

Care as a factor for sustainability in situations of crisis: Portugal between the Welfare State and interpersonal relationships*

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Abstract

Portugal is going through a socio-economic crisis which has led to increased pressure on social services. Faced with the reduced capacity of state care systems to continue providing support, people are (re)turning to informal ways of addressing the problem. During field work among middleclass families from Lisbon and Oporto, we witnessed how people simultaneously engage with both formal and informal care systems. The article discusses the ways in which informal practices are used to respond to crisis situations, thus contributing to social sustainability.

Key-Words: Care, Interpersonal Relations, Crisis, Portugal, Sustainability.

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The concept of “care” has been employed in anthropology as a means of describing situations in which privation and health problems are addressed in ways that include, but are by no means limited to, state assistance (Benda-Beckman, 1988). In the relational existence of everyday life, however, people employ the term “care” in a broad sense, to describe processes and feelings between people who take care of each other in varied domains of social life: a practical as well as an emotional involvement, which shows that *to be* means being with others, to care and to be cared for.¹

Care has, therefore, a two-fold meaning: it refers (i) to a practice, or a set of practices (taking care of the other), and (ii) to a value, or a set of values (the affection of the one who takes care, the love and compassion/empathy of the relation with the other). This multifariousness of the act of caring for the other is expressed in various terms and expressions, which, triggered in different contexts, ensure a wide range of values, commitments, rights and duties which are somehow involved in the practices of “taking care” of those who are unable to look after themselves. Jane Tronto (1993) distinguishes between four interconnected stages of care: *caring about*, *taking care*, *caregiving*, and *care-receiving*, each of them involving an ethical element: *attentiveness*, *responsibility*, *competence*, and *responsiveness*. To reflect on the concept of care therefore entails addressing, in an articulated manner, actions and moral dispositions which are constitutive of the social bond: care practices are always relational and founded on motivation of “caring for the other”. In a similar sense, John Borneman (1997:574) contends that more attention should be given by the social sciences to caring and being cared for as an ontological process.

¹ According to Sahlins, in his essay “What kinship is”, the meaning of family is that of an intersubjective belonging, in which people perceive themselves as participating intrinsically in each other’s lives, sharing a “mutuality of being” – “(...) generally considered, kinsmen are persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent” (Sahlins, 2011:11).

Portugal is now going through a profound social and economic crisis, with rising unemployment rates, decreasing family income, significant emigration, and population ageing, leading to increased pressure on both private and public social services which are being severely cut. Faced with the reduced capability of state care systems to continue providing support, people in need are (re)turning to informal ways of addressing the problem.

In this article, I will discuss some of these different dimensions of care, focusing in particular on the Portuguese case and on the transformations generated by a situation of economic and social crisis and by the subsequent application of severe austerity measures to tackle the public sovereign debt, all of which, from 2010 to the present, have brought profound changes to public policies and people's lifestyles. However, I must note that this text does not intend to be a reflection on the professional activities of care (or *care work*). Processes of care, of the kind I shall analyse here, are relations of mutual aid, of attention given to, and attendance of, those who live in some kind of deprivation or need – whether these be social, domestic, economic, medical or sanitary. These tasks, which are undertaken in informal ways and in the private sphere, are of such an importance to daily survival that they also come to occupy a central place in the public sphere.

Drawing on a broad notion of care to reflect on all the various ways of helping to ensure that needs are met, and building on ethnographic work done among middle class families in Lisbon and Oporto, I shall argue (i) that informal provision of care, such as it has become in the present situation, takes on a central role in the processes of everyday livelihood, in national economy, and (ii) that these informal strategies are effective means of survival in a context of crisis. Confronted with increasing shortcomings in the state care system, people return to informal ways of making ends meet. Interpersonal care is consequently crucial for coping with situations of crisis – whether economic, social, personal, or political – and, in that sense, can be thought of as a factor for sustainability.

