
Review

Caring democracy: Markets, equality and justice

Joan Tronto

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Don't let 'care' distract you. This book is about democracy, what it requires, what troubles ours and how we might remedy contemporary political malaise. Care, Joan Tronto compellingly argues, is at the heart of both our democratic deficit and our democratic potential.

Tronto leads a multidisciplinary field of scholars who have developed a rich literature on care. In this latest pioneering contribution, she brings the insights of care theory to bear on democratic theory and practice. This long-overdue connection reveals much about our political present and possible futures.

With *Caring Democracy* Tronto contributes to renewed efforts to theorize the interaction between economic and political forces of contemporary life. The work vividly illustrates how democracy depends on activities that are often ignored, undervalued and left out of public discussions, and provides a devastating account of how gender norms, tropes of choice and personal responsibility, and market mechanisms are deployed in the neoliberal context to undermine both care and democracy.

The book is of two parts. The first is conceptual, an argument about the connections between democracy and care, and the implications for self-consistent democrats (care-ist and other); the second is a critique of current practices, rhetoric and rationality. Both are powerful and compelling.

Tronto's argument begins with that oft-forgotten fact of which she has spent her career reminding us: we human beings depend on care.

'Care' is a vexing *political* concept. Its maternalist roots suggest something women do in 'the private sphere'. Tronto's signature contribution is to expand our understanding of what care is and why it is an essential concern of politics and political theory. In *Caring Democracy*, she returns to a definition that she and Bernice Fisher developed in 1990: 'care is a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (p. 19). If this sounds like nearly everything we do, it is. Expansiveness, in a sense, is her point. It is essential to the political project of



exposing and revaluing the swaths of too often ignored activity upon which our lives – and democracy – depend. We are interdependent beings. Living well is not a solo endeavor; it is the result, and Tronto would argue, the activity of care – giving, receiving, taking, sharing – broadly understood. This is the case she makes: production (for example, factory work) and societal protection (for example, policing) ought to be understood as caring activities, similar in key ways to, for example, educating, meal preparing and house cleaning (p. 21). It follows, as she shows, that the distribution of care has profound impacts on the distribution of social and political power. Receive inadequate care and one is less likely to develop the capacity to function well as a democratic citizen; shoulder too much caregiving and one is less likely to have the resources to participate in the democratic process. Call these the facts of care.

What we ought to do about these facts, Tronto insists, is a political question. Indeed, as she points out, acknowledged or not, every political system and theory has an account of care and its demands (p. 28). In refreshing divergence from the dominant strains of care theory, Tronto filters the facts of care through democratic commitments. Thus she adds to her earlier definition a ‘final phase of care’: ‘caring with ... requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all’ (p. 23). If a commitment to democracy implies a commitment to equal voice, then it also entails – at very least, Tronto argues – a commitment to making the distribution of caring responsibilities the first concern of politics.

Tronto – it should be highlighted – writes as a partisan of democracy, albeit democracy defined in light of the facts of care. ‘Democratic life rests upon the presumption that citizens are equal ... What is distinctive about democratic caring, though, is that it presumes ... that we are equal as democratic citizens in being *care receivers* This quality of being *needy* is shared, equally by all humans’ (p. 29). Building from this Tronto argues that ‘[t]o be a citizen in a democracy is to care for citizens and to care for democracy itself. I call this practice “caring with”’ (p. x). And to do this, the distribution of care needs to be the first concern of our political lives.

Some will worry that she puts outcome (that is, a certain distribution of care) before democratic process. In fact, though, her position is deeply faithful to democratic process; the concern about the distribution of care stems from a commitment to what she quite plausibly claims is the defining value implicit in a commitment to democratic process, that of equal voice. Once ‘a democratic society makes a commitment to equality of all of its members, then the ways in which the inequalities of care affect different citizens’ capacities to be equal has to be a central part of the society’s *political* tasks’ (p. 10).

With the conceptual frame of a ‘feminist democratic ethic’ in hand, in the three central and perhaps best chapters of the book, Tronto turns a critical eye to contemporary life. Patriarchal gender norms, neoliberal rationality and marketization, she shows, distort the realities of care and real costs of democracy, and threaten both.



Some citizens shoulder more care responsibilities or receive inadequate care and thus have inadequate resources to participate in politics; other more privileged citizens can purchase better care and are given ‘passes’ that exempt them from significant care responsibilities. Heteronormative masculinity underpins the ‘production’ and ‘protection’ passes that exempt cis-gender men from giving care typically associated with women. Tronto’s expansive definition of care is key here. For her, both production and protection are caring activities. It is not, then, that men do not care, but that our ideologies of gender, citizenship and the private sphere obscure the ways in which care is distributed. Gender norms are also at work, she shows, where recipients of ‘nurturant’ care are cast as feminized dependents and recipients of ‘protective’ care have their status as a citizen affirmed. Gender thus links threats to care *and* democracy.

Neoliberal practices and rationality do much the same. Tronto’s illuminating and much-needed discussion of the marketization of care calls attention to the ways in which class and race mark some as ideal caregivers and thus more likely to be assigned caring responsibilities. For others, class and race function as passes of ‘privileged irresponsibility’ that allow them to shunt caring responsibilities onto others. Neoliberal rationality also underwrites the ‘bootstrap’ and ‘charity’ passes. Representing the refrains of ‘personal responsibility’ and obligation as the results of unfettered choice respectively, both feed the conclusion that care should be left to the market. Without rejecting the value of market mechanisms altogether, Tronto makes a powerful case that this turn threatens both care and democracy. Not only do the market values of efficiency and fungible exchange conflict with the nature of key varieties of care, but markets have very bad memories; they thus tend to re-entrench social inequality and are ill-suited to relieving it. Indeed, without historical memory – and the realities of interdependence it reveals – the basis for the far-reaching sense of responsibility she advocates is lost. By effacing the facts of care, neoliberal rationality and the market mechanisms it champions threaten care *and* democracy.

In the final two chapters, Tronto begins to paint a picture of how we might think about care democratically. Her broadly compelling account provides essential foundations for further work on how care and democracy might be harmonized.

This is an important and pioneering book. Any effort of such ambition is bound to leave unanswered questions. *Caring Democracy* is no exception. To say, as many have, that Tronto’s definition of care is broad is close to an understatement. Indeed, it is not entirely clear what human activity would *not* fall into the category of care. Poetry, play, violence? Given its baggage of, for example, the connotation of altruism and the historical connection (in scholarship and practice) to motherhood and gendered labor, the question is important. Tronto’s efforts to address it – saying that the general concept can be refined for particular purposes – are successful in part but not, I think, entirely. Take, for example, the function of *necessity* in the concept. The language of need is central to Tronto’s discussion. Clearly, she has in mind activities that are essential – not superfluous – to living well. The normative power of this status is important: if none of us can do without care, if we have no choice but to



depend on the care of others, then to claim that we are *in some sense* mutually responsible for one another makes sense. And yet, as Hannah Arendt has argued, the introduction of necessity into political discourse has a way of closing off real deliberation. One is tempted to ask: what happens, on her account, when the *demos* doesn't care about care? What if an actual democratic process does not produce the conclusions she shows are the essential to the realization of democracy's defining values? Explicitly, Tronto sides with the democratic process. But one wonders then what to do with the force of necessity highlighted by *care*.

To be sure, this is a vexing question for all democratic theory. The essential contribution Tronto makes here is to help us see just what is at stake, really, in our commitment to democracy.

Once again, Tronto has broken new ground. The path laid here is one down which anyone interested in democratic, feminist and care theory, and our political world more generally is wise to follow.

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