



Utopian thought: re-visioning gender, family, and community

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ABSTRACT *Utopian ideals are vital to sustained engagement in the struggle to create a better society. However, the problematic aspects of utopian traditions also need to be addressed as part of the work of social movements. This paper offers a framework for exploring the interplay of healthy and pathological forms of idealization in groups and for analyzing the non-rational dimensions of group life. In critiquing communitarian thought, the paper develops a socialist-feminist and psychoanalytic perspective focusing on the connections between family, sexuality, and democratic community. The paper concludes with political strategies for grounding utopian ideals in contemporary struggles for reform.*

KEY WORDS *Utopia, communitarian, psychoanalytic feminism, family and community, psychoanalytic group psychology*

RÉSUMÉ *Les visions d'utopie jouent un rôle très important dans les mouvements visant à faire une transformation sociale. Pourtant, dans ces projets transformatifs, il faut aussi tenir compte des aspects les plus problématiques des traditions utopiques. Dans cet article, les auteurs proposent une stratégie pour l'exploration de l'effet réciproque des formes d'idéalisation saines et pathologiques et pour analyser les aspects non-raisonnables en la vie des groupes sociaux. En critiquant les idées des 'communitariens', une perspective socialist-féministe et psychoanalytique est présentée qui met au centre de l'analyse les rapports entre la famille, la sexualité et la communauté démocratique. Pour conclure, on propose quelques stratégies politiques pour intégrer des idéales utopiques dans les luttes actuelles pour la réforme.*

MOTS CLEFS *L'utopie, communitarian, féminisme psychoanalytique, la famille et communautaire, groupe sociale psychoanalytique*

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

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In two American utopian novels of the 1970s, *Woman on the edge of time* and *The dispossessed*, Marge Piercy (1976) and Ursula LeGuin (1974) drew on anarchist, that is radically democratic collectivist ideas, mapping out imaginary futures born of radical feminism [2]. Both novels assumed, as did feminists of the time, that the privatized, heterosexual nuclear family household was pernicious for women. They imagined a world where gender was no longer a central social category, where homosexual desire was treated no differently from heterosexual desire, and where monogamous relationships were not mandated but freely chosen. They envisioned children and parents embedded in a supportive, participatory community—men and women equally involved in caregiving, the essential chores/pleasures of daily life (cooking, eating, laundry, etc.) taking place in communal rather than private spaces. The boundary between sanity and madness was a fluid one, and those prone to exceptional states of mind were embraced rather than shunned. They argued that involving children in productive work had to begin early, so kids would appreciate the pleasures and rewards of contributing to the common good. In a society where labor is organized through profoundly democratic decision-making and for meeting human needs, workplace ‘efficiency’ would encourage, even demand, making a place for apprenticeship—not to mention flexible (and shorter) working hours to free people up for activities of nurture, leisure, and citizenship. These utopian visions grew out of some of the core struggles of second-wave feminism in the USA, particularly its radical liberationist wing. Compared to feminists today, feminists then, facing a patriarchal family/household system that appeared firmly entrenched, felt more free to reject the family wholesale. And in a period of relative prosperity and economic security, they were also more free to experiment with alternative forms of living.

In this paper, we argue that utopian ideals are vital to sustained engagement in the struggle to create a better society, but that the problematic aspects of utopian traditions also need to be addressed as part of the work of social movements (see Whitebook, 1995). As activists engaged in socialist feminist politics in the USA over the past three decades, we are interested in critically working through the role of idealization in social movements. Idealized images of group life are partly what draws people to social activism. Yet it is important to explore the form group ideals take and the extent to which they are part of the conscious activity of a movement, rather than split off or repressed and thus emerging in a primitive, unintegrated way. For instance, communities may be bound together through an idealized representation of group goodness, projecting all of the ‘bad’ elements of group experience onto a perceived external rival, including potential allies in coalition movements. Or the revolutionary ideal may substitute for the powerful father (or mother) as the organizing group principle, with a quasi-religious union with the omnipotent parent as the unconscious motif.

Social movements based on utopian ideals can be destructive in that they often do mobilize longings for surrender, and create hypnotic group ties based on suspension of critical thought. Utopianism also has a close affinity with the

desire for human perfection, which can be a particularly pernicious ideal. But phobic responses to utopian ideals also have their psychic and social costs: the repression of longings for a harmonious oneness with the world may mean that it returns in a disguised form. Just as a jilted lover may refuse to fall in love again, radicals may refuse to suffer again the painful disappointments of earlier political passions.

