

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / What Communes and Other Radical Experiments in Living Together Reveal

So, I took a trip to Santa Cruz recently and I was wandering through my favorite book store, Bookshop Santa Cruz, and I ran across this book by Kristen Godsey called Every Day Utopia, What 2000 Years of Wild Experiments Can Teach Us About the Good Life. On one level, this book is about something I love reading about, which is communes and various experiments in communal living, and she's ranging all the way from way back the Neolithic period to modern eco-villages, to communes and religious experiments you might have heard about in the 19th and 20th centuries. But on another level, it's this book about the problem of care in society and in families, how to find enough care, how to share the needs of care and the joys of care broadly enough, and how to construct living arrangements that center care and center community.

So, communes and what happened to them and the various stories around them, old obsession of mine,

if you've been listening to the show this year, you know, I'm thinking a lot about the scarcity of care faced by young families and the elderly and the crisis of loneliness we seem to have in our society. And so, this book struck me as, I think the term is relevant to my interests. So, I asked Godsey to come on the show and talk about it. As always, my email is reclinedshow at nytimes.com. Kristen Godsey, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for having me.

So, I want to begin with a point you make early in the book where you write, quote, today's future positive writers critique our economies while largely seeming to ignore that anything might be a miss in our private lives. Tell me about that point.

Yeah. So, I do think that we're in a kind of plastic moment right now. And in the last decade or so, because of the various challenges that we're facing, you know, in the 21st century, there have been a

kind of spate of future positive books that are sort of thinking about economic policies or social policies that can very much be implemented in the public sphere in order to address some of these diverse challenges. So, what books are you thinking of here? So, I'm thinking of like Rudger Braggman's Utopia for Realists, right, where he talks about a 15-hour work week or he talks about open borders or universal basic income. Diamantes and Kotler have this book called Abundance. You know, the future is better than you think. Aaron Bastani wrote a book called Fully Automated Luxury Communism. The Best of the Titles. Yeah, The Best of the Titles, which is about like free solar power and asteroid mining and CRISPR gene editing and all sorts of things that will sort of enhance our lives in the future, you know, collective ownership of the algorithms that are eventually going to replace all of our jobs or whatever. But all of these books really tend to ignore the private sphere. And I think this is an issue with a lot of the sort of what I think of as futurism or future positive literature right now is that it leaves the private sphere and family relations intact. And there's sort of an assumption that you can change society, you can change politics and economics without really looking at the fundamental institution in society that underpins those wider and larger structural systems. So, if you take those other books you mentioned, I take most of that literature as being about an insufficiency of material goods. In different ways, I think all those books are about how people of less means right now could have much more in a fair, more utopic future. And I take your book, which kind of sells itself as about communes as about an insufficiency of care in our lives. Is that a fair way to read you? Absolutely. I mean, I don't want to say it's about communes because I think that that's a part of it. Certainly, I talk about different ways of living collectively in wider networks

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of love and care with both people who are of blood-related relatives and are non-blood-related friends and colleagues and comrades. So, anthropologists will call this consanguineous and non-consanguineous kin. And, you know, there are all sorts of... Rolls off the tongue. Rolls off the tongue, right? There are all sorts of interesting studies about, you know, how human societies over time have organized these sort of groups, bands of humans. But the thing about the family or the expanded family or the chosen family, whatever term you want to use, is that it widens these networks of care and affection so that not only are people supporting each other and, for instance, supporting each other's children as well, right? So, I talk a lot about this collective child rearing. It's also about sharing resources in a way that actually benefits the community, that actually gives people in that community access to more resources while simultaneously being less wasteful. And to maybe alienate us from our present a little bit, you're talking about a lot of experiments here, but something that has been more on my mind since going through COVID with two young children, is that we're living in a pretty unusual experiment now, that if you look at the vast arc of human history, the way a lot of people, and I'll use the American case for now, are living in small nuclear families where you have two working parents, one to four, one to three kids oftentimes, and in many cases, you're far from any extended family, that has become a very normal way to live, right? If I tell you that's how I live, you're not going to raise an eyebrow. But that's actually a shocking aberration across really almost any time period you might want to look at.

Exactly. And I think that idea of a heterosexual monogamous couple raising their own biological offspring through biparental care in a single family home surrounded by their own private stuff is really a unique family form. And as you said, it's an aberration. We can look across the world and we can look transhistorically, cross-culturally and transhistorically. And what we can see is that human family forms show a remarkable amount of diversity, depending on climactic, geographic,

economic, political, social circumstances. One of the things that makes humans so incredibly adaptive is precisely our ability to sort of shift our mating practices and our child rearing practices in order to better suit the environments that we find ourselves in.

So what I think that the book is trying to do most importantly is to destabilize this notion that living in the nuclear family and your own single family private home with your stuff and you're providing biparental care for your own biological offspring or your adoptive offspring is sometimes the case. That is just one way of organizing family life and that way is completely contingent on a variety of historical circumstances that could change. So I want to read a quote from you here. You say, we could be raising our children cooperatively in dwellings designed to enhance rather than inhibit social connection. We could be more sustainably sharing our resources

and teaching our children to value collaboration over competition. We could be living in wider lateral networks of love, care, and support, fighting the scourges of loneliness, anxiety, precarity, and the many stresses associated with modern life. Most of us are not.

And I think a good starting question here is why not? Many of us could. These things are available in some cases. There is intentional living communities. People could live near to their families, right? Living their extended family is a time-honored way of doing this. A lot of people aren't. So what is behind the choice to not if these are such good ideas?

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So in a very sort of simplistic way, when you think about our architecture, right, the ways in which we literally box ourselves into single-family homes, we do not have the architectural options available to us in order to live in these wider networks of care and support. And as I mentioned in the book, some cities actually don't allow for non-blood-related people to share single-family homes. There are ordinances and zoning regulations and sort of nimbyism around our houses.

