

The Cost of Care: Rethinking Value in Times of Crisis

An interview with Annabelle Dawson, Mary Mellor

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From nursing the sick to keeping grocery stores open, the coronavirus crisis has shone a spotlight on the work that is essential to the survival of societies. Its burden has fallen heavily on the shoulders of women. Economist and ecofeminist Mary Mellor explains why the economy sidelines certain work and workers, pointing towards opportunities for a new system of value. In the push for economies guided by the principles of justice and sustainability, reconciling work with life will be essential.

Annabelle Dawson: The health crisis has given the question of work in our societies huge visibility. What has been the role of women in the pandemic?

Mary Mellor: Life for women has become much more complicated since the beginning of the crisis. Women are well represented in essential work and work in the home has changed dramatically too. It is not only about caring but also avoiding infection and homeschooling. The opportunity to interact with female friends – at school gates, the park, children’s play areas – has been reduced, while worries about income or cramped space are greater than ever. Mental health and domestic violence are major concerns. Nearly all of the problems that a woman can face, she is facing now.

It comes down to two types of patriarchy. One is patriarchy in the home. Are men changing their behaviour, and if so, will they sustain that change after this crisis is over? And then there’s the patriarchy of the wider economy. Does it make space for caring? If the economy is patriarchally organised and assumes that it is the role of women to step in whenever there is a crisis in the family, then men can’t help even if they want to as they don’t get the same understanding from employers.

Ideally, we would see a “new normal” that maintains respect for the essential jobs in the human lifecycle – caring for the old, the young and the sick, and education. People talk about universal basic services. Caring and education should be seen as the universal basics of the economy – the essential, most important parts. They should, therefore, be properly rewarded. Though it varies between societies, the gender pay gap is still large. In part, it’s because much of the work done mostly by women, like care work, is unpaid or underpaid. If those kinds of jobs were better paid and valued, more men would do them.

You’ve observed that women’s work is body work. Is this observation relevant in the context of Covid-19?

I see body work as the responsibility for human existence as a body in nature. Body work is not only done by women – it can be done by men, it can be done by children. Historically, it was done by slaves. However, it tends to fall back on women and their sense of duty, fairness, love, commitment, and compassion because nobody else takes responsibility for it – something I call “imposed altruism”. Body work is not just doing the care work, it’s the responsibility for it, the time it takes, and the constraints it puts on women’s lives – being “available”. You can’t plan it. You know people are going to grow old or that children have to be brought up. But when it comes to mental and physical breakdown, it can happen at any time.

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We are creatures in a body, and our body is in the environment. The economy marginalises the life of the body. I developed the idea of “Economic Man” (who could be female) to refer to how the economy is carved out of human existence in nature. People who work in the economy have to ignore body work, the unexpected and daily cycle of routines of the body. Of course, it's not that they don't have bodies; they still have to live through their 24-hour cycle and the lifecycle from birth to death. They can marginalise their embodiment but they can't get rid of it. Economic Man must pretend that they're not sick, that they've not got responsibilities, that they've not got to work close to home so they can pick the kids up from school.

So body work tends to be the “essential work”: the nursing, teaching, and care work that meets the very human needs of the body?

It's also collecting the rubbish, ensuring there's a clean water supply, transport... quite a lot of body work is associated with men as well as women. We should be careful not to gender body work too much. The big question is, are we going to continue to recognise these jobs as essential further down the line? Are we going to reward the sewage workers and the food processors? We can certainly do without a financial sector, without superyachts for billionaires, and new SUVs. We need an economy that upends the priorities of what we pay for, or don't pay for, in the case of unpaid labour.

Why are female leaders such as Jacinda Ardern, Nicola Sturgeon, and Angela Merkel generally perceived to have been more effective leaders throughout the crisis?

This is certainly gendered. I'm not saying that there are no competent male leaders, but these women have been outstanding. They all have different politics – Merkel is from the Right, Sturgeon's Scottish National Party is to the Left, Jacinda Ardern is Labour – so it strikes me that what they share is a lack of political ego. You cannot imagine these women behaving in the same ways as narcissistic politicians like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. On a continuum of how purposeful, rational, and undramatic their behaviour is, those three women and Johnson and Trump are at opposite extremes. It's strength without ego, and I really admire them all.

You've worked extensively on money and the financial system. How do you link this focus with your work on ecofeminism and reproductive labour?

My work on money grew out of my work on ecofeminism. I became interested in ecofeminism when it began to grow as a movement in the mid-1970s, and I began writing about it in depth in the 1990s. My original framework was Marxist theory, in a very loose sense – the general theory about inequalities, class, and economic structures.

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I started looking into the distinction between domestic work and the economy as we perceive it, and women's place in this distinction: their unequal treatment by the economy, with their work unpaid or underpaid. I felt that this came down to body work – that the male-dominated formal economy cushioned itself from the implications of being a human body in nature by making women responsible, by imposed altruism, for that work of maturing, dying, sickness, and health.

I began to think, “What is the boundary here?” “How is it policed?” It struck me that money was the boundary. Women’s work, and the natural world, are externalised by how our economy is structured. I began to ask, “What is money?” How come many things that are unnecessary or trivial get a value, whereas the things we need don’t? This led me to question what money actually is, who controls it, who owns it, and how it functions.

Could money be a lever for change in the transition towards more sustainable and just economies?

