## Cybernetics

### 1NC – Alt – Ethics of Care

#### The alternative is to embrace an ethics of care – it creates relational understandings

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4. What Digital Socialism Could be About: Ethics of Care

Queer and feminist scholarship and analyses might prove useful antidotes to the violence of abstraction that is inherent in the data-driven knowledge-economy. They can provide ways to look at contrasting communicative capitalism not from the perspective of individually-centred property-based rights, but from collective and relational modes of being in the world. They can help us to locate digital socialism in spaces other than the production of the immaterial.

A concept that I would like to borrow from feminist scholarship engaged in rejecting “traditional male reasoning” (Koehn 1998, 4) and underlying the latter’s embeddedness in norms and stereotypes of patriarchal societies, is that of care. As “care is both value and practice” (Held 2006, 9), care and the work of care cannot be separated: they are deeply connected and interdependent. The work of care has traditionally occupied disadvantaged workers – women, migrants, people of colour – in activities related to social reproduction and reproductive labour, i.e. “the set of tasks that together maintain and reproduce life, both daily and generationally” (Hester 2018, 345), spanning from the care for others (childcare, elder care, etc.) to the maintenance of the infrastructure necessary to support life and work life (cleaning, etc.) to species reproduction (bearing children).

Whether being carried out in private spaces such as the household by unpaid workers, or in public places such as hospitals and remunerated, reproductive labour cannot be separated from the idea of an ethics of care. This has been made the object of several theoretical reflections in feminist studies24 , many of which emphasise them being “a serious and important alternative to dominant Kantian and rights-based ethics” (Robinson 2011, 21) and, in general, a powerful antidote against the “quasi-mathematical form of ethical reasoning” (Koehn 1998, 2) imposed by male philosophers. Ethics of care are characterised by an understanding of the self that is relational rather than individualistic, placing human and intimate relations at the centre of life, in stark opposition to “legalistic contractual thinking, so favored in traditional analyses” which might in fact “alienate persons, rather than draw them together” (Koehn 1998, 6).

This emphasis on relations rather than rights, on sociality rather than individuality, on interdependence rather than independence, on particularity, connection, and context rather than the universality and abstraction of legalistic contractual thinking, is what I would like to offer to the reflection on digital socialism. Ethics of care present a radical critique of liberal individualism and its values25 . The work of care in itself – through which work at large is made possible, through which all of us are made possible as workers and humans – is a reminder that the independent, autonomous, rational individual is a fantasy deeply imbued with patriarchal ideologies. Care work is, in fact, “dependency work” (Held 2006,14), as it puts into bold relief how we all depend one on another, how we are all connected, related and interdependent. It makes a powerful detour from the rights-based approach, from the abstraction and immateriality of the knowledge economy. It restores materiality and relationality as central elements to the discussion on how digital socialism could be looked at, instead of just being imagined as a timid reformist attitude within the domain of communicative capitalism’s knowledge economy.

Apart from it shaping an ethics that is not abstract and universal but contextual and intimately connected to labour – care and the work of care, care is the work of care – there is an aspect of contemporary care that offers another interesting angle to the debate on digital socialism. Reproductive labour, which has been traditionally understood as women’s work, and which is increasingly occupying a crucial sector in contemporary market economies to the extent that we can speak of a “care economy” (Hester 2018, 346-347), is threatened by the growing automation that is causing an impending “crisis of work” (Hester 2018, 344). This dramatic technological change in the job market is investing not just high-income economies, but also developing countries, further strengthening power inequalities that are already in place.

The domain of the care economy, which once seemed the exclusive territory of feminised (paid, underpaid, or unpaid) work, is now at risk of being colonised in its turn by the abstraction and immateriality of automation. The New York Times refers to a recent experiment in France where Zora, a robot caregiver, has replaced humans in assisting elderly people (Satariano, Peltier, and Kostyukov, 2018). Care.Coach, a “game-changing innovation for aging and geriatric care that leverages the best of both human and technological capabilities”26 , is successfully providing patients with pet avatars that assist with psychosocial support 24/7 and from a distance, while “conversations of a clinical nature are automated through software algorithms that implement clinical best practices”27 .

“The care.coach approach is a thoughtful combination of digital technology and genuine human connection…a creative solution to the shortage of qualified caregivers in the US”28 , says Tom Grape, chairman and CEO of the Benckmark Senior Living company. Actually, rather than due to a shortage of qualified caregivers, the business of automated care is on the rise because of its cost-effectiveness in a healthcare market, like the US, which is highly commodified and competitive. “Human contact is now a luxury good” (Bowles 2019), the New York Times has titled, hinting at the increasing phenomenon of automation and screen-mediation taking over all domains of human life for the working class. In stark contrast, elites enjoy the privilege of disconnecting when they wish to take a distance from technology, still being able to purchase nonautomated, more costly human labour.