Similarly,

collective child rearing, the upper classes, these classes that have the most to bequeath to their children through this intergenerational transfer of wealth and privilege, they often want to isolate their children from the children of others. And so when we look historically at the way children have been raised, they've been raised away from other children. And so there are these sort of historical practices that are by no means, quote, unquote, natural. They're social constructs. They are the products of certain types of religious and political institutions that shape the way we think today is the, quote, unquote, normal way to raise a family. But that is in and of itself part of the problem. So tell me about the kibbutzim. You spent some time on them in the book. I know a bit about them and have always been interested, but many people may not be familiar. So what were they? How did they work? And what are they? The first kibbutz was established near the Sea of Galilee

in, I think, 1909. It was called Degania. And these were basically groups of Ashkenazi Jews who were coming from Europe to settle in what was then Ottoman Palestine. And they really believed in this idea of self labor. So they were often associated with the Bund. Many of them had sort of socialist background, socialist ideals that they were kind of drawing from. So these were agricultural communities that basically did all of their labor together, owned all of their property in common and raised their children in common. They were radically egalitarian communities. And they're very important because they still exist to this day. Not all of them, many of them since the 80s have been privatized, but I think about 20% of them are still fully communal. And the one that I happened to have spent some time on back in 1990 is one of the ones that is still communal and was fully communal then, which is this incredible idea that people basically rotate through a variety of different jobs. Everyone eats together. Everyone has access to the same resources. And it's a sort of extended, non-consanguinist kin network that you're living in. It's very much like living on a college campus in the ways in which everything that you need is walking distance or bicycling distance from you. Did you live on one in the 90s? Yes.

Tell me about that experience. Which one was it? How did you end up there? What was it like?

Yeah, so it was Kibbutz Hatsarim. I was a college student at UC Santa Cruz, as I think you know. I'm a banana slug like you. And a very dear friend of mine was Israeli and decided to go back to Israel. So I ended up going to live with her for a couple of months on her Kibbutz in Hatsarim, in near Becheva, in the Negev Desert. And this was a Kibbutz that had an avocado orchard. It had an irrigation factory where it made this irrigation tubing. And then there were a variety of other jobs associated with like the dining hall, washing dishes, looking after children, you know, doing sort of cleaning and various chores that needed to be done in order to keep up the Kibbutz. So we lived in basically sort of dormitories. There was a job board and in the morning you were assigned to a particular place. You had some choice. You could express your preferences, but there was basically kind of a labor requirement. And in exchange for your labor, working in the avocado orchard, you know, picking avocados or working in the night shift in the

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irrigation tubing factory or doing the dishes, which was another, you know, or working in the dining hall, all of these things, in exchange for your labor, a certain number of hours a day, you were basically given full room and board for the entire time that you stayed on the Kibbutz. And tell me about the attitude in Kibbutzim towards children, towards families, towards the education of children, because that's been a big part of that project. Exactly. And so the thing that's quite unique about the Kibbutzim is that they raised their children collectively and from a very early age, because many of these early Kibbutzim were very poor and both men and women had to

contribute an incredible amount of agricultural labor in order for them to function. All of the children were kept together collectively in something called the Children's House, where there were a few women and it was usually women who looked after the children. Now that didn't mean that mothers didn't have access to their children, but especially in the very early experiments, the children were raised collectively and they also slept collectively. And so since there is almost a hundred years of data from child psychologists who have looked at the children of the Kibbutzim, we actually know a lot about collective child rearing because of the Kibbutz experiments. And it turns out that collective sleeping was a disaster. For the most part, children did not get the care and attention that they needed from the few women who worked those night shifts. But the child care that was offered in the Children's House during the day with sort of dedicated caregivers that really followed the children as they aged before they went to school, those relationships were extremely secure and loving and basically the parents and the caregivers sort of worked together. So it really is this idea of cooperative breeding, which is instantiated in this sort of more collective community. Now over time, some of these have changed, right? Once the Kibbutz got richer, they were able to build onto their houses and then they had rooms for the children to come home so they could sleep at night.

But it's a fascinating experiment. And what we know from those experiments is that children thrive in a community of loving, caring adults beyond just the nuclear family.

The Kibbutz team were a lighter version of this. You go through in the book some heavier versions where one tension in a lot of these experiments is how much the specificity of love, of resources, takes away from the communality of them. And as such, I mean, it's easy enough to think about that in terms of money and sharing it or not sharing it. But one thing that a lot of these projects, these utopian projects try to do is explicitly break the parent-child bond, really try to separate parents from their children, make it so all the children would have all the parents and all the parents would have all the children. But in doing that, try to sever that fundamental tie. As a parent reading this, I mean, I felt myself recoiling, right? If this is a cost of community, I don't want to pay that cost. But I'm curious how you thought about it, how you thought about reading it and kind of tracking the way that evolved and did it over time. So I'm a parent too. I have my own daughter who's now grown, but I also recoiled, you know, in some of these experiments, particularly like the Oneida community, where it was very clear that the children actually did quite well. It was the mothers who suffered because they wanted the attachments to their children. The children were actually much more flexible, it turns out, than the parents are. At least in that experiment in the Oneida community, it was the mothers who suffered the most. Even in the kibbutz, right? It went from babies going

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to the children's house very soon after birth to like three months after birth, so that mothers would have more time with their children. And mothers did increasingly assert their roles over the children. But I think that if you have more than one child, for those people who are a sibling, you know, if you're in a family with more than one child or you have more than one child, you will know that parents are supposed to love their children equally. You can never ask a parent, which one is your favorite, right? That's sort of like a no-no of a question. And the idea of expanding these parental connections with more children is to sort of fundamentally challenge the idea that only your biological child is worth your attention and love, right? That only your immediate biological offspring is worthy of your wealth and privilege, which is going to be transferred

intergenerationally. And that can be money, that can be titles, but that can also just be affection, right? So one of the things that I think is... But isn't there something a little bit weird about describing affection and love as wealth and privilege? I mean, there's a way in which it's true, right? And like the attention my kids get from me, there is value in that. Absolutely. And it does have an intergenerational transmission effect, but the family is an important institution.