But how do we navigate between progressive and regressive elements of utopianism? How do we distinguish between idealized conceptions of community that sustain democratic work, *vs* those that disguise domination through rousing appeals to group harmony and community? In this paper, we take up these questions, beginning with an assessment of the contemporary political climate for re-visioning family and community. In mapping out alternative visions, we offer a guiding set of ideas for recuperating the saner side of utopian traditions, ideas grounded in psychoanalytic cultural theory and socialist feminist politics. Psychoanalytic theory is best suited for this political project because it allows us to theorize a dynamic tension between pathological and healthy forms of idealization, and it makes us more conscious of the overdetermined aspects of group life. Attending to the role of unconscious processes (for example, infantile conflicts and fantasies and their defensive elaborations) need not take away from the rational, conscious aims of individuals or groups. Rather, the joining of psychoanalytic theory and socialist feminism provides a holding ground for the complex and often contradictory elements of human experience, and a means of foregrounding the interplay of rational and non-rational aspects of group life.

Searching for community

Our generation of socialists and socialist-feminists who took part in and were inspired by the great post world-war II waves of rebellion against exploitation, oppression and colonial rule, has been fundamentally shaped by our historical experience, an experience of enormous political gains but also dashed hopes, profound disappointments, and some bitter defeats. For many revolutionaries of this era, the losses have had a chastening effect, with 'identity politics' emerging as antidote to an earlier era of political hubris within the left. Working within the borders of a marginalized group identity, activists involved in sexual/queer politics or anti-racist work have contributed greatly to awareness of cultural differences and how such differences are often repressed, including within the left. This is an era of deep mistrust of grand political projects of various kinds, as well as of the meta-narratives that inspired them. More than this, it is an era of anxious uncertainty about the very possibilities of human progress. The post-modernists' hostility to 'grand narratives' (feminist as well as Marxist) draws support from not only the bankruptcy of Communism but also the exhaustion of radical political organizations (Marxist, anti-racist and feminist) of the 1960s and 1970s which embodied the revolutionary aspirations of our

generation. While there is a progressive side to their critique of the Western Enlightenment and various liberation movements associated with its influence, the post-modernist position also has a defensive side, as well as reactionary consequences. It may be interpreted as a collective inhibition, a political agoraphobia, that emerges out of the painful losses associated with a prior era of activist struggle.

In recovering the passion and promise of utopian traditions, we emphasize their grounding in 'pre-figurative' politics. This is an approach to revolutionary work that reduces the distance between the 'imaginary and the real' by attempting to create the modes of relating and forms of organization which foreshadow, or anticipate, the kind of society that is being created. Feminism and New Left politics were committed to this vision—to making the personal political, the future more present, the ideal a less remote possibility. The pre-figurative communes and political collectives of the New Left, including feminist groups, which hoped to bridge the present and the post-revolutionary future have almost all splintered and died. Attempts to legislate personal relations and group life, to 'live according to political principle' defined in rigid, narrow terms, bred intolerance, sectarianism, factionalism and splits. Yet alternative communities (political groups, community-based organizations, collectively run workplaces and living spaces) remain an important arena for creative experimentation and exploration of alternative approaches to group life. They allow us to practice being in different kinds of relationships, to experience our capacities for cooperation, solidarity, and democracy.

From the perspective of the 1990s, however, the battle against the bourgeois family, against the stultifying, consumerist, conformist, privatistic, patriarchal household, might seem anachronistic. Even though there are strong political forces attempting to reimpose the traditional male breadwinner/female caregiver family ideal, the material basis of the patriarchal nuclear family is eroding. Many children spend some time in a single-parent, generally single-mother, family; in almost 25% of two-earner households in the USA, women earn more than men; increasing numbers of blended families create many new kinds of kin relationships; new reproductive technologies are exploding concepts of 'natural' motherhood, and lesbians and gay men are more accepted as parents and more out as families [3]. And insofar as their circumstances allow it, many men and women are trying to break old gender patterns, sharing both income-earning and responsibility for everyday caregiving within their families. It is no longer compelling to assert that only one kind of family is natural, normal, or even preferable.

