towards a (former) Twitter employee publicly (Duffy 2023). Rugged individualism makes it so that members from marginalised communities who benefit from the system use it to perpetrate harm against others. This paradox is also reflected in the film very evidently in the fact that Roman is outraged and willing to go to massive lengths to remove his mother from this abusive situation, while simultaneously proposing to partner with Marla to expand this same business. I would argue this is one of the results of this hyper-individualistic culture, which incentivises care to be extended only to individuals close enough to oneself instead of incentivising care towards individuals outside of personal relationships.

Despite this thesis being based on the way care work is ignored by neoliberal capitalism, there are plenty of capitalist ventures concerned with care work. This way, the 'ignored' portion of care work mostly

⁶ While Musk uses the word 'Aspergers' to describe his diagnosis, this term has fallen out of use in recent years, with distinctions between 'types' of autism being considered harmful and outdated. As this was the diagnosis given to many individuals in the past, the term still is colloquially used.

applies to care work performed inside of the home, unpaid. Neoliberalism has no issue recognising care needs and responsibilities if that means a possibility for profit. The care industry is already massive, and the increasing commodification⁷ of care means there is an opportunity to further expand and capitalise on care needs.

Technology also allows for the commodification of all aspects of human life to become easier, through subscriptions and added costs associated with products that used to be a one-off purchase. For instance, I use a TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) machine, a small device that gives small electric shocks to help my chronic pain. Living in The Netherlands, where healthcare is privatised, I (and/or my insurance) have paid for the time of a physiotherapist to introduce me to this machine, as well as the machine itself. At first, I was given a big block with a handful of buttons I could easily navigate. Then I got 'upgraded' to a smaller machine with only one button, which I must use with an app. The app then has a 'premium' feature where I can pay for supposedly more adequate electrocution sessions.

This trend goes in line with Marta Russel's (2019) writings about the concept of handicapitalism, a term coined by Johnnie Tuitel, the idea that disabled people are not a marginalised group under capitalism, but rather an untapped market with a demand for goods and services not currently exploited. Marta Russel's comment on the term – and what it represents – rings very true. She explains how disabled people are one of the most marginalised and impoverished groups worldwide, and how a lot of the money disabled people have is thanks to the fight for accommodations and rights for disabled people.

My reading of handicapitalism is not so much that it is an inappropriate reaction to the marginalisation of disabled people but rather a symptom of how disability interacts with capitalism. When seen as a market, disabled people are a very desirable one, since disability often leads to the need for additional tools or aids. Many items I own I have purchased due to my medical and access needs – a pill slicer, many pill organisers, a long shoe horn, an e-reader where I can both read and write (so I carry fewer items around), my sunflower lanyard (which indicates I have an invisible disability), a standing desk, the list goes on. Many of these products are also useful to nondisabled people, as in previous chapters, here too, the line proves blurry. These items often come with a hefty price tag attached to them, sometimes because companies know they can charge a premium for things that might ameliorate the lives of disabled people, others simply cost more to produce (Scope Policy Team 2018).

The truth is that many of these items are life-saving and life-changing and that we need individuals to design spaces and products with disabled people in mind. The fact that this does not happen reflects the very marginalisation and systematic exclusion of disabled people. So, on a certain level, we do need disabled people to be considered consumers whose needs matter, but this is not exclusive to capitalism. Wheelchairs, for example, have existed for hundreds of years (Woods and Watson 2014). This way, while under capitalism it is disabled people's money that is taken into consideration, alternative economic systems can account for disabled people's needs and address them without the goal of profit. Capitalism does not ameliorate the conditions in which disabled people live and instead leads to the systematic

⁷ Commodification is the process of turning an aspect of human life into a commodity, that is, a good or service to be exchanged for profit in a free market, characteristic of neoliberal capitalism.

exclusion of disabled people, which leaves the disabled population at much higher levels of poverty, trapped in a cycle of poverty (Statista 2024, Eurostat n.d.).

Neoliberal capitalism, as an ideology, does not stand for discrimination at face value – it insists that the market does not see identity markers such as race, ability or gender. The issue is that neoliberalism thrives on the aesthetics of inclusion – the idea that any type of person *could* be successful and accumulate vast amounts of wealth. The issue is that not *everybody* can make it. This economic system having such an unequal distribution of wealth, while at the same time making all aspects of human existence and survival tied to wealth, means that equality is inherently not possible. This means that the odds of “making it” for an average person of a marginalised community are slimmer but not impossible, because of historical and environmental factors.

There is another argument to be made about people from marginalised communities being more likely to be raised in community with others, thereby having values that would never allow them to accumulate such vast amounts of wealth without distributing it one way or another or finding issue in the exploitation of others that is necessary for that accumulation of wealth. But seeing women CEOs, black people in politics, or disabled people as professors gives a rightful sense of hope. It also gives, however, an arguably false sense that things are getting better, and allows systems which oppress marginalised people the possibility to profit from the aesthetics of the inclusion of marginalised people. Nike, for example, uses amputee mannequins to promote their product – but then does not allow people to buy a single shoe (Gillibrand & Pandey 2024)⁸.

Capitalism does not care. I would like to call the ending of *I Care a Lot* dystopian, with Marla becoming a billionaire and a figure for inspiration and praise in the public eye. Unfortunately, it is rather realistic, and an accurate representation of how this system is set up. Under a veil of caring for and about older people, this person accumulates massive amounts of wealth by exploiting these people. For this, Marla utilises legal means of capital accumulation. Her exploitation of the elderly is seen as positive, an untapped market she has found as a savvy businesswoman.

