From Human Rights to a Politics of Care

For some time now human rights have served as the global moral yardstick used to evaluate governmental and corporate policies and practices (Douzinas 2007). The widespread acceptance of human rights as *the* dominant moral framework in the national and international arena has, without doubt, propelled a range of discursive and institutional changes (Perugini and Gordon 2015). This is reflected in the way that liberal and conservative governments (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999) as well as many corporations (Schrempf-Stirling and Wettstein 2017) have integrated the language of human rights into their policies. Simultaneously, human rights have also become part of mainstream culture through their incorporation into the popular imagination: from film festivals (Tascon 2012) and children's literature (Todres and Higinbotham 2015) to celebrity branding (West 2008) and sports activism (Donnelly 2008).

Yet, at the same time as human rights have become the global moral yardstick, human rights advocacy has been undergoing a profound crisis regarding its ability to advance transformative social change. One of Israel's leading human rights lawyers has stated, for example, that if we liken the Israeli colonial regime in the Palestinian territories to a building, "then the experience of… [human rights] litigation in Israel's High Court shows that the court is willing to intervene in the interior design… But the court explicitly refuses to deal with the building's exterior walls and supports" (Sfard 2018, 443). Similar disappointment has characterized human rights organizations' and activists' endeavors to eradicate repressive political and economic structures in societies with illiberal governments (Hafner-Burton, and Tsutsui 2007) from Myanmar (Macmanus, Green and De la Cour Venning, 2015) to North Korea (Fahy 2019), or to address institutionalized racism (Lentin 2004) and economic inequality (Brinks, Dehm, and Engle 2019) within western liberal democracies. The crisis has been precipitated by the growing recognition that while it might be able to mitigate specific

social wrongs, the human rights toolkit is extremely limited when dealing with the systems and structures that engender these wrongs in the first place (Marks 2013; Hopgood 2013).

Indeed, scholarly critiques of the human rights framework have proliferated over the last few decades. One well known and trenchant critique builds on Karl Marx's (1972; 1973; 1978) claim that the whole notion of rights is an outcome of the development of capitalism and capitalistic exchange. This line of criticism highlights how human rights help constitute the subject as an atomized individual bearer of rights (Gordon, Swanson and Buttigieg 2000), which prevents the cultivation of class consciousness by eliding exploitative economic structures and thus helps sustain capitalist relations (Baxter 1989; Douzinas 2000; Marks 2011). Scholars from within the Marxist tradition, moreover, have also traced the ways that human rights have been mobilized to advance imperial and neo-imperial objectives, showing how human rights have helped to justify recourse to sanctions, embargos, and different forms of humanitarian intervention aimed at maintaining neo-imperial control and influence (Bricmont 2007; Douzinas 2007; Nanopoulos 2020; Rieff 1999). Underscoring the relevance of the Marxist critique to the neoliberal era, Jessica Whyte (2019), for instance, has described how human rights became a moral mouthpiece for neoliberals from Friedrich Hayek to Milton Friedman, and how they have been used to justify privatization, deregulation and attacks on the social safety net. In a similar vein, human rights have been perceived as a key ingredient in advancing "progressive neoliberalism"—to use Nancy Fraser's (2016, 2019) phrase—which emphasizes recognition and different forms of identity politics at the expense of the redistribution of wealth and power.[1]

Incorporating a postcolonial perspective, still other critics (Samson 2020) have documented how human rights have helped reproduce colonial and racialized power relations. In what has become a classic article within human rights literature, Mutua Makau (2001) demonstrates how human rights NGOs ultimately cast the abused populations in the

global south as victims, the perpetrators as savages, and human rights practitioners from the global north as saviors. Drawing on this line of thinking, in the past decade feminist scholars have documented how governments alongside right-wing ideologues have mobilized women's (human) rights to advance racist and Islamophobic political projects in a range of European countries (Farris 2017), while also showing how women's rights have been used to justify wars and military occupation in the international arena (Hopgood 2013). The argument, it should be stressed, is not that human rights discourse is being perverted, but rather that the epistemological and normative underpinnings of this discourse, in effect, lend themselves to different modes of domination (Perugini and Gordon 2015).

Adding yet another dimension to the critiques, governmentality theorists have claimed that human rights are not merely a normative framework embraced by NGOs and other nonstate actors but are also employed by the state to buttress the management of the inhabitants within its domain by shaping the comportment of the populations and the individuals it administers (Rathore and Cistelecan 2011; Sokhi-Bulley 2011). Human rights, as governmentality critics forcibly demonstrate (Brown and Halley 2002; Brown 2011), are not just an inventory of entitlements assigned to subjects but are mechanisms used to constitute as well as regulate the human subject.

Thus, while the critics of human rights often come from different theoretical traditions, the debate among them is not so much about whether human rights have been complicit in enhancing different forms of violence, oppression or the exacerbation of social inequality—there is widespread consensus among critical scholars that they have—but, rather, whether human rights can still be mobilized to advance emancipatory projects (Golder 2014). Twenty years ago, David Kennedy (2002) already concluded that human rights have for too long dominated the imaginative space of emancipation while marginalizing other potential discourses. But Kennedy and most other human rights critics have failed to offer a

more compelling moral and political discourse that could potentially replace the hegemony of the human rights regime. And while Marx and some Marxist and abolitionist thinkers have indeed moved beyond critique to offer an alternative political framework as well as concrete strategies for overcoming capitalist social relations—and our claims below are informed by some of their insights—this paper's objective is to gesture towards a different alternative, one based on a politics of care.

In what follows, then, we briefly examine responses to Covid-19, arguing that the pandemic exposed, with great clarity, the extremely limited capacity of human rights not only to identify and confront the source of violations but also to provide effective guidelines for transformative social change. We further claim that the pandemic dramatically highlighted in arguably unprecedented ways that the so-called "subject of human rights"—imagined as either independent or dependent—is woefully inadequate, throwing into sharp relief that *interdependency* is constitutive of the human condition and indeed of all life on the planet, human and non-human alike. We accordingly maintain that moving from a conception of the human as either independent or dependent to one in which human beings are conceived as inextricably interdependent enables a much more capacious understanding of justice and opens up new avenues for mobilizing collective social change as well as for imagining future political horizons.

