

The Banality of Carelessness and the Prefiguration of a Caring Society

The Care Collective (2020). *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. New York: Verso.

A Summary Review by Jose Duke Bagulaya with support from Eric Feng

At the height of the pandemic in the year 2020, when billions of human beings were locked down in their homes, if they were lucky enough to have one; when millions of infected persons were struggling to breathe or were simply dying in crowded and dilapidated hospitals manned by underpaid and ill-equipped medical staff and supported by an ever-decreasing amount of medical supplies; when more than half of the world population in the global South was patiently waiting for the extra dosages from the vaccines that the advanced economies had requisitioned for the benefit of their own citizens, five activists wrote under the name *The Care Collective* and issued *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*.

The Manifesto identifies a pandemic of carelessness in the world created by neo-liberalism, which had replaced Keynesian economics as the logic of the global capitalist system in the wake of the stagflation in the 1970s. Through its imposition by the invisible hands of states and international organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, neo-liberalism has unleashed wave upon wave of privatization of health, transportation, and other basic service systems that formed part of the infrastructure of the capitalist welfare state, thereby leaving people out of work, bereft of medical care, and even more impoverish than ever. Neo-liberal capitalism's functionaries have erected before our eyes an idol of a profit-seeking and independent individual whose only concern is self-interest and the accumulation of more profits through the marketization of everything. If Hannah Arendt had identified a banality of evil in fascism, the Manifesto perceives a banality of carelessness in the world of neo-liberalism, a carelessness that has emptied the human soul, doubly depriving us of the ability to care and the access to care.

To combat the pervasiveness of carelessness in global society, the Manifesto summons us to make 'care' the front and centre of our concerns through the recognition of human interdependence, which it considers as a major step towards the construction of the infrastructure of a caring society. This step entails '*recognising the myriad ways that our survival and our thriving are everywhere and always contingent on others.*'¹ Only through this recognition can we unveil the veiled dependency of the powerful whose economic power inverts its dependency on subalterns into independence. Only through this recognition can we de-pathologize our own apparent dependencies, which are, in reality, only the manifestations of economic subordination.

Appealing to various strands of feminist, queer, socialist and anarchist thought, the Manifesto calls for the reconfiguration of kinship, community, state, and economy. First, it calls for a new 'promiscuous care' that opens traditional kinship to wider circles of interdependent relations beyond the family, blood kin, and human kinship. Inspired by the

¹ The Care Collective [Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal] *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso, 2020) at 30.



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AIDS activists' redefinition of the notion of promiscuity as the experimentation of sexual acts that lead to safe sex, the Manifesto advances 'promiscuous care' as an 'ethics that proliferates outwards to redefine caring relations from the most intimate to the most distant.'² Promiscuous care asks us to care more 'in ways that are experimental and extensive by current standards.'³ In practice, this means caring indiscriminately, that is to say, caring that goes against the 'paranoid and chauvinistic caring imaginaries' of neo-liberalism that focus only on 'our own.'⁴ Indeed, promiscuous care unleashes an expansive universal care that informs various scales of social life: our families, communities, markets, states, not to speak of our transnational relationships with human and non-human life.

Second, the Manifesto imagines the prefiguration of care communities that are characterized by four core features: mutual support, public spaces, sharing, and democratic solidarities. A care community is possible by developing 'neighbourliness', which is but a form of promiscuous care.⁵ Here, this neighbourliness can arise from small acts of care like feeding pets, running errands, and extending help to neighbours who fall ill. Through these small acts, people can create mutual support in communities. Experimental associations such as cooperative credit unions, workers federations, community co-operatives, and other kinds of collectives may serve as models in providing support for their members. This neighbourliness can be nurtured, in turn, in the community's public spaces. To counter the mallification of spaces, a community of care must fight for non-privatized spaces such as public parks, public libraries, public museums, public gardens, and so on. This recalls what Henri Lefebvre called 'the right to the city', where people participate in the production and management of the space they inhabit.⁶ Thus, 'Creating communities that can care means amplifying spaces that are public...rather than those designed for or hijacked in the interests of private capital.'⁷ We must create what the Manifesto identified as a 'sharing infrastructure.'⁸ To supplement this infrastructure, a care community may create 'a library of things.'⁹ The idea of a local library, which is a model for sharing in communities, may be expanded to include the circulation of other sharable things. Hence, a care community may create a tool library, a bicycle library, a kitchen ware library, and other 'library of things' where one could borrow things and reduce the overproduction that is detrimental to the environment. 'Immaterial resources' such as time and digital resources may also be shared to strengthen the bonds between people in the care community.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the Manifesto notes that while we need a community where we can share things with others, it is the very act of sharing that constitutes a community. Lastly, a care community must be founded on democratic solidarity. The Manifesto urges us to look at experimental collectives. One of these new arrangements is the workers' collective ownership of the business after retiring owners sell the business to the workers. The Manifesto also imagines the possibilities of expanding the care community through the new 'municipalism', which is the practice of 'self-government by an area, town or city.'¹¹ What makes this form of democratic rule attractive for the care collective is 'insourcing', that is, the

² Ibid at 41.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. at 42.