If we understand what money is, how it works, its history, and its social and political nature, we can realise its radical potential. Now, the dominant model of neoliberalism has almost total control and most people think that the economy is immutable, that you can’t change anything. But the body of work on rethinking money is not just academic theorising, it is building up a framework powerful enough to fracture the status quo. Friedrich Hayek began his work on neoliberalism in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. It took 30 years for his ideas to coalesce into what became the heyday of neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards. Thinking around radical alternatives has been growing from the 2000s and, in 20 to 30 years, it might be the new common sense.

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The scale of intervention in moments of crisis undermines the idea that government action is financially constrained. Are there opportunities to be found there?

This is the possible breakthrough: moments of crisis expose the limitations and potential failure of the market system. In 2007 to 2008, it was the financial system. In 2019 to 2020, it has been a health crisis leading to an economic crisis. It is significant that health has so far trumped the economy. The great claims of neoliberalism – the myth that money is in short supply, that only the market creates wealth, and that the state does not create money (or if it could, it shouldn’t) – have been blown out of the water. The state rescued the financial markets back in 2007 to 2008, and again here it comes with bucket-loads of money. The assumption that the state must cover its expenditure by taxation, and even then that the taxpayer is uniquely a product of the private sector, is very persuasive. However, the public sector contributes to gross domestic product (GDP) and its employees also pay taxes. We have no conception of the public economy, only the market economy. The very concept of debt is the denial that there is a public economy and that money is public. The public has the sovereign right to create and circulate money. If the government borrows off the financial sector, that’s borrowing. But if the government borrows off the central bank, the state is effectively borrowing off itself.

Which narratives can challenge assumptions around debt? Post-2008, the politics of debt were used to justify austerity. Going forward, this is also a huge threat.

It is a source of hope that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which wrongly advocated austerity after 2008, now has a very different tone. With its influence on global monetary policy, the IMF is now – quite rightly – calling on states to not stop their massive injection of new money through quantitative easing and direct support for the private sector. The public sector is still functioning, but the private sector is being rescued by unlimited funds.

There is no natural limit on funding or money in the economy. At the moment, the money that was in the market economy has disappeared with unemployment and reduced demand. It’s like a football game where the ball has been kicked out of play. The players are still there, but until the ball is put back in, they cannot play. The money has gone out of play and it won’t come back unless somebody puts it back. The only source of money that is strong

enough to do that is the state. The flow of money only needs to stop when the economy begins to “overheat”– to inflate. But our economies have been flat for a very long time. The context for monetary policy has completely changed since the 1970s.

So, there is hope that we won't see the return of austerity politics?

Oh, absolutely. Ideas about money that were originally marginalised are becoming mainstream. One of the starting points of the monetary reform movements was the realisation that banks created money out of fresh air. Before then, it was assumed that banks took in savings and lent them out to borrowers. But there was always much more lending than there were deposits, so it became clear that the banks were creating money. What kind of money were they creating? Public money: pounds sterling, euros, dollars. The money supply began to depend on bank lending, and when lending seized up in 2008, the money supply shrunk dramatically. The ensuing crisis forced a kind of recognition, even among central banks and the IMF, that the uncontrolled private creation of money was unsustainable.

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The institutional structures of money are beginning to understand the argument that radical money theorists like myself have been making, and they are shifting their position. The role of the public in the creation and circulation of money is seen as being part of the process of how money operates. We need to start asking questions like, “How much direct funding is possible by the state?” and, “How should bank lending be regulated?” Many discussions can be opened up that enable us to break away from market-based concepts of profit and growth. The public economy works on different principles: it's about needs, services, and the circulation of money to support this exchange: “I'll nurse you, you teach my child.” That's not a market structure, that's a public structure.

In Finland, more than half of GDP is in the public sector. It's a public rather than a private economy. The economy of the United States, on the other hand, is about a third public. Balancing the public and the private economies is where money comes in. It is allocation through bank lending, and state spending needs to be at the centre of the debate.

In their role as caregivers, women often find themselves at the sharp end of cuts to public spending. A similar gendered dynamic can be seen in the impacts of environmental change and degradation. How would you describe the link between the feminist and climate movements?

I have worries about this. Ecofeminism arose in the 1970s at the same time as ecologism and the second-wave feminist movement. I don't think the feminist movement has incorporated green thinking at its heart, and I don't think the green movement has taken feminism to its heart either. The two have been linked by ecofeminists, but they are neither exclusively feminists nor exclusively green – they are ecofeminists. My concern is that the climate debate will fail to integrate feminist thinking. I think it will be largely male-dominated and focus on technical arguments. The idea of the separation between the work of the body and the work of the economy as it is currently structured is probably not going to be broken down. The Green New Deal is likely to be all technological solutions – which will get public funding, but there will probably not be public funding for care and community work. This kind of work most likely won't be recognised in monetary terms.

The Green New Deal for Europe calls for a care income for people who care for others and the planet. What do you make of such a proposal?

Back in the 1970s there was a campaign for wages for housework. Some feminists were against the idea, arguing that it trapped women in gendered work, in body work. It's a fair argument when it comes to a care income, which would be a transfer payment from the economy to women or nature for the work they do. What the Green New Deal has to do is integrate work and life, taking into account both ecological time (the time it takes for nature to regenerate) and biological time (the birth-death lifecycle of the body). If the Green New Deal does not integrate work and life in this very complete way, I don't think it will overcome the care question.

What we want is an economy that prioritises our basic needs. I call it "sufficiency provisioning": enough for everybody, but not too much or too little. Provisioning brings in unpaid work, convivial work, and community, not just profit-generating activity. Profit should be the last calculation. When it comes to private or public work, the key question to ask is what human need it meets.



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