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Re-Imagining "Progress"

Motherwork, Human Flourishing, and the Political Culture of Care

This article attempts to do two things. First, to suggest that the way in which we define progress is severely lacking as it is associated primarily with material accumulation, self-interest and the freedom to compete with others. Such a limited notion of progress is reliant upon an equally narrow understanding of the individual. Thus, it is important to both recognize and to challenge the ideological foundations of these connections which limit the very way a developed society is defined. The second task is to put forth an alternative meaning of progress, drawing on feminist theories of Care as well as practices of motherwork, which capture important aspects of the human experience that go beyond narrow economic concerns. In this way it is possible to re-imagine what the individual is and what a truly developed society could look like. An alternative expression of the individual and progress is thus necessary to create and sustain a different kind of world.

What often goes unquestioned in the analyses of the political and economic systems of industrialized countries is the way in which progress is defined. That is, the "good life" is defined primarily by the accumulation of material goods with the accompanying over-inflation of the importance of self-interest. This, I would argue, is an impoverished understanding of what it means to be a "developed" society and what constitutes "progress." In this paper, I present an alternative view that identifies and incorporates aspects of human experience that go beyond narrow economic concerns. To do so, I draw on feminist theories of care which question the gender-neutral notion of the rational actor (Ferber and Nelson, 1993) and challenge the idea that a "developed" society is one in which economic growth, accumulation, efficiency and profit maximization are all that matter. A feminist interpretation based on theories of care and practices of motherwork, provide a way to re-imagine what a society could look like,

transforming the very way in which we define what a developed society should be. In particular, we need to move beyond the limited and unchallenged notion—which dictates social life as well as policy formation in both the First and Third Worlds—that development is strictly an economic concept. In my view, such a critical challenge will be useful for scholars, practitioners and activists alike—who are striving to create and sustain a caring global society.

Feminist theories on care: Care as ethic, virtue, value, experience, and practice

Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), offers a very useful elaboration of care. She and Berenice Fisher define caring as

> a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (103)

Included in this concept of care are four elements. First, care and care activities are not restricted to interpersonal connections since a person could care for herself, her work, hobbies, pets, or the environment. Second, caring is not necessarily dyadic or individualistic, but social. Third, although care is a universal need, specific needs vary across cultures and throughout history. Finally, care is both a single activity (an outcome or a product) and an ongoing process.

Care is both rational and emotional, uniting feeling, thought and action. Sara Ruddick (1989) argues that maternal care is "an ongoing, organized set of activities that require discipline and active attention" (50). Barbara Katz Rothman (1989) and Adrienne Rich (1986) urge us to think of motherhood and caring as experiences, existing within particular ideological and institutional constructions. Virginia Held (2006) writes that care is not simply the work involved, but it is indeed a practice. The example she gives is chopping down a tree to fell it. In whatever way one does this, it is work. But doing so *effectively* becomes a practice. Thus, care is more than the labour itself, it is a practice (37). In different ways these theorists view care as both labour and experience, demanding self-reflection, rational thought as well as emotional attention, characteristics that are not merely "productive."

In sum, I identify care as a feminist ethic, virtue, value, experience, and practice. Care demands a revaluing of what has been marginalized and devalued by patriarchal capitalism—not because women are assumed to be naturally better at caring practices, or even because care has evolved in the private sphere of women. Care challenges what has come to be considered virtuous: individuality,

efficiency, rationality, and autonomy, reminding us that such socially identified virtues are only possible through good, supported care practices. Care insists on interdependency and affective and emotive responses. And it does so by placing societal expectations equally on men and women, rich and poor to engage, initiate, and incorporate care and care activities as central principles and practices of social life.

Human flourishing and the Political Culture of Care

A pretext for a caring society begins with the notion of "human flourishing." Human flourishing, a term borrowed from Aristotle (1980), comes from the concept of *eudaimonia*, literally meaning "having a good guardian spirit," which is central to living a good, virtuous life. In classic terms, a flourishing life consisted of pleasure, honour, and virtue, all of which come out of habit—of doing and of action. To enhance Aristotle's notion of flourishing, I incorporate Karl Marx's (1978) concept of species-being, which is related to the notion of individual potential, whereby individuals are capable of conscious, imaginative thought and action. Human flourishing requires that the individual has the access to and helps create and sustain the institutional structures embedded in a culture which supports one to advance in ways that are healthy for the self, family, community and society at large. Human flourishing embraces the full range of individual and collective values that are part of living a good and healthy life. Of the many maternal practices that Sara Ruddick discusses in her work, is "fostering growth," which is "nurturing a child's developing spirit" (Ruddick 1989: 82), an essential aspect of motherwork that allows for human flourishing.

