When Charity Does Not Begin at Home: Exploring the British Socioemotional Economy of Compassion

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Abstract

The British socioemotional economy is marked by a tension between cosmopolitan humanitarian sentiments and the denial of sympathy for geographically close, but socially distant, strangers in need. The essence of this tension can be captured by the Dickensian notion of 'telescopic philanthropy'. A proper understanding of this tension would benefit from examining both short-term and secular trends - proximate and distal causal mechanisms. The paper is not explanatory in nature, but aims to generate sensitizing concepts, while at the same time seeking to steer the altruism, morality, and social solidarity literature towards a more active engagement with history, power, and ideology.

Keywords: *Class, Cosmopolitanism, Cosmopolitan Altruism, Globalization, Morality, Neoliberalism, Social Distance, Solidarity, Sympathy, Telescopic Philanthropy.*

Introduction

1.1 'Charity begins at home', as the proverb goes. The proverb indicates a normative demand as much as a common-sense reality of moral obligation to those close to the source of charity. The force of moral obligation to the local and familiar is so strong that philosophers, writers, theologians, sociologists, and social commentators of all sorts have long reflected upon the possibilities of extending charity beyond this realm, i.e. of moving from local solidarities, be they based on families, tribes or nations, to cosmopolitan ones (Bellah 1999; Smith 2002 [1759/1790]; Sorokin 2002 [1954]; Singer 2009).

1.2 The mere existence of this proverb, however, suggests that from time to time people have felt the need to remind themselves of their obligations toward their immediate surroundings vis-à-vis the wider world. In this paper I examine a phenomenon that calls for such a reminder, viz. the existence in the UK of charitable commitments towards geographically distant strangers, described as 'cosmopolitan altruism' (Wright 2002), and the simultaneous neglect of sympathy for geographically close, but socially distant, strangers in need.^[1] Following Charles Dickens, I call this phenomenon 'telescopic philanthropy'.^[2]

1.3 The paper does not explain telescopic philanthropy, but argues that an adequate explanation thereof could take into account both secular and shorter-term trends (Chase-Dunn 2011: 10-11). In other words, the paper's goal is to contribute to the generation of 'sensitizing concepts' that can pave the way for future empirical studies of this phenomenon (Bowen 2006: 2; Blumer 1954; Zerubavel 2007: 141).

1.4 I illustrate my points with impressionistic evidence from a case study of charity shop volunteers. In order to ground my argument theoretically, I use Clark's concept of the 'socioemotional economy', which designates the 'rules and logics' that govern the distribution and administration of scarce emotional resources, in this case compassion (Clark 1997: 14).^[3] In so doing, I address some of the limitations of the wider literature into prosocial behavior, namely its lack of engagement with ideology, history, and power (Seu 2000).

1.5 The paper's structure is as follows. The first section provides a methodological note, while the second explains the notion of the socioemotional economy of compassion. The third section reviews the concept

of cosmopolitan altruism, which is then illustrated in the fourth section. The fifth section focuses on the idea of geographically close but socially distant strangers. The sixth section, which deals with the possibility of change in the distribution of sympathy, is followed by a reflection on the uses of proximate and distal causal mechanisms.^[4]

A Note on Methodology

2.1 Although this paper is theoretical in scope, it draws on interview data from a study conducted between 2005 and 2007 on charitable volunteering.^[5] Against the background of sociological debates about compassion, the chief aim of this study was to understand participants' motivations.

2.2 Overall, I conducted interviews with 58 charity shop volunteers^[6] from different organisations, notably Oxfam (n = 27) and Cancer Research (n = 13), but also from charities such as Age Concern (n = 3). Additionally, I conducted 10 interviews with volunteers working for other charitable organisations – among them, a Salvation Army community centre (n = 5). The data reported here draws on interviews with charity shop volunteers working for Oxfam (n = 4), and Age Concern (n = 1). In addition, I report data from interviews with volunteers working for the Salvation Army community centre (n = 2). Interviewees were asked for consent and guaranteed anonymity, and interviews were transcribed and coded according to key themes. One such theme related to the distinction between deserving and undeserving recipients of compassion, especially as this distinction concerns geographically distant strangers in need. This distinction arose spontaneously in the course of some of my interviews.