But as important as these changes in family structure are, they also have strengthened the family's hold on popular social and political imaginations. While families may be more internally democratic, they are also even more private than ever before, one of the few remaining places people expect to give and receive support. The harsh political and economic shifts in the society surrounding the family have closed off the space for imagining different kinds of community. Instead of organizing for a revolutionary alternative to welfare state

cold-war liberalism, we find ourselves battling to simply preserve a minimal welfare state.

Life in this center of global capitalism seems ever more contradictory: on the one hand, there are increasing opportunities for self-expression through consumption of a mesmerizing array of commodified identities; on the other, many experience mounting economic insecurity and worries about what the future might hold. On the one hand, there is increasing sexual autonomy for women, and on the other there is the abandonment of single mothers and their children, now forced to survive alone in the low-wage labor market. Increasing economic and political opportunities have opened up for women, yet they face a growing crisis in caregiving inside and outside family households.

This crisis has led to various initiatives to strengthen the family, whether the nuclear family or alternative family forms. Familistic politics is attractive in part because communities are weaker than ever before. Conservatives make use of this state of crisis, mobilizing pervasive anxiety in the culture over how we will take care of ourselves, each other, our elderly, and our children, and a simmering resentment about the toll that this caregiving is taking. Family households are more burdened and perhaps more isolated from other sources of support than ever before. In one of the most blatant examples of political hypocrisy in our time, the last remaining public institutions through which some kind of societal responsibility for our elderly and our children is expressed—social security and public education—are under ruthless attack by conservatives. In the current political configuration, where government and the public are savaged and the market extolled, the family household remains the only place where people can envision non-contractual relationships, claims on others for support, and an unquestioned right to have one's needs met. The romance of the capitalist market, of a society organized around individualistic striving, can only work if families are there to pick up the pieces (see Barrett & McIntosh, 1984). As women with young children enter the workforce in larger numbers, middle class and affluent women are increasingly relying on paid services made affordable by service workers' low wages. Working-class families get by in other ways (drawing on female relatives for childcare, working different shifts so parents can trade-off being home, having fewer children). But even with these accommodations, responsibilities for others, in addition to children, remain: the elderly parents, the brother who cannot find work, the sister who cannot make it alone as a single mother.

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

Alternative visions

Community is a more progressive grounding of relational life than is family because it requires a broader capacity for empathy and social identifications, beyond the narrow sphere of one's immediate attachments. For feminists and leftists, human progress means enlarging relational life and affective bonds beyond blood and kin, embracing difference as vital to, rather than threatening to community cohesion.

But 'community' is an amorphous concept with different political meanings. In the USA people speak of the business community, or the therapeutic community, in the same way we speak of neighborhoods or socially homogenous spaces. In this meaning, communities are little more than interest groups, voluntary associations formed to contest for economic and political resources. The kind of community the left and feminists envision is quite different: a very particular kind of public space organized for communication, democratic decision-making and cooperation around crucial tasks and decisions. This sort of community is inevitably undeveloped in advanced capitalist societies. Yet while there is little space for people to create or sustain communal institutions, there is a kind of 'romance' of community, even as there is a real longing for community.

In the USA conservative political movements play on this longing. Voucher systems for privatizing public schools, ordinances banning pornography and other forms of sexual 'deviance', publicizing the names of those accused of sex crimes, are all proposed in the name of preserving community. Communitarianism is another response to a felt 'cultural crisis' and the unravelling of traditional forms of community (Phelan, 1996). The communitarians share with the religious right an emphasis on moral decline which they see as the result of too much freedom and too much individualism. They argue that security, support, and nurture can only emerge when obligation and duty are enforced by social norms, law, and the reallocation of resources to encourage desirable and discourage undesirable individual choices. For example, communitarians would change laws to make divorce more difficult in order to encourage two-parent families.

