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## Democratizing Care

As long as we are talking utopia, we might consider moving beyond the social democratic welfare state and the family/household as the major institutions for organizing care.<sup>1</sup> Given that proposals for anything like the Nordic welfare state system are already “off the charts” in the current US political climate, to envision even more radical change may appear to take us well outside the bounds of a “real utopia” project. Certainly, the reforms proposed by Gornick and Meyers are important and to be supported. However, I want to argue for going further toward socializing and democratizing the organization of care over the life cycle. At their most developed, social democratic welfare state programs attempt to make the family/household workable by expanding public responsibilities for early childhood education and care (freeing parents from having to carry that labor entirely themselves) and subsidizing parenthood, especially in the early years of life, so that parents can withdraw temporarily from the labor force. Shorter workweeks, as Gornick and Meyer propose, provide parents more time to carry out the everyday tasks of care throughout children’s growing up years. These programs are meant to lighten the burdens on the household and redistribute those that remain so that both men and women can be equally responsible for the work that still must be done.

Although these policies do socialize some of the responsibility for caregiving work, they leave in place the family/household as the major institution for organizing care. Relying on family/households for the work of care limits possibilities for moving toward gender equity and undermines social solidarity, especially under conditions of relative scarcity. Further, although it

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is certainly possible for work/family policies such as paid parenting leave to gain more political support than they have now, I would wager that significant gains in this area will require a broad and powerfully mobilized social movement. Under such circumstances, we ought to be ready with workable alternatives that will inspire and motivate people to join that movement and take advantage of the possibilities for radical reforms that such movements open up.

I offer two strategies for transcending the family/household system and the social democratic welfare state by socializing responsibility for care and democratizing the institutions providing care. First, I explore cohousing communities—a more collective form of living that broadens and democratizes the group of people sharing the work of care. Second, I explore democratic and participatory forms of organizing public services and consider how these might engage both careworkers and those dependent on their care (e.g. parents of young children, families of elders, elders themselves) in mutual governing relationships. Collective, democratic, and participatory institutions expand the possibilities for gender equity at both an individual and group level. Many studies of women’s participation in democratic decision-making, particularly at the local level, demonstrate their increase in confidence and leadership skills and, often, changes in their expectations about gender relations in personal life. In the practice of deliberative decision-making, under supportive conditions, participants learn to present their own needs and interests in relation to those of other individuals and the larger group. Through the deliberation process, individuals are often compelled to re-evaluate their own interests in light of what they learn about others and in consideration of what will work best for the group as a whole. (Fung & Wright, 2003; Mainsbridge 2003) The deliberative decision-making process opens up an arena for questioning inequalities in life situation, including both men and women interrogating men’s privileges. The culture of radically democratic institutions values equal

participation and holds the group responsible for ensuring this occurs, so it is not left up to women as individuals to fight for their place at the table. Democratic practices certainly do not in themselves challenge the gender divisions of labor which are at the heart of gender inequality. But they create a far more favorable ground on which women can press their claims for men to share more equally the burdens and pleasures of care. More indirectly, radically democratic institutions organizing carework expand the ground for gender equity because they support the deepening of social solidarity. Social solidarity, in turn, underlies political support for the kinds of programs Meyers and Gornick propose. It is true that a sense of common purpose and group connectedness within a workplace or a neighborhood is never automatically generalized to a larger collectivity. On the other hand, the highly individualized institutional relations within which family/households carry out their responsibilities for carework and family members are forced to negotiate within their workplaces and households around who is going to take up carework, tend to reinforce rather than counter individualistic striving. Collective forms of living and working at least push in the opposite direction.

#### Co-housing: a realistic alternative to the family household

Even two-parent families face barriers to achieving gender equity because the burdens on the household remain quite extensive. Shorter work weeks will help but are not sufficient to manage the time load. Inevitably there is a misfit between the demands of market work and the time needed for carework in the household. [If we were to include elder care in this discussion, the time burdens on families would be even more extensive.] For all the reasons we already understand, women take up this work much more than men do. Even in Sweden, the country where the proposed reforms are most developed, families must still provide high levels of carework; women are much more likely than men to engage in part-time work and gender

segregation in occupations and across sectors remains very high. It is true that the gender wage gap in Sweden is far more narrow than in the U.S. But, because women are much more likely to work part-time, their overall incomes are lower and differences in the time that fathers and mothers spend in carework compared to wage work continue to be quite large. (Thornqvist, 2006) Further, although single mothers do not sink into abject poverty in social democratic welfare states, solo parenting is difficult enough that it cannot but have a coercive effect on mothers' choices about staying in relationships.

