Research Article

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"It's Time for a Rent Strike": COVID-19 Rent Strikes and the Absence of State Care

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Abstract: COVID-19 unemployed millions of Americans, many of whom already lacked the financial ability to withstand an economic crisis. Mid-quarantine, politicians began to grapple on what protections for renters would stay in place as the assistance bills came to an end. The COVID-19 rent crisis raised significant moral questions to the American populace – namely, that of the State's responsibility to care for its citizens. This article examines rent strikes in the context of care ethics. Care ethics contends that our actions have moral weight. What we do matters. Rent strikes sit at the intersection of political practice and care ethics. This article contends that rent strikes provided care when the State did not, and that this lack of care highlights the need for solidarity.

Keywords: COVID-19, rent strike, care ethics, policy, United States, solidarity

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed inequities which existed long before the arrival of the virus. It swept through the United States without warning in the Spring of 2020, drawing attention to socio-economic inequities through the ways in which it exacerbated them, predominantly affecting marginalized communities of Black, brown, indigenous, Asian, and Latinx people.[1] The pandemic led to many racially marginalized communities fighting eviction orders. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES act) federal stimulus package was passed on March 27, 2020, including a short-term moratorium on evictions of tenants who were unable to pay rent. It contained further measures of preventing evictions 30 days after the end of the moratorium and a prohibition on fees and penalties around non-payment of rent. With the end of the relief act in Spring, evictions began to impact marginalized communities once again.

The COVID-19 rent strikes are moments in which individuals come together, navigating important public health guidelines, and provide emotional support which is integral to individuals knowing and adhering to those very same guidelines. Communities came together, creating and sewing impromptu face coverings. Individuals sought to create hand sanitizer and helped individuals more at risk of COVID-19 with groceries and other tasks. The risks of COVID-19 transmission are significantly elevated for the homeless, and nation states the world over have struggled to provide adequate assistance to the homeless during the pandemic. However, the lack of large-scale aid for the population within the United States places homeless people and people who are at risk of homelessness in a dangerous position, as the

1 This article does not discuss the ways in which COVID-19 and settler colonialism impacted indigenous peoples.

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nation lacks comprehensive healthcare coverage for the poor. By preventing people from becoming unhoused, the COVID-19 rent strikes protected numerous people from exposure to further risk and harm.[2]

Although there is as of yet no concrete data surrounding the health of the rent strikers, community is a necessary factor in the emotional and mental resilience it takes to maintain a strike *and* cope with a sudden and ongoing pandemic. The COVID-19 rent strikes as moments of national solidarity were also precious moments to build community, which is not only essential for public health – they are also a method of care for one's community. Care theorist Joan Tronto points to five empirical values by which we may measure care: attentiveness, nurturance, responsibility, compassion, and meeting another's needs.[3] Thus, we can evaluate the State's actions utilizing care ethics, as well as those of the rent strikers. The rent strikes have been a reaction to the lack of comprehensive tenant protection during the pandemic. Although the CARES act was able to protect some tenants, the stalling of the HEROES act and the subsequent CDC eviction halt puts individuals who were already in economically precarious situations nearly off edge. By evaluating the State's actions, we can begin to understand if it meets the provisions of care.

COVID-19 evictions led to questions over whether the pandemic constituted a *force majeure*, an event outside the reasonable control of a party which prevents them from fulfilling contractual obligations and momentarily frees both parties from liability. A *force majeure* is often a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or a fire. No person could hope to control such a disaster, and because of this they cannot be held accountable for their inability to fulfill their obligation. *If* the pandemic is in fact a *force majeure*, then tenants should be protected from evictions. Why are people not being protected from evictions? The United States directly abandoned Black, brown, indigenous, Asian, and Latinx communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to interrogate the State's long-term responsibility for individuals whose lives have been upended by the pandemic. These important questions point to the idea that the State has an obligation to meet citizens' essential needs when they are unable to fulfill them to outside circumstances. Rent strikes have been a visible reaction to the State failing to meet these obligations.

This article examines the COVID-19 rent strikes through the lens of care ethics: a system of ethics in which our interactions with one another have moral significance. Care can be evaluated empirically. Care is a practice grounded in the commonplace. Care happens in our everyday interactions with one another, and the moments in which we encounter State action – from protection of the environment to food assistance. The article interrogates the question – what is the State's responsibility for tenants during COVID-19? Rent strikes sit at the intersection of political practice and care ethics. To illustrate this, the article is structured as follows – first, it examines solidarity and its connections to care. It then moves to discuss rent strikes as an example of solidarity built upon linked fate. Next, it looks at how rent strikes positively impact the health and wellbeing of a community. It investigates *what* a caring State should have done in response to COVID-19. The article contends that the COVID-19 rent strikes concretized problems of care within neoliberal capitalist logistics.