2.3 The data presented here are impressionistic, and marginal amongst respondents. This notwithstanding, I considered that these data were worth reflecting upon because they point towards questions which have remained largely unexplored (eg telescopic philanthropy) in spite of their intrinsic sociological importance. In turn, the tension invoked by telescopic philanthropy has been and remains important in the British public discourse, eg vis-a-vis public discourses about 'deserving and the undeserving' in the context of welfare cuts.

2.4 The following is a brief description of volunteers quoted in this paper. Unless otherwise indicated, all respondents fall within the category of 'post-retirement' volunteering (Davis Smith and Gay 2005; Musick and Wilson 2008). All names used to identify interviewees are pseudonyms.

- Patricia was a retired librarian who highlighted her love of books as one of her reasons for volunteering at an Oxfam bookshop.
- Amy, an Oxfam bookshop volunteer in her 20s, had previously worked for other Oxfam shops and was looking for paid employment at the time of the interview.
- Emma was an Oxfam bookshop volunteer who also worked as a psychologist.
- Sandra started to volunteer for an Oxfam bookshop after losing her husband.
- Judy and Brian volunteered for a Salvation Army community centre that was open to everyone, but was especially welcoming of homeless people. Judy, a retired midwife, was born in France but came to Britain as a child during the Second World War. Brian was also retired.
- Linda volunteered for an Age Concern shop.

Compassion and its Socioemotional Economy

3.1 Along with spite, compassion is part of the array of emotional reactions that human beings, as evaluative creatures (Sayer 2005), can display in response to another being's suffering. While spite invites mockery or even joy at someone else's misfortune, compassion entails a 'suffering with' those who have been 'been injured by life on a grand scale' (Nussbaum 2001: 301, 405). A key thread of the Western philosophical tradition, one associated with Aristotle's work, tells us that compassion rests upon three judgements: a judgment of seriousness ('is this suffering serious?'), a judgment of responsibility ('is suffering the product of bad luck?'), and a judgment of 'similar possibilities' between the damaged person and the onlooker (Nussbaum 2001: 306; 1996: xi).^[7] Understood in this way, compassion is premised on the conviction that human beings, resilient though they may be, can be seriously damaged by events such as illness, violence or personal loss (Nussbaum 2001).

3.2 Compassion's place in everyday life varies greatly across social formations and throughout history. What is considered serious undeserved suffering and who is considered to share the onlooker's possibilities is contingent on social and historical settings. Anthropologists report that members of societies at the brink of material collapse might not be able to afford sympathy and grief at the loss of a child (Clark 1997: 129; Turnbull 1984). In contrast, actors from wealthier and more stable societies routinely write sympathy cards in all sorts of circumstances (Clark 1997: 23).

3.3 Nor is compassion granted the same value in all social contexts. Even in societies that value compassion, actors do not always react compassionately to other people's misfortunes. Because sympathy, as any other emotional resource, is arguably costly, actors face the need to administer their compassion lest they exhaust it.^[8] Such administration of (arguably limited) emotional resources lies at the heart of the metaphor of the 'socioemotional economy' of compassion (Clark 1997: 130-132), a metaphor that points our attention to the distribution of compassion within any given society: who gets sympathy from whom under which circumstances and according to which rules.^[9] However, it should be noted that the assumption upon which the socio-emotional economy metaphor rests is not unproblematic. Alternatively, a number of philosophical traditions (Bellah 1999; Sorokin 2002; Revel and Ricard 1998) contend that compassion can be conceived not as a finite resource, but as a skill that can be cultivated.

3.4 As far as the sociology of compassion is concerned, Britain possesses a number of features that call

for analysis, but which have not yet received enough attention. These features, which will be discussed below, include Britons' sustained support of overseas causes, and animal welfare, as well as the existence of under- or crosscurrents of neglect for locals in need.

Cosmopolitan Altruism

4.1 Wright has suggested that a British charitable ethos has a distinct cosmopolitan orientation, as compared to its American counterpart, with which it otherwise shares many similarities (Wright 2002: 8). As a proportion of the GDP, charitable giving in the UK is approximately half that of America (slightly under 1%, and above 2%, respectively) (Wright 2002: 8). However, donations in Britain tend to be 'spontaneous' (through spare change) (Wright 2002: 13), 'peripheral to social identity', and oriented towards 'universal causes such as Oxfam and Save the Children' – which contrasts with a more 'planned', identity-based, and local ethos that, Wright argues, characterizes American charitable giving (Wright 2002: 24-25). If 'charity begins at home' is the chief guiding principle for Americans, Britons are, in this account, keen to give time and money to causes beyond their immediate groups of affiliation (Wright 2002: 11).

