

Neo-libs don't care for carers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the L'Oreal ad for a men's skincare cream, television star Patrick Dempsey represents neo-liberalism's ideal type: the free individual who competes and wins in the marketplace. He exudes sex, power and wealth. Even his stubble looks expensive. In the closing frames he briefly caresses a baby and gazes into the camera as he says: "Because you are worth it." That phrase, reeking of narcissism, self-obsession and entitlement in equal measure, is an emblem of our age.

As Dempsey does his guy thing, the baby's carer remains invisible. That, too, is symbolic of the neo-liberal era. Market work has become an enchanted value. As one book's title put it, work is "better than sex". Meanwhile the shadow care economy, on which the visible economy depends, has become all but invisible.

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The neo-liberal revolution, with its emphasis on employment for all and competitive striving in the marketplace, occurred simultaneously with two other significant social movements. The first was de-institutionalisation of the mentally ill and the severely disabled. Care in the community is a humane ideal, but it costs money and time. The second was the feminist revolution; women joined the workforce in growing numbers.

On both counts, we desperately need greater, not less, government funding for support services such as child care, care for the elderly, respite care and accommodation. And on both counts family members who are caregivers need labour market regulations, such as parental or carer's leave, to work and care effectively. Yet neo-liberalism has meant a new ideal of reducing state spending as a proportion of gross domestic product and, via deregulation of the labour market, fewer rights for workers.

We simply have not worked out the care issue. Existing ideas of delivering care represent exhausted positions. The conservative vision is nostalgic: female self-sacrifice in the private realm, supporting men in the marketplace. Neo-liberals want women to work but don't want to alter the workplace to help them do so. Their answer is to transform care into a profitable commodity and sell it in the market. The results are cheap-as-chips ABC Learning-style corporate care or a low-waged, largely female servant class for the affluent.

Any left project should put an ethic of care, with values of justice, fairness, interdependence, reciprocity, compassion and respect for the vulnerable, at its centre. It will have to develop innovative but practical policies. The proposed national disability insurance scheme is one. Generous paid parental leave schemes such as those in Scandinavian social democracies and not-for-profit care are others. But the project must go deeper than this, changing our social imagination from seeing care as the sad fate of the loser to making it a valuable and humanising part of all citizens' lives.

So let's imagine another ad. It is next year's election campaign. This time the face is not a sleek master of the universe such as Dempsey but a careworn one, the mother of a disabled child. She leads the successful new Carers Party, now poised to hold the balance of power in the Senate. She wants a New Deal for the care sector. The slogan is: "No one giving or receiving care will live in poverty by 2015". She swings to face the camera and says: "Because they are worth it."

- reprinted from The Australian

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