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Protecting Children and Supporting Families post-Covid

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Abstract: In this article, the author revisits her work on the Social Model of Protecting Children. This work is based on research into social inequalities and social harms and poses a challenge to the individualising child protection narratives that have dominated in England, the country the article is based on. The author explores the possibilities thrown up by Covid 19, for supporting shifts towards a social model. It will be argued, however, that while there were, indeed, such possibilities, subsequent explorations have raised troubling questions particularly concerning the role of the contemporary state in England. The article concludes by highlighting some conceptual and empirical resources to support renewed critique and activism going forward.

Keywords: Social model; child protection; state; private capital

Introduction

The last decade has been a time of great political and economic turbulence in the UK. A programme of government led austerity, from 2010 onwards, has meant that the services available to families have been cut extensively and reforms to welfare benefits have meant a significant growth in child poverty. Economic shocks have resulted from the pursuit of Brexit, the challenges of Covid-19 and the war in the Ukraine. However, in spite of the many policy failures, scandals and crises, the vision that has emerged of a post Brexit Conservative regime remains very powerful particularly in England (Davies, 2021). This vision includes a strengthening of the rights of private capital and its relationship with the state and further moves away from a more social democratic ethos. Opposition to this vision remains weak (Davies, 2021).

In such a context, the prospects for progressive social work with children and families may seem extremely gloomy indeed. However, I want to argue for the importance of traveling hopefully keeping the wise words of Rebecca Solnit (2016) in mind: 'We should call (hope) an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings' (xii).

This article explores the openings that Covid-19 facilitated; openings that involved long overdue conversations about the consequences of a neo-liberal settlement that was marred by intersecting inequalities and had hollowed out the supportive capacities of both the national and local state with the tentacles of the market extending across all areas of life. As part of these conversations, there were spaces for critiques of, and alternatives to emerge to the dominant approaches to supporting families and protecting children. Alongside such moments, however, expanded opportunities for capital emerged with the state becoming even more enmeshed in facilitating these and in entrenching patterns of inequality.

The article reflects on some of the lessons that have been learned and the possibilities going forward drawing on the author's work, with those of other colleagues, on the Social Model of

Protecting Children, one approach that has emerged as part of oppositional voices (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and White, 2018).

Fragile and uncertain openings

> *The first lesson a disaster teaches is that everything is connected*…. At moments of immense change, we see with new clarity the systems – political, economic, social, ecological – in which we are immersed as they change around us. We see what's strong, what's weak, what's corrupt, what matters and what doesn't. I often think of these times as akin to a spring thaw: it's as if the pack ice has broken up, the water starts flowing again and boats can move through places they could not during winter. The ice was the arrangement of power relations that we call the status quo – it seems to be stable, and those who benefit from it often insist that it's unchangeable. Then it changes fast and dramatically, and that can be exhilarating, terrifying, or both (Solnit, 2020, italics added)

A settlement that denied our interdependence as human beings, our vulnerability and our need for care at all stages of the life cycle was exposed as quite simply delusional, as well as utterly cruel, by COVID-19 (The Care Collective, 2020). Our need for each other in good times as well as bad, our reliance on care and solidarity became clearer at the same time as we were confronted with the reality that so many of the government policies, that had been followed, reinforced the pursuit of a damaging individualism.

A host of evidence reinforced the need to think beyond individual risk factors, to explore the 'causes behind the causes' of illness and mortality rates and to recognise the intersecting nature of inequalities and the consequences. Who died, why and where? These questions obliged a reckoning with the consequences of a social settlement that in its rhetoric of individual responsibility had obscured the systematic patterning of risks.

In seeking to understand gross inequalities, for example, in the mortality rates of those from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, the need to lay bare the inadequacies of a frame that focused solely on the role of individual choices and behaviours to manage and control risk was underscored. A wider frame was necessary to drill down into why individuals imperilled their own lives and health by going out to work and did not self-isolate if ill (IPPR and Runnymede Trust, 2020).This required making connections between individual choices and public troubles, notably, the systemic racism underpinning occupational arrangements and policies that baked in long-standing health, income and housing inequalities that were the consequences of policy choices and failures (Featherstone, Gupta and Morris, 2021).