On the other hand, in their critique of classical liberalism, the communitarians share some common ground with Marxism and feminism (for critique, see Burack, 1995; Weiss, 1995). Bourgeois ideology assumes a self prior to and separate from society, ready to advance its own interests through contractual exchange in the market and participation in civil society. Communitarians rightly expose the poverty of bourgeois individualism and insist that humans are constituted through the web of relational, intergenerational experiences and obligations that form family and group life. But however much the communitarians may criticize capitalism for its rampant individualism and commodification of every sphere of life, their utopian vision is antithetical to feminism. They derogate the value of 'chosen' interdependencies (friendship, intentional communities) and privilege bonds of obligation that rest on a bedrock of blood

relations—the primordial ‘born into’ communities whose webs of interdependence are never questioned and therefore never really chosen, only accepted (see Sandel, 1982; Whitehead, 1993; for critique, see Burack, 1994; Friedman, 1995).

Much of our critique is informed by feminists of color, who have confronted more directly than white feminists, the strengths and weaknesses of ‘born-into’ communities. Contrasting families in communities of color to those of the white middle class, black and Latina feminists argue that the extended kin (and fictive kin) sharing networks linking women and children across families and generations, and the norms of communal responsibility for children, especially strong in black communities, offer an alternative to the possessive and exclusive relationships of the bourgeois family (Collins, 1990). This positive re-valuation of disparaged family forms emphasizes the communal values and cooperative institutions which undergird resistance to white supremacy and provide a basis for women to claim authority in their community.

However important this analysis is as a corrective to the early feminist critique of a supposedly universal male breadwinner household, it still left only dimly illuminated another side of racial solidarity in a patriarchal, capitalist society: the suppression of women’s sexual desires, the limitations on their exercise of public power, the onerous responsibilities for others that left little room for self, the webs of sometimes overwhelming financial and emotional dependencies, and the corrosion of relationships weighted down with too much to carry. In ground-breaking work opening up possibilities for exploring sexism within communities of color, lesbian feminists of color explored the painful terrain of their marginalization within their home communities. They described the enforced silences, the regulation and self-regulation of women’s sexuality as a political strategy, the fears of betrayal projected onto women’s bodies and sexuality, the powerful pressures toward conformity and the suppression of individual needs/desires in the name of group solidarity.

We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition to the anglo threat. And yet, our refusal to examine all the roots of the lovelessness in our families is our weakest link and softest spot... Family is *not* by definition the man in a dominant position over women and children. Familia is cross-generational bonding, deep emotional ties between opposite sexes, and within our sex. It is sexuality, which involves, but is not limited to intercourse or orgasm. ... It is finding familia among friends where blood ties are formed through suffering and celebration shared. The strength of our families never came from domination. It has only endured in spite of it—like our women. (Moraga, 1983, pp. 110–111)

In challenging the narrow ground of solidarity that has dominated the culture and politics of their home communities, lesbian feminists of color have been among the most eloquent voices articulating, in accessible language and

with emotional immediacy, the case for a radically democratic, anti-racist and feminist–socialist politics in the USA. This restricting of political space for women’s voices can only be countered by a vision of radically democratic communities that allow for variation in the ways that individuals can live and participate [4]. In working toward this collective ideal, however, we encounter myriad obstacles. Reconciling community solidarity and individual freedoms inevitably generates conflict. Communities do make claims on people and constrain their range of freedom, just as they provide forms of support. From a feminist perspective, democratic community is built not only out of particular kinds of political structures, but also by particular kinds of people—people who have the ability to negotiate inevitable tensions between collective demands and individual needs.

Psychoanalytic theory sensitizes us to the non-rational aspects of mind, and to the inevitability of ambivalence in human relationships. Children who are raised with a sense of secure connection with others, including others who are different from themselves, are more apt to weather the vicissitudes of love and hate, and to be less fearful of conflict. Psychoanalysis also foregrounds the role of sexuality in the social organization of personality and of human needs. Because sexuality is an area so fraught with social symbolic meanings—with early nurture, with dependency, with loss of control, with merger—the ideal of sexual freedom may be irreducibly problematic, particularly for many women, who are far more vulnerable than men to the consequences of sexual encounters. This dilemma need not mean that we abandon the ideal of sexual freedom. Sexual pleasure, sexual experimentation, and the rights of sexual minorities are vital to a feminist utopian vision, not only on the basis of human rights but because the regulation of sexuality (especially women’s sexuality) is often central to the libidinal apparatus of political repression. Communities must be able to support various expressions of sexuality—both casual and exclusive/monogamous—while simultaneously curbing exploitive practices. Of course, drawing the line between exploitive and free sexual practices is not easy. A socialist/feminist utopian community would have to include space for reflecting on the multiple meanings of sexuality, the diverse ways in which it may be expressed, and its powerful symbolic loading. In creating cultural space for recognizing how unconscious desires and conflict work their way into human encounters, and in refusing a hyper-rational, mental hygiene model of the ideal society, we are less apt to allow the free reign of a ‘collective superego’, albeit organized around progressive principles.