1 A theory of care

There is no universal definition of care ethics. However, significant themes that bind the varied branches of care ethics together are responsibility, obligation, and the idea that emotions are both informative and contextual. These themes allow for the empirical evaluations of care. Care ethics posits that *neediness* is the starting point for human beings and understanding that neediness and vulnerability is essential to ontology. Care ethics emerged in the 1980s, speared by feminist Carol Gilligan. She argues that the interactions we have with others have moral weight, with the private sphere of life acting as an important site of ethical and moral action. Gilligan is a key figure in care ethics' foundations. She argues that women develop

2 Wood et al., "COVID-19 Precautions;" Massimo et al., "Homelessness and COVID-19;" and Kuehn, "Homeless Shelters."
3 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

an affinity for *care* as an ethic, rather than men,[4] who are more focused on individualism and autonomy. According to Gilligan, men learn care later in childhood and thus perceive women as caregivers. Because of this, men do not experience a social imperative to provide care. Women on the other hand learn care early in life. They are taught to be oriented *toward* others and have a more relational idea of justice. Gilligan's analysis is grounded in concrete and somewhat outdated binary expression of gender; however, it was an important moment in recognizing the moral weight in our daily actions. The majority of research on child development had been conducted by men, and only using samples of men, such as Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Gilligan's introduction of women into the study of moral development and ethics was a critical moment in feminist theory.

Contemporary work has moved away from the perspective of care as primarily part of women's ethical development. Now, figures such as Joan Tronto, Maurice Hamington, David Engster, Sandra Laugier, and Nicki Ward examine care as a non-gendered practice.[5] They place care as an intimate site of meeting another beings' needs, being compassionate, being nurturing, and being responsive. There are disagreements and divergences within care ethics; however, this approach will examine care ethics as an intersectional ethic of care.

The context of caring actions involves understanding a person's identity. Nicki Ward pointedly argues that *some* individuals have more access to care than others and identities can inform what type of care is provided to a given person.[6] Needs are not monolithic. The needs that I experience as an epileptic are different from those of a person without epilepsy.[7] Tronto adds that by knowing another person, we ensure that the care we provide is not paternalistic.[8] She is deeply concerned with the need to develop contextual understandings of care, and understanding that the boundary between caregivers and care receivers is not static. At all points in our lives, we are proximate to care; when we are born, we rely upon others. Likewise, when we are sick, our roles may shift, and the ways in which we are asked to provide care may differ. Effective and good care involves a pluralistic understanding of care. It recognizes the differences of needs and asks that we remain aware of the ways our needs fluctuate throughout our lives. It is a deeply involved process, asking that we seek to understand one another's needs and experiences in order to provide them with a form of care which is not paternalistic.

Much of care ethics primarily focuses on interactions between individuals or interactions between individuals and the environment. However, care ethics has extended into the debate on the State's role. Tronto argues that "Americans will be able to escape from their anxiety and rage only when they are able to face these realities: the current economic, social, and political order cannot adequately express the scope of caring concerns."[9] She proposes a form of democratic care, in which both States and citizens have an ethical demand to participate in caring for citizens, as well as other beings. This article contends that the State has *some* role in providing care, yet David Engster argues that the State has a responsibility to ensure that people can access what is needed for a full life,[10] pointing to Martha Nussbaum's capabilities theory. Nussbaum contends that a function of the State is to ensure that individuals are able to access basic capabilities, which are those aspects of life necessary for a dignified and minimally flourishing life, to use the Aristotelian definition.[11] Nussbaum points to aspects of life such as bodily health, affiliation, play, and political control over one's environment as examples of these capabilities.[12] While we can assist one another to a certain degree, State action is needed to ensure that on a national scale, some if not all of these

4 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.
5 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*; Tronto, *Caring Democracy*; Ward, "Care Ethics;" Laugier, "The Ethics of Care;" Hamington, "Care Ethics and Engaging;" and Engster, *The Heart of Justice*.
6 Ward, "Care Ethics," 63.
7 I use the term "epileptic" for myself as epilepsy is a significant part of my identity and lived experience.
8 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 142.
9 Ibid., 93.
10 Engster, *The Heart of Justice*.
11 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*.
12 Ibid., 33–4.

needs are met. For example, if we wish to ensure that *all* individuals are able to fully develop the capability of bodily health, the State can provide important institutional support and facilitation to develop those capacities in ways that communities with limited resources may not be able to do so. For example, as a disabled person, I require access to specific forms of healthcare to maintain my quality of living. Federal legislation in the United States prevents healthcare insurers from discriminating against disabled people, which ensures that I am able to see my doctors, obtain medications, and pay for necessary surgeries. Before the Affordable Care Act (ACA), insurance companies *could* and *did* discriminate against disabled people. The ACA, then, is an act of recognizing a problem that stands in the way of someone reaching their capabilities and attending to that problem through the means of the State.

Importantly, care ethicists such as Engster are critical of the State *as-is*. They contend that *if* we wish the State to be a caring actor, the State must be reimagined and re-thought. Rent strikes are a demonstration of the State *not* being a caring actor. The State is not providing for marginalized communities' needs, nor is it assisting these communities in accessing and gaining the capabilities which are required for a dignified life. Housing and the ability to meet other necessary aspects of a dignified life, one which presidents such as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt have recognized. Rent strikes are a method to politically demand care and it is within the contexts of these rent strikes are strikingly similar – the State not attending to marginalized communities, who have been historically disenfranchised.

