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International AID
From the Moral Case, to Everyday Life Experiences

Introductory remarks

As its title is meant to suggest, this paper is a reply to Sir Tim Lankester's article "International Aid: Experience, Prospects and the Moral Case", published in the *World Economics* last year[1]. Therefore, I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude for the author's responsiveness to my interest and queries in the area of development economics.

The main point of Sir Lankester's article was, I believe, to strengthen the case for international aid by showing first, that it was not just a theoretical (e.g. optional!) matter[2] and second, that its efficiency was not a self-evident *fait accompli*, but a still-to-achieve objective, entirely contingent upon human and institutional factors such as the will, interests, and past experience of donors, as well as the system of governance and existing policies from the recipient countries. Moreover, the human factor is actually two-fold, in the sense that one can focus either on the external part engaged in the aid mission – the donor –, or on the internal one – the recipient. Sir Tim Lankester looks into what motivates the former, whereas I intend to unpack the life-experience of the latter, for I strongly believe that what ultimately decides the success or failure of development projects has more to do with understanding their life situation, than with the actual quantum of aid.

Although the two cases grounded on the above-mentioned claims (the moral and the pragmatic) may seem completely separated in Tim Lankester's article for he allocates distinct sections to them, I have

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[1] *World Economics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January-March 2004, pp. 17-39.

[2] The fact that the author used arguments from theories of *justice* – that is, reflecting social and institutional realities – as opposed to purely ethical ones (built around philosophical concepts) helped him to advocate a proactive understanding of the matter, which would bring about better attitudes and actions in this area. The alternative would have been to create yet another pretty picture of moral entities, which have all the good attributes except for reality.

reasons to believe that they are not only inter-connected, but also deeply inter-dependent, which is crucial for the kind of existentialist scenario (centered around life-experiences of the poor) that I intend to outline here. In order to prove this, I am going to combine two sets of argumentative tools: one will be logical, the other – empirical. The former will help us address the issues at stake in Tim Lankester's moral case, and find ways of strengthening it; the latter will help reminding the real goal of this attempt – which is to improve the prospects of aid missions in real-life scenarios, rather than in theory.

The first, rather theoretical section will consist of an extended analysis of the moral case that Sir Lankester started to build. The focus will be not only on the supposedly fruitful aspects of social justice theories, but also on their potential risks; both heroes and villains (of the case for international aid) will emerge from the analysis, and new leads will be discovered. The main criterion for testing whatever findings will remain the pragmatic one: questioning their implications on the life-experiences of the poor.

The other approach that I have mentioned (empirical, as opposed to analytical) will consist of providing a description of life in a particular community, which I have known and learnt from. In this case, the 'empirical' obviously means more than just the use of examples – which can be invented, or refined: it actually involves relying on a set of personal experiences and convictions, thereby *testifying* in – rather than just advocating – the case for aid and development projects, under discussion here. Again, the purpose will be not so much to prove that my claim has the sort of objective validity that a theoretician would normally seek to achieve, as to enforce it by whatever relevant testimonies – be them contextual, perhaps even biased; in this case, the 'biased' aspect consists of using an example derived from life-experiences in a particular developing country: my own. And it is exactly what I regard as the strength of it; indeed, I would not be writing this, had I not learnt that lesson.

A critique of liberalism

Insofar as ethical and social justice issues are concerned, arguments are never compelling enough to make them effective – that is to say, the logical grounds of a moral case, however strong, will never transform it into a practice. This is, *in nuce*, the corollary of Tim Lankester's article –

namely, his skepticism concerning the Keynesian belief that "the world is ruled by little else" than philosophical ideas. Had it been so, there would have been no need for him to try and unpack the moral case for international aid in the first place, or for me to substantiate it any further. Unless they breathe and suffer (e.g., spring out from life experiences), arguments remain ineffective in people's lives, or even neutral to their needs and actions, regardless of how much truth or justification we grant them. The only case in which Keynes' thesis is entirely valid is that of ideologies, which are *manipulated* ideas – e.g., concepts charged with meanings that hide and support particular interests and a will to power.
However, this is not to say that arguments are useless or that moral cases are unworthy of our attention, especially when such an issue as international aid is concerned. The point of my unfriendly remark about theoretical arguments is that on the contrary, they need not only a conceptual framework to make them coherent, but also a pragmatic or existentialist substantiation, in other words a body (made out of bits and pieces of human-life situations) so that they can then walk and act in the world, become 'ways of life', in Wittgenstein's terms. There is no better means to achieve this, than by focusing on the practical implications of whatever theory we look at – e.g., trying to understand what a particular concept, claim, or moral call feels like, when seen through the eyes of its subjects. It is this rather sensitive aspect of the case for international aid that I intend to highlight throughout my response to Lankester's argumentation.

