REMAKING AMERICA
Democracy and Public Policy in an Age of Inequality
Joe Soss, Jacob S. Hacker, and Suzanne Mettler, editors
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Chapter 9
Welfare Policy and the Transformation of Care

By 2001, five years after “the end of welfare as we know it,” reports from around the country were triumphal. Rolls had been cut—as much as 90 percent in some states. Millions of people once on the dole were now employed. The war on welfare was succeeding beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. As one of many success stories, the New York Department of Human Services put forward Angel Martinez and Regla Belette, a couple with three children whose five-year time limit on welfare was fast approaching. The state told them they were no longer eligible for assistance and invited them to come in for an appointment “so you can discuss how you plan to manage your household expenses” (Bernstein 2001; all details and quotations in this family profile are from this source).

In a tiny gesture of resistance, Martinez and Belette told a New York Times reporter that they didn’t count themselves as a success, despite what the city said. Although Mr. Martinez worked all the overtime he could get, he still couldn’t pay the light bill and give his kids money for snacks. He summed up his feelings about the state’s welfare program: “None of the those welfare bureaucrats’ kids is going to go hungry and cry themselves to sleep. My kids are.” Though they both held jobs, he as a warehouseman in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, she as a child-care worker, Mr. Martinez and Ms. Belette were still struggling to keep their family afloat—to pay the rent and keep hunger at bay. They were also trying to take care of each other in the way that families do, the way that usually involves little money and lots of personal attention—nurturing, nursing, teaching, protecting, loving. But thanks to New York City’s welfare rules, Mr. Martinez and Ms. Belette were operating under a bizarre set of arrangements for family care.

In order to qualify for assistance, Ms. Belette had to be working for money, so instead of taking care of her own children, she was paid by the city to take care of her sister’s three children while her sister worked in her workfare assignment. Presumably Ms. Belette and Mr. Martinez were either paying someone to look after their kids while they worked, or were getting a relative to do it for free, or asking their oldest child to look after the others, or just letting the children be on their own. The one child-care arrangement unacceptable to the city was taking care of their own kids. At some point in her time on public assistance, Ms. Belette went to Florida to take care of her sick father. While she was away, she missed some appointments with the welfare office, a transgression for which the family was penalized with loss of its Food Stamps and rent subsidies.

Since the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, public policy expects almost all mothers to work outside the home for pay and to put their kids in child care. If a mother refuses to do this, she doesn’t get benefits. In a strange and perverse twist, if a woman takes care of other people’s children for money—as a baby-sitter or a family day-care provider—then welfare policy considers her to be doing some-
thing valuable and earning her keep as a citizen. We, her fellow citizens who are in a position to help her, will give her vouchers to purchase care for her children on the market, but we will not help her, or even seem to reward her, to take care of her own kids. Likewise we will help her if she takes care of someone else's frail parents as a paid home health aide or nursing-home assistant, but not if she takes care of her own parents out of honor, loyalty, and love. As long as she exchanges her care for cash, we will help her if she still earns too little to support her family.

The story of Angel Martinez and Regla Belette encapsulates the story of how American welfare policy makes a certain kind of politics. Policy creates incentives and disincentives for citizens to engage in some kinds of behavior and not others. In 1986, Charles Murray launched the decisive battle in the war against Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with his argument about welfare's perverse incentives (Murray 1986/1996, 221–3). All social assistance, he declared, unintentionally but inevitably rewards people for being needy. So powerful and ineluctable was this effect that Murray described it as a natural law, calling it the Law of Unintended Rewards. Murray popularized the idea that welfare “pays women to have babies” (Murray 1994, 30). Welfare policy, he argued, tried to help children by helping their (single) mothers, but instead, it provided an incentive for women to act badly: to have sex without protection, to decide to keep their babies when they get pregnant, and to raise them in poverty instead of waiting to bear children until they have achieved economic security.

If we were to follow Murray’s logic and comb welfare policy for its “unintended rewards,” we would have to conclude that current policy rewards people for putting the family out on the market. As the Martinez-Belette story illustrates, welfare pays women not to take care of their own children. The unintended reward—or perhaps it’s really what is intended—is a reward for hoarding one’s own care and exchanging it for money. It is a penalty on ordinary altruism, on caring for love instead of for money. It is a lesson in how to live by raw economic self-interest.

Beyond creating incentives, policy shapes politics even more profoundly by providing moral tutelage to citizens. In this era of conservative moral revival, government has consciously defined its role in welfare policy as less the aid dispenser and more the moral tutor. Yet it is hard to fathom how policymakers think they are inculcating virtue when they require Ms. Belette to take care of her sister's children instead of her own and give her a check for the job. How, one wonders, do policy rules teach Ms. Belette the meaning of “responsibility” when they punish her for choosing to take care of her sick father instead of keeping an appointment with her government caseworker?

The morality encoded in current welfare policy reverses and rejects ordinary morality. The supreme laws of the universal human moral code might be stated as “Honor thy parents,” “Nurture thy children,” and “Help thy neighbor.” But in the new code book of welfare policy (and arguably social policy more generally), “Earn thine own keep” has become the first duty of adult citizens. And this is a third way that public policy shapes politics. By pitting public morality against private morality, public policy sometimes forces citizens to go underground and requires them to engage in behavior regarded as immoral by the dominant morality, such as cheating, lying, and stealing. When people must violate government laws in order to remain true to themselves, to fulfill their commitments to their deepest relationships, and to obey their understanding of higher law, public policy risks fomenting disrespect for government and even civil disobedience.

Last, but not least, welfare policy has de facto reformed American notions of distributive justice, with scarcely any public deliberation about the profound transformation. Most scholars of social policy in Western democracies, myself included, have regarded
work and need as the only politically recognized bases for economic distribution. Need, in turn, has been interpreted through demographic categories that describe valid reasons why people cannot work, typically old age, disability, illness, and childhood. These categories, by political consensus, render the people in them morally deserving of social aid (Stone 1984). In fact, as I will show in the next section, welfare policy historically recognized a third basis for social aid: caregiving responsibilities. But welfare reform has largely eradicated caregiving as a legitimate basis for redistribution. Meanwhile, politicians and policymakers give increasing attention to the importance of family caregiving and its tensions with market work among middle and upper-income citizens, and have enacted “work-family balance” policies to ease these tensions (Heymann 2006; Drago 2007). Thus, the moral basis for social redistribution differs for different economic classes. This hidden moral inequality among citizens, I would argue, threatens democracy far more than the economic inequality that currently garners political attention.