In search of an alternative discourse where the human condition of interdependence is center-staged, we turn to the literature on care. We claim, however, that even as the feminist ethics of care literature is very critical of the liberal framework, it still, in some ways, remains trapped within the liberal imagination, and this is most clearly seen in how the concept of interdependence, while incessantly invoked, is often assumed to be self-evident and consequently left undertheorized. Using Audre Lorde's and then Judith Butler's insights to unmoor interdependency from the liberal subject, we go on to argue that interdependency

constitutes the condition of possibility of subject formation and individuation. This conception of interdependency, in turn, transforms our understanding of care.

This enables us to move beyond much of the "care crisis" literature—which mainly highlights current challenges to child and elderly care due, in part, to the demise of the welfare state (for a much broader perspective see Dowling 2020)—to conclude that the rising inequality across the globe, endless war, the refugee crisis, and immanent environmental catastrophe are all distinct manifestations of the crisis of care. Indeed, drawing on the *Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al 2020),[2] we argue that the current "reign of carelessness" informing the political and economic spheres is the result of histories of colonial, imperialist, misogynist and white supremacist violence compounded by now decades of intensified neoliberal policies and the reduction of ever more domains of our lives to a market logic. Thus, precisely at a time when dystopian visions of the future are flourishing, it is vital to offer a collaborative utopian counter-narrative for the 21st century. Such a move allows us to gesture towards an alternative discourse and form of activism, one based, as we detail below, on a politics of care that recognizes interdependency as constitutive of all life. We accordingly suggest that the politics of care we outline here differs from an ethics of care as well as the politics of care conceived within this conceptual school, since it asks after the material, social, and affective conditions of possibility that would facilitate the creation of a society whose organizing principle at every level is care, while also providing some key guidelines for achieving such changes.

Lessons from the Pandemic

When the pandemic hit, it was like an earthquake; one could even say that Covid-19 was unprecedented in the ways that it uncovered so quickly and clearly the reigning politics of carelessness (Gordon and Green 2021). Many of the historic crimes that governments have

perpetuated against their own populations were exposed, revealing how, through decades of neoliberal and neo-colonial policies (Finley 2021), the longevity and life chances of millions of people across the globe have been profoundly curtailed. The impact of neoliberal policies on healthcare, livelihood, working conditions, food security, shelter, and education—particularly as they affected racialized and marginalized groups, not least migrants—became tragically apparent (Elver and Shapiro 2021; Guadagno 2020). Even as the pandemic has had a devastating impact on human life and has highlighted a number of crucial and connected issues around how inequality and injustice have been produced and sustained across the globe, for the purpose of this paper we focus on the global north.

To be sure, human rights organizations in the global north have documented many of the violations emanating from government policies in the pandemic's wake (e.g., Amnesty International, No Date, 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020, 2021; Physicians for Human Rights No DateA). They have claimed that in several countries restrictions on movement were disproportionate to the health threat, and that the crisis was often exploited to expand digital surveillance of citizens and to crack down on peaceful assembly and free speech. Rights group have also underscored the pandemic's disparate effect on older people and people with disabilities, as well as on inmates and migrants in detention centers. In addition, they have chronicled the increase in gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence against women and girls, while also expressing concern that some of the children who lost access to education are at greater risk of falling behind their peers. Moreover, they have flagged the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on different segments of the population, highlighted the pandemic's effect on certain sectors in which employees were unable to work, emphasizing, for instance, the need for guaranteed and adequate paid sick and family leave.

On the one hand, then, the pandemic—an event that forced national governments to take dramatic steps, such as immediate country-wide lockdowns—has pushed rights groups to examine economic and social rights much more closely than in the past, particularly those of certain marginalized groups. On the other hand, even as they have attempted to speak to such violations, the leading human rights organizations in the global north are "inevitably entangled with neoliberal legality" (Kapczynski 2019, 82), and have fallen short of addressing the wider structural issues that have produced systemic violations in the first place. And while some critical scholars suggest that human rights might "also have more radical potential if we consider aspects of the movement further from its mainstream" (Kapczynski 2019, 80), we maintain that the subject at the heart of the human rights project as well as certain liberal assumptions underpinning this project would ultimately preclude the introduction of transformative and deep-seated structural changes. Indeed, the responses of rights NGOs to the pandemic have underscored with particular force that human rights discourse and activism are unable to alleviate social inequality and injustices both within the state and among states (Salomon 2011). Part of the reason for this, as scholars have already shown, is that in order to begin to adequately address social and economic inequality, we need an analysis of the structural causes of the vastly unequal distribution of wealth and income. As Brinks, Dehm, and Engle (2019, 363) have pointed out, economic inequality "requires interrogating the neoclassical economic and neoliberal paradigms for producing growth." Such an analysis would, in turn, lead to a different set of conclusions regarding how to generate change, such as an immediate end to austerity, the eradication of sovereign debt, much higher taxation on wealth and elevated income, and, crucially, instituting new forms of publicly engaged and more democratic governance, including of the modes of production.

These kinds of analyses and solutions are all, however, beyond the purview of human rights. Human Rights Watch (HRW), for instance, calls on investing in "public healthcare

systems so that they are accessible and affordable to everyone without discrimination, including marginalized groups" (Human Rights Watch 2021), but it does not say how this can be achieved nor does it offer any insight into why we are witnessing such inequalities. This at a time when 28 million people in the United States—the wealthiest country in the world—do not have medical insurance and nearly a third of the population—100 million people—have difficulty affording payments for treatment even though they are insured, as HRW already noted in its 2020 pandemic report. Not only does HRW lack the toolkit that could offer solutions to these violations, but so long as it uses human rights and thus ultimately discrimination as its reference the organization cannot offer a compelling analysis to explain why we are witnessing such egregious violations.

