

## **The caring classes: a socio-demographic and occupational analysis of caring values**

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### **Abstract**

In the past, the working class was perceived as a cohesive social and political subject, although this was never fully the case, and it is certainly less the case today. Class, in fact, is not just defined by economic attributes, but also by social, cultural and ethical ones. Care, understood either as work or values, is fundamental for better understanding class. The implications of the relationship between care values and class are yet not fully understood. In this paper, building on David Graeber's intuition regarding the caring classes, we theorise and statistically explore the existence of a working-class care ethos by examining which socio-demographic and occupational groups share care values. Using European Social Survey (ESS) data and ordinal logistic regressions, we test to what extent self-perceptions of care for others are associated with occupational/working profiles and socio-demographic characteristics. We find that caring for others is a value shared, transversally, by an intersection of different individuals who experience a few conditions of subalternity in the context of patriarchal and racial capitalism; a left-wing political orientation and background of political/union organising; some specific occupational profiles marked by interpersonal interaction and, most significantly, by explicit forms of care work. We conclude by speculating that the concept of caring classes can be a useful one towards a fertile terrain of political struggle.

**Key words:** care, caring classes, value, class, Graeber

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## **Introduction**

There is a general belief that the post-war working class represented a unified political subject in most European countries. In the so-called “Golden Age” of capitalism (1950s-1970s), the – prevalently male, white and adult – workforce could gather in factories, identify collective needs, and mainstream their demands to the broader public, acting as a “sword of justice” for the promotion of their socio-economic rights (Flanders, 1975). This cohesive political subjectivity has been deemed as extinct in the following neoliberal phase of post-industrial capitalism, mostly due to processes of industrial fragmentation and labour market diversification (Bonoli, 2005). Broadly starting from the 1980s, class has progressively become understood and articulated in multiple forms, consistently intersecting with various classifications related to nation, race, gender, and sexuality (Skeggs, 2003). Furthermore, the transition to a post-industrial economy in the Global North (mainly through the relocation of industrial activities to the Global South) coincided not only with higher global inequality, but also with higher inequality within the North itself, where unemployment grew and an upsurge of poverty rates among vulnerable groups took place (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Piketty, 2017). In this context, an increasingly dispersed “proletariat” has been seen as failing to coalesce around shared values or normative orientations.

However, the idea of a unified working class in the post-war era, and then the “paradise lost” of the neoliberal era, is itself now ever more contested. Sociological research has put into discussion the narrative of a “Fordist working class” as a cohesive political subject, pointing to the conflation of objective, subjective and discursive class elements. Firstly, feminist work has shown that the notion of labour cannot be confined to the formal labour market, and that informal (care) work shall be added to the definition of who belongs to the working class and who does not (Dalla Costa & James, 1975). Secondly, labour movements have also been identified as significant agents of discrimination, particularly towards women, with different intensities depending on race, ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship (Chun, 2016). In fact, dilemmas between redistribution and recognition tend to emerge when individuals experience economic and cultural injustices simultaneously (Fraser, 1997). Thirdly, class definitions cannot be merely confined to economic attributes (e.g. income, main occupation or work logic). One’s position in cultural and social networks also matters in defining class

(Bourdieu, 1987). Similarly, research has shown that moral standards are used to draw boundaries and define working-class communities of individuals with shared values (Lamont, 2002; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 2014).

The focus of this piece is on the latter point: that is, to what extent cultural and ethical attributes can provide opportunities for different socio-economic groups to coalesce and self-recognize as a unitary political subject in the current neoliberal phase. This is particularly relevant as common accounts on the atomised “precariat” (Standing, 2011) disregard how precariousness has always been a structural feature of the working class (Todd, 2008). We thus look at class not through the lenses of social stratification, i.e. seeking to clarify boundaries between groups based on material-structural features, à la Savage (2015). Our work is rather in line with the idea of class as a discursive, relational, and necessarily political construct. From this analytical standpoint, the very idea of working class is seen as forged in its redistributive struggles: “demands for equality are demands not only for economic and social justice but demands for redistribution within the fields of visibility and intelligibility within which class-based inequalities are naturalized, reproduced and legitimated.” (Tyler, 2015, p. 507). Since it is class narratives and values that make class a class, it is thus relevant to assess to what degree the same value orientations are shared between different socio-demographic and labour market groups.

We draw from anthropologist David Graeber and his idea of “the caring classes”, a concept which we explore in the context of this article. In a Grand Conference at the *College de France*, in 2018, Graeber noted that the activist core of the movements he participated in and wrote about, such as the Alterglobalization Movement or Occupy Wall Street, were people (mostly women, but also men) whose job in some way involved helping others. This raised the question of what a working-class movement would look like under the current form of capitalism, and made him think of Occupy as a “revolt of the caring classes” (Graeber, 2018b). We ask: how can the concept of caring classes help us better understand the relationship between value(s) and class, and its political implications?

To answer this question, we reconsider Graeber's notion of the caring classes by drawing on Skeggs' influential works on class and gender and formulate a more systematic definition. Despite the significance of Graeber's intuition, the concept of caring classes lacks thorough theoretical development, leading to multiple potential definitions: a first one based on

subjective perceptions of people who see themselves as caring for others' flourishing; a second one related to a set of specific occupations with a high degree of interpersonal contact; a third one regarding the caring classes as the reformulation of what a working class actually is - and has always been - as a whole. By following Graeber's arguments, these definitions are not necessarily contradictory, but their conflation makes it difficult to look analytically at the caring classes. In this paper we suggest a possible path to disentangle the caring classes empirically, that is by examining the caring values shared by certain socio-demographic, occupational and political groups.