⁵ Ibid at 47.

⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* as quoted in Mark Purcell, 'Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City' *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 36 (2013) at 148.

⁷ *The Care Manifesto*, supra note 1 at 51.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid at 52.

¹⁰ Ibid at 53.

¹¹ Ibid at 55.

return of workers to the public sector where they could have job security, living wages and pensions.¹² Thus, ‘insourcing’ is ‘an act of caring for workers that puts them in a position to care more.’¹³ For the writers of the Manifesto, all these prefigurative communities are not meant to fill the lack of neo-liberal society. On the contrary, the care community is meant to be the end of neo-liberalism itself.

Third, the Manifesto urges the salvaging of the care practices of the welfare state and transform the latter into a ‘caring state.’ It departs from the Marxist instrumentalist theory of the state which treats the state as a mere tool of the ruling class. Rather than view the state as an instrument of the elite, the Manifesto views the state as a critical arena for the construction of ‘sustainable infrastructure of care.’¹⁴ A caring state is one that revives the social services established by the welfare state, but this time devoid of racialized oppression, ethnic solidarity, and a gendered division of labour. As the Manifesto emphatically puts it, ‘The caring state is precisely not a paternal, racist, or settler-colonial state.’¹⁵ Hence, the caring state propagates autonomy rather than dependency; its central concern is the promotion of social justice rather than criminal justice. In short, the Manifesto calls for the transformation of the state into an insurer of care through the establishment of infrastructures that would allow care communities and promiscuous care to thrive.

Fourth, the Manifesto demands the construction of a ‘caring economy.’¹⁶ This entails the rejection of the neo-liberal economic order, which imposed austerity policies on Third World economies, thereby causing incalculable damage to peoples’ lives from Chile to Greece. The Manifesto insists that ‘care and capitalist market logics cannot be reconciled.’¹⁷ Few are the intimate care work that cannot be delivered by hands-on care with its personal engagement and emotional attachments. Moreover, privatized care only exacerbates the inequalities in contemporary societies. Privatized care is only accessible to those who have the money. This form of commercialized care also instrumentalizes care work through metrics that reify acts of caring. Like Midas’ touch, neo-liberalism commodifies and reifies anything it touches. Thus, the Manifesto calls for the ‘de-marketization’ of various spheres of human society and the re-regulation of neo-liberal capitalism’s inert tendency for hyper-accumulation in order to defetishise the market. To achieve defetishization, ‘we need to ensure that consumers are reconnected with producers, and care-receivers with care-givers.’¹⁸ In this way, producers and caregivers do not appear inverted to each other as if their relations are relations between things, that is to say, between money and labour power as exchangeable things. For this reason, the Manifesto celebrates cooperatives and other forms of cooperation that localize markets and make human relations appear as social relations rather than a relation between things. Indeed, a care economy requires de-marketization and de-fetishization through the creation of new modes of ownership, production, and consumption.

Finally, the Manifesto proposes a cosmopolitan form of care that opens national borders to those in need, reduces global inequality, and organizes global alliances of care movements on the bases of our ‘shared vulnerabilities and interdependence.’¹⁹ Human interdependence is

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid at 56.

¹⁴ Ibid at 59.

¹⁵ Ibid at 64.

¹⁶ Ibid at 71.

¹⁷ Ibid at 75.

¹⁸ Ibid at 79.

¹⁹ Ibid at 94.



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not simply local as the global pandemic has tragically revealed to humanity. Medicines and vaccines are produced in one place; while nurses come from other places. Our very survival depended on other people and other states. It is therefore imperative to build ‘new transnational institutions and intergovernmental organizations, agencies and policies whose organizing principles are based on care and caretaking and which can be reshaped according to share logics, not neo-liberal capitalist logics.’²⁰ Moreover, care movements must build on all existing transnational networks to form a ‘global alliance of caring connections.’²¹ To strengthen global connections, the opening of borders should be made a sine qua non to the building of a caring world. Neo-liberalism opens borders only to goods and capital, while trapping the unemployed labourers within national borders. It guaranteed free movement of goods and capital without a free movement of peoples. The interdependence of care makes this border built on racial prejudices superfluous. ‘Caring societies can only be built by overcoming careless nationalist imaginaries and fostering truly transnational outlooks among radically democratic cosmopolitan subjects.’²² Thus, a global politics of interdependence requires ‘an everyday cosmopolitanism—promiscuous care in a global scale—that moves our caring imaginaries beyond kinship structures, communities, and nation states to the furthest reaches of the ‘strangest’ parts of the planet.’²³ To be a cosmopolitan subject is to be a ‘citizen of the world’ who cultivates care towards the stranger. Being cosmopolitan means to ‘care across difference and distance’ in our daily lives.²⁴ This cosmopolitan subject is the subject of ‘*universal care*’ which makes all of humanity ‘responsible for hands-on care work, as well as engaging with and caring about the flourishing of other people and the planet.’²⁵