A psychoanalytic-feminist utopian vision also means reorganizing the care of dependent members of society, most of which falls to women, and the reworking of the social meaning of dependence. Feminists have long argued that childrearing by women within the context of an isolated family/household creates particular kinds of gendered personalities but also fundamental difficulties around dependence for both men and women. The hyper-individualism of bourgeois society is reproduced in personality via family structure. Personality is shaped both directly and indirectly (through how parents, teach-

ers, and other caregivers envision the goals of child development) by a capitalist culture that devalues dependence and over-values individual independence (understood as freedom from ties to others). These dilemmas arise out of a human reality—the long period of dependence and inequality of power in relations of infants/children to adults who care for them. Whatever the existential limits or grounding of developmental dilemmas in biology, however, social structures shape both their character and resolution. For children reared by isolated, disempowered mothers and distant fathers in patriarchal family households, developmental struggles center around individuation from a female caregiver, conflicting desires around autonomy and merger, conflicting fears about being left alone and about being taken over (see Benjamin, 1988). Having the capacity to bring these fears and desires into some kind of balance, to resolve them in at least a ‘good enough’ way is necessary for individuals to engage well in the give-and-take of democratic group life—to be able to share power, to recognize the needs of others and, at the same time, to be able to assert one’s own views against pressures toward group conformity, or, in other words, to tolerate conflict.

There are currently many examples of existent alternatives to isolated mothering. Indeed, childrearing throughout history and the rest of the contemporary world is far more socialized than it is in the West. Segura and Pierce (1993) argue that the particular family constellation within which Chicano and Chicana children are cared for, characterized by non-exclusive mothering and significant cross-generational ties between grandmothers and granddaughters, explains, in part, why Chicanos and Chicanas develop strong group identities [5]. Mahoney and Yngvesson (1992) make the point that how a society defines the process of development affects interactional patterns between adults and children. For example, among the Ilongot people of the Philippines the developmental process is understood as a gradual acquisition of knowledge (and thus of increased autonomy) through an extended network of interactions (experiences) with multiple caretakers. In contrast, they argue, among the Anglo-American middle class, development is seen to be a struggle for autonomy envisioned as breaking away from a confining dependence on a primary parent.

Examples of the less alienated aspects of collectivist societies need not blind us to the repressive sides of many traditional practices, including those of oppressed groups. Black women writers are beginning to address the burdensome side of Afro-centric ideals and how women are chastened by calls to maintain group solidarity (Collins, 1998). Outcries against ‘Western feminism’ may be based on genuine concerns over racist elements of the white women’s movement, but they also may be a projection of male anxieties onto feminism, as the dangerous, disturbing Other (Narayan, 1997). Behind male hysterical reactions to feminism are infantile anxieties over abandonment, anxieties based on unconscious awareness of how much the pseudo-independence of men rests upon their dependence on women.

Feminists have given considerable thought to how a rigid, defensive masculinity, constructed through the devaluation of the feminine, reinforces drives

toward domination, expressed in both the micro-politics of relationships and the macro-politics of the economy and the state. Feminists have also at least tentatively explored how women's fears of separation create over-enmeshment, inability to distinguish others' needs from one's own, conflict avoidance and inability to tolerate differences within a group, and projection of aggressive impulses onto sons, husbands, and fathers (Miner & Longino, 1987; Segal, 1990).

These analyses all point toward rearranging family life in very fundamental ways. A key change, feminists have argued, is for men to become equally involved with the daily routines of caregiving for young children. This is important not only to change how boys and girls come to acquire gendered identities, but is also crucial to creating reciprocity and equality among adults who have to negotiate with one another in ways that a more gendered division of labor does not require. And men need to develop skills—the ability to tolerate and respond to helplessness, to recognize and respond to others' emotional states, to anticipate wants and needs—which carry over into their relationships with adults—with their partners as well as their colleagues and friends (Coltrane, 1997; Rothman, 1989).