This article reconsiders and expands the idea of the caring classes, not only by theorising but also by statistically assessing whether we can indeed see a convergence between certain demographic and occupational traits and self-perceptions of care. To this effort we proceed through three subsequent steps. Firstly, we discuss relevant literature on care work and care ethics, and bridge it with literature on value and class, to build our theoretical framework. Then, using European Social Survey (ESS) (NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2019) data and ordinal logistic regressions, we speculate on the existence of what could be defined as a working-class "care ethos" by analysing socio-demographic and occupational patterns in relation to care values. In our empirical analysis we observe that - through the lenses of care - subjects who experience different but often intersecting forms of oppression (such as gender and race) share a similar commitment to caring values. Parallely, we check for and highlight occupational and political patterns associated with caring values. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings.

### **Care is work**

The insight that care work is fundamental for maintaining life, reproducing society, and producing value is at the core of the scholarship on Social Reproduction Theory, whose authors have widely articulated the nexus between care and labour (Bhattacharya, 2017). Its origins are to be found in feminist campaigning about half a century ago: in 1972, as part of second-wave feminism, a transnational movement focused on the centrality of care labour was founded in Padua, Italy. There, Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Brigitte Galtier launched the International Wages for Housework Campaign (Dalla Costa, 2019). Self-defined as feminist-Marxists, they advocated for the recognition of care work as the hidden reproductive labour – predominantly performed by women – without which

production would not be possible (Dalla Costa & James, 1975). In fact, Federici argued that the invisibilisation, naturalisation, and devaluation of reproductive labour is what made primitive accumulation possible, thus creating the conditions for capitalism (Federici, 2004). Campaigning for making this value-creating work visible and retributed would therefore hit capitalism at its core (patriarchal) mechanisms.

In this literature, care is primarily understood as a form of work that is part of the broader concept of “social reproduction”, understood as “the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally” (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 382). Importantly, the demanding and challenging aspects of care work are emphasised, especially (though not only) as an activity that predominantly rests on women’s shoulders and is most often neither recognised nor retributed. Furthermore, care work is often an unavoidable burden for those who experience overlapping form of discrimination, not only gender but also race, citizenship status, and class, making care itself a site of intersection of multiple scales, inequalities and crises (Tyler, 2015, p. 201).

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic made it clearer than ever that care occupations are essential for sustaining our communities and ourselves. Many people realised that while numerous economic activities could be paused, care work, particularly domestic work, could not. Formal care work and other essential activities were recognised (possibly more than they had ever been) as fundamental, receiving praises and applause. Yet, as the recent nurse strikes in the UK also show (Pym, 2023), these same “heroes” represent some of the most precarious, underpaid and under-protected workers of the economy, which appears as paradoxical when considering that workers on the other side of the service spectrum – the so-called “high-value added service jobs”, such as corporate managers and lawyers, or bank accountants – receive a much higher degree of social and economic reward, despite being far from essential for our economies.

These two broad categories are the result of two parallel processes that constitute what is commonly referred to as the expansion of the service sector. On one hand, David Graeber (2018b) argues that the neoliberal financialization of bureaucracies and the bureaucratisation of finances have given rise to a new ruling class of rentiers. The existence of the latter is made possible by the exponential growth of (prevalently private) bureaucratic structures,

made up of a vast army of managers, middle-managers, administrators, human resources experts, corporate lawyers and the like. These roles often (though not necessarily) coincide with the upper-end of what Graeber (2018a) called bullshit jobs: those activities that are “so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case” (p. 9-10).

On the other hand, private and public caregivers have increasingly become fundamental figures in an ageing population, the health and education sectors have expanded, and domestic care has become increasingly commodified – although many noted that care is among the most difficult human activities to quantify and to fully commodify (Oksala, 2016; Skeggs, 2014). Care work has been defined in multiple ways. Social policy, for example, sees care as a distinct set of activities referred “to the labour, resources and relations involved in the provision of care and assistance for those requiring it” (Daly, 2020, p. 1), and seeks to understand how the welfare state organises its provision. The sociology of work similarly defines care work as “the labour associated with meeting the physical, emotional, and developmental needs of others. Care work takes place in homes (e.g., the care of children or elders) and in institutional settings such as nursing homes, childcare centres, schools” (Stacey, 2013, p. 20). Graeber, differently, does not define the caring classes as composed by those who perform care work in the above sense alone. Instead, he primarily defines them in a broader sense, as “people who see themselves as caring for others’ flourishing” (2018b). Akin to his definition of bullshit jobs (mentioned above), the logic of the caring classes is mostly subjective, thus being represented by the (caring) value that actors assign to their labour, something discussed by the scholarship on Care Ethics we describe below.