THE EVOLUTION OF FAMILY CARE IN WELFARE POLICY

Public policies toward families are caught in a tangle of conflicting visions. Policymakers have never been sure whether government help for economically struggling families should encourage mothers to work for wages or to stay home to care for their families. When forty states established mothers’ pensions between 1910 and 1920, the surrounding rhetoric elevated motherhood to high heroism. “The pension,” proclaimed the Illinois Congress of Mothers, as reported in the Illinois “State Report” published in Child Welfare in 1916, “removes the mother and her children from the disgrace of charity relief and places her in the class of public servants similar to army officers and school teachers” (Skocpol 1992, 475). Pensions, according to a 1914 article in The Independent, were “salaries for women who serve the state by giving all their time to rearing good citizens” (see Ladd-Taylor 1994, 144). The pensions were issued mostly to widows, but also to some women whose husbands had deserted them. If these destitute women could be paid for raising children, the thinking went, they wouldn’t have to choose between caring for their children and earning a living, or between rearing their children in extreme poverty and placing them in an institution. This same vision—public support for family care—inspired what later came to be reviled as “welfare,” but was more formally known first as Aid to Dependent Children and then as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Yet political dissension about women’s proper role made even the early public programs schizophrenic, snaring mothers in the same tangle of conflicting expectations that shaped the laws in the first place. Nominally, mothers’ pensions enabled mothers to continue caring for their children in the absence of a male breadwinner, but most states effectively forced the mothers to work part-time by making sure their pensions were too low to live on. Mothers were supposed to contribute to their own standard of living and work their way out of dependence on aid, yet they weren’t free, as men were, to seek out the best-paying work they could find. They were limited to jobs elite women deemed suitable for poor women, and these were usually just low-paying versions of the domestic work women otherwise did for nothing—laundry, cleaning, sewing, and taking in piece-work, in which they might also employ their children. No woman could achieve economic self-sufficiency on these kinds of jobs, but if a mother worked outside the prescribed occupations, she risked being declared an unsuitable mother or a disobedient pauper and having her pension taken away (Gordon 1994, 49–50; Skocpol 1992, 469–70; Mink 1995).
Another goal of mothers' pensions was to "Americanize" immigrant families, particularly by teaching immigrant mothers white, Anglo-American standards of homemaking and child rearing. These public-servant mothers were required to provide the proper homes and upbringing, but—a harbinger of things to come—few of them could maintain "suitable homes" and proper child-rearing practices on their meager allotments, with or without part-time work. And in yet another contradiction, although the programs prodded immigrant families to conform to white, middle-class standards of housekeeping and child rearing, many agencies figured that immigrant families needed less money to live on than white Anglo-Americans, and so gave them smaller grants (Gordon 1994, 47).

In all these ways, the internal contradictions in public aid programs translated into double binds for mothers. By the rules of public programs, it was virtually impossible for women to be good mothers and good providers. This double bind, perceived as unjust and oppressive by low-income women, catalyzed the welfare rights movement of the 1960s. Women's identities as mothers, with its fierce sense of moral duty, provided the political identity and sense of legitimacy necessary for an alternative form of political participation by low-income women (West 1981).

Confusion about the values of work and motherhood blurred welfare policy at every stage of its evolution. Until the late 1960s, work in the paid workforce remained highly suspect for women receiving public aid, even though paid work was the norm for low- and middle-income women generally. Under AFDC, women were not allowed to work for pay while receiving cash grants, or at least not to earn more than minimal amounts. If they did work, they were required to report their earnings, and when their earnings exceeded the tiny amounts allowed them, their welfare grants were cut back or cut off altogether. The vast majority of women on welfare have always worked for money and still do—but they do so under the table, forced to conceal their work in order to get state help (Edin and Lein 1997).

Significantly, while welfare policy before 1996 wasn't exactly munificent with mothers, it often treated family caregiving as honorable and something to be encouraged. In sharp contrast to current rhetoric, the moral ideal that suffused American family policy was women's dependence, not their independence. Women were supposed to be economically dependent on a husband-breadwinner. Economic independence was neither a virtue nor a proper aspiration for a woman. But starting with the so-called "welfare crisis" in the late 1960s, policy rhetoric about women, work, and motherhood began to fork along class lines.

First was the question of whether mothers of young children should work outside the home. It was a value question that became political, and as in all such issues, scientists weighed in with their opinions. Well into the 1990s, Benjamin Spock, T. Berry Brazelton, and Penelope Leach, child-rearing experts whose tomes appealed to well-educated readers, pressed full-time mothering as the healthiest route to child development. Good mothers, they advised, would be willing to buck the feminist trend and stay home for at least the first year, if not two or three, of their children's lives. They would regard raising a child, Leach said, as "more worthwhile than any other job" (Slone 1997, 79).

For low-income women, though, professional child-rearing wisdom clashed head-on with the growing political consensus according to which nothing was more worthwhile than a self-supporting job, or its equivalent, a supporting husband. Politicians and welfare reformers began to imagine child rearing as an obstacle to poor women's gainful employment, instead of a worthwhile dedication. With heightened concern about a welfare "explosion," and barely concealed racist assumptions that welfare and out-of-wedlock childbearing had become a way of life for African American women, Congress gave the states
new leeway in operating welfare programs. Until 1967, Congress had insisted that mothers with young children not be forced to work out of the home. Starting in 1967, however, states could require mothers to work or accept job training in exchange for benefits. Even mothers with children under three years old could be sent to work if the states desired. Prodding and pushing women to go to work was helping them—helping them to achieve “self-sufficiency” by offering them “rehabilitation instead of relief,” in the words of Senator Abraham Ribicoff (D-Conn.) (quoted in Michel 1999, 244).

The rhetoric surrounding the new work requirements in this and other welfare-reform legislation was the mirror image of Progressive-era rhetoric about work and family. Then, poor mothers were offered aid so that they could care for their children. Now, mothers were offered child care so they could stop receiving aid. Then, women were said to fulfill their citizenship obligations by rearing children, our future citizens. Now, they were said to fulfill their citizenship obligations by becoming economically self-sufficient. Then, they were expected to sacrifice any yearning for careers or high-paying occupations that were incompatible with motherhood. Now they were expected to sacrifice any yearning to care for their children that was incompatible with earning a living. Then, caring for one’s own children was a moral duty and a calling. Now, caring for one’s children was a luxury, merited only by those lucky enough to have a high-earning partner or an inheritance. To be sure, mothers’ pensions were rarely implemented fully in the spirit of the political rhetoric that produced them (Ladd-Taylor 1994, 148–52), but still, the rhetorical ideals of welfare policy then and now stand in striking opposition.