I argue that human flourishing requires a "Political Culture of Care." The Political Culture of Care is a political, economic, social and moral "way of life." It is a set of values and norms operating ideologically and institutionally, which express a version of "development" of the individual predicated on the development of all individuals. It counters the prevailing development ethic, based on a zero-sum calculation, that fosters hyper-individuality and competition, and is supported by masculine-derived notions of the autonomous individual. In this way, care is more than labour, more than practice, more than an ethic or moral standpoint—it is a way of life, a way of thinking about what individuals do and what individuals need and how these needs are met, day to day.

The Political Culture of Care challenges us to see caring labour in practical, non-idealistic terms allowing us to examine and appreciate the everyday reproductive labour and practices associated with caregiving. Although many purport to value care, there is a tendency to do so merely in idealistic and sentimental terms—e.g., the care of a mother for a child, the care of the family, the caring for others during holidays or disasters. This process of idealization actually devalues care and care-giving, and mystifies our understanding of how each operate at the everyday level. Tronto (1993) suggests that we can overcome

this problem by paying more attention to the power dimensions underlying how care labour operates. By not noticing the importance and significance of care and care labour, people of privilege—those usually cared for—are able to devalue activities of care and those who give care, thereby maintaining their privilege. For Tronto, where care is devalued and contained, it poses no threat to how we construct the social order. Thus, in a Political Culture of Care, the power dimensions that undergird our care practices are recognized and social policy is created based upon attempts to dismantle the persistent inequalities of these care relations.

Thus, a fundamental aspect of a Political Culture of Care is the promotion of equality and interdependency. That is, care as a dominant ethic, value, and valued set of practices would enable social beings to make choices and increase the options from which to choose. In a Political Culture of Care, where caring practices are expected from men and women, male privilege in the public and private spheres would erode. If men and women alike were expected and encouraged to carry out the necessary reproductive labour—activities as diverse as child-care and gathering fuel—the oppressive sexual division of labour found throughout many societies would be dramatically transformed, enabling true human flourishing to emerge. As Mona Harrington (1999) has stated, "to assure good care to all members of the society should become a primary principle of our common life, along with the assurance of liberty, equality, and justice" (48)

In a society dominated by a Political Culture of Care, social beings would meet one another not as isolated competitive entities, but as interdependent and relational beings, each of whom understands that everyone at some points in life inevitably need the care of others. There is a consciousness and recognition that some in society will require more care than others, more of the time. Martha Fineman (2004) unpacks the myths surrounding "autonomy," "independence" and "self-sufficiency" which mask the fact that individuals have progressed and societies have developed only through their relations with others—whether the family, community, the state, or the market. Despite the rhetoric of "self-sufficiency," much of the economic success that exists in the marketplace requires the unpaid, invisible care labour that is carried out in the family, as well as the resources and benefits provided by the state.

Fineman calls for instead, a "collective responsibility for dependency," which recognizes the inevitability of everyone's need to be cared for or to care for someone else, both roles necessitating a dependent relationship. For those who are "cared for," one is dependent upon the care labour of those giving care, and those who are caring for others are dependent upon societal institutions and resources that make quality care possible. Thus, for Fineman (2004), a necessary precondition for the realization of substantive equality is through ensuring that the care labour and practices that currently exist in the unpaid private family or the low-paid privatized market be adequately supported by the state. She writes,

> Some robust version of substantive equality is essential in a society that imposes on its individuals an expectation that they can attain a degree of self-sufficiency as adults. In order to eventually develop competency to the fullest extent possible, an individual during her or his formative stages of life must have access to basic material and social resources. The assurance of some fundamental level of economic security guaranteed to all caretaking units in which such individuals are nurtured would be foundational in this regard. The state must subsidize caretaking just as it does other socially productive labour: It is the articulation of this aspiration for substantive equality that is the first step in building a politics to demand it. (275)

As Fineman (2004) and others have argued, it is only the state that can distribute these needs justly and equitably. It is the state, and not the market, that must define the rights and responsibilities of its members, carry out the conditions of equality, and can mediate the inequalities produced by the free market system (Fineman 2004: 264). The market cannot do this alone, as its principles of profit maximization and cost reduction often are used to supplant all other concerns.

