



Citation for published version:

Howard, N 2020, A World of Care. in M Parker (ed.), *Life After COVID-19. The Other Side of Crisis*. Bristol University Press. <<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/life-after-covid-19>>

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

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A World of Care

Neil Howard

This crisis is different from anything we have ever experienced, and different from what the majority of us ever imagined experiencing. Yet alongside the suffering and dislocation, a huge window of opportunity has opened, to leverage the best of the present into a future that works for all. I argue that that this future could centre around care, which has been irrupting back into the mainstream of public and political life. Our task as political actors is to harness the hope, possibility and desire for change that this is generating and to channel it towards that better future. This essay aims to contribute to efforts in this direction.

Why is now so different?

In 'normal' life, the economically expendable are left to suffer and often die. Given this, one may have expected our political leaders to respond to the coronavirus outbreak in neo-Malthusian ways, letting it root out the 'weak' while business carries on as usual and perhaps even benefits (Klein 2007). Yet this is *not* how they have responded. In fact, for all their dithering, their basic response, at least in the first major phase, has been to subordinate business in the service of society, with the express intention of caring for all, and in particular the vulnerable. Concretely, this involved pressing pause on most of the economy, taking progressive steps like infrastructure nationalisation, and even efforts to end homelessness. Leaders have been exhorting us to look after each other. This both acknowledges that there is another principle around which society can be organised – care – and, temporarily at least, sees the system-logic of profit suspended in favour of it.

Part of this radical divergence from the status quo can be explained by the universal nature of a pandemic. One individual can ultimately be a vector of transmission for all others. Likewise, protecting (caring for) one individual becomes a universal imperative – if we fail to protect the one, we might all get ill. In the same vein, if we are to protect all of us we must act as if each individual life is all our lives. That is why contained in the logic of social distancing – however worrying it may also be – is something so potentially transformative. Authorities which usually compel us to be separate and alienated in our togetherness, our collective experience of market life, are now compelling us (and in many cases pleading with us) to be together in our separateness, and this time in service of life (our lives) beyond the market.

It is also significant that so many of us are now experiencing a sense of shared humanity. Again, this is because a pandemic brings home that we are all made of the same stuff, we are all human, vulnerable, and thus in need of care. This embodied experience of our shared vulnerability is extremely connecting. And the connection (and in many cases community) being weaved between people is manifest in the sheer scale at which so many are responding with acts of care, ranging from the millions participating in localised mutual aid groups to the hundreds of thousands who have volunteered in support of national health systems.

Care is also returning to the foreground of public consciousness through the blurring of 'traditional' boundaries. Typically, within Western market society, home and work life are constructed not just as distinct but as opposites. Yet during lockdown, for perhaps the first

time in the history of capitalist civilisation, we have almost *all* been asked to work and care from home at the same time. This has had a number of consequences. First, it explodes the fiction of separate realms and makes it possible for many to acknowledge that they have caring commitments and priorities beyond the domain of work *even whilst at work*. Second, it has made clear that care is the foundation of all else, including ‘work’, since those with dependents have largely been asked to work ‘as much as possible’ and only after attending to their caring responsibilities. This is like a general return of that which has been repressed.

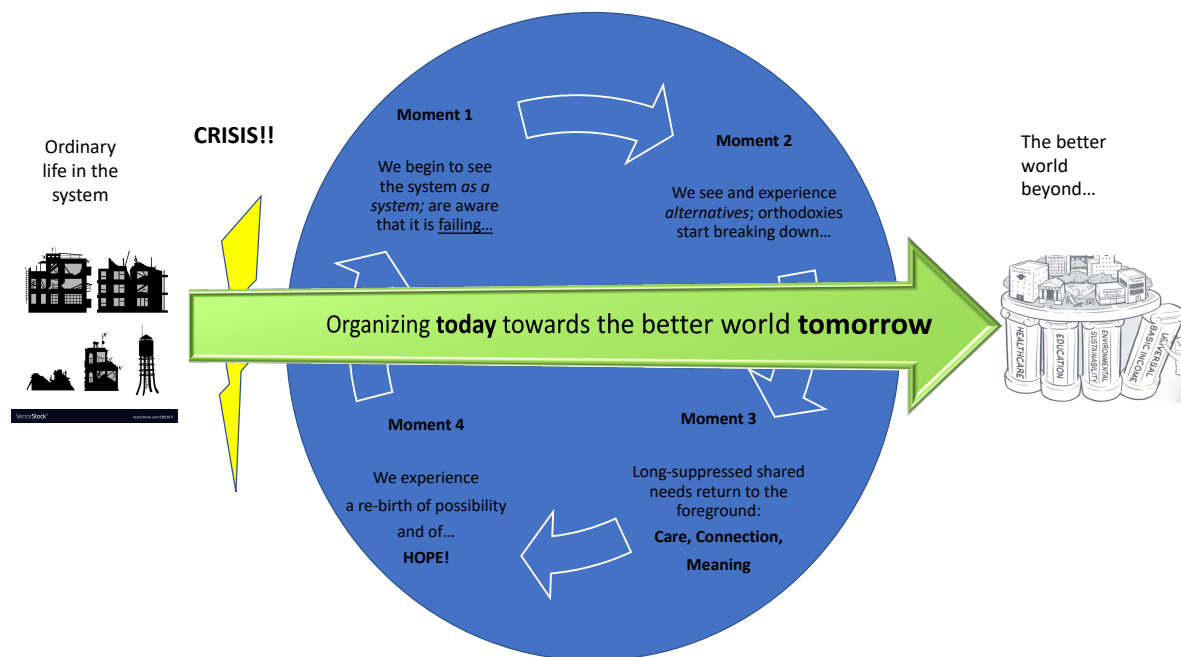
And the repressed is also returning socially in the sense that lockdown/slowdown is exposing the routinised brutality of the system we normally live under. Whereas, in ordinary times, many people are too busy to worry about the homeless, too stressed to think of those living hand-to-mouth, and too distracted to remember all those bodies in need of specialised attention, right now such societal detachment is impossible. Slowdown is bringing vulnerability into the public consciousness like never before, focussing attention at last on everyone for whom the system is not well designed. Partly this is because millions have at last had the time to stop and see what was always there. But partly it is because slowdown has impacted ‘normal’ lives so deeply – with countless numbers losing income security and access to the services they rely on – that suddenly they have gained a sense of what life is ordinarily like for the disadvantaged. This has led to a groundswell of calls for the better organisation of our collective resources so as to care for those who usually fall through the cracks.