Co-housing offers promise, because adults share caregiving in reciprocal relationships among an extensive group of people. Co-housing combines individual living units with a central common space. Housing is designed to maximize social interaction, while also providing individual privacy. Co-housing members are expected to share responsibilities for organizing collective life, serve on committees, and participate in decision-making. They are also expected to participate in community meals, although how this is organized, the frequency of the gatherings, and the intensity of expected participation varies across communities. A large, comfortable space that can accommodate the whole community for meals and social gatherings is at the heart of co-housing. The common house can include, in addition to a dining room and kitchen, a children's space, a library, recreation room, meeting rooms, a workshop, an office, shared laundry facilities, and guest accommodations (allowing individual units to remain relatively small while allowing community members to accommodate visitors).

The modern cohousing movement emerged in Denmark in the early 1970's and is most developed there. From that beginning, cohousing has spread to the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria and elsewhere. The first cohousing community in the United States, Muir Commons in Davis,

California, was completed in 1991. Currently there are ninety completed multi-generational cohousing communities and more than a hundred are in formation or building. They range in size from 7 to 67 residences, with the majority containing 20 to 40 households.

([www.cohousing.org/overview.aspx](http://www.cohousing.org/overview.aspx)) Although, previously, cohousing groups envisioned a multi-generational community, elder (senior) cohousing has recently emerged as a more collective alternative to the typical retirement community. (<http://www.cohousing.org/elder-cohousing.aspx>)

Studies on cohousing residents find that participation in neighborhood activities, and engagement in reciprocal helping are much higher than in their previous housing situation. (Williams, 2005) Cohousing seems to be especially beneficial for households with children, because parents (whether single or coupled) have expanded resources for dealing with their care responsibilities—built-in child-minding, help when kids or adults are ill, and so forth. Community members can easily establish relationships with the children living there if they want to and this seems to happen—although it generally is not a requirement of membership. (Wann, 2006) Single parents particularly benefit not only because there are more adults to help care for children but also because shared tools and common facilities (e.g. laundry rooms) reduce individual outlays for consumer durables and make available otherwise unaffordable resources (e.g., workout space or office equipment). (Williams, 2005)

At the moment, participants in the U.S. cohousing movement are middle class, even relatively affluent. However, cohousing is not inevitably a middle-class privilege. In Denmark cohousing also began as a middle-class movement and those who wanted to build cohousing communities faced scepticism from financial institutions and the government. Legislation passed in 1981, the Cooperative Housing Association Law, made it easier and less expensive to finance

cohousing. Today, co-housing in Denmark has broad support and, most important, government programs have made co-housing more affordable and available to modest income households. By 1994 there were already ten rental cohousing communities in Denmark financed with government sponsored loans. (Milman 1994) In the US, recent local experiments have broadened access to cohousing. Strategies for opening co-housing to working-class people include government subsidies, sweat-equity, and internally generated loans. In Boulder, a cohousing development was built using multiple resources: Habitat for Humanity built four homes, 9 were financed by the city's affordable housing program, and 21 are market-rate. (Orelans, 2004). Common Ground, in Aspen, Colorado, is exclusively comprised of permanently affordable units and was built on land provided for free by the city and with construction costs subsidized by the county. (Bader, 1998) The inclusion of rental housing along with owner-occupied units has also emerged as a strategy for incorporating people who cannot afford a home down payment into co-housing communities. (Ferrnate-Roseberry, 2002/3) Bank lending rules are a major obstacle to combining rental and owner-occupied units, but could be overcome through government subsidies and alternative financing sources. (Wann, 2006) These initiatives demonstrate the possibilities for incorporating co-housing into non-profit, community development, and even public housing programs. Currently, single family homeownership is promoted by federal government programs administered by local housing authorities, non-profit local community development organizations, and national organizations. Cohousing experiments could be encouraged by these institutions through public programs and public subsidies, rather than being available only to those who have the money to make the substantial private investments necessary to create cohousing projects.

