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Towards a Parasitic Ethics

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Abstract

The parasite is widely conceived as a negative figure that takes without giving; perceived as an agent of corruption and destruction, it is subjected to programmes of eradication and expulsion across cultural, economic, political and ethical contexts. This paper offers an alternative approach to the status of parasitic relations in light of Michel Serres's *The Parasite*, elaborated through ethnographic research into the after-hours culture and hidden economy of London's Borough Market. We highlight the mutual dependence of agents in host-parasite networks according to what we term 'general parasitism', while inquiring into its ethical potential. Ultimately, we argue that while taking into account the near ubiquity of parasitic relations cannot form the basis for any concrete axiomatic ethical paradigm, it should at least encourage an ethics of hesitation before judgement when faced with any apparent instance of parasitism: to presume that parasitism is undesirable and unethical is itself undesirable and unethical.

Keywords

ethics, gift-exchange, market, parasite, Serres

Introduction

A parasite is generally perceived as something negative. The word itself, for many, will conjure up images of tiny yet menacing creatures such as lice, tapeworms and infectious microorganisms, which, through their ability to penetrate our bodily exterior and cause harm, evoke disgust and a drive towards elimination. Such associations are frequently transferred onto metaphorical uses of parasitism to refer to certain social groups and individuals deemed to have a detrimental effect on the rest of society, from Saint-Simon's denunciation of the parasitic class of aristocrats and bureaucrats (Pilbeam, 2013: 8), to the formalized offence of

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social parasitism in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union of the 1960s, to the current widespread tendency to describe as parasites those considered guilty of tax evasion, benefit fraud and related perceived offences. In this paper, we propose to take a step back from this often instinctively invoked range of associations, and ask whether it may be possible to conceive, at least under the right circumstances, of the parasitic relationship as playing beneficial if not essential roles in the sustainability, perhaps flourishing, of a social group. While this inevitably requires something of a counter-intuitive retooling of the common conception of parasitism, which we draw from the work of Michel Serres, it is nevertheless one that retains what we consider to be the essential character of parasitism as a non-reciprocal, subtractive relationship with an unwilling or non-consenting host.

The logic of social relationships, communication and cohabitation which Serres develops in *The Parasite* (1982 [1980]) offers an alternative to certain established ways of approaching cultural-economic interactions, in particular those based implicitly or explicitly on the notion of gift-exchange. Serres's text presents certain obstacles to the derivation of a straightforward, formally delineated model – not least his free movement among diverse discourses such as fable, biology, information science, literature and social theory, and his preference for suggestive exposition over the clear-cut presentation of hypotheses and supporting evidence: as Steven Connor (2008) puts it, Serres's thought is 'virtual, or prepositional, which is to say, in advance of, or on the way to becoming position, thesis'. However, as Steven Brown (2002) has shown, it is quite possible to discern a set of key features of his understanding of parasitism, which we find to be a rich and innovative resource for opening up new ways of interrogating social relationships through a consideration of the socially productive roles, to put it simply, of *taking* rather than *giving*. Indeed, part of Serres's thesis is that parasitism is much more widespread within societies than is generally acknowledged, to the extent that it may even be considered fundamental. In the first parts of this paper we use such an approach to consider a particular case study, examining how the subterranean and after-hours economy which exists alongside the official public economic sphere of London's Borough Market can be understood to be sustained and structured by parasitic relations.[1]

However, if the thesis that parasitism is a very widespread form of social relation – and that it can be productive, beneficial, or simply necessary in certain contexts – carries weight, we contend that this should not only constitute a challenge to the negative perception of parasitism in economic or systemic terms, but simultaneously in an ethical register. The imbrication of notions of giving and taking with questions of morality and ethics, across a wide range of theoretical and everyday cultural contexts – as well as the ethically deleterious consequences that so often follow or accompany the application of the label 'parasite' and associated

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terms – suggest that it would be irresponsible to sideline this dimension. However, in beginning to explore the possibility of a parasitic ethics in the later parts of the paper, we do not argue for parasitism to be accepted as inherently ethical or valuable: in seeking to cast doubt on any and all *automatic* negative socio-cultural/socio-economic and ethical judgements of parasitism, we are not calling for them to give way indiscriminately to positive judgements. We are advocating, rather, an ethics of hesitation, of reservation of judgement, in situations where apparent instances of parasitism present themselves.

Serres's Generalized Parasitism

> There is no system without parasites. (Serres, 1982: 12)

That Serres is using what might seem an unconventional understanding of parasitism is signalled immediately by his use of fables to discern and elaborate its logic, beginning with La Fontaine's retelling of Aesop's tale of the country rat and the city rat. Whereas the fable is traditionally understood as suggesting that a humble yet secure existence is preferable to a life of opulence and danger, in Serres's account, the salient theme becomes 'dining at another's table': the city rat eats well from the left-overs at the table of the 'tax farmer' who himself 'produced neither oil nor ham nor cheese' but 'can profit from these products' (Serres, 1982: 3). The city rat's guest, the country rat, benefits from this flow of goods by accepting an invitation to dinner. Each relation in this chain, between citizen and tax farmer, tax farmer and city rat, city rat and country rat, Serres suggests, is parasitic, in that the latter agent in each pair takes something from the former without offering anything in return. Moreover, each pair is connected to the one before, as it effectively diverts or reappropriates something from that prior flow, giving the larger set of relations the form of a 'cascade' when considered together (pp. 3–4). However, Serres's eventual aim is to show how, in this fable and throughout systems of parasitic relations, 'the host counter-parasites his guests' (p. 52), and that, ultimately, the status of host and parasite fluctuate to such an extent that one can no longer say who is parasitic upon whom – unless we simply allow that all are parasitic upon all.