Furthermore, while HRW (2021, emphasis added) has called on governments to support "efforts at the WTO to *temporarily* waive some provisions in the TRIPS Agreement as they relate to Covid-19 vaccine development," Physicians for Human Rights USA failed to publicly support waiving corporate patent rights in order to ramp up universal inoculation. It has also failed to promote a universal public health care system in the United States (Physicians for Human Rights, No DateB). As Physician for Human Rights' publications on the pandemic demonstrate, the organization has refrained from challenging or even analyzing the economic order that has helped to engender the disparities in health, limiting its analysis to issues relating to discrimination. The notion of *free* underlying its recommendation that governments ensure free and fair distribution of vaccines notably fails to include any critique of the fact that large pharmaceuticals companies continue to enjoy immense profits from patent rights, which were developed in large part through research funded by tax payers' money (Frank, Dach, and Lurie 2021), and that governments subsequently need to purchase the vaccine, again from tax payers' money, in order distribute them "for free" to the

population. The call to revoke vaccine patents tout court, crucially, is not something that the rights group has been willing to adopt.

Given that discrimination is the key framework through which human rights analyze and evaluate the world, the actual sources of social injustices, or the "root causes," as Susan Marks (2011) calls them, are ultimately concealed. Concurrently, the recommendations offered are both restricted—since they address the symptom not the source—and ultimately fantastical, since they do not provide guidelines about *how* such a goal can be achieved. Even the Center for Economic and Social Rights (2020), which calls for the introduction of universal public health care and appears to be aware of the structural drivers of inequalities, provides recommendations on forms of progressive taxation that ultimately will do very little to address the concentration of wealth and growing inequalities across the globe (for a much more robust critique and the kinds of taxation needed see Pikkety 2020).[3] While we have already mentioned the many reasons for why human rights are unable to advance an emancipatory horizon at this historical juncture, the notion of (negative) freedom underlying the subject of human rights, namely a subject who is also conceived of as unencumbered and autonomous, is also a key and fundamental shortcoming informing this imaginary.

The Subject of Human Rights

The events since March 2020 have thrown into sharp relief not only the illusion of the autonomous subject but also—and more crucially—that interdependency is constitutive of the human condition and indeed all life on the planet, human and non-human alike. We will not rehearse all of the criticisms involving the abstract nature of the liberal subject or the limited conception of freedom this notion of subjectivity advances here. Rather, what is most important for our argument is how the liberal subject is inevitably positioned as *either* independent or dependent, where independence has historically been identified with

autonomy, action, rational reasoning and has been gendered and racialized as white and male. By contrast, dependency has been linked to emotive, feminized (Brown 1995; Elshtain 1995; Pateman 1988) and racialized behaviour (Mills 2008), and associated with childhood (Viterbo 2012), women (Bunch 1990) the poor (Macpherson 1962) as well as the frailty that comes with old age (Segal 2013). Within this binary framework, which is part and parcel of the liberal imagination, independence is clearly coded as good and the normative ideal, while dependency is coded as lacking in full human potential and therefore negative. Any manifestation of dependency, particularly among adults, has, in other words, not only been associated with lack of liberty but has also been feminized, racialized and pathologized.

The subject of human rights is imagined and constituted in a similar fashion. Even though contemporary human rights discourse might not perform the same overtly gendered, racial and class exclusions as eighteenth and nineteenth century liberal political thought, human rights reports continue to assume and constitute the ideal subject as an abstract and autonomous individual. Indeed, the human rights lens portrays the subject as *either* dependent or independent, clearly shaping the conception of emancipation as a move from dependency to independence. While this bifurcation is most apparent in how the 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child imagines the relation between adults and children (Viterbo 2021), it, in effect, informs all human rights conventions and indeed human rights work. Independent subjects are perceived as fully human and most able to enjoy an extensive inventory of rights, whereas those subjects deemed dependent are construed as in need of guidance and more protections to fulfil their potential. Moreover, within the current human rights imaginary, human rights experts are perceived as independent while the subjects of abuse are envisaged and portrayed as constrained, and consequently in need of emancipation (Makau 2001). By presupposing independence as the normative ideal and dependence as its opposite, human rights—like liberal and neoliberal discourses—disavow the inexorable interdependence of all

human beings at *every stage of life* and consequently perpetuates a vision of justice based on the individualized subject and individual freedom. In this way, human rights discourse not only can and does dovetail with neoliberalism—providing it with a moral valence (Whyte 2019)—but also helps to create and reify a vision of emancipation that is individualized, fundamentally heteronomous, and ultimately lacks a sense of the commons, or a conceptual framework for addressing how human and non-human life depend on one another—always and everywhere—for their very survival.

On the one hand, then, the politics of human rights and the human rights discourse neither offer the necessary tools nor the vocabulary to either highlight systemic violence or bring about the changes required to ensure human and non-human flourishing in the 21st century. On the other hand, rights discourse has managed—due, we believe, to its imbrication in and with neoliberalism—to overshadow and side-line alternative discourses that confront structural violence and the neoliberal consensus. It is precisely in this context that we argue that the dominant human rights discourse should be replaced with a discourse and politics of care. The first step in making this discursive and political shift, however, is by recognizing and avowing human beings' interdependence.

From rights to interdependence

Again, one of the key issues the pandemic has made very clear is how we are "all formed, albeit in diverse and uneven ways, through and by our interdependencies" (Chatzidakis et al 2020)—and not just in infancy, childhood, infirmity or old age. This was concretized when the majority of the population was instructed to remain at home in many countries, while workers deemed essential for society's day-to-day functioning were required to carry on. These workers included not only medical staff but also supermarket stackers, cleaners, transport workers, and those caring for the elderly and the disabled. It was in this and other

ways that the pandemic and the imposed lockdowns laid bare the numerous ways in which our lives and very survival depend upon not only a whole slew of other people but on functioning infrastructures and diverse material and affective networks—realities that are most often rendered invisible in non-pandemic time because they are simply taken for granted.

Indeed, these extraordinary lockdowns brought home the fact that even the young healthy and ostensibly independent (and even wealthy) adults among us rely on a range of others and services in order to survive. This historic—and devastating—lesson of interdependency has also helped to underscore both how empirically and theoretically impoverished the notion of the individualized subject of human rights is, as well as the repercussions that this notion of subjecthood has had on freedom and perceptions of justice more generally. As we stated above—and drawing on the Care Collective's *Care Manifesto*—the first and perhaps most fundamental step in moving away from the restrictions embedded in the human rights discourse is by avowing *interdependence* as an inexorable human condition and acknowledging that independence is a fiction. This recognition is where a *politics* of care begins, and a political project organized around a commitment to providing for human and non-human needs on a planetary scale emerges.

