

Symbiosis and the humanitarian marketplace: The changing political economy of ‘mutual benefit’

Abstract

This article develops a diagnostic lens to make sense of the still baffling development of a ‘humanitarian marketplace’. Ambivalently hybrid initiatives such as volunteer tourism, corporate social responsibility or even fair trade do not strictly obey a distributive logic of market exchange, social reciprocity or philanthropic giving. They engender a type of ‘economy’ that must be apprehended in its own terms. The article argues that the large-scale collaborative effects of such a dispersed market can be theorized without resorting to the classical biopolitical move of simplified agency/holistic reification. The argument proceeds counterintuitively, by appropriating the notion of symbiosis as redefined by contemporary biology, contending through historical contextualization and conceptual work that nature itself offers the best example to grasp spontaneous collaboration among unrelated human beings as a non-automatically balanced and intrinsically political affair that calls for critical management through an *ex post facto* interventionist policy of selective cultivation.

Keywords: Foucault; biopolitics; market; gift; biology; symbiosis.

Introduction

Despite the politicized history of the concept (Sapp, 1994) and long-standing anti-biological bias of contemporary social theory (Connolly, 2011, ch. 1; Malabou, 2016), ‘symbiosis’ has been opening up new conceptual possibilities in recent times. The option of drawing critically productive lessons from ‘nature’ or, to be precise, from a certain ‘idea of objectivity’ (Blencowe, 2013) that is being advanced by an authoritative biological knowledge is becoming increasingly thinkable again (see Meloni, 2014: 605). For about half a century now, biologists have been gradually introducing unexpected technical nuances that significantly distance this concept from a pure notion of mutualism and, for that matter, from an utilitarian notion of parasitism, as symbiosis at times has also been interpreted (see esp. Martin and Schwab, 2013). These nuances have come to inspire different areas of cultural theory during the last decade: post-human critique (Adema and Woodbridge, 2011), biophilosophy (Hird, 2010), multispecies ethnography (Helmreich, 2009) and the ecological humanities (Rose, 2012). In the last few years, in particular, two bold interventions have solidified this at one time counterintuitive theoretical path. Donna Haraway (2016) has ambitiously sought to capture our historical horizon of sustainability in terms of ‘sympoiesis’, redefining our collaborative value in a way that is conceptually and materially coextensive with the symbiotic ontology of nature itself. Going one step further, Bruno Latour has even resolved, after engaging with the symbiosis-derived thesis of Gaia, that overcoming the nature/society divide is no longer the urgent matter, for ‘we can no longer abstain from drawing lessons from the Earth’s behavior’ (Latour and Lenton, 2019: 678-679).

At least since Deleuze and Guattari deployed the concept of symbiosis in *A thousand Plateaus* (2004: 11, 263), published in 1980, the idea of a ‘nature-culture continuum’ has

been an effective critical strategy to denaturalize biological conceptualizations (Massumi, 2002: 11). Michel Serres would publish the same year his landmark work, *The Parasite* (2007), inspiring in a similar way a radically heterogeneous notion of agency among the pioneers of Actor-Network Theory (see esp. Callon, 1980). *The parasite* might have been ahead of its time, however, for it can equally inspire us to revisit and perhaps even ‘return’ to the classic humanist division between nature and society at our conjuncture, when a symbiotic ‘worldview’, as Latour himself contends, could well be in the brink of producing a ‘cultural paradigm shift’ (Latour and Lenton, 2019: 661).¹ Serres’ justification for applying a parasitic terminology to any microcosm of human relations was, after all, never ontological:

Quite simply, what is essential is neither the image nor the deep meaning, neither the representation nor its hall of mirrored reflections, but the system of relations (2007: 8).

For him, parasitism – and, we could add, symbiosis – finds its empirical logic in a language of cohabitation that is highly anthropomorphic itself. In a sense, all he was doing was ‘reversing anthropomorphism’ (2007: 7). The representation and content presented by the vocabulary of biology did not have to be accurate. In effect, it remains difficult to believe that nature can in fact be neatly divided into mutually beneficial and competitive interactions (Haraway 2016: 60). Yet, what is relevant is simply that we have come to understand ‘the system of relations’ within nature in a way that could also be useful in the current moment for our critical understanding of society. ‘We have made the louse in our image; let us see ourselves in his’ (Serres, 2007: 7).

The article starts by introducing the current problematization of a ‘humanitarian marketplace’ as the empirical ground and source of justification for its symbiotic analysis. The last 30 years have seen the baffling global expansion of ambivalently hybrid economic practices such as volunteer tourism, social entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility and fair trade – uncategorizable forms of collaborative initiative that do not strictly obey a distributive logic of either market or gift exchange. A symbiotic framework allows us to break with the expectation that a divide between ‘interested’ and ‘disinterested’ agency is inherent to modern society whether in substance or in form through, for example, a recurrent network effect of ‘market framing’ (Callon, 1998: 12-18). The rest of the article articulates a definition of symbiosis that is applicable to human interrelations and relevant as an interpretive grid for critical analysis, showing how ‘symbio-politics’ can stand for both a distributive logic and mode of interrogation that defamiliarizes the characteristically biopolitical style of modern thinking on circuits of collaboration.²