Serres is himself quick to admit that he is 'using words in an unusual way', and that from the perspective of scientific parasitology, rats, or hyenas, or humans who benefit at the expense of others 'are not parasites at all' (p. 6).[2] From a scientific viewpoint, to be classed as a parasite an organism should live on and/or in its (usually much larger) host, in (semi-)permanent contact. However, Serres refuses to privilege either such a scientific discourse *or* that of the fable: literary or fabulated applications of the term 'parasite', he suggests, are not metaphorical uses of a scientific concept; rather, all these discourses inherit their notions of

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parasitism from a shared origin, in 'such ancient and common customs and habits that the earliest monuments of our culture tell of them, and we still see them, at least in part: hospitality, conviviality, table manners, hostelry, general relations with strangers' (p. 6). The fable of the rats and the scientific understanding of a tapeworm alike entail, both in vocabulary and conception, an anthropomorphism belying their shared origins in this sphere of custom or habit.

Even a cursory examination of the classical sense of the Greek term reveals that it does indeed originally concern eating arrangements among humans. Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (1940) defines the noun *parasitos* as 'one who eats at the table of another, and repays him with flattery and buffoonery', and the verb *parasitein* simply as to 'board and lodge with', also noting the application of the term *parasitoi* to priests whose food was provided by public funds. In Lucian's second-century dialogue *De Parasito,* the protagonist Simon defends parasitism in the sense of 'sponging' as both a noble profession and a superior art, recognizing that the term's generally accepted second-century meaning, 'getting your dinner at the expense of another', or 'to eat [...] at another's side', is already old (Lucian, 2004: 304).

Serres suggests that an 'intuition of the parasitologist makes him import a common relation of social manners to the habits of little animals, a relation so clear and distinct that we recognize it as being the simplest' (Serres, 1982: 7). The simple parasitic relation which emerges by homology (rather than analogy) in these different discourses of science and fable is that which links host to guest, a unidirectional, non-reciprocal flow: 'through story or science, social science or biological science, just one relation appears, the simple, irreversible arrow' (p. 8). As Brown puts it, what emerges from these reflections is 'a way of considering human relations as a parasitic chain which interrupts or parasitizes other kinds of relations [...] The essence of such parasitism is taking without giving' (2002: 16).

Thus while Serres distils this basic relation – of taking food from the table (metaphorical or literal) of another – as the elemental form of parasitism from its common appearance in both fable and science, he takes a step beyond both in the emphasis he places on its generality. Whereas common references to parasitism implicitly treat it as a phenomenon of relative rarity – scientific discourse, by considering it a subset of the general range of possible relations among species, the fable and other forms of cultural discourse by casting it as a type of behaviour that can and morally should be avoided – Serres views it as 'the atomic form of our relations' (p. 8). Thus any given relation identified as parasitic in Serres's sense may be considered in the context of a variety of others surrounding it and with which it is connected: this is already suggested in the notion of the cascade, where one instance of parasitism becomes the effective 'host' for another; yet if parasitism as

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the process of intercepting 'what travels along the path [...] money, gold, or commodities, or even food' is 'the most common thing in the world' (p. 11), then it is always possible, if not likely, that any figure or agent identified as host to a given parasite will be, when some other relation between them is foregrounded, identifiable as playing the role of parasite to its host. Hence Serres repeatedly draws on the fact that the French word *hôte* is used for both 'host' and 'guest': the parasitic relation is in a sense one of *hôte á hôte*. A further consequence of a perspective which sees the parasitic relation as the 'most common' or 'atomic' social relation is that it becomes harder to consider it a purely, innately or universally destructive or damaging element, despite its unidirectional, subtractive character when viewed in isolation.

Serres's paradigm of parasitism can be said to parallel Mauss's paradigm of gift-giving to the extent that he sees it as a general relation, something almost universal within human society, playing key roles in the cohesion of larger social structures. The proposed near ubiquity of parasitism in social relations echoes Mauss's view of the gift as a 'total' or 'general' social phenomenon – something concerning 'the whole of society and its institutions' (Mauss, 1966: 76). Mauss suggests that even the 'pure gifts' identified by Malinowski (e.g. gifts between spouses, tributes offered to a chief) cannot really be considered 'pure', being neither spontaneous nor disinterested, but imbricated within various sets of contractual obligations, implicit or explicit conceptions of rights, entitlements, expectations (Mauss, 1966: 71): similarly, Serres presents parasitic taking as not simply a question of subtracting value, as something socially useless or destructive, but as performing a wide range of other social roles, some closely related to and some distant from the original context. Hence, like Mauss, Serres is interested in how the complex interaction of a multiplicity of the relations with which he is concerned contributes to the maintenance of a larger socio-cultural structure. Where the symmetry ends, however, is in the unidirectional nature of Serres's parasitic relation: its productivity is to be found not in a direct return to those from which something is taken, but in its further passage elsewhere, or in the coexistence of multiple parasitic relations in which different agents play both host and parasite with regard to one another.[3]

Whether or not one goes as far as Serres in conceiving parasitism as the atomic form of social relations, the prospect of focusing on the parasitic opens up an interesting alternative perspective on relations which otherwise tend to be viewed in terms of gift-giving, exchange, or related paradigms of socio-economic transaction. The usefulness and further potential of such a perspective is indicated below through a discussion in these terms of the unofficial economic culture that exists alongside a mainstream farmers' market: that is, as constituted through a series of relations in which goods or value are diverted, unidirectionally, away

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from the supposedly reciprocal exchange relations of market transactions, in a series of connected cases of 'eating at the table of another'.

The Hidden Market

The distant shouting of 'half-price fish!' signals the closing of the market day. As traders busy themselves with packing away stock, a final wave of customers rushes in to catch the end-of-day offers. Buy-one-get-one-free bread, two pies for a fiver – this is the time to snap up good deals. While some stalls get rid of their leftovers by lowering prices, others try to keep their produce exclusive by throwing out the excess. The manager of an olive stall, for example, refuses to reduce prices for fear of encouraging customers to frequent her stall only at closing. While this may be the official rule, employees nevertheless pack away the leftovers and secretly give them out to their trader friends after work. The leftovers that do not make it onto the workers' tables are carefully discarded at the nearby rubbish collection point, where groups of people in the know will be waiting for their turn to pick and choose from the piles of perfectly good loaves of bread, bags of olives, baskets of vegetables, and other produce.

