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Care and its Resistances

The Gens Manifesto and the Ambiguities of Kinship

I am grateful for this opportunity to revisit the *Gens* manifesto, which, as the authors state in the interview, serves as a "declaration of an intention, a call to action, and a promise". The manifesto has reignited our attention to the centrality of anthropological contributions and feminist substantivist critiques in rethinking relations and processes involved in the naturalization of capitalist structures. My contribution follows the *Gens* manifesto's call for generativity, examining the growing centrality of the notion of care in anthropological analysis. I unpick care as a category, essential to processes of capitalist dispossession, appropriation, predation and capture. In doing so, this piece departs from the closing notes of the interview with the authors of *Gens* published on boasblogs, in which they highlight the "productive powers of kinship".

I have chosen to examine the term care in particular, itself widely associated with such powers of kinship, in part because it has been widely employed by the authors of *Gens*, but also as it gains widespread purchase in anthropological discourse and more widely across social theory. Furthering the insights of the authors of *Gens*, I question whether the term care risks aggregating too wide a range of 'productive' phenomena? I do not wish to argue that phenomena grouped as care are not central to understanding social inequalities. On the contrary. This being said: do the ambiguities of care themselves – the ability of care to be potentially both coercive and autonomy enhancing require further unpicking to be truly analytically useful? Are these all the same thing?

As the authors of *Gens* have highlighted, it is crucial that we examine the analytical frameworks we employ. Pulling apart such distinctions, they argue, is critical to help scholars analyse the ways in which profound inequalities of race, gender, class, and

socio-economic status emerge and solidify. In some cases, they highlight, such analytical distinctions are in fact central to furthering social inequalities.

Scholarship has begun to give more importance to the family as a crucial site in the development or even the origins of inequality (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Activist scholars and movements have in turn highlighted the need to reformulate kinship relations to foster autonomy enhancing relations, in which mutual dependence and care are seen as central to freedom (see Chatzidakis, Hakim, Litter and Rottenberg 2020; Bergman and Montgomery 2017). Graeber's work in particular, drew attention to the significance of asymmetries of care and knowledge (Graeber 2012) in shaping social relations, particularly under bureaucratic managerial manifestations of capitalist logics. His work, as I have discussed elsewhere (Dillabough-Lefebvre 2020) drew extensively on much of the same feminist scholarship focusing on social reproduction and care from which the authors of Gens explicitly trace their intellectual lineage. In uncovering such genealogies, we can shed light on the social movements informing scholarship, rather than reproducing a logic of capture and appropriation, while also acknowledging the asymmetries of power embedded in academic practices.

The authors of *Gens* suggest that the ways in which we theorise such logics should avoid adopting totalizing frameworks. The term care, I argue, is overdue a reassessment in light of the growing reliance on it as a broad-ranging analytic term. Care can repair and reproduce yet can also generate dependency (see Ferguson 2013). Moving beyond this, should we identify more precise terms for the more coercive aspects of human behaviour? Are care and coercion simply two sides of the same coin (as in Foucault's concept of Pastoral Power – 1982)? Is it precisely this ambiguity which underpins the resistances of kinship, aspects of our relation to states (Steinmüller 2022), as well as the naturalization of capitalist structures? If this is the case, then care as an analytic term requires disaggregation, so as to specify what aspects of care are themselves violent and coercive, instead of advancing an

approach which places care in opposition to violence.

Paradoxes of Care?

Anthropological writing on care, as I see it, has coalesced around two approaches, often- overlapping. The first approach highlights under-valued acts of caregiving/taking, as part of a wider ethical and emancipatory project aimed at addressing inequalities, an approach widely influenced by care ethics (Tronto 1993); work emerging from feminist movements arguing for recognition of 'domestic' labour (Federici 1975: 187-194, De La Costa); as well as insights from new kinship studies (Borneman 2001). Those adopting such approaches largely cast acts of care as critical aspects of social reproduction – and tend to describe "care" as a positive aspect of human sociality. Tronto (1993), for example, describes care as an attentiveness to the needs of others; "caring about", "caring for", "caregiving" and "care-receiving" are described as the four phases of care.

