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After economics' "discovery" of *homo socialis*: Decolonial vigilance and interpretive collaboration

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Abstract

Current intellectual calls for more socially-minded governance often resort to the authority of the experimental and behavioral economists who have provided uncontroversial evidence for the generalized existence of a *homo socialis*. For a qualitative social researcher, the narrative of a "discovery" makes little sense. This article provides a more meaningful account of the experimental rationale of prosocial preferences research, interrogating, from a "decolonial" theoretical perspective, the epistemic and normative implications of a method that persuasively claims to have challenged the intellectual imperialism of *homo economicus*. Just as the colonial discourse that speaks of the "discovery" of America has shaped the global Eurocentric mentality that splits the world into hierarchical binaries, the academic discourse that speaks of the "discovery" of *homo socialis* could reinforce a behavioral range that reduces the interpretation of non-prosocial choices to a binary spectrum still metrologically organized around *homo economicus*. The danger is that Southern subjects do not always have the privilege of feeling prosocial and could be penalized for their disadvantage within a socially-minded mode of governance. To address this danger, the article argues, experimental social scientists need to become qualitatively attuned to the methodological question of "range validity" beyond the traditional one of "external validity."

KEYWORDS: Decolonization; range validity; non-prosocial choice; behavioral economics; interpretive social science.

Introduction

Decolonial theory was developed by Latin American theorists with an intentionally provincial outlook.[1] The critical project at stake was one of "de-linking," as Walter Mignolo (2007) put it. The challenge of decolonizing the sociology or economics curriculum in British universities, for example, may not ultimately depend on incorporating the lessons of what Aníbal Quijano (2000) theorized as "the coloniality of power" in Latin America. There is no reason to assume that Southern theorists know how to effectively decolonize knowledge practices (Moosavi 2020; Valluvan & Kapoor 2023). But there is at least one important lesson that can be directly drawn from the line of thinking that this sub-continental tradition of critical theory has been for many decades articulating.

The driving insight of decolonial theory is that the long dominant European narrative that the American continent was "discovered" — that it was land "up for grabs," without rightful owners due to their inferior humanity, a morality-free zone (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243-248) — still, after five centuries, continues to shape the mentality of Latin American citizens, including policy makers and social scientists. A Eurocentric myth of origin based on a discourse of "discovery" invites, to this day, historically decontextualized and spatially self-contained explanations for the chronic poverty, inequality and corruption that pervades this region of the world, from "[under]development" to "[bad] governance." The historical narrative that a culture perpetuates about itself can have long-lasting power effects in the formation of subjective experience, social relations and collective understanding. The same insight applies to academic communities. Just as decolonial theorists have encouraged Latin American readers of critical theory to adopt an attitude of vigilance towards Eurocentric epistemic injustice, in this article I seek to encourage socially-minded economists and economically-minded social researchers to be wary of the decolonial dangers that come with a scientific knowledge built upon the supposed "discovery" of pro-social human preferences.

There is a rapidly-emerging intellectual discourse mobilizing the premise that the construction of a "moral" political economy is now finally possible thanks to the recently conclusive evidence that behavioral economists have provided for the existence of "*homo socialis*" (Bowles 2016) or "behavior in the interest of others" (Levi & Ugolnik 2023). A whole issue of Daedalus, the official journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,

was recently dedicated to the interdisciplinary project of reimagining capitalist democracy through the newly thinkable possibility of "governance arrangements that facilitate, even generate, prosocial behavior" (Levi & Ulgonik 2023, 9). Two of the contributors to this issue were especially significant, Samuel Bowles and Wendy Carlin (2023). For a decade, they have been successfully pioneering a curriculum reform movement in economics around the world, based on the premise that the rational and selfish *homo economicus* found in market theories based on perfect competition is only a "special case," one among other types of economic agency and far from the most relevant one, considering the inequalities, externalities and care-based attitudes that characterize most economic contexts in a post-colonial globe (Bowles & Carlin 2020). From a decolonial angle, a renewed intellectual appreciation of the socially-minded individual is uplifting, but also disconcerting.

From the time of Adam Smith (2004, 11) and John Stuart Mill (1967, 325—327), many theorists of liberal political economy have explicitly declared that human beings are *not* just driven by self-interest. There have always been specialized critics as well as supporters of mainstream economic theory who have been fully cognizant of the fact that *homo economicus* historically emerged and continued to serve a purpose simply as a useful caricature of human behavior (see esp. Zafirovski 2014 and Bowles 2014 respectively). And yet, despite this widespread historical awareness, the contemporary economist cannot avoid reiterating a temporal narrative in which the recognition "that people have preferences and ethical commitments regarding others" constitutes a path-breaking "development" or even a "discovery" among the "recent advances in economics" (Bowles & Carlin 2023, 20-21; Fehr & Schmidt 2006, 617).

It is only in economics that the experimental demonstration of *homo socialis* can be deemed an epistemically revolutionary "discovery." In biology, for example, evolutionary theory has opened its range of interpretation to prosocial behaviors, among other reasons, because the collaborative rather than competitive phenomenon of "symbiosis" has been recognized as an alternative source of reproductive fitness in the process of natural selection (Meloni 2013). For a biologist, however, symbiosis is simply the eventually observable effect of a chance encounter between two species, one that happened to result in a stable pattern of co-enhancing cohabitation (Douglas 2010). Even if one day, for argument's sake, all symbionts

were somehow proven to be "mutualistic" on purpose, this finding would not necessarily alter nor fundamentally challenge their current interpretation. Similarly, in psychology, the recent finding of a number of child development studies that even one-year-olds are often willing to be altruistic and use their emerging strategic thinking to help with others' goals is far from unexpected (Warneken 2013). Such a finding simply contributes a new piece of evidence to ongoing discussions within the psychological sciences that are already habituated to advance the debate in terms of the binary pendulum nurture-vs-nature (see e.g. Michael 2022).

In economics, on the other hand, the experimental demonstration of generalized types of prosocial behavior constitutes an epistemic rupture from which there is no turning back. Over the centuries, economists have maintained a methodological allegiance to the modelling of *homo economicus* for one or another reason — mathematical formalization, heuristic simplification, behavioral government, self-regulating design, political realism, predictive power, unobtainable information, decisional consistency.[2] As a whole, it would be reductionist to assume that there is one grand epistemological reason at the root of the discipline. It makes more sense to understand modern economic thinking as a "field of problematization" in which it is simply acceptable to take *homo economicus* as the shared yet contested point of departure for the formulation of intellectual questions, valid solutions and even unorthodox approaches that seek alternatives to it.[3]

Nonetheless, the notion that, during the last four decades, behavioral economists and other experimental researchers have suddenly found proof of the existence of *homo socialis*, as though such a type of human being were a discovery, risks advancing an interpretive lens in the social sciences that approaches pro-social preferences as a residual event, that is, as a type of human agency that calls for explanation to the extent that it seems "anomalous" when compared to the normalized expectation of finding a *homo economicus* (see e.g. Frey & Jegen 2001, 590). This refractive economic lens has not only started to heavily inform global economic surveys (Falk et al. 2018) and international economics textbooks (CORE 2017, 2019), but also become a distinct methodological source of innovation and debate in the social sciences as a whole (see esp. Naar 2020).

The article is divided in five sections: first, it elaborates on the vantage point of a decolonial inquiry; second, it presents a thorough outline of the overall argument; third, it offers a revisionist account of the actual innovation that is behind the ostensible "discovery" of *homo socialis*; the fourth section then reflects on the epistemic premises and normative dangers that follow from this innovative methodology; and, finally, the last section elaborates with precision on the ways these premises and dangers in social preferences research call, in practical terms, for decolonial vigilance and interpretive collaboration.

The "decolonial" methodological insight

The concrete aim of this article is to offer a practical decolonizing contribution to the interdisciplinary area of social preferences research and, in doing so, hopefully shed some light, at the same time, on the current concern with the decolonization of all the human sciences, from sociology (Connell 2018) to political science (Ravecca 2019) to psychology (RDEC 2022). I agree with the Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective (2022) that, to operationalize decolonial theory for this mainstream purpose, Thomas Teo's (2010) specification of "epistemological violence" for the case of the empirical social sciences is readily available. Teo repurposes a widely-known impersonal concept of "structural violence," one that sociologists and anthropologists often use to denounce the complicity of entire states in the systematic production of arbitrary inequalities and the ensuing harm and uneven mortality rates. In the case of "epistemological violence," Teo qualifies, the risk of harming others may also be produced unintentionally, but the responsibility to avoid harmful consequences falls in the hands of the researcher. Without needing to reconstruct the long-standing "decolonial" conversation among Latin American or other theorists, this concept succinctly conveys that such violence occurs "when theoretical interpretations regarding empirical results implicitly or explicitly construct the Other as inferior or problematic," despite the data's "hermeneutic deficit (one interpretation among many possible)" (298, 301). As Teo stresses, "the concept of epistemological violence is descriptive... not about political correctness but about scientific correctness" (2010, 298). The results of empirical research, in short, can be epistemologically violent to the extent that all data requires a measure of interpretation, and Eurocentric or "Northern" interpretive standpoints can lead to form distorting concepts or recommend unethical policies.

