

# Home and Market, Love and Work, Nature and Profession: Controversies regarding the commodification of care work\*

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## **Abstract**

Care work can be performed under different conditions: at home or outside domestic spaces; as a professional or a compulsory social relation; in paid or unpaid forms. In this article I depart from these multiple realities in order to develop two main points. First, I argue that care work is a rich domain that can be used to review recent debates regarding the process of commodification of goods and services. Second, I seek to illustrate how the controversies surrounding the moral dimension of care work can be of relevance to scholars studying other markets.

**Key-Words:** Care, Care Work, Commodification, Moral Contestation.

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## **Introduction**

In this article, I use care work as an empirical territory from which I will try to illustrate two arguments. First, I will claim that care work is a challenging domain from which to reflect upon controversies relating to the commodification process more generally. Moreover, since care work can be performed under different social relations (in the home or outside of it, under a compulsory or professional regime, as a paid or unpaid labor relation), the more we pay attention to that plurality of situations, the richer becomes the analysis. Second, I illustrate how the moral controversies surrounding care work may be relevant to scholars of other markets and to economic sociology in general.

In order to better construct these two arguments, the article is divided into two sections and an introduction. The first section is more factual in nature. Here, I seek to rediscover ways in which we can better perceive the chronology of the commodification of care work in Brazil. I accompany the development in the public consciousness of two key terms that have only recently been incorporated into our daily lexicon: “cuidador” (caregiver [masculine]) and “cuidadora” (caregiver [feminine]). I follow the development of these terms in the press, paying attention both to their frequency of use and the ways in which they are employed. This exercise is then taken as the empirical base for the reflections which will emerge in the article’s second section regarding the commodification of care work. In this section, I seek to explore some possible dialogues between two theoretical domains: the literature produced by the sociology of the economy (particularly the sociology of markets) on the one hand, and studies of care, on the other.

### **1. The scene: A long-standing activity begins to create new terms through which to understand it**

Words appear and become consecrated through their daily social use. They can also redefine the very content they allude to,

in ways that leave for us, their interpreters, precious “footprints”, marking out on-going social transformations. New words mean new ways of organizing life, new roles, new forms of division of labor, new actors and new representations. Therefore, by studying the ways of naming given phenomena, we can better follow the constitution of social processes.

Thus thinking, I investigated the trajectories of two words that have recently become consecrated (intuitively, natively) in Brazilian Portuguese through our quotidian use: “cuidador” (caregiver [masculine]) and “cuidadora” (caregiver [feminine]). My main resource in this endeavor was the past issues of one of the oldest newspapers currently in circulation in Brazil, *O Estado de São Paulo*. Using this source, I could investigate a period of nearly 150 years, from the late nineteenth century (1875) to beginnings of the twenty-first century (2014), looking at the route these two words and their common variants (“cuidadores” and “cuidador[a]”) have travelled in their journey through public space.<sup>1</sup> And, indeed, the recent character of these word’s consecration through use is evident in the exponential curve shown in Figure 1. Of the 1080 records from the years between 1875 and 2014, almost all instances of these words (92%) occurred during the last two decades. Furthermore, no less than two thirds of the occurrences were from the 2010-2014 period.

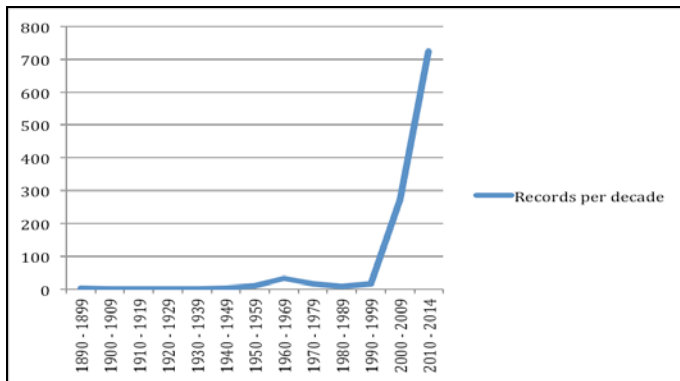
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<sup>1</sup> Archives of *O Estado de São Paulo* available at <http://acervo.estadao.com.br/>. These contain digitalized versions of all the newspaper’s daily editions since January 4th, 1875. Specific stories can be accessed via key words and the total number of the occurrences of these words is calculated on an annual basis, specified as to their distribution in the paper’s various sections. Each occurrence of the words can also be located in the specific stories in which they appear. The data presented here is from the last consultation I conducted, on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

**Figure 1**

New words, new phenomena?