### **Care is values**

The literature on the Ethics of Care is likewise fundamental for our framework, as it looks at the intersection between values, moral orientations and labour. The theory started to be developed by thinkers such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings (1982; 1984), who highlighted the significance of the act of caring, as well as of dependencies, relations, and vulnerabilities. In this literature, moral disciplines based on care are more often found among women, though obscured by masculine liberal justice and utilitarian traditions. Essentialist arguments on the morality of women (i.e. that care values are “naturally” feminine) have

been challenged vigorously and, we believe, rightly so. Tronto, for example, wrote that “In suggesting that an ethic of care is gender related, Gilligan precludes the possibility that care is an ethic created in modern society by the condition of subordination” (Tronto, 1987, p. 646). In other words, to find caring values in women more than in men has rather to do with patriarchy than with nature.

The implications of the Ethics of Care, and, more importantly, the relevance of the practice and virtue of care, have been extended in the following years by thinkers like Diemut Bubeck (1995), who started to bridge theories of care labour with care ethics, highlighting the injustice and exploitative character of care work as long as it is assigned to women, and providing a reinterpretation of care ethics in light of this matter; Virginia Held (2006) who explored the political, social and global implications of care; and Joan Tronto (1993, 2013), who brought forward the study of the intersections between care ethics, feminist theory, and political science, with particular reference to questions of power. Importantly, Tronto and Fisher provided the influential and broad definition of care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment” (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40)

The ethics of care essentially defies the self-interested (male) individual that thinks of himself as an autonomous and independent being, and who is currently at the centre of the economy and the world. In fact, it represents a challenge to...

...theories from classical to modern [that] assume a structure of feeling – usually disenchantment and/or instrumentalism and greed – which are somehow internalised into dispositions that shape the subject, such as the rational, reflexive, acquisitive, knowing, omnivorous subject, etc. [...] so much so that what at first appears to be critique often ends as legitimisation. (Skeggs, 2014, p. 3)

In other words, Skeggs points to the performative aspect of social theories. Following her point, the Ethics of Care – by building on the very fact that the human experience is marked by vulnerability and interdependency, if not constantly, at different stages of life – legitimises structures of feeling which imply alternative social theories to the currently hegemonic ones. If one starts from the premise that we are all vulnerable, then care is the obvious necessary

praxis as well as ethical principle on which to restructure society as a whole, by making it visible, centring it, redistributing, and democratising it (Tronto, 2013). A society and economy built on such basic, yet profoundly different, (prevalent) understanding of human beings – the substitution of the homo economicus with the caring person –, would work in a substantially different way, likely involving a shift away from hypercompetitive logics towards more solidaristic and cooperative ones.

### **Work is care**

Within and beyond the subjective logic or the identification with certain occupations, as anticipated, David Graeber also suggested that the caring classes could be seen as what the working class, in reality, has always been as a whole. This understanding is built on his research on matters of value and work, and on what an anthropological understanding of those might suggest towards grasping the essence of an economy. In this respect, Graeber's work has mainly rested upon the theoretical engagement with anthropological literature on value – crucially, the work of Terence Turner –, although he always recognized the fundamental influence that feminist literature had on such studies (Graeber, 2001).

More specifically, Graeber underlined that what has mostly interested human societies in many places and times was never the production of wealth and material goods (let alone their consumption), but the production of *people*, or rather the mutual production of certain kinds of people (Graeber, 2006). In most societies, major ethical debates have revolved precisely around the question of what kind of people a certain society wanted to produce. In these contexts, “the production of material necessities is valuable precisely insofar as it can be seen as an extension of the principle of care for others, and the mutual creation of human beings” (Graeber, 2021, p. 322). Among the main insights of the anthropological theory of value that he worked with, a central one is precisely that it is the mutual creation of human beings, what an economy, or society, is really about (2001).

In this sense, any economic action can truly be seen as a form of caring labour, understood as labour that helps meet others' needs (Folbre, 2009). As Praetorius (2015) provocatively puts it, then, “the economy is care”. In fact, houses are built because we care for people to have shelter, and cars are manufactured because we care for people to be able to move around. As Marx himself famously pointed out, the issue resides in the fetishism of commodities, by



which relationships between people are disguised as relationships between commodities. However, without alienation, work (including production and manufacturing) would be driven by the anticipation of others' needs and desires, reflecting a caring attitude. This is not to cancel the specificities of what is currently considered care work (refer to section 2), nor to argue that in the current economic system any job is caring, but to suggest that all non-alienated meaningful work can be seen as a form of care, even if material objects might mediate the relationship.

In the *College de France* talk, Graeber suggested that such an economy would substitute a productivist understanding of the economy as production (as creation out of nothing) and consumption (as destruction) with one in which all value-creating labour is seen in terms of care and freedom (and freedom as play). In fact, “caring labour is best conceived as labour that is directed, ultimately, at maintaining or enhancing another’s freedom” (Graeber, 2018b). In the paradigmatic example of caring labour - maternal care -, a mother takes care of her children so that they can play (as well as to play with them) – while play, in turn, is the “development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom” (Marx, 1993, p. 959). Therefore, Graeber proposes a revision of what we look at as defining features of a working class, moving from structural attributes to subjective-value and relational ones, as we further elaborate in the next section.

### **Class is value(s)**

Having looked into how care is both work (value-creating labour) and values (care ethics), and having turned value and values upside down to argue that work itself is care, we now move to the last tenet of our theoretical framework: *class* – and its relationship to the concepts explored above. Here we follow Skeggs, who offers fundamental insights for connecting care values and practices with class. For a definition of class, we draw from her revised version of the Marxist and Bordieuan understanding of “class as struggle” rather than as a mere matter of classification and social stratification (Savage, 2015; Tyler, 2015).

