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Individual motivations, emergent complexity and the just city: Is egoism one of the main problems of contemporary social-spatial realities, and altruism the principal antidote?

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1. Introduction: questioning a widely accepted view

Egoism - human selfishness - is today harshly criticised. Three points are often emphasized in this regard. First of all, the capitalist era in which we live is deemed to pivot on a form of ruthless, selfish competition: the influential sociologist Bauman (2000), for instance, repeatedly underscores that the vast majority of individuals are bent on serving their own egoistic interests, and only a handful are disposed to altruistically help their fellow human beings. In short: "Capitalism makes people selfish and individualistic" (Fleming, 2005: 396). From the kind of selfish behaviour that is deemed typical of capitalist systems many individual and collective disadvantages are said to derive (Murtaza, 2011; Urquhart, 2012). Selfish market behaviour is also deemed to crowd out virtues. Many believe that this kind of selfishness epitomises human interactivity in our cities, which are considered in complete thrall to the mechanisms of market economy. Short (1989: 12) speaks of "cities of economic man", "cities as if only capital matters", and writes: "The rise of capitalist industrialism involved the development of a capitalism ideology, which extolled the virtues […] of perfect competition and self-interest" (Short, 1989: 13). The housing bubble that hit the United States in 2008, giving rise to the subsequent world economic crisis, has been widely attributed to the selfish behaviours of many economic actors[1].

Secondly, if on the one hand the market is deemed guilty of fomenting and exalting selfish behaviour, on the other economic theory is accused of having been built on this type of motivation. Adam Smith is often accused of having made selfishness the core of economic theorization, and so too has subsequent mainstream economics (Fazio, 2006). As the Nobel laureate in economics Vernon Smith (2008: 20) observes: Many scholars argue that the standard socio-economic science model "requires, justifies, and promotes selfish behaviour". See for instance Sobel (2009: 3): Economics makes predictions about behaviour "assuming the joint hypothesis of individual greed and equilibrium".

From this we might therefore deduce, thirdly, that one way to revitalise our societies is to curb self-interest and put greater emphasis on altruism. As Weinstein (2008: 39) writes: "At the root of our most pressing social problems […] are an excess of egoism and selfishness and a deficit of altruism. Consequently, a necessary component of the solutions to these problems is the creative promotion of altruism in the way people believe and behave. This argument - which has roots in most of the world's religions and humanistic ethical systems - was first articulated as part of the very foundations of sociology in late-eighteenth century Europe and late-nineteenth century United States". Substituting the presumed current focus on egoism with a new focus on altruism seems to be the solution (Gates and Steane, 2009). Actually, for more than two centuries altruism has been typically considered as *identical with moral concern* (Badhwar, 1993: 90).

In this article I will attempt to show that the overall question is more layered and complex than this. It therefore requires a more manifold approach in terms of both positive economics and normative theory: Section 2 will outline two cardinal features of today's cities and societies (the multiplicity of actors involved, and the pluralism of lifestyles) which in my opinion shift the focus of attention from individual motives to other structural aspects; Section 3 will cover two issues in positive theory (Does the market system require, and positive economics itself necessarily presuppose, that economic actors are selfish in their actions? Is altruism always possible and viable?), and Section 4 addresses two issues in normative theory (What public rules are preferable in social-spatial systems characterized by plurality and pluralism? What is the main individual virtue when people are actors in extended complex systems?). Section 5 will briefly draw the conclusions. The entire discussion will consist of comparison with the true teachings of Adam Smith, which need to be reconsidered in order to clear away various misunderstandings of Smith's thought that have come to predominate. The article's intention is also to show that the tradition of "classical liberalism" was very different from what is today called

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[1] As Hansen and Movahedi (2010: 367) observe: "One of the most popular explanations of the contemporary financial crisis […] is personal greed, a 'selfish' pursuit of 'self-interest' that has no recognition of others at its boundaries or limits […]. It is the greedy investment bankers, corrupt politicians, and unscrupulous lobbyists who should take the brunt of the […] economic meltdown in the United States".

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"neoliberalism".

But first, some clarifications are needed to forestall any misconceptions. As well known, Auguste Comte (1851/75) is credited with having coined the term "altruism" to define selfless, other-regarding desires[2]. Here by "altruism" is meant the concern for the well-being and welfare of others, at some cost or disadvantage to oneself. More precisely, a fully altruistic act is one that is primarily motivated by a recognition of another's desires or needs. Hence, such motivation implies first, the concern to increase the other individual's welfare, and not merely to be the agent of an altruistic act; and, second, the desire to obtain this as an end in itself (Badhwar, 1993: 110). Altruism does not necessarily include drastic self-sacrifice; it is rather the willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other individuals, without ulterior motives but with some inconvenience to the agent (Nagel, 1970: 79). By contrast "egoism", or selfishness, may be defined in strict terms as the motivation of an agent who attends to his or her interests without *any* regard to - or even at the expense of - other persons. (As we will see, not all self-interested actions are therefore necessarily egoistic). In short: in the case of altruism there is an interest in other persons as ends in themselves, while in the case of egoism the other persons are regarded as *merely* means to someone's own ends.