Frequency of the use of “cuidador,” “cuidadora,” “cuidadores” and “cuidador(a)” (1890 to 2014)



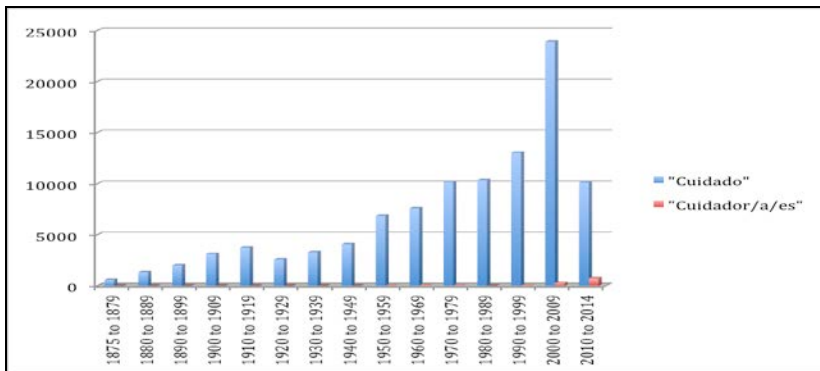
Source: *O Estado de São Paulo*. In: <http://acervo.estadao.com.br/> Data current to 2/19/2015

In other words, these terms only really began to spread into public use in the 2000s as a new type of specialized work began to appear in public space, bringing with it the need for a word to apply to those who engaged in this sort of labor.

Curiously, however, we can describe another trend when we follow how the care activity that these individuals engage in is named. In fact, the term “care” – different from the various formulations of “caregiver” – is almost as old as the *Estado de São Paulo* itself. This can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the distribution in time of no less than 102,876 occurrences of this word. This large number of occurrences, in fact, almost makes the frequency of records of “caregiver” appear to be derisive.

**Figure 2**

“Care”: long term presence of the word



Source: *O Estado de São Paulo*. In: <http://acervo.estadao.com.br/> Data current to 2/9/2015.

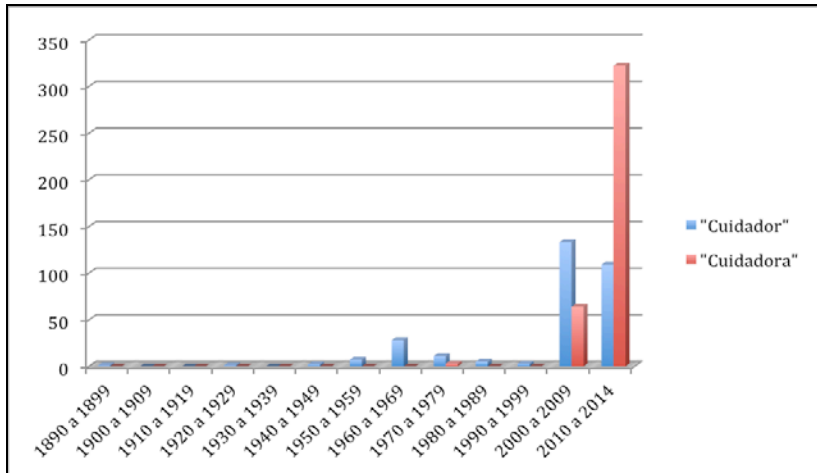
As for the frequency of “care”, we see that since the middle of the last century it has had a strongly recurring presence in the pages of the newspaper, suggesting that care, as an activity, was legitimized in the print media by the 1950s, at least. In other words, the term was something that could be comfortably used in a public forum, as it spoke to the interests and concerns of many newspaper readers.

This difference in the trajectories of the naming and use of “care” (an activity that was recognized quite early on) and “caregivers” (a term only recently coined) illustrates the recent emergence of a new kind of activity, that was once relegated to domestic spaces, into the public sphere.

Upon emerging, however, this activity would carry into public spaces characteristics (in terms of the ways in which it was exercised) that had earlier been consecrated in the domestic sphere. The most important of these, of course, was the presumed gender of the people engaged in this activity: female, as Figure 3 shows.

**Figure 3**

A word that increasingly becomes associated with the feminine



Source: *O Estado de São Paulo*. In: <http://acervo.estadao.com.br/> Data current to 2/9/2015.