4.2 For Britons 'the most compelling needs are often not their own (or local ones) but those of others who are far less well off and often very different from them. International aid often gets the largest piece of the charitable pound followed closely by medical research, child and family welfare, religion, heritage, and a particular favourite, animals.' (Wright 2002: 12).

4.3 The differences in giving patterns between the USA and the UK, Wright notes, reflect differences in 'expectations of public and private sectors; attitudes towards money, income and wealth; tax policy; and the strength of fundraising practices and institutions' (Wright 2002: 14). Wright has proposed a distinction between 'altruism' (UK) and 'generosity' (USA) to characterize these distinct giving patterns. According to this distinction, if the American giving ethos is driven by an 'enlightened self-interest', Britons conduct themselves more in line with 'collective duty' and cosmopolitan altruism (Wright 2002: 23 and ff.). Indeed, at least since the 1970s, humanitarian organisations with a cosmopolitan orientation such as Oxfam and Save the Children have consistently ranked among the top ten charities favoured by the British public (CAF 2007).

4.4 Whether this pattern has changed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath is an empirical question. However, data from the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) suggest that overseas causes remain a priority for British charitable donations (see Table 1, below).^[10]

Table 1: 'Causes and voluntary income' (March 2012)

Education/Training	8.86bn
The Advancement of Health or Saving of Lives	5.91bn
The Prevention or Relief of Poverty	4.49bn
Generable Charitable Purposes	4.29bn
Overseas Aid/Famine Relief	3.52bn
Religious Activities	2.96bn
Disability	2.89bn
Arts/Culture/Heritage Science	2.71bn
Economic/Community Development/Employment	2.66bn
Environment/Conservation Heritage	1.91bn

Source: (Charities Aid Foundation 2012; figures in pounds sterling).

4.5 In what follows, I illustrate the idea of cosmopolitan altruism, while at the same time pointing to one crosscurrent within the British charitable landscape, namely telescopic philanthropy.

Worthy Geographically Distant Strangers

5.1 The following snippets from an interview with Amy and Patricia might be read as a manifestation of the British cosmopolitan ethos. While interviewees' responses are not to be taken at face value, they at the very least illustrate what may be a socially desirable response:

Interviewer: What about Oxfam?

Amy: Well, as a child I watched the news and I saw famine and I saw poverty (...) and, em, so that made me feel that it was something I wanted to get involved with. (...) It is easy to forget sometimes, that we are actually raising money. But I try to remember that, because it reminds me of why I'm here.

Patricia: She [Amy] has put me to shame, because I was putting my own self-interest [first]. I'm not quite like that. But for her Oxfam was the impetus then. To me, it was both [the

5.2 The tone of Patricia's response was much more common in my sample than Amy's tone, which was an exception. Indeed, most of my respondents tried to distance themselves from the ideas related to compassion or altruism, let alone cosmopolitan altruism. Instead, they tended to present themselves as looking predominantly after their own well-being. However, Amy's response, uncommon as it was, spurred Patricia into admitting that for her Oxfam's values were also 'a consideration'. Amy's account was also uncommon for her declared sense of belonging to a global community, which seemed to co-exist with a less pronounced sense of local belonging:

Amy: I mean, really, for me people who Oxfam help, they feel like my family, you know? I have a very global feeling. And I feel that, even though I don't necessarily feel very much part of the community here, I do feel that we are part of the global community, and this is something that really matters to me.

5.3 Though few respondents professed to be card-carrying cosmopolitans, some of them nonetheless expressed awareness that the British involvement with overseas charitable causes is not universal:

Linda: Have you heard of 'Drop the Debt'? I was demonstrating in Trafalgar Square and a Jewish [sic] couple came up and said: 'Why are you doing this? Why are you putting yourself in this position for people you don't know, that you'll never meet'. They said: 'in Israel, we have enough problems sorting our own things out, looking after our own security than to worry about anyone else'. [11]

5.4 However, as the next section illustrates, cosmopolitan currents co-exist with a contrasting feature of the British socioemotional economy, viz. the denial of sympathy for sections of the local population.