I assume here that the variety and diversity of human motivations is real, and that altruistic behaviours cannot in the end be all reduced to – and converted into - egoistic motivations: David Hume (1751/1998: 164–169) convincingly suggested many counter-examples to this last possibility[3].

2. Two crucial features of our cities and societies: preliminary notes on plurality and pluralism

Before discussing the questions mentioned in the "Introduction" it is important to underscore certain fundamental features of today's urban societies. (I am assuming here that cities are made first of all of "processes" rather than "objects": Jacobs, 1961; of "flesh" rather than "concrete": Glaeser, 2011).

For eons, humankind lived in clusters: our ancestors lived for at least 2.5 million years in small bands and tribes (Smith, 1998). In terms of the human biological timeline, only recently have people massed together: large societies, including town-size settlements, are very recent phenomena; it is estimated that still 12,000 years ago all human beings lived in small foraging bands - each band composed of a few dozen individuals (Dubreuil, 2008: 196). As well known, the first true cities began to form in the Middle East in around 3500 BC; the settlements of that period could amount to 20,000 inhabitants (Véron, 2006). As Childe (1950: 4) writes in a famous work on the early cities in the Middle East: "The first cities represented settlement units of hitherto unprecedented sizes". On the same phenomenon, see also Carter's (1977: 15) observation: "The urban settlements were of a completely different order of size from anything which had previously existed". From the outset, cities were characterized by dense agglomerations of people and economic activities. Over time, cities and markets became more and more inextricably linked. Urban expansion has always been an integral part of processes of economic development. The prosperity generated by markets is decisive for the life of cities, and the interactions and knowledge spillovers that take place within urban realities provide fertile ground for the development of markets themselves (John & Storr, 2011: 46). Cities have been highly successful in their development: in Europe today (2017), more than 75% of individuals live in a city; and 80% of the wealth produced in the developed countries comes from cities (Landry, 2008). As Schneider (2003: 21) observes: "For the first time in human history, cities are […] becoming the universal medium of people's life on earth". (To avoid misunderstandings: the crucial point is that for a very long period of human evolution social life was *exclusively* life in small groups; today people obviously live in both small groups - e.g. families and associations - and in large social-spatial agglomerations - e.g. cities - but what is new is the omnipresence and importance of the latter).

The decisive issue is that the transition from past life lived among a handful of people to life in the extended dimension of contemporary urban societies has qualitatively and structurally altered the *type of problems* that arise (and hence also the *type of solutions* that can be successfully implemented) (Hayek, 1982; Popper, 1945; Simmel, 1908). Simmel (1908/2009: 53 ff.) expressly speaks of "structural differences" deriving from "mere differences in group size". This does not simply concern a different "thickness of interaction" - on which the literature on the city has often focused - but more profound differences.

In particular: in a small group of people, (i) the relations among its few members are for the large part direct and simple; and (ii) the group as a whole tends to be homogeneous. As a consequence, complexity is minimal or entirely absent.

Conversely, in a large group, as in a contemporary city, (i) many of its numerous components will not know each other at all and their interaction is iterative and recursive (i.e. non-linear), with many direct and indirect feedback loops; and (ii) a marked heterogeneity and pluralism is present. In this case, complexity reigns. We may speak of *plurality* in the former case (Section 2.1) and *pluralism* in the latter (Section 2.2). In themselves, these are two obvious features, and they will be only briefly mentioned here. What is instead of key importance is how these features affect our fundamental questions (as we shall see in Section 3 and in Section 4). The crucial aspect of cities is clearly that plurality and pluralism are spatially concentrated, which makes their presence even more significant.

2.1. First issue: plurality (reciprocal unknowability and unintentional consequences)

In this case, the crucial aspect is the vast quantity of individuals that comprise today's complex societies and cities. Cities are without doubt among the most complex objects in our world (Ghitter & Smart, 2009). Indeed, social-spatial systems are typically made up of large numbers of active agents interacting.

On the one hand, this means that we are only able to know directly and personally a tiny amount of the people that compose the extended urban orders of which we ourselves are a single component. As Adam Smith (1776/1993: 11) observed long ago in a passage that is often overlooked: in civilised society each human being "stands at all times in need of the co-operation and assistance of great multitudes, while his [-her] whole life is scarce sufficient to gain the friendship of a few persons".

On the other hand, generated among all these people is an intricate web of relations which produces ripples of unintended side-effects. This occurs because whenever we carry out our intentions in a complex urban world - made up of many individuals, activities and relationships - there will be countless side-effects that could only partly be foreseen; most of the outcome depends on a series of combined reactions of a largely random nature. In this case, the interplays among forces and circumstances are so numerous and complex that it is impossible to know all possible social and spatial outcomes in advance (Moroni, 2012). Any urban action (for instance opening a café in a certain neighbourhood or using a public space in a new way) therefore has *immediate* effects, to some extent intentional and predictable, along with *remote* side-effects that are not necessarily intended or predictable.

[2] See Comte (1851/1875: 496): "Although Egoism is the more ordinary basis of unity among animals," he writes, "there are still many races which approximate through Altruism to unity of a nobler and more beautiful kind, and also more complete and more durable".

[3] On this see, in the recent geographic literature, Sack (2003: 29): "Both self-interest and altruism are real impulses and must be taken into account."