In her research, Skeggs ethnographically accounts for the potential of working-class resistance where people engage in struggles not only over value, but over values, by activating alternative values through forms of class solidarity (Skeggs, 2011). In other words, she argues that value is not only the one extracted through exploitation (Marx) or accrual

(Bourdieu) but also a relational one: a “more general ethos for living and connecting to others” (Skeggs, 2016, p. 14). To cite Skeggs more fully: “if we think about how time and energy is given to others rather than invested in the self, or extracted from in the interests of capital, we can see how value practices are made not (just) through self-value accrual but through the gift of attention to others over time and space” (Skeggs, 2016, p. 14).

In other words, class consciousness is formed not only through economic, cultural and symbolic formations, but also through care relations, institutions, norms and practices (Crean, 2018). Crean, for example, calls the affective formation of class consciousness “care consciousness” (2018). Her in-depth ethnographic study provides a fundamental insight for our research: that “affective relations are not social derivatives, subordinate to economic, political, or cultural relations in framing social justice” (Crean, 2018, p. 4). Similarly, Lamont (2002) has shown how black working-class communities in the US emphasize their identities in terms of “caring self”, prioritizing “solidarity, egalitarianism, generosity, close interpersonal connection, fictive kinship, and the defence of the black imagined community” (p.67).

Differently from the literature cited above, we do not take affective relations themselves as a unit of analysis. Instead, we look at how much people value caring for others’ wellbeing and how this is related to the lived experiences of social actors. In other words, we look at care values and at what they tell us about class. Sociologically, class always describes problems of inequality (Tyler, 2015). Yet, while it is normally associated to inequality of *value* (economic inequality), our article seeks to describe inequality of (care) *values*, which we use to define the caring classes. Inequalities of (care) values, as we will find, have interesting correlations to an intersection of other inequalities (of value and values) related to issues of both distribution and recognition. A merit of the concept of caring classes is then to allow us to see some of these inequalities together by looking at care values.

## **Data and methods**

We operationalise our theoretical framework with this empirical question: what are the demographic, political and occupational characteristics of those who value caring for others? Rather than coming to the empirics with predefined hypotheses, we first check for relevant associations between caring values and general socio-economic attributes in a quite inductive

manner. Then, we muster such empirical findings to propose a new conceptualization of the (intersectional) caring classes and their subjectivities. In this way, we amend Graeber's hypothesis and seek for a synthesis between care ethics and labour-centred approaches. To gauge associations between individual characteristics and caring values, we use data from the 8th round of the European Social Survey (2016). The survey gathers a large number of responses (over 44.000) from 23 different countries. The ESS is generally considered as the "gold standard" in quantitative survey research, thanks to its rigorous sampling method and weights system. We thereby use individual-level data nested in 23 countries to gauge whether caring for others and their well-being is associated with a number of socio-demographic or labour market characteristics.

As a dependent variable, we use responses to a question formulated as follows: "Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer. *It's very important to her/him to help the people around her/him. She/he wants to care for their well-being*". Interviewees could express their answers on a 6-item Likert scale, ranging from "not like me at all" to "very much like me". This question is used as a proxy for care values as shared by individual workers. We believe that the survey question best approximates our understanding of care values. The degree to which subjects think they support people around them, and the extent to which they care for their well-being is not only a subjective indicator of individual behaviour; but arguably also a projection on the extent to which someone gives importance to care and help as goals in themselves. In turn, this is fertile soil for a care ethics, since priority attributed to care and help can be seen to mirror "how much" care, solidarity and support someone is expected to give and receive in their daily life and shared in their communities (Held, 2006).

We focus on a set of socio-demographic and occupational factors as independent variables. First, the article examines whether care values are significantly associated with gender, age, education, contractual arrangement, income decile and migration background. While we cannot fully draw from theory to elaborate hypotheses on how the caring classes may look like, based on Graeber and the reviewed literature we broadly expect that subjectivities associated with precariousness or vulnerability (female, young, low-skilled, unemployed or temporary workers, less wealthy and people with a migrant background) are more likely to cultivate care values vis à vis the male, older, high-skilled, permanent workers, wealthier and

people with a native background. Similarly, labour market outsiders (i.e. the unemployed) are expected to care more for others' wellbeing. In addition, we expect that caring values are not only shared by subaltern subjects by virtue of their vulnerability; we posit that vulnerability and interdependence lead to valuing the principle of solidarity. The latter is not without a political connotation, as it has been traditionally mobilised by the left, and by union activists in particular. For this reason, we also look at political orientations via partisan leaning and union membership, expecting left-wing people and union members to care more for others.

Finally, the aim of this article is to corroborate Graeber's speculation that care values tend to concentrate among people in certain "caring" occupations and less in others. We use Oesch's (2006) well-known 8- and 16-class typology to define workers' occupational role and status (the full schema is available in the appendix). The advantage of Oesch's elaboration is that it considers not only the "work logic" (independent, technical, organisational, interpersonal), but also the skillset and degree of autonomy. In so doing, it strikes a good balance between structural and status-related features of job holding (see also Wright, 2002). For the sake of simplicity, we exclude entrepreneurial work (large employers, managers, self-employed people, etc.) from our analysis. In general, Graeber seems to suggest that the bedrock of the caring classes lies in interpersonal service work, at all skill levels. Both socio-cultural (semi) professionals such as doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, and service workers such as waiters, home helpers and caregivers, tend to cultivate care values in line with their professional ethos. On the other hand, people with an organisational or technical work logic (bureaucrats, consultants, accountants, corresponding with many of the examples provided by Graeber for bullshit jobs) are more likely to care for others to a lesser extent than the first group.