The state's role in securing these basic needs is vital for a Political Culture of Care to emerge because true autonomy—a pre-condition for human flourishing—cannot exist without them. As Fineman writes,

> Autonomy is only possible when one is in a position to be able to share in society's benefits and burdens. And sharing in benefits and burdens can only occur when individuals have the basic resources that enable them to act in ways that are consistent with the tasks and expectations imposed upon them by the society in which they live. (29)

She continues that "[t]he expectations that one should achieve this form of autonomy—autonomy supported by a societal commitment for the provision of basic social needs—should be every person's birthright. Autonomy in this sense concedes that there is an inherent dependence on society on the part of all individuals" (Fineman 2004: 29-30). Fineman affirms that it is the state's role to respond to dependency and that this is justified because it is "fundamentally society preserving" (48).

> Without aggregate caretaking there could be no society, so we might say that it is caretaking labour that produces and reproduces society. Caretaking labour provides the citizens, the workers, the voters, the consumers, the students and others who populate society and its institutions…. The fact that biological dependency is inherent in the human condition means that it is of collective or societal concern. (Fineman 2004: 48)

Furthermore, care becomes one of the primary ways in which we meet one another as moral beings. Such an ethic relies on particular virtues of care, in particular, attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect. (Tronto 1993; Ruddick 1989; Held 2006; Engster 2005). A Political Culture of Care includes redefining the individual as a social being, interdependent with others and connected to those of future generations. In doing so, it transgresses the sanctity of the individual as embodied in mainstream economic and political theory underlying much of the social policy of the United States as well as in the development policy in the Third World. Yet, it is actually more consistent with the experiences that all human beings have in the course of their lives. Care is a universal need, and so is necessary for human flourishing. A tempered individuality where care predominates could help to bring about a more humane, caring world.

Thus, a carefully and fully constructed theory and practice of care provides a critical reconstitution of how we define what is a developed society. As a counter to the hegemony of the rational actor market-driven model, a Political Culture of Care would operate at the level of ideology, framing our thoughts and ideas, and translating them into certain political, economic, moral, and cultural practices. This would occur at the macro level of major societal institutions as well as the micro level of the every day life of social beings. Thus, it is not only necessary to reconsider the fundamental ideas, but to alter the ideological and structural premises upon which policy is generated, which would reflect new and more humane visions of progress.

Care practices can have important consequences for social life. Speaking particularly of a redefined motherhood, Barbara Katz Rothman (1989) suggests:

> We can focus on nurturance, caring, human relations. We can come to accept and to respect a wider variety of family relationships and arrangements. Those qualities we have come to think of as maternal could become more widely shared, by both men and women. We could direct this nurturance, this maternal caring, not just to children, but to each other. That is, I suppose, the fantasy, the truly revolutionary potential of a recreated motherhood. (23)

As this passage highlights, the practice of caring may affect the way we organize social life, and help us cease glorifying rigid independence, efficiency, bottom line costs and benefits. Throughout society, we would rebuild institutions and workplace practices to reflect a Political Culture of Care, a culture that would in turn sustain these institutions. Ultimately, such a culture would affect and reflect our very notions and make possible a truly caring society

The Political Culture of Care and motherwork

We are perhaps most able to see the symbolic and real manifestations of a Political Culture of Care through the every day practices of mothering. I

use the term "Motherwork" to recognize the multitude of mothering practices, experiences, and self-definitions that are indeed historically and culturally bound (Collins 2000; Hart 2002). Mechthild Hart (2002) uses the term motherwork because it makes central the labour of mothering—it is life affirming work, that is unrecognized, unpaid, but life sustaining, what Hart refers to as "subsistence work." Whether it is breast or bottle-feeding a newborn, holding and soothing a crying toddler, or organizing and mobilizing around environmental justice issues, these are just some examples of the physical, emotional, and mental work of mothering. While my point here is not to idealize mothering or the work that mothers do, I focus on these renderings of motherwork in order to capture some of the values, virtues, experiences and practices embodied in a Political Culture of Care. For example, when one is engaged in motherwork, one is recognizing and being attentive to the needs of another. Motherwork entails supporting, nurturing, and helping others to grow and flourish. Moreover, motherwork requires interdependency, as well as it fosters the importance of interdependent relations, as the community othermothers discussed in Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Certainly, caring practices go beyond motherwork and include a variety of social relationships—nursing, teaching, friendship, to name a few. I think a careful consideration of motherwork helps to highlight the everyday practices as well as the societal institutions of a Political Culture of Care.