During the pandemic, not only did the unspooling of a direct causation frame occur with a recognition of systemic complexity, but there was also an associated recognition of the resultant ethical demands placed upon us as individuals and members of families and society. What did it mean to be a good father or mother? Was it to stay at home and avoid infection but risk not feeding children, or to go to work to feed them and risk one's own health, and that of others? Such desperate 'choices' exposed how threadbare the social fabric had become due mainly to deliberate policy decisions impacting on income support systems such as sickness pay (Featherstone *et al*., 2021).

Overall, as an expanded range of constituencies attempted to understand and decode the individual tragedies of lives cut short, connections were made that had been disavowed for decades – connections between the individual and the social, the public and the private, and the economic and the political. Such connections refused to be silenced in the face of the

evidence that while human beings faced a universal storm, they were not equally exposed. Who got ill and died, how we locked down, in what circumstances, who were exposed to risks, how children and young people were equipped to continue learning – all issues riven by intersecting inequalities were exposed at least initially to a societal gaze that had hitherto been averted.

So, a moment opened up for different kinds of discussions than had hitherto been possible– discussions about the dangers of individualising social problems, responsibilising citizens and the need to re-think the role of the state as a guarantor of social protections. Indeed, it became commonplace to observe that that we needed to construct a different, more **care-full** and equal post-pandemic world (Marmot, *et al.*,2020).

Turning to child protection

Before the pandemic, developments in relation to evidence and ethics had begun the process of fracturing the following long-established child protection story (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). This story encompassed the following elements. The harms children and young people need protecting from are normally located within individual families and are due to acts of omission or commission by parents and/or other adult caretakers, Such acts are normally understood through frames that focus on the role of individual choices or psychological and relational dynamics. Developing procedures, multi-agency work and professional expertise are all key to protecting children from their families.

A growing programme of research expanded the challenge to the focus on intra-familial harms rooted in parenting behaviours and choices. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) was a programme of research which ran for five years and explored the relationship between deprivation and a child's chances of becoming subject to certain state interventions. (for the final report of the programme see Bywaters *et al.*, 2020)

It found that children in the most deprived areas in England were over ten times more likely to be in the care system than children in the least deprived areas, and, moreover, that there was a social gradient. Increasing rates of deprivation increased children's chances of becoming subject to a child protection plan or coming into care with each ten per cent increase in neighbourhood deprivation bringing a 30 per cent increase in rates. Thus, the research overall countered policy assumptions of a unique group of highly stressed families separate from the rest of society and pointed to the dynamic and shifting contours of deprivation, as well as to the way in which a growth in deprivation was likely to impact upon demand for services.

The research with social workers, carried out by the CWIP team, found that they did not consider engaging with income and food security as core business and that such business was defined as assessing parenting capacity and risk (Morris *et al.*, 2018). Poverty was unremarkable and unremarked upon by social workers and was the accepted backdrop to everyday practice.

The finding by Bilson and Martin (2016) of a disproportionate focus on the investigation of abuse rather than the provision of help increased concerns about how systems and practices operate. Moreover, this work highlighted the increasing rates of such investigations over the decade and further research by Bilson *et al.* (2017) noted the disproportionate numbers of such investigations into those living in deprived areas.

Other research projects explored the perspectives of families who engaged with services, noting their fears about seeking help in contexts dominated by concerns with risk and the, often, shaming nature of encounters with professional services (Featherstone, *et al.*, 2018).