1. Crisis, austerity and new lifestyles in Portugal

Portugal is now experiencing a broad situation of economic and social crisis which, despite similarities with other European countries, displays specific features. In part, these are due to the fact that its recent Welfare State only took shape in the mid-Seventies (Santos, 1993).²

The present situation of crisis, and the austerity measures implemented after the intervention in June 2011 of the so-called Troika (formed by the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission), brought about radical changes in the organization of the Portuguese Welfare System, significantly reducing the benefits provided to citizens. Simultaneously, the social and demographic context of the country also changed. After a decade of economic growth and significant social improvements, Portugal is now facing a worrying rise in unemployment (13.9% in April 2015, 17.8% in April 2013, 15.2% in April 2012, 12.6% in 2011, 10.8% in 2010 – which means that, since the imposition of austerity measures, it has risen about 8%, 5% of which since the beginning of the Financial Assistance Programme)³, a significant decrease in family income and “a huge

² The common portrayal of Portugal as a “welfare society”, in opposition to a “welfare state” (Santos, 1993), implies that the encounters between the citizen and the state are scant, in terms of the support provided by the latter, and that the Portuguese State has been eroded not so much by neoliberalism as by the underdevelopment of its welfare provision mechanisms. Community support is frequent, due to the effectiveness of moral ties, networks of relatives and neighbours which provide economic support and forms of care and assistance, in all of which women play a central role (cf. Cunha, 2013). Regardless of the characteristic ambiguity of the moral field of obligations (Narotzky and Smith, 2006), the efficacy of these social networks has been crucial to low income populations. This fact has led some authors to consider the poverty that can be observed in Southern Europe as a specific phenomenon, different from the “exclusion” emerging in late capitalist societies (Merrien, 1996; Paugam, 1996).

³ When we include those who are no longer taken into account in the calculations (because they are not registered at the job centres or because they have exceeded the time limit), the percentage rises to 22% (in April 2015). But the youth unemployment situation is even more serious. In 2011, before the

increase in taxes”,⁴ which is reflected in the rising cost of living, in a growing feeling of uncertainty, and in social and economic precariousness. Ever more numerous sectors of the Portuguese population see their livelihood becoming increasingly precarious, and guaranteed only in a volatile and temporary way. On two occasions (in 2012 and 2014), the Government imposed pay cuts to civil servants, which were afterwards extended to the private sector, and implemented a “brutal” rise in taxation (estimated at 11%), resulting in a very significant reduction of disposable family income. This situation puts considerable pressure on social services, which in turn has also reduced the range of benefits provided, thereby inevitably compromising their ability to continue guaranteeing what until recently were universal rights of citizens, with evident negative consequences on daily life.

In this sense, one should not analyse the present crisis from a strictly economic point of view. This is a social crisis which has inflicted a serious blow to the European social model, calling into question not just markets, but also the institutions, ways of life, and processes of social reproduction, thus significantly altering social relations and affecting nearly every dimension of daily life.⁵

implementation of the Troika’s austerity measures, 28% of the active population between the ages of 15 and 24 was unemployed, and this was already a relatively high rate. Four years later, at the beginning of 2015, youth unemployment reached 34.4% (which was however an improvement compared to the maximum of 42.5% reached in 2013) (National Statistics Institute data).

⁴ The Minister of Finance’s own expression, in a public declaration made on 10th March 2012.

⁵ The increased impoverishment and material deprivation generated by austerity in a ‘welfare society’ (where people depend on social networks and mutual-aid) has played a major role in increasing social inequality and has radically altered relations among generations (cf. Collins, 2008; Collins and Mayer, 2010). The effects of the adjustment measures on citizens’ lives coldly reflect the exacerbation of inequality-producing mechanisms, not only in Portugal, but, as Piketty (2014) clearly demonstrates, in all Western capitalist societies which are subject to the dynamics of contemporary capitalist political economy.

As a result of the austerity measures imposed by the Government, people's livelihood has been greatly affected, and their life prospects and expectations about the future have been made more fragile. Differentiated contexts of deprivation are now proliferating in Portugal, contributing to both material and immaterial needs, and are increasingly extending to many sectors of the society, particularly the middle class. One of the less usual effects of this situation is that deprived social groups are no longer the only ones in need of help and care in order to assure their daily survival. The impoverishment of the middle class, as a result of the austerity programme's economic measures, in addition to the pauperization of the more disadvantaged social groups, leads to a nation-wide situation marked by the loss of basic goods and accelerating the degradation of people's wellbeing.