To examine such associations, we primarily use ordered logistic regressions with country-level fixed effects. Since our dependent variable is ordinal (1-6), logits seem the most appropriate design to test our hypotheses. As robustness checks, we perform linear mixed-effects OLS models with and without country-clustered robust standard errors. We also add life satisfaction as a control variable. More details are reported in the appendix.

## **Empirical results**

Findings from ordered logistic regressions with country-fixed effects generally show that vulnerable groups and labour market outsiders are more likely to cultivate care values than the rest of the workforce (figure 1). In particular, the most incontrovertible result is that identifying as a woman is strongly and significantly associated with care values. This finding holds true in all models with all specifications (available in the appendix). The same applies to having a migrant background: being non-native increases one's chances of cultivating care values by 15% as compared to native citizens. By contrast age, education, unemployment, temporary contract and income decile have a null effect on interpersonal care values.

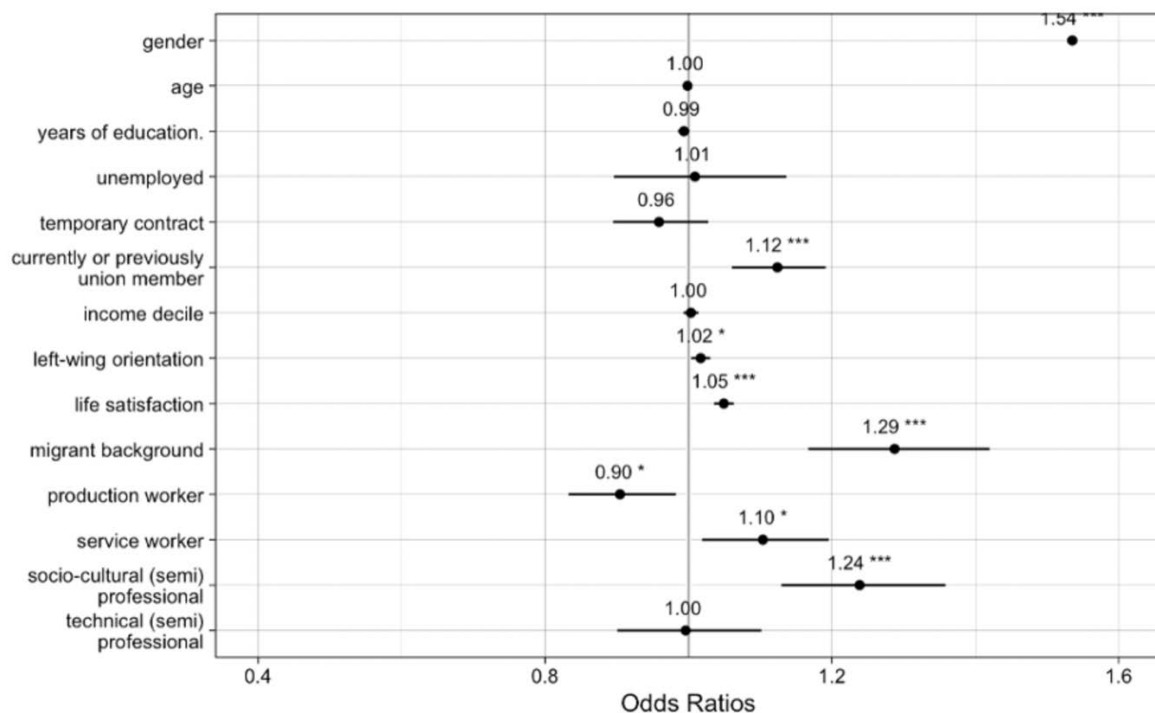


Figure 1

The model shows that past or present membership in trade unions is strongly and positively related to cultivating interpersonal care values, as their chances of doing so are 9% higher than the baseline. Similarly, left-wing values are positively associated with caring for others and their well-being (albeit at lower degrees of statistical and substantive significance). As we will discuss in the next section, the result is in line with recognising a certain affinity between care values and the idea of solidarity, a politically connotated principle historically mobilised by the unions and the left.

Building on Graeber, we also expected that jobs with a high density of interpersonal connections, such as socio-cultural and service professions, would be associated with care values to a larger extent than other work categories. Two results emerge clearly from our empirical test. First, the two work categories based on a high level of interpersonal relationships (socio-cultural and service sector) are significantly associated with care values (1.28 and 1.13 respectively). Workers such as primary school teachers, social workers, medical doctors, but also cooks, nurses, home helpers and waiters are more likely to care for others and their well-being. Conversely, people who work in technical, clerical or production jobs (technicians, IT specialists, engineers, assemblers) show no significant association in our study, which resonates with the idea that not all occupations encourage care for others.

