How everyday ethics becomes a moral economy, and vice versa, by Webb Keane

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The piece appears as a critique of behavioral economics and its reliance on methodological individualism, rational choice theory and utility maximization even as it sets out to explain the pervading practice of allegedly irrational behavior. Keane points out a major flaw of this perspective: it doesn't take into account other people except as external sources of irrational behavior. "In other words, the dominant behavioral approaches retain two aspects of rational choice, the centrality of voluntaristic models of decision-making, and the marginality of social relations in their portrayal of economic life." I couldn't agree more with this critique. Keane's approach proposes a middle ground between methodological individualism and sociocentric perspectives, between looking at 'individual preferences' and at 'collective existence'. To economic anthropologists, however, much of what he says does not come as a surprise. Yet, some of his propositions based on the 'anthropology of ethics' perspective seem puzzlingly close to postulates of psychological individualism he critiques. Likewise, the concept of 'social interaction' –maybe his main methodological building block—appears strangely dyadic when presented as an analytical tool, but not so when used in the actual analysis of empirical cases. I will briefly address these issues in what follows.

While I agree with Keane's critique that the vision of 'moral economy' is often conservative, as he also notes, many authors have pointed to that issue as a form of historicized epistemic moralization. They show how all economic systems are involved in a moral qualification of economic activities and produce a narrative of their contribution to the 'common good' (Booth 1994). What seems to me problematic in Webb Keane's description is his view that 'moral economy' is based on "organicist communitarian assumptions", a position that seems to evacuate conflict from the concept. Some of us have tried to argue, however, that moral economy can be understood to be both about value frameworks defining good and bad, *and* about the struggles to make a particular value framework dominant or hegemonic. Here moral economy refers to value struggles and to the ability to impose certain moral frameworks of action to others (De Angelis 2007, Narotzky 2015, Palomera & Vetta 2016, Collins 2017). In this definition, moral economy is a useful concept that helps us analyze how conflict is domesticated in support of the reproduction of particular forms of wealth and power distribution.

Keane refuses the principle that individual rational action can be isolated from social interaction: "we cannot understand economic behavior by treating individuals in isolation from the practices that create social relations and the value those relationships hold for them." He also underlines that other people (in social interaction) should not be treated as an exteriority and a source of irrationality for the individual rational actor. I fully agree with this critique and most of social anthropology's observations and analyses support this view. In my opinion, however, the concept of 'social interaction' that he presents retains a dyadic aspect that real life observations, including the cases that Keane himself uses to illustrate his point, do not justify. Social interaction is described as connecting an individual –a cognitive, psychological entity—with other

individuals thus forming social groups where values would emerge. But, as almost any ethnography will show, 'society' is more than interaction among and between living individuals: it is about past histories, future imaginations, and creatures of many kinds that inhabit multiple often incongruent moral spaces and temporalities. The magma of economic behavior cannot be simply explained by dyadic forms of 'social interaction'. As a result, everyday ethics would mostly appear as a collective process of permanent reconfiguration of categories, values, and systems of valuation; in practice, it would point at struggles around category making and tensions around resources of all kinds – material, immaterial, instrumental, relational—at different scales, in the short, medium and longue durée. The questions then would be: How are the value concepts and categories produced? How do we come to share, reject, ignore, understand or misunderstand normative categories? How are value systems institutionalized and how do they change? And, finally, how does all of it relate to the processes sustaining life and accruing wealth, what is ordinarily defined as 'the economy'? The kidney donor and the sex worker cases analyzed in the article are great examples of this complexity, of the ambiguity and tensions of everyday ethics in their entanglement with economic practices.

Finally, what puzzled me all along while reading Keane's piece is his reliance in cognitive and psychological assumptions that underscore the validity of the 'person as individual' proposition, together with a series of premises on the ontological characteristics of that human entity that support a non-instrumental understanding of social interaction, values and evaluations. Following Strathern (1988, 1992), however, one can also think of a 'dividual', distributed or porous personhood, resulting in forms of agency that do not easily conform to the individual cognitive psychology experimental canon (Smith 2012). Indeed, we could understand the concept of 'social capital' –which became adopted and adapted by economists at the World Bank in the late 1990s (Woolcock 1998, World Bank 2001)—as related to the awareness of the connected and co-constitutive aspect of people in economic practice, as being more than individuals.

Do humans value relationships that are non-instrumental? Of course they do. Does this mean that social relationships are spontaneously and primarily valued in their own right and only as a secondary process can they become instrumental? Keane asserts: "At the heart of our approach is this premise: humans value social relations *for their own sake*" (emphasis added). In support of this assertion he uses studies in child psychology that find that "human children have a strong orientation toward other persons *for their own sake*" and "a *propensity* to help and cooperate with others" (emphasis added). All of which would support the non-instrumental drive of human beings. While I will not dispute these findings, I would like to add that many studies have also shown that humans would not be able to survive after birth unless as part of a social environment that nurtures them. Their organs are immature, and they need special care and protection (MacCormack 1982, Worthman 2003). Therefore the orientation toward other persons and the propensity to cooperate are *also* instrumental to their primary life-sustaining needs. Why, then, insist in an opposition between instrumental and relational value? Why either/or, when all the examples he gives us are of the type with/and? What appears in these everyday ethics practices is ambiguity, ambivalence, continuous transformations of the balances and entanglements of the instrumental and the relational. I think we need to retain this complexity in order to understand economic practice beyond rational choice theory.

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