Moral exposure in a humanitarian marketplace

At a certain point, Ancient Greeks came to understand the care of the city, and of others in general, as a by-product of the ‘care of the self’ – collaboration as a corollary of the practices of ethical intervention that citizens in the polis conducted based on the meaningfulness of their own lives, tasks and selves (Foucault, 1997: 287). Christianity would eventually invert this understanding of ethics in which the self, as a being of autonomous and peaceful reflection, appears as the telos of a moral life. But, for a number of centuries, the maintenance of collaboration among fellow human beings was understood within certain corners of Western culture as the ‘correlative effect’ of individual practices of freedom (Foucault, 2004: 192; see also 2011: 273). Symbiosis, in a post-Christian world, is a challenging conception. It

similarly articulates a way of understanding the collaborative state as a by-product of private initiative.

For decades, Western states have been opening their bureaucratic gates to a plurality of private interventions. We have come to live with a model of governance whose aim is to create overly responsible and entrepreneurial subjects whose vital goal and purpose for existence is to continuously scramble for resources whether for social or other personally meaningful life projects. As a by-product of this ‘ethico-politics’ (Rose, 1999), which has been substantially supported by a post-radical ‘humanitarian’ discourse (Douzinas, 2007), there are countless ways democratic citizens can today incorporate a humanist ethical sensibility into their lives and lifestyles and, noticeably, however they choose to intervene, it currently matters much less whether what they do seems conscious, altruistic, social, political or public enough (see e.g. Chouliaraki, 2013). To grapple with this jarring development, social critics have often aspired to the possibility of refining collaboration by denouncing market contamination. Business discourses celebratory of a ‘collaborative individualism’ that is inherently promising (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: xx, 70) have been met with equally stark responses suggesting that market-mediated solidarity merely involves ‘empty moralizing’ (Butcher, 2003: 97) and ‘image manipulation’ (Stiglitz 2006: 199, cited in Browne, 2009: 28), through initiatives that are ‘masked by ethics’ (Baptista, 2012: 648) via one or other ‘Trojan’ discourse (Kenny, 2002: 297) for the sake of the participant’s own ‘absolution’ (Schmelzer, 2010: 234).

The belief that a ‘purity politics’ is still possible is what Alexis Shotwell has qualified, in a broader analysis of the Anthropocene, as a ‘paradoxical politics of despair’, which is, as she

incisively reflects, most probably ‘a bad approach because it shuts down precisely the field of possibility that might allow us to take better collective action’ (2016: 8-9). There is a growing sense among cultural researchers of a need to conceptualize a ‘human economy’ that is ‘two-sided’ (Hart et al., 2010: 4-5) and of moving towards a more ‘productive critique’ of ‘human rights in the age of enterprise’ (Dale and Kyle, 2016: 792). The justification for this emerging interest is not necessarily that every cultural innovation demands a new grid of intelligibility. If we take as a relevant point of comparison the parallel rise of a ‘sharing economy’ driven by the wide accessibility of digital platforms, we can see that it is still quite easy for us social critics or even for business scholars to immediately aspire to differentiate those initiatives that are truly about ‘sharing’ from those that are simply about market profit and utilitarian values (e.g. Belk, 2014). Even if the lived reality of these collaborations in the sharing economy is bound to remain hybrid (Arvidsson, 2018), one can still plan to evaluate, for example, the extent to which their collaborative dimension is actually embedding practices of market exchange in the substantive dynamics of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘redistribution’ famously synthesized by Polanyi (Arcidiacono et al., 2018: 277-278).

In the case of a ‘human economy’ or what I am trying to less holistically spatialize as a ‘humanitarian marketplace’, the tension between the social and the economic is distinct in that it does not find an immediate path for resolution. Many researchers have pursued a similar substantivist analysis, of course (e.g. De Neve et al., 2008). Yet that critical lens does not seem to be immediately justifiable, for the kind of initiatives that one finds in this arena, such as *corporate* social responsibility, *venture* philanthropy, *brand* aid, *ethical consumption*, *fair trade*, *social microcredit*, *social entrepreneurship*, nonprofit *internships* and volunteer *tourism*, are not just hybrid but ambivalently hybrid. Even those who embrace the humanitarian aspect of these experiences are likely to perceive their contribution as a

‘disquieting gift’ (Bornstein, 2012). They are givers and volunteers who are intrinsically prone to remain in an ambivalent state that I believe should be acknowledged as ‘moral exposure’.

