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**Should Feminists Aim for Gender Symmetry?
Why a Dual-Earner/Dual-Carer Society Is Not Every Feminist's Utopia**

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Ann Shola Orloff
Department of Sociology
Northwestern University
1810 Chicago Avenue
Evanston, Illinois 60208, USA
a-orloff@northwestern.edu

Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers argue persuasively that to advance toward greater gender egalitarianism, feminists everywhere – or, at least, across the developed countries of the west¹ -- should pursue a set of policies that will help to bring into being, and support, a utopia of “gender symmetry” in the allocation and performance of carework and paid employment (or, presumably, other kinds of participation in collective activities, such as politics). In their view, it is the gender division of labor – above all, men’s greater participation in the public spheres of paid work and politics and women’s greater responsibility for unpaid care work – that underpins gender inequality. Thus, ultimately, women’s emancipation demands the dissolution of that division of labor. Their main focus, however, is not on the utopia of gender symmetry and the transformations that it would entail, but on policy institutions derived from contemporary practice in several European countries, above all Sweden, which are expected to serve as the way stations on the path toward gender symmetry. These policies are individual entitlements to paid leaves and well-developed care services available as a right, alongside a restructuring of employment to reduce work time. They argue that such policies put us on the road to gender symmetry by allowing and encouraging both men and women to work for pay and to participate in family caregiving in equal measures.

Certainly, there are many attractive features to this vision. Indeed, there is already a lot to like about the Scandinavian social-democratic model, even before its utopian extensions, including its explicit commitment to gender equality, excellent care services and very low poverty rates among children and solo mothers – and this is especially so when we contrast the Nordic model to current US social provision, with its gaping gaps in coverage against the everyday risks of contemporary life, and the high levels of insecurity, poverty, illiteracy and crime

¹ I agree with Hassim (in this volume) that the spatial, political and social limits of the proposal deserve greater scrutiny.

which have flourished in their wake. But the task here is not to contrast – yet again – existing Nordic and US welfare and gender policy models (but see Orloff 2006; Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999).² We are asked to consider a gender-egalitarian utopia and the policy institutions that might get us closer to it. But Gornick and Meyers' essay is a bit lop-sided in this regard. While gender symmetry is portrayed as the opposite of the gender asymmetries that are implicated in women's oppression, the ideal is not itself subject to much probing; we are not given much of a sense of what such symmetry would look like, beyond that men's and women's time in paid work and informal care work would converge -- or how we might measure progress toward symmetry. Instead, it is simply assumed that if asymmetry is associated with inequality, symmetry should be associated with equality – a perilous assumption, indeed, as I will try to demonstrate below. Gornick and Meyers lavish their attention on policy institutions that would allegedly begin to correct the asymmetries and move us along the road to their utopia. And these policy institutions do not actually look very different from what is already in place in Scandinavia – indeed, the authors see this as proof of the potential “realness” of their utopian vision.

In the following pages, I will do two things. First, I will assess Gornick and Meyers' argument for a feminist utopia based on gender symmetry, considering their proposals from the perspective of long-standing feminist debates about emancipatory projects based on “sameness” and “difference,” how we can get beyond the well-known limitations of both, and perhaps find ways to overcome this very dilemma. I attempt to unearth the assumptions about politics, culture and gender that support their contentions. And in answer to the question of whether feminists should pursue gender symmetry, I will say “no.” Second, I will offer a different take on how feminists might approach political goals, which may be long- or short-term, utopian, radical or reformist. While Gornick and Meyers take an essentially structural and deductive approach, I offer a more inductive and historical approach. “Interests,” or, as I prefer, goals,³ as well as utopic visions must be understood in specific political and historical contexts. I say this not in the sense that some utopias are conceivable and desirable, but unreachable in certain countries – as some Swedophilic political realists might conclude about the US and Nordic-inspired utopias featuring generous parental leave and extensive, high-quality public care services. One could agree with the ultimate goal, or utopia, of gender symmetry, and think that there might be

² I have argued that these comparisons have been far too influenced by “Swedophilia,” and that we need a more comprehensive appreciation of the advantages as well as failures of existing US gender policy (as I offer with colleagues in O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999) – but that is not the subject of our concern here.

³ Thanks to Julia Adams for many patient discussions of precisely this point; she convinced me that the concept of “interests” brings too much accreted semiotic baggage, trailing any attempt to set it free from understandings of politics as determined (in the last instance of course) by “material” forces.

policies other than those highlighted by Gornick and Meyers that could help deliver us there.⁴ This point is of course true, but hardly a startling proposition. One also needs to question the desirability of the goal itself, both in terms of the specific substance of gender equality and with respect to how political goals emerge more generally.

I argue for a utopian vision that emerges inductively, from an investigation of feminist political practices and theorizing, rather than assuming that we can deduce the features of a gender-egalitarian utopia and desirable political goals from analyses of gender “interests” read off social locations and structures that seem not to vary substantially across the developed world. Thus I question Gornick and Meyers’ goal, gender symmetry, from the angles of political and empirical as well as normative analysis. Individuals and groups come to conceive, understand, and analyze their situations and themselves as political subjects with particular sorts of “needs” and goals, and develop strategies for stability or change through historically-specific cultural and political processes. It is, I think, impossible to understand how and when any goal – or utopia – emerges and might be brought into being without considering politics; the very desirability of goals (or utopias) depends on context.

My own analysis and normative probing has led me to advocate political goals that would expand choice, or decisional autonomy, based in interdependence, and inclusive citizenship, emerging from a consideration of diversity in modern societies and from an understanding of gender as constitutive of subjects. Further, as we fashion better policy and social arrangements, we must include mechanisms for democratic accountability and of respect for the multiplicity of gender arrangements among the diverse citizens and residents of modern states. While I am favorable to basing these entitlements on citizenship, I would also argue that this must be problematized; we need to find ways to take account of issues of immigration and integration, but I will not here pursue these fully. The policy institutions that might serve as “way stations” toward this utopian condition will vary, depending on context. Thus, finally, let me add that one might agree with Gornick and Meyers – as I do – that increasing support to care is desirable (although I would advocate a somewhat different menu of policies, closer to Ferree’s proposals than to theirs), without supporting their vision of utopia, or believing that their preferred policy package is likely to deliver us to it. More below!