The Manifesto’s diagnosis of carelessness that afflicts contemporary global society is not just a timely analysis of the symptoms of such social disease; it is also a brave denunciation of the economic and ideological foundations of carelessness. The recognition of the existence of the social malaise that has infected individuals, governments, communities, and institutions is the Manifesto’s most potent point, a point that jolts anyone to realize the urgency of the problem.

This recognition of urgency is then properly followed by the immediacy of the solutions imagined in the Manifesto. To formulate its own immediate solutions, it returns to the tradition of prefigurative practices of workers’ cooperatives and feminist organizations in the past century and in recent times. Prefiguration refers to the practices in the present that prepare for the construction of the ideal in the future. It combines ‘immediate aims with ultimate ends.’²⁶ The Manifesto silently alludes to these prefigurative practices through its advocacy for mutual aid, public spaces, sharing, and democratic relationships. It therefore calls for immediate social experimentation with new modes of relations and alternative practices that would transform present communities into social laboratories for the constitution of care communities.

The Manifesto’s identified immediate and localized solutions somehow deviate from the apocalyptic visions of systemic reconfigurations identified with Marxism. In fact, the Manifesto leaves the market intact and simply settles for the de-marketization of various human spheres, the re-regulation of market forces, and the de-fetishization of production by re-

²⁰ Ibid at 86.

²¹ Ibid at 90.

²² Ibid at 95.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid at 96.

²⁶ Colin Ward as quoted in Carissa Honeywell, *Anarchism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021) at 79.



connecting consumers and producers. The survival of exchange value is thus resolved by localized relations that would prevent fetishism, which is, of course, inherent in commodity exchange.

Finally, the localist tendency in the communities of care envisioned by the Manifesto is balanced by its radical twenty-first century cosmopolitanism, which is expressed in its embrace of open borders for refugees and migrants. This cosmopolitanism may be seen as part of recent reformulations of cosmopolitanism by philosophers.²⁷ Nonetheless, the radical spirit of the Manifesto has closer affinity to early twentieth-century socialist internationalism than to liberal cosmopolitanism. Indeed, the Manifesto's visions of global social justice and global alliances of care movements imagine a New International.

We find *The Care Manifesto* as a fitting text to contextualize this series of discussion group meetings organized by the International Research Centre for Cultural Studies (IRCCS), The Education University of Hong Kong. We believe that the Care Collective's diagnosis of carelessness in our global society is correct and apropos. We recognize the urgency of addressing this social malaise of carelessness. It is in this context that we open the series to debate the theorizing of care and the practical steps towards the construction of a community of care in our time.

In this regard, the Manifesto invites us to raise some questions concerning its vision of care.

1. **What do you think of the manifestations of 'carelessness' and acts of 'caring' in your community in the past few years? To what extent can such carelessness be traced to neo-liberal capitalism's pervasive presence and influence? How do those small acts of caring subvert the banality of carelessness?**
2. The Manifesto formulates a care community based on our 'shared vulnerabilities and interdependence'. **Any examples of these shared vulnerabilities?**
3. **Does the concept of 'universal care' remind you of any philosophy of care in the philosophical and cultural traditions that you're familiar with?** For instance, one may think here of Mo Zi's 'universal or impartial love', which was a polemical response to Confucianism's hierarchical and kinship-based care.²⁸ **In what ways can the Care Collective's concepts of 'promiscuous and cosmopolitan care' converse with these philosophical traditions?**
4. The vision of care and community presented by the Care Collective significantly departs from the Marxist critique of the state and neo-liberal economy. **How do these theoretical and practical departure from Marxism strengthen or weaken the Manifesto's vision of a care community? In experimenting with care community models like 'new municipalism', who should lead such a collective or co-operative?**

²⁷ See Martha Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

²⁸ See 'Chapter 9 Mo Tzu's Doctrines of Universal Love, Heaven, and Social Welfare' in Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).