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Relational Dimensions of Housework:
How to Reconcile the Gift with the Market

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1. Man, “tamed” animal

“Come and play with me,” proposed the little prince, “I’m so sad...”

“I can’t play with you,” said the fox, “I’m not tamed.”

“Ah! Pardon,” said the little prince. But after a moment of reflection he added: “What does ‘tamed’ mean?”

“You’re not from around here,” said the fox. “What are you looking for?”

“I am looking for men,” said the little prince. “What does ‘to tame’ mean?”

“Men,” the fox said, “have some rifles and hunt. It is very boring! They also raise chickens. It is their only interest. Are you looking for chickens?”

“No,” said the little prince. “I am looking for friends. What does ‘to tame’ mean?”

“It’s an act that has been neglected for a long time. It means ‘to create ties’...¹

In the famous conference held in 1951, at the convention of architecture at Darmstadt, entitled “Building, dwelling, thinking”², Heidegger observed how the housing crisis was the “crisis” par excellence, a sign of eradication and disorientation of contemporary man. Dwelling, according to the German philosopher, is the typical human way of being in the world. This category is connected to the other heideggerian category, *Care*, the basic structure of existence, which expresses at the same time projectuality and commitment, coexistence and work. And it is thanks to this care that man opens himself up to the future, projecting himself towards others and towards things and getting in tune with his horizon, which becomes, in a certain way, a home. If this doesn’t happen, the world remains an uninhabited area and man has no horizon, he is lost, *unheimlich*, homeless.

This category, previously developed in *Being and Time*³ and later on revived in *Introduction to Metaphysics*⁴, has clear Freudian echoes⁵. The *Unheimlichkeit*, even in its polysemy, always expresses the *not-to-feel-at-one’s-own-home*, being ousted from a familiar and reassuring place. This indicates strangeness, inability to recognize oneself and to recognize others. Summarizing the concepts of *Heim*, home and *Heimat*, homeland, *heimlich* contains the meanings of “intimate”, “familiar”, “trustworthy”, “quiet”, “domestic”, where *unheimlich* is “disturbing”, “alien”, “disquieting”.

The *domestication* or, in conclusion, the *domesticity* are the reverse of disorientation. They represent the reassuring condition for those who feel comfortable in a place that is

¹ A. De Saint Exupéry, *Il piccolo principe* (1943), Bompiani, Milano, p. 91.

² Cf. M. Heidegger, *Costruire, abitare, pensare*, in *Saggi e discorsi*, Mursia, Milano 1976.

³ Cf. Id., *Essere e tempo* (1927), Utet, Torino 1969.

⁴ Cf. Id., *Introduzione alla metafisica* (1953), Mursia, Milano 1986. Here we find the term *Unheimlich*, also used to translate the exclamation of the chorus of the *Antigone*, where the human being is defined as *deinós* and as *deinótaton* (vv. 332-375). Heidegger interprets him both as one who causes panic and terror, and who perpetrates violence, “that which is violent in the innate drive and necessary to the pursuit of human physical and mental faculties” (p. 157).

⁵ Cf. S. Freud, *The uncanny* (1919). It should however be noted that the term in Freud – also translated as “uncanny” – is extremely complex, referring to the unconscious and to the mechanisms of removal.

considered to be “home”, the stable and familiar landing point, where time becomes long term, in other words, biographical continuity.

The development of this category’s theme is to be ascribed to contemporary philosophy, perhaps both because of the sensibility of the new existential condition of man and the discomfort caused by the roots’ loss of the past. We can cite, for example, the reflections developed by A. Heller and E. Lévinas.

Agnes Heller’s considerations are particularly significant when we consider her Marxist formation. The references to Heidegger are explicit, as Heller puts domesticity in relation with the need for the center, which turns out to be structural in the human being, and with the discomfort that man feels in the globalized universe. “‘Home’ – as Heller observes – is one of the few constants of the human condition”⁶. According to the philosopher, home is the “fixed point” in space, from which one leaves and to which one always returns. In a world such as the modern one, in which the inner life is threatened and is likely to vanish, we must “exercise the ability to return”⁷, which is primarily expressed in the return at home, as well as in the ability to preserve memories and to find the ways to escape from the pressure of time. Home is not the simple building: it is a clot of affections and memories, it is a family, a place of intense and solid emotional relationships, able to provide a stable center in the globalized universe, a symbol of protection and continuity of affections⁸.

