



# Exposing the Spectrum of Care

## An Alternative Way of Looking at Art and Neoliberalism

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**Abstract.** The term care has received attention lately, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the term, while indeed important, must be examined more closely, especially if it's to be used to solve social problems. Care is usually seen as an opposition to neoliberalism. But this view is somewhat misleading since, in close examination, care is a paradox; it is also moral yet political. We want to bring this paradox to the front. One of ways to do this is through art since art is open-ended that could give us a picture of the said paradox. We utilize a semi-ethnographic approach supported with literature study in this research.

**Keywords:** *Care, neoliberalism, art, ambiguity, politics*

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Neoliberalism and the Idea of Profit over People

Neoliberalism has become an everyday terminology. It is now common to see people saying that “neoliberalism is the root of all the problems we face in contemporary society.” Some people also go even further, arguing that (neoliberal) capitalism is the system that would be impossible to replace. In a sense, neoliberalism has become an “absolute reality” for all people—that all that we do, whether we realize it or not, is for neoliberalism in one way or another, from religion to multiculturalism. What do we mean, however, by “doing things for neoliberalism”? Neoliberalism is actually quite hard to define, but, if we trace the basic structure of it, neoliberalism means (a) economic policies concerns with deregulating the economy, (b) defining the social world in terms of capital, and (c) ideology of self-regulating market and self-regulating individual [1-2]. In other words, “doing things for neoliberalism” means doing things for advancing capital (supporting capital accumulation). Put it differently, neoliberalism means dominating social life with “private economy ideology.” In short, neoliberalism took the idea of *Homo economicus* seriously; the idea that humans are rational actors, seeking *financial profit* as much as possible which could only be realized through free market mechanisms [3-4].

It creates what people usually call “precarious life”— a life of danger, where one’s basic needs are not met not only in material sense but also social and existential sense [5]. One could say that neoliberal capitalism has created a form of governmentality and biopolitics [6]. Neoliberalism, in short, is an “archetype” of what Marx [7] wrote as bourgeois society. The idea of precarious life leads to the notion of neoliberal life has “destroyed” or, at least, extremely limited one’s social relations. For example, Allison argues that the rise of neoliberalism in Japan has led them to a lonely nation—even into what she called “ungrievable death” [7]. This is a problem. The question, then, is what has been proposed for an alternative?

## 1.2 Critical Review of Ethics of Care: Is it the Answer?

One answer to the previous problem is ethics of care. As explained by Black [8], ethics of care basic principle is “Social activities of care both constitute and are made relevant by morally/ethically framed relationships with others and oneself” (p. 80). Care is a form of solidarity, a form of attending to the so-called “other,” and a building block of humanity [9]. Kropotkin [10] even wrote that mutual-aid is what “kept [human] together” (p. 178). Nurture or care, or being in (equal) relation with others, then, seems to be a fundamental thing for human existence [11]. Corwin [12] summarized this idea when they wrote,

“[T]he fact that Sister Helen’s physical actions were extremely limited, she continued to be *framed as a valued participant* simply by being included in the game . . . This interaction *reveals a model of personhood* in which Sister Helen . . . was included as a ratified joint participant” (pp. 10-11, emphasis added).

However, ethics of care is usually seen in an apolitical lense. For example, consider how ethics of care is introduced to the general audience. Boone [13] wrote,

“Ethics of care argues for an approach to moral philosophy from a more traditionally ‘female’ viewpoint—and that the most important virtues are taking care of others, being patient and nurturing, and being willing to sacrifice one’s own happiness so as to bring happiness to others.”

Other introductions to ethics of care have the same color [14-16]. They all emphasize the importance of relationships with others as the fundamental block of human (social) life. They argue that ethics of care is a negation to injustice; it is an alternative for these injustices. The ultimate argument for ethics of care, then, is that what is valued is “intimacy, responsibility, relationships, and caring for others, while seeing autonomy as ‘the illusory and dangerous quest’ [...] in tension with the values of attachment” [16].

While it has been argued that (social) existence relies somewhat on relationality rather than abstract; determining metaphysics [11], it must be highlighted that, as numerous scholars have written, the said relationality is highly political [17-21]. The love and affection associated with care is always situated in some kind of political narrative. Althusser [22] and Engels [23] both argue that the family—which is very associated with care—is constructed along with capitalism. Wolf [24] even argues that kinship is a kind of political strategy for production. Hence, while care is indeed important for one's existence, the said existence is achieved through political means.

### 1.3 The Spectrum of Care

One might ask, how come intimacy, something central to care, be juxtaposed with political means? We must, first, understand sociality, or human relations. Sociality is traditionally understood as dealing with other people; interacting with a different person. However, Descola [25] argues that human relation is fragile in the sense that it could move from one mode to another; unstable. In the context of care, we could move from egalitarian-based care, to political-based care [25-26]. If that is true, does that mean our sociality is a “messed up” situation? Yes, but sociality is always shaped by political narrative (ideology); care is no exception.

