

Egalitarian Pluralism

Steven M. Teles

Alison Gopnik makes a compelling case for care as a matter of social responsibility. A politics of care, however, must address who has the authority to determine the content of care, not just who pays for it. The most attractive ideological vision of a politics of care combines extensive redistribution with a pluralistic recognition of the many different arrangements through which care is provided.

Alison Gopnik’s elegant essay for this volume grasps an essential challenge in liberal political economy, which is how to account for the fundamental and ubiquitous phenomenon of care within a political economy that prioritizes production and exchange.¹ I am in basic agreement with her essay. That said, I think care raises other tensions within liberalism, which I think are best understood as problems of authority.

There are two dimensions to the question of care at work in Gopnik’s essay, one on which she has a strong opinion – redistribution – and one on which the essay is ambivalent, which is what I will call *professional authority*. Even when care is provided in an intimate context – children being cared for by their parents, elders being cared for by their children – it still interacts with the rest of the political economy. Whether parents can actually care for children, for instance, is critically dependent on the structure of the labor market and the provision of social insurance. In a purely free market, she argues – and I agree – care will be undersupplied.

We do not need to go outside of the tradition of classical liberal political theory to understand why this undersupply is a problem. As far back as John Locke, liberals understood that the rational, contracting, “free” agents in their theory were an artifice, not something given by nature. As political scientist Rita Koganzon asserts in *Liberal States, Authoritarian Families*, the early moderns recognized this problem, but they argued, perhaps paradoxically to our contemporary ears, against a “logic of congruence” between the egalitarian state they hoped to produce and the nature of citizen-making.² Hierarchy in the family and schooling, they thought, was necessary to insulate children from influences that would make them overly subject to the opinions of others. Free citizens had somehow to be made, rather than just assumed.

It does not take much imagination to see how this might point to an argument for social insurance where care is concerned. A liberal society is impossible without liberal citizens, liberal citizens are produced through institutions of care, those

institutions will be systematically underproduced through market relations, and hence there is a social obligation to spread the costs of making citizens across the entire polity. From an argument like this, we get a liberal justification for redistribution to families.

While liberalism aspires to a political economy of equal, rational agents, however, it also recognizes that those citizens will have profound and basically irreconcilable differences on fundamental questions that are deeply implicated in care, which is inherently and unavoidably morally laden. What constitutes care as distinct from, say, abuse or exploitation is not immediately obvious. As Gopnik makes clear, “Tending the ill or the old also involves fundamental asymmetries between the carer and the person they care for.”³ Calling the relationship “asymmetrical” is just another way of saying that it involves authority, rather than exchange. Given that authority is inherent in care, normative questions of who is doing the caring – for example, families versus professionals – have significant weight.

Combining redistribution and authority produces a politics that is inherently multidimensional. The first dimension, redistribution, is the one we are most used to grappling with in political economy, with the right calling for limited socialization of responsibility, and the left calling for a very significant degree of socialization. The second dimension concerns professional authority, with the left calling for a high degree of centralization and professionalization of authority characterized by a “logic of congruence,” and the right supporting a high level of diffusion of authority, opposition to professionalization, and a logic of incongruence. Table 1 presents an overview of each option.

The lower-left quadrant is roughly aligned with contemporary progressivism. On the redistributive dimension, it accepts that ordinary market relationships will lead to an undersupply of care, but it also claims that care is best provided by professional service providers whose treatments of the cared-for can be justified by best practices determined by licensed experts. It also seeks to professionalize care because devolving care to the family will reproduce a gendered distribution of domestic labor, which impacts power relations within the family.

In the lower-right quadrant, we find what I call *corporate productivism*. This approach accepts a social priority on professionalizing care, but primarily for the purpose of allowing the highest-skilled female workers to devote themselves to economic activity. As a consequence, corporate productivism is relatively low on the redistributive dimension, defraying the costs of professionalized care through the model of corporate benefits rather than through social insurance.

The upper-right quadrant is occupied by libertarianism. This approach to care is essentially individualistic, largely for reasons of first principles about legitimate redistribution. But libertarianism is also distinct because it rejects the professionalization of care (or wants it to be simply one option for the production of care that might be provided by the market).

Table 1
Multidimensional Politics: Redistribution and Authority

		Degree of Socialization of Risk	
		HIGH	LOW
Degree of Professional Authority	LOW	REDISTRIBUTIVE PLURALISM	LIBERTARIANISM
	HIGH	PROGRESSIVISM	CORPORATE PRODUCTIVISM

Source: Table created by the author.

The final category, in the upper-left quadrant, is *redistributive pluralism*. Redistributive pluralists accept the arguments of Gopnik's essay and believe that care will be undersupplied in the absence of effective social insurance. But they are deeply worried that socializing the costs of care will lead to the dominance of a logic of congruence embedded in professionalization, and thus seek to decentralize decisions about the character of care.

Redistributive pluralism is highly attractive morally, but I will focus here on its merits politically. Redistributive pluralists start their political analysis with the fact that the welfare state – like a political constitution – is an intergenerational compact. People make long-term commitments based on the welfare state's promises, on everything from where to live and how many children to have to how to balance work and caring. Reliance on the welfare state depends on political stability, which requires a kind of overlapping political consensus in excess of normal, temporary legislative coalitions. While the larger culture war over the family and related issues cannot be simply wished away, redistributive pluralists argue for declaring as much of a truce as possible where the welfare state is concerned in order to generate a durable, overlapping consensus for redistribution.

The best example of the kinds of care programs supported by redistributive pluralists is a child benefit. Child benefits embody a recognition of the concentrated costs in the life cycle of raising children, and thus seek to spread those costs across society. But they are quite explicitly an alternative to state-provided,

professionalized childcare, which redistributive pluralists worry will embody a logic of congruence that they either reject or believe is politically unsustainable.

Redistributive pluralism will be unsatisfying for a great many people who seek a moral political economy of care. Libertarians and corporate productivists will flinch at the higher tax rates needed to support it. Progressives will wince at the willingness of redistributive pluralists to tolerate traditional forms of care and existing gendered distributions of domestic labor that they cannot stomach. But the strongest argument for redistributive pluralism as the philosophy of a moral political economy of care is that it has the potential to generate a political coalition sufficient to support greater investments in a context of intense cultural polarization. And maybe that is enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven M. Teles is Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University and Senior Fellow at the Niskanen Center. He is the author of *Never Trump: The Revolt of the Conservative Elites* (with Robert Saldin, 2020), *The Captured Economy: How The Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality* (with Brink Lindsey, 2017), *Prison Break: Why Conservatives Turned against Mass Incarceration* (with David Dagan, 2016), and *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law* (2008).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Alison Gopnik, “Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy,” *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 58–69.
- ² Rita Koganzon, *Liberal States, Authoritarian Families: Childhood and Education in Early Modern Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- ³ Gopnik, “Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy,” 80.