Disentangling the causal channel between care work and care values is beyond the scope of the article. However, this association could be interpreted in two main, non-mutually exclusive, ways. Certain occupations may foster a higher degree of personal attachment and empathy, thereby converting into values of care for other people. Since time spent in paid labour makes up for a large share of people's lives, it almost certainly affects our attitudes and value orientations, and it would not be surprising if working in care or interpersonal service sectors stimulated a stronger care ethos (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). At the same time, a self-selection pattern might be at play: it is plausible that people who value caring for others are more likely to seek employment in care-related sectors. Mindful of the limits of survey designs and descriptive statistics, we leave such interesting speculations for future research.

Secondly, we expand our logits model to include the broader 16-class typology by Oesch (2006) and a variable on doing housework as a main task (figure 2). Looking at more granular occupations, a few findings stand out. Socio-cultural semi-professionals, as well as low- and high-skilled service workers, keep being positively and significantly associated with care values. Being employed in low-skilled services increases one's odds to cultivate care values by a considerable amount (17%). Low-skilled service work also includes domestic workers, category which emblematically represents the concept of care labour and in many countries is going through processes of unionisation and politicisation. On the other hand, people who work in technical or production jobs (skilled clerks, technical experts, manual workers) tend to value care less than average, or the relationship is non-significant. Surprisingly, however, unskilled clerks and technicians show a positive and significant association – two categories frequently equated with so-called bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018a).

While this result might be seen to invalidate Graeber's intuition (or at least a strict dichotomy between "bullshit" and "care" jobs), we suggest that this depends on the interplay between degree of human contact and conditions of subalternity. Firstly, clerical and technical jobs exhibit varying degrees of interpersonal attachment. Individuals in low-skill clerical occupations, such as mail sorting clerks, call centre employees, and receptionists, as well as technical roles like electrical technicians and computer equipment operators, dedicate a significant portion of their time to assisting colleagues and interacting with customers. Secondly, another potential explanation is that caring values may be cultivated due to a state of subalternity, as discussed in the subsequent section. In other words, in the case of unskilled clerks (quite subordinate workers) subalternity holds greater significance than job classification level. Combining these two insights, while keeping in mind that Graeber's definitions of "bullshit" and "caring" occupations are both subjective, it is plausible that subaltern clerical and technical workers see themselves as caring for others (more than they see themselves as doing meaningless tasks).

Finally, while 'housework as a main occupation' demonstrates a positive correlation with care values (12% higher odds compared to the baseline), it does not reach a statistically significant level. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the variable for 'housework' does not fully capture the complexity of unpaid care work, and the dataset lacks a more suitable alternative (see the limitations and future directions section).

Overall, our findings broadly suggest that certain socio-demographic features and occupations prompt care for the others and their well-being. Moreover, for almost any kind of occupation (socio-cultural, technical, service, clerical), less skilled workers see themselves as more "caring" than their skilled counterpart, supporting the claim that more vulnerable and subaltern workers tend to be more caring.