Heller’s remarks also derive from a comparison between two characters she met during her travels: an old landlord from Campo de’ Fiori in Rome and a career woman who constantly travels all over the world⁹. The first character represents stability: he never moved outside the area where he runs his restaurant, experiencing the passage of time in a microcosm made of familiar faces and regular rhythms. Campo de’ Fiori is the point of view from which to look to the rest of the world, which, being “outside” the family’s perimeter, represents the unknown, the indifferent, felt, in some cases, almost as a threat.

However, the condition of the career woman encountered by Heller in a transoceanic air travel is completely different: she is a real *globetrotter*, she speaks five languages and owns three flats in three different cities. When the philosopher asked her: “Where are you at home?”¹⁰ the woman, after a moment of perplexity, answered that her home “is where her cat lives.” The reflection of the philosopher reflects all of the disorientation expressed by this answer:

“my middle aged neighbour on the Jumbo jet looks like a kind of a cultural monster. But she is not a monster: she is just a very lonely person, one end product (although not only the end product, and by far not the final product) of two hundred years of modern history.”¹¹

⁶ A. Heller, *Where are we at home?* «Thesis eleven», Number 41, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1995, p. 2.

⁷ A. Heller, *L’ossessione postmoderna per il tempo*, in G. Paolucci (edited by), *Cronofagia: la contrazione del tempo e dello spazio nell’era della globalizzazione*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2003, p. 54.

⁸ Cf. A. Heller, *Sociologia della vita quotidiana* (1970), Editori Riuniti, Roma 1975, p. 393.

⁹ Cf. A. Heller, *Where are we at home?* «Thesis eleven», Number 41, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1995, pp. 1 and 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.1.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

This woman appears as the symbol of a culture where the individual is uprooted, without ties to a community with which she can share traditions and language, whose only tie is that to the animal, the *domestic one*, almost as a memory of a certain type of domesticity, which, once, was made of affections and human presences, now consumed by the proliferation of places and by the frenzy of time. The bivouac replaces the home, the pied-a-terre, housing, maybe comfortable, but devoid of emotional references, where people live without roots and only one animal is left to ensure the experience of familiarity.

Heller captures acutely that the woman's reply reveals a discharge rather than a vacuum. The paradox lies in the response with which she introduced herself:

"My home is where my cat lives". She has not answered: "My home is the wide world" or "My home is my firm" or "My home is the present age". No, she said "My home is where my cat lives", where a natural being, a homemaker lives. The animal keeps home for a (wo)man: deconstruction of the term "home", nostalgia, yes, but also something that appears as a regression: back to the cat."¹²

The new sensibility doesn't consist of the disappearing of nostalgia or the need to return, but of the changing in direction of ties. The house continues to exercise its role as a center, but it is radically impoverished of human quality, so that the tie to an animal – although living – replaces the one to a loved person.

According to Lévinas, *domesticity*, defined as a category of *being at one's home*, is at the same time the sign and condition of the other three dimensions: *intimacy*, *familiarity*, *hospitality*. The home, he affirms, "occupies a special place in the system of finality in which human life is found", since it is the condition and the beginning of each activity¹³. Being at home means you can enjoy the "elemental", that is a word that in Lévinas indicates "what is not possessable envelopes or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped."¹⁴ The home is separation from the world not in a sense of space, as a removal, but as a condition of expression of subjectivity, which, in this way, is not confused with a blurred totality. The ego needs meditation, which, in Lévinas' words, is the "suspension of immediate reactions solicited from the world, in anticipation of increased attention to oneself, to his possibilities and situation"¹⁵. Meditation is necessary to establish a new relationship with the world, not of dependence but of possession, enjoyment, engagement and project. Hence the insistence of the term *home*, which Lévinas puts alongside the other three – *chez soi*, *domicile*, *maison* – yet the one he seems to prefer, because it better underlines the sense of stability, tradition and expectation.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹³ Cfr. E. Lévinas, *Totalità e infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1990², p.155.

¹⁴ E. Lévinas, *Totalità e infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1990, p. 132. It is a category present also in Heidegger, which indicates "the side facing us of something already opened that surrounds us".

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 157.

The world becomes *familiar* in the home, full of that “sweetness which spreads on the surface of things”¹⁶ and that derives from the relationship with someone. “The intimacy which is already the presupposition of familiarity is intimacy with someone. The interiority of meditation is a kind of solitude in a world that is already human. Meditation refers to a welcome”¹⁷. Familiarity is therefore *living* and *lived* intimacy, where the face of the other appears, which prevents the closure in one’s own subjectivity and enables hospitality.