Graeber [26] wrote that care relations are always with us — “everyday communism”; that we always live communally in our everyday life. However, he continues that even the most egalitarian society must “develop safeguards against anyone”; making sure that no one “goes berserk” [26, p. 13]. To give and receive care is to follow a certain rule. Care, then, is a form of politics of belonging; determining who gets “the obligation/right” to give and receive care and why they deserve it [27-30]. In other words, care is not always situated in the context of personal; affective relationship [31]. Care is also a form of work or labor to “support” the existing social structure; to maintain it so we could live in it, in a Marxian sense [29, 32]. Therefore, care is *both* moral *and* political; liberating and constraining at the same time. Buch [33] illustrates this perfectly in her ethnography,

“Quitting [from home care] was, in Sally’s non-confrontational way, a deep critique of the demands of this labor, the toll it took on her body, and the lack of support she received in return for her dedication. Yet, even in voicing this critique, Sally emphasized that quitting was itself a form of care, in that this act would enable Ms. Murphy to receive care from someone with the bodily stamina to sustain her” (p. 646, emphasis added).

## **2 RESEARCH GAP AND METHODOLOGY**

The problem thus far is as follows. Neoliberal ideology does indeed bring problems, such as weakening our sociality in favor of financial profit. However, to think that care is some kind of alternative to neoliberal capitalist life would also be misleading. As we have argued before, care is achieved through political means, it is a form of work. Therefore, care also carries some notions of burden. Care, then, is not “weakening” — care has been unstable in the first place [31-32]. However, we found that among artists and research of art, art is usually framed to represent care; that artists could bring about change through their work by referencing the concept of care [34-35 & Indonesian artist, personal communication]. Our article aims to disrupt this by showing how practice of art and care is ambiguous and not as clear as artists often claim. Our argument, then, is that the affinity of art and care is not how artists tend to imagine; if care is ambiguous, then to present care through the form of art must also took an ambiguous form.

To do this, we utilized a semi-ethnographic approach (observation and interview), supported with literature study to capture the spectrum of care. Ethnography, which specializes in documenting how people live their life [36], provides a critical edge due to its inductive logic. This logic enables us to see life in its “natural setting”; challenging preconceived notions [37].

In this article, we would first provide an illustration of the spectrum of care; how care is both moral and political. In the next section, we’ll depict how art, traditionally understood, serves as an opposition to politics and/or neoliberalism. In the third section, we’ll argue why a traditional understanding of art is misleading by referencing the illustration provided in the first section. We conclude by summarizing and highlighting the main point of this article.

### 3 FINDINGS

#### 3.1 The Spectrum of Care: An Illustration

From the 26th of July until the 1st of August, we went to Cianjur for coursework. One of the main orientations (and interesting point) for conducting coursework in Cianjur was because it is an area of post-disaster. Cianjur was hit by an earthquake around November 2022. While it has been a while from November 2022 to July 2023 (around 9 months), the area was still somewhat affected by the earthquake. Some people still live inside refugee camps, such as in Kedung Girang and Gasol. Not all schools have been recovered either; we saw some students studying in tents on our way to and from Cianjur. Posters of “*Cianjur Bangkit*” still stand in some areas, indicating that they are, indeed, still in the process of recovering. We receive some of this information from the internet and the news before going to Cianjur. Thus, we assumed that we’ll see somewhat of a struggle in the people’s daily life.

Once we got there, we were placed in Legok, one of the local villages in Cianjur. We’re kind of surprised because the place looks too fine for a post-disaster area. When we were looking around, we didn’t see any post-earthquake remnants—all the buildings look intact. We asked the kids several days after we met them, what happened when the earthquake hit. They said they were scared but, there’s not that much of a change, physically at least. When we asked other people, such as Lady F, that attended the local store, she said that nothing much happened physically. After the earthquake hit, they were living inside refugee camps with other people, but once everything “went back to normal,” they lived like normal again, as one lady informed us.

This is somewhat confusing because we didn’t expect that they would live such a “normal life.” There’s no sign of significant struggle in their daily life. The kids also played without any hesitation with us, strangers. They even stayed in our rented house until around 6 P.M. The next day, some of the kids were already visiting around 7 A.M. They said that today was not their schedule to go to school because they still must share the tent in school, but some of them were missing since they have to go to school. One question that we had was, where’s the mother? It is quite unusual to see children in Jabodetabek (where we came from), to be “let loose” like this. We asked one of the Lady S and she said that people around here know each other so there’s no worry in letting the kids roam around. In Jabodetabek, children usually play in the park with their parents, but here (at least during the time we were here), they play all over the place—we even accompanied them to play in the river across the village. Lady S told us that it is common for kids to play there. We thought, then, this is how they care for their children. Lady S told us that, nurturing kids means “knowing what they want and need.”