The reproduction of inequalities by state interventions intergenerationally also became a focus of concern. Research on parents who have had repeated removals of numbers of children highlighted that many of these mothers and fathers had themselves been removed from their birth families (see, for example, Philip, *et al.*, 2020). In other countries, Aboriginal and First Nations people have been able to draw from collective stories of systemic and systematic injustice and dispossession to make sense of such intergenerational patterns and traumas (Lonne *et al.*,2016). However, in England, a stubbornly resistant individualising frame had made certain kinds of questions impossible to even be thought about, never mind articulated, with policymakers and academic researchers often reinforcing and reflecting such invisibility. Thus, data are not collected on the socio-economic backgrounds of the parents from whom children are removed. There have been no government-commissioned prevalence or incidence data gathered from which a robust picture of the harms children and young people experience not only in their families, but also across multiple domains, could be built up over time.

Alongside the research findings outlined here, other developments involved young people, families and their allies coming together to tell their stories. Fledgling initiatives emerged that built alliances with parents and other family members in co-constructing services. These primarily focused on what Fraser (1995) named as 'affirmative', rather than 'transformative', remedies within the current system, such as parent-to-parent advocacy. This work holds much potential to challenge the top-down expert-led approaches currently dominant (Saar-Heiman and Gupta, 2024).

The research findings on poverty, and the developments emerging from those who experienced services on the disproportionate impact of state interventions on marginalised populations, have posed a profound challenge to policy directions in England, particularly since 2010. For example, the relevant government department outlined its vision for child protection. (Department for Education, 2016). At the heart of the vision was practice – practice that focused on getting families to change through equipping workers with methodologies such as motivational interviewing and systemic family therapies.

However, while one part of government exhorted social workers to work with individual families to carry out behaviour management projects, another part promoted austerity policies that meant the risks faced by the very same families from poverty, poor housing and the hollowing out of social and physical infrastructures mounted relentlessly, with increasing numbers of children with not enough to eat, insecure housing, nowhere safe to play and no libraries to nourish them. These changes have become known as 'social harms', that is, harms resulting from the policy choices and activities of local and national states and corporations that impact upon the welfare of individuals and groups (Pemberton, 2016).

Social harm studies have focused predominantly on macrolevel causes embedded in the systems and organisations of capitalist societies but, as Mason (2020) has noted, less attention has been accorded to the unintended consequences of state interventions, particularly those associated with 'harm reduction' services, such as child protection, risk management and crime reduction. His work has started to fill this gap, highlighting the raced and classed nature of state interventions, as well as the experiences and the outcomes of such interventions. He argues that the application of a harms 'lens' can help us to engage more critically with the

experiences and outcomes of state interventions for recipients. This holds possibilities for developing more participatory models of service design as we explore further below.

To conclude, before the pandemic, the seeds of challenge to a 'child protection' project that focused on individualised risks and ignored social harms were sown, and an expanded cast of storytellers emerged to tell stories that highlighted the damage caused by focusing on risk rather than offering help. Challenges also emerged stressing the need for more service-user-produced services and/or service user involvement in designing and running services.

All these developments were vital tools in the conceptual and empirical work that informed the development of a Social Model of Protecting Children by the author and her colleagues (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018) as we explore further below.

While the challenges outlined above seeded important possibilities for change, it is vital to acknowledge their fragility in the face of powerful institutional dynamics towards continuity. Indeed, the pandemic exemplified tendencies both towards continuity and towards change. Firstly, let us look at what it revealed about the state before returning to child protection.

Strengthening the relationship between private capital and the state

Davies *et al*. (2022, p, 213) noted that in terms of the state, its size in the UK relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had fallen steadily in the decade leading up to the pandemic, as a result of austerity, with cuts to public spending concentrated especially in local government and the welfare benefits system. COVID-19 saw a big leap in public spending- from around 35% of GDP to 45%. However, this statistic concealed important questions about power and exploitation (Davies *et al*., 2022, p, 214). Indeed, it was to become clear that the main beneficiaries of a larger state were asset owning households, financial elites, digital platforms and outsourcing contractors. Therefore, the growth of the state did not automatically imply reduced power for capital, but actually was a big opportunity for certain forms of capital to expand and profit (Davies, *et al*., 2022).