In this article, the practical decolonizing message is that researchers of "*homo socialis*" should fully embrace an ethos of "interpretive collaboration." The type of collaborative engagement that is required, however, is not necessarily one between Northern and Southern researchers or even one between any researcher and Southern subjects. Helping scholars and citizens from the "South" to have a louder voice in academic debates is undoubtedly helpful, considering "the asymmetrical structure of the global economy of knowledge" (Connell 2018, 404). But the methodological challenge of developing mindfully-decolonial research cannot be ultimately addressed via "standpoint theory" – that is, by embracing the premise that "oppressed groups have privileged access to knowledge" (Pils & Schoenegger 2024, 172). Giving more weight to the experiences and ideas of Southern subjects in the production and interpretation of data cannot be assumed to lead, by itself, to decolonized knowledge, since the South must equally face the challenge of "intellectual decolonization" (Moosavi 2020; Valluvan & Kapoor 2023). As Latin American decolonial theorists have long pointed out, "the colonized do not have epistemic privileges" (Mignolo 2007, 459) and the aim cannot be to advance "an epistemic populism" (Grosfoguel 2007, 213).

For these theorists, the decolonial project calls for a kind of epistemic inclusion that is not just about refining knowledge, as though the colonial era had only produced a certain "bias" in samplings and empirical evidence in general. By contrast, for anthropologist Joseph Henrich, for instance, the critique that WEIRD populations (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) have been over-represented in the modern human sciences does not require an investigation into the horrors of colonialism (2021, 486). It is enough to demonstrate that these Northern populations are psychologically peculiar (e.g. because of the historical adoption of writing), and to call for an epistemological inclusion of "psychological variation" (2021, 488). For decolonial theorists, on the other hand, our global cultural history built upon "coloniality" is the fundamental problem (e.g. because techniques such as writing became powerful tools to normalize racist hierarchical perceptions within and outside the colonies), and an epistemically inclusive production of knowledge cannot be achieved by simply aspiring to "fill in the gaps." In the end, they are not hoping to refine a unified understanding of nature or reason (Escobar 2012, xxxiii), but precisely the opposite: a "pluriversal" world "in which many worlds will co-exist" (Mignolo 2007, 469).

Despite their general hostility towards the task of decolonizing mainstream knowledge practices and retaining "abstract universals" such as *homo economicus* (Mignolo 2007, 458), the crucial methodological insight that Latin American decolonial theorists have developed is that, more than a standpoint strategy, what is needed is a perspectival strategy. A mere rejection of abstract universals would be self-defeating for even the most "pluriversal" decolonial theorists, if one were to take this anti-universalism too literally (Domingues 2009). The underlying thrust of their critique is that epistemological violence can never be ruled out. And they do not reach this conclusion in a deductive way – by reasoning that psychological variation can always remain, exceeding our categories –but, rather, in an inductive way: the historical experience of Western modernity has perversely illustrated that adopting the perspective of a universal locus of enunciation or "a view from nowhere" can have extremely harmful consequences, reinforcing unavowed hierarchical contrasts between the epistemic location of those who are producing the knowledge and the subjects affected by this knowledge – from "modern citizen" vis-à-vis "uncivilized barbarian," to the WEIRDly self-contained and "color-blind" category that Henrich uses in his anthropological inquiry (Clancy & Davis 2019), which precisely assumes that the ostensible "development" of the North can be explained without panning out for long to maintain focus on the South (Henrich 2021, 486).

For cultural anthropologists, philosophers of epistemic injustice and other postcolonial scholars, "decolonizing" knowledge usually means rendering this knowledge fully contextual and politically-mediated (see e.g. Mitova 2023). In this article I entertain the option that it may be possible to decolonize the formal models of behavioral economists as much as "the informal models" (Gaus 2016, xvi) of other social preference researchers as long as their underlying abstractions of human agency are critically interrogated with a "Southern discomfort" (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea 2022). For this purpose, I specifically follow Ramón Grosfoguel's account of decolonial theory (2007). For he has managed to pinpoint how the larger implication of this theory is perspectival: pluriversal studies may be concerned with meaning-making "processes that can no longer be easily accommodated in the epistemic table of the modern social sciences" (Escobar 2012, xxxiii), but the general shift at stake is one of "epistemic location" rather than "social location." "The fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location" (Grosfoguel 2007, 213). The

point of a decolonial inquiry is, ultimately, about shifting the locus of enunciation, by approaching knowledge from the vulnerable position that a Southern subject can be *envisioned* occupying. As Teo (2010) would scientifically advise, empirical researchers need to engage in this kind of perspectival exercise every time they pose new hypotheses and draw general conclusions, in an effort to anticipate any epistemological violence contained in their conceptualizations and ensuing policy applications.

Outline of the argument

Since epistemological violence is bound to remain a danger in a world that still suffers from the power effects of modernity's co-constitutive "coloniality," researchers are in need of procedures that, instead of foreclosing critique and politically sanitizing an entire methodology, can encourage a reflexive ethos of "decolonial vigilance" within their hermeneutic process of empirical inference. I propose a procedure of "interpretive collaboration" between a *qualitative* and a *quantitative* way of understanding the behavioral range of human reasons for an action, or "preferences" (Elster 1983, 1-11).[4] The economists' excessive focus on *homo economicus* long overshadowed the "qualitative" or explicitly "interpretive" aspect of preferences research (see Bevir & Blakely 2018). The only behavioral range that orthodox economists seriously theorized was a quantitative one, ranging from more to less advantageous decisions. As S.M. Amadae reflects, orthodox economic theory does not just describe but, further, "invents a particular subjectivity, either as an ideal type or an experiential fact, insofar as individuals are taught to master and apply strategic rationality in various contexts of choice" (2016, xx). By investigating through mathematical abstractions states of equilibrium among possible choices and self-interested strategies, the economists who had not yet "discovered" *homo socialis* were ultimately working with a quantitative range in which decisions could be assigned an either higher or lower level of optimality regarding their maximization of utility or welfare.

When experimental economists were inspired by rational choice theory (RCT) to design laboratory tests in which actual humans could be given the opportunity to decide what to do in a strategic game-like scenario, they continued to work with a quantitative range. Yet they also came to realize that there were persistent "anomalies," not exactly because players were failing to optimize their strategic thinking – this was almost expected (otherwise, why are

economists needed?) – but, most importantly, because participants often did not even follow a "strategic" or self-interested mindset. Each experimental game was organized around a cost-benefit structure that, according to the rationality of game theorists, based on backwards induction, was presumed to lead, in a decontextualized laboratory setting, to a predictably selfish choice (Smith 2010). Yet, a substantial portion of observed behaviors consistently defied every game's expectations. "People transfer money in the Dictator Game, reject low offers in the Ultimatum Game, are trustworthy in the Trust Game, cooperate in the prisoner's dilemma, contribute to public good, and punish free riders" (Gächter 2013, 59-60). These "seemingly anomalous behaviors" (Cooper & Kagel 2016, 235) eventually turned into transculturally "consistent deviations" (Henrich et al. 2005, 795) and, by now, they are assumed to be scientifically proven "empirical regularities" (Capraro, Halpern & Perc 2024). In response to these laboratory findings, experimental and behavioral economists came to embrace the study of "social preferences," even before they could agree on how to define them.

Economists knew that, in ignoring "fixed preferences" and opening "Pandora's Box" (Fehr & Schmidt 2006, 618), they were inverting the direction of their explanatory logic and "making this an area of experimental research where theories flow directly from the experimental outcomes (as opposed to the more usual case of experiments designed to test extant theory)" (Cooper & Kagel 2016, 217). Such an epistemological shift was justified by the premise that experimental games could now offer a systematic method to study "the structure of people's social preferences" (Gächter 2013, 36). This premise has gradually opened their methodological thinking to interpretive collaboration with a qualitative range, allowing them to explore alternative economic models to the standard utility functions based on outcome-based preferences: from adaptive learning models to team-based, language-based and norm-based preferences, including models that account for both group- and individually-held norms (see esp. Anderies et al. 2011; Capraro, Halpern & Perc 2024). There seems to be an increasing qualitative awareness of how implausible an "all-encompassing model" is (Smith 2010, 13; Anderies et al. 2011, 1572; Cooper & Kagel 2016, 218).

Economists opened up this new field of inquiry with many theoretical preconceptions from RCT, yet whether these preconceptions apply is an open question (Smith 2010). Whether

participants' choice patterns respect the generalized axiom of revealed preference, or which prosocial preference is even really at stake in a given game have been important research questions, and only some specific economic studies manage to ascertain that RCT applies to the experimental data (Gächter 2013; Cooper & Kagel 2016, 235-236). The series of experimental games that economists developed ultimately amount to a "taxonomy to parse the social world" (Camerer and Fehr 2004, 57), and their common object of study, "social preferences," can be simply defined, as Bowles (2016) and his collaborators suggest (Bowles & Polanía-Reyes 2012; Bowles & Gintis 2013), through a residual logic: as anything that is not predicted by models of *homo economicus* – regardless, then, of whether there will be a formal (quantitative) or even informal (qualitative) model that will eventually account for every single "anomaly."[5]

As section five concludes, two deeply qualitative scenarios that have already been theorized in the substantial literature that is critical of RCT become particularly important, from a decolonial angle, in the interpretive context of prosocial measurements: the option of two or more value attitudes converging in the same preference – for, as Elizabeth Anderson has stressed, "there is not just one way to … have a pro-attitude toward things" (1993, 5) – and the option of people's preferences being "adaptive" in ways that are unconsciously responsive to the scope of possibilities provided by their environment (Elster 1983, 25). But the deeper issue that a decolonial inquiry identifies beneath these two eventualities is this: the experimental game, as a methodological design that is open to multiple purposes and disciplinary tweaks but inspired by RCT, has a basic structure that, regardless of protocol and lab-like or field-like conditions, imposes a restriction upon researchers. Unavoidably, it experimentally works by producing quantitative outputs that fit within a binary range, with *homo economicus* as the set baseline and *homo socialis* as the top limit. Choices will usually fall somewhere in between, and one can attribute to each experimental measure a greater or lesser magnitude of prosociality. Explaining why any such choice makes sense is the interpretive challenge of any researcher of social preferences, regardless of discipline.[6] But it is easy to fall into the quantitative logic inscribed within the design of these measurements, and encapsulated in the narrative that prosocial preferences were recently "uncovered" (Kimbrough & Vostroknutov 2016, 609), and simply operate with the presumption that, in practice, human preferences (or reasons for action) actually fall into this strictly binary and self-contained range.