The home is simultaneously condition and consequence of self-giving. It allows for the *for self* of a separation, but also for the *out of self* of a donation, because only through meditation you can reach reception. The door of one’s own home opens to the face of the other, who challenges us and invites us to give an answer and to make a gesture of consent. On the other hand, an opening and a hospitable welcome can only be achieved through a presence that can reconcile simultaneously intimacy and hospitality: a woman is, according to Lévinas, this presence, “condition for the concentration of the interior of both home and dwelling”¹⁸, the element that makes a house a place in which to be welcomed. Only the female presence makes possible the passage from the still far away relationship – the *you* of the face which appears from the outside – to the *you* of the familiar relationship that is achieved in silence, without a need for speech. In the home a woman is “the inhabitant who lives there first”, “the receiver par excellence, the receiver herself”¹⁹.

2. The present crisis of domesticity: a proposal.

In Heller and Levinas’ analysis, intimacy, familiarity, hospitality and feminine subjectivity are closely correlated and contribute to define the domestic dimension. Expanding these observations, one can affirm that where the home is there is a family, namely where you find a “community of love and solidarity”²⁰, which is able to create, in the space where it exists, a venue of affections and total communication. A tie between love and solidarity is necessary because it is the quality of relationships that builds the family. Love without solidarity is a transitory romantic passion or masked narcissism, while solidarity without love is impersonal and cold. The dimension of community and the dimension of solidarity are expressed in the gratuitousness and the reciprocity of family ties which go beyond mere functionality and utilitarianism²¹. Family is not a mere anagraphical cohabitation nor an aggregation of individuals who are together because they want to be themselves and consequently live individually, but a reality which is qualified by the specific characteristic of its relationships. The gift of oneself generates the family tie and, in order for it to be unconditional and authentic, it requires the promise of reciprocal stability. A family is known

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 158

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 161.

²⁰ The definition is contained in the *Carta dei Diritti della famiglia*, that the Holy See emanated on 22nd October 1983 (cf. F. D’Agostino, *Una filosofia della famiglia*, Giuffrè, Milano 2003, pp. 12-15)

²¹ Cfr. P. Donati, *La famiglia nella società relazionale. Nuove reti e nuove regole*, Franco Angeli Milano 1994, pp. 20-25.

not for the way it functions but for the specific quality of relationships, which is not comparable to any other reality²². Family ties transmit that which has been defined a “moral elementary experience”, in the fact that they express recognition of the other, generative force and a reciprocal gift. This is the added value which allows one to recognize a family and appreciate its contribution to the good of the society: a climate of trust, cooperation and reciprocity, the necessary condition for the development of personal and social virtues.

The home is the place where the quality of these relations is reflected: a center of affections, but also of commitment; a place for hospitality, but also for giving; a place of intimacy, as well as availability. A physical place and a symbolic place: “the sense of home, feeling at home – P. Ariès observes – is the other face of family sentiment”²³. It’s not a spatial-experience, but something that includes cognitive and emotional elements, inseparable from family values. As Agnes Heller says:

“The sense that we are at home is not simply a feeling but an emotional disposition, a framework-emotion that accounts for the presence of many particular kinds of emotions like joy, sorrow, nostalgia, intimacy, consolation, pride, and absence of others. This emotional disposition, as all emotional dispositions, includes many cognitive elements, that is, evaluations. For example, whether one, or an other, among the feelings or emotional happenings triggered by the emotional disposition (such as the sense of being at home) is intensive, strong, or subdued also depends on the character of the cognitive/evaluative elements that inhere to the emotional disposition”²⁴.

“Domesticity” indicates therefore, first of all, a relational dimension, which is expressed in a way of living together and is materialized in a sum of habits and practices which are, at the same time, its reflection and condition. In other words, a family’s life can only be built through the definition and the sedimentation of actions and attitudes, which express everyone’s ability to give themselves without keeping an account, and which regulate the small events of everyday life²⁵. Material order, the cleanliness and up keeping of the domestic environment, are not born simply out of the need to satisfy certain needs – according to the traditional Marxist approach –, but are requisites of “familiarity”, because they strengthen ties, showing attention to the other and to reciprocal acceptance. The domestic environment is the place where each person cares for the other, because motivated from the climate of gratuitousness that is created. The difference between cleaning an office and one’s own home, between cooking for a staff restaurant and cooking for one’s own children, is not found in greater or smaller competence nor in a retribution, rather in the intentionality of the act and in the orientation – recognition – of the other’s

²² P. Donati (edited by), *Ri-conoscere la famiglia. Quale valore aggiunto per la persona e la società?*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2007, pp. 18-25.

