

# Caring Labour and the Academy

Erica Lagalisse

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**When women discuss the private sphere in public, subversion resides in both the form and content of the action.**

I wrote these words almost ten years ago now, in a piece called *Gossip as Direct Action* published by Pluto Press. I was commenting on the social dynamics of anarchist activist collectives, based on an ethnographic study of a Zapatista solidarity group in Montreal, Canada. There had been a gendered division of labour in our collective, in which women performed operational tasks without equal power in decision making. We did the social labour of minute-taking and email communication, and the caring labour of facilitating meetings, mediating conflict, welcoming new members. Meanwhile, male violence was depoliticized, as well as the steps women took to challenge this violence. Women's concerns were "personal" and their communication about it "gossip": Men suggested the collective meeting was the only legitimate place to bring up grievances. I pointed out how their complaint parallels the liberal critique of anarchists—that they should petition government authorities as "civil society" instead of organizing independently from the state, something anarchists generally applaud as "direct action".

Of course, such dynamics are not limited to anarchist collectives. In the academy, it is also common for women to quietly "gossip", as public exposure of gendered violence and exploitation may amount to throwing away one's institutional and intellectual career. Only once did I myself dare make even a sideways reference to this set of problems in the academy in public. I was presenting a short pamphlet I had written called *Capitalism, Care Work and the Labour of Love* to a class of students. (In it I synthesize the work of Silvia Federici, Beverley Skeggs and other scholars of social reproduction and the global racialized division of "caring labour" – I invite others to use it in undergraduate courses.) As I explained how the dynamics I refer to in the pamphlet play out in different places, including the academy, I spoke about the time that I discovered that a male colleague had published ideas I had discussed with him under his name. When I confronted him about it, his response was "I thought you would be honoured to be my muse." Apparently he himself is now writing about "caring labour", and getting paid more to do so than existing women experts.

The academy is a place where women faculty do a disproportionate amount of social, emotional, and caring labour of counselling graduate students and reading their work while male faculty are more likely to promote their own individual success. The academy is a place where a male supervisor may still say to his female graduate student that the \$5000 for the small administrative gig she had been hired for will now go to a male international student in economic need, but she still has to do the work. "How is that fair?" she asked. The professor said: "You are married aren't you?"

In one of my ex-departments, a graduate student recently called on peers to boycott an upcoming departmental lecture by a junior woman scholar because a paper she had circulated before the lecture cited articles published in a journal that has fallen into disrepute because of a particularly problematic male editor involved. It is always easier to sideswipe another junior woman academic for being three degrees removed from a violent man than to challenge the violent male faculty of one's own department. The

academy is a place where frustrated women mobilize feminism against one another, instead of challenging professors that assault students, for fear of losing reference letters. It is not surprising we have not seen a strong *#metoo* movement here.

I urge women to engage in forms of feminism that comprehend and address the struggles of other women, and even men, whose subject positions they do not share – we must engage the challenge of intersectionality. For feminist struggle to be effective, and to be considered feminism properly speaking, it must work to make better lives for working class women, women of colour, trans women, all women. I also dream of a day when militants who do not identify primarily as feminists care about women, including women whose subject positions they do not share. Insofar as it is especially feminists who are called upon to be ‘intersectional’ in their approach, we must admit that the good feminist suspiciously resembles the good woman: One who cares for others, whether or not that care is reciprocated.

In short, the problem of caring labour, and its invisibilization via internalized concepts of “public” and “private”, is vast and reiterated on multiple levels of academic theory and practice. It involves everything from the problem of domestic labour in the Global North being delegated to migrant women of colour, to the problem of women academics caring more for students than their male colleagues; it includes the problem of theorists calling on feminists to care while not caring for feminism, the problem of women caring more to please male editors than their feminist peers, the problem of male academics profiting off of women’s caring labour, and no one caring about that, or speaking about it in public. Gossip is indeed a form of direct action, yet it is most meaningful if it leads to further action. And whether one is an anarchist or an academic, the most effective direct actions are collective. Insert happy ending here.

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