This recognition, and the value ascribed to interdependence as opposed to independence has been a fundamental element of the feminist care literature from its beginnings (Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989). Moreover, the notion that human beings are fundamentally "relational and interdependent" has been repeated time and again in the past four decades in this scholarship (for an overview see Engster and Hamington 2015; Urban and Ward 2020) Yet, surprisingly, the notion of interdependence has not been adequately theorized by care scholars, with many care ethicists invoking the term to connote concrete

dependency relationships between individuals, as a synonym for relationality, or, even more surprisingly, as if the term were self-evident.

Eva Kittay (1999, 77), for instance, imagines interdependency as a relation of dependency between individuals, stating that an ethics of care must start with "persons connected through relationships of dependency, and then take the moral commitments needed for such relationships as prior to all subsequent moral relationships." Virginia Held (2006, 13-14) frames interdependence as emerging from the recognition that: "Every person starts out as a child dependent on those providing us care, and we remain interdependent with others in thoroughly fundamental ways throughout our lives." Joan Tronto, who is most often credited with pushing the feminist ethics of care debate beyond the inter-personal moral realm into the political one, characterizes interdependence in her groundbreaking book *Moral Boundaries* as an interplay between autonomy and dependency. She writes (1993, 162) that, "Since people are sometimes autonomous, sometimes dependent, sometimes providing care for those who are dependent, humans are best described as interdependent. Thinking of people as interdependent allows us to understand both autonomous and involved elements of human life." In *Caring Democracy*, published two decades later, she notes (2013, 164) in passing that "being interdependent does not deny people freedom, though being dependent may do so, and being inside a hierarchical order may do so as well." Other political scientists who engage critically with the ethics of care are similarly vague. Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998) and Daniel Engster (2007, 2015) state that interdependence is vital for their work, but they do not offer any real or substantive conceptualizations of the term. In fact, Sevenhuijsen does not define it at all in her *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*, while Daniel Engster simply claims that interdependency emerges from the individual recognition of dependency "upon one another for care, and [this] supports a theory of community and politics resting upon caring relationships (Engster 2007, 99).[4]

The fact that one of the most important terms informing the care literature is left fuzzy points, we believe, to the ambivalent relationship that many care scholars ultimately have to liberal thought. Care theorists do reject the notion that dependency is in some sense a lack of human fulfillment or potential, insisting that relations of dependency are part and parcel of the human condition and that it is precisely the reality of human dependency that obligates us, morally, to care for others. Moreover, most care theorists underscore that human dependency precedes any sense of autonomy, since we are all born dependent on caregivers. Yet, despite their formidable critique of fundamental liberal assumptions, a trace of the liberal subject continues to persist in their thought. This trace is perhaps best seen in the work of care scholars who attempt to incorporate human rights within the politics of care framework.

In a paper entitled “Reconceiving Rights as Relationship,” Jennifer Nedelsky (1993), for instance, highlights the significance of interdependence as a “central fact of political life,” arguing that the “collective is a source of autonomy” and not only “a threat to it.” She claims that the individualized subject “fails to account for the ways in which our essential humanity is neither possible nor comprehensible without the network of relationships of which it is a part” and that the condition of possibility of autonomy is the relationship. She writes:

> Mediating conflict is the focus [of conventional liberal rights theories], not mutual self-creation and sustenance. The selves to be protected by rights are seen as essentially separate and not creatures whose interests, needs, and capacities routinely intertwine. Thus one of the reasons women have always fit so poorly into the framework of liberal theory is that it becomes obviously awkward to think of women’s relation to their children as essentially one of competing interests to be mediated by rights (1993 12).

Nedelsky's incisive critique of the autonomous liberal subject is well taken, but her objective is ultimately to incorporate rights within a care framework. Like many care theorists, she sees the liberal framework as profoundly insufficient and underscores the relational aspects of human life, invoking an ethics of care as a crucial supplement to the liberal rights framework. "The notion of rights," she writes, "can be rescued from its historical association with individualistic theory and practice. Human beings are both essentially individual and essentially social creatures. The liberal tradition has been not so much wrong as seriously and dangerously one-sided in its emphasis" (1993 13). Nedelsky therefore recommends that we understand the very concept of rights in terms of relationship: "In brief, what rights in fact do and have always done is construct relationships—of power, of responsibility, of trust, of obligation," she says, concluding that we need to understand "rights as relationship."

This idea has been picked up by several care scholars who attempt to find a way of maintaining some conception of human rights within an ethics of care. Fiona Robinson, for example, citing Hilary Charlesworth, argues that "women's experiences and concerns are not easily translated into the narrow, individualistic language of rights" and advocates instead for a feminist reworking of the concept of rights that would have "as its starting point a social or relational moral ontology based on the belief that human beings exist and live their lives in the context of patterns of relationship, rather than as isolated, atomistic individuals" (Robinson 2003, 174). Thus, following Nedelsky, she argues that while basic human and legal rights are crucial, the moral and transformative power of rights is most effective when rights are understood as "relational" and located within the wider context of care (Robinson 2003, 11). In a similar vein, Virginia Held suggests that care scholars should not abandon the rights frameworks; rather she insists that rights arguments do not serve well "for the full

range of moral and political concerns" (Held, 2006, 145). The ambivalence towards rights is thus manifest in these scholars' attempt to reconcile them with the care framework.

Even though we agree with the problematics raised by these scholars in relation to the subject of human rights, the solutions they offer ultimately do not resolve the core issue. They ultimately fail to take into account the inextricable and unavoidable link between rights and the autonomous subject, and this failure is connected, we believe, to the under theorization of interdependency, which is, in turn, clearly linked to the way in which these care theorists understand subject formation. Political scientists who engage the ethics of care and who argue for a political notion of care understand the subject as dependent and, importantly, as part of a wider social context; this subject, moreover, is always in relation with others. Nonetheless, in many crucial ways, the subject still exists as an abstraction before these relations. In their writing, there is still a tendency to understand the subject as a pre-social entity dependent on concrete others, and this dependent subject is in need of care, which leads to moral and political obligations. The starting point is precisely the dependent self, revealing that the liberal bifurcation between dependent and independent still haunts their descriptions of the human condition. This is precisely how Tronto (1993, 162) describes the human subject in a passage cited above: "Since people are sometimes autonomous, sometimes dependent, sometimes providing care for those who are dependent, humans are best described as interdependent."