As is well documented, the UK was a leader in outsourcing, privatisation and new public management in the early 1990s and this continued. But Davies *et al*. argue that the 'post-2020 version of public-private collaboration adds several distinguishing features that characterise what they call 'rentier nationalism'' (p, 215). Key is that the relationship between the state and private businesses has become even more intimate as the ideological veneer of competition and the market for contracts is abandoned. The greater willingness of the state to deploy the full potential of its balance sheet has produced more money to be diverted to global companies.

A further feature of 'rentier nationalism' identified by Davies *et al.* (2022, p, 216-217) is that rhetorical and symbolic appeals to the nation have become increasingly integral to state legitimacy claims. Thus, the dawn of the pandemic coincided with numerous culture war interventions against a range of institutions and experts. While appeals to nationhood are made in cultural and ethnic terms, they have economic implications. The rhetoric of nation and protection of an 'indigenous' population works to conceal how society is sustained and whose work is in reality essential. So certain forms of work (such as care work) are cheap because it is expected that they are performed for the greater good or because they have been performed by migrants, women or both. This rhetoric also plays a key role in ostracising centres of professional expertise who are perceived to be disloyal or 'woke' such as teachers

and academics hastening the rise in private -based alternatives to traditional schools, campuses and cultural institutions.

Thirdly, COVID-19 has meant the significance of the platform business model has been raised even further than previously, meaning that the extraction of data is often just as significant to business strategies as the extraction of profit as the mining of data can support a range of strategies particularly in terms of identifying new business possibilities and expanding new networks. In aiding this extraction of data, states wield crucial economic power. Governments are still needed to unlock access to populations, especially in sensitive areas such as health. Thus, Davies *et al*. (2022) note that COVID-19 could signal the beginning of a whole new era of public-private partnerships, in which states and platforms strike deals over access to different forms of population data.

Davies *et al*., applied key features of 'rentier nationalism' to analyse what happened in education. Over the course of 2020-21 education policy followed a familiar pattern, reflecting on the centres of economic power within the UK economy and state more generally:

> A cluster of firms hovering around the state, offering to fix particular problems at speed, extracted revenue from the public balance sheet. Some of these were established outsourcers …. others were friends of the Conservative party …. others were global technology giants… But this rapid turn to commercial entities, and the chaos that repeatedly engulfed schools, was also a symptom of a longstanding ideological project in education policy: to disempower local authorities, unions and teachers themselves. An alternative form of decentralisation would involve trusting those who are vocationally invested in education as such, but such are the pathologies of English government (p, 209).

Going forward, they highlight the continuing centralising tendencies and resumption of inspections as key obstacles towards understanding and engaging with the social geographies of inequalities and the role of education in mitigating or compounding these potentially. Policies that work with the grain of local desires and hopes and harness the expertise of those who live and work in particular spaces and places are less likely in an outsourced and digitally informed landscape.

The analysis by Davies *et al*., has relevance to understanding trends in child protection and children's social care more broadly. The growth of the for-profit sector and private equity in the care of vulnerable children has become a cause of great concern. An analysis in 2023 found that 863 registered care homes providing care for vulnerable children in March 2023 were fully or partially controlled by investment companies, including private equity, venture capital and foreign funds. This is an increase of more than double the 353 backed by these types of enterprises five years ago. Close to one in four places in a children's care home in England now ultimately have the involvement of an investment company, up from one in six in 2018 (Aguilar-Garcia *et al.*, 2023)

The increasing costs of such provision is proving extremely difficult for local authorities to manage as they have been hollowed out in a consistent and determined fashion with the most deprived local authorities bearing the brunt of the cuts, despite clear evidence that they are the most in need (Sigoma, 2023).