'...you don't have compassion for your own people, but you have it for people you don't know'.

6.1 The topic of deserving and undeserving recipients of compassion arose spontaneously. During a pilot interview, an elderly female volunteer quipped 'in this country some people would rather give money to save a dog than to help a blind person' (field notes). On another occasion, during a group interview with Emma and Sandra, Emma pointed to what she saw as an 'odd contradiction' in the way that British society perceives citizens from less wealthy countries. For her, this contradiction stems from the willingness of some sections of the British population to give money for distant causes while at the same time withholding sympathy for local people in need. During one exchange, both Emma and Sandra commented:

Emma: I think there is a lot of compassion in England, I really do. I mean as soon as there is a disaster people just give so generously.

Sandra: I think there is less compassion for people that are poor here. They tend to judge.

Emma: Yes, that's true, they have far less compassion for people in England.

Interviewer: So that would be a contradiction...

Emma: In a way, yes, and odd contradiction that you don't have compassion for your own people, but you have it for people you don't know.

6.2 This 'odd contradiction', which embodies telescopic philanthropy, brings together the ideas of cosmopolitan altruism and the 'undeserving poor'. Both of these notions rest upon distinct conceptions about suffering, agency, and responsibility to which neither Sandra nor Emma subscribed: 'I just don't relate to that' (Sandra). And yet both volunteers could speak meaningfully about this tension with reference to 'generalized social attitudes' (Mead, quoted in Holdsworth and Morgan 2007: 403), which might be taken to signal an aspect of the British socio-emotional economy:

Emma: Also I think that abroad there are natural disasters, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and things like that, whereas here people think 'damn it, I'm paying so many taxes, why can't they pull themselves together and do something about it? Why do they have so many children and they haven't got a husband and haven't got a job? Why do I have to pay?'

6.3 Entailed in the judgements that Emma comments on, and criticizes, is a vision of distant suffering as the product of misfortune (and thus deserving of compassion), and of the local poor as 'undeserving' of sympathy in virtue of their having brought about their own suffering. Inhabitants of distant regions – presumably from the global South – are portrayed as defenseless in a way which arguably denies their agency. At the same time, some sections of the local poor – women in this example – are construed as feckless, irresponsible, and not conforming to social conventions of respectability (cf Evans 2010; Skeggs 2005); and thus unworthy of sympathy.

6.4 However, it must be noted that perceptions leading to thinking about some individuals and groups as 'undeserving' are not immutable. Rather, these perceptions are amenable to change, as the next section illustrates.

Humanising strangers in need

7.1 Socioemotional economies are not stable in time or space but are malleable and vary throughout history, as well as within and among societies. Shifts in a socioemotional economy of sympathy can come about when the appraisals which give rise to sympathy are modified – when changes occur in perceptions about what counts as bad luck and serious suffering, and who counts as sharing similar possibilities with the observer. The following quote from an interview with Salvation Army volunteers running a coffee outlet open to the public, but particularly welcoming to homeless people, illustrates how

moral judgements leading to compassion can change as a result of social interaction with locals in need. This contact provided the respondents with an opportunity to challenge their own pre-conceptions about the responsibility and worth of locals in need who were previously socially distant:

Judy: I just think of one young man who I've just found out the other day. He's always been in foster care, he's never been with his family. (...) He's been into, I suppose, drinks, drugs, I don't know. (...) I'm beginning to feel when I see him in town now that he's more polite to me though, before he was rather rude when I didn't offer pennies. But I think he's beginning to feel that we're with him. (...) I'm beginning to learn about these people.

Brian: And it is basically what we've all found out, that people who live on the streets, they aren't untouchables. You can communicate, takes time, but quite often they will respond. And they like it, they enjoy it. Otherwise they wouldn't come back.

7.2 While volunteers spoke from a perspective that upholds values associated with the 'respectable' classes, such as cleanliness (Judy: 'he's basically clean the major said, it's just the clothes, he said...'), it is also apparent from this quote that, through volunteering, people may gain direct personal contact with socially distant others. The shifts of perception which result from these interactions can facilitate empathy and sympathy (Clark 1997: 36), thus turning previously unworthy individuals into worthy recipients of sympathy and care (cf. Wuthnow 1991: 307).