Furthermore, the attempt to retain the notion of rights within this framework of dependency and care—and without adequately theorizing interdependence—means that the notion of the subject as a bearer of rights and as someone who must negotiate relations of power has not been completely abandoned. The notion of rights as relationship assumes, in other words, that there is a subject prior to these relationships, and that this subject enters into relationships, which are structured by rights. Nedelsky and Robinson thus conceive rights—

even relational rights—as shields against violations, whilst failing to take—or inadequately taking—into account that rights do not necessarily "decrease the overall power and reach of the state nor do they enhance the collective power of the citizenry to determine the contours and content of social, economic, and political justice. This is above all because power does not only come in sovereign or juridical form and because rights are not just defenses against social and political power but are, as an aspect of governmentality, a crucial aspect of power's aperture" (Brown 2004, 459). Thus, for Wendy Brown, drawing on Michel Foucault, the notion of rights as structuring relations helps explain how subjects are constituted in the first place, while for Nedelsky they structure relations among pre-existing subjects.

In sum, even as feminist care scholars criticize the liberal conception of the subject of human rights (e.g., Tronto 1993; Held 2006, Robinson 2011), the human subject still serves as their starting point. The failure to move beyond the liberal subject within the care scholarship is, we suggest, related to the desire to construct an ethics or politics based on concrete moral foundations, namely, the moral obligation and responsibilities that emerge from human dependency and the need to give and receive care.[5] Thus, although we build on the work of care scholars who have center-staged interdependency as a component of the human condition, we aim to conceptualize a notion of interdependency that is neither based in the human subject nor on a notion of care that is reducible to a human disposition, activity or attribute.

Importantly, even among political theorists who discuss processes of subject formation (Woodly et al 2021) and those within recent abolitionist feminist literature who has taken up care as an analytic category of critique and as a framework for reimagining political alternatives to the carceral state (more on this below) (Medel 2017; Chua 2020), interdependency is also assumed as a key category but is neither systematically explained nor analyzed. Hence, in the next section, we draw on the ethics of care and care abolitionist

literature, while arguing that the subject is produced through and shaped by a series of relations among human and non-human organisms. Once theorized more robustly, interdependency highlights not only how human beings are always dependent on a range of human and non-human others throughout their lives in order to engage meaningfully as well as ethically in the world (as care scholars emphasize), but also that the notion of the subject itself is a product of and can only emerge as part of interdependent relations and structures. The subject's very intelligibility and thus viability are dependent on an entire network of social relations, norms, and material conditions that precede its very emergence. This theorization, we posit, helps overcome the problematics of the liberal subject and helps to distinguish between our conception of a politics of care and those of other scholars.

Theorizing Interdependency

One of the reasons that feminist scholars of care ethics have assumed that interdependence is self-evident is that they tend to focus on "caring for," which includes the physical aspects of hands-on caretaking and "caring about," which describes our emotional investment in and attachment to others. Thus, interdependence is often invoked as a stand in for inter-personal dependencies—often with maternal care as the exemplar. By contrast, we claim that interdependency needs to be foregrounded as constitutive of individuation and subjectivity, while care needs to be reframed and understood as the very possibility of cultivating any kind of society in which all human and non-human life can thrive. This is precisely how we understand Audre Lorde's claim (1984, 74 italics added) in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," where she states that interdependency "between women is the way to a freedom which *allows the I to be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is the difference between the passive 'be' and the active 'being'." Interdependency, in this sense, is the condition of possibility of all subjects because any

"active being" is always already formed through interdependence. Simply put, it is impossible to imagine any form of human agency that is not interdependent, because our ability to act in the world depends upon a whole host of "others," both human and non-human.

Accordingly, the concept of interdependency that we offer here is informed by Joan Tronto's notion of "caring with"—"a democratic process by which citizens are able to care *with* their fellow citizens" (2013, 13), but it is rerouted through Lorde's intervention and Judith Butler's work on precariousness (2006) and non-violence (2021), since it understands interdependency as a social and economic condition that precedes as well as underpins our ability to sustain ourselves as individuated subjects in the world. Care, then, is understood capaciously and inextricable from interdependency, encompassing not only a practice of caring for and with others, namely, a form of caring for human and non-human life and the planet, but also the material infrastructure that renders life and thus caretaking possible (Baraitser 2017). The objective of a politics of care is to help constitute and foster a social capacity to care for, about, and with others, an orientation toward others and the non-human world, as well as the introduction of a new political discourse.

In her recent work on non-violence, Judith Butler (2021) underscores how the fiction of the independent subject emerges following a complex, on-going social process of individuation. We are all, she argues, born into radical dependency that, in effect, precedes our emergence as subjects and which cannot be escaped by way of time, even as the contours of this dependency shift as we age. Dependency is not then a disposition, or a relation to intimate others or even a capacity, but rather a condition (that is also always contextual and historical) and "a relationship to what is outside, to a world of others, of food, of care and shelter, the very material condition of life and persistence" (Butler 2016, 2004). Individuation, which produces the illusion of independence, is a continuous process that

occurs from within this radical dependency and takes place through a certain disavowal of our inexorable condition of dependency. Indeed, the fantasy of the self-sufficient and autonomous individual of liberal and neoliberal societies is produced through a particularly violent repudiation and negation of this dependency.

Therefore, the recognition of this all-pervading dependency that *precedes the formation of the subject* underscores that we are all, always and everywhere, interdependent. It also helps decenter the human subject through its critique of the liberal notion that subjects serve as the constitutive source of all social relations (a position held by several care scholars cited above). Drawing on disability studies, Butler insists that no one ever actually stands on one's own; throughout our lives we rely on "social and material structures and on the environment" that make life possible (2021, 41). Yet, even as everyone is radically dependent on social relations and infrastructures in order to sustain life, exposure to injury, violence and death is uneven. The unequal distribution of human precariousness—which Butler calls precarity—is socially produced by existing relations of power.