In turn, I think all of the above is opening deep-rooted questions about *meaning* and how society is or is not set up to support people in experiencing it. Ordinarily, large swathes of the population live working lives characterised by the experiences that David Graeber describes in his book, *Bullshit Jobs* (2018). That is, they do things that neither care for anyone nor carry any meaning, which is part of why so many people ordinarily feel so alienated. But now, for the first time in most of our lives, we are living, however briefly, in a system that urges us to take responsibility for each other and invites us to do so. In addition, given that the incessant treadmill has momentarily stopped, we now actually have the time to do so. It is no coincidence that millions have therefore stepped forward, and what this points to is that people both need care and *want to offer it*, which stands in stark contrast to the individualising stories behind neoliberal claims that ‘there is no such thing as society’. Moreover, it supports claims that humans have evolved to crave both care *and* meaning, and that performing the former often leads to an experience of the latter (e.g. Rosenberg 2003). The radical potential in this is huge, and I think it explains a great deal of why so many people are presently connecting to hope that the world could really be different.

Four Moments

In organising hope towards this different world, I think it may be useful to break the moment we are living through into four distinct moments. All are interrelated and overlapping, but separating them can help us to recognise and act on their uniqueness. Each can be seen in the figure below:

Figure 1: Making Sense Of Moments Of Opportunity



In Moment 1, millions have begun to perceive the system we live under as a system and to see the many holes in it. People recognise that it leaves too many uncared for, unsafe or on the verge of being so. This is generating anger and resistance.

In Moment 2, people are sensing that other ways of doing things are possible, with citizens and political leaders responding by taking care of each other through organising time and the flow of resources to do so.

With Moment 3, we are witnessing the irruption of long-suppressed needs into the mainstream of public and political life. *Care* has returned as a central principle of our collective being. Similarly, a sense of *connection* and *community* is being fostered in our shared vulnerability and the many caring responses to it. The interaction between care and community is generating *meaning* for millions.

All of this coalesces in Moment 4, which I understand to be woven through and a consequence of the previous three: that **hope is back**, specifically in that it may be possible for us to live in a world set up to care for and attend to our needs rather than accumulation.

Vision

Every revolution needs a vision, a big story, and in organising our hope I think we need one too. For me, this could centre around a different telling of the human story. The story we have so far been told is tragic. It holds that humans are inherently self-serving, that there is never enough to go around, and that we have to compete in order to decide who gets what. *This is the definition of hopeless*, and it is being contradicted by the explosion of solidarity that we are presently witnessing.

The alternative story that I think has just become possible is that we are complex creatures capable of love as well as harm. We are primed for connection because born into and sustained by webs of care. These webs can be nurtured, and when they are, we grow. If we trust in each other and in the abundance of life on this planet, we are able to cooperate in order to distribute resources in caring ways to meet our individual and collective needs. Doing this is deeply meaningful, in part because these needs are always shared. We are united in being *needing-beings*, for we all require food, water and air, just as we require care, connection, and meaning. These threads of shared-ness are also threads of possibility.

What Ana Dinerstein calls ‘critical hope’ (2015) is revitalised right now precisely because these threads are again perceivable on a mass scale. People are connecting to their shared humanity and with each other; they are doing so in order to offer care through the provision of things like food and water; and in the process they are experiencing meaning. In it are contained the foundations of a better future.