The second approach, while interlinked, employs care as an explicitly analytical term; the act of care. Here caring about or for appears as an ambiguous and wide-ranging term, holding the tensions inherent in the acts of looking after things and others. Thelen, for example argues that care can be seen as an open-ended process of social organisation, connecting "a giving and receiving side [...] aimed to satisfy socially recognized needs" (2015: 509). This approach is, in part, levelled as a means to break down dichotomies of private and public spheres, and stretches care further into its absences and negations, but doesn't go as far as to thoroughly explore the more coercive aspects I see as part of care. Such darker sides are familiar to many of us: the abusive parent, the control of the caring school, the incarceration and violence at the heart of the state which advances claims of caring for its subjects. What of such ambiguities of care, essential to the applicability of the concept? How does care as a term help us understand how so called "caring" behaviour is similar or differentiated across various scales, from kinship to the state? Here, in terms of ambiguities, I specifically refer to the ability of "caring" forms of behaviour: to

promote autonomy, create and renew life and allow for others to flourish; on the other hand, the coercive, predatory and autonomy decreasing potential which "care" also entails. Much as Sigaut has noted of the concept of 'domestication' (1988) and Sahlins of 'power' (2002), there is a danger of confounding a variety of human practices, with significantly different logics, under a vague umbrella term.

So the question then is, where does care stop and where does it begin? While I wholly support the socio-emancipatory project of highlighting undervalued acts of caregiving from which the authors of *Gens* trace part of their activist lineage, I have a wariness that the widespread embrace of the terminology of care may risk obscuring ethnographic phenomena. A brief illustration: to enslave – in other words to capture and enforce submission – can be contrasted with the potentially less explicitly violent gradual process of domestication. Ethnographers have used care to illustrate aspects of these relationships. While one can care for those one has captured, such acts also include constraints of mobility and significant loss of autonomy for those who were at least initially forcibly trapped. Is this the same care we see in relatively un-coercive environments? To further illustrate:

I may capture a wild horse and tame it carefully, having a mutualistic relationship in which the horse is compelled to return to the farm to participate in herding, in full knowledge that it will return to "the wild". In its initial stages of semi-domestication, the younger horses will resist capture, refusing to herd unless forced, until they learn that they will eventually be released. Yet such a pattern of care and coercion is rather different than one in which the horse is captured, beaten into submission and forced to carry heavy loads for the remainder of its life. It wouldn't be hard for the reader to draw parallels in terms of the differences in forms of relating when raising or teaching humans, trading slaves, employing workers or commanding soldiers. Both examples could potentially fall under the bracket of care, if one employs a wide view of the term as some scholars have suggested. Or perhaps some approaches would classify mutualistic domestication, the first example, as caring, whereas the

second is violent. One can clearly see the room left for analytic confusion.

Domestication, in certain contexts, teaches us much of processes of kinship, and the boundaries we create between kin and others (Hans Steinmüller has suggested that we also acknowledge limit cases such as Amazonian processes of familiarisation as offering examples of other logics of the domestic/non-domestic – see Fausto 1999, for example). Enacting boundaries, acts of distinction (which as the authors of *Gens* highlight are potentially generative of inequalities) – are themselves acts of selective attention, and thus also could be included in a wider register of care.