While changes in family structure would vitiate some of the more destructive currents in human relationships, these changes would not protect us from the inevitability of emotional suffering. The ideal society would positively value uncertainty, ambiguity, and the co-existence of rational and non-rational processes in human experience. It must also involve developing practices for reintegrating individuals into the community, for making reparation, and for accepting human limitations and frailties.

Between the imaginary and the real

One of the principle weak points of the current economy is its failure to support families. So it would seem that one of the best arguments against the assaulting forces of the capitalist juggernaut is to point out the contradiction between corporate power and family needs. Many progressives are taking just that tack: the name of New York State's newest effort at creating a third party, the 'Working-Families Party' is a case in point. Yet to form a politics around 'working families' is terribly limited and ultimately conservative. To be clear, we are not arguing against campaigns, such as the United Parcel Service (UPS) strike, which protested the wide-spread use of part-timers on the ground that many UPS workers had families to support. We are arguing, however, that a politics centered on 'working families' simply reproduces bourgeois morality in which working is a sign of deservedness and family a sign of need—as if single individuals are or ought to be 'self-sufficient'. It also reinforces the ideal of the family/household as the privileged site of economic, emotional, social support and care. Further, a program of demands organized around the needs of 'working families' obscures the ways in which different kinds of communities are systematically disadvantaged. Some communities have more non-working famil-

ies than others. Finally, assimilating gay/lesbian families to straight families by focusing on their commonalities as 'working' or 'economically productive' or 'stable/coupled', leaves little room for the liberatory demands of sexual politics. This is not simply a matter of including rights of sexual expression as a fundamental democratic demand. A radical vision of community has to recognize the sexual/erotic bases of human connection, challenging both the repressiveness of traditional conservatism and the 'repressive desublimation' which redirects desire toward commodified visions of happiness. Queer politics creates a space for articulating this, partly because queer sexuality has not been harnessed so directly as heterosexuality to procreation and thus to the institutions of social reproduction. As lesbian feminists of color have demonstrated, through writing and political activism, fear of or shame about having the wrong kind of sexual desire fuels a defensive repressiveness which spreads throughout a community. In contrast, appreciation for our unruly desires makes them less threatening. We have less need, then, to regulate ourselves and others, opening up more possibility for empathic connection and thus solidarity.

Socialist-feminist utopian visions, though, go further than re-arranging the gender division of labor within the household. Along with most utopian theory, they reject family households as the basic unit of social reproduction, of reciprocal exchanges of emotional and physical caring necessary to renew life. The reasons are both social and psychological. First, more collective forms of everyday living expand the sphere of social solidarity and exert a countervailing pressure against the privatistic and exclusivist bonds of sexual/affectional partnership and parent-child relations. Second, although it is important for children to have intense, affectional bonds with some particular others, these ties become more problematic when parents do not share caregiving with other adults. In more communal forms of living, children can use other adults as a buffer in negotiating conflicts/tensions with their parents. In addition, participating in a broader supportive community, parents may find it easier to treat their children as separate individuals rather than as extensions of themselves. In other words, situated within a broader caring community, children and parents might not experience conflicts around autonomy/separation and dependence/merger as intensely as we do today. Further, affective ties that extend beyond the mother-child dyad, the oedipal triangle, or even sibling relationships lay the basis for individuals to develop psychic structures incorporating a broader set of social identifications.

The resolution of these dilemmas requires working for specific political programs and conditions where genuine alternatives would thrive. Instead of a political focus on protecting and supporting families, we should argue for expanding, supporting, and reviving communities, and investing resources in local, democratically controlled institutions for providing care. The entry (both chosen and forced) of women into paid work has drastically undermined the basis for patriarchal community: the unpaid labor of women. The crisis of caregiving and the burdens on individual family households are a compelling point of entry for a pre-figurative politics which proposes new kinds of sharing

relationships and new kinds of public places: such as co-housing, community gardens, daycare cooperatives, and democratized schools and recreation centers.