After a couple of days, we went to Kedung Girang, the place where the refugee camp still stands. There's a stark difference. The children rarely roam around. They usually play in front of their house or their friend's house. Some of the children even help with their parents' work. For instance, one kid helps with construction work and one kid accompanied their father doing delivery for construction material. Visiting Kedung Girang reminds us that, in Legok, according to our observation, it is quite rare to see kids spend most of their time with their parents. When we asked one of the local ladies here, they admitted that their children are more attached to them. The mother explains that their routinity consists of attending their kids, either playing with their kids there, or taking the kids to and from school.

Both mothers in Legok and Kedung Girang say that they were motivated by "mother's morality." What that means is that, for them, it is a mother's job to love and nurture their children. However, there's another side to the story. Another mother (Lady L) said that to "keep her kid" under her "radar" is quite important since kids don't really know anything yet. She complained that "keeping her kid under her radar" is difficult, it's either the kids don't listen, or they want to do things on their own. Lady F and Lady S have similar complaints. Both complained that it is hard to balance what their children want and what they want as a mother—Lady S even quit her job as a teacher just to manage her child. But they all agree that, even though it is tiring and confusing, it is for the best for their children. Being fierce towards their children, these mothers admit, is important, even though it means "restricting" their children's liberty.

### 3.2 Art and the Social World

Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) architecture, designed by Andra Matin, has been criticized severely by several people for its brutalist design. For instance, in an opinion piece written by Heizer [38], TIM architecture has this "uniformity" image and does not represent any creative expression, leading to the argument that TIM is not appropriate for an art center. Other kinds of critique carry a similar color. For instance, Randy [39] reported that the art community in Indonesia criticized the new TIM due to its commodification; that it is not about "art" anymore, but about "selling" art. This leads to artists worrying about the status of art as a cultural heritage [40]. Nurcahyani [41] also documented how artist, Butet Kartaredjasa, dislike the new TIM because it doesn't represent any history and culture. If art is supposed to bring a "new breeze" to society due to its liberal nature and respect to culture [Indonesian artist, personal communication], the new TIM rendered art as just a commodity; detaching art from its "innate" purpose.

The Indonesian artist (which we would call as H) we talked to, in his art exhibition, also shows how art is opposed to politics and/or neoliberalism. In that exhibition, he talked that art is a “weapon” to go against “political regime.” In his critique of the New Order era, he said that the regime has become “greedy,” and that art and artists, when we talked to him personally, could and should be utilized to imagine a new form of society. This is because, as we have mentioned before, for him art is liberal in its nature and because of that, artists are a “special” kind of people. Artists, to quote him, could “spark the fire that has been dead in society.”

These opinions and critiques are not completely wrong. We visited the now-reformed TIM for ourselves and indeed, we felt a kind of “liminality” and “emptiness” — something that felt out of place for an art center. The way Andra Matin positioned the music and dance studio, for instance, felt awkward since it does not give any image of the studio at all—our first reaction was thinking that the studio’s door was a toilet. The open space is also somewhat limited. The previous TIM had a lot of open space which was usually used by artists to practice. But the new TIM has limited open space; its open space is surrounded by big building; towering them, making movement difficult. Also, there’s a sense of discipline since the space is rigidly separated. As Heizer [38] wrote, the brutalist design is indeed close with authoritarianism. Heizer wrote that TIM “does not give soul to its space, meanwhile all products of arts and culture came from someone that has breath and soul.” If we may put it crudely, Heizer is arguing that TIM does not represent any sense of humanity. Moreover, H’s arts, in his art exhibition, carry an “eerie” atmosphere to demonstrate its critique for the New Order. Dominated by dark color and rough brush strokes, H said that his art is supposed to bring our attention about the lack of “light” during the New Order era; to represent, in an ironic way, that there’s no sense of hope.

## 4 DISCUSSION

To summarize the findings: from our fieldwork in Cianjur, we found how care operates in a spectrum. In one moment, care seems to take its “moral form,” shown by the mother’s genuine love and affection towards their children; feeding them, letting them play with their friends, etc. However, it is also common for a mother to complain about how difficult it is to manage their children; one mother even must quit her job to focus on managing her second child. Another mother has to deal with her child kept breaking the rules.