Day care was the second issue on which public policy split along class lines. In the United States, there has never been much support for the kind of universal public day care common in Europe. In the late 1960s, Congress considered many proposals to expand day-care facilities using federal funds. But even as women at all economic levels were in the paid workforce and in dire need of day care, the only proposals that drew much political support were ones targeted to women on welfare. In 1971, President Nixon vetoed a child-care bill that would have created a vast network of federally supported child-care centers, saying it would undermine “parental authority and parental involvement with children” and would push the United States “to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach” (Michel 1999, 250). Three years later though, Congress quickly passed, and Nixon signed, title XX of the Social Security Act, a program targeting child care to welfare mothers and “at risk” children (Michel 1999, 251).

“At risk” is euphemistic policy-speak for “poor.” Hidden between the lines in title XX was the extraordinary notion that poor children might be better off in “other care” than mother care. “The communal approach” might just be better for poor children than the all-American “family-centered approach.” The same day care that was a form of deprivation to middle-class children was enrichment for poor children. The same day care that supposedly weakened middle-class family structure strengthened poor families. Here was the germ of an idea that would recur with even more bite in the run-up to passage of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) legislation.

Two years later, in 1976, Congress passed the most important new funding for day care in the Aid to Day Care Centers Act. Again, the funding was aimed at poor communities and day care was envisioned as an antipoverty strategy, not a pro-family strategy or a vehicle for equalizing women’s work opportunities (Michel 1999, 251–53). Under the guise of a job creation program, the act also provided money to train welfare mothers to become a cadre of paid child-care providers to other people’s children. Here were seeds of two more transformations that would reach full bloom in the TANF pro-
gram—women could be paid by welfare to mind other people's children, but not their own; and child care was becoming a credentialed but low-education, low-skill, and low-paid occupation.

Balancing work and family was a third area where policy and politics split along class lines. The Family Support Act of 1988, another welfare reform measure, tightened work requirements for poor mothers still more, lowering the children's age at which the mothers could be required to work. Almost simultaneously, in 1989, Congress debated and then passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, the first glimmerings of a national parental leave policy. Wrapped in rhetoric of parental bonding and child development, the law required large employers to give new parents twelve weeks of leave without pay. Only dual-earner couples, and ones with at least one "family wage" at that, could afford to take it. Staying home with baby was at last permitted, even encouraged, for the well-off. In debates over the Family Support Act, stay-at-home (poor) moms were reviled as poor role models for their children, transmitters of a parasitic culture. But in debates over the Family and Medical Leave Act, a stay-at-home mom could be a perfectly good role model for children, as long as she had a high-earning husband by her side (Wexler 1997). The same double standard persisted through Bill Clinton's presidency. In 1999, three years after signing the welfare reform legislation that made family care nearly impossible for low-income women to obtain, Clinton proposed a tax credit to help middle-income women stay home with their young children (Chavkin 1999, 477).

A new idea about low-income motherhood animated all these debates. A life on welfare, Murray proclaimed, was "bad for children who need to be socialized into the world of work" (Murray 1994, 26). Poor women, especially nonworking women, were bad mothers. When Mickey Kaus proposed in 1992 that government should fund day care to enable low-income mothers to work, he was forthright about his motives: government ought to encourage day care, he wrote, "as part of an 'acculturation' campaign to get underclass kids out of the home and into classrooms at an early age." From the safe obscurity of a footnote he added: "It's not all clear that mothering by underclass mothers is better than day care." (Kaus 1992, 126, 252n. 21)

Poverty reformers, especially conservatives who seek to tighten social redistribution, have long emphasized personal deficiencies as the most important cause of poverty. From Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty" to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "pathology of the black family," poor people were said to have individual pathologies that, although transmitted through culture or community, were individual traits nonetheless (Lewis 1959; U.S. Department of Labor 1965). What was new in the 1990s was the emphasis on transmission of pathology from mothers to children. According to this mounting conservative critique, a mother's example as a "role model" for her children—even her infants, apparently—is more important than her taking care of them. As a role model, she could do more for them by being away from them than by being with them. No doubt Head Start and other good day-care programs are enriching and provide exposure to experiences that poor children don't get at home. But the idea that day care was better for these children than mother care was insulting and oppressive to poor families. It provided a professional, quasi-scientific rationale for requiring poor mothers to go to work even at the cost of not being able to care for their children. Day care, not they, would rescue their children from danger and tend to their well-being. The idea was an affront to the bond between mothers and children, no matter their income level. And, it sent a message to low-income families that harked back to the days of slavery, when black family life was disrespected and disrupted in a hundred ways.
HOW WELFARE POLICY SHAPED THE POLITICS OF WELFARE REFORM

Welfare reform and the ideas that inspired it didn’t spring full-blown from policy intellectuals’ heads. Each iteration of welfare policy, from mothers’ pensions to AFDC and its many revisions, contained structural features that overwhelmingly shaped the way intellectuals and ordinary citizens thought about welfare.

First, social redistribution always makes a weak, vulnerable, or disadvantaged group appear to be favored by policy, no matter how badly off the group. When government appears to treat any group favorably, no matter how stingy, stigmatizing, and unfavorable the actual treatment, the mere fact of positive treatment can make government appear to be treating its citizens unequally. Social Security Disability Insurance and disability rights legislation are cases in point. Never mind that few nondisabled people would wish themselves disabled; assistance to people with disabilities often generates enormous resentment and seems to threaten people’s trust in fair competition (Krieger 2003). Affirmative action policies in universities and workplaces have generated the same sense that government, corporations, and schools discriminate against people in the nonfavored categories (Burstein 1993; Kennedy 1986). “Special” government help to any category of citizens almost invariably creates a backlash. Welfare policy is no exception. The mere existence of government help for some people invited others to ask themselves, “Why not for me, too?”

Second, all policies operate through rules that divide people and behavior into different categories (Stone 2002, 284–304). Rules are in effect boundaries; policy treats people on one side of a boundary one way, while people on the other side are treated differently. Such rules invite comparison of people on opposite sides of the boundary and inevitably raise the question of whether the difference between the two populations is significant enough to warrant different treatment. Welfare, as a means-tested program for single mothers (primarily), seemed to divide mothers into two categories: those who had to—or least did—enter the workforce to support their children and those who did not. From roughly the early 1970s on, two great changes in American life conspired to make this distinction seem wrong and unjust. As economic growth slowed, so did the growth of family income and wealth, and more and more two-parent families had to send women to work just to maintain their standard of living or get by. Add to these economic forces a cultural factor: the feminist campaign for gender equality succeeded in making employment outside the home a normal and even desirable life path for middle- and upper-class women. With nearly three-quarters of all mothers of young children in the labor force by 1990, the idea that government should pay poor women to stay home caring for their children came to seem (to many people) an outrage. Assistance for poor mothers seemed to insult the sense of justice, and it was easy to mobilize resentment among working women and two-earner families.