Elements for an Explanation: Proximate and Distal Causal Mechanisms

8.1 Telescopic philanthropy calls for an explanation. Such an explanation could benefit from the use of both short- and longer-term perspectives – proximate and distal causal mechanisms (cf. Nee and Swedberg 2005). From a short-term perspective, cosmopolitan charitable commitments could be understood as resulting from factors mediating the judgements leading to compassion, such as discourses about 'the chav' (Hayward and Yar 2006), or the moralization and criminalisation of poverty under neoliberalism (Skeggs 2005; Wacquant 2008, 2010). These judgements could, in turn, influence some of the mechanisms which have been identified as key to charitable giving, eg. 'awareness of need' (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011).

8.2 On the other hand, exploring the role of secular trends – distal mechanisms – could also be illuminating. Different perspectives are available for this task, so I will limit myself to mention a few which strike me as particularly appealing: figurational sociology (Linklater and Mennell 2010), and world systems analysis (Chase-Dunn 2011; Wallerstein 2010). As far as figurational sociology is concerned, Norbert Elias hinted at how attentiveness to long-term trends might yield interesting insights when he comments, in passing, that in the late 20th century 'many members of richer countries feel it to be almost a duty to do something about the misery of other human groups' (Elias 1996: 26). He further argued that such a development could be understood in the context of shifts in the balance of power among human groups during the 20th century – due, for example, to decolonisation – alongside the astonishing increase in material welfare and life expectancy in the Western world during the second half of the twentieth century. The beauty of this approach is that it would allow us to understand cosmopolitan charitable behaviour within the context of wider social processes, such as the dissolution of European empires and the rise of the welfare state.

8.3 As for the neglect of geographically close people in need, an explanation could be elaborated in terms of social distance and the generation of class distinctions (cf. Forman-Barzilai 2010). These factors are likely to dash compassion, eg through their impact on the three judgements (of seriousness, responsibility, and similar possibilities) underlying this emotion. Proximally, social distance of this sort could stem from the same processes whereby the middle classes routinely distinguish themselves from the working classes by means such as disgust (Skeggs 2005) or mockery (Raisborough and Adams 2008). When linked to ideological frameworks such as 'neoliberalism' that frame structural social exclusion in the idiom of moral inadequacy, this distance can result in the outright de-humanisation of the 'feckless poor' (Evans 2010; Skeggs 2005; Hayward and Yar 2006).

8.4 A distal approach could help to account for the historical robustness of telescopic philanthropy in Britain, for the co-existence of overseas humanitarian missions with the neglect of the local 'undeserving poor' was not unheard of in Victorian times (Ferguson 2004: 121-122). Such an approach could take inspiration from the proposition that periods of globalization and hegemonic decline tend to see a heightened tension between 'cosmopolitan elites' and local 'dangerous classes', a tension which is taken to be a 'structural feature' of the capitalist world system (Friedman 2004). This approach would have the advantage of connecting the sociology of emotions with the study of long-term historical transformations. Table 2 summarises the explanatory strategy outlined in this section.

Table 2: Proximate and distal causal mechanisms

Phenomenon and historical precedents	Judgements	Proximate mechanisms (examples)	Distal causal mechanisms (examples)
Sympathy for geographically	a) Is suffering serious?	'Awareness of need'	The process of civilization (Elias 1996),

distant strangers; cosmopolitan altruism (Wright 2001).	b) Is suffering due to bad luck? c) Does the onlooker share similar possibilities with the victim of serious suffering?	'Altruism' 'Values' (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011)	the rise of humanitarianism (Sznajder 2001), and the 'decline of violence in history' (Pinker 2011) Cosmopolitan currents associated with globalization and hegemonic decline (Friedman 2004)
Denial of sympathy for geographically close but socially distant strangers. Telescopic philanthropy (Robbins 1990: 214; see also Agathocleous and Jason 2010; and Ferguson 2004: 115-116).		Penalisation of poverty under neoliberalism (Skeggs 2005; Hayward and Yar 2006; Wacquant 2008, 2010).	Social distance associated with rising levels of inequality in the context of globalization (Arrighi 1994; Friedman 2004).