Based on these leftovers and excesses, some by-products of regular trade, some 'produced' by market workers alongside their official activity, there thus exists another, less visible stratum to the market: a subterranean economy of exchange, operating mainly amongst traders themselves. In return for the weekly supply of olives, bread, sausages, and so on, I give my fellow traders and friends re-bottled juices from my stall. These might be offered as a gesture of goodwill, a sign of friendship, or used in exchange for other leftover goods. These favours are repaid in various ways – for example, by allowing me to jump the queue for lunch, or offering an extra discount, agreed upon in advance. The market workers' discount is highly flexible: while all who wear an apron are entitled to it by an unspoken rule, the scale of reduction is not set. How much discount one gets often depends on the friendships between traders; over the years I worked in the market, the changing details of the purchases reflected the progressive strengthening of social bonds. This was also observable in the hierarchy of choice in the food chain of leftovers – I went from recuperating whatever remained after everyone else had concluded their transactions, to a position which allowed me to place my requests at the beginning of the day and have first pick at the end.

To a certain extent, this unofficial economy resembles Mauss's gift economy, within which gift-giving might appear voluntary, free and disinterested, yet is in fact 'never unrequited' – there is always an 'obligation' to return gifts such that 'economic self-interest' is always involved in the exchange (Mauss, 1966: 1). In the market, there are cases of

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calculated pleasantries and sometimes even forced trades where unwanted goods are given in an attempt to compel a better discount. While gift-giving in the market is not necessarily competitive in the sense Mauss attributes, for example, to the practice in the Tinglit tribes, the exchanges are undeniably contractual in spirit: the obligation to receive and reciprocate forces the individual to enter into a system of exchange. What Mauss calls the practice of potlatch is 'a total system, in that every item [. . .] is implicated for everyone in the whole community [. . .] the cycling gift system *is* the society' (1966: xi; emphasis added). The importance of the gift, therefore, is that it is the conceptualization and expression of the social whole. Each act of gift-giving implicates another individual and draws the other into the system of exchange; the gift strengthens relationships and creates bonds and ties between tribes and clans. As Mary Douglas puts it, for Mauss, 'a gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction' (2002: x).

Much of the community spirit of the market is articulated in and fostered by the alternative economy of the after-hours market, such that it may well be considered something approaching a gift economy. However, the Maussian model has little to say about the fact that many of these exchanges are made on the sly – that this subterranean economy of trade, exchange and gift-giving is, from an official perspective, illegitimate, founded upon a set of parasitic relations or actions. Between packing away stock and serving customers, traders collect the leftovers and transform them into exchangeable gifts. Even where nothing of material value to the farmers (in this case, the capitalist employers) is 'stolen', the repackaging nevertheless uses company resources and company time. All the unofficial gifts and exchanges which take place among the workers ultimately depend on this surreptitious acquisition of goods and labour.

These forms of disguised labour can be understood in terms of what Michel de Certeau calls *le perruque*, the 'wig' that masks its owner's baldness: the appearance of carrying out legitimate work effects a *trompe l'oeil*, a trick that diverts attention away from the clandestine activity that is actually taking place. De Certeau discusses tactics that allow workers to capitalize on the possibilities offered by the circumstances of the moment and divert resources during the time of waged labour to something 'free' that serves their individual interests. As such, these techniques are seen to be playful, cunning and resourceful – *le perruque* is 'sly as a fox and twice as quick' (1988: 29): its nature is shifty, fragmentary and elusive, as its success depends on its ability to slip between formal structures and rules and to recognize the limits upon what it can get away with; it surfs on the margins of what is permissible, teases the boundaries of that which is punishable and tests the managers, probing the extent of their willingness to turn a blind eye. Such diversionary practices survive in the interstices of the mainstream, insinuating

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themselves onto the dominant order, knowing they will never change the system, but nevertheless tactically 'making it function in another register' (1988: 32) that serves purposes other than those of the formal economy of the market.

Yet just as these after-hours exchanges do not overtly belong to the main economic system of the market, nor should they be considered entirely clandestine. In testing the limits of what they can (or will be allowed to) get away with, the workers here are not 'putting one over' on the master or the company: rather, they are performing an activity which can be considered constitutive of the effective functioning of an interrelated collection of socio-economic systems, including the mainstream farmers' market with its public consumers, as well as the structural division of labour within the workforce. Through their creative reappropriation of resources, workers confirm their solidarity with one another and 'create networks of connivances and sleights of hand'; for de Certeau, such furtive exchanges enable *le perruque* to subvert the law that 'puts work at the service of the machine, and, by a similar logic, progressively destroys the requirement of creation and the "obligation to give"' (1988: 28).

The passage of goods from the farmer to the stall-worker deserves to be described as something other than a gift, in that there is no public or even private act of giving, no sign that it is taking place; and yet, nor is it treated as a theft requiring punishment, incurring contracts and obligations in the way that Mauss sees as analogous to those which surround the gift (1966: 49). The owner of the stall is likely not completely oblivious to these activities, or to the existence of the other socio-economic sphere which they support, yet makes no direct acknowledgement of them. Nor is there any obvious reciprocity involved. There is neither gift nor exchange – no act of giving, and nothing directly returned in compensation for what is taken – yet something *is* taken, and the act is tolerated.