Co-housing appears to combine many of the positive aspects of earlier communes, while avoiding the forced intimacy and lack of privacy that seems to have been a principle source of destructive conflict. Co-housing communities also have their share of conflicts; however, over time the co-housing movement, drawing on the extensive experimentation and experience in consensus process over the last decades, has developed governing structures and decisional practices that seem to be quite workable. (Christian, 2001). More collective living and decision-making requires people to develop various kinds of personal skills and learning these skills has become part of the generalized culture of the co-housing movement. (Daub, 2005; Renz, 2006; Wann, 2005)

While the suburbs continue to expand and individual American homes have become gigantic, a counter-movement within the U.S. appeals not only to the desire for greater community but also for economic and environmental sustainability. Co-housing, eco-villages, and, in more mainstream venues, the “new urbanism” express a willingness to reduce individual living space in return for more convivial, walkable, neighbourly, public space. Cohousing interests me particularly because it requires and produces levels of democratic participation, individual capacities for deliberation, and innovative structures that lay the basis for broader democratic community. Of course, in and of themselves, co-housing groups can be particularistic and insular. But as part of a broader movement for social change, they offer not only a model for collective engagement in the work of caring for ourselves and others, but also the dense social networks that are the basis for grass-roots political projects. (See, for example, the ways in which historically women's extensive neighborhood ties arising from reciprocity and shared labor created the starting ground for many different kinds of community-based movements). The communal spirit that motivates cohousing could also be mobilized in building

a movement for public, universal early childhood education and care. (For an example of cohousing community as the catalyst for a local environmental justice movement, see Wann, 2005)

The limited research on cohousing available in English has not explored gender relations in the communities or within households. However, accounts of participants' experiences in cohousing are full of comments by women, and women are often the public representatives of cohousing communities. Women seem to be completely engaged in the decision-making process and many report satisfaction with their growing ability to negotiate contention and conflict. When difficulties over participation and fulfillment of work obligations are discussed, neither men nor women are singled out as more problematic. In terms of work for the cohousing collective—gardening, cooking, cleaning the common house, etc.—it seems that the division of labor here is not particularly gendered; however, this conclusion is based on sparse and anecdotal evidence. Whether women's engagement in participatory governance has translated into a more equitable gender division of labor at this point remains an open question.

#### Democratizing the organization of public care

One of the challenges of advocating for publicly provided services, including caregiving, in the U.S. is that concerns about “free riders” and suspicion of government abound. Nonetheless, these negative attitudes coexist with an appreciation (albeit sometimes sentimental) for the value of community. A potential for social solidarity exists, even if it is overwhelmed by individualistic striving within a highly competitive and insecure political economy. But does the social democratic welfare state have a future in a period of global capitalist restructuring? Fiscal crises, and the rise of neo-liberal political movements, threaten to dismantle welfare state

programs. On the other hand, state programs and institutions that are universal, as they are in the Nordic welfare states, penetrate deeply into society and have the ability to mobilize constituents in their defense. The current picture seems to be fairly mixed—certainly, overall spending has not been as deeply cut as conservatives may have wished and welfare state supporters may have feared. Yet, quality has been eroded (for example, by raising the number of children per caregiver) in some instances and new forms of service delivery—particularly vouchers and the rise of both non-profit and private care providers contracting with the state and competing with state services for state dollars--have the potential to create a two-tier workforce as well as two-tier services. This process, of course, is far along in the U.S. but it has even begun to work its way through the public sector in Sweden—the bastion of universal public services. (Blomqvist, 2004)