Interdependence, then, goes well beyond relations of dependence with concrete others or even social networks and includes both material infrastructures and the norms that make social life possible in the first place. Moreover, it is not that subjects are born dependent and require care, but rather that subjecthood itself is made possible through a prior set of interdependent relations. While this can readily be seen in the formation of the child or the disabled person where their subjecthood is socially constituted and becomes legible through a series of avowed relations of dependency, it is also true of every subject even when dependency is disavowed. Individuation and any sense of autonomy, in other words, are produced either by the avowal or, what is more common, particularly in contemporary society, a violent disavowal of a prior dependency.[6]

While Butler argues for an ethics of non-violence based on a “radical equality of grievability” where all lives are treated as equally valuable and thus grievable, we believe that an emancipatory *politics* is best cultivated through a discourse of care. If liberalism, human rights discourse, and indeed the care scholars cited above all tend to assume a preexisting subject who serves as the source of social relations, the politics of care we aim to advance begins with the assumption that the subject is always already constituted through numerous interdependencies, a position that decenters the human subject (see also Braidotti 2013, 2019) and by so doing center-stages the need for *care* of the human *and non-human* alike (De la Bellacasa 2017; Chatzidakis et al 2020).[7] In contrast to human rights’ legalistic approach that commences from—and then aims to expand—primarily individual freedoms, a politics of care provides us with a profound sense of our humanness as constructed through its embeddedness in a world that is inescapably interdependent. During Covid, as we outline above, there was increased awareness of the different ways in which human beings are dependent on numerous networks, animate and inanimate, that sustain life everywhere. It is the avowal of this dependency and therefore of interdependency, understood in a capacious sense, that can serve not only to reconfigure the way we perceive the subject, but to revitalize democracy and reorient our notion of freedom by attempting to address the conditions of possibility that would make care ever more possible, while concurrently helping to redirect and minimize human aggression.

This is not a simple and all-encompassing affirmation of interdependency, however. Rather, it is a political call for our collective effort to forge the “best form of interdependency, the one that most clearly embodies the ideals of radical equality” (Butler 2023, 83). Human beings’ relationship to the environment as well as contemporary employer-employee relations become increasingly informed by destructive and exploitative forms of interdependency that urgently need to be undone. We suggest that certain forms of

interdependency need to be dismantled while others enhancing radical equality need to be developed, cultivated and nourished as we work towards a different and better future in which a politics of care is mobilized at each and every scale of life.

Caring Futures

A politics of care moves away from Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971) which assumes the existence of an unencumbered autonomous subject behind a veil of ignorance and follows the Marxist and socialist traditions by assuming that the most fundamental form of existence is informed by social and material relations. It also moves beyond most of the "care crisis" literature (e.g., Fraser 2016) which conceives of care in more limited terms, namely as the retrenchment of the services traditionally offered by women and/or the welfare state and/or the lack of solutions for child and elderly care. A politics of care is much more extensive and aligns more with Deva Woodly et al (2021, 891), who maintain that a politics of care must aim to unmake racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and the colonial present.

Moreover, within a politics of care imaginary, the liberal notion of freedom as lack of external intervention is an oxymoron because it is based on the disavowal of our on-going dependencies. In this sense, a politics of care defies the human rights framework. It not only abandons the individualized and independent subject of human rights, but also exposes the fallacy of the way human rights imagine civil and political rights—like freedom of movement, freedom to assemble, and the right not to be tortured—as if people can enjoy these rights so long as they are not encumbered by external intervention, most notably state intervention (Donnelly 2013). A politics of care conceives freedom in a radically different way: as dependent not just on care work but on infrastructures that make caring possible, both of which are necessarily manifestations of external intervention. Indeed, even the most

stereotypical example of care work, the mother caring for her newborn child, assumes the prior existence of infrastructures that enable that mother to care for her child in the first place and thus undermines the precedence some care scholars attribute to the caring subject. The challenge for an emancipatory project is to create and maintain the conditions that make possible and enhance rather than destroy the intricate and inescapable webs of interdependencies that render each and every life possible, while simultaneously resisting and dismantling forms of interdependency that are exploitative and destructive. In short, for a politics of care, the central and urgent question is about the material, social, cultural and psychic conditions that would make caring for, about, and with ever more viable.

We are, however, acutely aware that care, like human rights, has been appropriated for projects of domination (Perugini and Gordon 2020), as when migrant children were separated from their parents at borders or holding facilities because they were considered vulnerable and in need of special care and protection (Viterbo 2021). The invocation of the rights of and care for the child in this instance advance social wrongs but are rationalized precisely because our political institutions presuppose a pre-existing dependent subject in need of care. In a similar vein, scholars in Science and Technology Studies (Martin, Myers and Viseu 2015) have underscored “care's darker side,” revealing how “practices of care are always shot through with asymmetrical power relations,” and how care—not least in colonial regimes—can become a paternalistic means of governance. Concurrently, scholars investigating corporate behavior (Chatzidakis and Littler 2022) have shown how “care-washing” is being used for branding purposes and to advance corporate financial goals.

There is, to be sure, no guarantee against the darker usages of care, but in contrast to human rights, the politics of care we advocate has no pretensions to having some kind of universal recipe for resolving every social ill precisely because subjecthood is constituted through a series of contextual interdependent relations. Migrant children are constituted as

migrant children through their interdependent relations to other subjects, physical places, infrastructures, and social norms, and all these must be taken into account when thinking how to address their plight. Again, unlike human rights, attention to matters of care remain—and must remain—open-ended and forms of action must always be determined by the particular context (De la Bellaca 2011).

Consequently, actions and policies aimed at fighting inequality and injustice cannot and should not emanate from individual rights or from a conception of a pre-existing dependent subject, but must ask after the material, social, and psychic conditions that will enable and facilitate the creation of subjects, communities and a world where care and caretaking can flourish. The analysis and the guidelines that would have to be developed would be informed by the understanding that relations among human subjects and other life forms are interdependent in myriad direct and indirect ways, and that we must not only avow these interdependencies, but cultivate forms of interdependency that enhance an "egalitarian approach to the preservation of life" (Butler 2020, 61) and the thriving of the planet.