Many recent books have been written on the complexities and contradictions of mothering, especially for working, middle and upper middle class women in the United States (Thurer, 1994; Hays, 1998; Crittenden, 2001; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Warner, 2005; Blades and Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2006). These are just a few important political, economic, and cultural critiques of the contradictions between the idealization of mothers and mothering and the realities of mothering in a political culture where there is so little real respect and support given to the difficult, rewarding, pleasurable and frustrating work of mothering. As Hart (2002) reminds us too, such an understanding must also take into account those at the other end of the socio-economic class structure. For Hart, motherwork is "sustaining and affirming life in a social context that directly disaffirms life, both psychologically and physically/materially" (Hart, 2002: 2)

The Political Culture of Care derives its meanings from the practices and values of motherwork. But at the same time, it could potentially transform the practices, experiences, and values of motherwork. So, then, what could motherwork look like in a Political Culture of Care? What would it mean for those who carry out motherwork and the society in which it is practiced to elevate the value of mothering without idealizing it? Where practices so central and essential to the human experience could be supported institutionally, politically, economically, and culturally, and be in the forefront of what is considered virtuous? What would it do to our collective spirit to see mothers nurse their children in public spaces without fear of reprobation or legal action? What would it do for those engaged in motherwork if there were institutional

support and cultural approval to make better, more informed decisions on how best to feed a newborn child in one's circumstances? And how might we change the circumstances so that mothers have more freedom to choose how to best engage in motherwork? How would our moral obligations to each other be altered, in fact, improved, if all parents were extended the financial and institutional support to care for their newborns or newly adopted children for the first year of their lives? Or if all parents were able to nurture their children in healthy and safe environments?

The Political Culture of Care rejects the notion that profit maximization alone represents progress. Accordingly, it demands that development and progress embrace fundamental aspects of life that are often overlooked, or disavowed, in societies focused on economic development—such as environmental justice, preventative health care, life-long access to quality education, worker-safety and flexibility, the promotion of the public good and active participation in community life. Such societal institutions would profoundly alter the experiences and practices of motherwork as well as other activities and experiences relating to care.

The Political Culture of Care insists upon vigilance in fulfilling the substantive ideals of democracy, freedom and equality, ever-challenging current social inequalities, and working to eradicate "privilege" based on culturally constructed categories, whether class, race, gender, nationality, citizenship, physical ability, education level, or occupation. In a Political Culture of Care, there would be a willingness to embrace difference, and a commitment to a prevailing Care ethic that considers individual interests and desires in relation to the interests and desires of the broader community. Again, the possibilities this creates for improving the conditions under which motherwork occurs are important—as examples, the active participation of men in motherwork, and those who are paid to do motherwork be compensated justly, treated with respect, thus enabling them to care for their own children in the ways they would like.

An important component of a Political Culture of Care is the recognition of the indispensable role of the State in providing basic material needs, such as clean water and air, safe shelter, nutritional food, access to land, basic education and literacy, health care, and freedom from violence. These needs are often presumed to be lacking only in the developing world, though they are not just Third World problems. To the extent any society is failing to meet these basic needs, human flourishing cannot emerge, and most certainly motherwork is constrained by these deficiencies.

It does seem as if that these "caring" policies and the ideas they uphold have all been lost in the current American political culture as well as other places where such policies have been stronger. The market has triumphed as the widely accepted arbiter of fairness. It is the State that is seen as "inefficient" or discriminatory, rather than the market. In fact, the market, released from the regulatory chains of government, is viewed as the only societal institution that

can distribute the goods, services and resources that are produced by society equally and fairly. And this idea is predicated on the autonomous individual, which despite Fineman's illumination of its mythological construct, is overwhelming in much of neo-liberal political and economic thinking.

However, there have been some recent empirical studies that undermine the widespread ideological commitment to the rational actor model, and its opposition to active State involvement in the provision of basic human needs. For example, Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers (2003) undertake a cross-country comparative analysis of family policies among 12 countries. In doing so, they show very clearly how the *lack* of state involvement in universalizing workplace policies such as child care and pre-school, parental leave, paid vacation time, and proportionate part-time pay have negatively affected the overall well-being of children, families and adult individuals. They find that when compared to Canada and several European countries, the United States has higher rates of family and child poverty, higher rates of families without any or inadequate health care, and higher rates of teen pregnancy. Furthermore, many Americans experience other failures such as a parental time squeeze, wage losses for part time work, gender inequality in the labour market and the home, and non-standard working time. All of these experiences are interrelated and very much an outgrowth of the historical and exclusive privatization of care labour in the United States.