Third, the operation of welfare from its inception as mothers’ pensions was predicated on inquiry into applicants’ individual traits and circumstances. The eligibility structure based on individual examination sends a potent symbolic message to applicants, welfare workers, politicians, and citizens that the fact of poverty, as well as its cause, is to be discovered case by case, in individuals. The very eligibility structure, which is the face of the program to the public makes the problem of deficient family-keeping capacity appear to be personal, due to individual actions and traits, rather than structural, due, say, to larger economic forces. Welfare policy itself, then, focused everyone’s attention on the wrong cause. In fact, the problem is largely systemic. Low-wage work simply doesn’t pay
enough to live on and care for children decently (Edin and Lein 1997), nor does it provide necessary health care, sick leave, unemployment compensation, and other forms of security for a family to survive (Hacker 2006). And the structure of market work is inherently incompatible with family keeping. Market work requires long hours away from home, when one is physically unable to watch and care for children. It typically also requires inflexible schedules that don’t permit a parent to respond to the random, unpredictable needs of family members, anything from taking a child to a doctor to attending parent-teacher conferences. But the apparatus and procedures of individual examination at the heart of welfare administration became the lens through which most reformers saw the welfare problem, and that lens made it appear as a problem of deficient incentives rather than systemic forces.

POOR WORK AND POOR EDUCATION FOR POOR PEOPLE

In the national debates about welfare, taking care of family had come to be seen as the antithesis of work, almost a luxury or privilege that comes with already having earned enough to drop out of the workforce. Economics, casting its market lens on the family, transforms children into just another consumption item: “Having children is largely a voluntary choice, and may even be viewed as a matter of personal consumption preference from the point of view of parents,” droned two economists (Slemrod and Bakija 1996). Touting the same idea, Elinor Burkett made a media sensation with her book, The Baby Boon, in which she portrayed child rearing as a luxury hobby and chastised those who wish to indulge in it without having the means (Burkett 2000). In this brave new world, staying home to care for the kids was now the adult equivalent of playing hooky.

Meanwhile, when reform advocates talk about wage work, they make it sound almost holy, and certainly redemptive, transformative, and character building. “Work is more than just a weekly paycheck,” preached President Clinton, still stumping for his welfare reform in 1999. “It is, at heart, our way of life. Work lends purpose and dignity to our lives, instills in our children the basic values that built this nation” (DeParle 1999i). Sounding more like a parson than a state official, New York City’s welfare commissioner, Jason Turner, explained why he planned to make work requirements so stringent: “Work is one’s own gift to others, and when you sever that relationship with your fellow man, you’re doing more than just harm to yourself economically. You’re doing spiritual harm” (DeParle 1998a). Turner, according to the New York Times, harbored “an almost mystical belief in the power of work—not just as a source of income, but also as a redemptive force that can treat depression, order lives and stem moral disintegration” (DeParle 1998a). For Lawrence Mead, perhaps the leading academic voice in welfare reform, stringent work requirements help poor people by “enforc[ing] the values they already have and provid[ing] a control over their lives that benefits and services cannot give” (Mead 1992, 174). Work helps people be their best selves.

Thus, work for work’s sake became the new mantra. When a study showed that Connecticut’s welfare reform had indeed increased employment among recipients, but not their income, a state official explained why the program should still be counted a success: “We have to remember that the goal of the reform program was not to get people out of poverty, but to achieve financial independence, to get off welfare” (Flanders 2001). In 2000, when a study found that poverty among New York City families with children had risen sharply despite the economic boom of the late 1990s, Lawrence Mead told a reporter that the drop in the welfare rolls was more important than the rise in poverty, and
that families are better off when they earn money rather than get it from welfare, even if their income drops (Bernstein 2000). "Work first," the national slogan of welfare reform, is shorthand for the new philosophy. It's better to take whatever job you're qualified for now, no matter how bad the job or the pay, than to put off working while you acquire skills for a better life (Boris 1999, 41). "Any job is a good job," sing posters in Massachusetts welfare offices (Albelda 1999).

Welfare reform's cardinal principle was putting welfare recipients and would-be recipients to work, and to do this, the reform created some new categories of work and some strange relationships between care work and wage work. Federal pressure on states comes in the form of work quotas, or what are called participation rates; the federal government ties state grants to the percentage of welfare recipients engaged in work. And here's where things get murky, because states are allowed to count as work a broad range of "work-related activities." Among these are various kinds of subsidized public and private employment, nonpaid work experiences, on-the-job training, job searching and job readiness classes, certain education programs, community service programs, and—notably—providing child care to a person who is participating in community service.

And so welfare reform has created a strange world of Orwellian euphemisms and Potemkin workshops whose purpose is to baptize people as workers. Caseworkers have been renamed with titles such as financial planner, employment specialist, or in some places, double-duty financial and employment planner. Clients who aren't capable of getting a real job get "work experience" placements, subsidized jobs, trial jobs, or mock jobs. One of the private agencies that runs Milwaukee's welfare program owns and operates an entire plastics plant to train welfare recipients as workers (DeParle 1999c). Wisconsin has "transition jobs," with shorter hours and state-paid supervisors. In one such job, a woman packs cartons with books or calendars for four hours a day under close supervision (DeParle 1999g). In most states, welfare clients who aren't ready for real work are put to work with "job coaches," "mentors," or "buddies" by their side. All these pretend-workers are kept in place—"job retention" is the euphemism—with an array of "supportive services" such as child care, transportation, and on-site meetings with caseworkers. To get them through their lives while they're not on the job, they get "wrap-around services" such as more child care, drug treatment, and case management (DeParle 1998b; Fuchtgott 1998). Despite all these kinds of soft work, make-work, and pretend work, caring for one's family doesn't count as work in the eyes of welfare policy.

Given the cost of supervision and coaching, these transitional workers can't be terribly productive, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that they are imitating what real workers do. In effect, state program rules make everybody pretend to work in some way. It's not clear how many of these people who require a double to get them through their work day will ever be able to work on their own. But pretend work sustains the fiction that everyone can and will become a real worker—a worker who is productive and can support a family. And if work is redemptive, just going through the motions and imitating work is more important than what people actually do, whether or not they are productive.