In accepting that *homo socialis* was a "discovery" researchers can come to assume that *homo economicus* is the remainder, the familiar behavior that we already knew and that now we less often encounter. When *homo socialis* is simply *introduced*, as a kind of foreign element that we now need to add to our existing conception of behavioral options, the unreflective reaction for researchers can be to take for granted that when *non-prosocial* choices are experimentally recorded, it means that the individuals or groups involved lack prosociality. In accepting this quantitative bite of binary logic, the meaning behind the claim, very often made by economists, that a significant number of individuals in society have a "prosocial preference" is that: *they are not like a* homo economicus – as though the individuals who do resemble a *homo economicus* when faced with equivalent choices definitely lacked a moral rationale to back that choice or, worse, were actively choosing a selfish way of being over a prosocial one for lacking interest at all in questions of collective concern.

Even the worst version of the imaginary Hobbesian skeptics that inspired Enlightenment thinkers to find collective solutions that could work "even for a race of devils" (Kant 1917, 153-154) was never this proudly cynical. The leading pioneer behind the *Encyclopédie*, Dennis Diderot (1992), feared in 1749 (two years before the first volume) that most people would prefer killing someone far away rather than "butchering a steer with their own hands" (quoted by Ginzburg 1994, 51), similarly to how Adam Smith was bewildered by the idea that a remote earthquake could seem less terrible than losing one's "little finger" (2004, 178). Yet Diderot, Smith and Kant all tried to devise collective solutions that could accept this humanitarian indifference – not because they imagined human beings as cynical and amoral "free riders," as neoliberal theory portrays them (Amadae 2016), but, rather, because they could acknowledge that even those who care about the ethical question of how their actions impact others may lack a satisfactory answer for the practical issue of how to be mindful of humanity as a whole (Author 2019).

The problem of a narrative of "discovery," in short, is that it can foreclose the kind of interpretive collaboration that I advocate here between the strictly quantitative range of metrological analyses and the qualitative range of explanatory rationales. By taking the numerical indications of apparently economic preferences at face value, researchers can end up inadvertently judging ex colonized populations or subaltern segments within nations as

"prosocially deficient" or "characteristically selfish." In accepting these statements as possible scientific results, the violent and unjust history of coloniality that underpins the trajectory of these populations is lost, placed out of sight. This blindness to the modern inheritance of "coloniality" has important epistemological and ethical implications.

Overall, this decolonial inquiry leads to crystallize a methodological issue of "range validity:" even *homo economicus*, the supposedly fixed parameter and readily understood posture within the quantitative range, must be approached as an interpretively-open qualitative phenomenon. Anthropologists such as Drew Gerkey (2013) and Lee Cronk (2007) have found evidence that suggests, for example, that in certain cultures low contributions or "*homo economicus*-like" choices during public good games or trust games should be interpreted as expressions of need rather than selfishness. In a similar vein, the classic pioneer of experimental economics Vernon Smith (2010) warns that even when economists' theories match the data, their interpretations may still remain foreign, phenomenologically disconnected, to the participants' own way of thinking. Through a decolonial inquiry, I argue, it becomes possible to embrace the far-reaching methodological implications of this incipient line of questioning: among other counter-premises (see Figure 1S), that *homo economicus* should not ultimately be part of the resulting interpretations.

What economists have not fully brought into view in this area of research is that, just as the informal narrative models of other social scientists, their probabilistic modelling efforts are now meant to populate a qualitative range. The latter has become the problem-space of their calculus-mediated debate. For every utility function for a social preference is, before anything else, a qualitative rationale, one that, once hypothesized, is then formalized into a mathematical expression and tested against numerical evidence. *Homo socialis* has opened up a constitutively "qualitative" range that – instead of being oriented, as the quantitative range was, towards numerical benchmarks that approximate what is "rational" based on optimal or "good enough" reasons (Elster 1983, 14) – calls for explanatory rationales of behavioral evidence that is already experientially meaningful or minimally "rational" in itself, for it is empirically given (see Smith 2010, 6). Once an abstract *homo economicus* is superseded by a *homo socialis* of flesh and bone, the range of sensible interpretations must be scrutinized from a situated perspective.

The "discovery" of *homo socialis*

By 1995, a measurable *homo socialis* with such attributes as altruism, reciprocity, trust or egalitarianism had already become a well-established phenomenon in experimental economics (Cooper & Kagel 2016). Eventually, social preference researchers would theorize with the help of evolutionary psychology (e.g. Henrich et al. 2005), but their experimental methodology, the one that allows them to claim a revolutionary "discovery," is in principle an empirical application of classical game theory to real interactions. Their studies broadly follow the methodology of laboratory experiments. Yet, first, it would hardly be clarifying to explain that a sub-group of social scientists is defined by their interest in careful observational control for the sake of rigorous causal analysis; and, second, the comparative logic at stake in their case does not actually represent the conventional laboratory method of comparing a pristine scenario or "control treatment" with "positive treatments" that introduce changes that can be traced unambiguously back to predefined factors, such as demographic variables (Jackson & Cox 2013, 37).

The initial rationalization for social preferences research was, as two pioneering anthropologists put it, that by removing the incentives that individuals have in their everyday life to act prosocially, one could measure the "residual altruistic giving" (Gurven and Winking 2008, 180). But, over time, even economists became increasingly aware that producing absolutely context-free settings is neither possible nor an end in itself, and that the validity of any generalization of social preferences is ultimately dependent on "theory" as well "qualitative insights" about how the "data-generating process" and the real world are related to each other (Levitt & List 2007, 171). Many social preference researchers have been altering the conditions of the games through experimental protocols that add contextual cues and other "micro-situational variables" (Anderies et al. 2011). Anthropologist Nicole Naar has even provided a compelling argument for giving priority to the use of protocols that seek "to mimic real-world constraints" (2020, 793).

The distinguishing method of social preferences research is more precisely based on the logic of securing, either mathematically or procedurally, a "benchmark." Beyond the conventional laboratory method of using demographic features as a baseline, this type of applied game theory uses an extreme behavioral marker as the benchmark that allows researchers to

measure variations, compare results, draw hypotheses and test their validity. As Colin Camerer and Ernst Fehr (2004, 58) articulate in their pioneering interdisciplinary "Guide for Social Scientists:"

> Experimental economists are usually interested initially in interactions among anonymous agents who play once, for real money, without communicating. This stark situation is not used because it is lifelike (it's not). It is used as a benchmark from which the effects of playing repeatedly, communicating, knowing who the other player is, and so forth, can be measured by comparison.

While other experimental economists have been exclusively interested in the behavioral deviations from *homo economicus*, social preference scholars have found the variations from *homo socialis* to be particularly fruitful. The most "context-free" scenario has proven to be the most valuable for this type of research, but not because "preferences" are thought to be culturally-independent components of the autonomous essence of an individual. The cultural formation and variation of preferences over time or even within immediate institutional or situational contexts has become an object of increased concern within this "psychologized" tradition of economics (Bowles 1998, 2016; Henrich et al. 2005; Frey 2006; Falk et al. 2018). The real reason the least socially influenced scenario has become so valuable is that, experimentally, it has consistently revealed a significant level of prosocial decision-making *when compared* to the rest of the scenarios.

The Dictator Game, in which one individual can choose to give a portion of a given sum of money to another one and keep the rest, is the experiment that has the least amount of "context" or variables in social preferences research. By itself, however, it is not very revealing and not even, strictly speaking, a "game" (Bowles 2016, 43). We all have probably witnessed or experienced a moment of selfless giving in our lives, and yet, such experiences do not constitute definite proof on their own of unconditional altruism. The experiment becomes interesting for an economist the moment it is compared with the results of another strategic scenario, such as the Ultimatum Game, in which the receiver now has a choice to either accept the proposed amount of money or deny the payment for the both of them. As

Fehr and Klaus Schmidt stress in the *Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism and Reciprocity* (2006, 622), this comparison is significant to the extent that in the simpler experiment the proposers tend to offer, in fact, much less money than in the case that the responder has a chance to leave both parties without money. In a way, the Dictator Game elucidates the opposite of *homo socialis* – that people may seem generous at times, yet they are giving for the wrong reasons. Ultimately, however, the overall comparison demonstrates, precisely, in a way that experimentation with either game, by itself, would be unable to do so, that many individuals still offer something and, thus, can be generous even in the absence of a social repercussion or financial gain. It is the fact that one can interpret one experiment as a less complicated version of another one, as a baseline striped of the other available variables, what turns the results of the Dictator Game into a piece of evidence for the generalized existence of unconditional altruism.

