

UTOPIAN FAMILIES

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Every oppressed group needs to imagine through the help of history and mythology a world where our oppression did not seem the pre-ordained order. The mistake lies in believing in this ideal past or imagined future so thoroughly and single-mindedly that finding solutions to present-day inequities loses priority, or we attempt to create too-easy solutions for the pain we feel today.¹

IN TWO GREAT UTOPIAN novels of the 1970s, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed*,² Marge Piercy and Ursula LeGuin drew on anarchist, that is, radically democratic collectivist ideas while exploring in depth those areas of life that have been feminism's particular focus. They imagined how children would be parented and educated, whether gender would even exist, how individuals would experience and express sexual desire, what human relationships would be like. Both novels assumed, as did feminists of the time, that the privatized, heterosexual nuclear family household was antithetical to radically democratic, egalitarian social relations. They imagined worlds where gender was no longer a central social category, where homosexual desire was treated no differently from heterosexual desire, and where monogamous relationships were not mandated but freely chosen. They envisioned children and parents embedded in a supportive, democratic community, men and women equally involved in care-giving, the essential chores/pleasures of daily life (cooking, eating, laundry, etc.) taking place in communal rather than private spaces. Their concepts of parenting and of education challenged dominant ideas about children's need to be protected from the demands of the adult world. Education ought to be based in learning by doing as children participated in meaningful work. They envisioned more democratic, less authoritarian

relationships between adults and children. Challenging the idea of a benevolent necessity for adult control, they argued that children had much greater capacities for self-regulation and responsible decision making than adults gave them credit for. They also argued that involving children in productive work had to begin early, so kids would appreciate the pleasures and rewards of contributing to the common good. In a society where labour is organized through profoundly democratic decision making and for meeting human needs, workplace 'efficiency' would encourage, even demand, making a place for apprenticeship – not to mention flexible (and shorter) working hours to free people up for activities of nurture, leisure, and citizenship. These utopian visions grew out of some of the core struggles of second-wave feminism, particularly its radical liberationist wing. Compared to feminists today, feminists then, facing a patriarchal family/household system that appeared firmly entrenched, felt more free to reject the family wholesale. And, in a period of relative prosperity and economic security, they were also more free to experiment with alternative forms of living.

My generation of socialists and socialist-feminists who took part in and were inspired by the great post-war waves of rebellion against exploitation, oppression and colonial rule, have been fundamentally shaped by our historical experience, an experience of enormous political gains but also dashed hopes, profound disappointments, and some bitter defeats. The post-modernists' hostility to 'grand narratives' (feminist as well as Marxist) draws support from not only the bankruptcy of Communism but also the exhaustion of the radical political organizations (Marxist, anti-racist and feminist) of the 'sixties and 'seventies which embodied the revolutionary aspirations of our generation.

The 'pre-figurative' communes and political collectives of the New Left, including feminist groups, who hoped to bridge the present and the post-revolutionary future have almost all splintered and died. Attempts to legislate personal relations and group life, to 'live according to political principle' defined in rigid, narrow terms, bred intolerance, sectarianism, factionalism and splits. Yet the questions we tried to address are still with us. It's time to dust ourselves off and return to those imaginative visions, informed but not defeated by our failures. 'Pre-figurative' communities (political groups, community-based organizations, collectively run workplaces and living spaces) are an important ground for winning new people to socialist ideals. They allow us to practise being in different kinds of relationships, to experience our capacities for co-operation, solidarity, and democracy.