2 Rent strikes and neighborhood connections

Historically, rent strikes have occurred to draw attention to public health issues – such as rat infestations, poor water quality, and lack of heating and cooling among other reasons. American rent strikes have often occurred in urban Black and brown neighborhoods, typically in apartment buildings or other properties which are collectively owned and managed by a single person or company, and often as a response to landlord intimidation. In a discussion of landlords harassing Black, brown, and other non-white Brooklyn residents, Kate Aronoff states, "What we do know is that they cut off heat to our neighbors for two consecutive winters, attempting to freeze them out of their rent-stabilized apartments … We also know that going on a rent strike – and suing them in the New York State Supreme Court … helped get the heat turned back on."[13] Rent strikes are a force to draw attention to individuals who are often outside of the public light.

The belief that housing is a universal right is one which begins in America with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. President Roosevelt developed public housing initiatives during the New Deal as a national effort to provide for citizens' essential needs. He advocated for these needs to become American rights in his 1944 State of the Union Address in which he argues for an Economic Bill of Rights, saying, "We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence."[14] He goes on to enumerate the Economic Bill of Rights, with one of the rights being, "The right of every family to a decent home … All of these rights spell security. And after this war is won, we must be prepared to move forward, in the implementation of these rights, to new goals of human happiness and wellbeing."[15] Roosevelt's New Deal Liberalism led many to believe that decent housing was a right to all American citizens, and this expectation along with the United States Housing Act of 1949 is integral to Americans' perceptions of housing.

Rent strikers' arguments for decent housing are reminiscent of Roosevelt's belief that a person cannot be free if their essential needs are not met. In the 1950s and 1960s, home construction boomed across the United States; however, Black Americans were often excluded from private housing markets. Casey-Leininger, summarizing Ohio, provides a depiction which was not atypical to the mid-twentieth century:

13 Aronoff, "The Power," 124.
14 Roosevelt, "State of the Union."
15 Ibid.

> Whites increasingly saw public housing and government-subsidized low-income housing as housing for blacks and effectively resisted many of the planned developments. Moreover, despite growing black resistance, racial dis-crimination continued to severely limit the areas where blacks could find housing, resulting in inflated prices for black home buyers and allowing landlords to defer maintenance and crowd too many people into their buildings. The result was that as the city cleared the West End, new slums developed in new neighborhoods.[16]

Cincinnati's discriminatory housing policies and the highly crowded developments are not unique to Ohio. The problems of overcrowding and housing sit at the intersection of racism and poverty. By systematically limiting Black people's housing opportunities, Cincinnati, like many other American cities, sought to move Black people away from the white community's eyes.

The majority of work on rent strikes comes during the Civil Rights era and the protests over segregation. Sarah Judson notes that the 1968 rent strikes in Asheville demonstrated that it was "a politics of paternalism rather than cultural backwardness that kept resources out of their hands."[17] The cultural belief that housing was a right, along with President Lyndon B. Johnson's Mobile Cities and antipoverty programs, created the conditions for tenants to be seen coupled with initiatives to end poverty and build community-based institutions. As Judson notes, while rent strikes challenged traditional relationships between Black tenants and cities, they also publicly revealed paternalistic attitudes that white people held toward their Black neighbors. Rent strikes refuted temporary means to pacify tenants and upended racist narratives around *why* Black tenants suffered from public health crises. No longer were problems of heating, cooling, and rat infestation particular to Black tenants, they were problems particular to racist housing policies.

Asheville's rent strikes displaced the idea that tenant complaints were specific to Black tenants, but cities such as New York City held onto this conception of Black community members. Rent strikes and the publicity surrounding them developed in the public imagination. The press coverage and the narratives which people, separate from the strikes, encounter create an image of both the strikers *and* landlords. It develops and cultivates a story with which the public, often the white public, can identify. Mandi Isaacs Jackson notes that this public imagination, when it came to Harlem, created a community "that was simultaneously invisible and horrifically vivid … Those who lived in the slums were both victim and perpetrator in the city's decay."[18] Residents were criticized for not conforming to white ideals of the family – a married household who exclusively owned or rented their apartment. Residents' "abnormal" households were to blame for the persistent problems in their housing. Jackson writes that landlords vilified their tenants, "The landlords who found themselves in courtrooms and headlines during the rent strike blamed their tenants … They often said tenants insisted on throwing trash out of windows, refused to use trash cans instead of bags, and persisted in defacing the properties […]."[19] However, they neglected to mention that there often was no trash pickup or incinerators for residents to use. Communities lacked trash cans and individuals may not have been able to afford to buy the cans on their own. The public quickly targeted Black residents within the city as having problems specific to their communities. According to them, white neighborhoods did not have rats. The press leaned into images of Harlem in which the rats symbolized Black people, representing them as an infestation. The 1960s rent strikes in Asheville and New York City demonstrate that while rent strikes challenge racist stereotypes of impoverished Black people, the ways in which they are framed are just as important to making this an identifiable narrative.