The comparisons and variations among social preference games can quickly become extremely complex and almost unintelligible to a non-specialist. But a telling cue that permits anyone to grasp the methodological reasoning of social preference scholars is that when they have sought to convince others of their "discovery," their justification often relies on the "one-shot" game striped of extra variables. When trying to persuade sociologists of their solid finding of "strong reciprocators" that "must have internalized cooperative social values," Fehr and Herbert Gintis (2007, 49) resorted to the one-shot version of the Public Goods game without punishment as compared to the one with punishment. Likewise, when trying to persuade mainstream economists of the relevance of social preferences for the study of cooperation in competitive markets, Fehr and Urs Fischbacher (2002, 5-8) referred their colleagues to one-shot versions of two different games on reciprocal fairness, adding, also, specific evidence to demonstrate that in one-shot game scenarios people are not just being prosocial based on a misplaced analogy between the experiment (where reputation building is not relevant) and everyday life. Finally, when trying to persuade a general readership of the universal existence of *homo socialis*, Bowles (2016, 41-42) started with a reference to the one-shot Prisoner's Dilemma game, which shows that about half of the times players decide to cooperate, and that, as clarified by sequential versions of the same game, even the non-cooperative players are often conditional reciprocators.

Homo socialis, whether as a cooperative player, strong reciprocator or unconditional altruist in one-shot interactions, did not start as their star benchmark, though. The first comparison between the Ultimatum and Dictator games, for example, came as late as 1996 (Fehr & Schmidt 2006, 622). The methodology of social preference researchers may be said to follow, as argued here, a not-entirely-lab-like comparative logic for which an only relatively "context-free" baseline serves as a source of contrast for the analysis of modified versions of the same behavioral scenario. Nevertheless, the benchmark that led behavioral economists to embrace the study of social preferences and consolidate the "discovery" of *homo socialis*, in the first place, was a simplified and disembodied *homo economicus* that predictably aspired to maximize profits (see e.g. Henrich et al. 2005).

The contemporary experimental economist may now easily acknowledge, first, that "the full context within which the subject makes decisions" includes "a dazzlingly complex set of relational situations, social norms, frames, past experiences, and the lessons gleaned from those experiences" (Levitt & List 2007, 170) and, second, that the specific orientation of a corporate *homo economicus* with monopolistic behavior "cannot simply be *assumed*: it must be justified empirically… Some are sales maximisers; some are 'satisficers'; some – perhaps from altruistic motives, or perhaps because they fear regulation – seem to be charging a price close to marginal cost" (Brennan & Buchanan 1983, 93). In the early 1970s, however, many leading economists could not even get their head around the pioneering and quickly popularized hypothesis of Richard Titmus, which predicted that economic incentives for blood donations would actually detract most potential donors to the extent that their willingness to donate stems from their social values (Frey & Jegen 2001, 589-590; Bowles & Polanía-Reyes 2012, 369). It would take many years before the systematic findings of emerging behavioral economists could dislodge the long-established orthodoxy of exclusively focusing on fixed economic preferences (see Zafirovski 2014). And the initial benchmark that allowed them to challenge the, often purposeful, "economic imperialism" of their discipline (Lazear 2000) was the situated behavior attributed to a wealth-maximizing *homo economicus* when confronted with a strategic game in which the choices of the other players had to be taken into account in order to reach an optimal decision.

The fact that real players often decided to act more generously than, based on game theory, was obviously optimal for their self-interest was sufficient evidence to validate the relevance of social preferences research. Rapidly, an increasing number of experimental studies started to challenge the two main fearful imaginaries of chaotic self-interest of the 20th century, the prisoner's dilemma and the tragedy of the commons – thus confirming the powerful critique of these models pioneered by Elinor Ostrom (1990). Eventually, a new behavioral game theory even came to include cooperative strategies (Gintis 2007). And yet, the line of questioning surrounding the economic theorization of *homo socialis* has not managed to overcome the sense of self-evidence with which economists started. As Camerer and Fehr reflect in their guide for social scientists, the findings that are worthy of explanation are those that would "appear to be contradictory at first blush (e.g. sacrificing money to harm somebody in an ultimatum game, and sacrificing to help somebody in PD or trust games)" (2004, 84). The mere fact that real individuals are sometimes willing to "sacrifice money" or, as Bowles and Gintis put it, that "we are not purely selfish" (2011, 3) is the fundamental oddity that economists continue to find puzzling. Yet, their methodology of rigorous comparison through a progression of tests that systematically measures differences relative to a benchmark has proven useful to detect and analyze gradual changes along a behavioral range. This "range" does seem to describe with precision a spectrum of more and less prosocial conducts, but it is not inherently necessary to also interpret it via the simplistic binary logic contained within such an extreme figurative contrast between *homo economicus* and *homo socialis*. The hyperbole of "discovery," along with its implied suggestion that what is at stake is just a matter of adding something new to something old that can be taken for granted, can be left behind.

From "external validity" to "range validity"

After four decades of experimentation and debate, social preference researchers have managed to substantiate the "internal validity" of their tests to the point of claiming the discovery of *homo socialis*. The "external validity" of their methodology, on the other hand, continues to be heavily questioned by economists and other social scientists, that is, the correlation between test responses in lab-like experiments and everyday behaviors (Gurven & Winking 2008; Jackson & Cox 2013; Galizzi & Navarro-Martinez 2019; Naar 2020; Findley,

Kikuta & Denly 2021; Naar et al. 2022). The methodological aspect that is more immediately relevant for a decolonial inquiry has to do, however, with what I call "range validity."

External validity is sometimes also referred to as "range *of* validity" (e.g. Jackson & Cox 2013, 35), because it concerns the question of how far the applicability of results goes. In this sense, "range" refers to distance or extension in social space, and one can focus, for example, on issues of "parallelism" – whether an experiment is validated by external measures within its larger context – or issues of "generalizability" – whether a study is globally validated by results found in distant contexts (Naar 2020). My notion of "range validity" does not refer to this spatial connotation of "range," but, instead, to those occasions when the term "range" can be used to refer to *the limits and structure of a spectrum* of possible options – as in the physics question of "what is the range of visible light?"

To properly apprehend what the notion of "range validity" means, we can immediately think about the historical refinement of microscopes. There are many different technologies in light microscopy, depending on which property of light they capture; for instance, refraction, absorption or diffraction. Thus, one can immediately wonder, "what is ultimately the *range* of observable matter for these microscopes?" And, further, even if the intention with the development of each new microscope is to see an – ideally not-too-blurry – slice of reality, we can still inquire, as the philosopher of science Ian Hacking (1981) once defended, into the representational quality of the resulting image. Regardless of its seeming fuzziness, especially for the non-trained, what is the "validity" of the microscope's range of visibility in terms of how it captures physical reality: how closely does the image of radiation that a microscope produces correlate to "some structure in the specimen in essentially the same two or three-dimensional set of relationships as are actually present in the specimen" (p. 320)? (Hacking's suggestion is that when alternative observations using different microscopic technologies coincide in the same structure, then their range of visible reality is proven valid.)

Conventionally, the "range" at stake in the measurements of any behavioral game is the one going from *homo economicus* to *homo socialis*. Yet the gradual spectrum and extreme poles described by this binary range are much harder to conceptually determine or

methodologically stabilize than it is being currently assumed, implicitly or explicitly, by experimental researchers. Pressing the issue of range validity amounts to questioning whether a simplistic binary spectrum of behavioral options can truly encompass the range of human conduct within and outside experimental games.[7] This section critically reflects on three premises about range that underlie the experimental research on prosocial preferences, questioning, specifically, what dangerous type of global policy scenario each could engender for the postcolonial subject.

Premise 1: Homo socialis *as a measure of distance to a set baseline,* homo economicus

Bowles is one of the behavioral economists who have pushed contemporary economics the most to refine the conceptualization of "preferences." Yet, despite his sustained efforts at integrating socially-minded and socially-embedded preferences within the purview of economics – including "endogenous" and "situation-dependent" preferences (2016, 85) and even such a principled motivation as self-sacrificial "commitment" (Bowles 1998, 79) which challenges the foundations of rational choice theory (Sen 1977) – he still cannot avoid the tactic of using *homo economicus* as the interpretive baseline (Bowles 2016, 51). In social preferences research, *homo socialis* can refer to many things since, depending on the behavioral game at stake, one can measure different motives, from conditional reciprocity and contextual trust to fair-mindedness and pure altruism. But, ultimately, this behavioral figure is assumed to be untraceable by itself, devoid of stable reference markers. The term "social preferences" is simply used to refer to "motives that induce people to help others more than would an own-material-payoff maximizing individual" (Bowles & Polanía-Reyes 2012, 370). It is a measure of distance that inevitably takes a bare economic conduct as its source of meaning.

Contemporary economists are, of course, generally well aware of the fact, cited earlier, that *homo economicus* is a behavioral model that can be specified in different ways (for critiques of this issue in relation to rational choice theory, see esp. Sen 2010, ch. 8 and Amadae 2003). The following passage should probably be read, then, as an ironic commentary on the methodology of social preferences research: "As with Tolstoy's happy families, in this and other games there seems to be just one way to be self-interested … but many ways to depart from the standard economic model" (Bowles 2016, 45). At any rate, even if this premise is an

intentional methodological simplification that behavioral economists are implicitly self-critical of, it could lead to reinforce some of the effects still maintained by the shared global cultural legacy of "coloniality."