Ever since the beginnings of commercial society, market enthusiasts have attempted to justify the social relevance of *homo economicus* through arguments of ‘mercantile virtue’ and commercial civility or ‘doux commerce’ (Poovey, 1998; Hirschman, 1997). Regardless of the selfish feelings that may drive the economic agent, many liberal writers have reasoned over the centuries that the market dynamic encourages practices of accounting, self-management and courtesy that are in themselves morally desirable. In other words, they have advanced a moral justification of commercial sociality with a disregard for the fact, as Mary Poovey has emphasized, that the embodiment of this virtuous market persona produces ‘public signs’ that end up mattering ‘more than actual attitudes or beliefs’ (1998: 168). The historical development of ambivalent hybrids, on the other hand, poses the opposite problem. It does not promote the idea that *homo economicus* is an immediately acceptable subject, a conduit of values that are conducive to sociability, or the idea that, regardless of the real intentions behind our interactions, what matters is how we portray ourselves. Certain liberal figures today may still endorse this type of ideas (Dean, 2007: 123) but, in everyday practice, an expansive humanitarian industry is encouraging citizens to engage in moral endeavours *despite* the obvious ambiguities and latent skepticism that surround its marketized style of intervention. The kind of ‘public sign’ that these citizens come to embody through such ambivalent combinations as leisure-and-work, exchange-and-charity or competition-and-altruism is one that is intrinsically open to critical questioning. If they can be said to share something about their public persona is that they are all morally exposed.

At a moment when ‘the social’ seems unrecognizable turning to Durkheim offers useful contrast. His approach to the exponential rise of *homo economicus* at the turn of the 19th century can help us elucidate the analytical difficulty posed by this historical inversion. In *The division of labor in society*, even before Taylorism had become widespread, Durkheim sought to address what he recognized as Western society’s ‘anxiety and hesitation’ with the rapidly growing specialization of the worker (1997: 5-6). To do so, that is, to find a criterion to critically assess the value of this historical phenomenon, he notoriously defended a neutral or at least ‘non-speculative’ diagnostic stance for which ‘the rule emerges from the facts themselves’ (1997: xxvii). What is interesting about his self-professed ‘scientific’ approach to morality is that, underneath, guiding his inquiry, one actually finds a clear normative telos – a desire to advance his society towards ‘the ideal of human brotherhood’ (1997: 336-337). In fact, the book as a whole constitutes an effort at showing that what seemed on the surface to be the expansion of a purely economic behaviour was, in reality, at its core, a potentially humanitarian dynamic. As he elaborates in the conclusion:

if the division of labour produces solidarity, it is not only because it makes each individual an agent of exchange, to use the language of the economists. It is because it creates between men a whole system of rights and duties joining them in a lasting way to one another (1997: 337-338).

It is noteworthy that the way Durkheim theorized this ‘lasting’ social bond was through the notion of ‘organic solidarity’, an influential conceptualization that is significantly symbiotic, if still derived from a narrow Darwinism (Durkheim, 1997: 208-217).³ At any rate, his point was that exchange ‘is only the superficial expression of an internal and deeper condition’ of systemic solidarity through which atomized subjects of interest become each

other's 'inseparable' and 'natural complement' (1997: 22). For Durkheim, the methodological challenge was to discover a moral compass buried within an industrial division of labor (1997: 23-24), a phenomenon that was self-evidently economic and, for the same reason, that could not be easily reconciled with a humanitarian worldview. Two decades into the 21st century, Western culture is increasingly perplexed by a development that goes in the other direction. A cosmopolitan purview is being explicitly rather than implicitly encouraged by the globalizing impetus of commercial transactions (Haskell, 1985). Active global citizens and their connected publics are anxious about an expanding circuit of collaboration that invites them to relate to others as humanitarian beings. The perplexity at stake is that moral engagement has now become immediately accessible yet predicated on the maintenance of an underlying market relation – precisely the inverse situation of what Durkheim once diagnosed.

Durkheim at some point provides a justification for why a new diagnostic lens is called for in his circumstances. His rather Foucauldian reason is that a 'human consciousness' does not offer a stable norm or criterion of evaluation – hence the need of a moral 'science' – since 'every people forms regarding this alleged type of humanity a particular conception' (Durkheim, 1997: 329-330, see also xxvi). I have argued that in our case the reasonable justification is instead the pervasive matter of 'moral exposure'. But Durkheim's point helpfully reinforces mine, for it has become even clearer than in his time that the humanitarian ethos driving modern society is irreducible to a construct of value that is explicitly collaborative or 'social' in absolute terms. The acts of ambivalently hybrid initiative driving the human economy are best understood as what Foucault called 'practices of the self' or 'of freedom', since they are ethical practices that are not ruled by strict boundaries and normative guidelines as much as by an ongoing 'problematization' of the

ways the self can become ethical, given the absence of a clear path for moral realization within a humanitarian discourse (see esp. Foucault, 1990: 10).

A turn towards symbio-politics

To an important extent I turn my attention towards the biological notion of symbiosis because, like Haraway, I believe that ‘staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles’ (2016: 4). And yet, what I find most relevant about this concept and the reason I only circumscribe it to a humanitarian context is its peculiar political dimension.