From the perspective of the 1990s, the battle against the bourgeois family, against the stultifying, consumerist, conformist, privatistic, patriarchal household, might seem anachronistic. There are strong political forces attempting to reimpose the traditional male breadwinner/female care-giver family ideal; and we have been forced to spend far too much political energy beating them back. But there are strong counter-currents, appearing perhaps more in how people live than in the political system, where well-organized conservative minorities

have influence far beyond their numbers. Many children spend some time in a single parent, generally single-mother, family; in almost 25% of two-earner households in the USA women earn more than men; increasing numbers of blended families create many new kinds of kin relationships; new reproductive technologies are exploding concepts of 'natural' motherhood, and lesbians and gay men are more accepted as parents and more 'out' as families.³ And in so far as their circumstances allow it, many men and women are trying to break old gender patterns, sharing both income-earning and responsibility for everyday care-giving within their families. It is no longer compelling to assert that only one kind of family is natural, normal, or even preferable. But important as they are, these changes have, if anything, strengthened the family's hold on popular social and political imaginations. While families may be more internally democratic, they are also even more private than ever before, one of the few remaining places people expect to give and receive support.

The harsh political and economic shifts in the society surrounding the family have closed off the space for imagining different kinds of community. Instead of organizing for a revolutionary alternative to welfare state cold-war liberalism, we find ourselves battling to simply preserve a minimal welfare state. But the issues we confronted are still there. If anything, life in this centre of global capitalism seems ever more contradictory: on the one hand, increasing opportunities for self-expression through consumption of a giddy array of commodified identities; on the other, frightening economic insecurity and worries about what the future might hold. On the one hand, increasing sexual autonomy for women, and on the other the abandonment of single mothers and their children, now forced to survive alone in the low-wage labour market. Increasing economic and political opportunities for women, yet a crisis in care-giving inside and outside family households.

The communitarians and religious authoritarians are trying to convince Americans that we have too much freedom and too much individualism. They argue that security, support, and nurture can only emerge when obligation and duty are enforced by social norms, law, and the reallocation of resources to encourage desirable and discourage undesirable individual choices. However much the communitarians may criticize capitalism for its rampant individualism and commodification of every sphere of life, their utopian vision is antithetical to feminism. They denigrate the value of 'chosen' interdependencies (friendship, intentional communities) and privilege bonds of obligation that rest on a bedrock of blood relations – the primordial 'born into' communities whose webs of interdependence are never questioned and therefore never really chosen, only accepted.⁴

Feminists of colour have confronted more directly than white feminists the strengths and weaknesses of 'born-into' communities. Contrasting families in communities of colour to those of the white middle class, Black and Latina feminists argue that the extended kin (and fictive kin) sharing networks linking women and children across families, and the norms of communal responsibility

for children, especially strong in Black communities, offer an alternative to the possessive and exclusive relationships of the bourgeois family.⁵ This positive re-valuation of disparaged family forms emphasizes the communal values and co-operative institutions which undergird resistance to white supremacy and provide a basis for women to claim authority in their community. However important this analysis as a corrective to the early feminist critique of a supposedly universal male breadwinner household, it still left only dimly illuminated another side of racial solidarity in a patriarchal, capitalist society: the suppression of women's sexual desires, the limitations on their exercise of public power, the onerous responsibilities for others that left little room for self, the webs of sometimes overwhelming financial and emotional dependencies, the corrosion of relationships weighted down with too much to carry. In groundbreaking work opening up possibilities for exploring sexism within communities of colour, lesbian feminists of colour explored the painful terrain of their marginalization within their home communities. They described the enforced silences, the regulation and self-regulation of women's sexuality as a political strategy, the fears of betrayal projected on to women's bodies and sexuality, the powerful pressures toward conformity and the suppression of individual needs/desires in the name of group solidarity.

We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition to the anglo threat. And yet, our refusal to examine all the roots of the lovelessness in our families is our weakest link and softest spot. Family is *not* by definition the man in a dominant position over women and children. Familia is cross-generational bonding, deep emotional ties between opposite sexes, and within our sex . . . It is sexuality, which involves, but is not limited to intercourse or orgasm. It is finding familia among friends where blood ties are formed through suffering and celebration shared. The strength of our families never came from domination. It has only endured in spite of it – like our women.⁶

In challenging the narrow ground of solidarity that has dominated the culture and politics of their home communities, lesbian feminists of colour have been among the most eloquent voices articulating, in accessible language and with emotional immediacy, the case for a radically democratic anti-racist and feminist-socialist politics in the U.S.