⁴ I do believe that historically-specific institutional legacies make certain policy approaches likely, possible, or impossible – this is at least partly a matter of politics, as these legacies create, reinforce, or alter definitions of problems, understanding of patterns of coalitions and enmities, and sets of institutional capacities (Weir, Orloff and Skocpol 1988), while conditioning “actors’ struggles to name themselves and their protagonists by generating support for the formulation of their own preferred collective identity,” as Jenson and Mahon (1993) put it. In short, “policy creates politics” (Pierson 1993).

Analyzing Gornick and Meyers' Utopia of Gender Symmetry: Gender Inequality, Gender Interests, and Gender Politics

Gornick and Meyers proceed from the conviction that gender difference in patterns of engaging in care work and employment is the key to gender inequality and that "gender symmetric" social arrangements would better suit women's – and, interestingly, also men's -- interests. Their proposals have been informed by feminist thinking and long-standing Marxist theorizing about the significance of women's entry to employment in unsettling patriarchal arrangements and empowering women. In their policy proposals, they respond as well as to research on children's development, and a distinctively American concern with the social problems produced by our long-hours, employment-oriented culture. The dual earner/dual carer arrangement:

is a society in which men and women engage symmetrically in employment and caregiving and all parents have realistic opportunities to combine waged work with the direct provision of care for their children. A dual-earner / dual-carer society is one that supports equal opportunities for men and women in employment, equal contributions from mothers and fathers at home, and high quality care for children provided both by parents and by well-qualified and well-compensated nonparental caregivers (Gornick and Meyers January 2007 mss, p.3).⁵

Reaching the utopia of gender symmetry depends on several interrelated transformations: the dissolution of the remaining gendered division of labor in employment and in the home, a thorough transformation of workplace practices and the establishment of state policies that would encourage and support the model of a "dual earner/dual carer" household. But Gornick and Meyers eschew any deep analysis of how gender itself might be ended – for that is the implication of "dissolving" the gender division of labor; and while they indicate the need for controls on capitalists' prerogatives, they do not examine in any detail how capitalist and masculinist employment structures could be changed, and instead focus almost exclusively on state policies. They outline a package of work-family reconciliation policies that would support dual earner/dual carer arrangements: paid family leave provisions in which both mothers and fathers get equal, non-transferable shares of leave; working-time regulations; and early childhood education and care services.⁶ Gornick and Meyers find the inspiration

⁵ It is not entirely clear how we would measure gender symmetry. Does it depend on 50/50 informal care and employment splits by all heterosexual couples? Most couples? What about singles or gay couples or other familial or household arrangements? Or should it be measured at the societal level?

⁶ Although they mention "equal opportunities" in employment, they do not outline policies that would regulate equal treatment on hiring and wages and prevent

for these policies in Sweden, where social-democratic policies have supported mothers' employment with less time stress than in the US, provided better care services and resources for children, and encouraged fathers' caregiving. They contend that the "realness" of their utopia rests on the existence in Sweden, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in several other European countries, of the kind of policies that could conceivably be extended to more aggressively promote equal sharing of care work and paid work by women and men.⁷ And, indeed, while their policy proposals would dramatically change the landscape in the US were they somehow to be enacted, these proposals are already quite familiar in the Nordic countries which are the stimulus for Gornick and Meyers' policy thinking. (How – politically, culturally -- and when such existing policies might be extended is not here on the agenda.) Given how close their ideal policy institutions are to already-existing practices in the Nordic countries, one might ask why these countries are not much closer to symmetry and women's emancipation than they are; although some measures of women's relative well-being vis-à-vis men's are better than in the US (e.g., gendered wage gaps, or poverty ratios), they are far from equal. Perhaps other forces – not solely the gender division of labor – are implicated in sustaining gender? Let's take a look, then, at how they analyze gender inequality.

Underlying Gornick and Meyers' account is the assumption that gender inequality is tied to gender differences in time spent on care and family versus employment and career. As they put it (p.16):

Feminists concerned with the family have concluded that persistent gender inequality in the labor market is both cause and consequence of women's disproportionate assumption of unpaid work in the home. ...[M]en's stronger ties to the labor market carry social, political, and

hostile environments, sticking only with the regulation of working time. I return to this point below.

⁷ Gornick and Meyers claim there is widespread agreement that the Nordic countries plus France and Belgium constitute a "coherent cluster." I think this misreads the evidence. Yes, they all have strong elements of public provision for children's care, but that does not extend to other features of their gender policy models, nor does it reflect similarities in the political forces that brought these services into being. See, for example, Morgan 2006; Mahon 2002; Lewis and Ostner 1995. And specialists on the Nordic countries further insist that gender and family policies are actually becoming more distinctive within the cluster, as right or liberal parties especially put their stamp on policy (see, e.g., Ellingsaeter and Leira 2006). Sweden remains the principal exemplar of policies said to foster dual earner-dual carer households, as the other Nordic countries increasingly embrace "choice," and with it, continuing gender differences in care and employment patterns. Yet note that Sweden, too, features plenty of continuing gender differentiation in work and care patterns.

economic advantages that are denied to many women, especially those who spend substantial amounts of time caring for children.