Such experiments and reforms would provide a space for envisioning a rich, local, public life and identifying the kinds of resources individuals need in order to participate. For instance, parents cannot belong to daycare cooperatives if they cannot afford to leave work to fulfill the volunteer time requirement. And they cannot understand or appreciate what is happening with their older children in public schools if employers will not pay them for their time off work. Making schools more democratic and convincing teachers to share power with parents requires that parents have the time and resources to really participate in the work of the school (Levine *et al.*, 1995). Living patterns are constrained by social institutions but also by the built environment. Without capital to renovate old housing, most people cannot participate in new kinds of living arrangements, like co-housing. Co-housing communities combine individual households with communal living spaces. Members are expected to participate in a committee responsible for some collective activities and daily life is organized around sharing of responsibilities like providing adult supervision for children after school and preparing meals. Co-housing communities offer new possibilities for expanding the circle of adults who care for children and for each other. They make it more possible for individuals to participate in childrearing without necessarily having children, and they create spaces for adults, including elderly people, to share the burdens and pleasures of caring for each other. Taking the sting out of living single, co-housing communities create a ground for real freedom about coupling up. These experiments should be encouraged and subsidized with public funds rather than being available only to those who have the money to try them (Cament & Durrett, 1988).

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

There are many different entry points for the political initiatives we are proposing. In the USA some of these would be: the fight to defend the public

schools against voucher systems, the movement to shift federal spending from the military to human services, efforts to defend single mothers driven into low-wage jobs, battles about urban development and attempts to reshape the built environment, local government use of federal funds for public housing. In these and many other arenas, we can pose alternatives to the over-burdened, isolated family household through an attractive vision of cooperative, democratic ways of caring for adults and children.

The utopian project requires us to creatively work through the subjective side of group life, as well as its 'objective' basis in material conditions. It means recognizing the ambivalent, disturbing currents in psychic life and in interpersonal relationships. The larger the group formation and the more diverse the community, the more challenging is this project. But without support for experimenting with group process, including disappointments with their outcomes and allowance for failure, retreat into familistic bonds may appear to be the only enclave of social influence in a depersonalized world.

One of the many ironies of our present is that, at least in the USA, the expanding space for more inclusive, more diverse, more tolerant and more respectful social relations in personal life coexists with a narrowing space for public democracy, and a cynicism about public life. This irony reflects not just the defeats but the successes of the liberatory movements of the 1960s—their cultural and political legacy. However bleak the political terrain on which we struggle today, we cannot afford to lose the communal, egalitarian visions those movements created nor to suspend attempts to prefigure these visions through the kinds of organizations we build, the reforms we propose, and the ways we argue for them. If, last time around, prefigurative politics informed by utopian visions often became oppressive, we can learn from our mistakes. To defensively turn away from dreaming because we are so afraid of being disappointed, to wish for less because we fear we cannot win more, will impoverish and undermine our efforts to build more radical political struggles. We can and must speak to the real dilemmas, the practices, and the yearnings of people. The crisis in caregiving haunts everyday life, creating a political space for the left as well as the right. We can enter that space with imaginative alternatives and, as far as possible, practical proposals for new kinds of communal institutions that express our vision of deeply passionate, compassionate, and democratic community.

Notes

- [1] Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the war years*, South End Press, p. 129.
- [2] The novels are also different. LeGuin's subtitle, 'an ambiguous utopia', reflects her exploration of repressive tendencies in communal society, a problem that is not at all foregrounded in Piercy's novel. The two novels also reflect, perhaps, generational differences in radical post-war feminism. If Piercy's theoretical touchstone is Shulameth Firestone (*The dialectic of sex*), LeGuin's would be DeBeauvoir (*The second sex*).
- [3] These changes, of course, have very real downsides. Single mothers are impoverished; reproductive technologies have opened up new avenues for controlling and exploiting women's bodies, two-thirds of the closing of the gender gap in wages has occurred not because women are making more, but because men are earning less.

- [4] Much of our thinking about collective living is pre-occupied with the problem of 'free-riders' on the one hand, and collective despotism on the other. These are important questions. But that they loom especially large for us says more about our own society than universal human propensities toward power over and exploitation. The evidence from social relations among egalitarian band societies indicates that they are able to achieve a balance in which individual idiosyncrasy and differential abilities to contribute to the group or engage in the group's social life are tolerated. Conflicts are resolved through dialogue; rifts acknowledged and, at least temporarily, repaired, through games, clowning and communal ritual. See, for example, Turnbull (1981, pp. 205–219).
- [5] The authors also explore the relationship between these childrearing patterns and 'machismo'.

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