Once acknowledging and fostering interdependency are cast as the condition of possibility of emancipation, and care is understood as emancipation's overarching normative frame, then a different kind of political horizon and different forms of political, social and economic critique and action become not only possible but necessary. Simultaneously, it is vital to keep in mind that caring time, as Lisa Baraitser (2017) insists, is very different from neoliberal time. The first is slow, focused, attentive and often repetitive; the second is accelerated and extensive. Therefore, a politics of care is a *protracted* world-making project that is participatory and similar to abolitionist politics calls for a "radical reconfiguration of current arrangements of economic and social life towards meaningful freedom" (Chua 2020, 130).

Mobilizing and advocating a politics of care crucially challenges the focus on homo sapiens and underscores that care for the non-human and for the world cannot be separated from our own survival or ability to thrive. This too is very different from the human rights framework as well as much of the care literature.[8] Yet, at the same time, specific caring toolkits will have to be developed according to the historical, political and geographical context of particular communities, cultivating the conditions that facilitate care from the inter-personal to the planetary.

Following the Care Collective's (Chatzidakis et al, 2020) use of scales, a politics of care would need to be developed from the global dimension, where the climate crisis and economies that put profit over people are wreaking planetary devastation, scaling down as it were through to careless states, communities, and our interpersonal intimacies. In every dimension or scale, caring forms of interdependency need to be developed and nourished to counter our contemporary condition of carelessness. Such a scalar structure, as the Care Collective stresses, helps to highlight how our capacities to care can only be cultivated and realized by avowing the inextricable interconnections among scales.

The Care Manifesto (Chatzidakis et al, 2020) begins its vision of caring alternatives from the most intimate aspects of our lives—kinship. They maintain that we need to reimagine the limits of familial care to embrace more "promiscuous" models of kinship, where caring interdependencies among people who may or may not have blood relationships are nurtured. In the 1960s and 1970s, such alternative forms of kinship were developed by the Black Panthers (Alondra 2011) and Young Lords (Fernández 2020) through the introduction of survival programs, including clothing and food drives and the introduction of free community health clinics, which were perceived both as forms of defense against domestic warfare, but also as building blocks for creating a more just society. These forms of communal kinship were further articulated by gay liberation healthcare initiatives in reaction

to the AIDS epidemic where the ACT UP activist Douglas Crimp (1987) highlighted the notion of promiscuous kinship, which he understood not in the sense of "casual" or "indifferent," but to describe the experimental ways that gay men were intimate with and cared for each other during the AIDS epidemic. These experimental intimacies ultimately served as the basis for the safer sex initiatives and went on to save many lives. More recently, Orisanmi Burton (2021) describes forms of intergenerational kinship that Black men perform within and beyond US prisons, underscoring the different kinds of care work they have been carrying out.

In our current conjuncture, promiscuous kinship that enables numerous forms of care challenges the neoliberal defunding and undermining of care as well as forms of exploitative and destructive interdependencies. Writing within disability and queer studies, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), for instance, uses the term "care webs" to describe how instances of "promiscuous care" manifest themselves, pointing out that within certain communities these webs of caring interdependencies have become an integral part of life. Ultimately, as the *Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al, 2020, 42) underscores, promiscuous care means establishing *more* forms of caring interdependencies in ways that remain experimental and extensive by current standards. It means multiplying who we care for and how.

Moving to the level of community, the Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al, 2020, 49) argues that the only way to cultivate and maintain caring communities is by amplifying the spaces that are public, shared and co-operative. Communities that care prioritize *the commons* and collective *public spaces,* which constitute a political sphere in the Arendtian (Arendt 2013) sense of term; these kinds of public spaces encourage different forms of acting in concert while creating and sharing infrastructures. Building and utilizing public spaces of this sort, in turn, reverses neoliberalism's compulsion to individualize and privatize everything

and could readily be translated into the creation of free or inexpensive public transport and public lending facilities—including local libraries of tools, equipment, and clothes (Chatzidakis et al, 2020, 53). It also entails putting an end to the costly and damaging outsourcing of care (Fraser 2016) and other basic services by bringing them back into the public sector and communities. In short, only those communities that have adequate resources, are co-produced, and that facilitate people's ability to connect, to deliberate and to debate with one another, as well as to support each other's needs can be considered caring and participate in what Deva Woodly (2022) has called "healing justice."

China Medel describes the emergence of precisely such a caring community, one which emerged against all odds in an encampment set up by the organization No More Deaths on the Mexico-US border. Medel (2017, 874) demonstrates how the all-volunteer organization "actively works against the neoliberal process of strategic abandonment, in which governing bodies carefully eschew responsibility for a minoritized social group deemed valueless by a logic of racialized criminalization." This group of abolitionist care workers use direct action to introduce alternative forms of recognition and inclusion by developing novel practices of interdependency that are radically different from the modes of capture, imprisonment, and punishment used by the carceral state. As this ad-hoc community demonstrates, a politics of care strives to build a world that counters different forms of "strategic abandonment" through the coproduction of spaces where existing hierarchies of human value are not only challenged but undone. It does so by acknowledging our interdependencies and fostering forms that enhance physical and emotional care. The crucial point is that a politics of care, like abolitionist care, rebuilds as it dismantles, introducing caring micopractices and frameworks for recognition and collectivity, while dismantling "the rules and laws of value and markets" (Medel 2017, 880) as well as destructive and harmful forms of interdependency that lead to dispossession, violence and annihilation.

Moving from caring kinship and caring communities to caring states, The Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al, 2020) urges us to ask about the conditions that would enable the expansion rather than the contraction of democratic participation at all levels. Part of the answer clearly lies with reimagining the state. A caring state, in other words, "seeks to dismantle the entirety of oppressive systems that rationalize inequality and normalize white supremacist systems of containment and capture across multiple sites, institutions, and conditions of life" (Chua 2020, 130). It is one in which infrastructures are shared to ensure the provision for all of our basic needs while, at the same time, participatory and deliberative democracy is deepened. A state, however, can only be caring if notions of belonging are based on recognition of mutual cosmopolitan interdependencies rather than on ethno-cultural identity and racialized borders.