What functions might these practices serve that would account for the fact that all parties allow them to be maintained in this form, rather than forcing them back into the status of either formal economic exchange or theft? An aspect of the logic of parasitism to which Serres repeatedly returns is its ambiguous status as an 'excluded third' that is necessary for the relationship or transaction between two parties to succeed, to function, just as there is no transmission of information without noise (Serres, 1982: 57; 150; 161). For Serres, the simple binary of excluded/included must be replaced by a fuzzy logic, at least with regard to the parasite, such that there is 'a spectrum, a band, a continuum' of exclusion (1982: 57). From this perspective (e.g. as opposed to that of the accountant, the lawyer or the law-enforcer), there is a difference of degree rather than kind between physical and observational exclusion – between the imperative to exclude the major thief (through security measures, policing) and

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the minor parasite (through tolerance, non-observation). The workers' reappropriations of resources in the market are in just such a manner somehow included while excluded: they are not officially part of the system of exchange, and do not overtly contribute to it, seeming in the immediate context only to detract from it; yet they are tolerated, as though necessary, as if having some broader function. What might this be?

Parasitic Collectivity

We have seen how the worker in our case study is able to appropriate a little of the farmer's official entitlement to dispose of his/her goods as s/he wishes. This reappropriation is not exclusive to the (not quite) clandestine economy, nor is it confined only to the period after official business has finished. During regular trading, goods are also redirected in plain sight; for example, giving an extra apple or two to a regular customer, or giving a neighbouring trader a bottle of juice to start the day are common practices. During my break, I parasite from my status or role as a trader and claim the benefits from discounts and favours. The farmer allows this, and although tacitly, this tolerance is recognized and appreciated. A set of unspoken rules or 'table manners' governs this sphere of exchange, where the appropriation is tolerated only to the extent that it does not disrupt the overall running of the stall and the market.

Yet there are potential motivations other than simple altruism for the farmer/stall-owner to be tolerant. Eventually at least, benefits may accrue further down the parasitic cascade. Perhaps the most important of these is the way friendly relations established among the stall-workers, largely through their unofficial trading activities, contribute to the positive communal atmosphere of the market, from which the customers and thus in turn the farmers benefit. (This might be contrasted with the competitiveness and rivalry more often associated with markets of various kinds, from the shopping mall to the stock market trading floor – though these no doubt have their own local communities and after-hours economies.) In addition to exchanging friendly banter, neighbouring traders bring one another sandwiches or pastries for breakfast, while for better discounts, traders, farmers and stall-holders may ask one another to do their shopping, depending on who has the stronger relationship with a particular shop or stall. Within the mutually maintained boundaries, the market flourishes – traders who work there enjoy their jobs and maintain good relationships with each other and regular customers, who enjoy the positive atmosphere, while the farmers benefit from the returning trade.

In this sense, the seemingly unidirectional set of cascading parasitic relationships closes into a loop when the farmer, in turn, 'parasites' the traders by profiting from the informal relationships that they have

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established and to which s/he has *directly* contributed almost nothing. One might also view the effects of the tolerated unofficial trading among the market workers in terms of a reduction of alienation – though one which simultaneously benefits the individual worker and the larger capitalist system. The added layer of friendly, unofficial, though still exchange-based interaction makes more tolerable what is, in its fundamentals, a fairly simple, repetitive and subservient form of labour, with a relatively low level of official remuneration. Apart from amounting to a partial subsidy in kind for the worker's wages, this unofficial sphere may be understood to produce something like a temporary quasi-equality among actors who, within the economic and capitalist framework of the labour force, are hierarchically separated into different strata. This quasi-equality is implicit not only in the effects, but in the very execution of the processes which tacitly maintain these parasitic relationships – as the worker is unofficially permitted to take on a little of the farmer's capital and position. In effect, one could understand a peculiar kind of collaboration to be taking place between the farmer-owner and the stall-workers, one whose success or continuation depends upon each side privately acknowledging the other, but never in mutual recognition: the redistribution of wealth, within limits, is accepted but treated as though invisible; thus, crucially, for the transfer of goods (information, energy) to take place without eye-contact, giving must effectively be replaced by taking.

It is admittedly not easy to quantify the benefits arising from the positive atmosphere among the market workers, nor to specify how much this atmosphere depends upon the trading of parasite(d) goods. But what we may note is that the sense of belonging, if we may call it such, is not just a nebulous 'community spirit', existing only in the minds or affective states of those involved, but is directly tied to the collective practice of taking and passing on what is taken. Furthermore, visitors to the market do not experience the atmosphere thus generated passively, as if from the outside, but help produce or maintain it to the extent that they connect to and participate in these material practices. This may be illustrated by the behaviour of a particular market regular, Lord Lucan, considered through the lens of what Serres terms the 'quasi-object'.[4]

Lord Lucan – as he calls himself – is one of the familiar faces of the morning market. An elderly man with a head of silver grey hair, he trawls around the market, scavenging, collecting, hunting out salvageable discards and buying damaged goods at reduced prices. Lord Lucan would often stop at my stall to give me some of the food he had accumulated, claiming that he would not be able to consume it all himself. While these exchanges may have been calculated to a certain extent, they also suggested an apparently caring attitude. Lord Lucan never wanted anything from my stall, but he would unfailingly drop by every Saturday to share some of the treasures from his morning hunt. Without diminishing the

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selflessness of his intentions – that is, without reducing his attitude and actions to the rational individualism often presumed in economic perspectives (e.g. through the application of game theory) – it is worth asking what he may have gained from such behaviour.

It might be tempting to return to a broadly Maussian paradigm here: Lord Lucan exchanges gifts for a sense of belonging and recognition within the market community, helping to maintain his status as something other than that of the 'ordinary punter'. Yet this would seem to abstract unnecessarily the material relations his actions already constitute. In what appear to be acts of gift-giving, he is participating in the means by which certain objects – or in Serres's terminology, quasi-objects – circulate among those individuals whose actions and relations are constitutive of the market. For Serres, the circulation of quasi-objects is what forms a collective: 'This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective; if it stops, it makes the individual' (1982: 225). A certain collective is literally, materially, described and constituted by the paths followed by certain kinds of quasi-objects; their function *is* this passage, this dynamic constitution. While the market (perhaps any market) may already be seen to operate in such a fashion, in its official form its most prominent quasi-object is money (or the money-commodity) and the collectivity established by the latter's passage is virtually inseparable from the much larger and dispersed collectivity of commercial capitalism. The goods parasited from the market stalls, on the other hand, establish a different form of collective, one conducive to a sense of community and mutually supportive relationships.