Let me begin with a general remark concerning the latter, which entails a critique of it: liberalism is the only player in the race for moral justification for aid, displayed in Sir Lankester's article. While this is not a bad thing in itself, it may be risky – for it involves unidirectional thinking. My claim is that it is important to engage in a constructive critique of liberalism, because: 1) it is multifold – and arguably, some of its versions are better than others (Lankester mentions three and attempts a general evaluation of them); 2) albeit the most promising social-political framework inasmuch as governance and human rights are concerned, it is far from perfect, or risk-proof and in fact, recent history has witnessed terrible things being committed in the name of liberalism; 3) multifold and attractive as it may be, *there are* alternatives to liberalism, and we must at least consider them before embracing the latter. Therefore, I think it may be worthwhile focusing on the missing parts in

Lankester's scenario (a critique of liberalism, and its alternatives), rather than analyzing its constituents – which are straightforwardly outlined.

For the sake of facility, let me briefly summarize Tim Lankester's findings insofar as theories of justice are concerned: from the three most visited versions of liberalism – the social (Rawlsian), the cosmopolitan, and the (extreme) laissez-faire one – most promises to provide for the aid-oriented moral case come from the first one; the others are simply too far-fetched in this respect, for not in tune with "what people actually think"[3].

However, there are still issues to be clarified insofar as the **social liberal** view is concerned – starting with one of its core concepts: that of the "common humanity" taken as basis for international aid (together with its corollary concerning the border-proof system of redistribution). I think everyone agrees that, as long a belief in such a universal notion remains the only motivation behind international aid missions, we have the success story of development projects. Unfortunately (and Sir Tim Lankester repeatedly warns about this), more often than once aid missions have various other strings attached – political, commercial or otherwise – which make them morally dubious and pragmatically less successful. On the other hand, even though we agree that believing in a 'common humanity' does entail granting equal status and opportunities to all, regardless of their location and cultural affiliation, the specifics of this equality claim are less than clear. In fact, there are intense debates carried out between liberals and communitarians – as well as between representatives of various liberalisms – on what should be regarded as the bedrock implication of this claim.

This is actually a good place to start our internal critique of liberalism, for the most important corrective comments and suggestions in this respect come from thinkers belonging to the same group as Rawls – namely, Will Kymlicka and his doctoral supervisor, G. A. Cohen. The latter raises the problem in general terms (see G. A. Cohen, "Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities" in Nussbaum and Sen, 1993), whereas the former focuses on the *resources* vs. *welfare* distinction,

[3] Tim Lankester, *International Aid*, p. 35. The author obviously has a point there. It is when he stops being critical, granting that "the moral case is a strong one", that our views collide. I genuinely believe that the moral case is far from strong – as long, anyway, as the most popular view (the social liberal) remains utopian to a large extent, and not so popular in two of the richest countries (the US and Japan)!

which has been at the core of liberal debates ever since Rawls put the question about the right and the good in these terms.

The practical implications of this issue, '*What does a theory of justice ultimately aim at: equality of welfare, or just of resources?'* reach further down the road of average people's lives than we might suspect. They have to do with: a) what the poor are generally entitled to expect (as rightfully theirs) from the rich, and b) the attitude of the rich vis-à-vis their own situation and that of the poor. In ethical terms, these are the *redistribution* and the *responsibility* issues. I shall not get into the various details and arguments of the respective debates around these topics. Instead, I am going to make a few remarks about the practicalities of one stand or another in each of these matters – from the perspective of their significance for the poor. When customized this way, they become *motivational* and *behavioural* issues, having to do with people's expectations, intentions, and attitudes (those of both categories involved in aid missions – agents, as well as recipients), rather than with the general norms that regulate such projects.