Labour instability and the worsening of everyday conditions of livelihood, together with attempts at ensuring an ideal of normality which seems to have been lost, prompt us to reflect on a fundamental issue: how can the future of a country be built on the basis of a present without expectations of growth and investment, without hope of maintaining the living standards established during a period of economic expansion and individual prosperity? The collective imagination of the West is based on an idea of development and qualitative improvement in living conditions, wages, and academic and professional qualification. Likewise, the ideology underpinning technological and civilizational development is based on the very same idea of progress and improvement. Today's generations studied more than those of their parents, who, in their turn, had also studied more than their own parents, and live better and in better conditions than preceding generations. The ideal of the modern Welfare State is that of guaranteeing basic and decent living conditions to all, in accordance with a democratic socio-political paradigm of citizenship and equality of rights and opportunities. These last years of crisis and austerity in Portugal, however, have jeopardised this set of values, which were taken for granted and on which was built the model of modern society that is now collapsing, not so

much as an idea but rather as a possibility of coming into being. In addition to the change in material living conditions, there is now a deep transformation in the perception of that very existence, an ontological transformation in what it means to be a citizen.

With the crisis also came a rising percentage of people unable to meet their financial obligations and their daily needs. Together with the more disadvantaged social strata and long-term unemployed, there are ever more newly unemployed, and the number of precarious workers keeps rising. In these cases, having recourse to family solidarity, sharing the resources of the domestic unit, relatives, friends or neighbours, has become a recurrent strategy for ensuring everyday living conditions. As a result, the promotion of alternative strategies, such as support provided by interpersonal networks or social solidarity NGOs, is becoming ever more frequent in Portugal. As a means of facing the situations of need resulting from this withdrawal of the Welfare State, people are returning to informal ways of assuring their daily survival. Other authors have shown how, in situations where a weak and incipient State fails to provide assistance, the effects are mitigated by networks of relatives and neighbours who provide support and care in a personal basis (Santos, 1993; Hochschild, 2004), thus overcoming critical situations through informal personal strategies (Borneman, 2001; L'Estoile, 2014).

2. New contexts of uncertainty and precariousness, and the emergence of new forms of care

These changes in the labour market, in public policies regarding taxation, social security, health and education, have profound implications in multiple dimensions of people's existences, in their ways of conceiving their lives and, consequently, in the decisions they take with regard to building their future. This issue particularly affects the younger generations, for whom the lack of employment – and the absolute uncertainty surrounding their entry into the labour market, their future and their economic stability – is, as has been pointed out, one of the

factors which most constrain the making of decisions regarding the future, such as leaving the parental home, settling into a conjugal relationship and planning parenthood.

Let us look at some examples:

Raquel is a 27 year old dentist. After concluding her degree, she has been working in several “low-cost” dental practices where she is paid by the hour, earning very little in comparison with colleagues who have stable contracts in a clinic. Raquel maintains a steady relationship with her boyfriend of five years, but still lives with her parents. Her present situation is not sufficiently reassuring to give her “the courage to take that step towards independence and self-sufficiency”, and she is afraid that something might go wrong and she might not be able to pay the bills of a house shared by the two.

Carlos is a 45 year old unemployed sociologist, who lives at home with his parents. He used to share an apartment with his girlfriend, but this year she moved back to her parents’ home when her post-doctoral grant came to an end. They never had children because they were afraid of the instability of their situation, and today they think they made the right choice, since they are currently both unemployed and living separately with their respective parents.

Mariana is 40 years old and is a journalist. She spent 10 years working for a major daily newspaper until she was fired. Divorced and with a daughter, Mariana had to leave the house where she had lived since she was 25. She went back home to her parents’, where her grandmother also lives. Her father has been unemployed for two years now (he was fired from a large company after 14 years). Her mother is a teacher. Mariana’s grandmother uses her retirement pension to pay for all the education expenses of her great-granddaughter Rita, who has

recently become eligible for the social services provided by the Ministry of Education (free meals in the school cafeteria). Mariana is presently working as a cleaner in a hostel which is owned by a close friend of hers. She started as a favour to her friend when one of the cleaners left suddenly (a Brazilian girl who returned home after 5 years as a migrant in Portugal), but she soon decided to keep the job because she could not find any other alternatives and she liked the ambience of the hostel. When asked about what she feels about being a cleaner, she says that it is a very good way to get by (“se virar”) and contribute to the household budget.