In my version of the future, which is inspired by people like Miki Kashtan (2015) and Ian Gough (2017), our basic needs are provided for, be these food, water, clean air, or shelter, alongside systems to support our physical and mental health. *We are the ones doing the providing*. Because of this, we all feel deeply that we belong, are part of a community, and this engenders a foundational trust. That trust is what enables us to stand humbly but calmly in the face of uncertainty. For although we won’t always know how we to deal with our challenges, we do know that we are committed to finding solutions which work for everyone, because in this world everyone is valued.

Principles

Organising for this world will involve many strategies and numerous disappointments. To that end, I offer a list of principles for the strategic and tactical choices that we are going to have to make. Although far from complete, if I am right in my analysis as to why this time and the four moments within it are so different and full of possibility, then these follow on logically as core guides for what we do.

1) *Grow the space opened by at least one of the moments described above.* Otherwise, we waste the opening and the energy attached to it.

2) *Link different moments to each other.* This will grow the space opened by each moment and do so in ways that could set off mutually reinforcing dynamics.

3) *Link everything to the golden thread of hope.* As Bloch famously argued (1959), hope is the foundation of all progressive politics because it affirms that other better worlds are possible and that we can sense them in this one. In my view, it is therefore absolutely vital that whatever strategic choices we make be grounded in the intention to grow people’s hope.

4) *Link everything to a meta-narrative centred around care.* The return of care is at the heart of the return of hope and in this sense it is vital that we pivot our stories around care as the alternative principle by which we could organise our society.

5) *Build coalitions.* All social movements are pushing for a world of care. Right now, each is thinking about how to respond to this crisis, and all are asking how best to use the opportunities it has opened. This makes now an unprecedented chance to push for the broadest possible coalition in the direction of a world of care.

6) *Be intentionally diverse.* In actively co-creating our coalitions, we would be wise to develop strategies and tactics in conversation with those who we might not ordinarily not encounter or agree with. This will increase our chances of reaching across existing divides, which this crisis is making possible.

7) *Target different pillars of the status quo.* In their book on civil resistance, Paul and Mark Engler argue that major social shifts tend to seem impossible until they feel inevitable (2017). The avalanche of inevitability gathers pace as established pillars of society begin to reject the old paradigm and move into line with the new one. Churches, mosques, temples, universities, unions, business associations, public bodies, civil society coalitions: all are pillars of the norm, and we need to progressively nudge each towards a demand for a different future based on care.

8) *Walk the walk whilst talking the talk.* Few qualities are more inspiring than integrity. And if we want to build a world based on care for our shared humanity, then we will need to treat everyone with care and respect. For those in positions of privilege, this means confronting the painful reality that our privilege is made possible by the suffering of those who lack it.

Towards a world of care

In applying the above principles towards the more caring world latent in this one, I think the following could be fundamental steps to take and targets to work towards:

1. Mutual Aid. Already, exceptional solidarity has coalesced around local mutual aid groups providing unleadership to people throughout this crisis. All of us can be a part of these. They are vital for now and as prefigurations of the better, more caring world.

2. Universal Basic Services and Universal Basic Income. If we want to live in a world of care in which we share our resources to attend to our needs, we require the infrastructure to make that work. This means well-funded basic services free at the point of delivery for all. Likewise, in a money economy, we need money to survive; this makes basic income vital both as a humanitarian intervention in the present and a potential tool for leveraging the new world into existence.

3. A Movement of Movements. Inside every progressive demand, and therefore every progressive movement or organisation, lies care, and specifically the desire to organise social life to advance it. Now more than ever the caring imperative is in our collective consciousness, so now more than ever we have a chance to make care explicit as the foundation of a movement of movements that unites our struggles against a common problem and towards a common alternative.

4. #NoGoingBack. It is impossible not to be struck by what we are living and how *different* it feels. Much of that difference involves hardship. But in many respects, it is better. This cuts across party politics and makes the cry that there can be no going back one that people of all political persuasions can rally around. Like many other powerful demands, this one is open. It does not narrowly circumscribe; rather, it articulates the essence of what is shared by so many and in the process affirms our shared humanity.

5. A People's Assembly. I have not discussed any of the elephants in the room. No climate change. No new economics. No new social contract. This has been intentional. These are *the* issues and we all know it. The problem is that we are not united in how to deal with them or in believing that doing so is possible. Now, possibility is in the air, but still there is no agreement as to how to use it. For me, this makes a state-mandated people's assembly potentially very attractive. People's assemblies are intentionally inclusive processes designed to arrive at solutions that care for the needs and interests of all stakeholders. In this, they could appeal both to those who may have to give up what they hold as part of the status quo and to those who want change but do not yet know how to organise it so as to care even for those who stand to lose in transition.

The crisis we are living through is opening up fissures and shifting tectonic plates. As those plates shift mountains are moving and when they do the ground on which we stand shakes and shakes. These tremors bring danger, fear and uncertainty. But they are also exhilarating. The exhilaration so many of us feel is rooted in the irruption of care and its re-emergence as the always-ever-there foundation of our lives. In this, there is hope. Our challenge is to organise that hope towards the caring alternative reality that has begun to make itself visible.

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