The *resource*-based view of 'equal individuals' – namely, as "capable of adjusting their aims and ambitions in the light of what they can reasonably expect and of restricting their claims in matters of justice to certain kinds of things"[4] can be translated as follows: sensible people will only expect to have or achieve what is available / possible under the circumstances in which they live. In other words, if one lives in the middle of Africa, one should adjust one's needs to those settings, and not even dream of the facilities that Western-born people usually take for granted, simply because of the scarcity of certain natural resources – or the difficulty of making better use of them, due to inadequate physical infrastructure. (See, for instance, the vivid description from the beginning of Todaro's book on development[5], which contrasts the life of average people in North America with that of people from rural Asia.)

Caricature aside, I think the problematic aspect of the above rationale is self-evident. The alternative is a justice theory centered on the *equality-of-welfare* claim. "In a welfare-based scheme, just distributions are adjusted to the pre-existing pattern of ambitions and desires"[6]. Simply put, this means that we should adjust the quantum of aid, and not the needs of

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[4] J. Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory" (*Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 77, 1980), quoted in Kimlicka, 1991, p. 37.

[5] Michael P. Todaro, 2000, pp. 3-6.

[6] Kimlicka, 1991, p. 37.

people – to various climates and circumstances. It is, obviously, a much more development-friendly view than the 'sensible' (philosophically informed) one[7]. The question is how to transform it, from a general norm, into a global practice. Just one suggestion here, following G. A. Cohen's view that "the right thing to equalize is (…) 'access to advantage'"[8]: the normative emphasis should be – as Cohen puts it – on "a person not lacking an urgent desideratum through no fault of his own", which covers well "the equalitarian concern with such things as health, nourishment, and housing".
Indeed, the access-to-advantage claim seems the most promising norm in terms of the variety of aid projects that it can stimulate. Unfortunately, the necessary (and sufficient!) condition for putting this belief into practice is that aid be distributed solely on the criterion of urgent need – and not on urgent need associated with good-looking political choice, or with the prospect of reaching a new market.

Moving on to the next version of liberalism that Sir Tim Lankester refers to (and hints at its soft spot), the **cosmopolitan** view, what is most striking about it is its *utopian* aspect, which the author labels the 'global government requirement'. Indeed, the more compelling these liberals' case against global inequality, the less practical their suggestions about how exactly "Moral universalism and global economic justice"[9] are to be achieved. A fairly straightforward correction would be the replacement of this utopian assumption (the global state) with another version of 'the cosmopolite', based on a subtler meaning of *kosmos*: an ordered space, not necessarily homogeneous, but wisely organized – that is, one in which every little thing has its right place and value. The point I am trying to make is that something like what Clifford Geertz calls 'local

[7] It is not our purpose here to reject Rawls's view – or to criticize it, for that matter – on philosophical grounds. Its validity and consistency for the followers of Kant is a well-established fact. What this paper focuses on, however, is international aid – and in this context the welfare (of the poor) remains, unquestionably, the main criterion, regardless of what philosophers may think of its relevance for the quality of life. Moreover, in this context, to speak about foresight and self-discipline (as Rawls does) would be either a cruel, or an altogether stupid response to the situation of the poor – and the best treatment for it would be a six-month trip to a place where people live with less than $ 1 per day.
[8] Where 'advantage' refers to "a heterogeneous collection of desirable states of the person reducible neither to his resources bundle nor to his welfare level" (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993, p. 28).
[9] It is the title of a section from Thomas Pogge's *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2004).

knowledge' should be emphasized by the supporters of cosmopolitan liberalism, rather than the mere openness of borders. Indeed, if there were a guaranteed recipe for the success of development projects, this would have to be the main ingredient.

Let me try to illustrate the potential of local knowledge in this respect, by taking an example from Geertz and extrapolating it to an aid-mission context. In chapter 2 of his "Essays in Interpretive Anthropology", Geertz quotes a long paragraph from a 19th c. Dutch writer who describes a stunning sacrificial custom from Bali. In short, the story is that three of the Rajah's concubines willingly sacrifice themselves (by being burned alive) at the latter's death – and the entire event is celebrated by the Balinese society with both piety and enthusiasm. Unsurprisingly, the story is immediately turned into an argument for imperialism[10], but the subtler point that Geertz makes (despite his own, explicit affiliation with liberalism) is that there is a case for collective moral imagination beneath this story. We *do* get some feeling or flavor of the intense spirituality infiltrated in the ritual, terrifying as it is[11] – and despite our instinctive rejection of the idea that it could pass for normal behaviour anywhere on earth.