Gornick and Meyers (2007, pp.8-9) define contemporary problems of gender inequality as resulting from “incomplete transformations,” as we’ve moved from full to partial gender specialization; women have changed a great deal – taking up paid employment in addition to their work of caring (as we all know), but men have not changed enough, and still do much less care work than women. Moreover, labor market and policy institutions assume the traditional division of labor and fail to give adequate support to modern arrangements for caregiving. Sensibly, they do not want to focus solely on women, as some contemporary efforts at achieving better “work-family reconciliation” do (e.g., Esping-Andersen et al. 2002), yet they do not put the blame on men (as, for example, Arlie Hochschild did – at least to some extent [women are implicated, too] -- in *The Second Shift*.) They claim that the interests of men, women, and children are not essentially in conflict. Rather, the “most pressing conflicts of interest arise not between women and men, nor between parents and children, but between the needs of contemporary families and current divisions of labor, workplace practices, and social policies.” I certainly agree with this analysis, as far as it goes, but, as I will argue below, I think it is not fully adequate.

These conditions are pivotal shaping women’s and men’s gender interests, they argue, and because they assume a straightforward link between interests and goals, they are also key to the gender politics of social policies. Women are all disadvantaged by the existing gender division of labor, though to varying degrees – some have the resources needed to buy private services that can help them reconcile family and employment and can negotiate favorable bargains with their employers, while others must struggle with meager resources in unforgiving environments. Yet Gornick and Meyers stress that all women are hurt by the gendering of care burdens, either directly, or indirectly, as, for example, when employers engage in statistical discrimination in the expectation that women will favor family over work commitments. Thus, without considering solutions that center on increasing direct support to women’s (informal, or unpaid) care work, they assume women are in employment, and argue that all women would benefit if the current masculine model of the full-time and unencumbered worker is replaced by a model of an encumbered worker, who also puts in fewer hours than typical men do now (but would still count as “fulltime”). Women should find attractive policies that would encourage, reward and support a more equal division of care work and paid work between men and women. Men, too, are often forced to work too hard by current social arrangements, and certainly cannot contribute more at home as long as they are held to its strictures, even if they want to. (How much they want to is another concern, but this is not pursued.) Gornick and Meyers’ take on the question of gender interests thus echoes Marxist and social-democratic, more than second-wave or contemporary feminist, accounts; men and women do not have opposed gender interests; rather, it is employers and “the state” that are problematic.

Drawing on much feminist work on social policy, Gornick and Meyers advocate policy prescriptions, which are supposed to get us to gender symmetry, that draw on the second-wave feminist contention that “women’s emancipation depends on reaching parity with men in the public spheres of employment and politics” (Gornick and Meyers, p.3) – although without as much of the critical edge vis-à-vis men. Their basic commitment to women’s employment alongside support to care is nourished as well from broadly Marxist sources, via Scandinavian social democracy. This connects them to a greater concern for supporting caregiving activities than was usual for second wave feminists, and marks their approach as having gone beyond the liberal feminist proposals (“universal breadwinner” in the terminology of Nancy Fraser [1994], or “sameness” feminism), or “androgyny” in the terms of more radical feminists, of the 1970s.⁸ This seems to have been amplified by the authors’ familiarity with Scandinavian developments, which had a homegrown set of supports for caregiving linked to concerns about population, labor supply and working women’s rights to be mothers (Hobson and Bergmann 2002; Hobson 1993; Ellingsaeter and Leira 2006).⁹

Gornick and Meyers’ proposal might be positioned in the space created in the aftermath of bitter feminist conflicts over “sameness” and “difference” in politics and policy, in which protagonists argued about whether women’s interests (taking those as relatively unproblematic, at the time) would be best served by strategies assuming and promoting women’s similarity to men, or by those which assumed women’s difference from men (see, e.g., Bacchi 19xx; Milkman 1995?). The fight was staged in many policy arenas, for example, how best to craft policy on pregnancy and employment protection (is pregnancy a disability like any other meriting inclusion in existing general disability protections? Or is it a gender- or sex-specific condition warranting a gender-specific protection? [Vogel 1993?]) Questions of care and the body loomed large in these discussions. While feminists (especially though not only in the US) in the 1970s seemed to gravitate towards “sameness” strategies, the 1980s had brought greater attention to the

⁸ Perhaps this also reflects the direct influence of “difference feminism” – meaning largely though not entirely care -- that has characterized feminism in the developed world since the 1980s; this certainly influenced Fraser. Yet the important care theorists (e.g., Tronto 1993; Sevenhuisjen 20xx; Kittay 20xx) and welfare state scholars who emphasize care (e.g., Fiona Williams 200x) are missing from Gornick and Meyers’ references.

⁹ Gornick and Meyers are also motivated by concerns of developmental psychology about children’s well-being, mainly American in origin, but they have rebelled against a common prescription of that US literature (which is usually quite distinct from feminist analysis) – to support mothers’ withdrawal from employment (e.g., Waldfogel 20xx; McLanahan 19xx). Sweden as source of policy inspiration gave them a way to respond to worries about care without losing the emphasis on mothers’ employment, and allowed them to fashion a credible set of policy institutions for promoting dual earner/dual carer households.

importance of “difference,” especially that based on care. Since then, there have been several attempts to go beyond “sameness versus difference.” Among feminist policy analysts, the work of Nancy Fraser has been extremely significant, in seemingly offering a way out of the dilemma – yet unlike poststructuralist analysts in the Butlerian vein, she works on the familiar terrain of work and care. I want briefly to examine Fraser’s argument because it provides insight into the analytic underpinnings of the dual earner/dual carer policy model that Gornick and Meyers have directly borrowed from Rosemary Crompton.