Although their numbers were not very significant, male caregivers were already visibly present in the profession since the 1950s and were to remain so until the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> But the care they provided was generally concerning the welfare of animals, especially horses in horse racing stables or similar establishments. This was the meaning of all valid uses of the term “caregiver” found between the years 1950 and 1980.<sup>3</sup>

In this same period, I found only three uses for the feminine version of the term. Two of these were in regards to taking on the administration of a public external debt and one, only, had to do

<sup>2</sup> There are 4 occurrences before this period which are located between the late 19th and late 20th century: one in 1927, 2 in 1941 and one in 1982. All of these are in fact errors in terms of classification given that they use the word “cuidador” for the word “cuidado”.

<sup>3</sup> I found only 5 errors of classification in 51 records during these four decades.

with taking care of horses.<sup>4</sup> The newspaper doesn't record anything with regard to the presence of women in the professional activity of caregiving up until the beginning of the 1990s.

Judging by the frequency in the use of the words, it is only in the 1990s that the commodification of care for human beings appears as a phenomenon of social life in Brazil. Certainly, the records for the terms "caregiver" and "caring" as public activities are either non-existent before this date (in the case of female conjugations of the term) or do not refer to care for humans (in the case of male conjugations). But in the 1990s, when for the first time records appear regarding taking care of humans as a professional practice, new characters are entering the personal service scene. Interestingly, and contrary to what will occur in the following decades, are all occurrences of the term in its first decade of use refer to the work of caregivers, and not to employment listings. Job listings will become widespread at the turn of the century, giving us another clue to best date the moment the commodification of care service becomes consecrated as a social practice.

Also of interest is something that can be seen in Figure 3. At first, male caregivers are prominent in the newspaper records: 133 references are for "cuidadores" in the period stretching between 2000 and 2009, as opposed to only 64 for "cuidadoras". This situation will be inverted in the first four years of the 2010s, where we see 109 occurrences of "cuidador" vs. 322 for "cuidadora".

In the wake of the recent commodification of care, which took place in Brazil beginning in the 1990s, the work of both men and women is reconfigured. Men as caregivers for animals disappear almost entirely from the newspaper's records, even though this was the original meaning of the term. Simultaneously,

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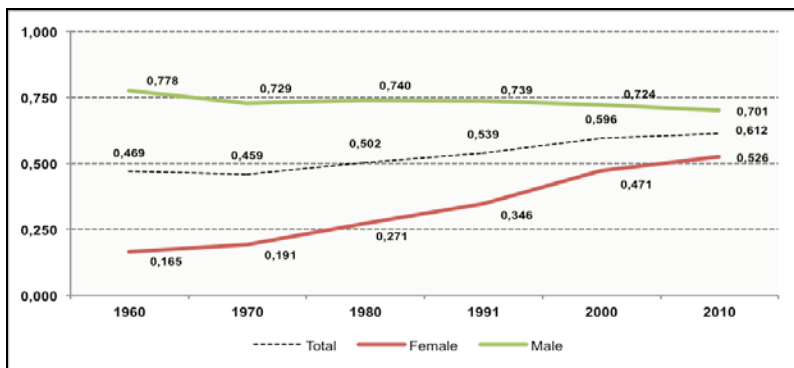
<sup>4</sup> This is the case of "Brita, the blonde champion" (according to the title of the story published on 02.03.1975), a young, Swedish, female jockey and horsewoman who became international news when she won a prize in Stockholm.

men appear in the classified ads, en masse, as “care-givers for the elderly”.

Similarly, the care work undertaken by women becomes diversified. The professional, paid and public caregiver work appears in the records, alongside the previous form of women’s caregiving labor. This earlier type is still conducted in private, domestic spaces, with women described as being responsible for the welfare of dependent people, especially children, the elderly and the disabled.

This movement should be understood as taking place in the midst of another, which I have described in greater detail elsewhere as the consolidation of labor commodification in Brazil (Guimarães, Brito and Barone, 2014; Guimarães, Barone and Brito, 2015). This has been a recent movement, which has also, significantly, been represented, in feminine terms, as shown in Figure 4. In effect, looking at Figures 3 and 4, one can clearly see that there is a significant synchronicity which manifests between the growth of references for the word “caregiver” (female) as connoting professional public work carried and the remarkable advance by women into the Brazilian labor market.