“Consumer choice,” embedded in paeans to the market and attacks on the rigidities of the state (and public sector unions), is a central element of the neo-conservative political discourse that is fueling this process of privatization. As surveys of public opinion show, neo-conservative ideology does not fully express the complicated attitudes that many people have toward the welfare state. Still, we ought to acknowledge that consumer choice, understood as an avenue for exercising control in one’s life, reflects much actual experience. People’s real possibilities for influencing the institutions that organize social, political and economic life are indeed restricted. This is particularly the case in the U.S., where institutions such as unions or social movement organizations, which at one time were avenues for the exercise of some collective power, are in such decline. Parents are especially vulnerable to discourses that play on their fears about their children and, at least in the U.S., their actual experiences of suboptimal (to say the least) daycare arrangements. But even when parents are satisfied with their childcare, they can feel defensive

about placing their children in full-time care, especially center care. One reason for the popularity of family day care is that the informality of the arrangement offers parents the illusion that they have more influence and control over how their children are cared for, since they are dealing with one caregiver (Wrigley, 2007)

The idea of consumer choice also has power because it reflects the actual relationships between institutions that provide public services and those who need them. While in the abstract we can talk about public goods as those things we own as a public or own in common, for the most part we experience ourselves in relation to public goods as consumers. Some philosophers and public policy analysts have captured the importance of institutional arrangements through which public goods and services are provided by making a distinction between public goods and "the commons" or commonwealth. A public good is typically what David Bollier has termed an "open-access regime," a resource, such as a lighthouse or a park, whose benefits are accessible to everyone but which cannot be effectively allocated by market mechanisms and so are better produced by the state. (Bollier, 2002) In contrast to an "open access regime" where users have no direct responsibility for the resource, a commons implies an inalienable resource managed, cared for, and primarily enjoyed by a group of cooperating people committed to insuring its availability to future generations and capable of engaging in democratic decision making about how it will be used. It is the social relationships in production and use of a good that make the difference between private property, open access, and a commons. (Bollier, 2002; Anton, 2000) In an open access regime, although goods are not privately produced, and are public in that sense, the public has no direct involvement in either administering their use or organizing their production. As users experience them, public goods delivered through bureaucratic, hierarchical, and inaccessible organizations are much closer to commodities than to a commons.

Most public service delivery constitutes the public as consumers on the one side, workers and managers as producers on the other. Now, to a certain extent this is a necessary state of things--those of us who use services are happy to rely on the expertise and knowledge of those who organize and deliver services. However, insofar as public services are organized in traditional bureaucratic forms, they are not a common project, generating the kinds of relationships among producers and users and among users themselves that create and sustain social solidarity.

The way public services are produced, administered, and delivered can be bureaucratic or participatory, hierarchical and centralized or local and accessible with shared governance and decision-making. As Bourdieu has argued, our dispositions are developed through practice, through enactment, such that ways of imagining self in relation to others become deeply embedded in our identities and in our habits of being and acting. When public services are produced and administered within institutions that involve shared governance and decision-making, they provide the structures and experiences within which people can develop the dispositions that are fundamental to social solidarity.

Even as bureaucratic and inaccessible as our contemporary public schools often are, in surveys people will express negative assessments of public education in general, but give their children's own school high marks. Why? Because through their children's relationship to their teachers and through their own contact with the teachers, parents develop some sense of a shared project--they and the school have a common purpose. If this kind of feeling can be generated under the relatively alienating and alienated relations that particularly working-class and poor parents have with their schools, imagine what sorts of common bonds could be produced in a more collaborative institutional arrangement.

## Empowered Participatory Governance

What sorts of models, if any, do we have for these kinds of services? And what evidence do we have that transformations of public services toward shared governance can work? What difficulties are there and how might they be addressed? In 2000, the Real Utopias conference engaged these issues through a discussion of empowered participatory governance. The complexities of organizing and managing empowered participatory governance within the state are many and beyond the scope of this paper. They are explored well and in great depth in Deepening Democracy, the volume produced by the conference. Complexities notwithstanding, the book makes a strong case that empowered participatory governance can work.