Joaquim, 57 years old, is a former pipe welder in the naval sector. He has now been unemployed for two years, after the shipbuilding company where he had worked all his life (since he was 15) closed down. His wife worked as a cleaning woman and in recent years she lost her job at most of her middle-class homes (where they can no longer afford to pay her). She now works by the hour whenever she gets the chance. As a result, she has lost her social security, and the right to sickness benefits. They have two older children: Pedro, a 30-year-old welder, and 28-year-old Carla, a currently unemployed hospital cleaner. They are both married and they have one child each. Joaquim and his wife also have a younger daughter, a 17-year-old who was forced to give up plans for going to university in order to work as a cashier in a local supermarket. They live in Loures, near Lisbon, in an informal housing estate. They settled there when his parents-in-law arrived in Lisbon from the north of Portugal (45 years ago) seeking a better life. Their children live in an extension of the house built by themselves. The house is in the hills and has land. There, they have been raising a few animals and growing a vegetable garden for two years now, which allows them to provide for their own subsistence. It has been six months since they started to go to the market to sell their products on Saturdays. This allows them to earn some money. It has been three months since Joaquim started selling at a very important roundabout in the Capital. He leaves home at 7am and rides 18kms on an old bicycle. He takes his

products with him and sells them sitting on the floor outside a supermarket. One year later, he has stable clients and makes around 20 to 25 euros per day.

These examples clearly show that, in hours of need, domestic groups have reorganized themselves in order to ensure, through different forms of mutual help and care, the subsistence of all its members.

Uncertainty in relation to the future, in a situation of prolonged precariousness, generates new forms of dependence and generational and intergenerational solidarity which deserve analysis, since they effect profound changes in the organization of family and interpersonal relationships. As in the case of Raquel, Pedro, Mariana and Joaquim, with the intergenerational relations of mutual support created among their domestic groups to cope with an everyday life which has become uncertain, parents are helping their children to an ever later age. Even those who have formally independent living arrangements are in many cases only able to survive thanks to direct or indirect support from their parents (whether in cash or in kind, through paying their house rent or their car instalments, taking care of their children, or regularly providing them with basic necessities). At the same time, one increasingly comes across situations in which the survival of the younger generation is ensured by the older one, by those putatively in need, whether by drawing money from the savings of an entire working life, or from their old-age pensions which are, in some cases, the only source of income for families where unemployment has taken roots. The example of Mariana's grandmother is representative of so many others one can find in Portugal, where pensions constitute a fundamental source of income, for the domestic unit. A profound change can be observed in intergenerational relations, where those older people who, until recently, were considered to be dependent members of the family, now take on a renewed role of providers, while unemployed adults lose their autonomy and the young are unable to conquer

theirs. This is clearly expressed when people tell us that the older generations are better prepared to face the new constraints which result from the crisis, since they remember what it was like to live with almost nothing, with no steady job and no regular salary, with no help from the State, with no school for the children, with no access to public health care, at the bottom of the hierarchy, in a world so totally different from that of the rich, the educated, the affluent. Many express this feeling as an inevitability: “we are doomed to be poor”, as Joaquim summed it up, while telling us that his young daughter was forced to leave school and go to work, to help with the family’s expenses.

In order to overcome economic difficulties, people find creative ways of pooling resources, whether material or human. The cases of Joaquim and Mariana are significant examples of the deep changes which the imposition of adjustment policies has implied for people’s lives in all their dimensions.

Personal initiative, imbued with a morality of “care” and the common good, is becoming frequent in a country where it was almost inexistent and proliferates in various dimensions of social life. It is because these informal strategies are fundamental devices for survival in situations of uncertainty that they make life possible in times of crisis, not only for those who use and benefit from these devices, but for the entire social system, insofar as they inhibit, to a certain extent, the escalation of social tensions and the outset of individual and collective economic collapse.

Let us take another example:

Tomás is a university student from Fundão, now in the second year of his Food Engineering degree. Despite his parents being both unemployed, last year Tomás lost his scholarship and support from the social services. Unable to cover all his expenses, his parents had to make the difficult decision to take him out of the university. Now, Tomás is back at his studies, as he lives at Isabel’s place, splitting expenses with her and not having to pay a rent. For

her part, Isabel now has company and help with household errands and domestic chores.