Discussion

9.1 This paper has advanced the following claims: (A) There is a long tradition in Britain of engagement with cosmopolitan charitable causes, dating back to at least the 18th century. (B) There is a parallel tradition of denial of sympathy for locals in need. (C) Sometimes (A) and (B) stand in tension with one another, in what Dickens called telescopic philanthropy, which may be a historically robust feature of the British socioemotional economy. (D) Telescopic philanthropy can be taken as a sensitizing concept and is sociologically interesting insofar as it offers a contrast with the normative and descriptive elements contained in the proverb 'charity begins at home'. (E) Telescopic philanthropy can be overcome, at least partially, through direct personal contact. (F) Explanations of telescopic philanthropy would benefit from being attentive to social processes unfolding at different time scales.

9.2 I have identified two explanatory dimensions of telescopic philanthropy. First telescopic philanthropy is associated with short-term social processes, eg the social construction of 'awareness of need' and the social distance created by the stigmatization and moral condemnation of the 'undeserving poor' (eg 'the chav') under neoliberalism (Evans 2010; Hayward and Yar 2006; Skeggs 2005: 968). Second, it is related to long-term historical processes such as the spread of cosmopolitan ideals in the context of hegemonic decline, the process of civilization, the rise of humanitarianism, and the 'decline of violence in human history' (Sznajder 2001; Elias 1996; Friedman 2004; Pinker 2011).

9.3 This second, and secular, level of analysis is particularly relevant to the study of charitable giving and philanthropy, which thus far has focused mostly on proximate mechanisms (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011), and the wider field of altruism, morality, and social solidarity. While the proximate level of analysis is of course necessary, there is also much to be gained by examining long-term historical trajectories which, together with ideological currents, have been largely overlooked by research into generosity (Seu 2010: 654). Attentiveness to secular trends and distal mechanisms would help us make sense of the apparent parallels and differences between early 21st telescopic philanthropy and its Victorian counterpart, as well as seemingly similar tensions experienced during the 18th century in response to the rise of commercial society (Tronto 1994: 38).^[12]

9.4 While previous literature has focused on the American case (Wuthnow 1991; Clark 1997), this paper has focused attention on the British socioemotional economy of sympathy, which I have described as being traversed by a number of different currents of sympathy-giving. It is my hope that, in so doing, it has also demonstrated that the socio-emotion economy of sympathy in the UK and elsewhere deserves further analytical attention, for it has a bearing on social solidarity, but also on social divisions within society. Future accounts of the British socioemotional economy of sympathy must acknowledge not only the existence of cosmopolitan currents of sympathy, but also the barriers that exist within British society for the wider circulation of this emotion and indeed the forces that work to negate sympathy for some locals in need – the 'undeserving poor'. The fact that such barriers can be overcome, though perhaps not completely abolished, through simple acts such as volunteering opens the possibility of moving to a more just distribution of sympathy through the education of compassion (cf. Bornstein 2010; Nussbaum 2001).

9.5 At a more general level of reflection, my analysis resonates with the idea that, if sympathy were a landscape, it would be a 'craggy and uneven' one (Clark 1997: 253). In this account, the landscape of compassion under conditions of modernity is a multi-layered and changing terrain. Modern forms of organization create novel possibilities to help and harm, while also making compassion subject to competing social forces at different historical levels and time scales. Future research could elaborate a more nuanced understanding of the socioemotional economy of sympathy, the historic dynamics that have shaped it, and the ways in which it has shaped social structure, subjectivity and policy (cf. Berlant

9.6 If empirical research is to benefit from the availability of clear concepts (Blumer 1954: 4-5), it stands to reason that telescopic philanthropy and related concepts ought to be examined more carefully, both theoretically and empirically, in order to produce more refined notions. It is my hope that the reflections herein presented generate interest in these tasks. Directing our analytical gaze to the socioemotional economy has the potential of offering some new vistas, not least through opening a connection with the sociology of emotions and 'historical social psychology' as understood by Elias (Linklater and Mennell 2010). In turn, focusing on distal causal mechanisms could help us to regain the 'longer-term perspectives that alone could make shorter intervals intelligible', according to Elias (Linklater and Mennell 2010: 385).