**Figure 4**  
Commodification in the feminine: Brazil 1960-2010  
Activity rates for males and females



Source: IBGE. Population Census: 1960, 1970, 1980, 1991, 2000, 2010. *Apud* Guimarães, Barone and Brito (2015).

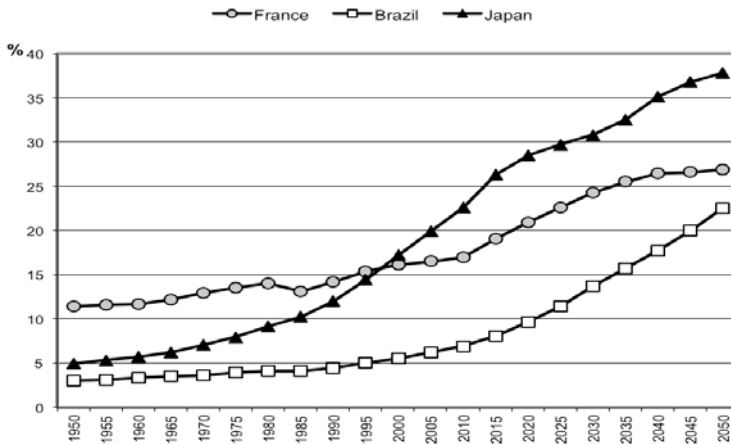


Indeed, Figure 4 shows that in Brazil, until the late 1960s, most working-age population survived *without* resorting to the labor market. Fifty years later, this situation has been reversed: in 2010, 6 out of 10 Brazilians had to engage in economic activities for a living. It was not until 1980 that more than half of those Brazilians of working age began to engage with the labor market.

However, labor commodification in Brazil has been a process that conjugates in the feminine. In light of the census data presented in Figure 4, we can see that at the beginning of the period (i.e. in the 1960s), the labor market was the domain of men. By the turn of the century, however, this had ceased to be the case. In these 50 years, women's incorporation into the job market nearly quadrupled, getting in line with the male tendency towards high commodification. This shift occurred much more rapidly in Brazil than in either highly developed capitalist countries (such as France or Germany) or in developing countries (such as Argentina or Mexico). Finally, this shift would be incomprehensible if we don't also remember that it has occurred *pari passu* with notable declines in fertility and significant educational gains among Brazilian women (Guimarães, Brito and Barone, 2014).

Three other facts complete the empirical scenario that precedes our theoretical reflections. First, the significant and rapid aging of the Brazilian population, as documented in Figure 5, which has gone hand-in-hand with the decline in fertility we mentioned above.

**Figure 5**  
Aging: the demand for care grows



Source: ILO apud Guimarães, Hirata and Sugita (2011).

More women are flowing into the job market, in a shift that has been made possible by the fact that women are having fewer children. There are, however, more elderly to be taken care of and this is yet another element that composes our empirical scenario. The growth of Brazil's elderly population, in fact, has been so large and fast that, in only a few more decades, we will be able to say that Brazil, like France, will be an "aged society" (to use a common bit of jargon). This situation, however, is not being prepared for, either in terms of measures for the protection of the elderly or in terms of policies and vacancies for long-term care, as care for the elderly shifts from the home to the market and the movement for institutionalization of dependents advances.

This female entry into the market has a dual aspect in Brazil, which is marked by class (Sorj and Fontes, 2013). The movement is nourished both by the influx of educated women (mostly white) competing for higher-paying employment with some degree of job security, and by relatively poorly educated women (mostly black) who form the country's huge contingent of more than 7 million

domestic workers. This later cohort contains close to 20% of the female workforce that is presently active in Brazil. This is yet another important contextual element that makes up our empirical scenario.

Under these conditions, at the same time that women's work is becoming heavily commoditized, the home is becoming a care service producing. This service is no longer based upon the unpaid compulsory labor of a stay-at-home mom (who, nevertheless, remains a key figure in the harmonization of this new division of labor). Instead, it is a service in which diverse characters converge, the main ones of which are the “maid” and the “caregiver”.

But if the ways of naming these laborers demarcate status and recognition of social differences which clearly favor the “caregivers”, paradoxically, the struggle for access to rights seems to be favoring those who are socially less recognized: the “maids”. Domestic workers have recently seen their job regulated and their labor rights expanded, in frank contrast to “caregivers” who continue to be very vulnerable in terms of job security and who compete with more prestigious care professions (nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists) for their place in the sun in terms of formal labor rights.