Unable to deal with the present, people turn to traditional ways of coping with the situation, at the same time giving them a new direction and new meanings within new domestic and social frameworks. Another dimension to bear in mind as one looks at the examples above, is a new way of employing these traditional forms of mutual help in organizing everyday life, by resorting to state and private institutions in order to provide a framework for validating informal transactions and relationships. In Tomás and Isabel's case, this modern, complex and institutionalized use is quite different from earlier forms of direct exchange, which are surprisingly used more frequently by urban alternative movements.

In fact, these forms of solidarity are not new, but rather represent a return to earlier support and mutual help systems, which have, in the last decades, been replaced by more mercantile practices. In these days of uncertainty and precariousness, people are reviving the traditional forms of solidarity and family care of pre-modern Portugal. Yet this apparent return to old communitarian practices may pose some ideological problems, as it may seem that the country is retreating from the achievements of the Welfare State. But although it is not entirely new, this phenomenon does not constitute a simple return to the past. Society has changed, mentalities have evolved, and for that reason the same practices of interpersonal care do not bear the same meaning. Through the current reactivation of these forms of intergenerational solidarity, people are in fact opposing the individualist project that has flourished in recent decades, embodied in the concepts of individual wellbeing and personal fulfilment which are so prominent in more versatile economies, while reviving informal practices of care that, since they are mostly undertaken by women, configure a revival of the old association between women, the family, and care. The Portuguese moral landscape is now experiencing a series of multidirectional and

multidimensional transformations which reflect a large-scale ethical change from a system of citizenship rights to one of collective responsibility and participation.

Social transformations arising out of the present crisis and the austerity policies implemented in its wake, have turned our lives into a paradox: after the Welfare State had taken on an increasingly central role, and the labour market freed individuals from their “family obligations”, governmental policies are now attempting to shift the burden once again onto the citizens. This “state of emergency” (Agamben, 2005), stimulates the construction of alternatives to the process of social reproduction, in the economic as well as in the social and moral spheres. Public actions of social solidarity occur ever more often, personal stories of support given to friends, neighbours, relatives or even mere acquaintances are heard everywhere. At the same time, there proliferate private organisms, which act in multiple dimensions of everyday life and try to provide support in different aspects of people’s lives (from basic necessities to other kinds of assistance).

This example of an ethnographically-based analysis contains an important part of a more contextualized contribution, critical of the meanings and conditions of possibility of “care”. Informal relations of care, which attempt to ensure minimum levels of wellbeing and/or economic sustainability for people in need, frequently have public impact and reaffirm values of what is good that are anchored in cultural regimes of morality and justice.

These informal practices constitute alternative devices to state assistance and aim, according to their scope, to overcome the effects of the present inefficiency of the Welfare State in Portugal. Ideologically, they conceptualize the help given to the other who is in a situation of need, open or disguised, as something mandatory, as something which “has to be done”. It is an impetus guided by notions of duty and ruled by a moral economy which tries, in practice, to make the lives of those most in need more dignified. This kind of evermore extensive actions of reutilization, sharing, donation and exchange of goods and services, reveals a new model of social redistribution. On the other hand, in the present

socio-political context, life, everyday livelihood and the economy are reduced to a technical jargon that directs reflection on the problematic of crisis onto numbers, indices and statistics. Among social scientists, however, it is recognized that the study of economic issues goes far beyond the application of mathematical models and financial measures, which turn the impoverishment of a significant part of the Portuguese population into something explicable by numbers. As we incorporate relations of care into this framework of analysis, without neglecting day-to-day individual practices and the gathering of what Okely (1999) calls “grassroots knowledge”, it becomes clear that these interpersonal dimensions are constituted jointly with political economy and the market, in a renewed moral economy which manifests itself clearly in everyday life. There is, thus, an obvious relation between the practices of care and the economic system, between political decision-making and necessity, or need for care, which can best be brought out by ethnography.

3. Care as a moral ideology of what is good and right

In Mariana’s own words, “to take care is to show that common everyday practices can be fundamental mechanisms of support and, at the same time, of self-satisfaction”. Simple household tasks, like taking care of grandchildren or picking them up from school, cooking or doing minor house work (simple sewing and mending, odd jobs around the house, etc.), taking in one’s own children or helping them maintain their independence in hard times, are fundamental for guaranteeing the viability of some of our interlocutors’ everyday existence. Simple gestures are reinvented in the experience of life in precarious situations and become central elements for social sustainability.