Nancy Fraser, in her influential 1994 article “After the Family Wage,” performs a Hegelian maneuver to overcome the sameness/difference problem, which leads her to advocate a policy model analogous to the dual earner/dual carer – “universal caregiver.” Investigating feminist utopian visions for reforming the welfare state in gender-egalitarian directions, in a period of crisis and restructuring, she identifies two approaches -- dubbed “universal breadwinner” and “caregiver parity” – roughly corresponding to the preferences and practices of US versus European feminists. The former would allow and encourage women to act as men do in the economy, as breadwinners, earning a family-supporting wage, and ceding carework to others -- not the unpaid housewife of the “traditional” household, but the paid service workers of the state, thus commodifying everyone while commodifying care. While this model would lead to a number of improvements in the situation of most women, Fraser (1994, p.602) critiques this approach as problematic on several scores. For example, while the model depends on full employment, she doubts everyone can be employed; and it depends on care being removed from households, but she believes some care cannot be outsourced. She sums up by saying the model is androcentric and unworkable, and ultimately unhelpful to women’s interest in equality, because it expects women to become like men. The “caregiver parity” model does not neglect care, or women’s work as caregivers, but instead tries to compensate them for the disadvantages this work creates in a masculinist and capitalist society. So women and men continue to be different. Yet Fraser (1994, p.609) finds this model also unhelpful because gender differences ultimately continue to create disadvantages for women that cannot be compensated; women end up marginalized even though better protected against poverty and other difficulties. Fraser’s dissection of existing feminist policy approaches is extremely useful, and lays the groundwork for new perspectives – such as those championed by Gornick and Meyers, or Rosemary Crompton before them.

The way out of the sameness/difference dilemma, says Fraser, is the synthesis of the two earlier approaches, a political ideal she calls the “universal caregiver,” in which men are made the focus of efforts at change, rather than women – in other words, the problem is that most men are unlike what “most women are now,” caregivers who are also workers. This is an important analytic innovation (paralleling others working to decenter the masculine). In this way, care is valorized while not leaving it solely to women – we try to retain what’s good about

women's devotion to care while, by making it normative for men as well as women, avoiding the problems of women's marginalization and the devaluation of care. To be sure, Fraser notes, this implies that the deconstruction of gender difference is a precondition for gender equity -- we must "end gender as we know it" (Fraser 1994, p.611)! This is a revolutionary demand indeed.¹⁰ But perhaps in a more reformist vein, attempting to make men more like women -- by finding ways to encourage their participation in care, such as the fully individual leave entitlements Gornick and Meyers propose -- would still be a worthwhile goal.

I want to probe more deeply into the analysis of gender -- and of subjects and politics -- that underlies the Gornick and Meyer proposal for gender symmetry. To my mind, they take too lightly the deep investments people have in gender (e.g., West and Fenstermaker 200x), and the ways in which subjectivity and knowledge are grounded in gender categories (Butler 1990; Zerilli 200x). Taking account of these investments matters insofar as it points to men's investments in preserving the power that current social arrangements give them, but also women's concerns to preserve their power in the domain of the private, care-giving realm; identities are formed in relation to whether men and women see themselves as caregivers or not. This can certainly be taken up from a range of different theoretical angles, but many scholars would find it hard to imagine subjects -- political actors -- whose "needs" or "interests" can be said to preexist culturally constituted consciousness, including gendered understandings and knowledge.¹¹ For example, R.W. Connell highlights political and psychic aspects of gender in an account of gender relations as shaped by three structures: labor, power, cathexis (see also Rubin 1975). Or take Joan Scott's (1986) germinal intervention, which defines gender first as a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes and expressed in symbols, norms, institutions and politics, and subjective identities, and second as a primary way of signifying power. One might also look to political and historical accounts that allow the "primary" causes of gender relations (or, less grandly,

¹⁰ Recall that Gornick and Meyers, too, understand the "dissolution of the gender division of labor" as a prerequisite for their utopia of "gender symmetry." This strikes me as unproblematic if we are speaking of the usual understandings of utopia, but more troublesome if we are speaking of "real" utopias.

¹¹ As Adams and Padamsee (2001, p.13) describe a similar set of analyses, these works begin from the premise that

social position--analytically independent of and prior to consciousness-- generates ideas and even identities. The latter are simply assumed to be aligned with actors' positional interests and preconceptual experiences. Further... these identities apply not just to an aggregate of people with the requisite demographic characteristics, but that these actors form a natural group and that their actions can be interpreted accordingly.

policy and political institutions) to vary over time and across place (e.g., Adams 2005; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999).

Scott's analysis is significant for any consideration of "sameness" and "difference" with respect to any sort of politics, utopian or pragmatic, for it points to the continuing productivity of gender – the ways it constrains us both to accept and refuse difference. Even when we speak on behalf of gender symmetry, we speak "as women," and must refer to difference. Moreover, while Scott points to the constitutively gendered character of subjects, she makes no assumption that gendered identities necessarily lead to a politics of gender difference. Au contraire! Women in the democratic age have been continually attracted to universalist visions. Similarly, Denise Riley (1988) or Judith Butler (1990, 200x) point to the variability and instability of gender categories for individuals, and for collectivities, and to the diverse ways gender can be mobilized politically.

Of particular concern for the prospects of a gender-symmetric utopia that will depend on men's recruitment to caregiving, men's attachment to the powers and privileges of masculinity seems to be underplayed in Gornick and Meyers' account. I am thinking here of men's work to keep in place gendered divisions of labor by avoiding dirty work at home and in the workplace or by excluding women from favored positions in the paid labor force through sexual and other forms of harassment, or discrimination in hiring, pay, or occupational access.¹² Will men be dissuaded from making these power plays simply by the offer of incentives to take up care? Women's disadvantages at work are indeed linked to the statistical discrimination practiced "rationally" by employers calculating the likely impact on employment of women's carework burdens (taking leaves, for instance). But there's plain old discrimination to deal with, too (see, e.g., Correll 200x; Charles and Grusky 2005).¹³ Feminists have identified a range of factors that – even if

¹² Note that this can be the case even among those accepting "material" determination of interests.

