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Commentary

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Breaking the distance: Dialogues of care in a time of limited geographies

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Abstract
In this commentary, we reflect on the limitations, somber difficulties, and possibilities of new geographies of care that have emerged as a result of our limited personal geographies during the time of COVID-19.

Keywords
care, COVID-19, distance, dialogue, Italy

Introduction

As a small group of geographers working in a large technical university in northern Italy, battling hard for possibilities of academic dialogue is not new to us. We have fought to obtain space within our department, to have a voice in international journals dominated by Anglophone geography, and to maintain research dialogues in distant elsewheres. In Italy, the outbreak of COVID-19 in mid-February 2020, less than 2 hours away from where we write, brought a whole new dimension to our struggle for dialogue. As of late May 2020, our university has been closed for more than 10 weeks, and our work is still confined to our homes.

From home, the spaces of dialogue that we had fought hard to obtain seem distant again. However, we are also embracing alternative methods of being

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connected and relating with each other. Starting with a reflection on the geographies of care at a time of limited geographies, we use our personal responses to show the forms of care-full dialogue that we enacted—including working collaboratively in ways which we had not foreseen. We then explain how these new forms of dialogue allowed us to use our geographical sensibility and disciplinary ethos to question an expanded 'solutionism' (Morozov, 2020) that our government embraced, at the cost of depoliticizing both the pandemic and responses to it. While the denial of scientific knowledge has produced a largely avoidable death toll in other national contexts, such as the US and Brazil, where political leaders are still pursuing reactionary agendas for the few and not for the many (see Pfrimer and Barbosa, 2020), the politics of expertise still needs to be carefully addressed. We then conclude by considering what kind of geographies and dialogues of care should be maintained and carried into the future.

Dialogue as care at a distance

As the first weeks of our isolation went by, we soon realized that social distancing was not only an issue of geographical distance. Reconsidering the ways in which we interact also encompassed the mundane, the sensorial, and the emotional dimensions of our work as researchers. However, feeling confined in our work as scholars has not just been a contingent circumstance, or a new sentiment. Working from a peripheral location in the circuits of international geographical knowledge means, at best, that our possibilities of dialogue are limited by language (Qian, 2018) and by the fact that necessary translations are always asymmetrical (de Araújo and Germes, 2016). Moreover, if scholarly dialogue is 'a form of embodied action' that is 'not confined to the textuality of the written word alone' (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018: 113) but distributed across all forms of academic encounter, the room for our international dialogues was already highly constrained by the neoliberalization of our academic system, mirroring more general trends in global higher education. Due to budget cuts and chronic underfinancing of research activities, our chances depended on very fragile circumstances: getting ad-hoc funding from the European Union, scavenging for travel grants, relying on philanthropic research support, finding material justification to invite international guests, and so on.

In writing this, we are not suggesting that our experience of peripherality is exceptional, but that the exceptional circumstances of a global pandemic combined with forced home quarantine revealed its utter fragility. As days went by, our fieldwork missions were canceled, our visiting research periods annulled, international conferences postponed, and the possibilities for dialogue as an embodied action reduced to the haptic technologies that, with different degrees of privilege, fill our homes. And if our position in a Western-European country is one of relative privilege, we should expect that COVID-19 will have a devastating impact on academic communities that are already more marginal than ours (Oswin, 2020).

Yet the circumstances of confinement have also been generative of a shift in the way we address these limits. To be sure, rethinking our academic involvement has not been easy, and trivial setbacks have registered as personal, emotional failures. They have, however, enacted a chain of solidarity in which mutual caring has taken on a new significance. Central to our effort in remaining connected has become a dialogue based on what feminist political scholar Joan Tronto (1993) calls the 'ethics of care': an affective work of maintenance, repair, and survival.

With all the limits of caring at a distance, we are learning to embrace the fact that, as Vicki Lawson argued more than a decade ago, 'care ethics cannot be practiced or theorized in the abstract'(Lawson, 2007: 3), since they are always situated. In this sense, we are aware that normative notions of care have put a disproportionate burden on women in carrying the affective toll of the pandemic, and that the moralizing dimension of care should not be overlooked. Nonetheless, placing the ethics of care at the center of the dialogues that we are trying to nurture has been a way to straddle the divide across the limitations on the movement of our bodies and the openness required by our geographical imaginaries (Massey, 2005).