The point of this twofold reading of the story is that we can (and should) always appeal to our collective imagination, when encountering people from other cultures and walks of life, especially if we are trying to change their lives – as indeed we are, when embarking on aid missions. If bridging the gap by means of imagination is possible in the case of such radically different cultures as a modern Western and a seemingly primitive Asian, how much larger this common space of imagination (and how much more effective its empathic function) must be when cultures from the same time-period or with similar cultural backgrounds are concerned. Obviously, this is of utmost significance in the context of aid missions, which are bound to take place in far more traditional countries than the Western ones. I shall return to this claim (about the importance of 'local knowledge', or empathy with the collective

[10] "The English in India, the Dutch in Indonesia, and presumably the Belgians, the French, and the rest where they are, are right and justified in replacing ancient civilizations with their own, for they are on the side of mercy and emancipation, against deception and cruelty" (Geertz, 1993, p. 43).

[11] "The truth of the doctrine of cultural (…) relativism is that we can never apprehend another people's or another period's imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can therefore never apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours" (*Ibid.*, p. 44).

mentality of the indigenous) in the next section, when describing a personal experience of encountering 'the other' in a rather exotic, small community from my own country.

For now, all I want to emphasize is that to really understand another culture is not to judge it – regardless of how strange and incomprehensible it may seem by contrast with one's own. Indeed, this is an "essential measure of the liberality of a society" in Habermasian terms: to have its own form of *Sittlichkeit* (e.g., a pragmatic ethics or common spirit pervading the everyday life of a particular society), however alien or odd that may look to other societies. This is also what gives it a sense of cohesion and unity, and why, when immersed in a different culture, we perceive it as a whole: "intuitively we very quickly sense – as if we were ethnologists living in an alien society – how emancipated, how sensitive, how egalitarian the environment really is; how minorities and marginal groups, the handicapped, children and old people are treated; what social meaning illness, loneliness and death possess; how much of the eccentric and deviant, the innovative and dangerous, people are accustomed to tolerate, and so on"[12].

One could never over-emphasize the importance of sensing this local spirit – that we may perceive instinctively, but which is also worth exercising our moral imagination on – for whatever practices that involve communication with *the other*, especially when the success of aid missions (largely dependent upon a good understanding of poverty) is at stake. Without such an inside perspective, the latter are doomed to remain sad illustrations of this half-sarcastic, half-realistic remark of a communitarian writer: "the universal aspirations which are the essence of world religion, liberalism and socialism – equal consideration for all – seldom in practice exceed the 'universality' of the nation"[13].

Finally, the views of the **laissez-faire** group of liberals that Sir Lankester refers to can be seen as both fruitful and dangerous, depending on the type of individual taken for reference therein – because this extreme version of liberalism is all about individual choice and action[14]. The

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12 Habermas, in Dews, 1992, pp. 266-7.

13 Michael Fuller, *Making Sense of MacIntyre*, Aldershot UK and Brookfield USA: Ashgate, 1998.

14 Indeed, the role of the state is reduced to a minimum in Nozick's vision, the only functions ascribed to it being that of protection against force or theft, and that of enforcement of contracts. See Nozick, 1990, p. ix. On the other hand, Steiner's libertarian and redistributive theory is also – albeit more ethically appealing – focused

achievement of justice aimed at (corrective or otherwise) is therefore contingent upon the attitudes and beliefs of the individual, which can range from *pity* (hence, an inevitably patronizing attitude[15]), to genuine interest in the well-being of the other, and an *investment*–oriented behaviour. Regardless of the quantum of aid involved in a specific project, if it is granted for the right reasons (e.g. motives) and with the right attitude, it will always have a higher yield. This is, I believe, the most fruitful meaning of the corrective justice vision, otherwise bound to remain an abstract picture – or worse, a pretty mask used for hiding ugly interests. Here, politics and economics meet, for they can both become manipulative. Indeed, if for example "The eternal 'Polish question' was never, it appeared, really about Poland at all, but about some use to which Poland could be put or some hindrance which Poland represented in the larger designs of others"[16], the same can be said about poverty!