9.7 Many empirical questions remain. Is telescopic philanthropy a real force in Britain and elsewhere as opposed to a marginal or, worse, imagined phenomenon? Has anyone subjectively lived the tension associated with telescopic philanthropy, apart from the fictional character of Mrs Jellyby? Furthermore, who engages in telescopic philanthropy?^[13]

9.8 Further research into socioemotional economies is needed at different levels, from the local to the transnational, since the socioemotional economy of sympathy and other emotions may have significant policy implications. For example, public views of debt as morally despicable and of debtors as undeserving of help, let alone sympathy, may hypothetically contribute to block the road of Keynesian policies needed to jump-start a slumped economy (cf. Krugman 2010). Future research might examine why sympathy for some animals, like dogs and horses, has become so strong in the UK (Charles and Davies 2008; McCormick 2008; Walby 2009), or examine the social construction of some sections of the population as 'undeserving' of sympathy – a question that arguably is relevant to those interested in fostering 'civility' and social justice (Baumgarten, Gosewinkel, and Rucht 2011). In the American context, gaining a better understanding of the socioemotional economy of compassion could be useful in the context of debates related to the 'punitive regulation of the poor' by the 'penal state' (Wacquant 2008: 2).

9.9 The question of whether support for cosmopolitan enterprises will diminish or be altered in some meaningful way as a consequence of the 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath remains open for empirical research, since economic crises tend to exacerbate nationalist feelings, class struggle and social unrest (Wallerstein 2010; 2012). Future research could also explore class sentiments and the moral injuries of class (Sanghera 2010; Raisborough and Adams 2008; Sayer 2005), against the background of, for example, inner social fragmentation^[14] and class divides among rising income inequality. Researchers could also look for those figurations that make possible different degrees of 'involvement and detachment' vis-a-vis the suffering of geographically close and distant strangers in need (Elias 1956).

9.10 Drawing on 'social pattern analysis' (Zerubavel 2007: 132), future studies could try to search for trans-historical social patterns related to telescopic philanthropy, and charity more generally. Such studies would have to spell out the universal features related to charity and philanthropy, while at the same time making sense of historical specificities with which these terms are associated (Zerubavel 2007: 133). The creation of formal models is also a possibility. For example, such models could take as a starting point the observation that 'communities that tend to distribute their goods equally are also keen to aid people in poorer countries' (Materia et al. 2005).

9.11 The limitations of this paper should be kept in mind. In drawing on a study of charity shop volunteers, the paper has focused narrowly on a very specific cross-section of the British population. Furthermore, the case study upon which the paper is based did not explicitly set out to investigate telescopic philanthropy, but focused instead on the motivations of charity shop volunteers. In this regard my data are therefore limited, and there is much that could be learned about telescopic philanthropy from case studies designed to investigate it (cf. Flyvbjerg 2006). A conceptual limitation concerns some of the presuppositions embedded in the notion of the socioemotional economy, which, as any metaphor, has its limits. Is every instance of sympathy given to geographically distant strangers one that is denied to locals in need? This answer should be 'yes' if we assume that sympathy is a scarce resource, as Clark (1997) suggests. We ought to draw a different conclusion, however, if sympathy is not a scarce resource, but one whose supply can expand and indeed is amenable to be cultivated and educated, as some philosophical and religious traditions teach (Bellah 1999; Sorokin 2002; Revel and Ricard 1998), and the 'expanding circle' of compassion metaphor would like us to believe (Forman-Barzilai 2010). If this is so, cosmopolitan and local sympathy need not stand in a zero-sum relationship with each other.

9.12 Fundamental though sympathy can be for the flourishing of individuals and societies, it is surely fallible, for it may rest upon flawed conceptions of the good life, or on misguided assumptions about what constitutes serious suffering and bad luck (Nussbaum 2001: 441). Construing the local poor population as unworthy of sympathy and help on the grounds that they are responsible for their own suffering may be as erroneous as construing distant strangers as worthy of sympathy due to their vulnerability to natural catastrophes, thus denying their resilience and agency.^[15] Although an analysis of the normative side of this issue lies outside the scope of this paper (for a relevant analysis see for example Galston 1993), such analysis may benefit from an understanding of the socioemotional economy of compassion.

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Notes

¹Ulrich Beck has examined a similar phenomenon in the German context, and accounted for it in terms of the impact of 'reflexive-modernity' upon social distance and boundaries (Beck 1996: 386-387).