¹³ I wonder about several things. Are they refraining from proposing policies targeting masculine privilege out of a political calculation that this would be counterproductive, pushing away potential allies among men, particularly in the unions and social-democratic parties that have been such important players in expanding social policy in the Scandinavian – and indeed European – context? Do we see here, then, a bit of a concern about political and practical feasibility? Or are Gornick and Meyers simply assuming that we already have policies flowing from an understanding of masculine interests in opportunity hoarding (to use the rather bloodless term favored by some theorists of inequality) or worse? They would be partially right about the US (and to a lesser extent, other English-speaking countries); yet these sorts of policies are rather less developed in other countries (see also Zippel's contribution to this volume). Or do they think such policies are unnecessary?

one does not accept them as principal sources of unequal gender relations – surely contribute importantly to it: sexuality, reproduction and violence (see e.g., Brush 2002). Perhaps these factors are required to understand the continuing problem of women’s oppression even in “women-friendly welfare states” like those found in Norden? Adapting Catherine MacKinnon’s (1989) words, (at least sometimes) the problem for women is “domination not difference.”

On the flip side, their vision of gender symmetry and “gender-egalitarian caregiving” also seems to occlude both the body – and especially women’s bodies – and women’s attachment to caregiving, promoting another assumption of “sameness” with reference to men’s and women’s equivalence going into childrearing. How do the demands of pregnancy and lactation affect any shift to “gender symmetry”? (In Scandinavia, to date, complete equalization of leaves between men and women has been blocked, in part because of concerns about breastfeeding [ellingsaeter and Leira 2006]). Many feminists have stress bodily aspects of gender (these days usually assuming that this also implies cultural understandings), and would on these grounds alone dismiss policies or utopias based on androgyny, or symmetry (see, e.g., Moi 200x, Kruks 200x, and of course, de Beauvoir 19xx).

Can we assume an unproblematic embrace of their socialist-feminist-inspired symmetric version of “egalitarianism” among women?¹⁴ What are we to make, then, of the widespread, well-documented preferences of many women to pursue life courses that are not premised on 50/50 sharing of paid work and care work with male partners? “Traditional” women in “new orthodox” religious modes especially pose a challenge to interpretations of gender that assume any kind of straightforward assumption that all women will find egalitarian arrangements in their interests, but even less extreme versions of women’s attachments to lives founded on caregiving pose problems for the symmetric scenario. The standard answer to these challenges among “materialist” and structurally-determinist analysts has made allusion to false consciousness, or to short-term versus long-term interests. Thus, men and women may not know it now, but surely they will be better off under egalitarian conditions, defined as gender symmetry. Understanding preferences that confirm the existing division of labor as merely

¹⁴ Much feminist analysis has been concerned with the power of social location to shape our political ideas, but here I do not want to make the standard “standpoint” critique of Gornick and Meyers. The problem is not that Gornick and Meyers have proposed a set of policies that somehow flow from self-interest based on their social location, and that might contradict the interests of other, “worthier” women. Rather, it is that they present their vision as something other than politically- and historically-contextualized. But their program – like any other -- will have to contend with other visions of gender equality, or other political and social goods, that women as well as men might embrace.

“adaptive” to constraining conditions may be less troublesome – though such an account would be improved if cultural processes were also invoked. But such approaches are hard to take seriously if we also value democratic politics and accountability in policy-making.

The analytic challenge for Gornick and Meyers of what I would call the “depth” of gender relations is matched in seriousness by a number of other challenges that might be grouped under the banner of “differences.” We have just discussed the wide range of variation in men’s and women’s preferences vis-à-vis the gender division of labor. A separate issue concerns the multiplicity of differences among women (and men). Some analysts embracing an “intersectional” analysis contend that advantaged white women may suffer from gendered differences in care, but that they are able to either mitigate or entirely offload their problems by using services provided by disadvantaged women of color, who suffer from more severe incompatibilities between employment and care – and who in fact may be deprived of opportunities to mother at all. Michael Shalev (in this volume) raises the question of class differences among women in terms of orientations about mothering and paid work, assuming their social locations cause their interests not just to differ but to collide; Duncan and Edwards (19xx) contend that such orientations (which they call “gendered moral rationalities”) vary not so much by class or its proxy, educational level, as by local gender cultures. The difference between these scholars is important, but they both raise a similar problem for Gornick and Meyers’ assumptions of uniformity of women’s interests. While, as outlined above, I disagree with the social determinism of these analyses, it is clear that both the individual preferences and the political demands of different groups of women have been at odds. To take but one example, in the 1970s, NWRO advocated a kind of maternalist policy of making AFDC more generous, enabling women’s full-time caregiving, while other feminist groups pursued equal employment opportunities and the extension of child care services. “Differences among women” are not simply an American concern, arising from the vexed and racially-divided history of US feminism and social justice movements. Instead, we see conflicts over gender arrangements, and disputes among feminists about how best to proceed politically, crossing the developed west, and indeed, the entire globe.

“Differences among women” (and men) also indexes a key concern that is absent from Gornick and Meyers’ utopic considerations: *who* will be entitled to these new social protections and services? Unfortunately, the authors have not paid attention to the question of exactly who would be included in these programs, although they seem to assume that nation-states will be the entities running these policies, and thus entitlement would be based on citizenship -- but the boundaries set by states, and their immigration policies, are not in question. Historical accounts of the development of systems of social provision and regulation are increasingly highlighting the link between generous programs (such as those provided in Norden, or imagined by Gornick and Meyers) and the existence of “we-feeling,” or solidarity. This in turn has been linked to practices

of social closure, until recently at the level of the nation-state. According to Maurizio Ferrera (2006), despite greater transnational movement of people, capital, and ideas “solidarity remains a national affair.... Social sharing builds on ‘closure’. It presupposes the existence of a clearly demarcated and cohesive community, whose members feel they belong to the same whole and that they are linked by reciprocity ties vis-à-vis common risks and similar needs.” Modern welfare states of the “golden age” – the period in which Scandinavians initiated pro-gender equality leave policies and developed public services -- enjoyed an alignment of redistributive boundaries with national territorial boundaries. In countries such as the United States with extensive social divisions, this meant that not all citizens were in fact treated equally, although this was the formal premise and promise of post-WW2 national social benefits (see, e.g., Glenn 2002). Increasing immigration also challenges the citizenship-based models of Europe. But clearly there is a deep challenge to any nationally-based utopia, such as Gornick and Meyers’ seems to be, once we think globally (as, for example, Hassim argues forcefully in her essay in this volume).