Welfare policy also has a system of education that is parallel but not equal to education for citizens lucky enough to escape welfare's net. Recipients and would-be recipients are allowed to count education and training as meeting their work requirements, but the system limits what kind and length of education people can pursue before taking a paying job. Under the "Work first" philosophy, clients are pushed to take whatever job they can get with whatever abilities they have. Training and education for a better job will have to come later, which usually means never. After welfare reform, college is no longer a proper aspiration for clients. In Massachusetts and New York, students
have been forced to abandon their studies and get a real job. But it’s not just college that’s off limits to welfare clients. In Boston, a survivor of Vietnamese refugee camps who had no skills to earn more than minimum wage was denied the chance to attend an eight-month training program tailored to immigrants. Graduates of the program find jobs with average wages of $10.32 an hour, a lot better than the $8.00 an hour the state welfare department finds for people who leave its rolls directly for work, and a far bigger jump than most workers starting at $8.00 would ever be able to garner in eight months. Massachusetts wouldn’t tolerate the woman lingering in a training program, though, and rejected her request. Why? “At some point these people have to go to work and it’s her time,” the welfare department spokesperson explained. “Work is work; it’s not job training” (McNamara 2000).

In place of real education, welfare clients are offered courses in good manners and behavior, masquerading behind high-flying titles like Milwaukee’s “Academy of Excellence.” The academy is not, as its name cheerily suggests, a prep school with a liberal arts curriculum, nor is it an exam school for the talented. In the Academy of Excellence, students get motivational talks and two weeks of classes on “life’s basic arts—negotiating with the gas company, avoiding domestic violence, and securing birth control” (DeParle 1999e; 1999h). (Presumably they learn how to negotiate for extended credit when their paycheck is insufficient to cover the utilities, how to escape domestic violence now that they have no independent means of shelter and food, and how to get birth control once they are cut off from Medicaid, either intentionally or in bureaucratic error.) In classes on “Job Search,” students get motivational talks, lessons on interviewing (“Make eye contact”), and tutoring in the rudiments of grooming, such as, “Don’t go in there with body odor on you” (DeParle 1999f).

In New York, welfare clients are offered the advice of “financial planners.” These are not your father’s financial planners, the folks at Fidelity Investments, say. These planners advise welfare clients how to obtain enough money by relying on relatives or sticking out a job they loathe. The goal of welfare’s financial planners, employment planners, social-service planners, whatever kind of planner, one office frankly admits, is “to redirect the participant to another source other than Temporary Assistance” (DeParle 1998b). Translation: Mooch, beg, whatever you do, ask somebody else for help, not us. At one time, Oregon’s welfare recipients got financial planning advice in the form of a “tip sheet” with ideas for saving money, including shopping at thrift stores (as if they didn’t know), clipping coupons (as if they could afford newspapers and magazines), and “Check the dump and residential/business Dumpsters” (Verhovek 2001). The sheet was withdrawn when several recipients said they felt demeaned by its advice to pick garbage—but it captures the spirit of so-called financial advice for the poor.

More often than not, welfare clients don’t even get the pretense of financial planning help. Instead, they get glib advice from their caseworkers or politicians. When they don’t have enough money to buy food or pay the rent, they are told to get more adept at budgeting. Asked whether he would consider offering money management classes to welfare clients, Jason Turner, the New York City welfare commissioner, demurred. The real way to learn, he said, was just do it: “Live on what you get, and if you run out, figure out what to do until your next paycheck” (DeParle 1998b). And as the five-year deadline loomed and clients like Angel Martinez and Regla Belette were unable to make ends meet even with federal assistance, Turner offered this reassurance: “Individuals should use the five-year milestone as an important opportunity to reassess their lives and their progress toward achieving self-sufficiency” (Bernstein 2001). For sheer cynicism, though, it’s hard to
beat this: in Chicago, a young mother of an infant named Jessilean sought her caseworker’s help when she had no money to buy formula. The caseworker suggested she fast (DeParle 1999a).

The nominal goal of welfare reform is to put low-income people on a par with everyone else. By holding poor people to the same expectations of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, and by nudging them, even forcing them, into honest paying jobs, welfare reform promised to stop condescending to the poor, stop oppressing them as dependents, and finally grant them genuine equality in dignity and social integration (Mead 1986). In fact, the new welfare policy inscribes different expectations for the poor and everyone else. Behind welfare’s façade of employment training and actual work, poor people get education, training, and jobs of a distinctly lower caliber than what middle- and upper-class people receive.

CAREGIVING DENIED

Welfare reform shrank the space for family care in low-income women’s lives. States were allowed by the federal government to set their own program rules within certain parameters. Exempting women with young children was one of those parameters. By the year 2000, forty-four states exempted adult recipients from work requirements if they were caring for a young child, but only five of these exempted parents with a child older than one year. Twenty-three states required recipients to work when their child reached age one, and sixteen states set the age for exemption at younger than one year (State Policy Documentation Project 2000).

In current welfare policy, family caregiving has largely receded into a private realm, akin to personal grooming or bodily needs that people should take care of before they go to work. Nevertheless, caregiving has reentered welfare policy through the new category of “barriers to work.” According to federal rules, some people cannot reasonably be expected to perform wage work because they have personal barriers to working. Those people can be counted as working if they are “addressing their barriers.” Two common barriers to work are substance abuse and mental illness. Welfare recipients with these barriers count as being in a work-related activity if they participate in rehab programs, psychological counseling, or mental health treatment. In the moral map of welfare policy, two other common barriers to work are “having an infant” and “having a disabled child.” If a state, such as Wisconsin, deems having a seriously disabled child a barrier to work, then taking care of the child becomes a work activity, because in caring for her child, the mother is trying to overcome her barrier to work (Meyer 2001). Similarly, if having an infant is defined as a legitimate barrier to its parent’s wage work, then permitting the parent to care for the infant doesn’t upset the state’s philosophical system in which wage work is the only morally worthy activity.

These bureaucratic definitions conceal an astounding bit of moral reasoning: caring for your own children is morally worthy only if they are considered obstacles to your personal advancement along the road to economic self-sufficiency. Beyond the grotesque transformation of children into barriers to personal advancement, policies like these raise interesting philosophical questions. Why is a disabled child a barrier to work, but not an ordinary child? Why aren’t two children a barrier to work, or three or four? Why is caring for an infant or a disabled child worklike activity while caring for other children is lazy nonwork? Why isn’t caring for a disabled spouse, parent, aunt, or grandparent valid work? And why isn’t caregiving, period, valid work?
The philosophical basis and the administrative rules of welfare reform teach mothers, and all citizens, some perverse moral lessons:

Lesson 1: Taking care of your children is a legitimate dedication only when they are barriers to your self-advancement.

