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Staying with the trouble of institutions

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Abstract: This paper provides a commentary on the theme section entitled ‘Troubling Institutions at the Nexus of Care and Control’. Using the recent book *Matters of Care* (2017) by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa as a reference-point, the authors of the commentary introduce the project of exploring how care and control admix across a range of institutional geographies, reflecting complex assemblages of places, peoples, practices and problems. Taking seriously the prompt by the section editors to think about the ‘troubling’ of institutions, the authors draw provisional distinctions between those who are ‘troubled’ and those who are ‘troublesome’, mapping across to the range of more-or-less institutional – more-or-less carceral – spaces considered in the papers comprising the theme section. The commentary concludes with attention, inspired by Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘staying with the trouble’, to the task of staying both with the troubles bundled up in institutional landscapes and, indeed, with the very idea and practice of institutions themselves.

Keywords: Institutions; institutional geographies; care; control; trouble

Care, control and institutional geographies

Care is omnipresent, even through the effects of its absence. Like a longing emanating from the troubles of neglect, it passes within, across, throughout things. Its lack undoes, allows unravelling. To care can feel good; it can also feel awful. It can do good; it can oppress. Its essential character to humans and countless living beings makes it all the more susceptible to convey control. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 1)

The recent book by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (2017), cited by Tom Disney and Anna Schliehe in their editorial introduction to the current theme section on ‘Troubling Institutions’, opens many windows on the subject-matters carried by contributions to this theme section. Inspired by feminist interventions around the idea, practices and complications of care, indexed in academic human geography by the likes of Victoria Lawson’s influential presidential address (Lawson, 2007),

Puig de la Bellacasa resists any simple elision of care with the good, kind and selfless works of a (usually woman) carer – although care can indeed be just that – and rather provides what we would term a determinedly geographical reading of care as *always* situated, irreducibly entangled with the specificities of places, peoples, practices and problems (perceived and acted upon). Care runs across the rough or ‘tricky grounds’ of lively worlds, as a ‘living terrain’ or woven into ‘the fabric of life’, to borrow phrases from this author: ‘The picture on the ground is always more fuzzy’ than in the abstractions of much ethical debate, while ‘[e]thnographies of care show how absurd it is to disentangle care from its messiness’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 10). In particular, Puig de la Bellacasa seeks to put the more-than-human into this picture, to address how human and nonhuman agencies are always muddled together in the generation of care, in which respect, while ‘displacing care’ from many of its conventional founding assumptions in (Western) discourse, she effectively *replaces* care in a multitude of worldly places and even in the ‘soils’ of the Earth (in a chapter concerned with the scientific, ecological and ‘foodweb’ engagements with the muddy clods of soil and its wormy inhabitants; also Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). Along the way, she repeatedly acknowledges the troubles that arise as care shades into control, as well as into other, less straightforwardly edifying modes of human being such as ‘burden’ and ‘boredom’, ones that may then transfigure the work of care into something more controlling, notably if subject to too much external regulation, and even into outright abuse.

Puig de la Bellacasa does not write much about institutions *per se*, although the institutional homes of what she terms ‘ethics hegemonic’ in the regulation of scientific research, drug trials, conservation experiments and so on – ‘Ethics with a capital E as the enactment of normative stances’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 151) – do make an appearance, alongside mentions of specific soil societies and associations. Questions about ‘biopolitics’, after Michel Foucault, also feature heavily in her book, and the role played by institutions of all kinds in the prosecution of biopolitical projects – as bricks-and-mortar establishments or as broader structures of societal governance – is of course central to much recent critical scholarship within human geography that can easily sit under the umbrella of ‘institutional geographies’ (eg. Legg, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). As such, the present theme section, entitled ‘Troubling Institutions at the Nexus of Care and Control’, can, we feel, be readily and usefully cast as a series of explorations – adopting an overtly institutional focus – tracking across the rough, tricky and lively grounds of care and control as surveyed by Puig de la Bellacasa. Cheryl McGeachan writes in the title of her paper about ‘the enfolding spatialities of care and control’, Jennifer

Turner and Dominique Moran about ‘careful control’, Frank Ollivon about an ‘ethics of care in a control-orientated technology’, Virve Repo about ‘spatial control and care’, and Emma Wainwright and Elodie Marandet about ‘care and control’. While Puig de la Bellacasa’s approach is not itself ‘a sociological or ethnographic inquiry into a specific domain of agencies of care,’ her trajectory is one that ‘invites others to consider care – or its absence – as a parameter of existence with significance for their own terrains’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 6). The authors contributing to the present theme section are indeed contemplating such matters on ‘their own terrains’, offering valuable insights relevant to these local terrains – all of which are placed in named locations (eg. the Barlinnie Special Unit, north-east of Glasgow, Scotland) and specifiable categories of site (eg. UK prisons, homes of electronically tagged French offenders, Finnish nursing homes; UK housing associations) – but also, as gathered together here, comprising resources for comparative interpretation (perhaps with reference to the more widely travelling speculations of Puig de la Belacassa and others).