Work on neighborhood mobilization shows that while family poverty depresses political activity, individuals who more frequently speak with or visit their neighbors have higher political participation rates. Todd Shaw, Kirk Faster, and Barbara Harris Combs found in a study on neighborhood poverty that 67% of Black respondents and 58% of Latino respondents believe that their political and social fates were linked to their racial/ethnic group.[20] Among individuals living in high poverty areas, the rate increased in

16 Casey-Leininger, "Not the Most Dramatic," 44.
17 Judson, "'We're Walking Proud,'" 830.
18 Jackson, "Harlem's Rent Strike," 68.
19 Ibid.
20 Shaw et al., "Race and Poverty Matters," 666.

Latino respondents to 67% but stayed relatively consistent among Black respondents. Connections between one's neighbors as well as perceptions of a linked fate, the recognition that an individual's chances are better if the group also has increased opportunities, are potential motivating factors for many political movements. Rent strikes act as a meeting point for this intersection of neighborhood connection and linked fate. Strikes often occur among Black and brown populations, individuals who are able to recognize that their fate depends upon their community's larger wellbeing.[21] Additionally, rent strikes necessitate coordination among one's neighbors and so act as significant moments of neighborhood mobilization around linked fate.

Rent strike movements have arisen specifically in Black, brown, indigenous, and other communities of color's neighborhoods giving rise to feelings of solidarity due to shared group identity. Studies on place show that neighborhoods provide individuals contexts for their social identities. Moreover, the more diverse a neighborhood is, the more complex a social identity will be – individuals will understand and perceive themselves to be members of multiple social identities.[22] Neighborhoods provide meaningful spaces for connection. Thus, we see in rent strikes the ability to draw on these multiple social identities for a single goal – to address the lack of State care for marginalized communities. Rent strikes create an additional social identity for the participants. They are *rent strikers*. The development of this social identity is important because the identity of being a "rent striker" is important to building solidarity and prolonging the ability for individuals to continue their strike.

Rent strikes' histories are grounded in public health and medical concerns. Rent strikers bring attention to the problem of the body, and the medicalization of politics has proliferated during COVID-19. Illness makes us aware of our bodies, bringing up concerns over our mortality and our fragility. Dan Degerman states that we become an "object of fear,"[23] with individuals who are more at risk becoming sources of anxiety. By coming together to protect neighbors from becoming more at risk of contracting COVID-19, we see their bodies as ones which are also at potential risk. The proximity to COVID-19 in large cities such as New York City, which were also dominant sites of mobilization around the strike, heightens the background understanding of our mortality. Rent strikes already are examples of a medicalized politics; however, past rent strikes were centered around problems that could be seen as tied to racist narratives of Black and brown communities being unable to clean their homes or take care of their waste. The COVID-19 rent strike centers around a virus that could infect anyone.[24]

Neoliberal logic asserts that all individuals are equal within the market, and that all individuals have equal access to knowledge of best practices. Nonetheless, race is a large factor in determining who can succeed. Albena Azmanova argues that the economy does not have equal access to all people, nor is it blind to a person's identities. Azmanova states, "the stratification of life-chances according to race and gender, allows for the competitive pressures on some groups (white men) to diminish, thereby ensuring their structurally secured positions of privilege."[25] COVID-19 sparked a crisis which brought attention to the inequities that have long existed. Black, brown, indigenous, Asian, and Latinx communities experienced greater death rates than white people. These communities were more at risk of eviction than white people.[26] This signals that Black, brown, indigenous, Asian, and Latinx communities are more expendable than white communities under neoliberal racial logics. State abandonment of racially marginalized communities historically has been a matter of racism, and the continued lack of support for these communities maintains the structural racial inequity of public health.

21 Dawson, *Behind the Mule.*

22 Schmid et al., "Neighborhood Diversity;" Wilcox-Archuleta, "Local Origins."

23 Degerman, "The Political is Medical," 67.

24 Previous rent strikes were more directly driven and shaped by racist narratives, while these only emerged indirectly in relation to the COVID-19 rent strikes due to the anti-Asian radicalization of the pandemic.