In passing on such quasi-objects to me or other favoured traders, Lord Lucan is making himself part of this collective: this seems a more apt description than one which would see him as somehow purchasing his status or entry into a community. He does not induce debt or obligation through these activities, but nor would it seem realistic to attribute his 'giving' to a *purely* altruistic intent (there are many places, even within walking distance, where such an intent could be better served by gift-giving than a farmers' market). Perhaps, rather, his aim is simply to remain part of the collective, by facilitating the transfer of its constitutive quasi-objects – 'token[s] which must be passed on as quickly as possible' (Brown, 2002: 19).

The farmers' market is often hailed as the antithesis of the supermarket, not only on the basis of the perceived higher quality of the food, but as an environment in which the selling of food is more lively and personal, compared to the sterile and lifeless aisles of a supermarket. To many who keep returning, Borough Market is more than just a place where they do their grocery shopping; they feel they are part of a social environment, a neighbourhood constituted by their relationships with shopkeepers, traders and other shoppers. The fact that most of the customers do not live locally does not render this sense of belonging

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more artificial: indeed, that they are prepared to travel into central London to buy their groceries would seem to be an indicator of the unique qualities they find in the experience; and while many customers on any given day will not be regulars, even the occasional visitors, tourists and passing trade may be attracted by the lively, 'neighbourhood' atmosphere. If the very notion of a farmers' market trades on associations with the local, the authentic, then the effects of the very real community of workers, held together to a large extent by their hidden parasitic economy, may be seen to compensate for the inevitable erosion of such features resulting from its situation at the heart of a modern metropolis.

This experience of neighbourhood, in de Certeau's sense, is not merely an experience of a physical space but rather a social environment defined by the practices of shopping, shopkeeping, trading and exchanging, where each individual takes up a position in the network of social relations inscribed by the environment (de Certeau, 1998). Each individual has parts to play and these roles change as the social milieu shifts, expands and contracts with the transformation of the social and economic environment. Not all of these relations, of course, contribute to the formation of the subterranean, alternative market and the community it supports: the chatting customer may not ostensibly or consciously be participating in the parasitic chain, but they remain connected to it even in exchanging capital for goods according to relatively stable systems of value. These effectively form the flows of goods and energy on which the parasitic collective depends, while those at its fringes may enjoy the generally positive atmosphere this collectivity generates. Extending Serres's metaphor of the team ballgame as a way of figuring how the quasi-object (the ball) organizes the collective by its passage from one quasi-subject to another (1982: 225–7), we might say that the market customers represent the observing crowd at a sports match, able to consider themselves both integral to and outside the collective(s) made up of the teams, and to become more involved or withdraw according to the further relations and transactions in which they engage. The more frequently a customer visits – and the more she engages in certain kinds of activity – the more likely she is to begin entering into the more established parasitic chains constituting the unofficial collective: yet if a regular customer picks up a special discount or a free loaf of bread as a result, this is not a privilege of membership in an exclusive group, but rather an effect of the passage of the quasi-object, of their participation in (and thus constitution of) the collective. As Serres says, if the quasi-object stops being passed, it ceases to make the collective and instead makes the individual: the recipient of the extra loaf may treat this quasi-object as a 'free gift' and head home to enjoy it, but they will then do so as an individual; or they may pass it (or part of it) on, like Lord Lucan, and remain part of the collective.

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Taking Taking for Granted: A Parasite Ethics?

We have suggested that, in our case study at least, local relations that may be described as parasitic, as consisting of, in Brown's phrase, 'taking without giving', can be said to contribute to the flourishing of a larger system of which those relations are constitutive, and thus to benefit the parasited hosts without any reciprocal return of value taking place at the local level. In the above account, farmers/producers allow – in the sense of not acting to prevent – a fraction of their produce to be taken by the workers on whom they, in turn, are parasitic, without entering into the relation of reciprocity inherent in gift-exchange (which could itself undermine other value-systems in operation, not only in terms of the economic value of the goods, but, for example, regarding what constitutes a fair wage, and the value of the stall-workers' interactions for the convivial atmosphere of the market).

However, in substantiating the claim for a productive parasitism, our intention is not only to suggest that a form of activity generally considered detrimental to a system or social group can in certain circumstances be considered beneficial to the flourishing of that system. For the widespread view of parasitism as systemically or quantitatively damaging seems, at least within a socio-cultural context, inextricably bound to the tendency of parasitism to induce negative *ethical* judgements. In the final third of this paper, we want to begin to elaborate how a challenge to the former should be linked to a challenge to the latter.

If thinking about ethics gives rise, repeatedly and ineluctably, to questions of economics, in at least one major tradition traceable back to Aristotle (Sen, 1987: 3), this may not be wholly unrelated to the fact that ethical systems themselves tend to function on the basis of implicit economic logics. More specifically, both philosophical and practical approaches to ethics tend to rely on a notion of fundamental or ideal *equality* among subjects or actors, which is to be pursued, maintained, and restored when destabilized. Thus 'unethical' actions and effects are widely considered to take something away from (other) individuals or groups, whether in the form of possessions, rights, or the freedom/capacity to pursue or maintain their wellbeing, while ethical frameworks emphasize responsibility, duty, a sense of debt, and require that unethical acts be met with retribution, reparation, the 'redressing of the balance' in moral and/or practical (e.g. financial) senses. Such notions of equality and balance are fundamental to some of the oldest and most influential forms of religious ethics, for example, such that a 'universal equivalence' of the ethical value of individuals (or 'souls') is presumed long before a money-commodity comes to be formally recognized as performing such a function for economic transactions. Even when, as in a Christian ethics, emphasis is placed on acquiescence in the face of deleterious actions, this can be seen to entail what Derrida describes as an 'economy of sacrifice',

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whereby one expects that in a future life God 'will pay back your salary, and on an infinitely greater scale' (Derrida, 1995: 106–7).