Absolutely, right. And I think that we think about our immediate biological kids, and then you might have like your nieces and nephews. Right, you're more likely to help your nieces and nephews. Right, you're more likely to need your nieces and nephews and your second cousins, right? Or maybe the kids of your best friend, right? We, you know, all sorts of societies have practices of god-parenting, comadres, comadres, right? This idea of other adults that are sort of stand-ins for parents or sort of supplemental parents should anything happen to the primary parent. We also know there's a long history of cooperative breeding where older siblings helped raise their younger siblings, grandmothers, extremely important. So we have always had wider networks, some of them kin-related, but interestingly, some of them not kin-related, right? So we have fictive kin, like, you know, Uncle Joe, who's not actually your uncle, but he's like your dad's best friend from college, right? So it's not that radical when you think about, okay, so if I have my own biological children, obviously I want to love them. But when I take my daughter to childcare, I also want her caregivers to love her too, to care for her too.

And I don't want to feel jealous of their love for her. I think she will be better off if she's loved and cared for by another adult. In this circumstance, if I'm taking her to daycare, I'm paying for that love. Like you said, rich people can outsource this. But we have a long history of bringing these alloparents, is the term that we use, into our children's lives.

And again, the psychological literature shows us that children can have secure attachments to us as parents, as well as secure attachments to their grandmothers and their biological uncles and their effective uncles. But that's a different, I think you slightly flipped the situation I was inquiring about, which is I want my children loved by as many people as possible. But there have been a lot of experiments here saying that my children should be loved less by me, so that I can love other children more. And one thing that I think is attention and that is always in people's minds around a lot of experimental ways in living is the sort of Berkian objection that the way human affection and families have evolved, particularly like the something as core as parental and child love is not a thing people should be messing with because they woke up and they're like, I have an idea. Right. But see, to come back to what we were just talking about, for your child to be loved by others, it requires them to love your child as much as their own child, right? So

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it's all interrelated. Well, not as much. But you have to kind of like destabilize those bonds, right? In some ways. So, you know, for instance, just like on a purely biological level, right? So a lactating person, that milk lets down the cry of any baby, not just the biological child. And we've had a long history of things like wet nurses. Now, again, I'm not saying that we should not have parents and children. I'm saying that we should take the family units that we have and submerge them in wider networks of love and care and comradeship and support. And that can be done in all sorts of ways. That can be done through expanding the social safety net, which is what many countries in Europe and around the world have done. It can also be by creating more localized communities where we're sharing our affective resources more broadly. But in order to do that, I think that we have to understand that our biological investments in our children, as they are right now, are the product of an incredibly competitive society where we have very high levels of inequality and where this intergenerational, both transfer of wealth and privilege and love and affection, which is sort of interestingly tied to each other, the biparental resources invested in children in the particular way that we're doing it, is the product of highly unequal societies. If our societies were less unequal, if we lived in a more egalitarian world, the desire to see our biological offspring thrive, it's not going to go away, obviously. But it's not going to be as fraught, the fear that our own children won't thrive in the future. So if we look at Thomas Moore's utopia, he talks exactly about how when the utopians shared their resources, all people in this society, even though they are in biparental families, right, they're secure in the knowledge that their children and grandchildren for as many generations as they can imagine will be safe and will be cared for. And that's a kind of happiness, that's a kind of security that very few of us have in the way that we organize our families and our societies today. So I've always been fascinated by the Kibbutz team. And one thing that happens is, I think it's dated differently in different places, but around roughly the 1980s, he began to go into decline. The Kibbutz team were a big deal in Israel. They are less of a common thing now. There was some thought that maybe this would become just like the way people lived, right? Maybe we have found a better way. And then it turned out people began making other choices to that. And I'm always interested in this. So what is your theory or what did you see in your reading and research of why they went into decline? Because they were big enough that you could have imagined them going the other way if people really liked it.

I do think that there were exogenous shocks that had to do with the global economy that put an extreme amount of pressure economically on the way that they were organizing their businesses and created international competition for their products in a way that gave them less of a competitive advantage. Again, you're trying to create a community within a hegemonic sort of global capitalist society. You're going to have pressures. But I also think that there was this sense that younger generations had issues. They didn't want to go out and become doctors and lawyers or professionals and then contribute all of their salaries back into the Kibbutz, which was required of these communal communities so that the whole community thrived. So a lot of younger Kibbutz sneaks left. But then interestingly, particularly after 2008, what you see is they're starting to go back. And you're starting to see the emergence of urban Kibbutz where a group of young people are starting to share their resources in non-rural agricultural contexts. Because again, the other thing about the Kibbutz is that they are largely agricultural. So as with many utopian experiments,

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the same sort of fundamental ideas fall off and then they reemerge under a different guy. And then they fall off and they reemerge under a different guy. And I think that's what we're seeing right now is this reemergence of this interest in these more sustainable ways of living. I was talking to a friend who lives in a kind of smaller intentional community. And it hasn't been going on for that long. So who knows if it'll work out in the long run. But I was asking him why it seemed to be working pretty well now. And one thing he said was that compared to a lot of communal experiments in the past, they weren't trying to create an economy too. They were just trying to live together. They were not attempting to also be a farm and also make maple syrup and also as many of these experiments in the past have been. So one question in terms of what different communities are learning here is in a economy that specializes where there's a million different things people do, was that just part of what held back the American commune movement of the 70s, the Kibbutz team in Israel, that many people might like co-living, but they don't necessarily want that to be the only economy they can participate in. Right, exactly. So many of these intentional communities are very much based on this idea of self-labor where everybody in the community is creating a kind of communal industrial or agricultural wealth that they are then sharing. And yeah, I absolutely think that that's really hard. So one of the most interesting communal experiments was a follower of Fourier in Guise in France between 1859 and 1968. It was called the Familisterie or the Social Palace. So it's 109 years. A group of workers all lived together in this huge sort of basically like a hotel. They shared their resources and they had this foundry where they were making enameled iron stoves and would eventually sort of put the nail in the coffin of that experiment. And by the end of it, it was a fully cooperative enterprise. The guy who started, died and he transferred all of the ownership to the workers. But the international pressures, the competition of trying to sell these enameled iron work stoves, it just didn't work out. So I think you're right. I think we could live more collectively. There have been these recent articles about quote unquote, mom-yoons, single mothers getting together and raising their kids, they buy a house and they raise their kids together. Or young adults have always done things like flat shares, right? And that's a very common thing to do when you're single. But why not just expand that to when you have like, you know, you and your best friend, maybe like when you guys get married at the same time, you have kids around the same time. Why not just buy a big house together? Well, partially because there aren't houses to buy. You have to have the resources to build something more communal. But that could be a very sustainable way of living. It could be a very comfortable way of taking care of a wider community, dealing with aging parents. So this is the co-housing movement in Denmark that has tried to balance community with privacy. So there are so many models and I agree with you that if you could take out the living part from the production part, that might be one way of dealing with the fact that sometimes the productive part of these experiments is what ultimately leads to their failure. One thing that brings up is that there are two phases of life right now where it's extremely common to live in community. So one is if you go to college and if you're young, you don't have that much money. So from 18 to, I don't know, 26 probably, I lived in community. I lived in a dorm and then I lived with a bunch of housemates because I was making no money as an entry-level journalism job in Washington, D.C. And then when you're elderly, increasingly, you have to be because