This film perfectly encapsulates the relationship capitalism has with care. For the sake of creating profit, care is a visible and important part of life – be that to care or to need care. But the system is set up to do exactly that – profit. Where there is capital to be invested, those needs and responsibilities will be considered and addressed. It is difficult to even put into words or imagine how else the system can interact with care by centring, supporting, and addressing the needs of individuals without expecting anything in return.

⁸ Nike has a charity programme exclusive to the US where amputees can request one free shoe per year but cannot choose the style.

Conclusion: Nurturing Care

Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution (2020) shaped my view of my own disabled body, the disabled community, and what an accessible future can look like. Unlike most media surrounding the topic of disability, *Crip Camp* centres the stories of disabled people as told by themselves and their peers. The documentary starts with footage of Camp Jened, a summer camp for disabled youth, located in the state of New York, USA. One of the film's writers, Jimmy Lebrecht, whose testimonies and memories are used throughout the film, says about his experience at Camp Jened: "What we saw at that camp was that our lives could be better. The fact of the matter is that you don't have anything to strive for if you don't know that it exists." Many of the campers and counsellors reported a feeling of belonging and community they had never experienced before. Many of them stay in touch, go to University, and even marry. These ideas, principles, and experiences meant that many Camp Jened alumni would go on to lead the Disability Rights Movement, which culminated in the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In its earlier stages, this thesis was meant to be structured within the logic of a false dichotomy between carers and those needing care. It quickly became apparent that such a distinction was not only impractical but also wrong. These two groups are far from mutually exclusive – a very large portion of the population belongs to both these groups. The concept of intersectionality shows how each individual exists at the intersection of different identities and life circumstances. This way, instead of dividing the population into two groups, this thesis identified different challenges and circumstances individuals face as carers or as receivers of care. *Crip Camp* features campers who go on to become counsellors, disabled people such as Judith Heumann, who simultaneously require care and assistance from others while performing a job filled with responsibility for young people. Campers themselves care for each other, attending to the care needs they could address.

Neoliberalism dictates that humans must spend their time generating profit through the exchange of goods and services to earn rest and leisure. With the mindset of "time is money", "everyone has the same twenty-four hours" and the cost-benefit analysis of one's time, taking the time to care for another is an act of resistance. But human kindness and cooperation can be a joint value in place of individualism and self-interest. By looking at the bulk of care work as a gift – something one individual gives another without the expectation of something immediate in exchange – it becomes clear it cannot be quantified. While the time someone spends doing care work might be monetarily compensated, as it is impossible to survive without participating in the exchange economy for one's survival needs, care in itself is not a quantifiable good.

This thesis set out to investigate why care work is a marginalised aspect of neoliberal economies, despite the system's necessity for care work to sustain itself. The first chapter lays out the approach taken to address this research question: one that sees care as holistic, indispensable, and crucial to human existence. The following chapter delves into the concept of care, which consists of the labour one person does to attend to another's needs, but is hard to draw boundaries around. Afterwards, we establish providing care is important to many human beings, but what care looks like and how that labour is performed is influenced by society and culture. Lastly, it is established that capitalism does "see" care, but only when that is a pretext to create markets to generate further profit.

The main argument is that neoliberal economies marginalise care work not *despite* needing care work to sustain themselves, but *because of* it. Neoliberal ideology argues against the importance of care work because it does not generate profit in the free market. It must rely on the large-scale exploitation of individuals to generate these profits for capital accumulation instead of needs-based distribution. This way, the marginalisation of individuals under neoliberalism is both an ideological tool to maintain existing power relationships between classes and a result of the policy choices brought forward.

The analysis presented in this thesis mainly stands out in its unique combination of methods, authors, and disciplines, as well as the positioning of care work as an all-encompassing topic rather than a niche. This thesis goes beyond the problematisation of the crisis of care most literature brings forward and rather argues for a reimagining of the very place of care work in society. It establishes this crisis not as a flaw in the system, but rather it working exactly as intended. Further, it offers argumentation as to why it does not have to be that way, and how an alternate future can be transformative in the fulfilment of life, with love, friendship, and of course, care.

While technology certainly plays an important role in this imagined future, that role must again be driven by the goal of the common good rather than corporate greed. While robots and machines can clean our homes, deliver our medicine, and perhaps even perform surgery, humans can enjoy more free time playing games, reading to children, writing, making art, and going to the park with elders. The important division of labour here is for humans to support and care for themselves and others, and for machines to facilitate the time for that by taking over other tasks.

Under neoliberalism, the state becomes a facilitator of the free market rather than a support system for those who need it. Under such circumstances, forms of community support, such as Camp Jened, domestic violence shelters, food banks, friends, and family become crucial to the survival and wellbeing of many. As a last example of community support, I would like to mention individuals who create content by cleaning hoarding homes for free. As cleaning companies charge high prices for these cleanings, individuals such as Brogan Ingram from Canada (Morgan 2024) and Auri Katariina from Finland (Kudhail 2022) provide these services for free. They are able to do so through the monetisation of the content they produce and sponsoring from cleaning companies, which provide products, as well as lodging and travel for their further cleanings.

These women leave behind cleaning products, new blankets, and most importantly a clean and safe house for people in dire situations. As they often point out in their voiceovers, such situations are the result of grim life circumstances with no community support, often involving disability, trauma, and mental illness. There are, however, no other forms of support for these individuals. If instead of individual efforts to tackle this issue, there were systematic forms of support available, the wellbeing of such individuals would be effectively handled.

This is just one example of how society is not currently set up to prioritise care and human wellbeing. As I planned this thesis, I reflected on the title for this concluding chapter. I pondered on words like enforcing, enabling, or practising care, but nurturing is the exact approach I support is taken towards care. This thesis

has conveyed, from so many angles, that human beings are wired and willing to care. While a society which centres care might seem distant and naive, the care is already there, it just needs nurturing.

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