In my own fieldwork, as hinted in the image and caption, I witnessed how family members forged new social ties, in turn legitimising more hierarchical social structures, through the ongoing creation of a liberatory ethno-nationalist movement for Karen independence, called the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The Karen are an ethnic group who have long lived in what are now the nation states of Thailand and Myanmar, with a subset of Karen peoples committed to various non-state nationalist movements and armed groups. While commanders could be described as caring for the peoples living in their areas, helping organise schools and hospitals, much of their behaviour remained predatory, accumulating large amounts of wealth while civilians lived in extremely dire conditions. Yet such predatory behaviour was couched under a widespread logic of protection. Villagers, many themselves soldiers, participated in both of these aspects – protection and predation – on a sliding scale of course. But these logics were not themselves dichotomous, it wasn't that the protective (or caring) behaviours were themselves universally positive or life giving, nor that the predatory aspects were wholly life taking. It became clear that a more nuanced analytic approach was necessary to examining these phenomena which we anthropologists have cast at the heart of kinship, the state and capitalism itself.



A young child dressed in military regalia is guided by his guardian in front of the parade of the Shan State Army South, or RCSS, a ethnic nationality armed organisation based in Northeastern Myanmar's Shan State. In my own work amongst a different ethnic nationality organisation, the Karen National Union (KNU), I examine processes that I call "insurgent kinship". Such processes have led me to interrogate the categories through which we view social reproduction, acts of looking after others and more coercive elements at the heart of military state building.

Care, in its paradoxical quality, is much like the gift (Mauss 2000), useful in its ability to show how acts of creating and sustaining relationships are also imbued with the potential for violence and the destruction of life. The wounds of care can bind us, much in the way as the gift tends to, though not always, compel a return. Care can further autonomy yet is inextricably linked with dependency. Amazonianist literature has equally highlighted the ways in which "'care' and 'control' (are) part of the same relational scheme" (Fausto 2013), whereby the "the transformation of a relationship between predator and prey into one between master and pet (see Fausto 1999; 2008: 345-348) in which the pet position is not necessarily imposed, but rather sought out

(Costa 2009: 176-7). Yet I still recoil slightly at the use of care here. Are such acts of feeding, which in essence foster asymmetrical relations, acts of care, or ultimately acts of domination? While total autonomy is clearly a limit case, and proponents of the politics of care seem to largely promote attempts to forge healthier forms of co-dependence, is care the right language for the range of actions which foster such darker dependencies? Is it simply a theoretical matter of scales or gradients of care, or are we instead talking about rather different phenomena for which we may need a more nuanced language to differentiate parts of a process, or even different actions?

These examples demonstrate that, as stated at the opening of the piece, at the heart of care lies an ambiguity, a profound dichotomy; that care can slip into coercion – and that acts of capture can also themselves be caring. My own apprehension in employing the term "care" is that most people do not seem to relate to the concept in this way. As seen in the earlier examples, it is a term employed predominantly positively. For example, in common speech we often counterpoint care with the ways in which such care could result in controlling behaviour (here I think of the use of terms such as manipulative or coercive), rather than acknowledging that different behaviours grouped as care can have intrinsically coercive aspects. How to differentiate such a range of ambiguous yet different phenomena is essential to unpicking the mechanisms by which structural inequalities are socially legitimated through interpersonal relations. Rather than pushing against the spirit of *Gens*, such a sensibility strikes me as furthering the same project, attempting to grasp the naturalisation of inequalities at multiple scales.

What I have dubbed "care and its resistances", a play on Stasch's reflections on kinship (2009), is a call to start to think through, and potentially beyond such an analytics of care. But what would such an analytics entail? What would it mean to have an analytics beyond care – an approach which would adequately deal with the ethics of the negative, the adverse affects care often entails, or violence which fosters dependencies, often themselves positively perceived? Such concerns point to

an ascendent anthropological focused on 'negative' aspects of sociality (see Carey 2017, Laws 2019, Mühlfried 2018, Howland and Powell Davies 2023). The authors of Gens point towards the creation of an artificial outside of capitalism, which is in turn appropriated through predatory means – here they refer to care labour and relations, and the environment, amongst others. The challenge for an anthropology thinking through and beyond the Gens approach is to find a better language to refer to these relationships. Such a language would eschew the ambiguity of care and confront the often dominating power of acts cast as caring, while simultaneously acknowledging the labour and attentiveness to the needs of others at the heart of such processes.

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