Apart from these informal ways of overcoming situations of need within interpersonal networks of family or friends, there are other ways of dealing with situations of extreme need and deprivation. Multiple institutions for social aid have been emerging

in Portugal in this period of crisis and social transformation, many of them built almost entirely on the basis of voluntary work.

From the confluence of the Welfare State and what is vaguely called “civil society”, less institutionalised structures of support and care are emerging in NGOs, Private Social Welfare Organisations, volunteerism and associativism, as alternative mechanisms to forms of state assistance. The aim is to overcome the effects of the current inefficiency of the Welfare State. Therefore, whether at the micro level of individual action, exclusively oriented to the resolution of a particular crisis, of an occasional or prolonged difficulty, or at the level of (alternativist) meta-economic actions aiming at overcoming the established order of liberal capitalist economies, the paradigm of informal social assistance should be thought of as a broader trend towards providing support to the most debilitated sectors of the population.

We should note that, until now, civic participation in altruistic projects has barely existed in Portugal. There is a generalized perception that many fellow citizens are experiencing extreme vulnerability and need. The generalized feeling of precariousness, need and privation which many people are experiencing is the most frequent justification given for working as a volunteer in an institution. A moral motivation that arises out of the compassion for others. This is an interesting point for reflection upon this version of the moral meaning of altruistic care, deeply embedded in Catholic ideology.

Examples of this are C.A.S.A. and Refood, two non-profit associations of assistance to the homeless and food redistribution that we have been following in Lisbon and Setúbal. In both cases, the practice of mutual aid emerges locally, in order to provide appropriate responses to the particular needs of the community concerned. Refood presents itself as an association whose main feature is not the food which it distributes, but the goodwill of people who carry it out. At Refood, all participants are volunteers. Donations and cash contributions are exclusively allocated to rebuilding and improving the spaces where Refood operates

(provided by companies, individuals, the State, or religious congregations). Many of the beneficiaries also become volunteers in the organisation, once they reach the conclusion that this is the best way to reciprocate the provision of food, denoting a whole universe of benefit and consideration.

It is, thus, through the metaphor of “care” that moral concerns about an ideal existence in a world marked by profound inequality and inhabited by people in need are frequently expressed. According to Slote (2007), the ethics of care offer us a comprehensive view of morality. This sense of a moral meaning for altruistic care can be illustrated by another case currently being studied: volunteer movements that have been emerging in Portugal.

Taking as example the Banco Alimentar contra a Fome (Food Bank Against Hunger), one can easily notice the rising number of volunteers collaborating with this NGO (on a day-to-day basis, as well as in the context of large actions organized at a national level), at the same time as calls for help from various associations have also been increasing.

Voluntary work and altruism are often considered to be constituent parts of a same movement. However, someone who works as a volunteer and, as such, gives part of his/her time to care for or to act for the benefit of another, has a return, a reward, which is not monetary, but moral. In other words, there is a consequence for the person concerned which is not exclusively dedicated to the other; something that could read like this: “I do good and I feel good. I think I became a better person, so most of all I am helping myself. I donate food to the Banco Alimentar, I give soup to the poor, but I gain self-esteem and a sensation of having done my duty.” Taking care of the other is, thus, not an act of pure generosity, which makes the question all the more interesting and complex. It is a process which has two facets – one of generosity, of understanding of other people’s problems and difficulties, and another of moral reward for the worker, who, in some way, is saving himself. In this sense, all voluntary work

shares very similar features with religious ideals, and this, in the Portuguese context, is an aspect that cannot be overlooked.

In his reflections on non-mercantile transactions, Simmel (2004) observes that gratitude is a vector of cohesion in interactions where an equivalence of values is not inscribed. When people mobilise in order to help, they do not expect a return equivalent to the value of the aid provided, not least because such a return would not be possible, since no specific or quantifiable value can be ascribed to “help”. As such, and still according to Simmel, the notions of care and sacrifice pervade the dynamics of aid and reconfigure the identity of those who help. This is particularly apparent in the growing number of Portuguese who participate as voluntary workers, giving their time and their work to help others in need, in the name both of a sense of solidarity and of motivation to do what is good and right. Like Simmel, Tronto also contends that care represents the moral quality of life:

To be a morally good person requires, that a person strives to meet the demands of caring that present themselves in his or her life. For a society to be judged as a morally admirable society, it must ... adequately provide for care of its members and its territory (Tronto, 1993:126).