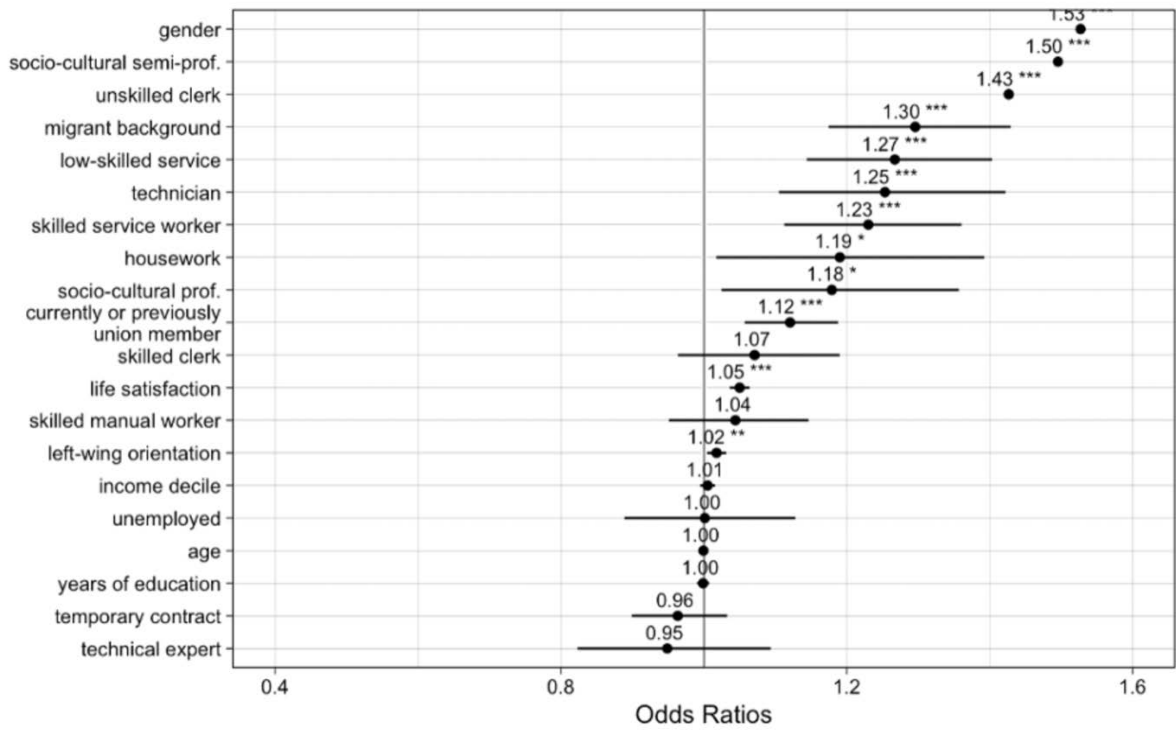


Figure 2

In the last part of the empirical analysis, we split the sample into two gender groups to check for relevant differences between self-identified male and female respondents (forest plots are shown in the appendix). Whereas no sizable variation exists on socio-demographic factors, a few differences on occupational profiles stand out. Low-skilled services are positively and significantly correlated with care values among women, but not among men. Conversely, unskilled manual work shows a negative association with care values only among men. This can be explained by considering that housework, a category overwhelmingly done by women and clearly associated to care by the literature, is included in low-skilled services. Men, instead, perform other kind of low-skilled services (security, driving etc.) which are less related to care. For both gender groups, socio-cultural semi- professionals also show a positive and strong association with a care ethic.

However, quite surprisingly the association with *skilled* socio-cultural and service jobs is more significant for men than for women. A possible reason is that, for the mere fact of being socialised as women, the latter tend to develop stronger care values in general (i.e. regardless of work categories), which would explain why we do not see substantial differences in care values for women in some potentially “care-oriented” sectors. On the other hand, (the fewer) men who work in skilled service and socio-cultural jobs, such as in the hospital or education



sectors, may show a stronger predisposition to care than average male respondents, either as a result of self-selection or for the values stimulated by the nature of the workplace in itself. Looking at frequency distributions, we see that almost 6% of women in the sample work as socio-cultural professionals against a much lower 3,5% of men, and 15.2% of women are in skilled services against only 6,9% of men.

Finally, the data show a positive association between care values and some technical jobs for male respondents, as different from female ones. Technical experts are negatively and significantly associated with care among women, fitting the idea of “bullshit jobs” as opposed to caring ones. By contrast, technicians display a positive and significant correlation with care values only among men. This implies that men in less skilled technical jobs tend to regard themselves as more caring than women in the same sectors, a finding that shall be explored in future research.

### **Towards a synthetic understanding of the caring classes**

The empirical analysis has revealed that demographic, political, and occupational patterns emerge when examining social categories that share the value of caring for others. It has been widely argued that women, not due to inherent qualities but as a result of subordination, dedicate more time - and therefore possess greater capacity - in recognizing vulnerabilities and providing care for those in need. While recognizing that care values are predominantly performed by women, gender segregation in care values should not be taken for granted. Instead, acknowledging the unseen labor of women is just the initial step towards ensuring a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities in society. In this article, we propose that the vulnerability of the human condition and the value of interdependency, solidarity, and care are primarily recognized by women, but also by several other social actors and groups. We contend that care, as a guiding value, is shared by multiple social categories that, akin to women, experience a subaltern condition in the current global state of affairs.

It is not surprising that being female is the most important predictor of care, but being exposed to other forms of oppression likewise predicts a stronger care ethos. For instance, having a migrant background is likely to expose people to the reality of the vulnerability of the human condition in a way that facilitates recognising how anyone, at any point, could be needy of care, and that, hence, caring for others' wellbeing is seen as something important.

This connection draws from research identifying a working-class commitment to egalitarianism, solidarity, compassion, commonality (Fazio et al., 2021; Skeggs, 2014; Strangleman, 2004) which, as Elliot and Roberts argue in their research on working-class caring masculinities, are “qualities fitting into a broader definition of care” (2022, p. 5). Similarly, those working-class solidaristic and egalitarian values are broadly associated with the left, in line with the finding that care is more valued by those who identify themselves as left-wing and by trade union members.

In a similar direction, research in social psychology has shown that lower-class individuals have a higher concern for the suffering or well-being of others (Stellar et al., 2012), that upper-class individuals report social values more oriented at prioritising their own needs while lower class ones express more concern for the welfare of others (Piff et al., 2010), and that “lower-class individuals should be more accurate judges of the emotions of others than upper-class individuals are” (Kraus et al., 2010). On the contrary, several other more privileged social categories are more likely to experience reality under the dominant illusion of the autonomous and independent individual. Having experienced less of a condition of vulnerability or having been able to buy the care needed at a specific moment, a wealthier male, with a stable job and with a native background is less likely to hold care for others as a main value. In sum, research in social psychology seems to be in line with our finding that holding care values is something shared by - or, say, a unifying trait of - subaltern categories in the current socioeconomic system.

While the association between socio-demographic characteristics and political orientations with care values is relatively straightforward, the one between occupation and care values deserves more consideration. Using Oesch’s (2006) class typology, we have found higher care values in occupations characterized by an interpersonal (care) work logic, and less in other *modi operandi* (especially independent and organisational work logics). Working closely to others in our daily life might fosters a higher level of empathy, mutual understanding and ultimately care, thereby encouraging a stronger care ethos. As a result, being employed in the interpersonal service sector(s), but also certain clerical and technical occupations, is more correlated with cultivating care values than working in, for example, manufacturing industries, business & management. Whereas this association stands along the whole skill distribution (i.e. from professions with a higher status such as university professors to low-paid service workers such as waiters), a “core” of care work can be

localised in the so-called “socio-cultural professions”: nurses, elementary teachers, medical doctors, social workers, etc. These occupations are the quintessential care professions to the extent that the very nature of their work logic is based on caring for some (vulnerable) others, may it be children, sick people, disabled, or the elderly.