The present theme section is expressly positioned by Disney and Schliehe as revisiting a theme section of the journal *Geoforum* on the topic of ‘Institutional Geographies’ co-edited nearly two decades ago – so long! – by the co-authors of the present commentary piece (Philo and Parr, 2000a). Our editorial introduction to that previous theme section did not directly speak about care and control, but rather operated from a loosely Foucauldian base-camp concerned with institutions as ‘those material built environments such as prisons, hospitals and asylums [that] seek to restrain, control, treat, ‘design’ and ‘produce’ particular and supposedly improved versions of human minds and bodies’ (Parr and Philo, 2000b: 513). From the outset, therefore, we envisaged institutions as (almost) always splicing together care and control, potentially coalescing in the one space caring acts – kindnesses or cures – with motives easy to represent as controlling – to encourage someone’s self-restraint (self-discipline, self-control) when overcoming their ‘madness’ or ‘badness’, or to rid them of a physical ailment otherwise leading them to be an unproductive burden on the resources of a hospital, a welfare state, a wider society. The present theme section turns the lens more squarely on such troubling coalescences, spotlighting what, on reflection, was a somewhat buried, under-explored dimension of our original discussion (but see Philo, 2017). Our editorial introduction also touched upon Latourian and ethnomethodological possibilities for the study of institutional geographies, seeing institutions – including ones that escaped, as it were, beyond the blocky walls of asylum, hospital and prison (also Del Casino *et al*, 2000; Tooke, 2000; Valins, 2000) – ‘as fragile achievements, as filamental and reversible accomplishments’ (Philo and Parr, 2000b:

518), always assembled (and potentially disassembled) from myriad admixtures of bodies and things, words and devices, feelings and rationales, and more besides. The contributions to the 2000 theme issue by Gail Davies (2000) and Julian Holloway (2000), with their Actor Network Theory emphases, spoke directly to such a theorisation of institutional geographies, chiming across to Puig de la Bellacasa and her drawing of inspiration from Bruno Latour when speculating about ‘the significance of care for thinking and living in more than human worlds’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 1; an obvious point of comparison here in the geographical literature is Whatmore, 2002). Our 2000 collection hence anticipated some, but by no means all, of the hinterlands of concern for both the present theme section and the interlocutor, Puig de la Bellacasa’s *Matters of Care*, which we are staging for it here.

Troubling, troubled and troublesome: notes towards comparative work

We particularly appreciate how Disney and Schliehe bring the construct of ‘trouble’ to bear upon the thematic of care, control and institutional geographies, and warmly endorse their stated belief that ‘geographers could develop trouble, scaling up to map the interconnected circuits of trouble interventions but also to move forward and consider how these networks are changing, adapting and increasingly troubled themselves’ (Disney and Schliehe, 2018: 3). We suspect that sticking with the multiple troubles disclosed here is a valuable strategy, as we will elaborate in closing, and we think too that it is important to note the troubles increasingly facing many institutions today, not least because of sharp confluences between how a neoliberal agenda of rolling back the state (privatisation, contracting out, internal marketisation) collides with an officious *reregulation* (through targets, auditing, constant internal reporting in the shadow of potential litigation) and the cutting demands of austerity. Insofar as institutional regimes in penal, psychiatric, biomedical and other estates have been caught in such controlling nets, certain care goals and initiatives – long-running, more recently began or even planned – have arguably been all too often sacrificed or compromised (EFPSU, 2012; Faulkner, 2010; Grimshaw *et al*, 2014; Roberts *et al*, 2012; Skinnis, 2016). Repo, in her piece in this theme section, writes of exactly this outcome, talking of the ‘careless control’ that can surface in marketised elder care. Other pressures too have been troubling institutions, including the forceful critiques directed at the more carceral of them, often with justification, for how they deprive individuals of their liberty and forge secret spaces where it is so easy for abuses to be harboured and hidden. The influential forces of anti-psychiatry and anti-institutionalism attacking any form of residential facilities for those with mental health problems have undoubtedly troubled institutions in this sector to the point that very many of them have closed,

but not always with adequate alternative community or deinstitutional provisions offered in their stead (to reference the ‘big picture’ story of dramatic shifts from institutional to deinstitutional ‘asylum’ geographies: eg. Parr, 2008; Wolch and Philo, 2000). To anticipate claims advanced in closing our commentary, we suppose that there are persuasive reasons not only to stick with the trouble, but also – in certain regards and with crucial caveats – to stick with the institution as well.