“I cannot be at home knowing that there are people out there to whom I can make a difference. That is why I am here”, we hear from Vera, who on that day had brought her daughter with her to help distributing food in the “parish refectory”. “We need help, but there are people even more in need of it than ourselves.” Austerity measures have also produced this effect – a growing number of social solidarity actions among citizens who take the care of others into their own hands. Caring is, thus, no longer circumscribed to the immediate and private sphere.

4. Feminist reformulations of the economy: care, value, and gender

Care practices have been traditionally performed by women and are symbolically associated with them. However, as the social contract changes, and women enter the wage labour market, many of the traditional feminine tasks, which were previously undertaken within the familial context without payment, have begun to involve money transactions (Folbre and Nelson, 2000). Usually defined as a set of practices within the family sphere, caring is now thought of as *work*. Ascribing an economic value to the act of caring, and to the informal networks in which these practices are embedded, thus becomes a challenge to mainstream economics. The development of research on the practices of care results from a preoccupation, at a micro level, with concrete situations in which people take care or are taken care of and that reveal important processes of global socio-political economies.

The first important theoretical works on the social importance of care were the feminist studies on social reproduction published on the Sixties and Seventies, which underlined the interconnection between non-paid domestic work and the economy, thus challenging the mainstream definition of a market-centred economy. As several authors point out, we owe to the first feminist economists the suggestion that economics should be defined on the basis of a preoccupation with provisioning and not only with market and profit (cf. Nelson, 2008). Criticising the reductionist view of caring as a form of feminine love associated with the family and domestic sphere, in opposition to remunerated activities performed by men in the public sphere, feminist reflections on care draw attention to the interrelations between care and economic relations, shifting the question of care from the private to the public sphere and giving it new importance from the point of view of sociological, economic and political analysis.

The idea that the mercantilization of care may result in an emptying of the sentiments and moral values associated with it derives from the fear that a money motive may lead to caring

practices being undertaken exclusively as (paid) work, without the love and concern which, according to the social values which are hegemonic in Portugal, should be the motivational basis of caring.

To introduce the issue of money in the discussion about care forces us to articulate moral motivations and affections with the economy. The question of paid carers' motivations is frequently formulated as a dichotomy: caring is performed either for love or for money – in other words, care is either based on spiritual values, affection and altruism, or motivated by economic interest or necessity (as in the case of cleaning women, nurses, and female immigrants who are paid to take care of children and old people). To state this dichotomy implies that the actions of market agents are always utilitarian, and that those of relatives, friends and neighbours are always altruistic. But neither of these assumptions is correct, as the work of Thelen and Read (2007), Lisboa (2007), Hirata (2012), Glenn (2010), England (2010) and Debert (2014) clearly demonstrates.

People claimed a total separation of sentiment and economics, while in practice, when asked how you know someone loves you, people described showing love by sharing food, money, clothing, access to credit, employment opportunities, labor, and child care – which I saw as economic transactions – while they were reluctant to so label them. They also described these acts as gifts, without explicit need for remuneration, but they could, when pressed, reluctantly, make an accurate accounting of such gifts, and judge people's character on the basis of whether they gave as good as they got (Rebhun, 2007:111).

In a similar vein Carol Gilligan (1982) argues that, as a result of its association with the subaltern female gender in an androcentric capitalist society, the ethics of care were relegated to obscurity or to an equally subaltern status in the West. Gilligan contends that, as a result of their differential socialization, men and women develop different ethical theories, and that these influence

their moral behaviour: men develop an ethic of justice, women an ethic of care based on responsibility (cf. 1982:165-6).

According to Gilligan, the feminist theory has shown how the patriarchal system ruling our society has divided life into two spheres – the public and the private – and endowed the former with value to the detriment of the latter. It has, in addition, reserved for the male gender preponderance in the public sphere of life, while circumscribing women to the private sphere. Invested with a false sovereignty in the home, and having been socialized to fulfil that role, the woman provides care and attention to others. According to hegemonic androcentric values, everything that happens within the private sphere, and all tasks performed by women, never have the same social prestige as activities undertaken by men in the public sphere. From this point of view, not only are tasks related to caring denied social prestige, but they are also thought of as a feminine obligation, circumscribed to the private and domestic sphere and thus deprived of social value. In other words, they are not merely female tasks, they are a female obligation. The social organization of care is built through multiple forms of coercion (Glenn, 2010:5). Furthermore, when care work becomes part of the labour market, it is associated with subservient tasks and with emotional support. “Caring” has thus been defined on the basis of a conceptual dichotomy which reifies a division of labour according to gender, naturalizes moral responsibilities, and reproduces social inequalities. Analytical perspectives which circumscribe care to the private sphere, to the sphere of affections and altruism, have obscured its social and public role, making its relevance to the economy quite invisible.