It is thus not surprising that in a recent study to look at how care workers see and represent themselves, I found that “home care” workers tend to describe their activities as domestic service, that is, as working as a “maid” (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

Fluid border in representing work: how caregivers describe their activities.  
São Paulo Metropolitan Region, 2009

<b>How caregivers describe the job performed</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Caregiver	732	<b>23.5</b>
Caregiver and maid	97	3.1
Maid	<b>2286</b>	<b>73.4</b>
<b>Total</b>	3115	100,0

Source: SEADE Foundation. PED – Pesquisa de Emprego e Desemprego (Research on Employment and Unemployment), São Paulo Metropolitan Region, 2009.

How can we understand this result? Why are “caregivers” renouncing this distinction if these women have in the name applied to their profession and in their recognition of themselves as caregivers a crucial (perhaps the only) element of distinction that shifts them away from maids in the new care-producing, salary-paying household? This brings up some intriguing theoretical questions, which we will develop in the following section.

## **2. Provocative intellectual dialogues**

So far, we have seen the activity of “care with / of the other” is a rich domain to reflect upon the controversies inherent in the process of commercialization of a particular good or service. However, following Igor Kopytoff’s seminal discussion (1986), commodification is a process of assigning cultural brands which are responsible for making individuals recognize a good or a service as a commodity, as well as (I would add) for making individuals recognize themselves as providing this commoditized good or service.

Employing this inspiration to think about the commoditization of labor in the case of caregivers, we must assume that this involves more than the mere growth of labor supply, which is now constrained to remain in the market either as employed or unemployed. This process is always open to

reversibility: it is always possible to change culturally produced signs that award a good or service recognition as merchandise.

And as we have seen in the case of Brazil, the dynamics of this recognition are complex and its reversibility is an ever-present risk. This risk is expressed both in the denial of one's condition as a caregiver, subsuming this under the label "maid", but also in the social contestations surrounding this work as a marketable service. Again, looking at the Brazilian case, we can see that the newspaper archives give us two precious excerpts in which the press itself takes a side in the struggle for professional regulation that has been initiated by caregivers. According to the *O Estado de São Paulo*:

There are currently 45 projects in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate which regulate professions... Among the "professions" [note the use of quote marks in the original] to be regulated, the most preposterous are "care giver for the elderly", "care giver for people", "mixed martial arts fighter", "traffic instructor", "Indian-catcher", "neighborhood watchman", "car washer"... [Our emphasis] (OESP, 04.10.2011, A3).

Note that "caregiver for the elderly" and "caregiver for people" head up the list of "preposterous" professions. And this was written in 2011 when, as we've seen above (and using the same newspaper as our source) an explosion of references to just this sort of work was occurring.

In 2010, *O Estado de São Paulo* made the following ironic comment in a section entitled "A kindness package":

Caregiver: a category whose name few people recognize was the focus of Congressman Otavio Leite's (PSDB-RJ) attention. This professional, who is responsible for caring for a sick or dependent person, cannot receive a salary of less than R\$765 a month.

In the case of care work, reversibility is thus closely connected to visibility and recognition. The chances that its status as a commoditized service will be reversed increase or decrease when the work is performed in private or public spaces; when it is unpaid or paid; when it is done according to professional rules and practices or when it is devoid of these.

In this sense, care work is a type of work that helps illustrate the sometimes fine line that separates that which has a market and that which doesn't. Not least because if we understand, along with Molinier (2012), that care can be thought of as a discreet way of knowledge, as an ethics of relationship with the other in the production of their well-being, when does care work then cross over to become converted into merchandise?

Or, similarly, if we accept with Zelizer (2012) that care involves all kinds of initiatives that produce and sustain the well-being of another, then the borders of what care can contain as merchandise will still have to stretch. This service will have to greatly transcend its more typical "personages" such as home caregivers or nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and caregivers working in long-term stay institutions. This transcendence has already produced heated debates and intellectual challenges in feminist media.