The American public's refusal to be horrified by Clinton's extra-marital affairs indicates that backward looking moralists remain a minority. Yet, conservatives have also captured political ground by taking aim at one of contemporary capitalism's weakest points: the pervasive anxiety about how we will take care of ourselves, each other, our elderly, and our children, and a simmering resentment about the toll that this care-giving is taking. Family households are more burdened and perhaps more isolated from other sources of support than ever before. In one of the most blatant examples of political

hypocrisy in our time, the last remaining public institutions through which some kind of societal responsibility for our elderly and our children is expressed – social security and public education – are under ruthless attack. In the current political configuration, where government and the public are savaged and the market extolled, the family household remains the only place where people can envision non-contractual relationships, claims on others for support, and an unquestioned right to have one's needs met. The romance of the capitalist market, of a society organized around individualistic striving, can only work if families are there to pick up the pieces.⁷ Affluent families are increasingly substituting paid services made affordable by service workers' low wages. Working-class families get by in other ways (drawing on female relatives for child care, working different shifts so parents can trade-off being home, having fewer children). But even with these accommodations, responsibilities for others, in addition to children, remain: the elderly parents, the brother who can't find work, the sister who can't make it alone as a single mother.

The situation produces a downward spiral: the more people must rely on family, the more focused they become on increasing their individual resources and maximizing their own family fortunes, the less willing to support other people's families, other people's children. New, more inclusive ideals of family are contesting compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance within the household. But they do not, in themselves, challenge the ideal of the family household itself as a haven in a heartless world. New, reformed and more democratic family ideals can coexist with an intensification of familistic political ideologies and individualistic survival strategies.

One of the main weak points of the current economy is its failure to support families. So it would seem that one of the best arguments against the assaulting forces of the capitalist juggernaut is to point out the contradiction between corporate power and family needs. Many progressives are taking just that tack: the name of New York State's newest effort at creating a third party, the 'Working-Families Party' is a case in point. To form a politics around 'working families' is terribly limited and ultimately conservative. To be clear, I am not arguing against campaigns, such as the UPS strike, which protested the widespread use of part-timers on the ground that many UPS workers had families to support. But a politics centred on 'working-families' simply reproduces bourgeois morality in which working is a sign of deservingness and family a sign of need – as if single individuals are or ought to be 'self-sufficient.' And it reinforces the ideal of the family/household as the privileged site of economic, emotional, social support and care. Further, a program of demands organized around the needs of 'working families' obscures the ways in which different kinds of communities are systematically disadvantaged. Some communities have more non-working families than others. Finally, assimilating gay/lesbian families to straight families by focusing on their commonalities as 'working' or 'economically productive' or 'stable/coupled', leaves little room for the liberatory demands of sexual politics. This is not simply a matter of including rights

of sexual expression as a fundamental democratic demand. A radical vision of community has to recognize the sexual/erotic bases of human connection, challenging both the repressiveness of traditional conservatism and the 'repressive desublimation' of the contemporary sexual order. Queer politics creates a space for articulating this, partly because queer sexuality has not been harnessed so directly as heterosexuality to procreation and thus to the institutions of social reproduction. As lesbian feminists of colour have demonstrated, through writing and political activism, fear of or shame about having the wrong kind of sexual desire fuels a defensive repressiveness which spreads throughout a community. In contrast, appreciation for our unruly desires makes them less threatening, we have less need to regulate ourselves and others, opening up more possibility for empathic connection and thus solidarity.