There are two subjacent ideas to this claim. One has to do with the background of an aid project – the motives behind it, and the attitudes of those who carry it out. The other has to do with its outcome. My

on personal relations. Suffices here to mention the titles of the last chapter's sections of his *Essay on Rights*: "Persons and Things", "Persons and Bodies", "Persons and Times", "Persons and Places" (Steiner, 1994).

15 A suggestive analogy may be worth making here. One of Roland Barthes' observations concerning the mythologies of our times refers to a particularly inspired artistic gesture of Chaplin's: namely, that of "establishing an identity between the nature of the poor man and that of the proletarian". Barthes argues that "No socialist work has yet succeeded in expressing the humiliated condition of the worker with so much violence and generosity" like Chaplin did with his representation of the primitive proletarian, reduced to a set of basic needs and reactions – therefore ignorant, or 'blind'. Indeed, "To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see" (Barthes, 1973, p. 44). Analogously, I would say, there is no better mirror for the humiliated condition of the poor like the ignorance of the rich towards the former. Ignorance, here, refers to any obliterate and / or insensitive attitude, from narrow-mindedness to lack of consideration for the other. It does not have to be intentional – or even conscious, for that matter. If, say, one of the people from a Western team engaged on an aid mission in a developing country misplaces his mobile phone and his first instinct is to look at the poor sitting next to him with suspicion, right then and there a gap is being widened – and it is the very gap that aid missions generally attempt at reducing: that between ways of life, status and behaviour based solely on material condition. The prejudiced opinion that the lack of goods and that of morals go hand in hand – while on the other side civilisation represents the privilege of the rich – is unfortunately more than just an opinion: it tends to be a dominant prejudice.

16 Iris Murdoch, *Nuns and Soldiers*, New York: Penguin Books, 1980, p. 18.

claim is that first of all, an aid backed up by the right motives and attitudes is productive, regardless of the amount of money invested in the project (or else, it remains a self-serving gesture of the rich[17]), and second of all, its yield is always bigger than forecasted. Arguably, this can be regarded as the main feature of development projects' accounting, and it is exactly the opposite of corporate accounting.

The kind of 'yield' that I have in mind is obviously more than just the standard, immediately quantifiable return on equity. I strongly believe that aid can bring along an improvement not only in the material life of people, but also in their mentality and social behaviour; so it should, in fact, if it aims to provide *sustainable* development. Incidentally, the strength of communitarianism lies in the very fact that it emphasizes this aspect: what spaces of encounter actually provide is an opportunity not only to satisfy our curiosities about 'the other', but also and more importantly to test our abilities to open up to, communicate with, and help the other. In this case, just as in the context of development projects, all that really matters is empathy – not gestures or intentions. Only empathy (e.g. understanding the other by putting oneself in his/her place) can effectively produce changes of heart, mind, and behaviour towards the other – be that the poor, the ugly, or the pathological.

Returning to our critique, I believe it is time now (after having drawn on some of Tim Lankester's suggestions concerning possible soft spots in the three liberal theories that he mentions), to widen the perspective, by encompassing other objections vis-à-vis the liberal views of social justice, objections coming from both inside and outside this theory's sphere of influence. Here are some of the well-known liberal critics of liberalism: Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott, John Gray. From the non-liberal critics, the most famous (and thorough) critic of liberalism remains Alasdair MacIntyre.

Interestingly enough, most of the liberals mentioned above are particularly dismissive of the Rawlsian universality claim. Hayek celebrates local and 'tacit' knowledge (e.g., embedded in customs and institutions); Popper talks about 'piece-meal' social engineering; Berlin advocates a rather agonistic version of liberalism, rooted in the conviction that basic human values and freedoms are contradictory,

[17] By this, I mean a gesture meant either to ease a guilty conscience, or to bring along various advantages for the donor. Sir Tim Lankester explicitly addresses this latter problem.

rather than harmonious, and not always right, as Kant and Rawls believed; Oakeshott is a relativist who only refers back to history and traditions. As for John Gray, he pragmatically distinguishes a realist type of liberalism from the classical, optimistic one, and argues (following Hobbes) that reaching a convenient 'modus-vivendi' in society is all that we can hope for – while Locke's and Rawls' belief in the possibility of achieving universal justice is far-fetched, in any case outdated[18].