Influential modern philosophical systems of ethics likewise depend on such a universalized notion of equality. Kant's 'realm of ends', for example, posits a form of social union in which every 'rational being' would treat every other as an end in themselves (thus as being of equal importance to themselves), rather than a means to pursuing his/her own interests (2002: 56–7). John Rawls's thought experiment on the basis of an 'original position of equality', whereby 'the principles of [social] justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance' (1999: 10), develops the pragmatics of such a notion of fairness by considering a scenario in which an agent's self-interest is *aligned* with the treatment of others as ends: both the Kantian and the Rawlsian paradigms, like many others, are geared towards a society in which everyone recognizes that everyone is equally entitled, and will seek to maintain the ethical balance.

One could argue that dominant ethical systems, from ancient to modern, both theoretical and practical, are thus geared, almost by necessity, towards the elimination of parasitic relations – those which take something away, fomenting inequality and imbalance. But as we have seen, local parasitism does not always amount to a net or systemic loss; and while equality in principle may indeed be necessary to any adequate ethical system, there seems to be a common slippage from such larger principles to the local level at which any given relation is judged (and one which is seldom accompanied by a reciprocal setting of the local parasitic relation within a generalized perspective). It is this slippage that a prospective parasitic ethics would want to interrupt. For while it might be hard to dispense with a conception of ideal equality at the abstract or general level in attempting to think or practice ethics, such a notion is by the same token unsustainable at a local level, given that relations are not only fundamentally unequal, but in multiple and non-linear ways. How then might we begin to think a parasitic ethics that would maintain some commitment to ideal equality while accepting fundamental inequality, not only as an unfortunate practical reality but as constitutive of social relations, and not necessarily ethically undesirable? We can only offer some initial reflections on such a challenge here, in light of the foregoing.

Neither we nor the market workers we have discussed as being engaged in parasitic relations, chains and collectives claim that these relations or their actions have any *inherently* positive ethical value. Still, it is worth noting that there are various precedents for assigning some kind of ethical basis to taking without giving. For example, to the extent that the workers reject or evade official rules and frameworks, they could be understood to be engaged in what de Certeau terms an 'ethics of *tenacity*' (1988: 26; original emphasis), consisting in the pursuit and implementation of everyday practices that subvert or escape the prescriptions and laws of the established order. Meanwhile, there are plenty of

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organizations, movements and groups with more formalized perspectives that make overt defences of taking without permission, whether in response to need, social inequality, or based on particular social values and commitments: the range of examples would be so ideologically and socially diverse as to include members of the anti-copyright movement, such as Aaron Swartz and those behind The Pirate Bay, freegans and 'skippers' or 'dumpster divers' who recover otherwise wasted food, and apologists for neoliberal and capitalist exploitation of various hues. There are also examples within dominant moral and legal frameworks for the permitting of theft under certain circumstances, such as dire need or common ownership, or where its local positive (e.g. nourishing) effects on the taker may be significant relative to its negligible negative effects on the owner. Classically, one might consider the provision along these lines in Deuteronomy: 'If you enter your neighbour's vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket' (Deut. 23: 24–5 [NIV]). More colloquially, one might think of the many terms tacitly legitimating such petty 'theft', such as the English tradition of 'scrumping for apples', or the German notion, legally enshrined until 1975, of *Mundraub* (literally, mouth-robbery; practically, the unsanctioned taking of small amounts of food for immediate consumption).

However, neither such notions, nor the idea of a productive or beneficial parasitism, whose possibility we have sought to highlight here, ought to form a *positive* basis for an ethics. Even supposing that the net benefits or returns to the stall-owners in our case study could be calculated, attempting to using this to claim an ethical status for the workers' parasitic activities and relations would lead us into a quagmire of further, objectively unanswerable questions, ranging from issues of political commitment to more abstract questions – such as whether one should take a deontological approach, assessing actions according to a sense of the individual's fundamental duty, or a consequentialist perspective in which those actions' subsequent effects are of primary concern; beyond this, one would have to address the question of whether, even supposing the net productivity of locally parasitic actions, one considers the flourishing of the larger system to be ethically desirable to begin with; and indeed whether productivity or calculable benefits ought *ever* to form a basis for ethical judgement.

However, precisely because of such complicating factors, and the multiplicity of arguable perspectives, we may be more confident about the ethical value of *reserving* judgement in situations in which parasitism has been observed and/or named. As we have highlighted, the overriding tendency in everyday discourse is to attach negative value to cited examples of taking without giving: the employment of terms such as 'parasitism', 'theft' or 'freeloading' for such activity is often enough to present it as unethical, and is used both formally and informally to reinforce arguments condemning it. Yet if every local example of a parasitic relation is

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surrounded, as Serres suggests, by numerous others, then the automatic condemnation of a particular instance ought to be called into question. That is, if we give any credence to Serres's approach, there would seem to be an ethical imperative, when confronted with any supposed example of parasitism, to take a step back and view it within a wider perspective – one which encompasses both its wider effects upon the larger system of which (local) parasite and host are part, and which emphasizes some of the numerous other parasitic relations that are simultaneously ongoing in and around those same agents' relationships.