Familistic politics is attractive in part because communities are weaker than ever before. But 'community' is itself an amorphous concept. We speak, at least in the U.S., of the business community, or the therapeutic community, in the same way we speak of neighbourhoods or socially homogenous spaces. Community as a particular kind of public space, a space for communication, democratic decision-making and co-operation around crucial tasks and decisions, is understandably undeveloped in advanced capitalist societies. In the capitalist political economy, communities are formed primarily out of their common position with regard to markets (e.g., for housing, for jobs) and to various institutions that regulate the distribution of resources (e.g., local government, the welfare department, the education system). Community appears as an arena of voluntary relationships over against the necessary and more obligatory ties of family and the commands of capitalist employers. So while there is a kind of 'romance' of community, and even perhaps a real longing for community, in the U.S.A. today there is little space for people to create or sustain communal institutions. On the other side, in both American myth and historical experience, the potentially arbitrary and repressive power of communities looms large. This can only be countered by a vision of radically democratic communities that allow space for variation in the ways that individuals can live and participate.⁸ From a feminist perspective, democratic community is built not only out of particular kinds of political structures, but also by particular kinds of people – people who have the ability to negotiate inevitable tensions between collective demands and individual needs. These capacities are first learned in relation to our early care-givers and continue in how we experience ourselves in relation to others.

Feminists have long argued that child rearing by women within the context of an isolated family/household creates particular kinds of gendered personalities but also fundamental difficulties around dependence for both men and women. The hyper-individualism of bourgeois society is reproduced in personality via family structure. Personality is shaped both directly and indirectly (through how parents, teachers, and other care-givers envision the goals of child development) by a capitalist culture that denigrates dependence and

overvalues individual independence (understood as freedom from ties to others). But fears about dependence needs arise also from forms of parenting that especially intensify dilemmas of development. These dilemmas arise out of a human reality – the long period of dependence and inequality of power in relations of infants/children to adults who care for them. Whatever the existential limits or grounding of developmental dilemmas in human physiology, social structures shape both their character and resolution. For children reared by isolated, disempowered mothers and distant fathers in patriarchal family households, developmental struggles centre around individuation from a female care-giver, conflicting desires around autonomy and merger, conflicting fears about being left alone and about being taken over.⁹ Having the capacity to bring these fears and desires into some kind of balance, to resolve them in at least a ‘good enough’ way is necessary for individuals to engage well in the give-and-take of democratic group life – to be able to share power, to recognize others’ needs and, at the same time, to be able to assert one’s own views against pressures toward group conformity, to tolerate conflict.

Feminists have thought quite a bit about this question, especially about how a rigid, defensive, masculinity constructed through the denigration of the feminine reinforces drives toward domination, expressed in both the micro-politics of relationships and the macro-politics of the economy and the state. Feminists have also at least tentatively explored how women’s fears of separation create over-enmeshment, inability to distinguish others’ needs from one’s own, conflict avoidance and inability to tolerate differences within a group, and projection of aggressive impulses on to sons, husbands, and fathers.¹⁰ These analyses all point toward rearranging family life in very fundamental ways. A key change, feminists have argued, is for men to become equally involved with the daily routines of care-giving for young children. This is important not only to change how boys and girls come to acquire gendered identities. It is also crucial to creating reciprocity and equality among adults who have to negotiate with one another in ways that a more gendered division of labour does not require. And men develop skills – the ability to tolerate and respond to helplessness, to recognize and respond to others’ emotional states, to anticipate wants and needs – which carry over into their relationships with adults – with their partners as well as their colleagues and friends.¹¹

Feminist utopian visions, though, go further than re-arranging the gender division of labour within the household. They reject family households as the basic unit of social reproduction, of reciprocal exchanges of emotional and physical caring necessary to renew life. The reasons are both social and psychological. First, more collective forms of everyday living expand the sphere of social solidarity and exert a countervailing pressure against the privatistic and exclusivist bonds of sexual/affectional partnership and parent-child relations. Second, although it is important for children to have intense, affectional bonds with some particular others, it seems that these ties can be made more problematic where parents don’t share care-giving with other adults. In more

communal forms of living, children can use other adults as a buffer in negotiating conflicts/tensions with their parents. And, participating in a broader supportive community, parents may find it easier to treat their children as separate individuals rather than extensions of themselves. In other words, situated within a broader caring community, children and parents might not experience conflicts around autonomy/separation and dependence/merger as intensely as we do today. Further, affective ties that extend beyond the mother-child dyad, the oedipal triangle, or even sibling relationships lay the basis for individuals to develop psychic structures incorporating a broader set of social identifications.