In his case study of public school reform in Chicago which devolved decision-making to the school site where parents, teachers, and administrators collaborated in making policy, Archon Fung demonstrates that localizing power has to be combined with processes for accountability and oversight managed by the central school authority. Funding for technical support and training in democratic deliberation is also fundamental. Further, as Fung and Erik Wright argue, based on a comparison of different outcomes of school reform projects, the stark differences in resources that the various players bring to the table have to be equalized. Administrators exercise managerial power through their connection to the central authority, teachers' claims to authority based on expertise are backed up by their union, while parents, especially working-class and poor parents, have no institutionalized base of power or authority. Fung and Wright point out that in general experts are reluctant to share power with non-experts in decisional processes and teachers are no exception to this rule. They argue that shared governance in which teachers, administrators and parents truly collaborate in making school policy and solving

problems requires that parents are organized or are supported by a community-based organization—what they call a “countervailing” power to insider groups (administrators and teachers)—who otherwise dominate the field. Under these conditions, they argue, schools in Chicago, Oakland, and Texas have been able to make collaborative governance work. (Fung and Wright, 2003)

While parents need to be organized in order to negotiate with bureaucratic insiders, workers also need to be empowered within institutions. Although teachers can use their unions and contracts to gain some job security, they are necessarily on the defensive vis a vis school administration. Professionals have always relied on claims to expertise as a strategy for defending their autonomy on the job. But so long as they need to defend themselves, they are unlikely to be willing to share power with others. The more secure professional workers are, the less resistant they might be to allowing others to have a say in their work. Empowering teachers by devolving decisions to the local school is a step in this direction. From the other side, parents need time for education and training (e.g., in child development and pedagogy) and for participating in the classroom, or at the daycare center, if they are going to be able to effectively collaborate with teachers and administrators in democratic decision-making. The reduction in work hours, proposed by Gornick and Meyers, would be an important background condition supporting shared governance in public childcare.

### Worker Cooperatives in the Social Economy

Although we might prefer to see publicly organized and funded early childhood education and care become the norm in the U.S, day care provision is dominated by for-profit and non-profit childcare centers and family day care providers. They will be huge contenders in

any movement to expand public funding for early childcare and education in this country. One way to counter their claim that they are more responsive to parental influence (via “consumer choice”) is to develop models of early childhood education and care within the public schools that are, as I argued above, accessible and democratic. Another strategy toward democratizing the delivery of care has emerged in what has come to be called the “social economy”—non-profit organizations, producer cooperatives, mutual benefit societies and worker collectives—a sector of economic activity between the state and the market.

Over the past two decades, the social economy has expanded in response to needs for human services unmet by government programs. In the US, the expansion of this non-profit sector is motivated primarily by neo-liberal restructuring of the state, which off-loads public services through contracting out to non-profits relying on non-union, low-paid, predominantly female, labor. In Sweden, Italy, and Quebec, Canada, the expansion of the social economy also has been spurred on by state retrenchment and the resulting unmet needs for caregiving services. But where in the US, hierarchically managed non-profit organizations dominate the field of government social service contractors, in other countries worker cooperatives have taken advantage of openings to create new forms of social and health service delivery. In Quebec, the expansion of worker cooperatives into the field was facilitated by a feminist social movement and trade union support. (Graefe, 2002) In Sweden, also, it appears that the trade union federations, worried about privatization of public services, have supported public funding of worker cooperatives and other forms of non-private enterprise which contract with the state to deliver social and health services. (Beng and Lovendahl, 1997) In Italy, where producer cooperatives were already well institutionalized, legislation in 1991 expanded state protection and regulation to include “social cooperatives”—worker cooperatives which are expected to

provide benefits to their local community as well as to their own members. Cooperative members included, in addition to paid workers, users of the services as well as financing entities and public institutions. The legislation also required that employment standards and benefits match those of the Italian state. (Vanek, n.d.) Following the Italian model, Quebec also recognizes “solidarity cooperatives” whose membership includes those in the community using the services. Unlike Italy, however, in Quebec the wages and benefits of workers in the social economy are not linked to those of state workers.