Ever since Herodotus, the scene of a crocodile and a plover mutually helping each other has inspired the idea that nature embodies the kind of perfect balance that humans should strive to embody (Egerton, 1973: 326). This kind of scene has inspired much of the modern biopolitical imaginary in which every being implicitly has a useful purpose that benefits the other parts of a general whole: from the Christian theology of Thomas Aquinas (Agamben, 2011: 131) to the natural history of Linnaeus, the political economy of Adam Smith (Cohen, 2018: 883-885) and all the classical strands of organicism that, at least since Durkheim’s 1893 *Division of labor in society*, can be found in social theory (c.f. Sapp, 1994: 27-28). The reason the biopolitical appropriation of symbiotic imagery has had such a level of success comes down to its seemingly natural apolitical dynamic. Yet ‘symbiosis’, even culturally, has never implied a sense of fairness that is strict as to the equivalence of the benefits received. In everyday use, it is fair to say, a symbiosis is simply thought to be a happy discovery, a found complementarity that is positive to the extent that it creates a synergy, not an even plateau.

Biologists today like to illustrate symbiosis through a different example. Some species of ants have attracted interest because of the way they act as an efficient repellent for *Acacia* trees and, most of all, for the way the hollow twigs of these trees exhibit in turn ‘locks’ or entrance holes that match perfectly the head shape of said ants (Douglas, 2010: 93). These ants must at some point have discovered in their matching trees a good habitat for their nests, while at the same time the trees must have started to enjoy the protection that a patrolling army of ants can inadvertently provide. In time, the progeny of each species emphasized their spontaneously cooperative traits assuring a tighter cycle. A stable ‘circuit of collaboration’ emerged; all despite the fact that the *balance* and *sustainability* of their connection is not something that any regulative supra-level order we label ‘nature’ can guarantee. An ant cheater with a similar head shape and poor patrolling habits in fact exists for this example, and there is phylogenetic proof that such associations between ant colonies and plants have broken down in the past (Douglas, 2010: 66, 51).

The symbiotic phenomenon offers the revelation that nature is actually imbalanced in the way it fosters collaboration or, phrased more accurately, that those collaborations that are thought to be ‘natural’ lack in fact an intrinsic tendency to either generalization or equilibrium. At the ‘macro’ level, biologists have found that ‘the predisposition for the symbiotic habit is far from universal’, it being unevenly distributed within and across ‘multiple phylogenetic scales’ (Douglas, 2010: 54; see also Latour and Lenton, 2019: 672-674). At the ‘micro’ level, they now know that symbioses do not necessarily take place between ‘co-equals’ or organisms with the same degree of selective interest. As Angela Douglas has stressed in her overview of the current understanding of the subject, this was ‘the erroneous assumption that symbioses are perfectly mutualistic’ (2010: 22, 12). As a whole, biological knowledge is in the process of grasping symbiosis as a well-defined, first-order

natural phenomenon that is, intrinsically, *macro-* and *micro-political*, that is: capable of organizing largely self-sustaining environments of coexistence in the absence of a unifying directive latent in ‘Nature’ (Latour and Lenton, 2019: 667; Haraway, 2016: 33; for the underlying debates see Suárez, 2018) *and* incapable of assuring an equitable balance in terms of costs and benefits between symbionts (Douglas, 2010: 6).

Thanks to the way contemporary biology conceptualizes it, therefore, my thesis is that symbiosis can now be culturally appropriated as a diagnostic tool to lead the much needed questioning of all those ‘win-win’ discourses driving social initiative in a market-driven era of post-welfarist intervention, from microfinance – where one of the largest global providers is precisely called ‘Symbiotics S.A.’ – to volunteer travel – where it is indeed common to find recruiters using a ‘win-win’ discourse in which ‘CV experience’ and ‘development aid’ become correlative outcomes (McGloin and Georgeou, 2016: 409). The critical literature on the growing industry of volunteer tourism has been particularly attuned to the micro-political problem of balance, some authors even suggesting that there is an urgent need of implementing a ‘contract corrective’ in every single project on the ground in order to address the unavoidable asymmetry that this historically charged dynamic fosters between affluent and under-resourced global parties (Banki and Schonell, 2017). Scholarship on microfinance has had a similar kind of structural concern. It is evident that a poor parent in Bangladesh who receives a micro-loan may be gaining autonomy over her life in the short term, but since the lending institutions often pursue this strategy of financial inclusion as a profitable endeavour, there are bound to be problematic residual questions, even if often there is no explicit public ‘discussion of the danger of indebtedness, of the possible impoverishment of borrowers ... or of the enrichment of certain lenders’ (Servet, 2010: 134).

Whether we are assessing the collaborative value and relational agency of entrepreneurial individuals, corporate programs or social enterprises, it is clear that the issue of asymmetry is inherent to a humanitarian marketplace – and it is an issue that is not restricted to cases involving post-colonial contexts either. Any contemporary project that is mediated by the market while also being driven by socially invested initiative will eventually strike a given balance of benefits in the relationship that it establishes with its orbiting communities through one or another humanitarian theme; a balance that is, by the ambivalently hybrid nature of this industry, highly susceptible to polemics and, in reality, always *validly* open to critical questioning. A stable public perception of ‘symmetry’ is forfeited as an *a priori* the moment one decides to collaborate from a condition of moral exposure through a marketized humanitarianism.