Transcending the racialized and nationalized borders of care—by which we mean dismantling exploitative interdependencies, where, for example, care work is outsourced to migrants and/or people of color and where a disproportionate number of people of color are "cared for" through mass incarceration (Threadcraft 2016)—is, of course, crucial. Creating caring states, as the *Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 60) cogently put it, requires "not only recognition of past atrocities but also a reckoning with forms of reparation for them, whether genocide, slavery, or dispossession" (see also Woodly 2022 on healing justice). Indeed, "only by confronting the past and prioritizing the needs of those who have been most marginalized, violated and negated by uncaring nation states will we be able to move forward into a more just future and cultivate a radically different way of relating to others and the world itself" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 60).[9]

To ensure that any kind of caring kinship, community, and state becomes possible, we simultaneously need to dismantle, change and rebuild the economy. This entails uprooting markets that put profit over people and completely reimagining relations of production and

exchange. To cultivate a caring economy begins with creating (or facilitating and scaling up existing) exchange arrangements that focus on cooperative networks of mutual support which redistribute social and material wealth according to everyone's needs, at the local, national and, ultimately, international levels. Markets, as The Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 81) insists, should be regulated, democratically governed, and as egalitarian, participatory, and environmentally sustainable as possible. In addition, they would need to be locally embedded, since local markets are better suited for cultivating relationships among producers, traders and consumers, promoting environmentally-sound processes and stimulating community-making. Indeed, a politics of care encourages us to venture beyond a politics of recognition and even beyond a politics of redistribution (Fraser 2014) to create vastly more democratic, cooperative and collaborative modes of economic governance within each and every stage and process of production. Democratizing the ownership over the modes and means of production and ensuring egalitarian forms governance become crucial since, again, such processes radically transform existing forms of exploitative interdependency. This can be accomplished by the collectivization and nationalization of key industries as well as the protection of our vital infrastructures from the forces of marketisation and financialization.

Finally, moving from the economy to the planet, scholars have highlighted the significance of attending to "little things" like insects and bugs (Schrader 2015) as wells as the importance of protecting the earth's soil, oceans, and air (De la Bellacasa 2017). Again, drawing on the template set up by the Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al 2020 86), caring for the planet and introducing a transformative vision of climate justice would mean rolling out a Green New Deal on a transnational level, and rebuilding social infrastructures that are sustainable at community and national levels while expanding alliances with progressive movements and institutions everywhere. A caring world will only be possible if the negative

forms of environmental interdependence that currently exist at various scales and in different domains are undone and instead care begins to inform all dimensions of social and climate justice, thus diminishing the conditions that force people to flee their homes out of economic necessity, war or climate emergency.

Caring imaginaries must move beyond the nation state and to the furthest reaches of the "strangest" parts of the planet, both human and non-human (Chatzidakis et al 2020). Ultimately, then—and coming full circle—it is only by acknowledging rather than disavowing our *global* interdependencies while eradicating the destructive and exploitative forms of those interdependencies that we can that create a more caring world. This calls for inventive forms of collective care at every single scale of life, where care is reimagined as both our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for the greatest possible number of people and living creatures on this planet—along with the planet itself—to thrive. As Audre Lorde (1984, 79) put it, "only within that interdependency of difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters."

By challenging individualist and liberal conceptions of both the human and of freedom, a vocabulary of care that adequately theorizes the notion and reality of interdependence and its constitutive potential provides us with a much more collective *political* horizon toward which we can struggle. Cultivating a politics based on an avowal of human and non-human interdependence transforms what we can imagine as our common future as well as how we struggle for this emancipatory vision. This struggle is no longer individual or national but collective and transnational. It is also the only kind of struggle that will enable us to confront the existential threats confronting human and non-human life in the 21st century.

Notes

[1] Following Wendy Brown and Michel Feher, throughout this article we use neoliberalism to denote not merely an economic system or a set of policies that facilitate intensified privatization and deregulation but a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject. Neoliberal rationality extends a specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics to every dimension of human life (Feher 2009; Brown 2015; Rottenberg 2018).

[2] In the article's concluding section we draw heavily on *The Care Manifesto*, which was written by five academics (including Catherine Rottenberg) who call themselves The Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al 2020). We use *The Care Manifesto* and The Care Collective interchangeably to refer to claims made by The Care Collective in the *Manifesto*.

[3] Human rights have also traditionally excluded wages for housework as well as minimum wage, retirement benefits, and workers' compensation for care work in their campaigns (Glenn 2010).

[4] In a more recent article where Daniel Engster attempts to rethink care ethics through the notion of vulnerability rather than dependency, he outlines the ways in which care theorists have generally understood dependency and thus grounded their theories of care in terms of personal dependency relationships (Engster 2019, 105).

[5] Thus, for Fiona Robinson who argues for a politics of care as well, the starting point is still care as a human activity. She writes, "If care feminism is not just an ethics, but a set of claims about the politics of care—who cares and who is cared for—and in what micro and macro contexts—it becomes a viable starting point for a critical feminist theory of politics (2015, 12).

[6] Moreover, even when we do avow our dependencies, our relations with others, even—or perhaps especially with those with whom we are intimate—are always psychically complex and shot through with ambivalence. After all, relationality in the form of interdependency is vexed and always carries within it a destructive potential (Butler 2021). This means that one cannot really distinguish between caring relations and aggressive and even violent ones, since caring relations often generate profound ambivalences. Consequently, a politics of care must

recognize the complexity of the human psyche, and attempt to address the problem of how to minimize and redirect ambivalence and human aggression.

[7] While post-humanist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti (2013; 2018) also de-center the human and emphasize interdependency, they tend to draw on notions of vitalism.

[8] A notable exception here is Maria Puig de la Bellacusa's work, which examines what care might mean in "more than human worlds" (2017 13). Her focus, however is on what she calls a speculative ethics and on non-human care and agency.

[9] Moreover, caring states would clearly need to rebuild and safeguard affordable housing, along with high-quality public schooling, university education, vocational training and health care. Education and vocational training would, in this way, be transformed, since they would emphasize care and caretaking practices, developing the capabilities of each person to hone their caring skills, while insisting that learning is about enhancing old as well as discovering new ways to nurture life and the world.

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