For the moment, though, we wish to keep thinking in the sociological groove suggested by Disney and Schliehe when wondering about ‘a sociology of ‘trouble’” (Disney and Schliehe, 2018: 2) and enlisting the figures of the ‘trouble-maker’ and the ‘trouble-shooter’. More simplistically perhaps, we want to consider the categories of person that might be, respectively, designated as either ‘troubled’ or ‘troublesome’, and immediately to acknowledge that both cohorts may elicit a palpable ‘sense of unease’ (Emerson and Messinger, 1977: 122), if for somewhat different reasons. Reworking standard dictionary definitions, the ‘troubled’ most obviously references those people who experience or endure ‘troubles’ – who are troubled by their own personal, embodied, psychological and social circumstances, perhaps not knowingly so but usually in a self-aware fashion – whereas the ‘troublesome’ most obviously references those who create trouble for others, wittingly or unwittingly, and whose participation in the generation of such trouble is explicitly recognised and acted upon by others (some of whom will be tasked with protecting relevant peoples and wider society from such trouble). With reference to the papers in this theme section, Repo speaks most directly about the troubled, in the sense of elderly people experiencing – if not always being able to reflect upon or even complain about – physical infirmity and, notably in this case, cognitive impairment. These individuals cannot be held responsible or blamed for any of their troubles, and they have not set out to cause trouble for others, although they may inadvertently become troublesome for nursing home workers, if unclean or recalcitrant, or for neighbouring communities, if they have a tendency to wander. McGeachan speaks most directly about the troublesome, in the sense of violent convicted criminals, maybe murderers, who could pose a danger to life and limb of a wider populace. These individuals can be held responsible and blamed for the troubles that they have caused, unless a miscarriage of justice has occurred, but they may also be troubled – maybe with psychiatric disorders – and may become further troubled by the harsh, depersonalising prison regimes to which they are subjected (as McGeachan persuasively shows).

The boundaries between the troubled and the troublesome are unsurprisingly blurry, therefore, and impossible to specify precisely. A single group of people can easily be simultaneously troubled and troublesome, even if there is a logic about which of the two states ought to be the primary descriptor in each case, and there can be considerable movement between the two states as the troubled become troublesome and *vice versa*. There is arguably a sizeable zone of indistinction between the two states, moreover, and it would be best to regard them as hypothetical end-states with all ‘real’ cohorts of people sitting somewhere between the two. Turner and Moran’s prisoners can plausibly be lodged towards the troublesome end of the spectrum, for instance, but may well not have committed crimes as serious as McGeachan’s prisoners; Ollivon’s electronically monitored probationers fit into much the same slot on the spectrum, meanwhile, maybe even a little further from the extreme of troublesome by dint of being thought suitable for release and tagging; and Wainright and Marandet’s housing association tenants can plausibly be identified primarily as troubled, in having relatively impoverished, disadvantaged and stressful lives where basics such as secure housing are not assured, even if then on occasion being labelled as troublesome for failing to seek employment or to engage with relevant training opportunities. It is worth underlining further the various situations that individuals may pass through in the course of a ‘troubling biography’, successively relocating them around the above-mentioned spectrum, and another point is that authorities electing to institutionalise an individual – maybe subjecting them to more-or-less ‘closed spaces’ (Wolpert, 1976) – will almost certainly be making judgements about *both* that individual’s past/present record of ‘troublesomeness’ *and* what might be anticipated as their likely future capacity for causing trouble (whether purposefully or accidentally). There are complex ‘anticipatory geographies’ (Anderson, 2010) in play here, but also what Foucault, in his oddly under-consulted *Abnormal* lectures (Foucault, 2003; Philo, 2010), describes as the constant search for latent ‘monstrosities’ in an individual’s biography to date as clues about possible difficulties or offences to come (ones that might therefore be prevented from ever coming to pass by solutions, including versions of ‘shutting up’, to be instituted in the here-and-now).