Translated into macro-political terms, the event of a ‘humanitarian marketplace’ can be considered disconcerting for the way it muddles modernity’s social imaginary of ‘mutual benefit’ (Taylor, 2002). Critical researchers usually diagnose it at this level in one of two ways: by suggesting that any form of ethical consumption and agency within this marketplace amounts to a narrow-minded act of intervention that ‘effectively elevates the economy to the prime vehicle for affecting change’ (Carrier, 2008: 46); or by granting the possibility of a ‘multivocal’ and ‘polymorphous’ production, not just commodified or decommodified, of social value (Barman, 2016: 218). The first view is guided by the historically-minded intuition that ‘neoliberal capitalism’ is an all-encompassing ‘force that can contain its negation’ (Muehlebach, 2012: 25), while the second view is premised upon the hope that from such a diverse intermingling of plural ends manifested at the local level a sustainable source of economic democratization, empowerment and balance can emerge (Abélès, 2010: 185; Gibson-Graham, 2006: xxi; Hart et al., 2010: 11).

My general argument is that there should be a more satisfying option, a conceptual path that can allow social critique to grasp the global effect of this historical development in its positivity and go beyond the universe of permutations that our standard sociological divide allows: the social/ the economic/ the uncategorizable. Thus, I will proceed to further elaborate on the meaning of symbiosis as well as on its implications for both our understanding of human micro-dynamics and policy macro-interventions.

Redefining symbiosis

Although the pioneers who coined the term ‘symbiosis’ in 1877 and 1878 defined it openly as a relation or situation of ‘coexistence’ or ‘living together’ that could simply be at times considered ‘mutualistic’, the latter connotation is the one that immediately acquired cultural significance (Sapp, 1994: 6-20). At its most rudimentary, the idea that mutual aid was part of animal sociality had already surfaced within French post-revolutionary thought, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon offering in 1840, for example, the kind of vivid depiction where ‘the elephant knows how to help his companion out of the ditch into which the latter has fallen’ (1970: 228). Following the experience of the Paris Commune, an event often considered the last substantial effort in the mutualization of the workers’ movement (see e.g. Defert, 1991: 227-232), a surge of interest in mutualism emerged among natural theorists (Sapp, 1994: 18-20). Whether as an argument of natural theology, social anthropology or evolutionary theory, the mutualism associated with symbiosis became in countless instances the key antithesis to counter the post-Romantic attitudes towards nature – Hobbesian, Malthusian, Darwinian – which came to populate the late nineteenth century (see Worster, 1977: ch. 6).

‘Mutualism’, besides its historical baggage, is just a poor description of any symbiotic relationship. It misleadingly conveys a sense of cooperative intention or, at the very least, a sense of cooperation. In doing so, it cannot account for those now well-recognized cases where there is ample room to describe as symbiotic a long-standing relationship that started as a ‘hostile bond’ (Sapp, 2004: 1050-1052). As Myra Hird puts it, symbiosis does not ‘corroborate social theoretical characterizations of sociable life as cooperative: lichen might well be the symbiotic emergence of a fungus attacking an alga for nutrients, after, say, 25,000 times’ (Hird, 2010: 63). The way I adopt the criterion of symbiosis here builds on the value-neutral definition that is becoming prevalent in contemporary biology and that, in its minimal form, is recognizable to anyone in contemporary culture: ‘an association between different species from which all participating organisms benefit’ (Douglas, 2010: 5-6).

The value of adapting this notion to human affairs may not be perceivable at first. There are after all many types of ‘associations’ that are thought to produce benefits for all the parties involved – market exchange, reciprocal gift-giving, democratic citizenship, to name only the most obvious examples. But there are significant aspects that are unique about the biological pattern of symbiosis. My suggestion is that from a recognition of its peculiarity one can start to imagine human collaboration in new terms; namely, as a *co-enhancement of capabilities achieved in the context of a contingent relation constituted by practices of freedom*.

The criterion of ‘symbiosis’ is one that is external, one that, regardless of the drives and modes of reasoning that are involved in a situation, is able to assess the collaborative effects that appear *in the context* of a relationship or interaction thanks to a widely agreed-upon scale of assessment. Only under this condition can one speak of ‘mutually’ beneficial relationships.

As researchers in this area have been insisting for a long time, any specific study or determination of symbiosis can only refer to ‘the interaction between the organisms, not the organisms themselves’ (Douglas, 2010: 8), since it would be teleological to attribute something like a ‘mutualistic’, ‘parasitic’ or ‘competitive’ character to an organism’s behaviour based on the eventual result of a given interaction (Sapp, 1994: 134). Natural selection is what ultimately can explain why pursuing certain behaviors can turn out to be mutually beneficial for certain organisms. An ‘alliance’ is oftentimes what endows a species with more fitness for survival (Douglas, 2010: 2, 12, 137). But those behaviors are never done with an eventual symbiosis in mind, or at least it has become clear that such a generalization cannot be derived from this grid of intelligibility (Martin and Schwab, 2012) – which, in turn, is arguably why this strand of biological research has been increasingly helpful to theorize nature as something other than a goal-directed or ‘unified’ system (Latour and Lenton, 2019: 665-669) and leave behind any semantic trace of ‘replication as life’s defining teleology’ (Hird, 2010: 61).