In particular, such a baseline can serve to maintain what some decolonial scholars call "the coloniality of being" or "permanent attitude of suspicion" that globally exists towards the postcolonial subject – an attitude that took shape in Western culture from the moment the European conquerors started to question, as no other culture had dared to do so before, whether the unthreatening others they had encountered were "human" enough to deserve being approached through the norms of engagement that ruled peaceful collaboration (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243–248). When such an inherently corruptible figure as *homo economicus* constitutes the backdrop against which a global or regional survey concludes that Latin American or "Chinese subjects exhibit relatively high levels of trust" (Fehr and Schmidt 2006, 627), while "prosocial preferences are relatively weak in sub-Saharan Africa" (Falk et al. 2018, 1647), there is an interpretive danger. The implication could be assumed to be that the point of this research is to determine, in simplistically binary terms, whether certain nations are on average ethical, caring and collaborative or, instead, more like a *homo economicus*.

The normative commitments of socially-oriented behavioral economists may in principle motivate them to make diplomatic generalizations, such as: "on average, the propensity to trust and cooperate among Latin Americans is remarkably similar to that found in other regions of the world" (Cárdenas, Chong & Ñopo 2009, 48). Nonetheless, the unintentional sub-text of this discourse can still be a colonial one that is implicitly interesting to the extent that it answers the question of how much Latin Americans actually differ from *homo economicus* or, to put it bluntly, how corruptible or untrustworthy they are as compared to the negative stereotype.

Premise 2: The spectrum of preferences describes a dynamics of inverted correlation

Depending on their discipline, social scientists pose different theoretical questions in relation to economic experiments. Instead of being concerned with individually rational decision-

making within an environment with institutional constraints, anthropologists and sociologists are interested, for example, in the interpersonal mechanisms and culturally intersubjective bases of cooperation (see esp. Gerkey 2013; Simpson & Willer 2015; Naar 2020). And yet, the fact that these experimental games serve as measuring devices of economic and various types of population-specific social preferences means that their increasing use unavoidably opens the door for globally comparative depictions of cultures or nations. Even in anthropology, a discipline in which sweeping cultural generalizations such as "national character" have long been questioned (Neiburg, Goldman & Gow 1998), one finds enthusiasm for the way experimental games offer a rigorous method to investigate "the distribution of such behaviors across human diversity—both longitudinally in an evolutionary sense and cross-culturally in the contemporary world" (Ensminger 2002, 75). The implication that is problematic in the mapping of social preferences is not that it encourages cultural stereotypes as such. As anthropologists have rightly refined the point in their debates, generalizations of some sort are in any case needed to produce cultural knowledge (Bunzl 2008). The specifically problematic generalization is the one that relies on a normatively deficient referent.

An "atlas" of prosocial preferences would be an inherently dangerous visual device – for example, in the hands of a business guru that presses governments on the international competitiveness of their country brand (Davies 2017, ch. 4) – but it can be especially dangerous if it is meant as an inverted economic lens. Unlike a survey that maps the diversity of "world values" and is immediately read, cartographically, through the normative lens of value pluralism, and unlike the comparative project of relational indicators such as "social capital," which refer us to "aggregates of institutionalised relationships" rather than attributes of individuals (Muringani, Fitjar & Rodríguez-Pose 2021, 1413), the study of prosocial preferences among post-colonial nations poses an immediate normative risk. Any *absence* of such preferences potentially speaks, by following a simplistic binary logic, to the *presence* of economic preferences and, ultimately, the extent to which a population approximates the (suspicious, exploitable and/or manipulable) behavioral patterns of *homo economicus* (see Gebel 2012). To address this colonial hermeneutics, as I elaborate in the last section, non-prosocial choices need to be interpretively open instead of being immediately associated with *homo economicus*.

The policy application of social preferences research will not always include, however, a cartographic contribution to such an ambitious "atlas" and, most important, it is open in principle to a mapping of unexpected preference dynamics. As Bowles (2016, 211) explains it, one may find out through experimental tests that a policy intervention that increases the "altruism" or unconditional generosity of a population may, at the same time, reduce their preference for reciprocal fairness as expressed by their willingness to punish free riders of public goods. Nevertheless, the main concern that has been driving economists' research in this area, following Titmus's cue about blood donations, is the *inverted correlation* that can be empirically demonstrated to exist – against Hume's maxim that effective policy is best designed with a "knave" in mind (Bowles 2014) – between prosocial motives and governmental incentives. They have been consolidating a strand of "crowding theory" that warns that economic incentives tend to produce "moral disengagement," decrease "intrinsic motivation" and, at any rate, prevent individuals from experiencing their personal values, thus "crowding out" their prosocial preferences (Frey 1997; Frey & Jegen 2001; Fehr & Fischbacher 2002; Bowles & Polanía-Reyes 2012; Bowles 2016; Besley & Gathak 2018). For the purposes of governance, the key policy insight that crowding theory offers is that intervening through incentives can often backfire, since it can lead citizens to act more like a *homo economicus* would when, in reality, their inclination in the absence of economic rewards or sanctions would be to act like a *homo socialis* (Bowles 2016, 46-50).

Experimental games have been repeatedly used in Latin America as evaluative tools for policy programs (Anderies et al. 2011, 1577; Attanasio, Polanía-Reyes & Pellerano 2015). But, to my knowledge, their use as a pre-test for crowding-out effects has not become a staple feature of incentive-based policies, in the way randomized controlled trials, for example, have become common for large development aid projects (Donovan 2018). "Crowding-out" is, however, a well-established side-effect that is now taken into account by the hundreds of private and public behavioral offices and agencies that, during the last decade, have surfaced to inform policy making globally (e.g. BETA 2019, 12). And the premise behind this policy application of behavioral games is problematic, because even though it is concerned with protecting the intrinsic "civicness" of any population (Frey 1997; Bowles 2016), the flipside of this concern is that a negative test of prosocial erosion or "crowding-out" would technically validate the rollout of an incentive among what, after the test, must be assumed to be a group representative of *homo economicus*.

In a Southern nation, the reason for economic preferences being relatively high will have something to do with the fact that, for decades, international organisms have been recommending, if not outright imposing, structural adjustment policies and other incentive-based rationales that eroded or "crowded out," precisely, the previously existing civicness among its population (Lavinas 2013). Or, alternatively, one should also explore the hypothesis that the majority of these citizens has never possessed a substantial level of civic spirit because, over the centuries, colonial and liberal forms of governmentality considered those like them to be sub-optimal individuals who were in need of disciplinary rule (Poovey 1998, ch. 2; Dean 2007, ch. 5). In such a scenario that, for instance, a policy evaluation of crowding-out effects was performed, and no such side-effects were detected, the implication would be that the proposed incentive is likely to be effective. When the targeted citizens react on average almost as a *homo economicus* would, we should conclude, according to the currently predominant binary logic of crowding theory, that there is no significant prosocial potential that could be eroded. As I argue in the last section of the article, however, it is misguiding to assume that the prosocial potential of a population does not exist or cannot be negatively affected, especially in a post-colonial context, simply because it cannot be registered by a behavioral test.

Premise 3: The behavioral expression of homo socialis *has a top limit*

The finding that most individuals, regardless of culture or context, are not fully cooperative, reciprocal, fair-minded or altruistic has not led experimental researchers to claim that they have "discovered" *homo economicus*. It has, however, led some Latin American economists to conclude that behavioral tests help "to provide an idea of the magnitude of the social welfare that our societies fail to generate as a result of limitations on trust and willingness to cooperate" (Cárdenas, Chong & Ñopo 2009, 66). Due to the way behavioral games are set up with definite amounts of money that the participants can either choose to offer or keep, the option to be fully other-regarding is always available. This top limit for *homo socialis* can lead to a dangerous mode of interpretation in which, by virtue of the measuring method used, the prosociality of a population becomes a maximizable quality or unused potential that is quantifiable. As the mentioned Latin American economists wrote in a report for the Inter-American Development Bank: "Although players in the six Latin American cities indeed

trusted and cooperated in the games, they did not do so to the maximum possible extent" (2009, 64).

The normalization of any normative behavioral figure, even that of "the cosmopolitan," can have problematic power effects (Dean 2007, 70). In a context like that of Latin America, where development aid investments have long taken the form of conditional cash transfers that demand certain social obligations in exchange for funding, the prospect of a normalized *homo socialis* is especially dangerous (Lavinas 2013). The lack of sufficient prosociality could become an exclusionary criterion to cut funding, if, for example, the successful conditional cash transfer comes to be defined as the one that enhances cooperation as tested by a Public Goods game (see e.g. Attanasio, Polanía-Reyes & Pellerano 2015). The normalizing effects of *homo socialis* will become increasingly relevant the more economists associate prosocial preferences with efficient public provision (Bowles 2016), optimal human capital (Besley & Ghatak 2018) and economic development (Falk et al. 2018).[8]

Decolonizing *homo socialis*

The first experimental boom in economics occurred around the 1950s and it managed to prove through small scale designs of interactive financial trading that the neoclassical hypotheses about market competition could in fact be replicated in real life (Smith 1962). Thus, the late-twentieth-century finding that, through even more laboratory-like tests, one could demonstrate the generalized existence of prosocial preferences came as a bit of a surprise to experimental economists (Fehr & Schmidt 2006, 617). A decisive issue of "range validity" emerged out of this clash between experimental markets and distributive games, since the existence of *homo socialis* could not be universally discarded within real markets. The general explanation for economists has been provided through the logic of crowding theory: "rational individuals will not express their other-regarding preferences in these markets because the market makes the achievement of other-regarding goals impossible or infinitely costly" (Fehr & Schmidt 2006, 618). In other words, environmental incentives can "crowd out" one's prosocial preferences, even if the latter, in principle, are not absent.