Where does this analysis take us? Or, put differently, do the caring classes actually exist, and what are the limits of Graeber’s broad categorization? Our findings confirm that certain vulnerable groups (women and migrants), as well as left-wing individuals and union members, are more likely to cultivate a care ethos than other people. Evidence is less convincing when it comes to proxies for socio-economic marginality (for instance income and job insecurity). As for occupations: interpersonal care and socio-cultural professions are indeed correlated with care values, and some “quintessentially bullshit” jobs are not. However, the “caring” category fails to satisfy a principle of exclusivity, as other occupations (unskilled clerks and technicians) in which workers are often to see their job as bullshit (or are expected to have a low interpersonal work-logic by default) also show positive and significant associations with care values.

While leaving a more definitive answer to future research, we go beyond Graeber’s strictly subjective approach (i.e. one’s work is meaningful or meaningless to the extent that the subject perceives it as such) and cautiously propose a more structural definition of the caring classes, in which jobs with higher degrees of interpersonal contact (especially with the public), as well as those that expose people to conditions of subalternity (for instance call centres), foster a more robust care ethics than others. Moreover, it is important to remember that the goal of this work is not to “draw the class line” based on whether one cultivates care values or not, but to speculate on a care ethics as a potential common ground for different marginal categories. Something which, as we explore in the conclusion, might be politically significant.

### **Limitations and future directions**

We have identified several limitations in this study. The first notable limitation is that survey interviewees may be inclined to present themselves as embodying caring values, introducing potential biases in their self-perception of their own actions. Nevertheless, despite not being able to definitively determine respondents' actual behaviors, we find their self-perceptions

intriguing in their own right, as the emerging patterns remain significant. A second drawback pertains to the generality of the survey question itself. "Caring for others' wellbeing" can encompass various interpretations for different individuals. For instance, even a prison guard might perceive themselves as caring for the prisoners' wellbeing. This highlights the subjective nature of the concept. A third limitation is associated with the dataset used, as it does not adequately account for informal and unpaid care work. Considering that within the European Union alone, 7.7 million women engage in unpaid care work to such an extent that it hinders their participation in the formal job market (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion., 2022), incorporating this dimension would significantly enrich our analysis.

Moreover, while we recognise the importance of a broad and ecofeminist understanding of care and (re)production, for the sake of this article we narrow our definition of care to interpersonal one. Although it is reasonable to suspect that, for many, caring for others might also imply caring for the biophysical environment that make life possible, we do not explicitly include earth-care – and its implications towards the redefinition of class – in this analysis (Barca, 2020). Fourth, we limit our research to the European context. Finally, as we reflect on our positionality, we recognise that our privileged identities as white, male academics with European passports limit our ability to gain an embodied understanding of the caring classes. However, we hope that our perspective will be valuable to other researchers and, potentially, to the caring classes themselves.

We believe that the concept of caring classes opens avenues for future research. Especially, in-depth qualitative analysis is needed to unpack some dynamics of the caring classes more clearly. For example, future studies should investigate why certain socio-demographic and labour categories tend to cultivate a care ethos more than others and examine the direction of such a causal channel (that is, whether people with higher caring values self-select into certain professions or working in certain professions fosters caring values, and how this is related with their intersectional class positions). Also, future research should investigate the extent to which the concept of caring classes holds real potential for political mobilisation.

## **Conclusions**

Graeber writes, paraphrasing Turner, that politics is a struggle...

[...] *Not just to accumulate value, but to define what value is, and how different values (forms of “honor,” “capital,” etc.) dominate, encompass, or otherwise relate to one another; and thus at the same time, between those imaginary arenas in which they are realized. In the end, political struggle is and must always be about the meaning of life.* (Graeber, 2013, p. 228)

If this is the case, the fact that a number of clearly identifiable segments of society are more likely to share care values than others could be a good hint towards a fertile terrain of political mobilisation. In fact, matters of value highlight very different versions of human species inhabiting divergent imaginary arenas for the realisation of value(s), and these arenas “carry within them a philosophy of human existence, of what people are, what they want, about the nature of the world we inhabit.” (Graeber, 2013, p. 229).

Following Skeggs, we also believe that theorising the caring classes is important because of the performative aspect of theories. Skeggs highlighted how, in the process of internalisation of neoliberal governmentality, *value* has been shrinking *values* parallelly to how a rationalist performative theory has been shrinking our sociological imagination (Skeggs, 2014). To think about the caring classes is to dare to re-expand it by looking at *values* shrinking *value*. In fact, care ethics and practices already form part of our daily lives. The issue resides in having built dominant institutions that assume, as a premise, that this is not the case. How would society and the economy work, if their fundamental institutions were built on a care premise, rather than self-interest? What if we replaced the rationalist paradigm with the caring one, and the *homo economicus* with *homines curans* (Tronto, 2017)? And what is an economy if not the means by which human beings can take care of each other, and stay alive, in every sense of the word?

If, as Graeber writes, we understand “human beings as projects of mutual creation, value as the way such projects become meaningful to the actors, and the worlds we inhabit as emerging from those projects” (Graeber, 2013, p. 238), then we believe that looking at human beings who somehow already recognise this by seeing themselves as caring for others could be a promising starting point for recognising a subject – the caring classes – already shaping the world we inhabit (society, the economy) as a project of mutual care.

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