

Editorial

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“A year ago, thinking about a society of care was utopian; today, in times of coronavirus, it has become utterly urgent and necessary.”¹

The coronavirus is a great illuminator. Over the course of the pandemic vulnerabilities in everything from global supply lines, lack of appropriate housing, lack of public and green spaces in urban areas to under resourced health services have been highlighted. In Ireland, especially prominent in the early weeks and months of lock-down, the weakness of the systems of care in society were exposed. The closure of schools left frontline workers scrambling so they could go to work,² the reliance on market-based solutions for childcare proving to be factor

in this vulnerability.³ Most significantly, the devastatingly high mortality rates in our nursing homes indicated that Ireland’s care system is tearing at the seams. Even where the measures taken to protect those in residential care settings worked, they resulted in high amounts of isolation in the older population.⁴ In times of stress, the cracks in the system widen, destabilising the entire functionality of the system.

We cannot claim ignorance of the faults. There were a steady stream of warnings over the years. The book *Capitalism and Care*, by Kathleen Lynch,⁵ while published during the pandemic, is built on decades of research and commentary on the state of care in our society. It is a devastating takedown of neoliberalism, arguing that care is fundamental to society

¹ José Laguna and Joseph Owens, *Vulnerable Bodies: Caring as a Political Horizon* (Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, 2020).

² Regan, M. “Absence of Further Childcare Supports in Budget 2021” RTE, 20 October 2020, <https://www.rte.ie/news/analysis-and-comment/2020/10/15/1171621-budget2021-childcare-analysis/>

³ Merike Darmody, Emer Smyth, and Helen Russell, *The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Policy in Relation to Children and Young People: A Research Review* (ESRI, 22 July 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.26504/sustat94>>.

⁴ “Interim Report on Covid-19 in Nursing Homes” July 2020, https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/special_committee_on_covid_19_response/reports/2020/2020-07-31_interim-report-on-covid-19-in-nursing-homes_en.pdf

⁵ Kathleen Lynch, *Care and Capitalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2021, 2021).

but is utterly disregarded within the present capitalist system. Similarly, the publication “Vulnerable Bodies: Caring as a Political Horizon”⁶ – conceived before the vocabulary of PCR tests and social distancing were embedded within our psyche – argues that our vision of ourselves as rational, self-reliant ‘men’ comes apart when tested even by basic comparisons to reality. The alternative vision of our vulnerability can be unpalatable where “the paradigm of vulnerability seeks to impugn the essentialist models of modernity.”⁷

How care is expressed in our society, the topic of this issue of *Working Notes*, is consequently an important topic of discussion. The stark limitations of our caring culture need to be fully understood and solutions – political, societal, and individual – explored. All of the essays within this issue highlight, to a greater or lesser extent, the ways in which we are not caring for people. These essays, in their different ways, also trace a path forward in terms of changes that can be made.

Hannah Malcolm’s theological reflection, *Delegating Love*, on the social structures which encourage society to disengage from care opens this issue. Her piece introduces the reader to the subject by highlighting some of the major issues surrounding how we currently care by delegation within our society. This inevitably has consequences from cradle to grave, with abuse reported in crèche services, elder care homes, and at different life stages in between. Drawing on *Capitalism and Care* and the works of Thomas Aquinas alongside the contemporary theologian William Cavanaugh, Hannah suggests that “moving away from a model of delegating love requires social conditions where the possibility and responsibility of caring for each other is shared out amongst us”. She not only focuses on the individual level but tackles the phenomenon of the state relieving its responsibilities for care of its citizens to private entities. Her introductory essay is a useful lens through which the subsequent essays can be read.

The scale at which the State obfuscates its responsibility is clear in *Housing Rights for*

Disabled People, by James Cawley. Cawley’s analysis illustrates the many barriers disabled people face in finding suitable and affordable housing. This essay draws on the first-hand experience of both disabled people and their families. While the housing crisis in Ireland is accelerating daily, there has long been a crisis impacting those on the margins, and specifically disabled people. Hearing from people about their every-day experiences facing challenges offers a level of insight that statistics alone cannot give. This essay is a critique of private solutions with a call for more public investment in housing solutions for disabled people.