Thus while there may be no ethics of parasitism *in general*, no plausible basis for understanding every instance of a parasitic relation as motivated by ethical intentions or producing ethical effects, there may nevertheless be something at least proto-ethical about the *movement* from the local to the global, from a restricted to a general view of parasitism (as opposed to starting from a general ethical condemnation, and applying this to each and every local instance); for this movement necessarily entails a suspension and recasting of prejudgements bound up with the assumption of parasitism's isolability as an instance of rare, abnormal or aberrant behaviour. Thus, as Julian Yates writes, Serres's lesson for those working in between the sciences and the humanities, especially those concerned with 'postmodern ethics', rather than amounting to a set of articulated prescriptions, comes down to 'a caution against solidifying our positions' (2005: 207). In this sense, Serres converges with the view of Alain Badiou, that '[t]here is no ethics in general. There are only – eventually – ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation' (2000: 16). Such a call for a reserve of automatic or generalizing judgement – *because of*, rather than despite, a generalized viewpoint – and the necessary focusing of ethical assessment on the local situation, nevertheless in itself constitutes a general admonition, one that is at least implicitly bound up with a critical view of the presumptions and values built into various mainstream strands of humanist ethics.

Whether you regard the parasite as good or evil, 'the Devil or the Good Lord' (Serres, 1982: 56), its identification with a particular person or entity always deflects attention from the widespread factuality, if not ubiquity, of parasitic relations, beginning with their role in the processes which produce such valuations in the first place. Restoring a sense of the wider context of parasitism surrounding any entity designated as parasite will not resolve questions such as whether that entity should be included or excluded from a given body, collective or system. Indeed, numerous questions – some of the biggest questions perhaps – necessarily remain unanswered: which parasitic relations, and where, should be tolerated? Which should be parasited in turn, and how? What kinds of collectives do we want to emerge, and what kinds of parasitic chains or flows should we promote through participation, and through which quasi-objects in which local scenarios? The perspective of

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a parasitic ethics would not lead directly to any particular answers to such situation-bound questions, but it would affect the ways in which they are posed and addressed. It should be considered ethical not in that it prescribes certain forms of judgement, but in that it demands a *hesitation* before judgement, and a widening of perspective, when faced with any apparent instance of parasitism.

Conclusion

Based on a combination of theoretical and ethnographic research, we have argued here, first, that there are situations in which one or several parasitic relations (involving non-reciprocal transfer, 'taking without giving') may lead to net benefits to the host or system further down the chain; second, that this social and cultural effect may be understood as ethically significant, and that when faced with any particular instance of parasitism, the process of widening one's perspective from the restricted to the general view – such that the parasitic relation in question is understood in the context of various others which parallel and intersect with it – may alter the basis on which value-judgements about parasitism are made. We hope that this move from a restricted to a general view of parasitism may prove useful in other contexts, contributing to the production of a better and fairer understanding of what is at stake when parasitism is identified and named, and to challenging the negative value-judgements that often automatically accompany such identifications.

At the same time, we hope to have given some indication of new ways in which Serres's parasitism might be used in social and cultural research. Other areas in which insights might be gleaned by taking up the hypothesis of productive parasitism and/or the near ubiquity of parasitic relations might include, for example, the sociology of theft – in which some contend that the criminalization of taking has been 'far more consequential in the protection it affords the holders of private property in the means of production than [. . .] in protecting the largely propertyless members of the proletariat' (Eglin and Hester, 1992: 174); or the understanding of 'free-riding' behavior in social groups. In the latter context, Elinor Ostrom has influentially argued that the supposedly detrimental effects of the behaviour of the 'free rider' who fails to contribute to the collective while benefitting from the contributions of others are mediated in many instances of group interaction by the 'norm-using' figures she terms the 'conditional cooperator' and the 'willing punisher' (Ostrom, 2000).[5] Might a third figure of the 'productive parasite' complement these terms, as a further way in which the damaging effects of free-riding behaviour are offset? On the one hand, productive parasitism may function as a specific type of free-riding activity, necessitating neither punishment nor negotiation, but conditional fostering or enabling in order to benefit the collective pool. On the other hand, it may be that the figure of

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the free-rider can already be considered a productive parasite, to the extent that it necessitates the emergence of conditional cooperators and willing punishers and the establishment and implementation of behavioural norms, thus acting as a catalyst for the development – where it is successfully managed – of more robust and sustainable self-organized systems for collective action.

A more general line of research inspired by Serres's parasitism might even ask whether there is scope for describing a society or culture in terms of a 'theft economy', in which taking without giving would structure a whole social organization. It may be that the near-inherently clandestine or locally unrecognized nature of parasitic relations would preclude this from being a phenomenon or perspective properly paralleling that of the gift economy: the absence of contractual arrangements, obligations and responsibilities accompanying instances of taking without consent may already prevent it from functioning in a comparable or complementary way.[6] Nevertheless, there is at least scope for investigating how widespread and varied are the potentially constitutive or productive roles of non-reciprocal taking that tend to accompany more overt forms of economic exchange and gift-giving – from the many instances of petty theft that surround the transport of goods to the capitalist's extraction of surplus-value from the worker's labour; from the value of data and metadata accumulated by information service providers while facilitating the transmission of messages to the deduction of banking fees; from charitable and religious tithing to national systems of taxation and the management of public debt.

We have privileged a socio-cultural understanding of parasitism here, as both historically and theoretically prior, following Serres, to the biological usage of the term; yet its suitability for describing certain relations among species may indicate that it nevertheless possesses a fundamentally ecological character. A number of Serres's works since *The Parasite* have dealt more explicitly with ecological questions – and it is perhaps in such contexts that he comes closest to advancing something approaching an ethical perspective. In *The Natural Contract* (1995), for example, Serres envisages, in light of the effects of industry on the global climate, the signing of a new pact between humanity and the world in order to preserve a chance of warding off their mutual destruction. In *Malfeasance*, he argues that pollution – the over-production of waste, dirt, excrement, but also noise, images, information – is a historically dominant mode of appropriation which in its escalating saturation of the planet is moving us towards apocalypse: 'the dirty bomb of property' (2011: 79). *The Parasite* anticipates these later works not only by attending to man as the 'universal parasite' upon the natural world (1982: 24), but in the centrality within it of the move from the local in the direction of the global, which as Brown (2002: 4) has observed, is both a methodological trajectory and a theme throughout Serres's work: 'it is clear