25 Azmanova, "Viral Insurgencies," 96.

26 Lopez et al., "Financial and Health Impacts;" Gramlich and Funk, *Black Americans Face Higher COVID-19 Risks*.

3 Caring communities

The theory of care ethics evolves from feminist theory which challenged Rawlsian notions of justice – focusing, instead, on morality as a concrete happening.[27] This framework allows one to judge whether a State's response to a given situation is adequately caring. Caring necessitates a recognition of the other being as expressing needs and attempting to effectively meet those needs. Good care affirms the recipient, empowering them, recognizing them as an autonomous individual with rights and concerns.[28] Solidarity is an important aspect of care – notably, it is an example of good care. Care ethicists note that within care there is a difference between *good* and *bad* care.[29] Good care meets the other person's needs and responds to them *how* the person asks for them. It decenters the self. It responds to the person as they are. It grapples with distinctions that are socially and bodily created. It engages with others' needs as they are presented and resists the potential to universalize all needs and experiences. Bad care, on the other hand, ignores individuals' autonomy. It does not acknowledge the difference of needs between individuals. It does not engage with the other's needs. Instead, it prioritizes the caregiver and their perceptions of the care recipient. Nicki Ward (2015) notes that these differences in care prioritize a generalized view of who is receiving care, and thus may potentially fall into fulfilling needs which are assumed due to differences. The care provided for renters can be divided along these lines. Good care listens to their needs, whereas bad care applies generalized responses. It is particularly important to attend to this difference, because rent strikers historically have been predominantly Black and responding to public health crises unique to poor quality of housing.[30]

Good care requires that in assessing rent strikers' needs we listen to their needs as they are being expressed. Care ethics assesses the effectiveness of care through whether it meets the following qualifications: attentive, nurturing, responsible, compassionate, and meets another's needs. The actions that individuals have with one another have moral weight. Harry Blatterer positions friendship within the discourse on care ethics.[31] He contends that friendship is a *happening*, and it is one shaped by solidarity.[32] Friendship, the connections we build among our community members, is held together by a sharing of common goals and aspirations, as well as care for one another. Solidarity and friendship are inextricably bound up. Trust, respect, compassion, and attentiveness are aspects of friendship, all of which are necessary for social cohesion.[33] Thus, we can look to the State to see if it is functioning in such a way that it facilitates these bonds. Ethicist Joan Tronto claims that care is also applicable to politics, in that it can be used to judge a political system's capacity to care *for* its citizens. She argues, "democratic politics should center upon assigning responsibility for care, and for ensuring that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities."[34] The State has a responsibility for assuming a burden of care and should be able to designate specific tasks for institutions or persons. For example, the CDC during the COVID-19 should work with international organizations to provide effective medical care to American citizens. The CDC would be expected to focus on caring for citizens. Citizens' voices and opinions should be taken into consideration as well. Thus, the rent strikers' voices are important to democratic caring. A State that cares for its citizens should listen to those citizens. Good care assumes that we share common humanity and equal personhood, which care ethicists contend is a basis for a functioning democracy.[35] In utilizing the care framework, the State has a duty to ensure that citizens' essential needs are cared

27 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.
28 Laugier, "The Ethics of Care;" Morris, "Impairment and Disability;" and Hamington, "Care Ethics and Engaging."
29 Ward, "Care Ethics."
30 Public housing initiatives beginning during the New Deal encouraged Americans to believe that housing was a rite that continued largely up until the late 1960s.
31 Blatterer, "Friendship and Solidarity."
32 Ibid.; Blatterer, "Friendship, Recognition."
33 Pahl, "Friendship;" Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*.
34 Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 30.
35 Tronto, *Caring Democracy*; Ellis, "Dependency, Justice."

for, and to guarantee that those needs are met. The State cannot meet all individuals' needs, as some needs require other human beings, but as Nel Noddings argues – the State must "support the conditions under which caring relations can prosper."[36] Care can prosper best when one's essential needs are met. If one is not worried about housing, food, or education, it lifts a significant anxiety, allowing individuals to participate more fully in their community. The provision and protection of essential needs are integral to caring relations and democratic care.

The COVID-19 pandemic was, and continues to be, both a scientific and a political issue. Individuals who lack political power cannot draw attention to their needs. Likewise, it is worth noting that experts such as Anthony Fauci consistently reiterated that we must place "science over politics." However, the individuals in charge of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic were political actors – from the president to the governors and senators; individuals with significant political power were asked to make decisions on public health. States struggled and bargained for medical supplies to keep their residents alive, and the spread of the pandemic highlighted problems which had already existed. Poor states, and states that suddenly lost revenue due to a lack of tourist industry, lacked funds for medical equipment.[37] The individualized responses placed a significant burden upon political actors to make public health decisions, potentially without having the necessary knowledge to make an adequate response.

Good care requires that the actors provide *effective* care, which necessitates that the caregivers have the necessary resources. Tronto writes, "Good care ...require[s] a variety of resources. Lest the description of care as a practice mislead our thinking, care depends upon adequate resources: on material goods, on time, and on skills."[38] Care, as a practice, is something that we *do* – whether the *we* is a community or a government, it is an action. Good care requires specific things in order to be effective – goods, time, and skills. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic was hyper-individualized. Initially, the federal response minimized the risk of the virus, leading to false confidence among many Americans. Thus, it was left up to states to decide how to respond to the pandemic – as death rates surged, we found many states lacking the three major resources needed for good care. Medical staff were overworked and exhausted, with not enough medical workers to meet the crisis. We lacked the labor force, and the labor force we did have was severely overworked. States jumped to respond to a crisis that they may not have prepared for and while lacking the goods (medical equipment) to keep people alive.