Furthermore, as Davies *et al.* document in relation to education, the pernicious impacts of an audit culture on the morale of staff, in combination with the centralising imperatives of

government, has impeded the ability of local authorities to take a rigorous and independent stance towards their local needs and plan accordingly. While many celebrate the hollowing out of what have been seen as bureaucratic top-down regimes, the locus of accountability has not shifted in a more democratic fashion towards communities and the seeds for further outsourcing, as has happened in education, have been well and truly sown.

Given this gloomy picture, is it viable to hold onto the hope that the state, both at local and national levels, can be rescued in pursuit of the aspirations for a settlement that promotes the flourishing of children and their families?

Fragile openings in social work and child protection

COVID-19 prompted massive disruption to professional lives and routines. For social workers, the home visit – the lynchpin of practice – was put under serious pressure and there has been a high degree of interest in exploring what practices emerged to deal with this. As health professionals were redeployed to deal with the pandemic and schools were restricted in who they catered for, a degree of reflexivity about the problems of relying on the professional gaze emerged, echoing wider reflections on how COVID-19 exposed already-existing fault lines:

> 'In normal times we don't seek to link families to communities around them, but rather make interventions personal and individualised … and then criticise families if we feel they're becoming 'dependent' on us … this crisis has highlighted how dependent we are on individualised home visit' (social worker, quoted in Featherstone, Gupta and Morris, 2020).

There was a degree of reflexivity too about the difficulties that may be attached to the professional gaze, certainly in the early days of the first lockdown, with some recognition that families might find endless agency engagement a source of strain rather than support (Orr, 2020).

Digital inequalities were highlighted, with practical measures taken to equip families with the means to engage with meetings and services generally. Such practicality had not been in evidence before the pandemic, for example, in relation to the provision of bus fares to attend meetings. More responsive family support-type approaches also became evident across many studies, with some evidence of their role in improving relationships (Featherstone *et al.*, 2020).

The response to the pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown, also showed possibilities for a recrafting of the relationship between state-led services and local communities. Indeed, research during the initial stages of the pandemic found that community cohesion and trust had never been higher, with over 95 per cent of council leaders noting that the contribution of community groups to their COVID-19 response had been very significant or significant (New Local Government Network, 2020).

While the pandemic provided opportunities for more solidaristic responses, it also exposed more worrying tendencies. This is not surprising. As Galea (2020) noted, while COVID-19 highlighted our common fate and, therefore, the need for solidarity, the recognition of differential levels of vulnerability in an unequal society could also lead to stigmatisation and othering. Some of the research suggests some distancing in operation, with important differences in perceptions between professionals from a variety of agencies and those

experiencing services emerging, highlighting the separateness of their worlds. For example, research has revealed a disconnect around the experiences of the use of digital means to hold child protection conferences. While professionals evaluated the use of such means very positively and noted their potential for the future, this was not the case for families. They often lacked the means to fully participate and did not feel confident they were heard and were able to understand what was going on (Baginsky, *et al*., 2020).

A study of remote family court hearings similarly noted that while most professionals felt that fairness and justice had been achieved most or all of the time, a majority of parents and relatives reported having concerns about the way their case was dealt with, and two thirds felt that it had not been dealt with well. There was particular concern about hearings where interim orders were made to remove babies shortly after birth, with mothers having to join by phone from hospital, or final hearings where care orders or placement or adoption orders were made, again with hearings accessed by parents on their phones. Specific difficulties were experienced by parents who required an interpreter or who had a disability (Ryan *et al*., 2020).

Openings certainly but lots of challenges!

So, as indicated previously, I have been involved with others in research and conceptual work over the last decades on the possibilities of developing alternatives to current approaches to 'child protection'. The Social Model of Protecting Children emerged from, and continues to be nourished by, those carving out spaces for resistance to old and harmful child protection policies and practices as explored above and has drawn from a wide range of influences (for a full account see Featherstone *et al*., 2018).

