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## An affirmative look at a domesticity in crisis: Women, Humour and Domestic Labour during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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While an array of newspaper articles have focused on the disasters that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on women and feminism, very few have considered how this unprecedented global confinement may bring about alternatives to the gendering of the domestic sphere. This issue of Commentary and Criticism has taken up the task of doing just that, through, for example, Jilly Boyce Kay's suggestion of a communal organisation of life (2020), and The Care Collective's arguing for a collective responsibility for all aspects of social reproduction, and thus hands-on care, including "community, health and educational infrastructures" (2020). If the importance of domestic labour for the functioning of capitalism has remained invisible to those who wished not to see it in spite of decades of feminism, it has now become impossible to ignore. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic has not only been a health crisis but also a crisis of capitalism and patriarchy.

Around the world, educational and commercial sectors stopped or slowed down their on-site activities and instructed their employees to work from home (where possible) and set up home offices. The closure of schools has direct consequences on families with children; for many, working from home becomes a challenge alongside home-schooling. The realisation of this incompatibility forces the consideration of education and the caring of children to become public matters and interests for society as a whole, in line with the way in which the collapse of the increasingly neoliberalised hospitals in many Western countries has brought discussions of local production and state-run social services back to the table.

The binary separation of domestic and professional spheres is an issue of gender and power relations that needs to be tackled, and the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly increased the urgency with which this needs to happen. This essay argues that feminist geography and the concept of affirmative politics allow us to show that these power relations are not immutable, but rather in constant transformation; they can thus be resisted and thrown off balance. Rather than endlessly lamenting the status quo, much of the coronavirus media debate could—or indeed should—be re-oriented towards an "affirmative politics" (as per Rosi Braidotti's concept). In her work on affirmative ethics and politics, Braidotti advocates recognising our multiple limitations while liberating ourselves from the "burden of negativity," so as to create the conditions for a sustainable, embodied, networked, and non-binary future (2011a, 270). As I have developed in earlier work, Braidotti's affirmative politics works as "micro-political

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instances of activism” (Rosi Braidotti 2011b, 268–269), and takes different shapes and aesthetics depending on the medium (Maud Ceuterick 2020, *forthcoming*). In this essay, I review newspaper and social media productions that deal with domestic labour and responsibilities of care within a Western heterosexual context. Looking at the implications of the crisis and the media debate through an affirmative analytical lens helps identify resistance and productive forces that may lead to the implementation of an alternative future.

The COVID-19 crisis has not reset people onto an equal plane: it has neither been the “great equalizer” as some Western celebrities have argued (Roberta K. Timothy 2020) nor has it been an opportunity to pause, reconnect, and reflect for all, even when it has been promoted as a way of constructing an alternative future (Ángel Luis Lara 2020). As both Kay and the Care Collective’s essays also point at in this special issue, the crisis has, in any case, made our differences and inequalities all the more visible, between countries in the West and the East, the Global North and South, white and non-white citizens, men, women, and gender non-binary people, and corporate employers, employees, cleaners, and other “essential workers” as they have become known during the COVID-19 pandemic (those working towards ensuring healthcare services and the continued circulation of essential supplies). If everyone is confined in a more or less same way (depending on countries’ particular laws, lockdowns and regulations), not all are confined in the same conditions: some small families live in a 200 square meter house with a vast garden while other large families live in a 30 square meter shed in a crowded city with limited access to the outdoors or basic facilities. On a more local scale too, power relations and inequalities amplify as public services close. Not everyone has the possibility to work from home (and hence keep their employment), nor has access to healthcare. For those working in healthcare and essential businesses, this crisis is imposing stress and demands that exceed the usual. Issues of domesticity, gender, and labour are therefore particular to each geographical, political, cultural, and socio-economic situation. Home may be a haven of peace as much as a nightmare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth a crisis of the domestic space creating with it an ideal situation to make structural inequalities visible—within a Western and heterosexual context—and to produce changes. For decades, feminist geographers have brought attention to how social relations embedded in gendered power structures constantly transform everyday spaces, such as the domestic space (Doreen Massey 1994; Gillian Rose 1993). In chaotic times of pandemics or wars, however, all issues related to the domestic intensify and change with a rhythm that goes beyond the “normal” and continual transformation of space. Thinking about space requires looking at the set of interrelations that construct it, and to recognise power as produced and reproduced by both micro-politics and structural inequalities (Doreen Massey 2000). Through the concept of power-geometries, Massey suggests that it is not only access to resources—although these are important—that affect our experience of space but also micro-social relations that convert spaces into sites of meaning and power (1994, 146–156). As such, the domestic space (just as any spatial environment) is constituted of power-geometries, which constantly evolve through political, historical, and cultural dimensions, and how bodies affect and are affected by others. Massey argues that a more “egalitarian map of power” requires thinking of power in terms of both possibilities and responsibilities, and

of the “spaces of domination/resistance [as] active spaces of action, continually being made” (2000, 284).