To address these concerns, Gornick and Meyers (2003) call for the creation of a "Dual Earner/Dual Carer" society. In such a society, both men and women would be equally and actively engaged in paid workforce labour as well as the necessary unpaid home labour, which includes family care. In addition, there would be societal and institutional support for substantial parental time to care for the very young. What this would entail, certainly for the United States, is an expansion of the State to provide for the institutional framework in the marketplace and the family. It would be the State that would provide a subsidized, universal pre-school for children between three to five years old, as is practiced in other industrialized countries. Major transformations in the workplace would be instituted whereby women and men would be expected to reduce work hours during years when care-giving demands are high, such as the early years of childhood (0-3 years) or the need to give care to elderly parents.

To be sure, incorporation of these ideas into the current political culture in the United States—with its strong ideological commitment to the free market—will not be easy. But there are reasons to be hopeful. First, there is the possibility that real policy change can transform practices and behaviors, which can then alter the culture that embodies these practices. As Gornick and Meyers (2003) write,

> Policies that support parents' choice to reduce working hours when their children are very young, for example, signal the value of care-

> giving work; policies that support this choice by fathers and mothers signal the equal rights and responsibilities for men and women; policies that socialize the cost of substitute child care signal a shared commitment to the well-being of children. (100)

Moreover, even in the existing political culture of the United States, a collective caring of others has occurred historically. As Hart (2002) writes, "Norms and values grounded in a belief in collective responsibilities and an established web of reciprocal obligations all carry the work of social motherhood or community caretaking" (175). There are many examples of this type of motherwork, especially among economically and socially disadvantaged women. The ideological foundations of Care as a central component of a just and developed society is already found in many places, as the motherwork experiences of poor women have demonstrated.

Perhaps the popularity of the slogan "It takes a village to raise a child" (though often attributed to United States Senator and 2008 Democratic Presidential candidate Hilary Rodham Clinton, this slogan comes from an African proverb) suggests an underlying preference for such notions of collective responsibility to care. It is possible that this desire is created by the hyper-individualist capitalist culture and practice that supports the current political economic system.

A Political Culture of Care would encourage such impulses to thrive rather than be relegated to merely rhetorical claims that perpetuate the status quo. The institutional arrangements of a dual earner/dual carer society, for example, would allow individuals the opportunities to pursue their interests and talents and flourish, and be supported ideologically by a valuation of care—as a work activity, as an experience and practice central to our lives. Such examples by no means encompass all that could be changed in order to create a Political Culture of Care, and to promote human flourishing.

There are many more avenues for policy formation that require attention. The main point is that, in order to create the pre-conditions for a truly caring society, the whole gamut of global social, economic and political policies, as well as the ideological assumptions that sustain them must be challenged. The Political Culture of Care, which demands that re-thinking, and the implementation of policies to foster human flourishing, is thus an indispensable part of promoting democracy and social justice.

Concluding thoughts

The basic tenet of a Political Culture of Care is that care matters as much as, if not more than efficiency and economic growth. A truly caring society aims at qualitative human flourishing—a concept that embraces the totality of policies and practices that define the "good life." That does not mean that economic considerations are irrelevant— it is true that humans have basic material needs that require a stable level of economic productivity. What is not necessary, however, is this "peculiar attachment" to economic growth that excludes other

elements that connote a "developed society" and "progress." Economic growth is a necessary but not sufficient component of "the good life."

A focus on motherwork, I argue, is a helpful lens through which to re-examine the notions of progress that are upheld. For one, we can look at how our current political culture subverts motherwork. Likewise, a focus on motherwork helps us to see what other human experiences could and should be paramount in our definitions of what society should be like. In doing so, we can construct a different set of expectations that take us beyond economic growth and accumulation, challenging the orthodox paradigm of the rational actor and its related free market ideologies. At the same time we could rethink the assumptions about the individual, of what individuals need, and what makes life meaningful for individuals. Thus, making motherwork a central focus of analysis, would alter our way of thinking, our consciousness, our ethics, and our ideologies thereby, transforming our very notions of what a developed society is and what progress should be. That is what the Political Culture of Care aims to do. It is only with the aid of such a theory that a liberated motherwork, which makes possible human flourishing, that a truly caring society becomes an attainable and sustainable reality.

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