Symbiosis describes a *co-enhancement* rather than any type of give and take, mutualistic or otherwise. An ant and a tree are not ‘exchanging’ things. Any such collaboration is simply one of the possible results that a ‘chance encounter’ between species can have (see Douglas, 2010: 46). Their behaviors just happen to benefit someone else (c.f. Sennett, 2012: 72-86). For the same reason, a symbiosis in human terms can be imagined as a *contingent relation* constituted by *practices of freedom*, that is, by parties with autonomous trajectories who react in non-entirely predictable ways to what or who they encounter in the world, based on how they come to problematize their experience or what Western political thought has at some points managed to apprehend as an individual’s own ‘peculiar interests’ (Palacios, 2018: 86).

A symbiotic characterization cannot suggest any thoughts on intentionality as such, considering that, as a wide-ranging biological conceptualization, it needs to apply to organisms that have no foresight. Microbes, as it has been proven and accepted since the 1960s and 70s, are particularly prone to symbiotic mergers or ‘endosymbiosis’ and would have played a central role in evolution (Margulis, 1999). Nevertheless, that a non-human organism can lack foresight does not mean that one cannot ‘distinguish its activity from mechanical causation’ (Connolly, 2011: 24). As such an influential and pioneering voice in this area of biology as Lynn Margulis has emphasized, even the simplest of bacteria display circumstantial preferences (Margulis and Sagan, 1995: 218-219). It is because of the basic freedom to react in particular ways that inheres within every natural being, and not a lack of ‘agency whatsoever, such that any organism could be replaced by any other’, that a phenomenon of environmental convergence like symbiosis can take place (Latour and Lenton, 2019: 663).

In the case of biology, natural selection can fill in the content of what ‘collaboration’ means within a symbiotic context. One can say that the ‘fitness’ of two individuals is simultaneously enhanced without having to say anything about their mutualism as particular species. In many cases, in fact, the benefits that an organism derives do not even come from anything the other party does. They just appear as a result of the relationship. It is as though certain organisms are simply ‘tuned to function well in the context of the symbiosis’ (Douglas, 2010: 169-170). Likewise, in many other cases, although the collaborative effect may come directly from something the other organism stands to offer, the benefits each party gains are ‘cost-free’ for the partner. No extra effort or sacrifice is needed. The impact on fitness is all positive (Douglas, 2010: 60). Rather than isolating some organisms as the ones

who can be intrinsically considerate or, worse, as the ones who happen to be other-oriented for selfish reasons, all that a language of symbiosis can really say is that they are ‘being’.

For the application of symbiosis to a humanitarian marketplace, instead of fitness, we can refer to *capabilities* as an immediately justifiable baseline, being a common framework that, since Amartya Sen (1999) conceived it, has been increasingly adopted and accepted in politics and academia as a minimal understanding of human development.⁴ This scale of assessment was originally intended as a critical comment on the lack of balance among the beneficiaries of social development rather than on the lack of balance between the agents and targets of humanitarian intervention. Nevertheless, it is a scale that allows us to solidify the biological analogy and accept the premise that it is always possible to ask, as in nature, the extent to which a market-mediated and hence serendipitous collaborative encounter provides sufficient benefits for all those involved in the contingent distributive pattern of such an open-ended partnership.

A heuristic critical optic

A conceptualization of humanitarian collaboration that is this open-ended in terms of what can count as a relational impact in terms of differential benefits can be uniquely useful to displace the financial mode of accountability that has long dominated the assessment of entrepreneurial projects and aid initiatives in post-welfarist times, whereby only the most tangible and immediately quantifiable effects and side-effects of a collaborative intervention are rendered visible (Rose, 1999: 146-156). The intrinsically political notion of symbiosis offers an alternative reference framework. The availability of this framework is not solely meant to inspire critical accounts of imbalanced impact and power relations within certain corners of the humanitarian marketplace, although it can certainly be helpful to elucidate the

stakes in this kind of targeted inquiry (see e.g. Palacios 2010). The larger ambition behind it is that, as a fitting diagnostic tool with substantial empirical reach for contemporary social theorization, it contribute to open up a new mode of accountability and distinct register of evaluative possibilities, that is, an actual ‘post-neoliberal’ horizon.

Methodologically, the criterion of symbiosis will have to be approached, at any rate, heuristically. For, taken too literally, the analogy can lead to either irrelevant or overly complicated judgments, given that some complementarities will improve capabilities that are not ‘central’ or worthy of theorization (Nussbaum, 2011: 28), while other cases will involve ‘tragic choices’ about competing humanitarian priorities (Nussbaum, 2011: 37). It will be crucial to keep in mind that within biology itself the methodological relevance of conceptualizing such relations was for a long time beyond the grasp of their technical purview. Ecologists as well as evolutionary theorists dismissed for almost a century the stability of the phenomenon (Sapp, 1994: 200). Even in their case, where one could imagine it is more straightforward to assess the balance of such commensurable factors as survival rate, reproductive output, pace of growth and the like, it is thought that ‘the complexity of the biotic interactions is overwhelming’ (Sapp, 2004: 1053).