How do all these apply to the moral case for international aid? In other words, what, if anything, can each of them contribute to make the call for aid stronger, and more comprehensive?

Perhaps the easiest one to apply is Berlin's view – simply because it's not supposed to be 'applied' (as a clear-cut theory), but practiced. Embracing his agonistic liberalism means to agreeing to accept conflict as part of all given situations, and not seeing it as the opposite of freedom, or rights. Conflict is so much embedded in every-day life scenarios, that learning to see it as such – and leave with contradictions, or look for compromises – is the only route we can realistic take and *get* somewhere, achieve something. For the moral case that would support the cause of development economics, this means to look at what is *feasible* – not desirable – from the viewpoints of both donors and poor countries. A value-pluralism kind of liberal approach entails, for instance, that aid projects be carried out accordingly to local needs and policies (be those imperfect, inadequate, or even incomprehensible from the donor's perspective). It also means that a certain type of project, albeit unsuccessful in one place, can prove to be a perfect fit elsewhere. The same goes for motivations – there is no such thing as *the* right reason (for aid), because conflicting motives can be right, just as well as we can have a set of reasons – all of which corrupt – that have a good yield. That much for the hope of a moral case! It looks as though Berlin's liberalism can only provide us with a normative stand insofar as international aid is concerned – not with an ethics that would enhance it. But I would not haste to dismiss it, considering what the opposite (Rawls' universalism)

[18] "Liberalism contains two philosophies. In one, toleration is justified as a means to truth. In this view, toleration is an instrument of rational consensus, and a diversity of ways of life is endured in the faith that it is destined to disappear. In the other, toleration is valued as a condition of peace, and divergent ways of living are welcomed as marks of diversity in the good life. The first conception supports an ideal of ultimate convergence on values, the latter an ideal of *modus vivendi*. Liberalism's future lies in turning its face away from the ideal of rational consensus and looking instead to *modus vivendi*." (Gray, 2000, p. 105).

provides. In fact, we may be better off choosing a realistic guide with a poor ethical background, than dwelling on a surreal moral case – that has no recognizable projection in a world where poverty hasn't been eradicated yet.

Although through a different route, Popper's views bring us to the same point insofar as the case for aid and other critical aspects of society are concerned. Basically, his recommendation is to apply the trial-and-error procedure in all domains – ethics and politics included. Unlike Berlin (and many other theoreticians), Popper believes in progress, and that it occurs with each and every newly falsified theory. Unfortunately, it is quite unlikely that this science-grounded view of social justice would help much in the attempt to strengthen either the moral case for aid, or its application. Arguably, if there were anything in science that could improve the motivational background, or the institutional design of aid projects, we would have learnt about it by now. But there is something in Popper that contains seeds of wisdom for the implementation of aid missions – namely, his critique of Hayek. When the latter's view, emphasizing tacit knowledge, is denounced as crippled because it does not come together with a view of tacit error, we can take it to mean that all prejudices should be removed – from the debate on international aid, as well as from social theories, because the poor are at least as prejudiced against as women, foreigners, and disabled people. Again, signaling such a red flag may prove more useful – in the course of our attempts to strengthen the future of aid – than whatever plea for a social contract that makes providing for the poor a priority.

This seems like the right note to end the critique on, for it stresses the main point that I think worth making throughout such attempts: it is applicable norms that we should search for (especially in pressing issues like the need for more aid), rather than foundational theories. Policies – rather than a universally applicable (e.g., motivating) moral case.

The moral case: new leads

One way of fighting the tendency to centralize all the 'right' motives for aid and the norms of all possible successful scenarios is to look at alternative social justice theories – like the traditional *republican*, or the recent *communitarian* ones.

There is no agreement between theoreticians on what exactly does republican freedom (or justice) mean. Traditionalists consider it to be the

positive exercise of self-government – and as such we can identify it in Aristotle and Rousseau, regardless of whether we count them as republicans or not. More recent thinkers (like Skinner and Pettit) give it a rather negative interpretation: freedom is no more than absence of constraints; Machiavelli operates with this concept, but so does Hobbes. Applied to states, it simply means independence, or the lack of external impediments. In terms of development economics, it translates as the will / possibility to offer grants on entirely non-political criteria; in other words, it means the end of aid-as-a-branch-of-the-foreign-affairs-department. To what extent this is a realistic scenario or not – it is for experienced economists like Sir Tim Lankester to decide.