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people often don't have family nearby or don't have much family nearby or their family can't take care of them that much through these huge retirement communities. I mean, you can think of things, I think it is a different name now, but what used to be called leisure village in Florida, elsewhere, then you have seen the citizen homes. It's funny because all these sound radical when we talk about these experiments in communal living, but we've completely normalized it so much so that we almost forget it happens. Exactly. For two pretty important life phases. Well, and for two quite long life phases, right? If you think about the time that you're alive, that you're actually raising children, right, actively doing biparental care, which is really kind of the moment in life when you need the most help from other people. If you have young kids out there, you know that having helpful neighbors, family members, kin, colleagues, you know, friends, anybody to babysit in a pinch or to, you know, help you out when you just need an hour away, you know, to those moments of our lives when we're parenting can be so taxing and more importantly, right, the biparental unit can be so freighted by the work of that, right, so that so many relationships can't really withstand the pressures of parenting, particularly of young children, right, so that if there were these wider networks, if we had neighbors and family members, right, so I talk about in the book, this community twin oaks in rural Virginia or an eco village in southern Portugal. You say what an eco village is? Yeah, so an eco village is an intentional community where the sort of primary purpose of the intentional community is to live more sustainably in nature. Many of them practice permaculture, which are forms of sustainable native agriculture. Some of them are really quite extreme as in like prepping for the fall of the nation state in the end of capitalism, they're really trying to live off the land in a way that they could do it if like all resources were no longer available. So there are, you know, some of them are just sort of living off the grid. Some of them are not off the grid, but are just sort of sharing resources in order to reduce their carbon footprints. So there's a real spectrum of these eco village communities. But I would say that in earlier times in human history, many of what we would think of as communal living, communities that were living together were religious. They were often people who were living together in order to get closer to God. Now, interestingly, some of these were celibate communities, some of them were not, some of them like the Oneida community, the spiritual perfectionists, they practice group marriage. But many of these, if you think about the shakers or any sort of cloistered, cenobitic monastic community, they still raised children because they often took in orphans and they often took in children that were otherwise unwanted because they were born out of wedlock or whatever. So they were still raising children, but they were raising children communally and they were not mating, so to speak. But there was an allowance made for communal living for people who wanted to live out a particular set of spiritual practices. And this goes back to the early followers of the Buddha. In the Pythagorean case, they were living communally in order to explore the mysteries of the universe and study mathematics. But in those cases, the goal was a somewhat more spiritual one. Today, I would say that the major impetus for more communal forms of living, and again, these run the gamut, are to reduce loneliness, to spread out parenting more equitably, and the sort of daily work of life more evenly among a wider group of people, but really primarily to reduce our carbon footprint because it's very clear that living in these communities reduces

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our impact on the earth. I wonder often how much of the loneliness crisis is simply the decline of not religion as a belief system, but religion as a social technology. So I remember having a conversation with Judith Shilovitz about her great book about Sabbath and particularly Jewish Sabbath,

but not only. And something she talks about there is in Orthodox communities or actually any Jewish community that abides by the prohibition against driving on the Sabbath, you have to live within walking distance of your shul. And that isn't necessarily living in the community of one household, but it means there are a lot of people you're connected to very nearby you. And my understanding of the broader data on loneliness is that being more religious is associated with being less lonely just because you're going to be very attached to some kind of social, spiritual institution, be that a church, be that a synagogue, be that a mosque, whatever it is. When you look at this and you look at how often these experiments were religiously motivated and you think about just how much religion did hold people in things that were more like communal living. How do you think about the interaction between secularization and loneliness and some of these questions you're exploring? Yeah, so I definitely think that the religious glue, the shared set of beliefs is very important for a lot of these communities. But I don't necessarily think that it's secularization per se because people can still congregate around shared belief systems. I talk a lot in the book about the ways in which inequality and the precarity of our economies and the difficulties of just meeting our basic needs in societies with very frayed social safety nets really pits us against each other. This is like Putnam's bowling alone argument, right? The fraying of civil society in so many ways. We used to have all of these Elks clubs and lodges and things like that. We were much more communally oriented even outside of the church or outside of religious institutions. However, the secularization and the competition of our societies and the ways in which we've organized our families and we've moved out to the suburbs and we box ourselves into these single family homes where we're divided from people by big yards, right? People want space and people want privacy and people want this isolation. And then they drive into the city and they're privately owned automobiles by themselves. So there's like almost no interaction going on. And now if you think about the pandemic, we used to have work friends. We used to know people that work, right? And now we're just working from home and we see our colleagues on a Zoom screen maybe.

So there's so much about the way that we're living our modern lives that isolates, isolates, isolates, isolates. And that's why I say that I think the eco village movement is so interesting because for some people environmentalism has sort of become almost like a spiritual practice, right? The idea that we have to preserve the earth has sort of risen to the idea of a kind of non-material goal that people are aspiring to. And so I do think that it's really important to recognize that secularization is part of this problem, but it's not the only part of the problem. It has to do with the context within which that secularization is occurring.

How do you think about the idea of wants? You just mentioned people get richer and they want to move

to a bigger house in the suburbs. Certainly I observed that when people get richer and they have a lot of economic choice, what they do is not buy a place for them and all their friends. It happens occasionally, but they get a big house and it's usually a little bit further out.

