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CARE, SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY IN TIMES OF CRISES: PRECARIOUSNESS AMONG PORTUGUESE MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES

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Abstract

After 3 decades of economic growth and significant improvement of social conditions, Portugal is now going through a profound social and economic crisis. Following the international financial crisis of 2008, Portugal signed four-year structural adjustment programme agreement with the ‘Troika’ (i.e. European Commission; European Central Bank; International Monetary Fund) in May 2011. Under a right-wing coalition government, the programme’s implementation was shaped by harsh tax increases, spending cuts, and reduction of welfare benefits. Similarly, to other countries on the indebted periphery of the Eurozone, the core of Portuguese policies of austerity centered on measures of internal devaluation mainly constituted by wage repression; employment precariousness, labour devaluation and mass unemployment – contributing to the most violent and rapid transfer of income from labour to capital in democratic Portugal (Reis et. al. 2013). The human and social costs of austerity measures were devastating.

While increasingly larger sectors of the population see their living conditions deteriorate and become increasingly unstable. In order to face up to everyday basic needs, and given the welfare state’s collapse, citizens are resuming informal routes to provide for their daily needs, such as the support provided by interpersonal networks or non-governmental organizations. Public actions of social solidarity grow day by day, the personal stories of help received by friends, neighbours, relatives or mere acquaintances are commonly heard among almost all social groups (young people, old people, poor classes, middle classes...)

I will discuss some of these different dimensions of care using a broad notion of concept - one that can tackle the multiple ways of helping and support to ensure that needs are met, - and building on ethnographic work done among middle class families in Lisbon and Oporto between 2012 and 2015,

I will argue (i) that 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. Actions borne out of personal initiative, imbued of the morality of “care” and the common good, have become frequent making life possible in moments of crisis.

NEW CONTEXTS OF INSTABILITY AND UNCERTAINTY – NEW FORMS OF CARE

In this section I examine the practices, motivations and dilemmas pervading the articulation of different forms of care work, predominantly undertaken by women, within and between households, across the public and private divides, paid and unpaid realms, and between generations. I explore how care work involves taking the concerns and needs of others as a basis for action (Tronto 1992), and as a basis to assert a morality with which to legitimize needs-claims and entitlements to material and immaterial resources, for survival and possible futures.

Let me introduce you to Mariana, a 40 years old, 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 lived autonomously since she was 25 because she could not pay the rent anymore. She returned home to her parents. Her father (64) was also unemployed for two years (he was fired from a large company after 14 years). Her mother is a teacher who didn't get a placement this year, after 20 years. In 2013 they were all living on the father's unemployment allowance (750€) and on the grandmother's pension (650€), who also lives there. Mariana's daughter, Beatriz, receives free meals at school. Mariana is presently working at 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 rapidly she 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 to be a cleaner she says that it is a very good way to get by (*desenrascar-se*) and contribute to the household budget.

In these times of need, the domestic group was reorganized in order to ensure the subsistence of all its members through different forms of mutual help and care.

As we can see in the case of Mariana, relatives are supporting each other in various forms of intergenerational support system that developed in and across domestic units as a way to face up to an uncertain day-to-day life. Even those who have formally gained their living independence fulfilling middleclass aspirations of independent house when you are an adult (like Mariana), often can only manage to survive with the support of their parents or relatives, whether through their direct financial support (money), or indirect help (purchase of goods, rent payment, car loans, taking care of their children, or regularly supplying first necessity products). At the same time, we find more and more situations where it falls upon the elder, who, in theory would be the ones in greater need of support, to ensure the survival of younger generations, with the life-long savings they have managed to amass. Retirement pensions which sometimes become the only income in families that have been stricken by unemployment. Let us consider again the

example of Mariana's grandmother, as representative of the numberless similar cases found throughout Portugal today.

The different strategies that people develop to overcome economic difficulties come down to finding creative ways to pool resources, whether material or human. Mariana's is an insightful example to understand how the application of the adjustment policies have deeply changed people's lives in all dimensions of their existence.

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 people's livelihoods.

Teresa would often express her caring efforts, practices and investments as 'uma luta constante' (a constant struggle) over the years, and fundamental to the livelihood and dignity of the household. "We were never hungry. If we cannot eat stakes everyday we always have soup and main dish", she told me once. The care work practices involved in household budgeting, shopping, planning meals, cooking and cleaning were for Teresa, as to many other women with whom I contacted, motivated by instrumental, affective and moral reasons tied to the present and the future. Teresa did not disguise the physical, emotional and moral exhaustion of having to manage and negotiate the threat of daily and immediate restrictions in the means of livelihood, while also envisioning possible futures across generations. Teresa is committed that her granddaughter goes to the university. It was important for her that Beatriz can pursue a 'better livelihood' through studying. Her granddaughter attainment of a college degree and a sense of future was something Teresa acted upon through care, with and against the precarious present.

Caring for the needs of others and using those needs as a vernacular morality of claims to resources and entitlements was particularly prominent in the caring labours undertaken between women from different generations, within and between households, crossing the public and private divides. Although they signal a strong tendency to the 're-familialization' of welfare and care, they are also instrumental in challenging (or subverting) municipal administrative modes of needs satisfaction or arbitrary typologies of moral deservingness.