Thus, for example, the work of manicurists or beauty professionals (as has been studied by Arango [2014]) could easily be included in this definition of "care". And why not then understand as care work the services offered by Philipian companions in nightclubs in Japan, as Parreñas has argued (2012) in her carefully constructed ethnography? Contracted for entertainment executives, these women work in a job in which emotional stress is at the heart of their performance. Stress is at the heart of care work in general as Hochschild has superbly pointed out (2012), both in the case of flight attendants and "moms/wombs for rent". The only major difference is that Parreñas' informants cultivate flirting as part of their work, even as they try to avoid their harassment or prostitution, as this is forbidden in the establishments where they work.

Setting aside Parreñas' polemical tone (2012), all of the authors who look at the conditions involved in the commodification of care work encounter the theme of emotional investment. This marks the social relations of care work, woven through as this is with intimacy, as Zelizer (2005 and 2012), Hochschild (2003, 2012), Molinier (2012 and 2014) and Debert (2014) and Soares (2014) have illustrated in their research.

And what to say about "social care", a kind of care work which is undertaken at a community level and which is influenced and even instigated by public policy? What is commercial in the "fellowships" paid out to the "Women of Peace" in Rio de Janeiro's poor communities, a situation insightfully critiqued by Sorj (2014)? Or what to say about the social protection agents studied by Georges and Santos in the periphery of São Paulo (2014)?

This is the key point in which the controversy surrounding care work touches closely upon the debate regarding the so-called "contested markets." "Love," while an emotional investment, should not be associated with a "truly professional" job, say the caregivers' managers, disputing the caregivers' own discourses regarding their work. This tension was brilliantly caught by Pascale Molinier (2014), who studied a private long-term stay institution in France, and it can be seen in two different registries.

On the one hand, the dispute sets the actors involved in care services against each other. In the case of Molinier's study (2014), this means a conflict between management and the caregivers themselves. For the managers, care as a professional activity should be free of any emotional charge. The (mostly foreign) caregivers meanwhile see things in exactly the opposite fashion: they are the ones who can take good care of the elderly by giving them the love that French (both the elderly's family members and the managers) cannot due to their cultural conditioning. As caregivers told Molinier (2014): "fortunately for you French, you have to us to worry about your old people". "Among us, older people are respected".

At this point, the academic controversy over the emotional elements involved in care work advances to major disputes regarding the moral dimensions involved in this type of activity. Boris, analyzing home caregivers in the US, would react by pointing out the limits that money imposes upon a relationship predicated on exchange and emotional commitment.

In this sense, it's worth taking up Zelizer's reformulation (2005), constructed by analyzing a legal dispute in the US. According to Zelizer:

The Lopez case is only one version of a wider set of legal, moral, analytical and political questions that demand a quick response.

First: what are the different and competing definitions of the relationship between care providers and the families for whom they work?

Second: what mutual obligations are created by the definition adopted by each of the involved parties?

Third, which are the aspects of this relationship that are capable of setting off litigation and the kind of recurring misunderstandings that we have seen?

Fourth, up to what point and how does the introduction of monetary regulations in care relations affect the nature of these relations?

Fifth, how can we, as analysts, explain the conflict and misunderstandings that frequently emerge in the relations between care providers and the families for whom they work, especially when money is at issue?

In short, the process of commodification as a social construction is always open to challenge and dispute. And, again, the debate regarding care is especially rich in terms of providing elements for us to confront such a discussion.

So I would say, in conclusion, that the controversies surrounding care work, in terms of its moral challenges, are not only relevant for the care scholars themselves, or for feminists, but also for scholars of markets in general. After all, the service relationship, as expressed in professional care work, constitutes an



area where economic logic penetrates into the “sensitive” sphere, (to paraphrase Steiner and Trespeuch [2015]) of intimacy.

The reason for this is commonly sought in the fact that in becoming a profession care work, as it is exercised in the market (or as it should be exercised – and I stress judgment that underlies all of this) is unable to break free from its foundational roots in “mother love”.

“Break free”, because this latter form of work is associated with:

- 1) Naturalized care, understood as “feminine” and as an integral attribute of women;
- 2) Unpaid care work, conducted as a compulsory duty, in the “home”, a domain ruled by feelings in which there is no place for interests.

When exercised in this form, it is assumed that the emotional investments of care work are decoupled from economic behavior, just as it is assumed that emotions and money must be associated when care is commoditized.

This controversy is constitutive of the narratives and perceptions of care work – that is, of the nature of the employment relationship that sustains the care service relationship – making this a domain of remarkable relevance for reflecting upon the heuristic value of the analytical perspective of markets, attentive to disputes and challenges of the moral order underlying the commodification process.

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