In practice, we have been conducting a dual experiment using care to both *enlarge our limited geographies through dialogue* and to *enlarge dialogues through our limited geographies*. This means that, on the one hand, we have sought to expand the boundaries of our peripherality by inviting international colleagues to online seminars—colleagues who would have otherwise had difficulties reaching us on site. Far from being techno-enthusiasts, and conscious about limitations in access and issues with proprietary communication platforms, we believe that such a form of care-full dialogue may in the future help to bridge the asymmetries of power of our discipline. The generosity and solidarity of the scholars who responded to our invitations are a testament to the possibility of a more cosmopolitan geography. On the other hand, caring for each other has also led us to enlarge dialogue opportunities within our own limited geographies. An example of the latter is this piece of collective writing, which has emerged as a collaborative reflection on our condition, cutting across diverse research interests and different seniority levels, including graduate students, early-career, precarious researchers, and fully established academics.

All this may read quite rhetorical or excessively pragmatic. What might it mean for the ways in which we approach the things we study? To answer this question, in the next section of this commentary we show how the centrality of care in our dialogues has provided a useful counterpoint to the technocratic 'solutionism' (Morozov, 2020) blindly championed by our government, and offers a pathway for our discipline.

Care-full dialogues as an antidote to technocratic solutionism

Faced with an emergency that possibly could have been avoided had China not been orientalized as a distant 'other' in the public opinion, the Italian government's response to the spread of COVID-19 showcases the contradictions that emerge when democratic politics are hollowed out by technical expertise. Managing the pandemic in Italy has involved an unusual proliferation of 'experts'—demiurgic figures appointed to manage the crisis at the national, regional, and local scales. The national government had early on nominated a special commissioner, only later to constitute a second, male-only taskforce, and a third one now for the phasing out of the quarantine. At a more local scale, our own university has addressed the national government with technical reports detailing measures needed for the resumption of industrial production, public schools, and sports (Politecnico di Torino, 2020).

Clearly, the question of technocracy goes well beyond the contingencies of the present pandemic. As critical geographers, we work to expose how the 'rule of experts' (Mitchell, 2002) shapes political discourses and social realities, but the severe restrictions over our daily geographies have perhaps allowed us to experience more directly the effects of expertise on our own bodies. Our perplexities do not lead us to dismiss the role of technical expertise, but to recenter our analysis in the way suggested by Marìa Puig de la Bellacasa: shifting from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of care'(de la Bellacasa, 2017: 30). Such a move allows us to reject depoliticized matters of fact, while generating care for the neglected things—human and not—in the making of expert responses that might maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it 'as well as possible' (Tronto, 1993: 103). Our dialogues have thus explored the gaps left by technocratic solutions (and how these have tentatively been filled). These gaps pertain to the question of which forms of knowledge count as 'technical'. More importantly, caring for neglected things challenges us and other geographers to more strongly extend these dialogues from our disciplinary spheres to arenas of public discourse and debate.

Several 'things' have indeed slipped through the cracks of public expertise. We cannot detail all of them in this short commentary, but some examples are germane. As a measure of physical distancing, our government imposed a 'stay at home' order, while failing to address those who do not have a home. Schools have been closed for almost 3 months now, but working parents have not been provided with adequate financial support to organize childcare. Indiscriminate shutdowns have impacted some economic activities more than

others, furthering inequalities between waged, autonomous, and more precarious forms of labor. The plea of undocumented migrants working in agricultural fields is still unheeded. And yet some of these gaps have been filled by other initiatives, such as food and medical networks of redistribution, which foreground alternate infrastructures of care (Alam and Houston, 2020) that contrast with the eerie, aerial footages of deserted cities widely circulated in the media.

Centering our geographical sensibility on these cracks and fragile sutures mirrors our commitment to each other, to dialogues of care that generate more than geographic facts but also interventions—political, intellectual, intimate—in the future that is taking shape as a result of COVID-19.

Conclusion

The efforts of care and dialogue that we have enacted in the past weeks emerge from volatile readings of an evolving situation. However, it would be a loss to only remember these efforts as a distant past marked by crisis and anguish, as the forms of care with which we have managed to continue our geographical dialogues are new spaces of contact that have not only helped us navigate a moment in which our reach seemed null, but may continue to do so in the future. Putting care at the center of our relationships has helped us develop a care-full critique of technical solutionism. At the same time, our practices of care can generate questions around which kinds of knowledge matter to live in the world—as well as possible.

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