And how do you think about the arguably revealed preference of wealth leading to separation

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that might suggest this isn't actually what people want. Maybe it's sometimes what they're forced to accept, but it isn't really what they want, right? I didn't stay in the dorms at Santa Cruz forever. Like I left and then found a partner and we got a little tiny place of our own. And those were choices. And yeah, when I've had young kids, I've been like, ooh, maybe I made all these decisions wrong. But one day I won't have young kids. Exactly. And then you might move into a facility with a bunch of older people and have a big party like you did at Santa Cruz, right? So it's funny that like I said, this moment of our lives when we actually need the village to raise our children is the moment when we isolate ourselves the most severely from our community. So the question of wants, I think there's a lot to be said and there's a broad literature on this. And this idea of what we are really after is esteem. People want to be esteemed. And yes, wealth buys us esteem. And there are certain markers in our societies that we collectively agree, give us esteem, like having a really big house with a big wall around it, right? So nobody can come knocking on your door and try to sell you something. You can isolate yourself in your private car, maybe even with a driver, so you don't even have to drive, right? So there are all these ways in which we can isolate ourselves. But what we're really after at the end of the day is esteem. And I think that many of these utopian writers have precisely said esteem is something that we all want. That's something quote unquote natural. But esteem doesn't necessarily have to be tied to wealth and privilege. It can be tied to all sorts of other things in our society, such as being a part of a wider network of love and care and seeing our children thrive and seeing our communities thrive and living in more equitable societies where people aren't suffering as much as they are. I believe it's William Godwin who talks about esteem as like being a good person. Wow, what a wild thought, like that you could be esteemed for being like a good human being and not necessarily just being somebody with the biggest house or the biggest car or the biggest whatever. So our concept of esteem is flexible. It's there, but I think that we can shift our wants. And lots of societies have struggled with that, both secular and religious. And I think that that's a conversation we still need to have. And we can learn a lot about looking at these utopian communities and how they have a portion to steam within their particular communities. In a way what strikes me about some of this is that we're putting the choice as between the kind of modern, let's call it like affluent urban isolation and some kind of communal living. But historically maybe, given that a lot of the experiments you look at are from earlier in the 20th or 19th centuries, they're actually putting a choice in a time when you had much more extended families. And so in some ways, at least one of the questions being raised here, you could imagine society saying, we've made a mistake. And the mistake we've made is we've gone away from the extended family. And we should hitch esteem to something more like relationships with your parents and the fact that your cousins are near you and so on, versus experiments and different kinds of living. How do you think about that as the choice between relying more on our bigger family networks and looking kind of a scans of people who maybe move away from... We moved to New York for my partner's family, but I've made moves that are just away from all family. I moved after college to Washington, DC because I wanted to follow my dream of being a political reporter and that moved me away from my family. And in another society, maybe people would have said like, what a selfish jerk you are. Yeah. Here's where our economic priorities come into play. So I think you recently had Joseph Henrich on the show. And he was talking about, in his work, he talks a lot about how

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communities with more expanded families have lower levels of economic development and communities

with fewer instances, for instance, of cousin marriage, I believe, is the specific thing that he's looking at. So the more nuclear our family is, the higher levels of our economic development. He does this by looking at these global light maps to show that... And a lot of other evidence. And a lot of other evidence. But there are these things. So there's this choice that we're making about growth in a capitalist society or an a, quote unquote, highly developed society.

We're making a choice to isolate ourselves and our families for the ability to realize our professional dreams and hopefully increase our economic status and increase the economic status of our societies. I think when certain kinds of conservatives talk about the breakdown of the family and the nervousness they have around this, they're really worried about not only the breakdown

of the family, but the effects that that will have on the economy, right? So if we were to submerge ourselves into more expanded networks of families, more kin, both blood-related and non-blood-related kin, these wider networks of support and care that I keep talking about, I think there's a fear that our economic productivity will be less, that we'll be less able to realize our dreams, that we'll be less able to innovate, to be productive, to extract resources, to create wealth. All of these things that are associated with smaller, more tightly blood-related families. But again, this is a choice that we are making as a society. And this is a choice that is not necessarily people are making it consciously. It's just sort of in the water of our societies that those are the things that we're supposed to want. I moved away from my family too.

Academics are incredibly itinerant for this reason, because we're constantly being sort of chasing after whatever tenure-track position is available, or adjunct position, or whatever. Academics are an incredibly precarious bunch of people. And we are trading off. Exactly what you said, like, I'm a jerk. I left my family. I left the networks that I could have contributed to of my friends, my cousins, my colleagues, in order to pursue my own selfish individualist goals in life. So I think that we need to be really open-eyed about these trade-offs. And we often are not. We're not having those conversations. We just assume that this family form that has come

down to us is, quote, unquote, natural. And it's just not. I think that's very well said. But I'm also asking a question from the perspective of, let's say society tomorrow woke up and was like, oh no. Look at these loneliness numbers. Look how hard it is to raise kids. Look at, I mean, as you noted, I think, glancingly there, there's a lot of increasing concern that our fertility rate is low. Way low. And if you're a parent, I don't think this is a mystery at all. It is extremely hard to have children. It is basically non-manageable. And the idea that I would have four of them, I don't know how much time and energy you think I have. You can't, you're not going to turn that around in a society built like ours. And the point there is not slightly more family-friendly policy. You would actually have to rebuild this totally. So let's say, though, that you woke up and you're like, oh no, we want to. And then one way to take that is more the direction of your book. We need to experiment with very different forms of living. And another way to take it is we don't need a new experiment. We have a phenomenal structure that is already built into humanity, which is the family. And we should go not sort of forwards into new structures, but backwards into the one we already

