POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

MAKING CARE VISIBLE & POLITICISING IT

// Care Strike & Critique of Sexual Difference: What Happens When Care Stops

Capitalism and the patriarchal gender order share a common narrative. Both act as if there are people who are successful, strong and independent entirely from within themselves. And both systematically conceal what these people actually live on.

Imagine a typical "self-made man". The entrepreneur who tells of his rise. The politician who owes his career solely to his discipline. The narrative goes: "I achieved all of this. Without help. On my own strength."

What this narrative conceals can be described on two levels.

On the material level, there is someone who washed his shirts, cooked for him. Someone who took his children to daycare, if he has any. Someone who cleaned the apartment. All of this must have happened – but it does not appear in his story.

On the symbolic level, something fundamental is repressed: that even this man is a vulnerable being who needs others. Becomes ill. Becomes tired. Seeks comfort. Seeks love. The story of the autonomous subject presupposes that this neediness remains invisible.

The Feminine as "Rejected Ground"

In this order, the feminine plays a special role. Women* ensure the functioning of seemingly autonomous masculinity – but their work is not considered value-creating. It is there, but it does not count.

Philosopher Tove Soiland calls this the *rejected ground*: the feminine is the basis on which the male subject stands – and at the same time that which it rejects in order to be able to experience itself as independent.

The economic devaluation of care work and the symbolic devaluation of the feminine are thus not two different problems. They are two sides of the same coin.

What the Care Strike Achieves

This is precisely where the idea of the *Care Strike* begins. When those who care daily lay down their work – when hospitals stand empty, daycare centres remain closed, housework is not done – then two things become visible at once.

First: the seemingly autonomous institutions do not function without the invisible work behind them. The economy, the state, the whole society depend on the care, the cooking, the carrying, the comforting, the cleaning, the listening.

Second: we ourselves – all of us – are needy beings. No one manages without others. The idea of being autonomous is a fiction that only works as long as someone else does the work.

What follows from this is a double demand. First, there needs to be collective control over the means that enable care – over care facilities, childcare, housing, time. Second, a new social narrative is needed. One in which vulnerability does not have to be hidden. One in which neediness is part of strength – not its opposite.

Key reference: Silvia Federici & Tove Soiland on the systematic invisibilisation and sexualisation of care

// Writing Down What No One Else Sees

Care work often remains invisible because it is considered self-evident – as "natural" care that should not be real work. This invisibility can be countered by collectively recording what happens.

What Care Protocols Are

Care protocols are documents that record how care work is organised in a group. This can be done in various ways.

Some protocols are descriptive: who does what, when, how often? Others are instructional, almost like a "how-to" list: this is how dinner is planned, this is how the night shift with a sick child works, this is how our flat-sharing community decides who goes shopping.

This may sound bureaucratic. But that is precisely the point: what otherwise happens silently as a "labour of love" or "natural task" suddenly becomes visible for what it is – work that can be planned, distributed and fairly organised.

Why Writing It Down Helps

When a group collectively decides who takes on what – and how to deal with disagreements or conflicts – complex negotiations emerge. Clear structures help to make these negotiations manageable at all.

Where there was previously silence, taboos or the expectation that "the women* will do it anyway", a space emerges in which care can be discussed. Where expectations are voiced instead of assumed. Where conflicts get a place instead of accumulating in exhaustion and frustration.

Comparability Beyond One's Own Group

Written protocols have another advantage. When several Caring Communities are dedicated to similar questions – and document how they deal with them in a comparable way – the experiences of different groups can be exchanged.

This makes visible what has already been tried elsewhere. What has worked and what hasn't. How others have dealt with conflicts that are currently emerging in one's own group.

From the protocols of individual groups emerges a common wealth of experience – beyond one's own bubble.

Key references: Helen Hester, "Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism" (2017); Michelle Murphy, Seizing the Means of Reproduction

/1 PATRIARCHAL SEXISM & THE BETRAYAL OF MASCULINITY

A Caring City lives from a simple insight: we all need each other. No one gets through life alone. We were all children once. We will all grow old. We will all be ill, tired, desperate at some point – and dependent on others.

Patriarchal masculinity, as it shapes our society, runs counter to this thought. It is built on a different narrative: the "real" man is strong. Independent. Sovereign. He needs no one – but everyone needs him.

// How Male Sovereignty Functions

This sovereignty is an illusion. It only works because one's own vulnerability and need for care are outsourced to others – mostly to women*.

Men quite naturally claim that they are listened to. That someone takes care of the household. That the relationship stays in shape. That the children are looked after. That their needs are recognised before they have to express them. What appears as "male strength" is based on others doing the invisible work.

// What "Betraying Masculinity" Means

It is not about morally condemning individual men. Patriarchal masculinity is not a personal character problem, but a social pattern deeply inscribed in bodies, feelings and habits. Precisely for this reason, it cannot be overcome by the good intentions of individuals, but only through collective practice.

The work that men have to do in this process is therefore not a moral duty – but a prerequisite for Caring Cities to function at all.

This does not mean behaving "better" or being nicer. It means addressing the deep-seated fear of one's own vulnerability – that fear which repeatedly generates the urge to assert oneself through the devaluation of others.

For cis-men – men whose gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth – this means in practice: no longer repressing one's own insecurities at the expense of others. Not automatically dominating spaces. Not taking the emotional work that others do for them for granted.

// What This Work Requires

It requires places where cis-men regularly come together and engage with these patterns.

But: not as a "safe space" for male sensitivities – not as a cosy room where men confirm each other in how difficult it is today to be a man. But as places where one's own masculinity is actively questioned, disrupted and undermined.

Only then can the promise of Caring Cities – solidary care for all – become reality.

Key references: Kim Posster, Männlichkeit verraten (2023); Jeja Klein, Wir leben immer noch in diesem Patriarchat (2019)