²³ P. Ariès – G. Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée, 5: de la première guerre mondiale*, Paris, Seuil 1987.

²⁴ A. Heller, *Where are we at home?* cit., p. 5. It should be noted, however, that Heller concludes his discussion with some ambiguous statements.

²⁵ “The economy of the marital exchanges is primarily founded on the gift of oneself”: J. C. Kaufman, *La trame conjugale. Analyse du couple par son linge*, Nathan, Paris 1992 p. 165.

total being. Both activities are necessary and qualified, but only the second is an expression of gratuitousness and sympathetic love and is finalized to the global good of the other.

Nowadays domesticity seems to be going through a time of crisis. It is profitable to examine its causes. We are witnessing a transformation that concerns the family and consequently the domestic environment. Family ties are more fragile and the existences are more atomized. For this reason, the domestic atmosphere and the way of living in the home suffer from certain individualism. Self-sufficiency and self-management seem to be the two most widespread aspirations. One must add to this the lack of spaces and the acceleration of time, necessary conditions not only for taking care of things, but also for the attention to people.

In addition to these transformations we must also consider the evolution of the role and of the tasks traditionally assigned to women. After the rebellion of a certain feminism to maternity as “destiny”, considered as a condition for the access of women into the professional life, today we are registering a progressive “return to maternity” which one could even define as a “right to maternity”. Today women view freedom mainly as the possibility to look at opportunities, overcoming the dilemma of a choice between work and children and looking for a way to realize themselves without renouncing to anything important in their life. This attitude, which is defined “double yes” – yes to work and yes to the family – presents, however, new challenges and introduces a new complexity. In order to reconcile work and family as well as an optimal distribution of time, it becomes necessary to turn to the services that are offered on the market both for the care of the home and that of the children. The current consumer mentality creates the risk of turning domestic work into a factory of desires, where any service has to be paid for and the gratuitousness seems to have disappeared.

In his famous essay, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Witold Rybczynski describes the comfort in the home, declaring that this experience is both objective and subjective, including the important features: privacy, intimacy, privacy, efficiency, leisure and ease²⁶. Is known his *Onion Theory of Comfort*: as the onion is composed of many delicate and transparent layers, so the comfort. It is simple to know what is comfortable, but it is hard to explain all the possible reasons why something is comfortable. But “domesticity” is something more than simple comfort: is not only the experience of wellness, the possibility of a feeling good, but the condition of the good life, that of a virtuous life.

We can signal some of the most evident consequences of this consumerist mentality: the phenomenon that has been defined as *erosion of the intimate life*, that is to say, the loss of the depth of the family relationships²⁷; the transformation of caring into a service, with the disappearance of the principle of gratuitousness in favor of the principle of autonomy²⁸; the

²⁶ Cfr. W. Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Viking, New York 1986.

²⁷ Cfr. A. Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 2003.

²⁸ Cfr. J. Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism. Where all of Life is a Paid-For Experience*, J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York 2000.

emergence of a domestic environment more oriented to comfort and well-being rather than to a good life.

The solution is not in freeing oneself from the market: this would be impossible and utopian. Even the idea of setting up the family to exist in a cold and self-sufficient atmosphere appears to be inhuman and not very attractive²⁹. The proposal of an *ecology of care*³⁰ is more realistic, a culture of care which needs to be promoted in several areas: the political one, in order to recognize the social value of the work of caring performed in the family, for example as E. Kittay hopes³¹; the professional one, for a revision of the timing and rhythms of work; the cultural one, to free femininity and family from negative stereotypes; the moral one, to regain the authentic sense of the gift and of the gratuitousness, where the family relationship is the irreplaceable paradigm.

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²⁹ Cfr. E. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies. The making of emotional capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007.

³⁰ Cfr. A. Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, cit.

³¹ Cfr. E. Kittay, *The Global Heart Transplant and Caring across National Boundaries*, “The Southern Journal of Philosophy” (2008) Vol. XLVI, pp. 138-165. Kittay stresses the need for “a public ethic care” not to replace, but enhance family ties: “I have argued for the importance of “a public ethic of care,” one in which the obligation to care for dependents and to properly support those women who engage in the work of care is recognized as a shared social responsibility. A public ethic of care is an ethic of care as it extends beyond the boundaries of intimate connections. A public ethic of care recognizes and values the importance of the relationships we form through our own dependencies and through the work of caring for dependents” (p. 139).

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