²Dickens used this term in *Bleak House* to refer 'to Mrs Jellyby, who is described as "a lady of very remarkable strength of character, who ... is at present (until something else attracts her) devoted to the subject of Africa; with a view to the general cultivation of the coffee berry — and the natives — and the settlement, on the banks of the African rivers, of our superabundant home population". Mrs Jellyby is 'too much occupied with her African duties' to brush her hair or take care of her children...' (Dickens, quoted in Robbins 1990: 214; see also Agathocleous and Jason 2010; and Ferguson 2004: 115-116).

³For convenience sake, I will use sympathy and compassion interchangeably here to designate the common, though historically variable, human experience of 'feeling sorry for somebody else with problems' (Clark 1997: 30). I am aware, however, that both terms can also be distinguished on the grounds that, for example, the term 'sympathy' can also denote our ability to share in the joys of others (Clark 1997: 28).

⁴I use the term 'causal mechanism' here as shorthand for 'causal pathway' or 'causal process'.

⁵Alongside volunteering, charity is one of the many ways through which compassion has been institutionalised and is routinely expressed and administered in societies such as the USA and Britain (Wuthnow 1991). However, both activities 'can be much more than (or indeed much less than) a demonstration of concern for others' (Moore 2010: 32; Clark 1997: 27). Charitable giving can offer only an approximation to the study of compassion.

⁶At least since the closing decades of the 20th century, charity shops – essentially second-hand shops devoted to raising money for charitable organisations – have become a common sight in British high-streets and thoroughfares. Thus, they offer a window through which charitable commitments, and the relationship between 'moral sentiments and civil society' (Wilkinson 2005: 164) may be observed. ⁷ A seemingly contrasting view argues that 'moral intuitions' preceed 'moral reasoning' (Haidt 2001). Assessing whether Haidt's argument about moral judgements is compatible with Nussbaum's account of compassion is beyond the scope of this paper, however.

⁸Healthcare professionals, and nurses in particular, routinely face the challenge to manage their care so as to avoid 'compassion fatigue' (Boyle 2011; Sabo 2011).

⁹The term refers here to 'rules and logics' guiding 'exchanges of socioeconomic resources' (Clark 1997: 143). I focus here only on one pattern, namely telescopic philanthropy. I have nothing to say about 'rules' here, however.

¹⁰ The Charities Aid Foundation's graph 'Total income over time, as at Mar[ch] 2012' suggests that charities' income has declined sharply from 2010 onwards. From a top of 60bn GBP around 2010, to under 36bn GBP in 2012. The 'Voluntary income over time, as at Mar 2012' has declined from a maximum of slightly under 15bn GBP in 2009 to under 3bn GBP by 2011 (CAF 2012). Whether or not there has been a shift towards local causes as a result of the 2008 financial crisis is a question that lies beyond the scope of this paper.

¹¹Another volunteer responded to Linda's words saying the following: 'But they [Israelis] have, you must admit, they have troubles. I can understand their way of saying that, the same as I can understand why you're doing [this].'

¹²Tronto writes: "I see a close connection between the political, social, and economic changes occurring in [eighteenth-century, RF] Great Britain, the growth of what I have called cosmopolitanism, and social distance" (Tronto 1994: 37).

¹³We could hypothesise that, at the very least, telescopic philanthropy is practised by social actors whose social position allows them to afford to give charity, while at the same time inviting them to distance themselves from the 'undeserving poor'.

¹⁴The alleged fragmentation of local solidarities should not be taken for granted. Notwithstanding the 'broken society' discourse and narratives which see social fragmentation as one of the defining features of British society, research on civility and rudeness suggests that local solidarities remain vibrant and resilient (Smith, Phillips and King 2000, cit. in Taylor 2010a).

¹⁵One Guardian reader commenting on the Coalition Government's decision to increase foreign aid put it thus:

'Yes, it is absolutely the right thing to do. Always and without hesitation. (...) The poor in the poorest countries in the world are however not intrinsically nicer or more honest than our own poor. Some of them can be just as bumptious, downright rude and aggressive as any other group of people. They need our help, they should have our help, and we are morally compelled to reach out and give it. Please don't romanticize them though. (...) Our own desperately poor and unfortunate also need help, and should be given help, regardless of personality, manners or temperament. I would be one of the last to romanticize some of the most desperate and unsavoury cases, but personal distaste should never trump responsibility. They need help, we can help, therefore we must help.' (Comments by 'Struans' to Cameron 2011).

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