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that it is necessary to begin with a theory of relations, that in this beginning hesitation between a local or global theory is unavoidable, and that this hesitation is integrated into this problem' (Serres, 1982: 130). As various figures and cognates of parasitism – noise, pollution, disorder – continue to play central roles in Serres's subsequent works, they never lose their ambiguity. Even faced with the onset of a new Deluge, describing a vision of a global culture submerging nature in waste (inverting the traditional/mythical narrative of culture submerged beneath nature) (2011: 69–70), Serres does not advocate the elimination of all parasites, all dirt, but rather, again, a *hesitation* that would make possible a kind of discrimination. For the logical outcome of a successful eradication of each and every invading force, species, threat, is one which will leave humanity '*alone in the world*, among ourselves. [. . .] Who doesn't see that the only thing left floating will be the homogeneous excrement of the victorious Great Owner, *Sapiens sapiens*?' (2011: 70; original emphasis). In his recent *Biogea,* he situates humans among all other invasive species as one of the most virulent, recalling the alignment between human parasitism and all its other forms which he had elaborated in *The Parasite* some 30 years earlier:

> Sailors, rats, fleas, microbes . . . but also ants and other insects, seaweed or plants, we call these species: invasive. Dynamic, expansive, their populations readily flood the world. [. . .] Yes, among the most invasive species, we're one of the lively ones. (2012: 106–7)

Such a perspective theoretically, and with an ethical passion that seems inseparable from its generalized scope, undermines any logic that would associate the success or survival of humans with the conquest and eradication of all their would-be invaders and parasites, be they other tribes, other species, germs, nations, governments, thieves or financial competitors. For even such competition is part of an ecological balance, in which ultimate victory means death: 'Which species, finally, uniquely victorious, will reign on this ship [. . .]? What will happen if one species, ours for instance, prevails? Who will it eat then, if not its fellow men?' (2012: 106).

In this sense, Serres's approach forms part of a contemporary rethinking of the ecological, which departs from the 'figures of the undamaged and unscathed, the unspoiled, intact and immune' dominating a certain established kind of ecological discourse, and instead pursues what Erich Hörl has referred to as a 'general ecology', one which would constitute 'an unnatural, non-natural, and, one might say, subtractive ecology; an ecology that eliminates the immunopolitics of ecology' (2013: 128). An ethics of parasitism would not amount to an unchecked, perhaps perverse acceptance of every invasive threat, every instance of theft or corruption: rather, it would consist in the reserving of judgement on such perceived invasions, and the abandonment of the fantasy of

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immunization, of absolute security, order, and cleanliness. Whatever order one wishes to promote or preserve, it will always have its parasites – some of which may well prove crucial to its ongoing existence. The task, then, is not to eradicate parasitic relations, but rather to hesitate, and through sensitivity to their near ubiquity, ask which should be excluded and which preserved, or even fostered.

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Notes

1. The material in this paper dealing directly with Borough Market – an upscale retail and farmers' market focused on local, organic and quality regional products – is based on fieldwork undertaken by Daisy Tam between 2007 and 2010, during which she worked as a trader on a farmer's stall selling organic apples. Direct reports from her fieldnotes are indicated by the use of the first person singular.
2. In fact, even the scientific terminology of parasitology would today include hyenas, within the sub-category of 'kleptoparasites', those which steal prey hunted or food collected by another – a definition that might already be extended to humans in a variety of circumstances.
3. One may find concrete illustrations of the idea of a productive parasitism, whose immediate negative effects provide a net benefit, in each of the broad contexts Serres emphasizes – informational, biological and social. In Shannon's information theory, noise plays 'a crucial role' in the transmission of a message: 'information is [...] totally dependent on [noise] for understanding. Without noise [...] information cannot get through' (Ballard, 2007: 11). Noise in the sense of random fluctuations has been shown to have the capacity to improve information processing in neural systems (McDonnell and Ward, 2011), while 'white noise' can increase cognitive performance (Söderlund et al., 2010). In the biological context, Lynn Margulis's (1981) endosymbiotic theory suggests that parasitic relations among monocellular organisms formed the evolutionary basis for the development of multicellular life (cf. Margulis and Sagan, 1986: 121); and it has been shown that biological parasites may have a destabilizing *or* stabilizing effect on biodiversity and ecosystems (Combes, 1996). Perhaps the most widely-cited example of social parasitism within the animal world – the cuckoo's (ab)use of other birds' nests and labour – has recently been revealed, counter-intuitively, to provide survival benefits to crows tolerating such behaviour (Canestrari et al., 2014). In the context of human sociality, it is widely recognized that many national economies benefit from both an official and an unofficial immigrant workforce: for example, calculations suggest that foreign-born workers are responsible for more than 14% of the

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economic output of the US, while constituting 12.5% of the population (Gans, 2012: vii, 26) – yet the members of this workforce are frequently described in political, everyday and media discourse as parasites, free-loaders, scroungers, a ‘drain on society’ (e.g. through their use of social services, competition for jobs). At least one US study has shown that, depending on the state of the national economy, ‘immigration may slightly reduce native employment and average income’ in the short term (e.g. over a five-year period), but ‘unambiguously improves employment, productivity, and income’ in the long term (over 10- to 12-year periods) (Peri, 2010: 4). Note that the term ‘productive parasites’ has recently been used, in a somewhat different thematic context, but also drawing primarily on Serres, by Thompson (2012).

4. For reasons of space we have limited ourselves to Serres’s discussion of quasi-objects here, rather than considering their more well-known redeployment by Bruno Latour, for example in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).
5. Our thanks to an anonymous *TCS* reviewer for reminding us of the relevance of Ostrom’s work to our discussion.
6. Although note, in this regard, Mauss’s acknowledgement of the specification in at least Roman law of ‘the acts and obligations’ arising from theft (*furtum*) (1966: 49).

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