The difficulty in grasping the analytical effectivity of this concept lies in the way collaboration cannot be deduced in symbiotic cases from anything other than its own existence. To put this conceptual challenge into perspective, one only needs to think about the now well-documented fact that an encounter between the same two partner species may be symbiotic in certain circumstances and not necessarily in others (Douglas, 2010: 8). Even without this fact in mind, in trying to elaborate on the standard features of the symbiotic

phenomenon biologists have long appreciated the problem of its containment (Martin and Schwab, 2012). To this day, beyond agreeing (for the most part) that it involves mutual benefits between species that cannot be called ‘mutualists’ but sustain a somewhat ‘intimate’ relation, they have only been able to add that their beneficial interaction must be persistent enough. Even then, they could be forced to acknowledge that, ‘it is biologically unrealistic to create a simple dichotomy based on duration of contact between relationships that are, and are not, symbioses’ (Douglas, 2010: 11).

A symbiosis is always open to disruptions. Its consistency is not a crafted achievement but, essentially, a sustained convergence of conditions. It is nothing more than the meeting point of two or more individual trajectories in the context of specific environmental factors. Symbiosis does not describe any sort of ‘human tendency’ that can be rendered governable through a calculative form of rationality that predicts its curve of productivity (Cohen, 2018). To this extent, it can only lead to something other than a biopolitical mode of organization.

None the less, symbiotic dynamics might still be susceptible to a certain kind of policy thinking. Despite the fragility of their conditions of existence, it would be possible to ‘encourage’ their endurance – in the sense that policy agents could find ways of cultivating symbiotic initiatives by providing their already witnessed successful appearance with more support. It is not possible to ‘governmentalize’ them (Foucault, 2007a). *One cannot presume to know in advance* what initiatives will engender a symbiotic interaction and, most importantly, which of these will be the most balanced and hence worthy of policy-directed cultivation.

Despite the intention of the fair trade movement to create ‘committed relationships with producers’ (Cotera and Ortiz, 2010: 108), for example, the circuits of collaboration that fair trade promotes cannot be assumed to fully embed the exchange of commodities in a reciprocal or socially balanced collaborative relation (De Neve et al., 2008: 3-10; Schmelzer, 2010: 233-234). Fair trade consumption renders the economy a ‘site of decision, of ethical praxis’, but it does not result in any social ‘whole’ or ‘commonality of being’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 86-87). Very much like in volunteer tourism, fair trade allows for an encounter between two asymmetrical parties that may or may not result in a balanced collaboration: the benefits of fair trade are unevenly distributed among producers, especially in relation to women, and are far from guaranteed, since the supply of such products substantially outweighs their demand, the latter being largely restricted as it is to educated consumers in the North (Schmelzer, 2010: 231, 233).

In a strictly economic model of coexistence, the generalization of a practice like bargaining or market exchange is supposed to guarantee or at least approximate, by the law of demand and supply, a circuit with an equitable distribution of value. Similarly, in a social model like the one described by Marcel Mauss, the widespread ritualized practice of gift exchange is supposed to have facilitated a fair distribution of goods and services, by the law or obligation to reciprocate, in circuits like that of the Melanesian *kula* (Douglas, 1990: xiv). But in the case of a symbiotic model, there is no uniformity of practice, no such rules or self-regulating laws of exchange. Fair trade can be understood to work through emergent, variable and *incommensurable* complementarities between socially distant and independent parties (c.f. Gibson-Graham, 2006: 62). A consumer that wants to effect a ‘boycott’ (Schmelzer, 2010) is suddenly linked to another one that simply wants to look more Western and ‘modern’ by buying fair trade coffee from a Starbucks (De Neve et al., 2008: 16), which is a

company that is only interested in sourcing a small percentage of this kind of coffee as part of its corporate social responsibility program (Schmelzer, 2010: 237).

Symbiosis materializes the possibility of a model of value that is not ‘overly unified’ (Lambek, 2008: 134). It is a way of appreciating from a macro-perspective the kind of value that is intrinsically contingent and local, that is, produced by what can be considered as acts, not of *either* (self-interested) ‘choice’ *or* (collective) ‘obligation’, but of ‘judgment’, in the sense of personally meaningful intervention (Lambek, 2008: 136-138). For this same reason, a symbiotic circuit cannot promise that the benefits of a collaborative chain will eventually reach an even pattern of distribution among all the parties involved; there is no automatic synthesis of interests, guarantee of universal applicability or any sort of binding moral nexus within a humanitarian marketplace.⁵

Conclusion

Modern thought has long moulded its understanding of a free society’s circuits of collaboration upon the form of the market (Palacios, 2018). Yet, currently, the messy cultural penetration through market avenues of such an open-ended ethos as humanitarianism allows us to consider an alternative strategic projection for an ‘economy’ composed of practices of freedom, at least in the sense that this term is arguably being used in post-capitalistic formulations such as ‘human economy’ (Hart et al., 2010), ‘economy of survival’ (Abélès, 2010) or ‘community economy’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006); namely, as a circuit whose spatiality and totalizing effect cannot be presumed beyond the idea that it comprises a series of contingent yet potentially self-sustaining dynamics among plural individualities leading, from an external point of view, to an aggregate productivity with a generally positive balance

for those involved and, crucially, a balance that is still susceptible to correction and redirection by means of policy; specifically, in our case, via symbio-political cultivation.