Good care, in a political context, necessitates that the federal State acts well. The State has a responsibility to protect its citizens and should do so even if there is opposition from individual states. Thus, it is important to examine *how* the federal government has responded, and whether that fits within the framework of good care. If it does not, then it is necessary to ask – why not?

4 COVID #RentStrike

The State, when acting in a caring capacity, must respond to needs as they are expressed. It must take into consideration the intersecting needs of the people expressing those needs. The COVID-19 rent strikers are responding to a specific crisis that is disproportionately impacting Black and brown communities, communities which are disproportionately at risk of eviction. In May, a movement for rent strike in response to COVID-19 began to be organized across the internet – hashtags #CancelRent and #CantPayMay as well as a call for a national strike via tenant groups.[39] Rent strikes have historically been connected to public health crises which predominantly impacted Black and brown communities;[40] Black and brown communities are

36 Noddings, "Care Ethics and 'Caring' Organizations," 83.
37 Adolph et al., "Pandemic Politics."
38 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 110.
39 Singletary, "FAQ."
40 Jackson, "Harlem's Rent Strike;" Lipsky, "Rent Strikes;" Casey-Leininger, "Not the Most Dramatic;" Karp, "The St. Louis Rent Strike;" and Judson, "We're Walking Proud."

less likely to have access to healthcare and often experience medical discrimination through assumptions that Black and brown people overstate their medical conditions or problems.[41]

Additionally, people of color are twice as likely to be renters, and studies throughout the country have shown that people of color make up 80% of individuals facing eviction. Similarly, people of color are most at risk of eviction during the pandemic. A report by Massachusetts Institute Technology demonstrates that in the first month of the Massachusetts state of emergency, 78% of eviction filings in Boston were in communities of color.[42] In a survey conducted of American adults during August 2020, the PEW Research Center found that Black, Latinx, and Asian Americans were overwhelmingly more likely to use money from savings to pay bills, have trouble paying bills, or have problems paying rent.[43] Rent strikers are struggling at the nexus of pre-existing inequity and heightening economic burdens. Good care, during COVID-19, would engage with the pre-existing systematic racism that people of color experience as well as the immediate concerns specific to the pandemic. It would respond to the needs of marginalized peoples as they represent them, which has been a demand for an end to rent and related fees. The COVID-19 rent strike movement itself was most visible in May, the time at which the CARES act ended.

The CARES act began on March 27, 2020, and ended on July 24, 2020. Tenants could not be evicted until thirty days after the expiration of the mortarium. After the end of the CARES act, the House passed the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act (HEROES). The bill is a $3 trillion stimulus package, which includes a halt to evictions. Due to the prolonged debate over HEROES' passage, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) executed a temporary stop in residential evictions from September 4, 2020, through December 31, 2020. However, the order lacks many of the protections in both the CARES and HEROES acts.

The Congressional Research Service issued a brief on the CDC moratorium. The authors, Maggie McCarty and Libby Perl, note that "within a week of the order taking effect," at least *one* lawsuit that challenged the CDC's actions had been filed. Moreover, in response to the question of whether the order will be effective, they note that despite the CARES act protections, "91% of legal aid attorneys reported illegal evictions in their areas."[44] Thus, despite the protections offered by the CDC, it is very likely that illegal evictions will continue. Under the CDC's eviction moratorium, tenants will still owe rent to the landlords and are expected to make partial payments to landlords. Tenants are obligated to pay any interest, penalties, or fees that have accrued to the landlord as well. They may also be evicted if they engage in illegal activities, threaten harm to other tenants, damage property, violate building codes, or violate any other contractual obligation. Covered tenants need to submit a declaration to their landlord on the following:

(1) The individual has used best efforts to obtain all available government assistance for rent or housing;
(2) The individual either (i) expects to earn no more than $99,000 in annual income for Calendar Year 2020 (or no more than $198,000 if filing a joint tax return), (ii) was not required to report any income in 2019 to the US Internal Revenue Service, or (iii) received an Economic Impact Payment (stimulus check) pursuant to Section 2201 of the CARES act;
(3) The individual is unable to pay the full rent or make a full housing payment due to substantial loss of household income, loss of compensable hours of work or wages, a lay-off, or extraordinary out-of-pocket medical expenses;
(4) The individual is using best efforts to make timely partial payments that are as close to the full payment as the individual's circumstances may permit, taking into account other nondiscretionary expenses; and
(5) Eviction would likely render the individual homeless – or force the individual to move into and live in close quarters in a new congregate or shared living setting – because the individual has no other available housing options.[45]

41 Hoffmann et al., "Racial Bias."
42 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Evictions in Boston*.
43 Lopez et al., "Financial and Health Impacts."
44 McCarty and Perl, "Federal Eviction Moratoriums."
45 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Temporary Halt."