Comparative studies of child rearing practice already indicate the importance of culturally produced understandings and the social organization of care-giving for defining paths of child development.¹² Segura and Pierce argue that the particular family constellation within which Chicano and Chicana children are cared for, characterized by non-exclusive mothering and significant cross-generational ties between grandmothers and granddaughters, explains, in part, why Chicanos and Chicanas develop strong group identities.¹³ Mahoney and Yngvesson make the point that how a society defines the process of development affects interactional patterns between adults and children. For example, among the Ilongot people of the Philippines the developmental process is understood as a gradual acquisition of knowledge (and thus of increased autonomy) through an extended network of interactions (experiences) with multiple caretakers. In contrast, they argue, among the Anglo-American middle class, development is seen to be a struggle for autonomy envisioned as breaking away from a confining dependence on a primary parent.¹⁴

What are some implications of these ideas for political action? Instead of a political focus on protecting and supporting families, we should argue for expanding, supporting, and reviving communities, and investing resources in local, democratically-controlled institutions for providing care. The entry (both chosen and forced) of women into paid work has drastically undermined the basis for traditional community: the unpaid labour of women. The crisis of care-giving and the burdens on individual family households are a compelling point of entry for a pre-figurative politics which proposes new kinds of sharing relationships and new kinds of public places: like co-housing, community gardens, day-care co-operatives, democratized schools and recreation centres, etc.

Such experiments and reforms would provide a space for envisioning a rich, local, public life and identifying the kinds of resources individuals will need in order to participate. For instance, parents can't belong to day-care co-operatives if they can't afford to leave work to fulfil the volunteer time requirement. And they can't understand or appreciate what's happening with their older children in public schools, if employers won't pay them for their time off work. Making schools more democratic, and convincing teachers to share power with parents, requires that parents have the time and resources to really participate in the work of the school.¹⁵ Living patterns are constrained by social institutions but also by

the built environment. Without capital to renovate old housing, most people can't participate in new kinds of living arrangements, like co-housing. Co-housing communities combine individual households with communal living spaces. Members are expected to participate in a committee responsible for some collective activities and daily life is organized around sharing of responsibilities like providing adult supervision for children after school and cooking dinner. Co-housing communities offer new possibilities for expanding the circle of adults who care for children and for each other. They make it more possible for individuals to participate in child rearing without necessarily producing their own child. And they allow adults to share the burdens and pleasures of caring for each other. Taking the sting out of living single, co-housing community creates a ground for real freedom about coupling up. These experiments should be encouraged and subsidized with public funds, rather than being available only to those who have the money to try them.¹⁶

Recreating community, rebuilding a supportive infrastructure for caregiving that does not rely on exploiting women's unpaid labour, points in the direction of new kinds of public investment: not only new public jobs (more recreation directors, child-care workers, etc.) but resources for building new kinds of relationships between those who provide services and those who use them. Democratized public schools, day-care centres, and community centres, as co-operative institutions, require workers, parents, children, and other neighbourhood residents, to participate and work together. And, because community institutions are part of a larger public system of provision, participatory norms can be extended upward – in a council-type system of governance. This is a particularly important point, for local control can also have a narrow, even conservative side. To counter parochial tendencies, community institutions have to be embedded in a broader set of democratic decision-making relationships with each other. Posing an alternative to the top-down and top-heavy bureaucracy of the capitalist welfare state, the fight for democratic communal caring effectively challenges the rightist ideologues who contend that only privatization can provide real control and choice.

There are many different entry points for the political initiatives I am proposing. In the U.S. some of these would be: the fight to defend the public schools against voucher systems, the movement to shift federal spending from the military to human services, efforts to defend single mothers driven into low-wage jobs, battles about urban development and attempts to reshape the built environment, local government use of federal funds for public housing. In these and many other arenas, we can pose alternatives to the over-burdened, isolated family household through an attractive vision of co-operative, democratic, ways of caring for adults and children.

