

Call for Papers

Politics of Care in Southeast Asia: Between Intuition and Institution

Workshop & Special Issue

Guest Editors: Ferdiansyah Thajib (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) and Vilashini Somiah (Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur)

Care, as both an ethic and a practice, is increasingly central to the lives of individuals and communities worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified global awareness of how human beings rely on intricate networks that sustain life. (Gordon and Rottenberg 2024). However, despite the global attention on care, the dominant narratives surrounding it remain largely Western-centric, marginalizing the diverse histories, philosophies, and practices of care that emerge from regions outside the Global North. (Raghuram 2016) In particular, Southeast Asia, with its diverse patterns of care offers a vital counterpoint to the Western-dominated discourse.

Moving beyond individualistic positionalities, the concepts and practices of care within the region bring interdependence to the center. In this context, care is not a transactional or isolated exchange between individuals, but a deeply relational process that involves communities, ecosystems, and the material world. This framework challenges the Western-centric focus on individual agency by highlighting the interconnectedness of all actors—human and non-human alike. It recognizes the environment, land, and other actants as integral to a complex web of relationships shaped by local histories, material realities, and the socio-economic inequalities tied to political struggles for survival, justice, and autonomy.

Taking into account the dual nature of care—it can serve as both an emancipatory and restrictive force (Woodly et al. 2003)—in Southeast Asia, care operates as a resource for resistance and social transformation, while also risking the perpetuation of paternalism, domination, and structural violence. By placing interdependence at the heart of care politics, this special issue seeks to explore the spectrum of locally embedded practices, acknowledging both their transformative potential and inherent ambivalence. On the one hand, we invite contributions that engage with how care operates as both a collective survival strategy and a form of liberation. In this expanded sense, care transcends interpersonal acts of nurturing or support—it becomes a resource for mutual aid, a materially grounded anti-colonial practice, and a method of non-capitalist world-building. It functions as a non-biological kinship arrangement that fosters collective survival, a politics of liberation that challenges hegemonic structures, and a non-exploitative relation to land that resists environmental degradation and resource extraction. On the other hand, we also seek contributions that examine how the multivocality of care interacts with the region's neoliberal socio-political contexts, which are shaped by enduring inequalities and vulnerabilities, thus complicating care's emancipatory potential in the face of power imbalances.

The special issue will address care both as a social good and process, as suggested by Akkan (2021). Care, as a political ideal, is essential for human well-being and serves as a powerful tool to challenge inequities rooted in public and private divides. Drawing on existing scholarship, we engage with the growing recognition that care is both context-specific and perspective-dependent (Martin, Myers, and Viseu 2015). By focusing on Southeast Asia, we aim to uncover hidden, invisibilised, or underexplored practices of care that span multiple axes and diverse geographies.

Key Themes and Research Questions

We invite submissions that address (but are not limited to) the following questions and themes:

- **Care as a Political Act:** How is care, as both an act and a political experience, understood and expressed in Southeast Asia? In what ways does care become a means of resistance or empowerment within the region? How do care ethics offer an alternative to both the liberal emphasis on individualized, self-contained selves and the normalizing, conservative approach of communitarianism?
- **Hidden or Overlooked Acts of Care:** What are the new, hidden, or unconsidered acts of care that exist across different assemblages? How do these acts intersect with identities, geographies, and institutions, and how do they challenge traditional or dominant notions of caregiving?
- **Global Urbanism:** How do rising conservatism, developmental anxieties, and processes like gentrification reshape the politics of care in urban spaces? In what ways are care practices adapted or resisted within rapidly transforming cities, and how do they address or challenge issues such as displacement, inequality, and the commodification of human relationships?
- **Capitalist Realities:** What forms of unpaid or waged care emerge in Southeast Asia, and how do these forms either resist or conform to capitalist demands? How do economic asymmetries influence the ways care is distributed and accessed in the region?
- **Health and (In)security:** How do human and environmental crises - such as public health emergencies, natural disasters, and climate change-reconfigure notions of care? How are care practices in Southeast Asia adapted to address the shifting vulnerabilities posed by these crises, and what new forms of solidarity emerge in response to environmental and health-related challenges?
- **Power and Patriarchy:** How do care practices challenge or reinforce policies of control, particularly in relation to gendered and patriarchal power structures? How do care networks and relationships reflect broader power dynamics, and what role do care practices play in resisting or perpetuating systemic inequalities within Southeast Asian societies?
- **Carewashing:** What are the implications of “carewashing” - the appropriation of care discourses for neoliberal or exploitative purposes? How do state or corporate actors engage with care rhetoric to mask or legitimize exploitative practices, and what are the social and political consequences of such practices? How can we critically examine the ways care is instrumentalized for political or economic gains?

Scope of Contributions

This special issue is interested in unraveling the nuances of care, understanding its potential for transformation and its embedded politics within the Southeast Asian context. We welcome submissions from scholars across disciplines, including political science, sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies, ecology, linguistics, and others. Papers may focus on person/ groups coming from the following background:

- Indigenous communities, migrants, refugees, and stateless individuals
- Aging populations, persons with disabilities, and those experiencing caste-based oppression
- Queer and trans individuals
- People of color or those navigating racialized experiences
- Land and environmental activists
- Workers in the care industries
- Labor, feminist and other civil society movements activists dealing with repercussions of political conservatism, authoritarianism, or entrenched inequalities

We also encourage trans-disciplinary and trans-boundary approaches to investigate care practices across cultural and racial representations, political divides and state interventions, and public and private spheres.

Selected Readings

Akkan, B. (2020): An Egalitarian Politics of Care: Young Female Carers and the Intersectional Inequalities of Gender, Class and Age. *Feminist Theory* 21(1), pp. 47–64. <https://doi-org.lse.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1464700119850025>

Gordon N. / Rottenberg C. (2024): From Human Rights to A Politics of Care. *Humanity* 14(3), pp. 327–346.

Martin, A. / Myers, N. / Viseu, A. (2015): The Politics of Care in Technoscience. *Social Studies of Science* 45(5), pp. 625–641. <https://doi-org.lse.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0306312715602073>

Raghuram, P. (2016): Locating Care Ethics beyond the Global North. *ACME* 15(3), pp. 511–533.

Woodly, D. / Brown, R. H. / Marin, M. / Threadcraft, S. / Harris, C. P. / Syedullah, J. / Ticktin, M. (2021): The Politics of Care. *Contemporary Political Theory* 20(4), 890–925. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00515-8>

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Prospective contributors to the Special Issue are invited to send a short 300-500-word proposal and a 100-word biography to the guest editors:

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