There is good evidence that worker cooperatives in the caregiving field offer far better wages and working conditions, including opportunities for professional development, than do private firms.<sup>2</sup> And, in particular, the social cooperatives, combining worker ownership with a mandate to include users of services in decision-making, create social relationships that have the potential to constitute publicly funded care services that are more like a “commons” than consumer goods. On the other hand, they also may be used to facilitate a neo-liberal agenda that undercuts public workers and their unions. While many of the services provided in the social economy in Quebec have never been delivered through public agencies (e.g., home care), other services, such as community health care, have been moved out of the state into the social economy as a cost-saving strategy. (Mandell, 2003, p. 12) Locally-based, responsive to local needs, supported by social movements, and by their own regional networks, the organizations of the social economy in Quebec have resisted the worst consequences of the neo-liberal restructuring and privatization that has devastated neighboring Ontario. Nonetheless, wages and benefits in the social economy lag well behind those of public workers and enterprises in the social economy have little bargaining power in relation to the state agencies on which they

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<sup>2</sup> Two instructive examples here are Childspace day care cooperative in Philadelphia and Cooperative Home Care Associates in New York City. See, Sloan Work & Family Network, 1999; Inserra et. al., 2002; Whitaker (n.d.), Laursen, 2006.

depend for contracts. (Graefe, 2002) Decisions about funding and levels of service are not made at the local level, where organizations of the social economy can mobilize support, but are monopolized by the traditional, highly centralized and inaccessible state bureaucracy. As Peter Graefe argues in his analysis of the Quebec social economy, “harnessing the social economy to progressive ends will at some point require democratizing the state.” (Graefe, 2002, p. 258) The examples of empowered participatory governance in Porto Alegre, Brazil and Kerala, India outlined in Deepening Democracy offer hope here. (Fung and Wright, 2003)

While no panacea, worker-owned and cooperatively run day care centers have the potential to incorporate parents into decision-making in ways that hierarchical and non-democratic workplaces do not. The most important aspect of a worker cooperative in this regard is that workers play guiding roles in management and exercise greater control over work processes and policies than in typical hierarchical settings. Having security as worker-owners should facilitate shared decision-making and collaboration between parents and careworkers, since workers’ claims to control over their conditions of work do not have to be protected from managerial intrusion. The cooperative culture that infuses the social cooperative movement and the legally mandated requirement to incorporate users in decision-making encourages/enforces collaboration. Still, informal practices may undermine formal requirements for equal participation. At this point, social cooperatives are at the beginning of an exciting experiment in which over time and no doubt through conflict as well as cooperation, the specific practices, institutional structures, and organizational scale necessary to ensure democratic participation will emerge.

Of course, democratic organizations face many of the same issues as hierarchical organizations: how to facilitate communication, manage conflict, motivate and engage workers,

exercise authority, maintain commitment, all made more complex by the dilemmas of democratic leadership and decision-making. Additionally, in caregiving work, as in any work that engages expertise, differences in knowledge and skills threaten to undermine equality of participation and authority. Finally, the incorporation of those who rely on services into decision making further complicates the challenges of democratic process. Resolving such problems is no easy task—but there is a huge difference between a workplace where such inequalities are not only accepted but rewarded and one where these inbuilt inequalities are acknowledged as a problem to be overcome. (Rothschild-Whitt, 1982).

At the heart of the vastly expanded, publicly funded, and universal programs that Meyers and Gornick envision are two claims: 1) that providing care for people over the life cycle is a social responsibility, an obligation that reflects our ties to one another as a human community and 2) that men and women ought to share equally in the work that these programs support because we value gender equality and because nurturing others is a basic human pleasure and skill that men should develop and enjoy. We might argue, and many have argued, for these programs in other ways: that they make workers more efficient, that without them our economy wastes women's talents, that they ensure children grow up to be productive citizens rather than drains on the society. While these arguments may be persuasive to those who hold power and make policy decisions, they are not the ideas that inspire activism—and inspiring activism will be necessary to win these significant reforms. Since caregiving workers are overwhelmingly female and predominantly women of color, and since women are also predominantly the unpaid caregivers, it will fall to women to drive this movement. Alternative models for democratically organizing care work and housing contribute to building such a movement, because they help to counter the anxieties that women experience around their responsibilities for care, anxieties that

are powerfully mobilized by both social conservative and neo-liberal discourses. And the people involved in these experiments, the skills they can share, and the ways of working and living they develop, offer compelling testimony to the possibilities of social solidarity and equality.

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