Lesson 2: Caring for them just because you love them and want them to have a good life is personal indulgence.

Lesson 3: Caring for your infant or disabled child isn’t virtuous because you are generous and loving and giving, but because by taking care of him or her, you are battling an obstacle that prevents you from getting ahead.

Lesson 4: Society regards caregiving as valuable and worthy only when you do it for material reasons.

Lesson 5: Society won’t help you care for the people you love, but will help you pay someone else to do it while you go out and earn a living, perhaps taking care of people somebody else loves.

Many states are using money from their federal welfare grants to train mothers how to market their caregiving. Women who want aid can learn to provide child care in their homes or in day-care centers, or to be licensed home health aides and nursing home assistants. According to one reporter who investigated welfare in Washington, D.C., “[I]t is possible to see welfare reform as a Ponzi scheme whose currency is children. You put your children in day care so that you can work, but the only work you may be qualified for, after years of being a full-time mother, is in a day-care center. There you take care of the children of other poor women, many of whom now spend their days working at other day care centers” (Boo 2001, 100).

At the extremes, the new welfare rules pressure women to shed their kids when they pose too big a barrier to self-sufficiency. One Michigan mother of three described her desperate search for housing with a $310 voucher from the social services department. “I could find a two-bedroom that fit that, but not a three-bedroom, and with three kids they said I couldn’t live there. They said, if you can do something about one of your kids. . . . Well, what do you want me to do—get rid of one of my kids?” (Pollakow 1994, 29). Newt Gingrich famously suggested just that—that government should help poor women care for their kids by paying for the kids to live in orphanages (Van Biена 1994).

In all these ways, public policy has transformed family keeping, the most elemental form of social cooperation. Through welfare reform, government has elevated the civic obligation to be economically self-sufficient above the human obligation to care for one another. Government tells citizens that it prefers to deliver care as an economic commodity rather than to allow people to care as human expression. A century ago, Jane Addams trained women to mother their own children and nurse their own families. The new welfare trains women how to turn their caring into a business—to be economic agents first, mothers and daughters second.

Family keeping is a near-universal human aspiration. By denigrating family caregiving vis-à-vis other kinds of work and refusing to let caregiving earn entitlements to social aid and public respect, the new welfare policy dismisses low-income people’s private lives and their rights to share in a precious and fundamental moral good.
THE NEW MORAL ECONOMY OF FAMILY CARE

According to the market view of human motivation, poor women (like everyone else) are moved by economic motives. This was Murray’s great transformation in how policymakers understood welfare, and from this vision came one goal of welfare reform: to make paid work more lucrative than welfare.

But mothers for the most part do not choose between work and welfare. They choose between different ways of caring for their families. More often than not, they must choose between bad ways of caring, because they have no good choices. The harshness of life at the bottom forces brutal choices on parents, and on anyone who has family members they love. Poor people have to choose between buying food and paying for heat, or between food and medicine. Between getting to work on time or making sure their children are in safekeeping. Between showing up for work or taking care of a sick baby. Between being a responsible employee or a responsible mother. Between risking their job or risking their children. And ultimately, they have to choose between becoming cheaters and lawbreakers or watching their children starve and suffer.

These are moral choices as well as economic ones. And this is what we know about poor women: they often choose care. They choose to put somebody else’s welfare ahead of their own. The tradeoffs they make show how differently they think from Homo economicus. They sometimes choose homelessness over public housing because they believe public housing is a worse threat to their children. Some are willing to go without medical care to avoid living in the projects, where their children will be vulnerable to gangs, drugs, squalor, and despair. Sometimes, they give up their children to foster care rather than take them into the projects or subject them to medical and economic deprivation (Edin and Lein 1997, 116-17). And when they choose welfare over paid work, they usually do it because it is the least bad way for them to care for somebody else, not because it is the most lucrative way to live for themselves.

Furthermore, it turns out that low-income mothers are often shrewd economists after all. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein interviewed several hundred low-income mothers, some on welfare, some working (Edin and Lein 1997, 63-65). Most of them, even the ones who weren’t currently working, could tick off the added expenses of working. Some pulled out envelopes or scraps of paper with the calculations they’d already done for themselves. The truth, as the women know, is that they get a better net return from welfare than from working in the kinds of low-wage, no-benefit jobs available to them. Working is “not worth it,” one woman told Edin and Lein. “It’s not worth it ’cause you have kids and then they gonna be sick and you gonna have to go to the doctor and you gonna have to pay hundreds of dollars and that’s why” (Edin and Lein 1997, 66). It’s not worth working, even for extra money, if you can’t afford to take your kids to the doctor. On welfare, you get a Medicaid card. On welfare, you can often take better care of your kids.

The low-income women in Edin and Lein’s study—and every other sociological study that takes the trouble to talk with women instead of totting up numbers in a large survey database—defy the model of economic man. In economic models, mothers calculate the return-to-self from each of their actions. Real mothers, for the most part, don’t think of their jobs as providing an income for themselves. They think of a job as a resource for giving. They ask themselves, “How will this job enable me to take care of my family and to give them what they need?”

When mothers calculate that working isn’t “worth it,” they’re often using figures that economists omit. Not just “Can I afford to take my child to the doctor or the hospital?”
but “Can I get the time off to take my child to a doctor?” Not only “Can I buy sneakers for my boy?” but also “Can I be around enough to keep him safe?” Real women don’t read just the bottom line. They consider how different strategies for getting income might help or hinder their caretaking. Does it give them time with their children? Time to talk with teachers and wait in doctors’ offices? Time to listen and watch so they know what’s going on in their kids’ lives? Time to invest in their children’s future? Time to care in the ways they deem decent?

And so mothers often sacrifice their own stature and income in the work world to gain greater power in the care world. “I don’t think I could accept a promotion,” one mother told Edin and Lein. “I mean they have talked to me before about being a manager, but I need the availability” (Edin and Lein 1997, 95). Some women leave better-paying jobs for ones with lower pay but health insurance for their kids. One woman left a job as a bookkeeper in a health clinic for a job with a dry cleaner because the health clinic, of all places, didn’t provide health insurance (Edin and Lein 1997, 96–97).

On this score, mothers are no different from family caregivers in general. Caregivers often reduce their paid work and sacrifice their income, even sometimes their careers, to accommodate their caregiving responsibilities. The National Alliance for Caregiving surveyed caregivers to the elderly and disabled. Of the two-thirds who were (or had been) in the paid workforce, more than half had changed their daily schedules, taken leaves of absence, worked fewer hours, taken less demanding jobs, turned down promotions, taken early retirement, or left paid work altogether, all in order to devote more of themselves to caregiving (National Alliance for Caregiving 1997).