As Pedro, a 27-year-old radically epitomized: "If it was not for the family we would be dropping dead on the streets from hunger". As we can see family as a support structure undoubtedly helps a great number of people survive the every-day problems brought

about by the crisis. The very existence of the family as a resource reveals how people revert to the more traditional ethos though they are living a modern life.

The uncertainty of the future brings about new forms of dependence, as well as generational and intergenerational solidarity, in this juncture of prolonged precariousness in this social group with hopes of a good life, which deserves our close attention since it has brought about deep transformations in the organization of family and interpersonal relations. This unexpected dependence from external support affects personal feelings of autonomy and independence which are central to the idea of adulthood in Portugal, among the middleclass above all.

Nevertheless, we must note that different generations experience this downward mobility differently and produce distinct narratives about them. The older generations seem to cope easier with this loss of living quality and material resources as they have previously lived without them and have the embodied experience and the symbolic resources of it. “Now it’s again a can of sardines for the all family. I grew up like this. And although my children were not used to this they will manage too.” Says Joaquim with resignation. Younger middleclass generations have an experience of constituting themselves as persons in a modern technological global world where dispossession of these assets was not foreseen as a possible way of living, where working class jobs were not considered in their promised future of the most schoolarised generation. And this is not a mere narrative or a discursive element. It is experienced knowledge from their life course.

Both formal and informal practices of care crystallize ideals of good which are collectively based on cultural systems of morality and justice.

CONCLUDING

The particular cases I described, show that the ‘capacity to understand what others need’ seems to speak directly to the argument presented almost 20 years ago by Tronto (1993) for feminists to ‘stop talking about women’s morality and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes values traditionally associated with women’ (3). When I started reflecting on economic crisis, austerity and the centrality of women’s caring labours (and caring relationships) to fulfil households needs I was primarily interested in understanding the extent to which women were bearing the main costs of austerity policies, as in other historical periods and contexts (Sparr; Beneria; Elson).

To do so, in the paper I have presented yesterday I examined how women’s bodies became the main instrument and site of survival and struggle among impoverished

households in Portugal to deal with the austerity crisis. I showed how women's bodily and embodied energies, capacities and energies became increasingly subject to various forms of extraction, in the public and private spheres, resulting from women's combination of various bodily investments in the production, allocation and distribution of livelihood resources. This evidenced the process of 're-familialization' of care in Portugal, along with the reinforcement of gendered patterns of labour market inequality, dislocating women to historical and long-lasting subordinated roles as carers, mothers and wives. The examination and analysis entailed in the present paper also suggests that the effects and costs of economic crisis and austerity welfare on household's survival capacities were heavily compensated by women. Indeed, during fieldwork when I inquired people directly if the crisis was being more difficult for women or men replies would almost invariably point out that women suffered more. Once I was told that 'when there is lack of bread in the table it is on women that falls the responsibility of solving the problem' - thus evoking a long lasting common sense gendered dichotomy between (morally valued) masculinized production and (morally devalued) feminized redistribution livelihood spheres. Thus, I would suggest that in Portugal, increasing welfare and citizenship tied to the production sphere and increasing livelihood needs, has potentiated the 'feminization of distributive livelihoods'. The latter is predominantly grounded on mobilizing women's distributive labour – as represented by the various articulated forms of care work examined in the previous section – to pool, allocate, hoard, transfer and access resources deemed necessary to fulfil material and recognition needs, with and beyond the market, and with potentially penalizing effects for women's capabilities to challenge gendered idioms of deservingness and social value.

When I asked directly women what was it that motivate them to pursue multiple and demanding efforts, that is, what was it that 'kept them going in spite of everything', the answers were the following: 'because I want my son to have a better life, to go to university', 'because I have to help my daughter to maintain her work', 'because I want to ensure my grandsons don't feel hunger', 'because I want my mother to be treated with dignity at this stage of her life', 'because my son is unemployed', 'because I like to take care of my grandson', 'because I am all my son has'. These were not the only explanations, but the most recurrent. I do not wish to imply that women accepted without complaints a sacrificial vocation towards the goal of fulfilling the well being needs of others. What I want to think through are the normative moral and ethical premises underpinning what they care for, what they value and evaluate as being worthy of struggling for (Sayer 2005; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). What mattered most to the women I came to know was seeking to minimize the risks that the agency of those they cared for could be compromised in the present and in the future. Women's various forms of care works fulfil agentive needs not in spite

of, but because of grounding their actions in the moral sentiments of interdependence, relationality, obligation and affect (among kin, family, friends, neighbours). Let me put this in a different light. For authors such as Amartya Sen (1999), needs fulfilment and well-being is ultimately tied to the implementation of political and institutional frameworks, a way of increasing people's capabilities of freedom and autonomy (Ferguson 2015: 143). Similarly, for Doyal and Gough (1991) health and autonomy are the preconditions for all human action and interaction. For the women I came to know, needs fulfilment and wellbeing is tied to promoting, nurturing and maintaining agency (including their own) through interdependence, relationality, obligation and affect. What sort of welfare policy could be envisioned by merging the human material needs of autonomy with those of moral interdependence? How to give value to the caring values traditionally associated with women, as proposed by Tronto, without legitimizing inequality?

[VOLTA AO SUMÁRIO]