The landlord or property holder is expected to accept this document. The US Department of Justice (DOJ) will prosecute any violation of the Order. This measure lacks many of the exemptions of the CARES act which, in regard to evictions, made it temporarily popular – despite individuals appreciating the exemptions, they still planned for future evictions. The lack of trust in the State to continue to care for citizens presents a failure of linked social capital. Marginalized individuals are hurt by this distrust, as prolonged mental and emotional stress is a significant concern in COVID-19.[46]

The COVID-19 rent strikes centered around families and individuals who already were in precarious economic situations, people who already were living paycheck to paycheck and having to make difficult decisions over what to financially prioritize. Nicole Dean, of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, stated in an interview with *Marketplace* that, "there would be mass evictions in California, after the pandemic, or tenants would potentially be tens of thousands of dollars in debt."[47] Alongside these concerns was the problem of whether or not people would be able to find employment after the moratoriums ended. How could someone find a job when industries were being financially devastated, such as the tourism industry in Louisiana?[48] As a resident of Louisiana, whose family lives and works in Acadiana, the economic future of many residents of Louisiana hangs in jeopardy. Because of this precarity, many people struggle in their prioritization of rent, healthcare, and food among basic needs. The pandemic has rippled through the country, leaving mass unemployment, newly disabled people, and a struggle to understand how to live now.

Many organizers for COVID-19 rent strikes centered in Black and brown neighborhoods across the United States, in major cities such as New York City. Scholars such as Michael Lipsky have noted that rent strikes are the "poor man's weapon."[49] The economically disenfranchised often lack political power and have little to offer as political bargaining. However, by enlarging the conflict and bringing increased attention to a crisis, they can build significant support and gain political power through that public support. Historically, rent strikes have often relied upon pre-existing neighborhood connections and become stronger over time as outside individuals join. The COVID-19 rent strike situation is unique in that it occurred during a time in which community connections were strained. Social distancing and stay-at-home orders restricted community mobility,[50] and individuals and families, at risk of eviction, struggled to maintain connections of solidarity while following public health guidelines.

Rent strikers have stated their demands clearly. The Action Network published a call for a moratorium on evictions in New York City during April 2020. The organizers list three demands:

- Cancel Rent for four months, or for the duration of the public health crisis – whichever is longer.
- Freeze Rents offer every tenant in New York the right to renew their lease. No one's rent should go up during this epidemic.
- Reclaim Our Homes. Urgently and permanently rehouse all New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and invest in public and social housing across our state.

These three requests are emblematic of problems which were exacerbated by COVID-19. The CARES act gave homeowners extensions on mortgage payments. However, landlords' ability to amend leases depends upon the lenders agreeing to the changes. Landlords do have access to loans through the CARES act, which broadens the pre-existing Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program. The loans are directly available to landlords and can defer principal and interest payments for up to one year. EIDL also provides non-repayable emergency grants of up to $10,000. The coverage that is afforded to both homeowners and landlords is comprehensive, but renters' access to such protections depends upon landlords utilizing it. The three requests of the strikers suggest that landlords are eschewing potential aid, placing the responsibility solely upon tenants.[51]

46 Mazza et al., "Anxiety and Depression;" Salari et al., "Prevalence of Stress;" and Bueno-Notivol et al., "Prevalence of Depression."

47 Garsd, "Rent Strike Activist."

48 Kemker, "Lt. Gov. Nungessers."

49 Lipsky, "Rent Strikes."

50 Kim and Bostwick, "Social Vulnerability;" and Pitas and Ehmer, "Social Capital."

51 Whitman, "COVID-19 and Real Estate."

The State's responsibility is to make sure that there are ways for citizens to be relieved of obligations that they cannot meet during crises, of which the COVID-19 pandemic is only the most recent. The State has provided means for landlords to alleviate their tenants' responsibility to pay rent, interest, or fees, and although the EIDL is not a long-term solution to tenants being unable to pay rent, it does provide aid to landlords. According to democratic good care, the State *must* delegate tasks that will aid citizens. Currently, the responsibility rests upon tenants and landlords. Landlords are limited in their ability to provide relief for tenants, as the CDC eviction stay does not mitigate landlords' responsibility to the banks. The State, then, has placed a burden upon landlords that they cannot effectively meet. Landlords' inability to prevent evictions has resulted with the CDC taking on that responsibility through their aforementioned stay. Under the stay, tenants still may owe rent, interest, and late fees. The tenants lack the political power to respond to these economic penalties.

5 Health and rent strikes

Public health researchers have found that social capital, which is accrued through community interactions, is critical to individuals' adhering to public health guidelines as well as *knowing* about the seriousness of a given illness.[52] Szreter and Woolcock focus on three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital is trusting and co-operative relationships among individuals who share a common social identity. Bridging social capital encompasses relationships of respect and mutuality between individuals who know that they differ in some aspect of identity. Linking social capital are norms of "respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society."[53] According to Szreter, Woolcock, and others – individuals' relationships of trust and respect among one another contributes to caring about public health outcomes. Individuals who have close social connections with their communities are more likely to take public health measures such as handwashing and mask wearing seriously, as they may potentially be aware of community members' health risks. Szreter and Woolcock importantly note that if there is large-scale inequity, the poor will lack the goods and knowledge necessary to benefit from public health measures. The separation from community members during COVID-19 is a potential public health problem in and of itself. Individuals' health benefits from community interactions and the social capital generated through these interactions. The COVID-19 rent strikes helped to maintain social capital. Individuals, coordinating through the internet as well as their apartment buildings and neighborhoods, were able to maintain already existent social capital *and* built further capital. Participants in the rent strikes built social capital through online organizing, an example of both bonding and bridging social capital. They were able to communicate with people who may have had overlapping identities, and others who might lack a shared identity but wanted to demonstrate solidarity. Solidarity is necessary for rent strikes, and it is significant to public health. The COVID-19 rent strikers, despite being cut off from larger communities, still developed national communities through utilizing the internet. Online social capital and connectivity is understudied; however, the usage of hashtags and websites for organizing guides has helped the movement gain visibility and support.