How exactly any market context may be crowding out social preferences must remain, of course, an empirical question (Fehr & Fischbacher 2002). Further, economists refined their explanatory logic through a methodological language that specifies the question of whether, in a given economic environment, the social preferences of individuals are altered by economic incentives or, as traditionally thought, *homo economicus* can be modelled "separately" without repercussions (Bowles & Polanía-Reyes 2012). When there is *separability*, as Bowles unpacks, "the economists' policies will work out as expected, even though *Homo economicus* is a misnomer for citizens who might better be termed *Homo socialis*" (2016, 48-49).

This way of arbitrating the question of "range validity" is appealing for economists. *Homo economicus* can still work! The policy relevance of *homo socialis* remains confined to those exceptional scenarios where an incentive proves to be counterproductive by eroding the willingness of citizens to be collaborative. The complication is that even those citizens that can still be treated as economic subjects must be recognized to be, deep down, prosocial subjects. Such a thesis is bound to be, in turn, sociologically appealing – to the extent that it poses important interpretive challenges to the experimental approach to *homo socialis*. For the empirical methodology of social preferences research to work coherently, it needs to be open to a more nuanced qualitative interpretation of the behavioral range that is at stake in its quantitative measures. In this section, I introduce with a decolonial imagination three counter-premises and two behavioral markers that are helpful to question and address this issue of range validity (see Figure 1S). (For continuity purposes in the explanation of the argument, I must start with the "Counter-premise to Premise 3" and finish with the "Counter-premise to Premise 1.")

Counter-premise 3: An extended range without a top limit

The explanatory logic of crowding theory can be helpful to elucidate certain scenarios of economically-induced prosocial behavior, but it may, at the same time, preclude other possible explanations. Nowadays, it is common for corporate workers to be encouraged to volunteer through their company's social responsibility program or for university students to be sold volunteer tourism packages, even while sitting in a classroom (McGloin & Georgeou 2016). In the face of such marketized invitations, in which moral self-promotion or "virtue signalling" could be a motivating factor (Westra 2021), some genuinely prosocial individuals

may feel disinclined to donate their time because the offer does not clearly involve selfless "volunteering." In such a scenario, their choice not to volunteer could thus be well explained as the "crowding-out" effect of an incentivizing context that openly offers individuals economic rationales to act prosocially, such as "because it looks good on your CV" (McGloin & Georgeou 2016).

Citizens who decide not to participate in today's ambivalent "humanitarian marketplace" may seem to conduct themselves in the way a *homo economicus* does it, that is, by rejecting the available institutional offers to be prosocial. Yet, the insight of crowding theory is that this lack of social engagement may be due to the presence of an economic incentive that comes to dilute the motivational force that is intrinsic to a *homo socialis*. I chose this peculiar institutional context, however, because it raises questions about a more radically prosocial orientation than the one captured by a volunteer. A humanitarian marketplace is a rather Northern context, even if it is technically available to Southern citizens. It is not too difficult to imagine a citizen from the North as a *homo socialis* who only donates time or money when humanitarian concerns are devoid of business interests. In postcolonial contexts like Latin America, on the other hand, there is generally a weaker tradition of volunteering and charity, and a stronger tradition of pro-social radicalisms (Granés 2022). Thus, if one was to find that a Latin American worker is rejecting the offer of her transnational employer to volunteer, the source of her motivation would be more uncertain. Her choice not to volunteer could have to do less with the presence of economic incentives and more with the fact that a rather modest form of prosocial action such as corporate volunteering is being offered.

In the global North as much as in the global South, citizens largely share the predicament of living in a historical era in which compelling political programmes of social change are absent, and the persistent ethical demand for (unenforceable) human rights constitutes "the last Utopia" (Moyn 2010). But a behavioral test is ahistorical and, thus, formally constrained. It has a set limit for how prosocial one can be, while, in real institutional contexts, one may well choose the most prosocial option that is on offer and still remain dissatisfied with just being what the tests would define as a *homo socialis*. Young volunteer tourists, in fact, often end up feeling skeptical about the progressive effects of their humanitarian placements

overseas (Vrasti 2013) – which means that, while they outwardly behave as a *homo socialis*, inwardly they wish they could be more radically prosocial.

The experimental measurements of *homo socialis* require, in short, a deeply qualitative interpretation, because, depending on the context, both a prosocial and a non-prosocial choice can stand at times for a more radically prosocial sensibility, one that has no set marker or top limit in a behavioral range. One could perhaps conceptualize this extended range of radically prosocial preferences through a marker such as "*homo humanus*," which would be helpful to explore new experimental hypotheses about individuals who apparently react to policies like a *homo economicus* or a *homo socialis* would, but who, deep down, have a humanistic sensibility that is more radically prosocial (see Figure 2S). Such a marker as *homo humanus*, however, cannot be quantitatively contained, for it necessarily represents an open-ended threshold.[9] In 1755, during the first decade of what historians treat as the modern humanitarian era, Diderot (1992, 19) naively attempted to foreclose this radically humanist range. He declared in the textbook of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*, that everyone should simply follow "the general will [of humanity]" when considering the question of "what is right?" And yet, no one, since then, has managed to decisively determine what the content of that will actually is, of course – even if, as moderns, we still aspire to address the question. The well-known enduring challenge is that there is a dangerous point at which the most radically pro-social behaviors can turn against humanity itself, as has been historically witnessed from the time of Robespierre to that of Che Guevara.

Counter-premise 2: A virtual spectrum of preference dynamics

The methodological language of "separability" refers to the notion that deep down one may still be a prosocial individual even if one reacts to an incentive as a *homo economicus* would. This language calls for explanations of selfish behavior, instead of being immediately satisfied with the answer that some individuals simply have a rationally economic "preference." Bruno Frey, the pioneer of crowding theory, suggests, for example, that even when individuals surrender to the lure of an incentive, they may retain an "altruistic anger" rooted in a sense of resignation and "impossibility" (2006, 16). This kind of explanatory logic makes a lot of sense from a sociological perspective, since sociologists tend to emphasize the way prosocial agency is not a pure enactment of one's individual will – thus, the failure of a

bystander to act, for example, in the face of a racist incident can be collective, attributable to a lack of cultural equipment rather than to a lack of prosocial preferences (Haynes 2016). Nevertheless, from a decolonial perspective, this explanatory logic still needs to be interrogated further.

To investigate whether a research subject from the global South is "deep down" a *homo socialis*, one could run a social preference game or perform an ethnographic interview. But the point that I want to emphasize is that this subject may, in the end, still resemble a *homo economicus*. Imagine the case of a resident of a capital city in a country where famine and armed conflict is daily portrayed in the news, even if this resident is not personally affected. This individual feels in any case powerless, due to the radicalized national politics and complex global structures that maintain the country in a state of crisis. This resident also comes across beggars in the street every day going to work, and constantly applies, as an urban rule of thumb, the personal policy of not giving money to them. There are many reasons that this person could give for this rule of thumb if someone asked, but, first, nobody asks this question because it is a rule of thumb, part of the shared common sense in this city, and second, this resident shares in the generalized condition of precarious employment of the larger nation – hence, given such economic insecurity, giving money to charity or political causes is not just an ethical question but very much an economically counterintuitive one.

The notion that one cannot help others if one is powerless is far from new. Hannah Arendt (2003, 43) developed it to elucidate the predicament of political responsibility of a citizen living in Nazi Germany and, more recently, Amartya Sen used it to articulate the imperfect moral obligation that anyone has of intervening in matters of global justice if one has realistic practical options or "effective power" (2010, 206). But the decisive methodological question at stake in our discussion is whether a postcolonial subject who, due to a lack of effective power, does not even feel "altruistic anger" and acts on an everyday basis as a *homo economicus* should be considered to be deep down a *homo socialis* – even if there is no methodological way of detecting, experimentally or ethnographically, a preference for humanitarian behaviors.

My postulate, based on my own Southern experience of the North, is that when postcolonial urban subjects relocate to a more empowering context, civic engagement can eventually seem to them a realistic behavioral option that offers a chance to "create a more just situation in the world" (Sen 2010, 206).[10] As Sen (1977, 340) and Jon Elster (1983) first argued, preferences can be "adaptive" in different ways. When faced with a new context presenting a broader set of feasible options, individuals may unconsciously alter their preferences, including, I add, their preferences for prosocial options. Arguably, then, experimental researchers should keep in mind not only the kind of parallel "separability" of a *homo economicus*, but also what could be called its "virtual" separability (see Figure 3S) – in a post-colonial scenario, individuals may not only exhibit, but also embody in the privacy of their own mind, a non-prosocial preference, and therefore one may more easily find that incentives work or show no signs of "crowding-out." Yet, incentive-based policies could still be having the performative effect of reifying the kind of calculating subjectivity that economics anticipates (Callon 1998).