Developing further the spatial dimension, these tentative discriminations between troubled and troublesome can be related to ones ranged on another spectrum: between the most classically institutional or even carceral of spaces – those typified by high walls, locked doors and high levels of security – and the more deinstitutional, distributed and barely-at-all carceral of spaces – those typified by home-based arrangements, community supports and relatively ‘normal’

everyday involvements. Envisaging such a spectrum is to borrow ideas from a recent paper by Dominique Moran *et al* (2017; also Hamlin and Speer, 2017) that conceives ‘the carceral’ as spreading from a core of obviously carceral institutions, marked by a spatiality of enclosure, to constitute, or to become an effective presence within, all manner of places and sites that, at first blush, might not be perceived as carceral or even institutional. From the present papers, McGeachan’s Special Unit at Barlinnie would sit at the most institutional-carceral end of this spectrum, Wainwright and Marandet’s housing association training-for-work sessions at the most deinstitutional-barely-carceral end, and Repo’s Finnish nursing homes somewhere between, constituting what she herself terms ‘quasi-carceral settings’.

It is possible to capture these simple formulations in a table (see **Figure 1**), positioning the respective contributions to the theme section across the space of this table. The purpose of such an old-fashioned categorial exercise is to suggest how the papers here (and potentially many other studies of institutional-carceral geographies) might be brought into comparison with one another, but it is also to respond to Puig de la Bellacasa’s hint at a structural – permutations-and-combinations – approach to thinking about care. To summarise and slightly re-word, she builds upon claims from Joan Tronto (1993) to posit that the many-faced phenomenon of care can be traced along ‘three dimensions’: ‘maintenance’ (the labour or work undertaken to maintain an other’s survival); ‘affection’ (the affective concern, worry and readiness to shoulder responsibility for an other’s well-being); and ‘ethics/politics’ (the more reflected, even ideological, motivations for pursuing a ‘good life’, or at least an ‘as well as possible’ life, for an other). As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 5) then argues:

These three dimensions of care – labour/work, affect/affections, ethics/politics – are not necessarily equally distributed in all relational situations, nor do they sit together without tensions and contradictions, but they are held together and sometimes challenge each other in the idea of care I am thinking with in this book. ... [S]taying with the unsolved tensions and relations between these dimensions helps up to keep close to the ambivalent terrains of care.

Differently composed ‘terrains of care’, variably balancing these three (we might risk saying ‘structural’) dimensions of care, hence swim into view, and we might envisage mapping these different care combinations into the spaces of our small table: insofar that each terrain of care tackled by the five papers in this theme section amalgamates, but in different proportions and with different intersections, the three dimensions of maintenance, affection and ethics/politics.

Moreover, given that Puig de la Bellacasa also furnishes insights into how care can, in certain situations, ‘convey control’, our table could be adapted to map out different articulations between care and control. Towards the left-hand bottom corner, we might identify what Turner and Moran call ‘careful control’, an institutional regime predicated chiefly on exerting control but with some signs of doing so carefully, softening the outlines of stark carcerality when maintaining the troublesome; towards the left-hand top corner, we might identify ‘care-full control’, an institutional regime where the controlling elements merge with affective caring acts out of genuine concern for the troubled; towards the right-hand bottom corner, we find ‘control-full care’, a deinstitutional regime designed to continue exerting control over the troublesome, maintaining them in a manner where their potential threats to others are managed, but with care displayed, perhaps mirroring an ethics/politics, for their liberty and potential wider community engagement; and towards the right-hand top corner, we find ‘controlful care’, a deinstitutional regime affectively turned to the travails of the troubled, including ones socially as well as more personally rooted, but where low-level mechanisms of control, such as Wainwright and Marandet’s training schemes, may still be operated. This table-mapping and indeed some of the terms coined here may strike as rather contrived, a charge that we would partially accept, but it may retain merit as a minor thought-experiment showcasing the possible advantages of an explicitly comparative perspective in teasing out precisely what is troubling about specific grounded institutional geographies in their differential care/control of the troubled and the troublesome. For us as commentators, such comparative work is prompted when reading the five papers together, but also because it is seemingly demanded as a corollary to Puig de las Bellacasa’s more speculative conceptualising.