The problem of place continues into the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has made vulnerabilities clear. The "shelter-in-place" order made "pre-existing" conditions of racism and poverty clear to comfortable, often white, communities. Public coverage of rent strikes in outlets such as *The Washington Post* brought the concerns of BIPOC communities to the forefront of American discourse. Geographers note that the COVID-19 pandemic highlights how *some* people are more at risk than others. LaToya Eaves and Karen

52 Szreter and Woolcock, "Health by Association;" Kim and Bostwick, "Social Vulnerability;" and Chuang et al., "Social Capital."

53 Szreter and Woolcock, "Health by Association," 655.

Al-Hindi contend that poor people of color are placed in situations of risk – essential workers, many of whom are not white, are asked to risk their families' health for employment which is precarious to begin with. They argue "Household financial instability became explicit through dramatically increased numbers of applications for unemployment insurance [...]."[54] The novel coronavirus has revealed insecurities which in the 1960s were the domain of rent strikes – economic precarity, structural racism, and public health inequities. The COVID-19 pandemic has afflicted the most vulnerable in American society – the disabled, the elderly, and people of color. It, like previous rent strikes, has pushed people to recognize that their fates are inextricably linked and to organize around their linked fates.

If the State is to provide good care to citizens, then there needs to be an understanding of *needs*. Tronto advocates for holding "public discussions of needs."[55] If we engage with one another as interdependent actors who have needs, provide care, and also either does require care or will require care – we can begin the process of holding dialogues on what these needs are. Needs being the material and immaterial things which we require to live full lives – dismantling of arbitrary boundaries due to race, ethnicity, gender, and national origins among other factors; accessible healthcare; adequate housing. The dialogue on meeting needs is not one that is new to American political and civil life. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as previously mentioned, asserted that housing should be a right to Americans. President Roosevelt in his proposed Economic Bill of Rights laid the foundations for what a public discussion of needs could be in America. A public discussion of needs is one in which the State grapples frankly with citizens' needs and encounters what is needed for a good life, not only one which meets essentials for living. Good democratic care requires a State that engages in this process, beginning with thinking of Americans as interdependent actors, and not as individualized persons who lack needs, having interests instead.

6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 rent strikes are a moment of connectivity despite a pandemic. Connection is an important aspect not just of rent strikes but also of community wellness. Individuals who have strong community connections show better adherence to public health measures. Furthermore, they are more able to organize socially and politically in response to a crisis. Rent strikes have historically responded to public health crises caused by social and political inequities – particularly that of racism. COVID-19 exacerbated underlying inequities, Black and brown communities found themselves more at risk not just of infection, but also of evictions due to sudden unemployment. The COVID-19 rent strikes continue the history of rent strikes as a response to structural inequity, and to the negligence of the State in providing aid to address systemic inequality.

The COVID-19 rent strike is an opportunity for the community to respond to political inaction. Tenants are the other group that have become responsible for meeting their needs. Rent strikes provide good, democratic care in that they acknowledge that the people involve lack of social and political capital. Tenants are responding to what Tronto calls "privileged irresponsibility."[56] Privileged irresponsibility is the phenomenon when those, "who are relatively privileged are granted by that privilege the opportunity to simply ignore certain forms of hardships that they do not face."[57] State actors, who are not in positions where they are steadily amassing unpayable debts and face evictions during a pandemic, can exercise this irresponsibility in not providing adequate aid and protection for tenants. Historically, rent strikes are a means to draw attention of the privileged, by rejecting contracts and legal norms, strikers demand that the powerful attend to their needs.

54 Eaves and Al-Hindi, "Intersectional Geographies," 134.
55 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 168.
56 Ibid., 121.
57 Ibid.

In the face of privileged irresponsibility, rent strikes provide good care to the community. The goal of the COVID-19 rent strikes was to bring awareness of exacerbation of housing problems and wealth inequity in America. The Action Network's three demands attend to the needs of those most directly impacted by COVID-19 – the homeless, housing insecure, and those experiencing poverty due to the pandemic. This is good care because it directly responds to the needs of the community, expresses compassion *for* those needs, and pays attention to the community's needs. The collective support for the community demonstrates emotional nurturance. Individuals cannot come together physically during the pandemic. However, expressions of solidarity can provide emotional care. COVID-19 separates people from one another – solidarity is a direct communication of connection and interdependence.

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