Introduction

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This book proposes to study the home as a multidimensional and multidisciplinary concept. This approach is useful and sometimes necessary in order to understand situations that affect people living in a physical place (the house) forming a unit (the family) with common objectives and an internal function that is projected into the society in which they live. The usefulness of this particular approach may be shown with the help of three examples.

The first is taken from a situation that occurs frequently in developed societies, but increasingly, also, in emerging and developing economies: the question of work and family commitments. Literature on the relationship between work and family has multiplied in recent years, written from many different standpoints. It often presents this relationship as a conflict (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007) between, on the one hand, employers’ expectations and demands, which refer to economic, technological, organizational and managerial demands or preferences; and on the other hand, the preferences and restrictions of the workers, men and above all women, in a labor market whose rules are dictated mainly by competition, technology, culture, legislation and collective bargaining. Variants in this narrative include, for example, the recognition that working outside the home also enriches parents in their tasks in the family; and vice versa, that the capacities developed by parents in the family also improve their performance in their occupations as employees (Carlson et al., 2009). Further considerations concern the ‘ideal worker’, gender disparities, or the importance of work at home, among others (Klimczuk and Klimczuk-Kochańska, 2016).

This kind of approach, and other similar ones, offer interesting insights but their focus is partial, because they ignore other stakeholders (Heymann, 2006) such as the children. Consequences for children of parents’ prolonged absence from the home include poor parental involvement; excessive reliance on school and extracurricular activities, or on grandparents, who are often involved in caring for them; difficulties in communicating with their parents; psychological and health problems;
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and the lack of values and models for their development. The harm done may be shown in the short term in poor performance at school, and in the long term in impaired work skills, biases, and immaturity in their future homes (Long and Long, 1983).

If the home is taken as the unit of analysis, with its internal relationships, its physical spaces and its linkage with larger communities, the sphere of reference is broadened and enriched, enabling researchers and practitioners to see the detrimental side effects of well-intentioned but short-sighted policies.

The second example is also global in scope. The right to housing is widely reflected in human rights declarations and legislation in many countries (United Nations, n.d.). It goes beyond the right to four walls and a roof, to cover aspects such as security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructures; affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy (United Nations, n.d., p. 4), and includes specific requirements for groups such as women, children, slum dwellers and homeless, disabled, displaced, migrant, refugee and indigenous persons. It is a right that must be addressed by national and local governments, international organizations, social institutions, companies and society as a whole. Thus it lends itself to partial approaches, which may be effective, but which may omit relevant aspects such as the involvement of the beneficiaries and their responsibility for the achievement of adequate housing, beyond that provided by those authorities or institutions. Again, the household approach—taking the home as the unit of analysis—can serve as a guide to give consistency to the measures adopted and to provide a solid foundation to the range of rights that will end up by fulfilling the overall right to decent housing.

The third example focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on developing countries. In 2015, the World Bank calculated that 702 million people lived in conditions of extreme poverty, not only in developing economies but also in affluent societies (World Bank Group, 2016). Poverty is a good example of a multidimensional phenomenon: it is a lack of material resources such as food, clothing, housing, sanitation and clean water, but also lack of access to health and education services, to jobs where one can earn a living or a piece of land where the family can gain their means of subsistence, to credit and to the services of financial institutions and the information circuits. It is also the denial of access to opportunities that other more fortunate people have, causing exposure to severe situations of insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion, a high risk of physical and moral violence, and, to cap it all, the denial of the capacity to control personal and family life: in other words, the denial of the person’s capacities and autonomy (Nussbaum, 2000).
All this is well known and has been extensively documented. Thousands of studies have addressed poverty—applying economic, sociological, psychological, health sciences, political, geographical and ethical viewpoints, among others. Many of these studies focus on the people who suffer poverty or are at risk of becoming poor; others focus on the international institutions, governments or social entities that can provide solutions for the problem, or on society in general. Often, concrete solutions are proposed: provide employment or social housing; increase efforts to provide an income to people with no resources, or access to education or health services, pensions, legal protection or institutional transformation.

These studies undoubtedly contain many proposals that are very useful for eradicating poverty. The same can be said of many other problems that have a high human and social impact such as infant mortality, dysfunctional families, urban decay, the wage gap, family indebtedness, neglect of the elderly, corruption, migration or the ‘end of work’. But taking the home as the starting point for analysis means recognizing that the characters in these stories are real, flesh-and-blood people who find themselves in a particular environment, have a history and are conditioned by certain circumstances. They usually belong to a family that, in turn, is part of a larger unit as in the extended family, the tribe or the neighborhood, which ultimately exists within an even larger unit—the country; they live under the same roof, share goals that are for everyone’s benefit, and try to solve common problems through joint action, in which everyone contributes something and receives something, applying criteria that are not those of the market but of giving and sharing.

We call this unit of analysis the home, a term that encompasses both the people and the place, their joint action and their objectives, performing both an internal social function, often without being aware of it, and a function toward the rest of society; these functions seem like a given at each moment, but they change over time. Approaching problems from the viewpoint of the home is more than combining the viewpoints of the sociologist, the psychologist, the philosopher, the economist, the jurist and the communicator. The aim is to offer a multidisciplinary, multidimensional, integrated, open, action-oriented framework of analysis to address complex social problems that affect people as members of a home. The differential feature lies precisely in the existence of this community of people, with shared goals, an explicit or implicit function focused on the home’s members, and an important projection into the society they belong to.