Counter-premise 1: A heuristic baseline that is not set in absolute terms

At the heart of social preferences research, experimental game-based data, crowding theory and, ultimately, the explanation of "separability" lies an epistemological question about the type of knowledge that this methodology of behavioral measurements produces. Since the post-war boom of mathematical and statistical analyses in the social sciences started, the question that economics has largely dismissed and sociology has remained puzzled with is whether, as Joel Isaac (2010, 135) has elucidated, these quantitative analytical tools are "heuristic devices, working hypotheses, or models of the cognitive dispositions and actions of actual social agents?" Socially-minded behavioral economists do not seem to have settled this debate either, but at least they have discarded the argument that, for policy purposes, the simplified model of *homo economicus* is always justifiable (Bowles 2016). There are times when the social preferences of individuals are just non-separable from their economic ones, which means that incentive-based policies can be disincentivizing. And even at those times when economic preferences are separable, and incentives can work, deep down the targeted individuals must be assumed to have social preferences. *Homo economicus*, in this light, is perhaps best captured by the notion of an interpretive social science that: any behavioral model derived from games of strategy and, more broadly, rational choice theory has neither

an explanatory, nor a descriptive function but, rather, a "heuristic" one (Bevir & Blakely 2018, 104-111).

I do not think any economist would be shocked to read that *homo economicus* accomplishes a heuristic or "what if" function, since even to Adam Smith it was evident that, "how selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others" (2004, 11). The crucial point with particular decolonial relevance is that the specific heuristic function of *homo economicus* in social preferences research is, as we have seen, that of providing a baseline. Yet it is a baseline that can be deemed to be intrinsically judgmental when applied within a post-colonial interpretive landscape. A Southern subject who makes a non-prosocial choice should not be read through a hermeneutics of suspicion that automatically attributes said choice to a selfish way of being such as the one of a *homo economicus*.

The embodied *homo economicus* that inhabits real markets and seeks, day in and day out, to earn a profit or make a living may be an ascetic entrepreneur who finds in fair exchange, disciplined labour and capitalist enterprise the foundations of a moral way of life (Weber 2011). Even the test subjects that in social preference games always choose the most selfish option will not match the Hobbesian skeptic of humanity that Diderot was trying to persuade in the *Encyclopédie*, the kind of skeptic that rationalizes the violent passions to the point of arguing that "my happiness demands that I rid myself of all persons who intrude upon my life" (1992, 18). Bowles (2016, 90) and other social preference researchers have been borrowing the idea from psychology that the "ethicality" of people can be switched on and off in the presence of an economic incentive. The notion that "incentives cause ethical reasoning to recede in people's minds" (Bowles 2016, 95) matches the current range of their analytical technique, which consists of measuring the distance between real choices and the choice that an abstract *homo economicus* would make. But the epistemic exclusion in this psychological account of "moral disengagement" is that it discards the equally ethical rationales that may lead contemporary individuals to adopt a non-prosocial choice, from structural powerlessness to prosocial radicalism (see Figures 2S and 3S). Economists and, for that matter, any other social scientist who tabulates data from economic games cannot do without *homo economicus* in their initial calculations; still, when it comes to the analysis,

they might do well to adopt as an interpretive baseline a subject who is minimally ethical. A "*homo ethicus*" does not have to be a "*homo virtus*." The former can just signal the acknowledgment that, for policy purposes, it is sensible to assume that most individuals care to some extent about the question of how they impact others, or at least that they care enough to agree that everyone should accept that this question calls for some justification or, as Sen elaborating on Thomas Scanlon conceptualizes, a "non-rejectable reason" (2010, 200).

Conclusion

When economists unreflectively accept the narrative that prosocial preferences have now been definitively "discovered" as a stable human phenomenon, they risk reifying *homo socialis* as a direct inversion and simplistic mirror image of *homo economicus*. *Homo socialis* was, obviously, always already there. And the fact that experimental economists have devised a systematic method to measure gradual differences of various forms of prosociality along a behavioral range does not mean that human beings can be classified in binary terms.

It would be highly inaccurate to suggest that behavioral economists have been ignoring the methodological issue of "range validity." The main contribution of prosocial preference researchers for the whole field of economics has precisely been the demonstration that *homo economicus* is an insufficient explanatory model and, thus, that the behavioral range that economics considers has to be extended so as to include the model of *homo socialis*. The point of a decolonial inquiry was to bring attention to some epistemic risks and normative dangers contained in this revised mode of knowledge production, departing from the appreciation that the very issue of "range validity" could not have been raised without the critical efforts of these socially-minded economists.

Social preferences research stands out, today, in the public debate about how to craft a truly moral political economy, because it has developed persuasive experimental evidence for the case that economic incentives tend to erode or "crowd out" the civic values that populations already have. Their research shows that a considerable portion of citizens has prosocial preferences that need to be protected and cultivated. This urgently needed public discourse is erected upon a questionable narrative of "discovery," however. It is questionable because, in

many ways, human beings have always embodied, of course, a *homo socialis*. But even economists already knew this. The truly far-reaching implication of this narrative is governmental, because it emphasizes that many economic designs are in fact inapplicable, since citizens do not react predictably to incentives as though they were all a *homo economicus*. The lesson of such a "discovery" as *homo socialis* for an economically-minded world is that incentive-based policies must be reserved for only certain contexts and populations.

This lesson is not unproblematic in a post-colonial but not actually decolonized world. In the Global South, citizens can be faced with many precarious contexts that are not conducive to the expression of their prosocial preferences. Thus, the risk of a socially-minded behavioral governance is that the Southern citizen is more likely to express non-prosocial choices and, hence, be prematurely interpreted and approached, with dangerous consequences, as a *homo economicus*. To correct this epistemic injustice, I have argued, it is crucial to expand the behavioral range of social preferences research in a number of qualitative directions that are not simplistically binary, such as the ones signaled by *homo ethicus* and *homo humanus*.

Many economists, anthropologists and other social scientists have identified the need that prosocial tests pose for greater interpretive collaboration between lab-oriented and field-oriented researchers (e.g. Ostrom 2006; Levitt & List 2007; Gurven & Winking 2008; Galizzi & Navarro 2019; Kranton 2019; Naar 2020; Naar et al. 2022). But the line of argumentation for this need has always revolved around the issue of "external validity." By adopting a decolonial perspective, this article has opened up a whole new area of methodological concerns that are not only epistemological but also normative in nature and that have to do, instead, with "range validity." Prosocial preferences may be experimentally measurable within a binary opposition between *homo economicus* and *homo socialis*. The argument developed here, however, is that any behavioral value or detection of crowding effects has a relative quantitative meaning that still needs to be qualitatively determined within a broader range that is "non-strictly-binary." For, despite being a "range" representing preferences in a graded order of positions signaling greater or lesser prosociality, it lacks fixed poles and includes virtual placements. The qualitative range may broadly describe a binary polarity,

but, to use a computer analogy, it accepts quantic superposition, since a quantitative “zero” does not discard a qualitative value of “one.”

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Notes

[1] For a brief summary on the differences between the specifically "decolonial" tradition of Latin America and the broader "postcolonial" tradition advanced by authors from the Middle East and South Asia, see Grosfoguel (2007) and Bhambra (2014).

[2] For elucidating analyses of this historical diversity, see Poovey (1998) and Amadae (2003). For contemporary defenses of this epistemological commitment, see Lazear (2000) and Brennan and Buchanan (1983).

[3] For Foucault, the history of thought is best explained in terms of a conceptual challenge or difficulty that makes a whole range of approaches "simultaneously possible: it is the point in which their simultaneity is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions" (1997, 118).

[4] There are many evolutionary anthropologists and other social scientists who, during the last two-and-a-half decades, have been combining ethnographic methods with experimental economic games (Chibnik 2005). There has already been substantial "interpretive collaboration," therefore, of the broad kind that I advocate here. Nevertheless, a decolonial approach is distinctive because it does not call for standardizable design principles to refine

the validity of the experiments, such as: choose whether your research question is targeting "private-world preferences" or "real-life preferences," and mimic everyday constraints or relax those constraints accordingly (Pisor et al. 2020). The point, instead, is that there are questions of correspondence between quantitative and qualitative interpretation that are crucial for the validity of any game-based study, which cannot be experimentally controlled and, rather, depend on the critical reflexivity or "decolonial vigilance" of the researcher.

[5] Bowles (2016) is the economist who has also come to propose the term "*homo socialis*" for this purpose of signalling an interpretively open marker of non-strictly-selfish behavior. I do find his introduction of this generic label useful to advance the debate. He is just capturing the "[in]adequacy of self-interest as a behavioral foundation for the social sciences" (Henrich et al. 2005, 797). By contrast, Gintis, who had been until his recent passing Bowles's closest collaborator, attempted to assign to the term "*homo socialis*," around the same time (Gintis & Helbing 2015), a more restrictive role within a strictly quantitative, modelling-oriented definition.

[6] Throughout the article, I will treat the terms "social" and "prosocial" preference as interchangeable concepts, following the ambiguous usage of the economic literature. The ambiguity exists because, as previously mentioned, this type of preference became validated by methodological rather than theoretical means. It is a residual concept. Any serious attempt to define these terms through an all-encompassing definition that is substantive rather than residual is bound to run into difficulties – as I will further elaborate, "the qualitative range" of *homo socialis* is overly capacious or lacks "limits." It includes, on the one hand, any behavior that is done for the sake of others, even if it involves violence; and, on the other, any behavior that is not about wealth maximization, even if it involves "anti-social" or ethically complex motives such as "spite" (Kimbrough & Vostroknutov 2016; Fehr & Gintis 2007; Gervais 2017).