But there is yet another implication of republicanism with direct impact on the aid missions debate – namely, the fact that self-governance requires virtuous citizenship; or, this is the challenge that all recipient countries must face (at least in theory) before actually being granted the aid. Again, it is an issue to be practiced, rather than discussed. (Indeed, Machiavelli's *Discourses* should be quite an inspirational source for states in the process of becoming self-sustained.) Habermas points out both aspects of this focus on virtuous citizenship: "The republican view (…) has the advantage that it preserves the radical democratic meaning of a society that organizes itself through the communicatively united citizens and does not trace collective goals back to 'deals' made between competing private interests. Its disadvantage, as I see it, is that it is too idealistic in that it makes the democratic process dependent on the virtues of citizens devoted to the public weal."[19]

Much more vivid conversations spring from the communitarian views expressed by neo-Hegelian theorists like Charles Taylor. As its name suggests, this is a theory about membership (as opposed to individualism); what the name does not convey, however, is its focus on recognizing and accepting the other in all hypostases and at all costs – hence, the label of multiculturalism, which is still very much celebrated in Canada. Obviously, the emphasis is on cultural – rather than economic – specificity; moreover, the communitarian side is so strong, that it may offset the sense of individuality to the extent that the recognition claim loses its subject. But these are details for theoreticians to settle. What is relevant for the issue at stake here – the case for international aid – is the economic interpretation of cultural recognition: namely, *redistribution*. Simply put, for a multi-ethnical state for instance, to 'recognize' all

[19] Habermas, 2001, p. 244.

cultural and ethnical groups means to grant them equal chances and possibilities – e.g., to redistribute its wealth so that the less well-off can enjoy the same dignity and life style (implicitly, means of expressing themselves) as the better-off. This is, indeed, a substantial contribution to the moral case for aid.

The Romanian lesson

All these theoretical findings or promises remain just that (theoretical), unless they are: a) substantiated by references to live situations, and – most importantly – b) *perceived* from the point of view of the less-endowed party: the poor.

Let me attempt the latter by getting back to an earlier claim – namely that, in the long run, poverty and development shape people's character and behaviour, not just their material situation. I would like to illustrate the need to go beyond the surface of their lives, and try to understand their existential backgrounds before attempting to change them (albeit for the better) with an example that I picked up seven years ago in my home country, Romania.

Like to most people born and raised in a big city, life in the countryside remained unknown to me (as a first-hand experience) until late in my youth. For many years, all that I knew about it was no more than what literature provides – usually an idyllic, in any case embellished picture. I only discovered its brutal, often grotesque realities when I had to spend three months in a village (just 15 miles from my city, but half-a-century behind it), working as interpreter for a French girl who was doing a monograph for a microfinance organization. When she finished her study there, we moved to a neighboring village, much smaller and poorer, where we spent another few weeks. It is this latter place that provided me and my French companion with the lesson referred to in the title of this section.

The name of the village is Slobozia, which comes from the verb "a slobozi" – in Romanian, *to set free*. For reasons which will become clear after I will have described life in this place, its name is mostly significant – for metaphorically a perfect fit. The village is spread on two hills – hence, its cold, windy weather – and quite isolated: the only road that links it to the next village gets easily blocked by rain or by snow. The soil is the worst in the region: "nothing but dry, stony layers", as an old man describes it. Hence – the poverty. Nothing can grow here, except for

some vegetables in the garden; more than half of the people in the village live with no electricity or running water – and with improvised sanitary cubicles in the courtyard. (My French companion and I lived in the home of one of the wealthiest families in the village – that of a teacher – and we still had to go to the toilet somewhere outside the house, beside the hen coop.) However, none of these (bad climate, soil, and infra-structure) is the reason why the village seems so remote from the rest of the world: the saddest thing about it is that it is dying. Its small number of inhabitants is getting smaller every day: part of them move away to other rural areas with a better soil, where they can support their families by developing agricultural activities; others work in the city and only come here to visit their older relatives, who could not find a job – or the strength to live their nests.