One of the many ironies of our present is that, at least in the U.S., the expanding space for more inclusive, more diverse, more tolerant and more respectful social relations in personal life coexists with a narrowing space for public democracy, a cynicism about public life. This irony reflects not just the

defeats but the successes of the liberatory movements of the 'sixties – their cultural and political legacy. However bleak the political terrain on which we struggle today, we cannot afford to lose the communal, egalitarian visions those movements created nor to suspend attempts to prefigure these visions through the kinds of organizations we build, the reforms we propose, and the ways we argue for them. If, last time around, prefigurative politics informed by utopian visions often became oppressive, we can learn from our mistakes. To defensively turn away from dreaming because we are so afraid of being disappointed, to wish for less because we fear we cannot win more, will impoverish and undermine our efforts to build more radical political struggles. We can speak to the real dilemmas, the practices, and the yearnings of working-class people. The crisis in care-giving haunts everyday life, creating a political space for the left as well as the right. We can enter that space with political discourses and, as far as possible, practical proposals for new kinds of communal institutions that express our vision of deeply and thoroughly *democratic* community.

NOTES

1. Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, Boston: South End Press, 1983, p. 129.
2. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1976; Ursula K LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974. The novels are also different. LeGuin's subtitle 'an ambiguous utopia' reflects her exploration of repressive tendencies in communal society, a problem that is not at all foregrounded in Piercy's novel. The two novels also reflect, perhaps, generational differences in radical post-war feminisms. If Piercy's theoretical touchstone is Shulameth Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*), LeGuin's would be DeBeauvoir (*The Second Sex*).
3. Just to be clear: of course the changes have very real downsides. Single-mothers are impoverished; reproductive technologies have opened up new avenues for controlling and exploiting women's bodies, two-thirds of the closing of the gender gap in wages has occurred not because women are making more, but because men are earning less.
4. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 150–152; Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Feminism, Family and Community', *Dissent* (Fall, 1982).
5. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, Routledge, 1990, esp Chapter 6.
6. Moraga, pp. 110–11; see also, Evelyn M. Hammonds, 'Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence', in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jackqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, New York, Routledge, 1997, pp. 170–182.
7. Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, London, Verso, 1984
8. Much of our thinking about collective living is pre-occupied with the problem of 'free-riders', on the one hand, collective despotism on the other. These are important questions. But that they loom especially large for us says more about our own society than universal human propensities toward domination and exploitation. The evidence from social relations among egalitarian band societies indicates

that they are able to achieve a balance in which individual idiosyncrasy and differential abilities to contribute to the group or engage in the group's social life are tolerated. Conflicts are resolved through dialogue; rifts acknowledged and, at least temporarily, repaired, through games, clowning and communal ritual. See, e.g., Colin M. Turnbull, 'Mbuti Womanhood', in *Woman the Gatherer*, Frances Dahlberg, ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

9. Jessica Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
10. Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990, pp. 264–268; Valerie Miner and Helen E. Longino, eds., *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*, New York: The Feminist Press, 1987, esp. pp. 21–37, 195–208.
11. Scott Coltrane, *Family Man*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 117–120; Barbara Katz Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1989, pp. 223–228.
12. Coltrane, pp. 180–192.
13. Denise A. Segura and Jennifer L. Pierce, 'Chicana/o Family Structure and Gender Personality: Chodorow, Familism, and Psychoanalytic Sociology Revisited,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1993) pp. 63–91. The authors also explore the relationship between these child-rearing patterns and 'machismo'.
14. Maureen A. Mahoney and Barbara Yngvesson, 'The Construction of Subjectivity and the Paradox of Resistance: Reintegrating Feminist Anthropology and Psychology', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1992), pp. 44–73.
15. David Levine et al, eds., *Rethinking Schools: An Agenda for Change*, New York: New Press, 1995.
16. Kathryn M. C. Cament and Charles Durrett, *Cohousing*, Berkeley: Habitat Press, 1988.