The literature on social harms (Pemberton, 2016) prompted the most fundamental of questions about what was framed as harmful and by whom and what power relations were obscured in such framing. For example, the focus on parental behaviours in the causation of harms to children meant not only that responsibility was individualised but whole areas of policy that impact upon children were ignored. Why has traffic pollution, for example, not been considered a child protection issue, given the evidence of its contribution to premature child deaths, particularly in deprived areas?

Perspectives informed by the public health inequalities literature have been highly influential in directing the gaze to systematic patterns and tendencies in relation to risks and vulnerabilities within populations thus eschewing policy approaches that are solely focused on individual behaviours and risks (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Thus, attention is directed to trends in physical and mental health problems, violence, substance misuse and the links between these and how societies are organised and the policy choices around equality and fairness. This is a very different perspective from the established narrative within child protection as outlined above which is firmly focused on individuals, their choices and their behaviours.

The core argument of the Social Model is that the protection of children needs to be linked to understanding what all families need to flourish. It draws from the evidence on the role of poverty in increasing rates of child maltreatment and the chances of children becoming subject to the child protection gaze as outlined above. .In the analysis developed under the Social Model, great faith was placed in the possibilities for both the local and national state to promote the flourishing of its citizens if firmly located within a decentralising and democratising framework. We wanted the state to be bigger and yet smaller, or closer to

home. As argued in Featherstone *et al*. (2020) robust social protections and a re-imagining of the promise of the welfare state, with decent income support strategies, housing, education and health for all were basic pre-requisites for the achievement of a decent life. However, we also argued for the need to rethink how services were delivered, with a focus on the local, on community and, crucially, on a commitment to co-production. We noted the importance of fostering social connections and argued for a decentring of the professional and professionally-led approaches to child protection. We argued that collective strategies needed to be considered in a project that promoted community work, locality-based approaches and peer support, and saw children, young people, families and communities as sources of expertise about system design and best practice.

Some years on, it is clear that there is some re-thinking to be done particularly in relation to the role of both the national and local state in a context where as a group of interdisciplinary scholars argue:

> today's capitalist free markets are quintessential systems of moneyed class domination, rather than of societal welfare maximisation through Adam Smith's famous notion of the 'invisible hand'. The prevalence of such a free-market system has been anything but a natural outcome. It has been actively enabled by national governments and transnational institutions. (The Care Collective, 2021, p, 72).

Moreover, we have seen in recent policy developments how the openings of the pandemic and the many critiques of child protection, outlined above, have been appropriated by policy actors to promote directions that could signal a shift towards more supportive orientations, but one that is undercut by further neo-liberal influenced defunding of public provision and/or greater deregulation and privatisation (Kerr and Sen, 2023).

Kerr and Sen argue for the importance of dissent going forward and the following is offered in that spirit, alongside a plea to broaden conversations and engage with a diverse range of disciplines such as political economy.

Thinking ahead

The Care Manifesto (The Care Collective, 2020) provides an analysis of our current travails alongside a roadmap for how we might live differently and, in so doing, provides some help to us in moving thinking forward. Firstly, it is important to outline the contours of this conceptual work. The writers comprising the Care Collective argue that we are in urgent need of a politics that puts care front and centre: 'Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive - along with the planet itself' (p, 6). While I recognise that many take issue with the paternalism attached to the term care here, and respect such reservations, I consider its deployment by the Care Collective helpful in signalling an alternative to our current impoverished language of markets or decontextualised relationships (see also Williams, 2021).

The Care Collective (2020) argue that taking care seriously means engaging properly and robustly with its paradoxes and ambivalences and they note its origins in the Old English word caru, meaning care, concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, trouble (p. 27).Taking care seriously means uncovering and rejecting the premises behind our current care-less international, national, local and intimate settlements and uncovering the connections between issues such as the elevation of the profit motive as a supreme good, short-termist and disrespectful

approaches to the planet, the construction of local and national states in hock to vested interests and the outsourcing of hands on caring practices to the most exploited and least valued.