In conclusion

In order to understand the fundamental role care plays in the creation, preservation and dissolution of significant ties, we have to bear in mind its centrality to the economy and to politics.

Given that care is associated with affection, with an emotional bond to the other, it is frequently considered as

unimportant from a social or economic point of view. And yet, in this historical moment, which has witnessed changes in the social contract, caring has become a central issue. Forms of exchange and support which go beyond the private sphere are more easily seen as pertaining to the political and economic spheres. Placing care at the centre of the analysis can thus allow the emergence of new analytical perspectives on social organization.

I have argued that informal, voluntary and non-governmental practices of care are important for understanding the forms of reproduction of the Portuguese social fabric, and that these strategies are fundamental for guaranteeing the continuity of a vulnerable economic system. Why are there not more street protests, more revolts against a government which imposes implacable austerity measures, cuts wages, raises taxes and reduces benefits? I suggest that it is because, despite all adversities, people keep finding ways of disentangling themselves from difficult situations, of “MacGyvering” (the closest term to the Portuguese “se virar” or “desenrascar-se”) through resorting to these formal or informal networks of care.

This ever more generalized set of practices, of sharing, giving and exchanging goods and services, should be analysed in the light of a new paradigm. It is imperative to be politically aware that if, on the one hand, these informal strategies of support for the most debilitated sectors of society make it possible for those benefiting from them to live through situations of crisis and uncertainty, on the other hand they are also fundamental to the entire social system, since they inhibit, to some extent, the escalation of social tensions, as well as individual and collective economic collapse. Thus, it is my belief that it is crucial to incorporate into a single framework of analysis the notions of care, economy and market, to the extent that these dimensions are jointly constituted, in a renewed moral economy which is expressed in everyday life.

Voluntary help is not underpinned by the logic of the capitalist market, but rather by a gift relationship, or by a special

form of economic exchange (Graeber, 2010), which stands beyond agency based on rational choice, related as it is to wellbeing, to “[t]he satisfaction of all human needs [...] the need for public goods, such as education, security and a healthy environment, and for intangible qualities such as dignity” (Hann and Hart, 2011). It thus becomes clear how care also acquires a market value, simultaneously affective and financial, moral and social, and hence cannot escape being considered as an economic factor.

The economic dimensions of the multiple and differentiated practices of care are constituted through solidary exchanges which address several needs, whether or not the agents (both recipients and providers) are directly involved in these transactions. This means that the circulation of goods and support services, local and community-based, constitutes a market which is made up of a set of needs and of collectively available goods that attempt to respond to material and immaterial life conditions. It is for this reason that care should be considered as a factor for sustainability, at three different levels: the economic (providing support to people in need), the social (assuring the reproduction of the social fabric) and the emotional (guaranteeing some measure of wellbeing in an everyday life marked by uncertainty and precariousness).

Nevertheless, unveiling these alternative practices of survival runs the risk of providing grounds for the ideological and moralizing argument of those who support a ferocious neoliberal approach, which underlies many of the political decisions that are being taken under the pretext of the crisis. Ultimately, these conclusions might be used to justify the idea that state-provided care is not a right – for caring would be in fact a family, more specifically a feminine, obligation – but rather a favour granted to the citizens on a temporary basis. According to the current Minister for Social Solidarity (member of the right-wing Christian Democratic party), the traditional family structure, which has been transformed in the process of modernization, should reacquire its lost importance, and women be brought to reassume their natural vocation as carers. Discussion is thus shifted from an argument about citizenship rights to a moral, ideological and political

dimension. We should therefore bear in mind that, although care has once again become an important factor for sustainability, the success of its practices reactivates and reproduces traditional forms of social inequality, while crystallising the dependence of those in need and thus legitimating the power and control of the economic elites who reproduce neoliberal ideologies typical of global capitalist society.

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