While paying too little attention to differences among women (or among men), it is not the case that Gornick and Meyers are simply stuck in an old vision of “gender difference,” emphasizing “women” and “men” as unitary and essentially different categories. Rather, they have embraced an approach that promises, by shifting the burden of change to men, to overcome the problems of understanding gender inequality in terms of a masculine standard. (It is the assumption of a masculine standard which forces the framing of gender problems in terms of women’s “sameness” and “difference” from men.) But their solution actually recreates the demand of sameness in a new form: women and men will still be the same, but (allegedly) on women’s terms, rather than men’s. In Gornick and Meyers’ gender-symmetric utopia, men must “become like what women are now,” as Fraser (1994) puts it -- meaning, they have to care more, while women are also working (for pay, that is) more. One wonders, when women cannot become like men are now, according to many feminist critics of androcentric ideals, on account of their attachment to care (among other things), how it is that men can become like women are now?¹⁵ How will men develop an attachment to care?¹⁶ (And let us recall that not all women are equally attached to or attracted to care work, or undertake it in similar ways.) The vision further presupposes that all are equally capable of caregiving (see also Weir 2005). Men might well be induced to care more – and I hope they are – but this is unlikely to lead to the “dissolution” of gender; rather, we are likely to see the reconfiguration of gender, perhaps in more desirable patterns. Finally, one might also fault this model for its singularity – it assumes, as Cynthia Willett (200x, p.xx) has said, a

¹⁵ I am grateful to Linda Zerilli for first raising this question in conversation, and continuing to probe its implications with me.

¹⁶ Indeed, some recent research on contemporary North American men who are primary caregivers (Doucet 2006) finds that these fathers do not see themselves as “mothering,” but fathering.

“single norm of a socially useful person.” Is it possible that we can have greater involvement of men in care without producing anything like “symmetry” or the effacement of gender difference? Is it possible to value care more than is now the case, without assuming everyone will participate in giving care? As may be clear from my posing such questions, I will argue that the answer is “yes.”

A Contextual Understanding of Feminists’ Political Goals

Let me conclude by briefly discussing an alternative approach to feminist politics and the feminist utopias that emerge from such an analysis. While I certainly share many feminist values with Gornick and Meyers and am favorable to some of their policy proposals, we differ on how to develop political goals, be they feminist “utopias” or “way stations.” The shorthand for our analytic differences is deductive versus inductive, expert versus political, singular versus plural. I proceed inductively, from the historical experiences of various western feminist and women’s movements and theorists. At a very basic level, starting points for feminists in different countries vary – what kinds of social and political capacities are on hand, what women “need” versus what they already have, what kinds of conflicts characterize the polity, and so on – and these influence what political actors desire. Still, the culture and politics of liberal individualism of the western countries – particularly those with a Protestant religious-political legacy -- has shaped, in a foundational way, the diverse understandings of feminists and women’s movements. Feminists have, of course, usually embraced a revised individualism, one that rejects masculine standards and the assumption of a rational, unconstrained subject, one that takes account of relationality and interdependence, yet it is still recognizably liberal in its assumption of the importance of personhood (Reich 200x; O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999, chapter 2).¹⁷ But other values are combined in distinctive ways with feminist ones, and nationally-specific politics and cultures have produced a wonderful variation in feminist goals, and utopian visions.

Different utopias have flourished in different political contexts, and bear the marks of their parentage as well as of their adoptive context. This is not to say that specific policy legacies in any sense “dictate” corresponding utopias, or that there can be no transfer of utopian ideas – surely there is. Wollstonecraft, DeBeauvoir, Wittig and Butler, to name only a few feminist utopians, have been read and appropriated globally. It is simply to say, as in any case of translation, that the receiving context shapes the reception and understanding of the transferred object.

¹⁷ Certainly feminism can – and has – emerged in non-western contexts, but as the protagonists themselves insist, it takes on context-specific forms; and it is still an open question about the extent to which any kind of feminism presupposes some kind of autonomy and individualism.

Let us take a closer look at the contrasting situations of feminists imagining utopian futures in Scandinavia, and in the US. The Nordic welfare model of excellent support to care and mothers' employment was built on notions of class equality and gender "equality in difference" (Jenson and Mahon 1993). These systems emerged – as did all the nascent welfare states of the modern era – from a context in which support to social reproduction was infused with eugenic thinking; generous social provision was based on sharing within the nation, not outside its boundaries. Some Nordic feminists, especially but not only within and in alliance with social-democratic parties, have succeeded in extending an originally gender-differentiated scheme – a set of policies with maternalist roots, which focused on allowing working-class, employed women to be mothers – to encourage men's caregiving as well as allowing all women to "reconcile" motherhood and employment. Thus, their near-term political goals look a lot like Gornick and Meyers' "utopian" policy institutions of equally-shared parental leave, more extensive services, and workplace reforms. But feminists have also raised issues concerning men's greater power in politics, the economy and personal life – problems that they do not think can be solved simply through equalizing leave-taking (see, e.g., Bergqvist et al 20xx). Clearly, some Nordic feminists are most concerned with equalizing men's and women's time spent on care and paid work, but others have developed utopian visions that focus more centrally on empowering women across spheres of life, and especially in politics (see, e.g., Nyberg 200x). And other feminists have opposed equally-divided parental leaves, responding to concerns raised by women who do not want to give up their own leave time – perhaps because they want to breastfeed for longer than six months, perhaps because they fear the fathers of their children will not take the leave (in which case total parental leave time would drop and children would have to go to day care before the age of 1 or 1-1/2).¹⁸