It’s not just money and promotions women sacrifice to care for their families. Mothers also orient their political participation in welfare around the primacy of their caregiving role, sometimes sacrificing their autonomy by silencing themselves, and other times sacrificing their security by taking risks with their caseworkers. Several welfare clients who took a decidedly passive role with their caseworkers explained to Joe Soss why they thought this was the best way to support their children. “I figure if I say something back, they know a way of getting me cut off of AFDC. And then I wouldn’t have anything for me and my kids” (Soss 2000, 129). Explaining why “we all fear our caseworkers,” another client stated, “Your life is in their [the caseworker’s] hands. Your kid’s life is in their hands” (Soss 2000, 134). And among the smaller number of welfare clients who were willing to express grievances and stand up to their caseworkers, Soss found that they “described taking a stand as a duty growing out of the obligation to protect their children” (Soss 2000, 138).

In the welfare office, mothers will sacrifice their pride and their reputation if they must. The sociologist Lisa Dodson tells this story she learned from a social worker. A young white woman came into a welfare office with her baby drinking coke out of a baby bottle. The social worker cajoled and encouraged her to enroll her son in a preschool program for special-needs children. The mother remained blank-faced, passive, so much so that the social worker was convinced she was retarded and all but filled out the forms for her. At the end of the day, the social worker stopped for pizza. She recognized her “slow” client, now talking animatedly with some friends. The baby was drinking milk with a straw. The young mother was telling her friends about the preschool her son would attend. “She was saying something like, ‘If you act really dumb, they figure you really need the help and they see those forms are in proper order’” (Dodson 1998 139–40).

A twenty-year-old mother told Dodson of an even greater sacrifice she made to get help from welfare officials. Luscious (as Dodson calls her) received a great deal of support and kindness from her child’s father, and his parents gave her their succor and a lot
of child care as well. So Luscious agreed to keep the father's identity from the welfare officials. She hated the lie, but explained, "If I'd of told on Lennie, it would have ruined everything." Protecting the extended family relationships meant saying that "I didn't know who the father was... like I was so loose I didn't know who I'd had sex with." Dodson comments, "This deceit was antithetical to everything Luscious had been raised to believe and value. It meant accepting the most disrespectful label a woman can have" (Dodson 1998, 137-38).

It doesn't matter whether work is more lucrative than welfare or if it endows women with an official stamp of approval. When work puts women in moral double binds, they are likely to break the work rules rather than their own care ethic. They show up late for work if the baby-sitter doesn't come and being on time would mean leaving the children alone. They skip work when a child spikes a fever and going to work would mean not taking the child to a doctor. They cut back from two or three jobs to one when they fear for their children's safety unless they can meet the school bus or shoo away the rats from the crib at night. They turn down promotions and new assignments that offer more money but less flexibility to care for their children. They disappear from work for weeks at a time to care for a sick parent, knowing full well that they probably won't have a job when they come back. Perhaps they lie for as long as they can get away with it, because they know their employer won't take caregiving for an excuse.

Welfare officials observe such behavior and think the women need a dose of job-readiness training, so they herd these "irresponsible" women into classes to learn about the work ethic and the almighty importance of showing up every day, on time. Surely some need these lessons. But blackboard lessons in punctuality and reliability don't sink in with people whose loyalties to kin are stronger than to clocks or cash. "Family bonds are more powerful than policymakers understand," wrote Jason DeParle in one of his characteristic understatements about poverty and welfare. He was trying to explain why Lashanda Washington, one of Wisconsin's problem cases, has trouble living by the textbook work ethic. Ms. Washington puts safeguarding her alcoholic, disturbed, sometimes abusive mother above most everything else. On the day she was supposed to start training as a nursing assistant, she spent the morning caring for her mother instead, getting her sober, tending her bruises. "Skipping work to keep watch at home, Lashanda has found herself trapped in irreconcilable roles: breadwinner, daughter, confidante, playmate, social worker, nurse, and cop," DeParle wrote. Caring for her mother was a job ten times over. Ms. Washington could probably teach an advanced graduate seminar on the work ethic for caregivers. But there's not much call for her expertise. Most policymakers don't respect it, or even recognize it. Besides, most of the other people in her position have already learned the same way she did—on-the-job training. As DeParle puts it, "Addicted sisters, imprisoned brothers, needy cousins and aunts—the great national drive from welfare to work winds through a forest of familial distractions" (DeParle 1999e).

"Familial distractions" is putting it mildly, another of DeParle's understatements. But that's just what welfare officials would like to believe about these cataclysmic clashes between one person's meltdown and another's yearning for family connection. The system can't afford to admit the truth: The yearning is so powerful that no Harvard, let alone an Academy of Excellence or a Draconian threat, can ever eradicate it. The yearning starts young. Ten-year-old Tremayne Franks was abandoned by his father (in prison) and his mother (gone South to work as a stripper, not heard from since). His grandmother worked the night shift as a hospital housekeeper and during the days, had no energy and even less use for Tremayne. Tremayne hung out at a neighborhood grocery store and
pretended to work for the owner. "Dude, it ain't the money," he explained to a reporter. "I just like to have someplace to go." At ten, Tremayne wanted to be a lawyer so he could "make a lot of money so I can take care of my dad, and if she comes back, my mom" (DeParle 1999d).

Until 1996, welfare permitted mothers a great deal of discretion in managing their families. There were work requirements, to be sure, but when a woman decided to punt on work in order to do what she thought necessary for her children, she wasn't thrown off the rolls, usually. It was precisely this maternal discretion that welfare reformers wanted to eliminate, and did, by setting lifetime limits on welfare and tough, unbendable work requirements for the short few years that welfare was still on offer (Oliker 2000a, 2000b).

What is likely to happen when yearning meets rules? The new system violates a basic human urge. People cheat, lie, and steal to care for their families. When work rules conflict with their caregiving, they choose care. Likewise, with government rules. They'd sooner break the law than violate their own ethic of care.

Virtually every person on welfare cheats. They have to in order to survive because it is not possible to live on the income from welfare (Edin and Lein 1997; Dodson 1998). Most work off the books, doing things legal and illegal. Some pay professional shoplifters to get clothes for their kids. Some use false ID cards to get food, and, more often, health care. Doctors and clinics sometimes abet these families, looking the other way or even suggesting that Mom bring in Tommy under cousin Johnny's Medicaid card (Finkelstein 2000).