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had. To put my question more directly, why did you not write a book worried about the particular crisis you're worried about? About why we should all live near our extended family in dual income, modern structures, right? So it's not just about the expanded family. I agree that that's a great step in the right direction. And I think that most people who read the book are going to say, yeah, I should spend more time with my cousins and my aunts and my uncles and find some godparents, right? But not all of us have those wide kinship relations. Some of us are alienated from our consanguineous kin. Some of us have moved away as you have from your family, your expanded family networks. So that doesn't mean we have to just throw up our arms and give up, right? It means that we can create families, this sort of concept of fictive kin, right? These fines, we can find ways to build community. And that creates the same type of familial relationships. And we can formalize those things, right? So there are new ways of quote, unquote, platonic parenting, right? So people who are not necessarily in a romantic pair, but who decide they want to have children. And guess what? It turns out that platonic parents are going to make choices about who they're platonic parenting with a lot more rationally than those of us who fall in love with our partners and have kids, right? And then when the love fades, you know, there can be problems. Or again, when the stresses of child rearing freight those relationships. And, you know, basically marriage is also a practice of forging kinship bonds, right? So the reason I want to think about 2050 rather than 1950 is because I think 1950 in the United States at least, and I think in many parts of the developed world is much more about consanguineous kin. And I really want to talk about the possibilities of non-consanguineous kin, which often have been a feature of these utopian communities over time and across cultures. Let's talk about platonic parenting, because I actually know now a bunch of people doing that. I know three people raising one kid, I know six people raising three kids, and they're very beautiful households. It's not that common, but it certainly seems to me that it's becoming more common. And I believe there have been some legal decisions that are, you know, actually recognize those as rights. And then of course, you have something much more common today than it was 100 years ago, which is you have families where the parents divorced and now they're step parents. My parents are divorced. I have a stepmother who is wonderful. I'd be curious to hear even aside from the question of experimental living about some of these experiments in parenting. Absolutely. So that's another kind of concrete way in the book that I talk about how our laws are a little bit out of date, right? So only some states allow for things like triparenting or multi-parenting, where if you have a stepparent, you know, or a bonus parent, they like to call them sometimes. If that bonus parent wants to become a guardian of a child, the biological parent often has to give up their rights. There can't be three legal guardians to a child. Now that's changing in some states. Maine is one of them. You also have this thing called mitochondrial replacement therapy, where you can literally have two biological mothers and one biological father for one child. So literally three biological parents. Our laws around parenting, multi-parenting and guardianship are completely out of date, right? So I think particularly in communities where you have same-sex couples and you may have a sperm donor or an egg donor or a surrogate mother, there are going to be constellations of family forms that are not going to fit the traditional way that we imagine the heterosexual nuclear family. And so we are starting to see all of this

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creativity around how people are parenting. Some of it's platonic parenting. Some of it's, you know, single mothers, right? Like the mom-yoons, right? So single women who are divorced or widowed or maybe who never had a partner who are banding together. They're not necessarily in romantic relationships, but they're deciding to share their resources and their attentions to raise their children together. Parenting is stressful. It can take an incredible amount of time and energy and resources, but it can also be incredibly joyful. It can also be incredibly rewarding. I'm a mother. I, you know, love my daughter and as hard as it was, I would not give up those experiences for the world, but why not share them? Why not spread it around? It would be so much easier for all of us. And I'm not saying that we should like, you know, run out and have like 15 other co-parents, right? It could just be one or two or three and it could just be a grandmother or an aunt, right? So there are all sorts of ways in which we can think creatively about the family. And yes, some of these utopian experiments, as you've been pointing out, are extreme. The point is that sometimes we have to look at the extremes and then walk ourselves back from them and say, okay, so maybe, maybe my kids should spend more time with their godparents. Maybe my kids should spend more time with my sister and her kids. Maybe my colleague who has kids around the same age as mine, you know, we should do more sleepovers, right? So there are all sorts of ways in which you could imagine just bringing other Allo parents into a relationship.

I think in some ways people think of the romantic partnership as a glue.

Yes. That keeps the parents connected to the very hard work of parenting. So you said a second ago that people who engage in platonic parenting, and it's worth noting that this is going to be a selection effect. Not that many people do that. Exactly. Maybe they pick their partners more rationally. And the thing I thought when I read that in your book, that possibility in your book was, well, parenting isn't rational. Sometimes you just, you just keep going. And I think that's something that when people imagine, you know, we're going to have a kid together and maybe our friend Pete is going to be the third parent because Pete's great and wants to have kids and doesn't. And is that, well, what if Pete just ups and leaves one day, right? What if Pete is just like, this is tough. And I actually like being able to take vacations and go out at night or whatever. And that there's something about the intensity of those bonds that you need to keep people stuck to the project of parenting, which unlike a lot of other things in life, you know, if I leave my job, my job's going to be fine. Yeah. If I leave a seven year old who adores me, that's going to be a trauma. Yes. How do couples solve that?

One of the big questions that a lot of these communities have grappled with, right? Both on a very local scale as well as on a huge national scale when we think about experiments in the 20th century. So, you know, a couple years ago, David Brooks wrote this wonderful article, The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake in the Atlantic, where he really talks about how the precarity of the romantic bond is actually really destabilizing for children because of high rates of divorce, because of abandonment, increasing numbers of single mothers, right? So, what do we know right now? We know, A, that a lot of young people are just deciding not to have kids because it's hard. So, birth rates are declining. For the people who do have kids, they're straining under the demands of parenthood. And that's straining their relationships, right? And I talk about in the book the reality of some of these things like postpartum depression or various forms of abuse in the family. You know, the family can be a black box that hides a lot of pain. You know, there is this very important role that the stable couple plays in keeping parents invested in the