Figure 1: Positioning the papers in the theme section

	carceral ‘classic’ institutional	quasi-carceral	barely-carceral ‘distributed’ institutional
troubled	<div>Repo</div> <div>Wainwright and Marandet</div> <div>Ollivon</div>		
troublesome			
	Turner and Moran		
	McGeachan		

Staying with the institutional trouble

Trouble is an interesting word. It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning ‘to stir up,’ ‘to make cloudy,” “to disturb.’ We – all of us on Terra – live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. (Haraway, 2016: 2)

... I am not interested in reconciliation or restoration, but I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together. Call that staying with the trouble. And so I look for real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms. These are stories in which multispecies players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying ... (Haraway, 2016: 10)

Donna Haraway’s book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Haraway, 2016a; also Haraway 2015, 2016b) is a significant intervention in debates about the Anthropocene, or what she prefers to term the Chthulucene so as to displace the centrality of the human in favour of an alertness to the multiple hoards of beings (including critters, organisms and environments of all species) who feature as ‘wayfarers’ in transforming Terra (the Earth and its many earths). Its more-than-human sensibilities are now familiar to many geographers, and they animate Puig de la Bellacasa’s bringing of care into ‘confrontation with the more than human worlds in which ‘staying with the trouble’ appears as the only ethical option for knowledge mattering’ (Puig de la Bellacase, 2017: 19). By writing her book, Haraway is appealing to a human consciousness (presumably with an attendant set of actions-that-make-a-difference) concerning how ‘we’, humans, are implicated in a multi-species and symbiotic ‘on-goingness’. ‘[T]he doings of situated human beings matter,’ she insists, and ‘[i]t matters with which ways of living and dying we cast our lot rather than others’ (Haraway, 2016b: no pagination). Crucially, she argues that we cannot dither as nothing will change: we have to ‘get our hands dirty’ and ‘stay with the trouble’ in order to change a polluted or poisoned world (Kenney, 2017: 73); and we have to care, although, as Jonathan Metzger states when reviewing together the books by Haraway and Puig de la Bellacase, ‘how we choose to value specific situated practices of care, and their consequences, must remain an open question’ (Metzger, 2018: 144; citing Puig De la Ballacasa, 2017: 6).

This excursion into Haraway’s notion of ‘staying with the trouble’ – a notion that had figured in the margins of her earlier writings (Haraway, 2010) – is provoked by the title of the current theme section, and also by the belief of the editors that ‘geographers could develop trouble’. In

closing, then, we advance the simple proposition that there is merit in staying with the trouble of the institution, with troubling institutions, because there is so much more to learn, to know and to apply if we wish to stop institutions from being such troubling spaces seemingly unable to respond open-handedly to the troubled and even to the troublesome. It is to stick, for instance, with the cases presented by the five papers in this theme section, deriving from them – as the authors begin to do in their respective conclusions – lessons for (re)shaping institutions that can, if simplistically, be bent towards the positive axes of Puig de la Bellacasa’s three dimensions of care: ones that maintain (beyond mere survival), are affectionate (properly concerned and emotionally touching) and entrain ethico-political commitment to a liberty that is not just vulnerable individuals left alone or hectored into being ‘responsible’ citizens. Here may well lie clues about Haraway’s ‘modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together’, even in the more classically institutional of geographies; and here we may encounter ‘real stories’ that can be the seeds for more speculative projections about alternative institutions or deinstitutionalizations, *alt*-versions of care and control, serving the diverse human fauna arriving in institutional spaces from Jimmy Boyle (in McGeachan’s paper) to the residents of Repo’s Finnish nursing homes.

In a broader vein too, we urge a staying with institutions, recognising that they cannot be magically wished away, certainly in their more distributed guise or as weakly defined ‘patterns’ for organising social worlds, but neither in their more concrete, gated, locked and barred forms pin-pricking our landscapes. As the specific example of the deinstitutionalisation movement in mental health care has shown, it is fiendishly hard to do away with ‘the asylum’, even to the point that geographers after Wolpert *et al* (1975: 25) speak of ‘a new monster, an asylum without walls’, also sometimes known as hard-to-escape ‘ghettoes’ of mental health services and their mentally unwell clients (Wolpert and Wolpert, 1974). Alternatively, as others in the same field have wondered, accepting all of the hesitations about institutions as ‘closed spaces’ (Wolpert, 1976) wherein abuses too easily accumulate, maybe there does still remain something ‘good’, or at least ‘as good as possible’, about institutional settings offering *true* asylum, sanctuary or retreat for those whose troubled dispositions call, if momentarily, for such benign enclosure. Such a claim may be troubling for some, for many psychiatric survivors to be sure, but we reckon it vital to stay with such trouble, pertaining to psychiatric institutions but also to many other institutions as explored in this theme section. Institutions will – and in some cases perhaps should – remain, however troubling, and critical scholars must stay with this irreducible institutional trouble.

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