These rules, however, for the mother, are also a form of love and affection; to keep the children safe. But, to completely restrain the children is not really an option—all these mothers agree that children must be “set free,” to let them learn on their own. It is, indeed, a common mother’s dilemma. Nevertheless, even though it is common, it actually shows how care is ambiguous; it could be seen in an egalitarian way, but also in a hierarchical way.

Art, in which we draw from architecture and paintings, is often claimed to be egalitarian. That art is supposed to “serve” society, rather than for profit. Thus, artists, as illustrated by TIM’s critique and H’s paintings, often argue that art should serve as an opposition to politics and economy. As Milner and Coombs [34] wrote, artists have “forge an alternative ethics in the age of neoliberalism” (p.2), by imagining caring as “a matter and materiality as expressions of caring for the world” (p. 4).

But, if care, in its commonality, is ambiguous, what about art? Could artists really claim what they usually say? Barthes [42] and Bourdieu [43] both argue that cultural (artistic) work, could not really be seen as “independent” in the sense that it has no anything to do with the larger social context. They argue that cultural work is always multidimensional—drawing from a lot of inputs—making it impossible to point to just one source of inspiration for a work of art. Moreover, as anthropologists have documented, creativity is always social; creativity is always learned from other people [44]. In that sense, those opinions are a bit misleading; art could not really “serve” society in the way they imagine it. TIM’s architecture, then, is also a form of art and culture, even though it is “brutal,” “authoritarian,” and commodified; representing neoliberal art, so to speak. That being said, Ingold [45] argues that art, while indeed is political, is relatively autonomous.

What that means is that one could not predict what art could bring. Art, Ingold [46] thought, captures the world in a new way because art operates as a line, rather than a circle; it's always moving. If we go back to TIM's architecture, while it is indeed "brutal" and "cold," one could also see, what these artists like to call, humanity inside it. From our observation, it is quite interesting to see how "messy" TIM actually is. It is a place where students, just finished school, come and play. We saw some students singing together with a guitar. It is also a place where people talk and gossip in an unorganized manner. There's also a small art exhibition. What is interesting in this art exhibition, even though conducted inside TIM, is that it gives a sense that they create "their own space" different from TIM. The exhibition is filled with students' art which depicts their everyday life; a drawing of a cafe, family, their friends, people inside a train, a person selling food, a poem about food that tells a story about their mom's cooking, and the like. While the building itself may be soulless, it is also filled with soul once we attend to people's activities. In other words, as Lefebvre [47] once argued, a space is a contested experience. Put it more generally, art is a contested experience. The same experience could also be encountered with a "traditional" form of fine arts. For example, in Simplican study [35], they documented how in a care-based community, there's a sense of burden since caregiving is a form of work. However, interestingly, this community acknowledged that burden and, to make the burden visible, they use drawing. For the community, drawing is a medium for its people to express what they felt about caring; is it a burden, a happiness, or other things. From that drawing, they would discuss furthermore about what to do.

As this observation shows, care and art are both ambiguous. Care, in one moment, could restrict others, but liberate them at the same time, so does art. Art, then, is not, as often claimed, "spark the fire" in society. The problem is "locking" art into two extremes: as an opposition to politics or as an extension of politics. It is more productive to see art in actuality; as an experiment in the sense of "praising an opening and following where it leads" [45, p. 7].

## **5 CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that care is an ambiguous concept. It escapes easy definition [28]. Care, as a concept, is both moral and political at the same time. In other words, care exists as a spectrum in which morals stand at one extreme and politics stand at the polar opposite. Thus, to think of care as the sole alternative to neoliberalism would be not productive since it neglects the politics of belonging embedded within the concept of care. Through fieldwork, we found that this ambiguity is really common, exemplified by a “mother’s dilemma.”

However, we found that artists still tend to think of care as a sole alternative. In a way, artists stuck at thinking of care as moral. Art is claimed to “spark a fire” in society. Hence, it is common to see artists using their art to bring about care or using their art to criticize politics.

This article contributes to the scene of art by pointing out that art has a similarity with care; that they are both ambiguous. If artists want to construct an alternative to neoliberalism based on care, it is important to know the nature of care and art, as it is being practice. Further studies are encouraged to explore the implication of such ambiguity, especially for the practice of art. If, as mentioned before, it is more productive to see where art leads, rather than predicting where art leads, a critical inquiry of understanding the ambiguity nature of art leads would be enriching our understanding of art. An inquiry to different forms of art, such as music, poetry, etc., (other than architecture) would also be helpful in improving our understanding of art.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

We would like to give our gratitude to the Bachelor Program Social Anthropology, University of Indonesia through their coursework that allowed us to collect the data used in this article and for their support. We would also like to give our gratitude to Dr. Phil. Geger Riyanto who has commented on our abstract to sharpen our argument in this article. We also say our appreciation to the two anonymous reviewers that constructively criticized this article.

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