Bringing the professional sphere within the domestic space—the traditional domains of waged and unwaged labour respectively—places emphasis on, and may challenge, the structural inequalities of capitalism and patriarchy. It highlights the irreconcilable juxtaposition of working-from-home (having a home-office) and house-work (what I refer to as “domestic labour,” including education and, in this case, home-schooling). While both types of labour have taken place in the domestic space during the COVID-19 pandemic, these are very different types of embodied use of space, which are often incompatible and gendered. The concomitant existence of paid and unpaid labour within the domestic space brings visibility to housework and care as (re-)productive labour and an integral part of societal well-being and development. It places emphasis on both the importance of welfare states, and a communal organisation of life, which resonates with Kay’s essay (2020): reproduction (including education and care) is not—and should not—depend only upon the nuclear family, but be the responsibility of society as a whole.

When the mainstream media have reported on the disparities in the gendered division of housework and caring responsibilities within heterosexual families during the COVID-19 crisis, they have often hinted at long-standing historical social, cultural, and economic issues that have only been exacerbated and made more visible by the crisis (see Helen Lewis 2020; Jessica Bennett 2020). On the one hand, a number of these newspaper articles fall into what Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg have termed “postfeminism” or “neoliberal feminism” (2020), as the writers share their own or others’ successful privileged, middle-class experiences (Donna Ferguson 2020) or provide a list of instructions “to split household labour fairly while in quarantine” (Eve Rodsky 2020). On the other hand, some writers point to the structural inequalities that generally place women in more precarious situations than men in heterosexual relationships, and suggest structural changes. In line with Marxist feminists’ demands since the 1970s (see Nancy Fraser 2016), they evoke, for example, the need to look at house- and care-work within the capitalist economy (Pilar Gonalons-Pons 2020) or suggest long paternity leave as a way of increasing the involvement of fathers into caring for their children (Claire Cain Miller 2020). For example, in her article in *The Guardian*, Anna Fazackerley (2020) significantly points to the negative impact that the closing of schools and cleaning services have on women’s economy since women tend to reduce their paid workload more than men in such a time of crisis, in order to carry out—equally essential but unpaid—domestic labour. Regardless of how relevant these statements are however, they often figure as end points of the article, rather than as starting points and forms of activism.

The rapid transformation of the domestic space into a site of both paid and unpaid labour on a scale not seen before puts into question the traditional binary oppositions between public and private space, the domestic and professional sphere, and men and women. Certain authors have in fact written about how times of crisis have historically contributed to positive social change: the Great Depression and Second World War brought about the modern welfare state, and the 1918 flu epidemic “helped create national health services” (Peter B. Baker 2020). Peter B. Baker cites Barack Obama’s chief of staff Rahm Emanuel: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” However, Rebecca Solnit notes that change following a crisis might not be effective or visible immediately, but rather “changes in the world at large affect our

sense of self, our priorities and our sense of the possible" (2020). While numerous articles regarding the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on the negativity of gender disparities with regards to domestic labour, I argue that this take need not be definitive. On the contrary, the anger and negative affects that this crisis exacerbates may spur a wilful movement towards gender equality and a politics of collective and systemic care (just as The Care Collective also argues) or, at least, a progressive change in our set of possibilities.

To look at the crisis in an affirmative light is to look at how the spatial merging of the professional and domestic spheres opens up alternatives to the status quo. As the systemic gendered division of labour disproportionately affects women both socially and economically, the extra visibility that this has gained during the crisis may contribute to a stirring up of a communal "wilfulness" for deep structural changes. Wilfulness arises from the experience of having "to insist on what is simply given to others" (Sara Ahmed 2014, 149), rather than stemming from an individual conscious decision. Through their insistence, wilful subjects create affirmative forces—opportunities for a collective enterprise of change—which may be carried out across all, mainstream, academic, and social media spaces. Negative affects give rise to wilfulness, which may translate as anger and exasperation, or take shape as humour and sarcasm on social media, with comments such as "Oh I see men discovered motherhood" in response to male users' proclamations that they are having to work on weekends during lockdown because taking care of children impacts on their ability to complete their work activities during the week. Another Twitter user exasperatedly (though humorously) states in a viral post: "The next person who tweets about how productive Isaac Newton was while working from home gets my three year old posted to them!" (cited in Alessandra Minello 2020). Humour has been recognised as a great feminist weapon in avoiding being dismissed as "too emotional," or worse "hysterical." The anger or sarcasm that generally accompanies these feminist comebacks expresses a will for change. They create resisting forces while also displaying a certain anxiety over the unthinkable: namely that the status quo will remain.

The motto of the COVID-19 crisis, "Being in this together" may, in fact, become part of an affirmative politics, which would take us through the pain of structural and systemic inequalities, and collectively bring us on a wilful alternative path. While feminist humour has sometimes been perceived as depoliticising feminism, humour and irony can also have a "community-building function" (Cornelia Brantner, Katharina Lobinger and Miriam Stehling 2020). As we laugh together at a meme or share a sarcastic comment on Twitter, we gather through our engagement in a common cause. The wilfulness of the authors of these memes and comments—manifesting through anger, humour, or sarcasm—calls for transformation while recognising the micro- and macro-power relations of the present. The feminist concepts of wilfulness and affirmative politics bring us to consider how the negative affects of the coronavirus crisis produce a fruitful terrain for wilful actions and affirmative change and may force the societal valorisation and redistribution of domestic labour—including the caring of children and the elderly—and a long-lasting transformation of the domestic and the professional spheres.

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