Nordic feminists are increasingly attempting to revise their thinking about policies, politics and ultimate goals in the face of the challenge of diversity, dealing with the integration of ethnic minorities, especially non-European immigrants (see, e.g., Siim 200x; Borchorst 200x). They do not yet agree how their generous systems can change to accommodate newcomers, nor about how much such newcomers – often from non-western countries – should be asked to change, especially in terms of their gender and familial practices. In these difficulties, we see Scandinavian versions of the difficult debates about the veil, sex-segregated schooling and the like that have roiled continental Europe and Britain, and are far from resolved. Gender and family practices have been part of what defines the "we" of the west, especially in contrast with the Islamic, immigrant "Other" (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995), and yet feminists have commitments to developing a more inclusive feminist utopia, and policy institutions to support it. To say this poses political difficulties is to put it mildly.

¹⁸ Morgan's essay, in this volume, deal with these issues.

Diversity has another face in Norden – that of the demand for greater citizen “choice” with respect to services and care arrangements, which has been forwarded by “third way” and “recalibrative” projects, and links with the greater social diversity of these societies. In combination with demands for fiscal cutbacks, these demands for greater citizen “choice” have helped to shift policy across Norden – with the current exception of Sweden -- towards “cash for care,” in which citizens can “cash out” the cost of public services (Berven 2005; Ellingsaeter and Leira 2006).¹⁹ It is usually mothers who have opted to take the cash and stay at home, and this reflects a class gradient. As is the pattern across most western countries, well-educated women pursue life patterns most symmetrical with men’s (tales of “opt-out revolutions” notwithstanding), while less-educated women tend to make greater accommodation to care. Feminists are divided on how to respond: keep pushing for greater involvement of fathers in care, even if it means less time for mothers who may want it? Or support women’s and men’s options to decide, but attempt to make the choices about at-home care versus employment more “real” by insisting that cash for care policies be accompanied by guaranteed rights to spots in child care centers (e.g., as is the case in Finland)? Clearly, contrasting utopic visions animate these different positions – symmetry versus choice, to put it too simply. And in either case, there is a challenge to maintain and broaden solidarity while accommodating diversity in all its guises.

What about the US? First, it is important to stress that the US is not an “exemplar of limited government intervention,” as Gornick and Meyers (p.6) claim, but that the modes of “intervention” have differed importantly from the European model, with an emphasis on regulation rather than social provision (Orloff 2006; Weir, Orloff and Skocpol 1988; Prasad 2005). We do not confront a blank slate, or simple lack of gender policy, in the US versus well-developed “women-friendly” policies in Scandinavia, but a distinctive alternative gender regime (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999). US versions of feminism, pathbreaking across many areas, have been influential in building this gender regime. The considerable influence of US feminisms in both policy and the broader culture, all too often forgotten when we focus on the obvious failures – like getting paid parental leave or publicly-supported child care services. One thinks of developments in our theories of sexuality and gender (e.g., Butler 1990) or “body rights” (Shaver 1993), among other things. And the US is a leader, not a laggard, in removing discriminatory barriers -- getting women into many masculine blue-collar occupations and the top tiers of management and the professions (including academia), in developing public remedies for sexual harassment (Zippel 2006), and, in the Family and Medical Leave Act, developing an understanding of caregiving needs that extends beyond mothers and children. The leave is not

¹⁹ Check this point – the new bourgeois government in Sweden is proposing something like “cash for care,” and the last bourgeois government of the mid-1990s also had such a program on the books, briefly, before the social democrats returned to power.

paid, and this is clearly a huge problem. Yet we should not ignore that the leave is available to men and women for a very broad range of caregiving needs, and not limited by a maternalist or “reproductionist” logic (see Franke 2001).

What is inescapable from any analytic engagement with actual feminist politics and theorizing in the US is that political actors favoring gender equality or the abolition of “patriarchy” do not agree (and have not agreed) on the question of gender difference or “sameness” (or “symmetry”), and that they have enunciated a rather wide variety of political goals. Thus, for example, in the early twentieth century, many feminists in the US (as in Europe) imagined a maternalist utopia – one in which, based on motherhood, women might be resourced and recognized by the state with allowances and services that would empower them within still-patriarchal households and allow them, sometimes, the capacity to live independently (Koven and Michel 1993; Bock and Thane 1991). In other words, these political actors proceeded from an assumption of gender difference, and did not aspire to symmetry in men’s and women’s participation in care and paid work. Rather, they sought “equality in difference.” (It is important to note that some maternalist, gender-differentiated visions embraced aspects of mothers’ employment, while others did not [Pedersen 1993; Jenson 1986].) Maternalist visions have remained surprisingly resilient in the contemporary period, although it has usually been revised in a degendering direction, from motherhood to care. In other words, the goal becomes supporting caregivers generally and not mothers specifically, although there is often an assumption that most caregivers are and will continue to be women, and most women will be caregivers (see, e.g., Fineman 2004). (And, again, this may or may not be combined with support to the employment of caregivers.)