Insight from the care giver, as well as those abandoned within the care giving system, is invaluable. Seán Duggan, Head of Chaplaincy Services of the Irish Prison Service, in his essay *A Year in Irish Prisons: Chaplains’ Annual Reports* offers such an account. Unlike the delegation of housing to the private market, prison chaplaincy is a responsibility held within the Irish Prison Service and is consequently still within the public realm. However, similarities can be drawn with housing in terms of the massive under-resourcing which is now embedded within the system. Seán explores the conditions within our prisons and the vital role that chaplains have within these systems. Walking with the most marginalised in our communities, chaplains are often described as ‘the voice of the prisoner’ as well as ‘the canary in the coalmine’. With a view from the inside, chaplains are often the first to raise concerns about abuses or prevailing conditions which are detrimental to the health and well-being of prisoners and staff. This advocacy role sits alongside the more recognisable one of support for a prisoners’ spiritual and mental well-being and its contribution to prisoner rehabilitation. The work of chaplains within the prison system however is curtailed by consistent under-staffing and difficult working conditions, diminishing the care of the most marginalised in society.

While the work of chaplains is an integral part of our care system, it suffers from relative invisibility. This is most certainly not the case with other areas of our care networks such as elder care. Unlike chaplaincy, elder care

⁶ Laguna and Owens.

⁷ Laguna and Owens, p. 7.

has largely been privatised for profit with its failings widely publicised, particularly at the start of the pandemic. We know that the current economic model is not congruent to a caring society. Dr Gerard Doyle in *Co-op Care – The Case for Co-Operative Care in Ireland* outlines an alternative route which has far reaching benefits for elder people and communities in general. Co-operatives, Doyle argues, are an ideal organisational form for elder care. When profit is removed from the equation and care for the person is centred, it is unsurprising that not only is the level of care improved but staff welfare and health outcomes as well. This economic model also benefits from its establishment globally. In Ireland, co-operatives exist within different sectors such as the financial sector (we think easily of local Credit Unions) and agriculture. International examples of elder care co-operatives highlight the benefits of such a model. Its proliferation however is hindered by restrictive policy and relative obscurity within this particular sector in Ireland, as well as a lack of imagination for developing creative alternatives.

This task of identifying and generating economic models, and ways of working which can pave the way to better future, is vital. The work of educating our children to continue building a better society is hardly less so. While other essays focus primarily on vulnerable citizens, the last essay in our issue – *Reaping the Rewards of an Inner-City Garden* – by Dr Karin Bacon and Elizabeth Cox, explores the interface of care and education of children, and care for our common home. Using an inner-city school garden as a case study, Bacon and Cox set out the argument that Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) is an important teaching tool in fostering children's relationship with the natural environment. Over the past few years, news of the pandemic dominated the headlines. However, the climate and biodiversity crisis we are simultaneously experiencing will require a fundamental change in how our society functions. The task of guiding these young people in their understanding of how our world works, through literally planting seeds and watching them grow, is important and intrinsically linked to creating a more caring

society. Like in *Housing Rights for Disabled People*, the first-hand experience of Cox is a powerful voice, illustrating the importance that access to green space and freedom to explore creation has on children.

Reading these essays, the threads that interconnect the different elements of care in our society are clear. When you lack care for one aspect of existence it is easy to imagine this seeping into all other areas. Ignoring the suffering of prisoners can go hand in hand with degradation of ecosystems vital to human flourishing. As Pope Francis argues in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, which extends the ideas of *Laudato Si'* into the political sphere, “to care for the world in which we live means to care for ourselves” (§ 17). Reimagining how we practically care for our own communities can not only transform our society into a more caring one but also one that cares for and protects our Common Home.