Many women receive goods and money from their children's fathers or grandparents. They don't report these gifts, as they are required to do. They lie to caseworkers about the identity and whereabouts of their children's fathers. In effect, they build their own child support systems, because the official one would confiscate all but a smattering of any child support fathers paid, instead of using it to support the children.

Mothers collaborate with their children's fathers to maximize benefits from the Earned Income Tax Credit. To get this rebate at tax time, a parent has to have worked (and earned income) and has to have had children living with him or her for at least half the year. If the mother has custody of the children but doesn't work, and the father works but doesn't have custody, the family loses out on the benefit. If they report that the children live with him, however, everyone benefits. When asked a hypothetical question, Deborah Morton, a cashier at a discount store, saw nothing wrong with letting her daughter's father claim the child lived with him, even though he lived in another city. She explained what was to her a simple moral calculus: "She is his child and he helps me with her" (DeParle 1999b).

These people see themselves as virtuous—indeed, as hewing to a higher moral code than what the government asks of them. In order to meet their own sense of moral duty, they must violate what they see as lesser standards, such as telling the truth, following rules, being on time, and being a reliable worker. Thus, policy rules encourage and sometimes demand that they engage in the very behavior that stigmatizes them in the eyes of elites (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

Nemesis, another of Lisa Dodson's informants, recalls the time when she was eleven and the police raided her mother's apartment. Her father had been an alcoholic and a batterer, and her mother had thrown him out. Her mother, unable and unwilling to live "on the dole," ran a gambling parlor, and kept the proceeds in a box of tissues. As the police were arresting her mother and the children were being taken off to relatives, Nemesis's mother handed her the tissue box and told her to take care of the other children and wipe their faces. Later, Nemesis's mother talked to her children about the law and breaking
rules. “My mother said it was wrong to tell lies and to cheat and to break the law. But she said there were bigger wrongs. Having hungry children, being dependent on people who abuse you, are bigger wrongs. She said that you feed your children first. You belong to nobody. The other comes later” (Dodson 1998, 194-95.) Twenty-three-year-old Carmelina Smith, with two kids to support, thought she’d supplement her meager wages with a cashier’s job at a university bookstore. She pilfered $11,000 from the cash register and wound up in jail. “I couldn’t buy my kids milk and Pampers—that’s why I did what I did,” she told the New York Times. “I wasn’t able to put clothes on their back the way I should have.” Did she feel like a criminal? Not hardly, Jason DeParle reports: “Ms. Smith recalls the moment as a rare time of inner peace. ‘It felt good. I felt like now I can take care of my kids the way I want to’” (DeParle 1998a).

In one way of looking at things, Nemesis’s mother and Carmelina Smith were ordinary criminals. In another way of looking at things, each is a modern Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles’ play about civil disobedience. The play opens when Antigone’s brother has died in battle, fighting against King Creon in a civil war. King Creon forbids anyone to bury him, on pain of death. According to ancient Greek beliefs, without a burial, the soul of the dead person could never join with other departed souls and find peace. Antigone buries her brother and defiantly tells Creon she is guilty of following a higher law. Sophocles’ Antigone stands for an essentially personal kind of civil disobedience. Her defiance was not about abstractions or grand principles like freedom, patriotism, or peace. It was about simple loyalty to kin and the right to care for people we love.

WELFARE POLICY AS MORAL TUTELAGE FOR CITIZENSHIP

This reading of welfare policy suggests several ways that policy feedback can be detrimental to democratic politics. Families are the building blocks of society. They are the schools for democracy, the place where citizens learn moral values and attitudes toward other people as well as toward government. Current welfare policy elevates self-sufficiency through paid work above all other virtues. By pushing poor people into jobs that cannot possibly support them and their families, welfare policy undermines their ability to care for their families. To a large degree, the rules transform family care into paid work. These policies divide families, so that parents, usually women, find jobs caring for other people’s parents and children while being forced, through strict exemptions from paid work, to put their own families out onto the market to be cared for. The only way the state will help them care for their own family is by providing child-care vouchers in exchange for paid work, or Medicaid coverage of nursing home care. If ever children were regarded by welfare policy as future citizens, to be nurtured, educated, and trained to think of the common good, current policy redefines them as barriers to their parents’ employment (if they are very young or very disabled) or as business opportunities for adults other than their own parents.

Families are the place where we learn about altruism, about taking into consideration the well-being of others as we make our decisions. Families are where almost every person first experiences being cared for and gains a sense that care for others is the essential glue and lifeblood. But welfare policy denigrates family care done out of love and loyalty, in preference to care done to earn money. Moreover, public laws create different pathways and different lessons for low-income and upper-income families. As we have seen, reforms in 1988 and 1989 toughened work requirements for low-income parents but promoted work-leaves for middle-class parents.
Families are where early political socialization takes place. Children learn by observing their parents whether government is something one can turn to for help or whether it is a dangerous part of one's environment. In families on welfare, children learn very young that the government is not helpful and that deception and strategic avoidance are necessary to their family's survival. In low-income families, parents have to buck welfare rules in order to survive, and they often have to violate their own moral rules, such as not lying, cheating, or stealing. Thus, they end up teaching their children to disdain government rather than to respect it. Like Nemesis's mother, they school their children in civil disobedience and the finer points of higher law.

It shouldn't be so hard to reconcile family care and market work. The issue has played out largely as a women's issue, and consequently seems caught in an inevitable tension between women's demand for independence and equality on the one side and their desires to care for family on the other. But family care shouldn't be a women's issue. It should be, and is, a social issue. It would be easier to recognize family care as real work, worthy of social support, if policymakers started with the assumption that family keeping is every bit as important to our civic well-being as national defense, universal education, and law and order.

From such a social vantage point, a few policy directions are obvious. Family care is incompatible with full-time paid work, sometimes even part-time paid work. For starters, it's impossible to take care of people if you are not physically in the same place with them. It's also hard to mesh two different schedules, a work schedule that calls for predictability and long-term planning and a care schedule that calls for spontaneity in responding to erratic needs. But policies can go a long way toward helping people cope with these irreconcilable demands. Flexible, care-sensitive work rules can modify the paid-work side of the equation. Public support for an infrastructure of short-term care organizations, such as day-care and respite-care centers and home health care, can modify the family side of the equation. Most of all, though, a polity founded on the ideal of equality ought not promote different family systems and moral values for citizens depending on their income. If there is any hope for a democratic politics, it starts with rearing citizens who care for others besides themselves and who trust government to treat all its citizens with equal respect.

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