Our capacities to care are interdependent – a crucial insight integral to the Social Model. When we are assessing a mother's capacity to care for her children, how can we ignore the psycho-social contexts in which she cares? What sources of income and employment are available to her? What kinds of childcare support? What kind of housing? What friendships and adult relationships does she have? What family support services are available in her area?

It is a travesty, as has been remarked elsewhere, that we have needed to make this case for 'social work', but we have had to as the evidence has uncovered the reductive nature of the assessments so often carried out and the subsequent responses (Featherstone *et al*., 2018). Our intellectual and emotional resources have been hollowed out by policy contexts which are care-less in the choices made about who and what is most worthy of resourcing, whose voices matter and what stories can get heard.

There is an urgent need for those of us concerned with protecting children and supporting families to make links between the practices that manifest in families that are care-less and damaging, with the practices of those professionals working for local and national states. The latter are often working in contexts where, despite their best intentions, the 'solutions' open to them are heavily constrained by care-less politics and economics. This means the making of links between the hollowing out of family support services under austerity and the resources available to the young mother above.

The privatisation of so much of social care, including that offered to vulnerable young people, means that 'helping' so often morphs into harming. Providing resources at a range of levels to young people to live safely within their families and communities and hearing from them what they need to do so is not core business for many professionals and their managers. Meanwhile vast sums of money are being paid by impoverished local authorities to remove such young people to institutions run by private equity firms who too often provide scandalously poor levels of care.

The lack of robust attention to care and the interconnectedness of its personal, familial, economic, political and international dimensions also reinforces an ethical hollowing out which is rooted in a care-less approach to generativity and history. What are our responsibilities to future generations in terms of what kind of planet and society we bequeath them? But also, what about making a reckoning with our past? When those young people we removed from their families because they were being harmed ask us to account for our decisions to remove their children because of harm, how do we respond? Where is our sense of moral accountability?

It is vital not only that we embrace the interconnected nature of the multiple crises we find ourselves in but also pay serious attention to the construction of alternatives. The Care Collective contains a range of examples that can be learned from, going forward. These examples involve developing caring economies, politics, states, communities and kinships and are inter-related even if actions are taking place at different levels. What is crucial is to carry on highlighting the different examples and opening up spaces for dialogue between those who are engaging in resistance and progressive politics around the world.

Some of the examples highlighted by the Care Collective include:

- Developing and strengthening alliances to expose and tackle tax fraud is vital – a third of the world's wealth is held offshore, spurring campaigns for international financial transactions tax such as the Tobin Tax

- Insourcing at local levels - in the UK there are models at local levels that provide inspiration with the focus on supporting local businesses that provide decent wages and work conditions

- The Green New Deal, an intra-and transnational multifaceted social justice strategy to deal with climate crisis through joined-up policies aimed at restructuring work, energy and financial systems

- The World Health Organisation, an important transnational institution that works effectively by building alliances across the globe

To those can be added international developments in child protection such as the abolitionist approach promoted by Roberts (2022) in the US and some of the developments in transformative justice. Here links are being made between the different forms of state violence (including child protective services) towards communities of colour and the need to develop alternative settlements.

Concluding remarks

There has long been a need to broaden spaces and places for dialogue in child protection in England. In that context the Social Model continues to provide a helpful space for us to contribute to that dialogue obliging us to engage with the fundamental question: What do children, young people and families need from each other, their communities and the local and national state to flourish?

In this article, I have reflected upon the limitations of previous work in understanding the role of the state in the context of the strength of the relationship with capital and broadened the gaze further to explore the work of scholars in the field of economics and political economy, among others. Alternatives to individualising risk averse and blaming narratives that reinforce the manifold inequalities experienced by so many are being developed and articulated particularly post Covid. Of vital importance are the many possibilities for dialogue that are now to be found and the importance of continuing a project of dissent (see the edited collection from Sen and Kerr, 2023 for further readings on this project).

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