This book is an initiative of the Home Renaissance Foundation and the Social Trends Institute. In it authors from very different backgrounds
and fields of interest—philosophy, sociology, economics, law, medicine, geography—discuss different issues that are all encompassed within that unit of analysis and understanding we call the home. In Chapter 1, Professor Antonio Argandoña provides an overview of the home, as a method for analyzing complex problems that affect people who live in a close-knit community, the family, and live together in a single place, the house or dwelling. The key to this analysis lies in the internal relations that are formed within these communities and, consequently, in the relations with the external environment. The chapter touches on the varied, complex role played by numerous variables, studied by different disciplines and that together shed light on the multidimensional, multidisciplinary, open, integrative, action-oriented nature of the field of analysis we have defined and that this book seeks to explore.

Obviously, the concept of home is not a recent creation. In Chapter 2, Professors Alfredo Marcos and Marta Bertolaso present a critical reflection of the concept of home based on the ideas of two philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Julián Marías, and a poet, Luis Rosales. The function of the home is conceived as that of a lighted house, ‘a space open for the quiet flourishing of human essence and personal identity’. Thus, the understanding of the home rests on the ontology of the person, who is presented simultaneously as vulnerable and dependent and also as independent, albeit an independence at the service of dependence, and the mediation between the two corresponds to the role of care.

In Chapter 3, Professor Maria do Céu Patrão Neves, taking Emmanuel Lévinas as her guide, reviews the development of a number of key ideas expounded by twentieth-century philosophers (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger, among others). The philosophical focus was placed traditionally on the ‘self’, that is, on the individual’s sovereignty. However, Lévinas says, this degenerated into authoritarianism and violence and, consequently, the point of reference now needs to become the ‘other’, which implies building one’s personal identity on relationship, and defining the human person as both vulnerable and dependent. The home is thus presented as the place in which the first and definitive encounter between the self and the other takes place: the individual’s identity is formed from the relation with the family in the home. Ultimately, there is no confrontation: the self is formed as a response to what the other is, that is, as responsibility, solidarity and generosity: ‘the home is the ethos of the relation self/other’.

Chapter 4 discusses an interesting contribution by medicine and health sciences to the understanding of the home’s function and importance. Professor Sir Harry Burns draws attention to the problems that are detected in children who live in deprived areas, showing the links
between the economic, social and moral poverty they experience in their homes and the negative directions their lives take. The study seeks to rise above the foreseeable problems (school dropout, unhealthy habits) to others that are subtler and more important (loss of control of one’s own life, of its meaning and purpose, and of the ability to overcome problems—and the prolongation of these situations in future unstable families), identifying their biological, economic and social causes. Professor Burns points out the importance of the first years of children’s lives and their home environment, and suggests actions that governments and society should undertake.

The home is a place for acquiring knowledge, abilities and values. In Chapter 5, Professor Mark Regnerus asks how learning about the family, marriage and the values of coexistence takes place in the home. This is an important question, as the consequences of negative learning can be very persistent. With more than 30 years of data from the US National Longitudinal Study of Youth, Professor Regnerus studies the consequences of the marriage culture as a ‘pure relationship’ and its transmission in successive cohorts of survey participants. The chapter contributes new ideas about the role of parental stability in the evolution not just of behaviors but also of ideas about marriage and the home.

Economics, a science of human action, is always built on an anthropology, often implicit and accepted more or less acritically, with the result that institutions, behaviors, incentives and results, and even the criteria used to assess those results, are guided by an underlying concept of the person. The ‘economic theory of the family’ is an example of that dependence. In Chapter 6, Professor Stefano Zamagni undertakes a critical review of this theory: if the home is built on individualist assumptions about the person, and a materialistic concept of his or her wellbeing, omitting moral learning and the acquisition of human capacities, the outcome is a reductionist theory that cannot provide a good guide for human action or for designing policies aimed at achieving excellence in the home. He proposes grounding the family on a richer anthropology that includes not only exchange, but also gift, reciprocity and generosity, and the family unit as the sphere for common actions, offering a vision of the home that can be very useful for understanding the limitations of some current models, and not just in the field of economics.

In Chapter 7, Professors E. Philip Davis and Rosa M. Lastra develop an apparently specific subject, but which has considerable implications for the life of the home: pensions for the elderly. At any given moment in time, several generations coexist within the home, each at a different stage in life, with different but complementary internal and external
functions. From a dynamic viewpoint, each person goes through these stages of life in homes that are responsible for shaping their personality. The pension covers a person’s financial needs during the closing stages of life, but it connects with previous stages (education, work, forming a family, saving and acquiring assets) and with other people (intergenerational transfers, inheritances). Pensions are often only seen from the viewpoint of the person who receives them or hopes to receive them but, obviously, they cannot be viewed separately from the function of the unit we call the home. Professors Davis and Lastra explore the economic, legal, social and human aspects of pensions, their functions and varieties, the difficulties in their sustainability and their regulation.

In Chapter 8, Professor Alban d’Entremont develops the geographical dimension of the home, situating it in its physical, political, economic, human, social and cultural context, identifying various dimensions of the home and their ideological connections. Because geography has been influenced by other social sciences and society’s lattice of ideas, beliefs and values, it views the home from different standpoints that reflect its multidisciplinarity. This enables homes to be studied as they are in the real world in which they exist. The key to this analysis, argues Professor d’Entremont, lies in the concept of the human person: the home is formed, first of all, by people; it is there to serve them and it is understood through them. Thus, personalizing geography is one way of understanding the home within its context.

NOTES

1. This may be a particular case of many other situations, such as the simultaneous caring of the elderly and children, in what has been called the ‘sandwich generation’ (Burke and Calvano, 2017).

2. The Chairman of the Home Renaissance Foundation, Bryan Sanderson, and its Director, Mercedes Jaureguibeitia, have always encouraged me in the task of editing this collective work. My thanks also to Helena Scott, for her help in the technical aspects of the edition. And to the Social Trends Institute, in the person of its President, Dr. Carlos Cavallé, for its generosity in supporting this initiative.

REFERENCES