Perhaps the most accurate way of defining the type of circuit of collaboration that symbiosis can form is found in the concept of ‘serendipity’, in all of its simplicity. This is a concept that was coined on January 28, 1753, in a decade when the very modern belief in self-regulating order was going through a process of consolidation (Sheehan and Wahrman, 2015: ix, 233-249), and, for the same reason, a time when the idea that society could be a holistic compound made of a certain human tendency, stable preference or homogeneous interest was still in doubt (see e.g. Palacios, 2018: 93, ft 8). By making reference to this concept of serendipity, a symbiotic circuit of collaboration can be suggested to emerge ‘naturally’ without risking an interpretation that refers us back to a collaborative effect that stems from an objectifiable aspect or ‘normal norm’ of human sociality (Foucault, 2007a: 57). These are circuits whose sustainability does not depend on the acceptance of a certain moral rule, communal bond, collective right, mode of exchange or any other type of relational injunction. Instead, such circuits come into being and are continually maintained by a serendipitous meeting and found synergy, if partial complementarity, of multidirectional interests, needs and, ultimately, desires – which is how, from the perspective of contemporary biology, inter-species solidarity can be comprehensively, albeit not exhaustively, defined. It is the contingency of a field encounter rather than the reassurance of an inhibitory promise what can sustain spontaneous collaborations in nature and produce ‘an achieved state in which desire ... constructs its own field of immanence’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 173).

‘Symbiosis’ invites us to embrace a heuristic type of evaluative interpretation rather than a new ‘metric’ for global development. It is a lens open to the unexpected and even polemic nature of many of our contemporary styles of collaboration. In an explicitly critical vein, however, it indexes the political questioning of a humanitarian marketplace around three axes: an understanding of policy that is about cultivating rather than governmentalizing balanced collaborative circuits; a conception of macro-sustainability as a spontaneous effect that is not guaranteed by any holistic logic and that therefore requires timely deliberative interventions; and a critical analysis of distributive micro-dynamics that, instead of simplifying agency through a divide between social and economic interests, drops the assumption that there can be a type of human collaboration that teleologically finds balance on its own. In general, these three axes point to the relevance of embracing a contrast between ‘biopolitics’ and ‘symbiopolitics’ within current social theory.

¹ Brian Massumi elucidates perfectly what is conceptually entailed by this humanist return: ‘The back-formation of a path is not only a “retrospection.” It is a “retroduction”’: a production, by feedback, of new movements. A dynamic unity has been retrospectively captured and qualitatively converted’ (2002: 10).

² In this article, I will adhere to the notion of biopolitics introduced by Foucault in his governmentality lectures, where he studies liberalism as ‘the general framework’ (2008: 22) for the modern governmental techniques that harness the productivity of a population based on the statistical or regular ‘naturalness of desire’ (2007a: 73). I do not assume that biopolitics is intrinsically negative (see e.g. Nasir, 2017), but I do assume that the exploration of an alternative framework is intrinsically justifiable. Biopolitics will always be dangerous, for, as Foucault (2007b: 116) put it, ‘how can the [calculated] growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?’

³ Durkheim’s explanation of worker specialization relies on a biological analogy that would be hard to describe as anything but symbiotic, inspired by Darwin’s iconic account of speciation by reference to

a densely populated piece of turf with countless species of plants managing to coexist close together (Durkheim, 1997: 209). Sociologists working in the field of human ecology would in fact later elaborate on Durkheim's formulation of organic solidarity in these terms, if only to stress that symbiosis is a non-fully-developed form of sociality (Park, 1939).

⁴ The capabilities approach, as Martha Nussbaum (2011) calls it, started with Sen's well-known proposal of seeing development as a matter of freedom rather than economics, freedom understood as the range of opportunities that are presented to an individual in society to become a person with a certain quality of life. In general, however, as Nussbaum has contended, it is misleading to say that capabilities are about 'freedom', since freedom is not necessarily in itself a social good and can often stand in the way of more collective needs (2011: 70-73). Thus, I follow the emphasis on capability, rather than on freedom (which has already been assigned other semantic tasks in this article), to refer to a measure of collaboration that evaluates an individual's relative 'opportunities to choose and to act' (Nussbaum 2011: 20).

⁵ Like the criterion of 'symbiosis', prices accomplish in principle the feat of translating contingent subjective utility into a measure of value that can be collectively recognized, as an examiner of this article well pointed out. Further, prices also serve to assess the issue of balance in a collaborative relation that is supposed to be of mutual benefit. Nevertheless, the way the price mechanism has been conceptualized in orthodox economics usually comes accompanied by a teleological expectation about the spontaneous order that fluctuating prices are able to produce (Palacios, in press).

Governmental intervention is required, from this traditional perspective, in order to facilitate the naturally balanced market order, however this order is mathematically derived. By contrast, symbiosis signals a type of spontaneous order that lacks a natural balance. The ideal balance must be not only 'constructed', as neoliberals would say, but also decided (see Palacios, 2018).

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