Something like “gender symmetry” -- a utopia premised on women’s and men’s similarities, and the goal of “halving it all” has been a perennial favorite among certain kinds of US feminists, to be sure. It has affinities with the broader demand for gender neutrality imposed by the US legal-political framework. Gender neutrality has been a wedge against entrenched privilege in many occupations and educational institutions. In the judicial arena, far-reaching anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action programs, and hefty jury verdicts against employers convicted of sexual harassment have broken (or at least begun to crack) glass ceilings. American women occupy professional and managerial positions in much greater numbers than their Swedish (or other European) counterparts. But of course, the shortcomings of this essentially liberal vision are well known. It is difficult to find ways to incentivize men’s care through negative liberties, and it has been more common for feminist political actors to stress the opening of women’s opportunities for vocation, which can be accomplished through legal regulation and the removal of state-sanctioned barriers.²⁰ Moreover, as social liberals have long pointed out, one may have formal rights

²⁰ This has not stopped women from fantasizing about getting men to do more housework, however.

but lack the resources with which to enjoy them. “Diversity feminists,” among others, have emphasized that while formal “rights to choose” are well-established in the US, the resources to allow choices among viable alternatives are often lacking, particularly for poor women and women of color (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999) – thus, for example, Dorothy Roberts (200x) calls for policies that will support “economic freedom” for such women.²¹ This is especially the case, they maintain, given that anti-natalist purposes have often motivated social policies targeted on poor women. The inequalities with which they are most concerned are those of race and class, which deny some women the option to be domestic, or to perform their own caregiving as they see fit. The proponents of this kind of feminist utopia seems relatively unconcerned with gender symmetry, evening out life patterns for men and women.

In the diversity of radical and reformist visions that have inspired US feminists, we see the reflection of the broader culture. American society is distinctive among the developed countries for its heterogeneity, and for the diversity and high level of inequality of life situations. Meanwhile, the US social policy regime is notable for the prominent role for private provision of services, and the importance of private sources of income to citizens’ and residents’ well-being. These features of political life reinforce heterogeneity of life situations, not simply inequality. Understandings of the good life in the US vary widely, including with respect to ideals about family and gender relations. This is partly the result of great ethnic and religious diversity, with people from every corner of the earth among in the current US population – a fact only intensified with the most recent waves of immigration. It also reflects long-standing religious, political, and ideological divisions, and the liberal pluralist institutional compromises fashioned to accommodate them.

If there is merit to be found in the liberalism of American policy and politics -- and I think there is – it is in respect for the different visions of the good held by members of the polity, that is, in pluralism. This is not to argue, as many “political liberals” do, that policy can ever be fully neutral with respect to people’s choices about how they live their lives – it cannot. (See, e.g., arguments such as those by Rob Reich, that citizens’ participation in liberal and pluralist societies requires a certain level of autonomy that undermines groups that depend on obedience and hierarchy.) But certainly there can be greater and lesser levels of respect for diversity, and for notions of citizenship that embrace difference. As

²¹ Gornick and Meyers, too, are concerned with expanding the resources available to women and men of all income levels, reflecting their social-democratic orientation. Indeed, the burden of their defense of the policy package of leaves, services and work-time reduction against accusations that it will impede choice, is that in fact it will allow greater choice as compared to the lack of provision currently obtaining in the US. But here they are simply defending a set of policies against the status quo, not adjudicating between different visions of utopia. They do not define their utopia in terms of choice.

compared with its European counterparts, the US features greater levels of support for diversity, without having yet reached anything resembling fulfillment of pluralist goals of toleration and respect.²² Given the variety of religious, social, and cultural norms we expect to exist in our diverse societies, we cannot expect a single ideal or policy model to appeal to them all. This is not an argument for relativism, but for respectful and democratic engagement among citizens with differing views of the good.

Where, then, are we US feminists left with respect to envisioning alternative futures that can animate democratic and gender-egalitarian politics? As I have been arguing, the sheer facts of diversity, of all kinds, demands that we respect differences in our conceptions of the good, and for how we will live our lives. “Gender symmetry” expects and presupposes too much similarity. Gender neutrality does not mandate similarity, only that neither men nor women be given options (by the state, or regulated entities) that are not available to the other; yet “gender neutrality” seems unlikely to stir much passionate political attachment.

The radical vision of opening opportunities for women – all kinds of women, and others denied access to advantaged positions in employment and elsewhere – has characterized large swathes of organized and popular feminism. It is sometimes accompanied by demands to open familial and care “opportunities” to men, to move towards something like gender symmetry – but at other times, the logic of expanding choice in the face of diverse situations and demands has prevailed, while the goal of making men’s and women’s lives more alike has been sidelined. Given the character of gender relations, in which the category of “woman” (and gender) has varying levels of salience at both individual and collective levels, we will wait in vain for a final resolution to the “sameness” or “difference” questions, and must be prepared to wrestle with gender forever. Thus, I suggest that our motto be “open possibilities for men and women, remove policies and practices that impede choices,” continuing the best aspects of past feminist practice in the US: removing obstacles to women’s freedom, and providing resources for the range of options that are democratically agreed upon.

I hope it is clear that such a vision could inspire political action aimed at securing paid leaves, better access to care services and upgrading conditions and pay for care workers in the US and elsewhere, as well as continuing attempts to promote women’s access to good positions in the workplace and the polity and to encourage men’s caregiving. I am not inspired by the utopian vision of gender symmetry, but I am very much in sympathy with Gornick and Meyers’ dedication to finding policy solutions to the dilemmas of combining care and paid work in ways that contribute to gender equality.

²² Whether respect for diversity and generous systems of social provision can coexist has not yet been demonstrated, either in the diverse but non-solidaristic US, or in solidaristic but not yet diversity-accommodating European countries.

Democracy is critical to our politics, both as means and end. The designers of policies that support social reproduction, care and employment, and that regulate these spheres, must be accountable to democratic constituencies. This is not to say that “anything goes” as long as people “freely choose” it: we must decide collectively what will be supported through public means, given legal protections to minority rights. There is no political obligation on feminists to support every possibility. Calculations of economic and political feasibility, as well as normative desirability, enter here. Within the multiplicity of political and policy possibilities, feminists can and should argue for those that empower women, that give them more freedoms to define their lives. But we must expect agonistic political debate among ourselves and others over how this will be understood – this cannot be fixed in advance or settled for all time. The continuing, constitutive paradox of feminist politics – that we must both accept and refuse difference, as Joan Scott famously put it – precludes any ultimate decision in favor of “symmetry” or of diversity. Our present-day goals and our utopias will be created politically, and anew, as long as there are feminists and democracy.