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children, but that phrase. And there are a lot of examples of parents who don't do such a great job of parenting. So, what is the solution, right? Well, there are a couple of ways to go about it. So, from a more sort of socialistic or democratic socialist or, you know, wider social safety net point of view, you can invest resources in publicly funded childcare, like universal, right? Give parents a break. Help them, right? I argue in the book following the work of Nancy Folber, the economist that children are public goods. Everyone who is alive is benefiting from the work that we do as parents because we're making future workers and consumers and soldiers and taxpayers, right? If you can't get the state to expand the social safety net to make this easier on families, you can do it in a more local way. And that's where I think these utopian experiments show us ways forward, that there are ways in which you and I, individually, just in our own private lives, can make choices about how we spend time with our friends, how we allow other adults into the lives of our children, how we expand our networks of comrades and colleagues and family members and friends, and submerge our families in these wider networks of lateral care and support, that incrementally, as we do it individually, starts to change society in really profound ways, even without the sort of top-down social policies of a state, we can do it from the bottom up. Let me ask about the other side of that. So, you have a section in that area of the book where you're talking about non-monogamy, talking about expanding the romantic relationship. You can tell me if this is wrong. I felt like I detected the most discomfort for you in writing about that, that you felt this was a taboo that was actually hardest to cross. But tell me a bit about that section of the book and, given how radical a lot of what comes before it is, why was that where it felt like you were treading most carefully? So, I think of our sexualities and families and romantic relationships as this really diverse spectrum. However, as I said, I do think that we tend to be pair-bonding, and most people are fairly attached to this idea of romantic love. And when I was researching this book and when I was talking to people and interviewing people and really thinking this through, I realized that that particular constellation of romantic love is the thing that people are the most resistant to. They really, really dig in when it comes to challenging this idea that I'm going to find a soulmate. And I think that's a particular function of the fact that in our world, where we don't live in these wider networks of expanded love and care and support, our romantic partners are where we get our validation. It's where we get our affection. If I have to share my romantic partner with somebody else, that means that I'm getting less. It's really zero sum. So, some partners can be very, very protective of each other. When you're in your 20s, you may have a lot of friends. When you couple up, you might start to get couple friends, and then your couple friends start to shrink, especially as you're raising kids. So, there's a way in which romantic couples really start to depend on each other for a lot of their emotional needs. And I think that the beauty of non-monogamous forms of relationships or even monogamous pair bonds that are submerged again in these wider networks is that you are getting emotional support and validation from other people so that your partner isn't the only person in your life who is giving you all of this attention that we all need. So, we freight our romantic relationships with so much. They have to do so much. They have to be so much that if we lived in either societies with expanded social safety nets, or if we lived in these wider communities, our relationships, our romantic, primary romantic ties would be so much less burdened by all of these various tasks that they have to perform in order for them to be

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successful. Well, let me ask a question in favor of that, and then a question more skeptically. So, you have a, I thought a very lovely quote from the scholar, Kim Tallbear, who writes, What is possible with a model in which love and relations are not considered scarce objects to be hoarded and protected? And one thing I found interesting about that quote was the idea of scarcity in there. That a lot of what is being thought of in utopian imaginings of all sorts, from the material utopianism of some of the other books you mentioned at the top here, to the parenting structures we're talking about, to the communal structures we're talking about, is the idea that one thing we're trying to triumph over as human beings is scarcity, particularly artificial scarcity. And the idea that love and even romantic love in our lives is artificially scarce is a kind of interesting idea that has been both for good and for bad looked at and experimented with. But I'm curious how you think about that within that wider project here of experimenting around scarcity and abundance.

So, a lot of my previous work is precisely about this idea of how in capitalist societies we often think of our romantic attachments in transactional ways. And a lot of that has to do again with economic precarity and what are often called marriage markets and whether men are marriageable or unmarriageable and the way that sexual selection and choice works and how we view resources attached to relationships. So, there is this concept, I think, that particularly in our societies that men are providers and that women choose their romantic partners on the basis of whether or not those people can provide. And this gets into a really interesting question about scarcity, like what are the things that are being transacted on either side of these relationships? Is it sex? Is it attention? Is it resources? Is it sort of affective support? Is it biparental care for children, provisioning for offspring? So, I think that every single one of these communities with very few exceptions really thinks of love and attention as a kind of boundless resource that should be shared. And this really runs the gamut from secular experiments to religious experiments, even experiments that, as I said, are cenobitic monastic celibates. Love is this thing that just multiplies. If you give it out, you get it back. That's the theory. There's not like a pot of it that gets depleted as you pull it out. Right now, I guess in the extreme, some people can become effectively drained if they're doing extreme forms of care work. Psychologists have recognized that. But for the most part, if we have lots of connections with others, and exactly what Kim Tallbear says, if I am richly fed, who can I feed? If I feel love and support, how many other people can I also love and support?

What I'm trying to say is that scarcity as a concept is something that gets attached to emotions. It gets attached to attention. It gets attached to these sort of non-material resources that we have. You were saying the attention, the affection that you give to your child. It has really harmed what I give to my dogs. Yes. I'm not sure love is bounded, but time is and cares. Time and care are definitely bounded, for sure. And I often get into debates about time. When we say that we don't have time for people, I don't have time for my friends or your cutting people out of your life. The idea is that that time is a valuable commodity. And Jenny O'Dell's recent book about saving time and the way that we have come to think of time as this fundamentally sort of fungible asset that we allocate in order to achieve certain goals. I think that that's a big problem. And that's one of the things that many of these Utopian communities are trying to claw back, is to bring time out of the realm of commodification and

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into the realm of something that we share more abundantly with others.

The flip of this is that when I have read accounts of a lot of the communes in the 70s in America, when I even read accounts in your book, there's a sense that free love, that group, marriage, dating, polyamory, etc., has been destabilizing for them. I mean, you also talk about communes, I forget which ones, but where the kids didn't want to come back or people just left because they wanted to be able to have stable partners and they didn't want to be in a context where there was a lot of pressure to be sharing their partner. Sharing is always weird language like that. But to be shared also, right? Some of these, there's also a feeling this can become exploitive, right? There's a, even if you don't want it, you have to do it. Are you some kind of uptight prude? Then there's also the very dark sides where you get charismatic leaders and all of a sudden you have kind of harem situations. Exactly. So within the, there's a different context of just people's romantic and relational dynamics in their lives, but within the context of the history of communes, how do you read that? Because I think that is one of the big kind of stereotypical takeaways that a lot of these collapsed in a sort of nightmare of abundance becoming endless drama. Exactly. And so this is a perfect point to come back to where you said that there's that moment of reticence that in the book. And that's because in societies and communities where people were still primarily pair bonded romantically, they lasted a lot longer. And their children were much more willing to remain in those communities because like the Oneida community, there were prohibitions on what noise called exclusive love, right? Because they thought it was sort of like some aberration for people to be selfishly in love and not to share their sexuality and their attentions with a wider group of people. So they literally prohibited romantic pair bonding, which is something that I think is a real mistake to prohibit it. And so the key thing for me is the separation of our mating practices from our child rearing practices. I think that any prohibition on pair bonding is going to now maybe in a different world in a 100 years from now, 200 years from now, it could be different. But I think that they're still going to be, you know, we're socialized in a particular way to really believe in those primary romantic attachments. Now they can be open, right? And we also, you know, in polygamous societies, there are multiple wives, right? You have, I think I talk about like Mitterrand in the book, you have men who have wives and mistresses, right? They're like stable relationships. Mitterrand being?