[7] For non-economists who use experimental economic games, the contrast between *homo economicus* and *homo socialis* is less explicit in their forms of theorization, but they must also remain vigilant in their exploration of concepts, even if they only borrow the method of simulating the cost-benefit scenarios that allow economists to distinguish between "economic" and "prosocial" preferences. Other binaries such as "extrinsic" versus "intrinsic" motivation allude to a very similar differentiation based on a divide between self-interested and disinterested conduct (see e.g. Gerkey 2013, 171-172).

[8] Economists are not the only intellectuals involved in this problematic. Psychologists, for example, are also starting to mobilize the potential normalizing effects of a discourse of *homo socialis*, by advocating that "prosociality should be a public health priority" (Kubzansky, Epel, and Davidson 2023).

[9] The term *homo humanus* could be useful to the extent that, despite having a certain genealogy (Giustiniani 1985), it lacks a clear connotation in the present and could be used to maintain a sense of humanistic open-endedness about the range of prosocial agency.

[10] For instance, when I first arrived to an Anglo-speaking "Northern" country, after having lived all my life in a Southern country like the one described in the just presented vignette, I could not understand why anyone who was in a position to donate money could be satisfied with the decision to prioritize a donation to "clown doctors" over one that could save lives in other countries. After living here for many years, that initial perception now seems rather foreign to me.

Figures

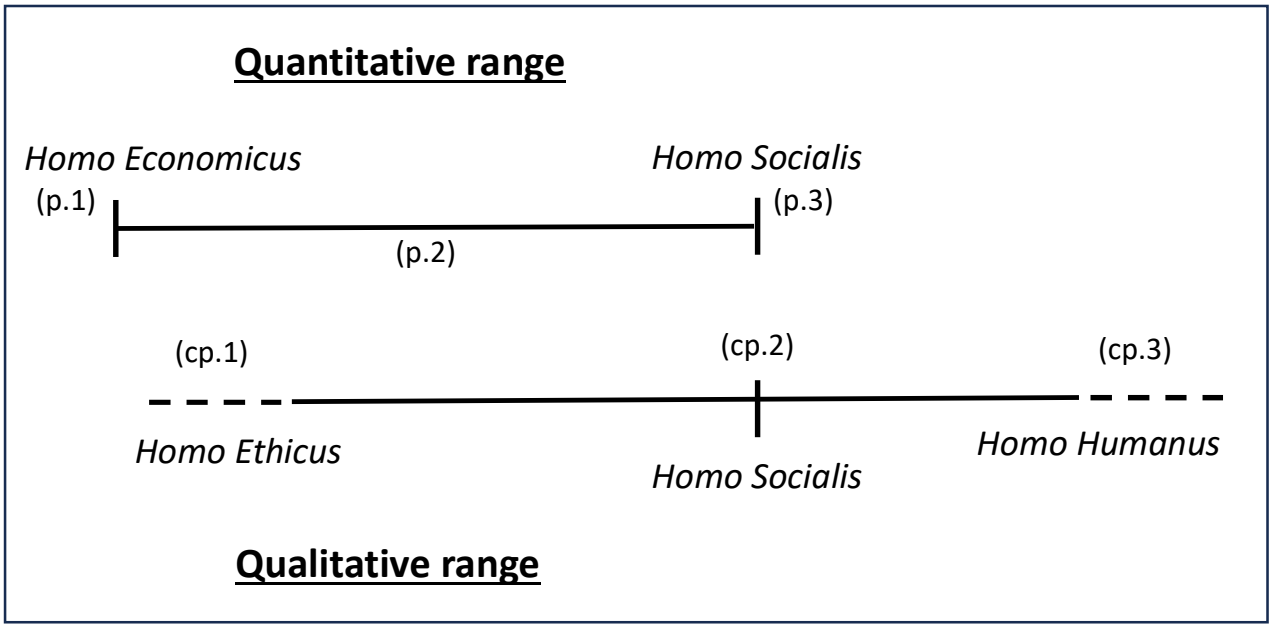

Figure S1: The behavioral range of social preferences

Premise 1:	*Homo socialis* as a measure of distance to a set baseline, *homo economicus.*
Premise 2:	The spectrum of preferences describes a dynamics of inverted correlation.
Premise 3:	The behavioral expression of *homo socialis* has a top limit.
Counter-premise to p.1:	A heuristic baseline that is not set in absolute terms.
Counter-premise to p.2:	A virtual spectrum of preference dynamics.
Counter-premise to p.3:	An extended range without a top limit.

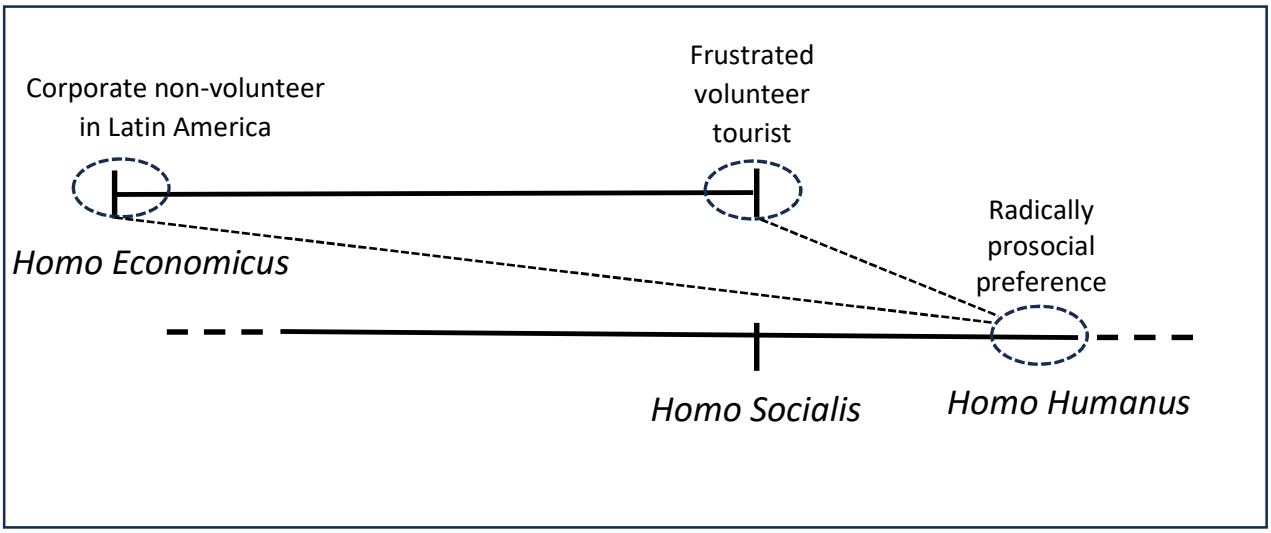

Figure S2: Interpretive collaboration between the quantitative and qualitative range

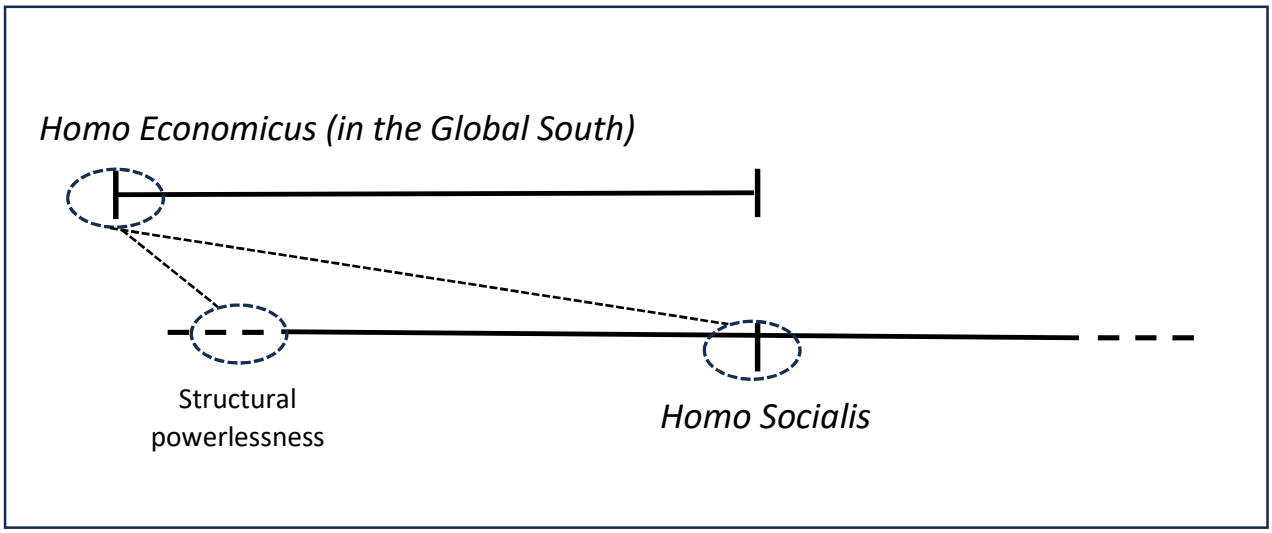

Figure S3: The virtual separability of a decolonized homo economicus