However, its bleak atmosphere is not what makes this village special – for sadly, the above picture could be used to describe numerous other rural areas in Romania. There is one good, and I would even dare say unique, thing about this community – which anyone who visits it will be surprised to discover: an intricate, multicultural experience infiltrated at all levels of life, from the petty commercial activities, to people's linguistic manifestations, religious beliefs and rituals. What I mean by the fancy phrase 'intricate multicultural experience' is something rooted in the simple (albeit stunning) reality that there are two different ethnical groups and three religions in this village. Indeed, almost half of the people living here are Gypsies, and the majority of them are Baptists. Most of the Romanians are Orthodox and Catholic, but some of them share the Baptist convictions with the Gypsies. They go to the same place for prayer – while the Orthodox and the Catholic Romanians observe each other's rituals (especially at Easter time) with interest, and realize with delight how similar they are.

What could have triggered all this sophisticated, intercultural experience? Apart from people's 'common humanity' – stimulated by the poverty they all share in this village – there is one other factor, much more concrete, which made them open up to new ways of living: money. As Fabienne – the French girl who had by now become my friend – and I quickly learnt from the Gypsies, as well as from Romanians (their versions were indeed the same!), a group of Dutch people had come and made donations to the people in the village a few years ago: brought them food, clothes, and other basic utilities. The Dutch also paid for the school to be reconstructed, and they have kept sending them helps every

few months ever since. They also brought a new religion: Baptism – without, however, imposing it as part of the helping package; the two (money and religion) were, obviously, connected – if by no other strings than the people who brought them, but with no explicit intention: the help was offered unconditionally. And it was definitely the change in their material (rather than spiritual) condition that made all the difference in people's life style and behaviour. The reason I'm mentioning this is because it constitutes the best example I know for what is nowadays labeled 'multiculturalism'.

Indeed, the way these people live together, both fully aware of the differences in their ethnic and cultural identities, and happy to accommodate each other's peculiarities is an illustration of the 'politics of recognition' that Charles Taylor & Comp. praise – without, actually, much hope of encountering it in practice. Moreover, although the people belonging to each of these ethnical groups and religious sects announce and exercise their respective affiliation, they do not seem constrained in any way by their collective identities; on the contrary, they feel free to satisfy all their curiosities concerning the other's affiliation. For instance, some of them attend another religious group's meetings; others like to 'borrow' their neighbors' symbols and use them as customized accessories. In short, none of them seems to have any trouble in shaping and expressing his/her individuality, regardless of the collective identity that their respective group 'imposes' on them. This again is an illustration of how one of the major worries expressed by the theoreticians who have joined the debate on multiculturalism (namely, that the politics of recognition – e.g., of the collective identities – might "script too tightly any one life"[20]) can be put aside. Although so poor (or maybe precisely because of that), the peasants from Slobozia feel entirely free to be themselves both as individuals and as members of different groups. It is a sad, but genuine kind of freedom, which remains a mystery for the rich.

Conclusion

The reason why I have chosen to describe this small community from one of the poorest regions of Eastern Europe is not so that I can advocate a communitarian viewpoint (which it just happens to reflect),

[20] Amy Gutmann, 1994, p. xi. See especially K. Anthony Appiah's essay "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction" (pp. 149-63).

and thereby reject one or several of the liberal views. It is, rather, because it constitutes the best illustration that I know of my conviction that aid missions can lead to sustainable development – by which I mean a change for the better in the whole life of a community, at both material and behavioral levels. When the Gypsy and the Romanian visit each other and share the same values (albeit expressed in different languages and manifested through different customs), when the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Baptist see their respective beliefs as complementary, instead of clashing – and all because of a successful aid mission – the development lesson is more important than the communitarian example. And that is what I have been trying to convey by using this episode from my own experience.

It is precisely that step further – from the moral case for international aid, to actual development scenarios – which this essay has been all about. Not the aid quantum, not the various theories of justice that can be used to promote an intensification of development efforts at global level, not even the high rate of return in the case of the most successful projects – a new generation of entrepreneurs in Africa, the commercial gains resulted from an updated physical infrastructure in Asia or the like. But the difference that aid can make in the life of the poor – for their material situation, for their health and education, but most of all for their sense of freedom (hence, dignity) and what the latter can bring to them in terms of life quality.

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