The former French president, right?

His mistress was at his funeral, invited by his wife.

Yes, invited by his wife, exactly, right? So even in societies where you have socially imposed universal monogamy, where legally speaking, only one wife for one man, it's sort of a social imposition of monogamy. You still have these practices whereby people can have long standard relationships with more than one person. But the pair bonding, right, is the thing that is really hard to disrupt. And that's why I think it's very important to say we can open it up. But the more important thing is to say that whatever our romantic mating practices may be, whatever our interpersonal relationships are, they don't necessarily have to be the container for child rearing. And because we have put those two things together, that's why we have, you know, designed our houses the way that we have. That's why we own our property the way that we do. That's why we, you know, distribute resources the way that we do. And so I think that there's just the big work of the book is trying to destabilize that linkage between those

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two different sort of sets of practices.

I also say at the end that part of the work of the book is trying to help people exercise a muscle of hope, of imagining futures very different than the ones we see now.

And you also have a nice line where you talk about with everyone exhausted by the hustle, needed to meet their basic needs, people tend to view others as potential competitors. And I put in the same category other futures. I mean, obviously my interest in this conversation is that I'm very interested in intentional living. And I talked to a bunch of people back in the Bay Area who had started communities like this. And I was awed by what they put into it to make this work. It takes a lot of energy. It takes a lot of effort. And if you're interested in it, because you're already expending more energy and effort than you have on trying to hold a job and care for your kids, there isn't all that much to be like, well, I'm going to start a whole new structure of living and recruit people for it. And I'm curious how you think about that task of on the one hand, you're responding to the flip side of a crisis of care is a crisis of exhaustion. And on the other hand, to build a different future requires not just resources that are literal in terms of money and wood to build homes and whatever, but time, but energy, but that muscle, not just of hoping, but of doing.

Yeah. And I think that again, this comes back to a set of preferences, right? Like, I can spend my time and resources to move away from my extended family, to pursue a career, to get enough money to buy a big house and a nice car and pay for childcare for my children, or whatever, like to create a sort of world that is exhausting in the way that I have to expend all my time and energy in order to achieve that. But you could think of that project as like being shifted to maybe I would be less exhausted if it was easier to do things like raising children. If we lived in a society with wider social safety nets, if we lived in communities of expanded care, and one of the things that I like to think about is this other 1%. So your friends in the Bay Area, right, they're part of a really long tradition that goes back, you know, historically, we have records until like the 6th century BCE, right, of people who said, no, we're not going to live this way. We're going to go off and we're going to, we're going to do it differently. We have these sort of core principles and whether they were Buddhist monastics or the Pythagoreans in Croton, or Plato conjuring up the Republic, reflecting on the way that the Spartans lived, you know, Thomas Moore and Tomaso Campanella and Utopian socialist anarchists, communists, I mean, environmentalists, feminists, there are so many different groups. They all kind of tend to coalesce around a very similar package of ideas, which I find really remarkable in their consistency over time. So there's always been this 1%, this other 1% out there, not the economic 1%, but this sort of Utopian 1%. And what they do is they show us other ways of being. Not all of us are going to uproot ourselves and go off and live in a commune, right? But the idea that people are doing things differently and the practices that they're experimenting with, they trickle down into society in really important ways. You know, there's this wonderful quote by Eduardo Galliano, where he says, you know, I'm paraphrasing that, you know, what is Utopia, right? I walk two steps towards Utopia and Utopia, you know, moves two steps away from me. And then I walk 10 steps closer to it and it recedes 10 more steps, you know, no matter how far I walk, Utopia keeps receding away from me. So what is the point of Utopia? The point is to keep walking. It's a lovely place to end. Always our final question. What are three books you'd recommend to the audience? The first one is Pirate Enlightenment by the late David Graber.

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The subtitle is The Real Libertalia. It's about this interesting confederated pirate federation kind of decentralized government theoretically in Madagascar. And it's this such a fun thought experiment that he's doing with very, very, very thin empirical evidence and historical evidence. But wow, what a sparkling mind he had. And what a fun book to read. I mean,

it's always fun to read about pirates, right? But like pirates in Madagascar and real pirates and the idea of like what pirate democracy might have looked like. I just thought that was a really fun one. The second book is Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed, which I have been teaching for 25 years or something in various classrooms for different reasons. It is a wonderful kind of imagining of an anarchist society on a planet called Anares. And it was written in 1974. And it sort of reflects on the deficiencies of both capitalism and communism as it was in the 20th century. In this really interesting way that sort of makes young people and has always made me every time I reread it, really try to think outside the box. She read a whole bunch of Peter Kropotkin before she wrote the book. And she was just playing around with how would you actually make this work in practice? And then the third book is Gender and the Politics of History by Joan Wallach Scott, who as a grad student many years ago kind of broke my brain and really gave me this sort of language of trying to understand patriarchy and trying to challenge patriarchy through a certain way of thinking about history. And so Joan's work, you know, she had this like sort of incredible essay called Gender A Useful Category of Historical Analysis, which is included in this book, which sort of I think it's like one of the most downloaded papers of the American Historical Review ever. It really just sort of created this whole new world of thinking about the way we live our lives that has been really profoundly influential to me over the years.

Kristin Gottzi, thank you very much.

Thank you so much for having me. This was such a fun conversation.

This episode of the Ezra Klein Show was produced by Emmafa Agawoo, fact-checking by Michelle Harris

and Mary March Locker and Kate Sinclair, mixing by Jeff Gelb. Our team also includes Andy Galvin and Virgin Karma and Kristin Lin. Original music by Isaac Jones, audience strategy by Shannon Busta.

The executive producer of New York Times, opinion audio is Andy Rose Strasser, and special thanks to Sonia Herrero and Christina Semiluski.
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