

Chapter 8: Moral economy: a framework and a manifesto

Dave Elder-Vass

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Andrew Sayer has employed the multi-faceted concept of *moral economy* in a long series of papers since the turn of the twenty first century (Sayer 2000; 2003; 2004; 2007; 2015a; 2018). For Sayer, our economy *is* a moral economy, but the term moral economy also refers to an approach to studying it and an approach to its critique. I will argue that it should also be seen as a central organising theme of his work more generally. On the one hand, it provides the framework for his re-introduction of lay normativity into explanations of economic behaviour (and indeed social behaviour in general). On the other, it is the basis of his ethical manifesto for critical social science and in particular for the advocacy of alternative economic solutions. This chapter will begin by explaining the three aspects of the concept as he employs it and their relation to his wider oeuvre, then offer some evaluations of its contribution loosely oriented to these three aspects.

The economy as a moral economy

In the first sense in which Sayer employs it, the term *moral economy* embodies an important theoretical claim about *all* economies. It implies that economies are not alienated spaces in

which impersonal isolated individuals act purely calculatively to maximise their own individual interests, as in the notion of *homo economicus* that is central to mainstream neoclassical economics (Sayer 2007: 264). Rather, all economic action is simultaneously social action that is chosen by evaluative actors with personal needs and emotional connections – actors who are affected by the webs of relationships and normative commitments that all social actors are embedded in and thus by a whole host of cultural and historic factors.

This builds on the work of Edward Thompson (Thompson 1971), in particular his argument that ‘The moral economy embodies norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others’ (Sayer 2000: 79). Thompson expressed this argument in the context of explaining food riots in eighteenth century England, where he argued that there was a customary expectation amongst both working people and elites that in return for their contributions, the working poor were entitled to be able to purchase subsistence foods at a viable price. Thompson, however, tended to see the moral economy as being replaced by modern market economies, whereas Sayer stresses that the moral and/or normative dimension does not disappear in the market economy or under capitalism.

This is partly because the market never becomes the whole economy, even under advanced capitalism: Sayer identifies the economy with *all* provisioning activity, regardless of whether it is done to produce commodities or not (Sayer 2004: 2; 2018: 23). Work outside the cash economy is directed more immediately towards providing what we need to live and to flourish (Sayer 2018: 23). But even within the market economy, he argues that many exchanges involve ‘thicker transactions and relationships involving cooperation, enduring responsibilities or specialist expertise’ (Sayer 2004: 9). Paid work, most obviously, does not simply involve an exchange of labour for money, but rather ongoing cooperation,

relationships and obligations with one's fellow workers (Sayer 2004: 10). Even an activity like shopping is not conducted purely in the spirit of utility maximisation but is often guided by our caring relationships to other family members (Sayer 2003: 353). Putting it more systemically, 'all economic institutions are founded on norms defining rights and responsibilities that have legitimations (whether reasonable or unreasonable), require some moral behaviour of actors, and generate effects that have ethical implications' (Sayer 2007: 261).

Moral economy as a mode of inquiry

In its second aspect, moral economy (by analogy with political economy) is an approach to studying, describing and explaining the economy. It 'studies the moral norms and sentiments that structure and influence economic practices, both formal and informal, and the way in which these are reinforced, compromised or overridden by economic pressures' (Sayer 2007: 262). It is thus an approach to inquiry that takes the first aspect of moral economy seriously, positioning normativity as an essential focus for the study of the economy in general.

However, it also treats normativity very differently than mainstream sociology, which tends to see it as rules backed by social sanctions that produce social order. This, he says, is 'an alienated conception of the moral dimension of social life, for it omits what matters to us and why morality should have any internal force' (Sayer 2004: 3–4). We often act morally 'regardless of whether there are any penalties for not doing so, because we feel that it is right or conducive to well-being, and because to do otherwise would cause some sort of harm to people' (Sayer 2004: 4). We are not merely socialised into normative understandings and behaviours. Rather, we are active, reasoning participants in our normative commitments, influenced by our culture but also by our nature as needy beings with desires and commitments, including commitments to the care of others.

This approach feeds directly into Sayer's major works on class (Sayer 2005) and on lay normativity (Sayer 2011). He argues that our class position affects our capacity to flourish or suffer, not only through material mechanisms but also because we may feel pride or shame as a consequence of how we are judged through prevailing normative attitudes to our class. In both books he argues that our moral sentiments are embodied and emotional but they are not irrational – we can reason morally and our emotions are themselves part and parcel of our system of ethical reasoning. Sociology often fails to see the personal, emotive and reasoning faces of lay normativity and thus to see that people's values matter to them because they are intimately bound up with their well-being. They are *about* how to achieve well-being but they also *contribute* to our success or failure in achieving well-being. In its fatuous search for an 'objectivity' based on refusing to engage with evaluative issues, sociology has become alienated from questions of well-being and thus produces an alienating account of normativity and class (Sayer 2005). Ironically, it also fails to see what *is* objective about normativity: that it is not merely the pursuit of culturally arbitrary norms but is oriented to objective sources of flourishing and suffering. Because we can flourish or suffer, we are evaluative beings who must assess what is good for us and those we care for. Moral economy, then, is a mode of inquiry that recognises and respects questions of care, well-being and moral judgement that have traditionally been marginalised by the social sciences.

Moral economy as critique

It is also a mode of inquiry that itself takes an evaluative stance towards its subject since social scientists, like everyone else, are evaluative beings with ethics of care and commitment based on the desire to flourish and to support the flourishing of those to whom we feel a duty of care. As a result, 'in paying close attention to how economic arrangements affect well-being, [we] can hardly avoid normative implications' (Sayer 2007: 262). With a few

exceptions such as the feminist ethics of care literature and the capabilities approach (Sayer 2007: 267), this represents a break with existing perspectives on the economy. On the one hand, mainstream social science disowns evaluative questions, but on the other hand critical social science has also been guilty, in what Richards calls ‘a great historical error’ that Sayer is devoted to correcting in this third face of moral economy, of effacing the normative basis of its evaluations (Richards 2020).

In a sense this is Sayer’s response to the challenges he posed in an earlier paper, which argued that critical social science largely fails to acknowledge the normative dimension of critique (Sayer 1997: 476). Even critical realism is criticised for giving ‘a complacent account of CSS [critical social science] in which ought follows straightforwardly from is’ (Sayer 1997: 473) – a reference to Roy Bhaskar’s concept of explanatory critique which suggests that we can derive critical conclusions from purely factual premises (Bhaskar 1986: 177). For Sayer, criticism can only be based on an ethical stance driven by our understanding of what is required for us and those we care about to flourish. Such understandings are influenced by our cultural contexts, but they also depend on basic features of human being: our physical and emotional needs, which arise from our ‘trans-cultural capacities for suffering and flourishing’, even though the way those needs are realised is socially shaped (Sayer 2000: 81–2).

Sayer argues that radical political economy is guilty of ‘the longstanding neglect of its critical standpoints’ in the sense that it takes those standpoints (such as opposition to capitalism or market forms of economy) for granted without examining their basis in normative judgements (Sayer 2007: 261). This chimes in with criticisms of the Marxist tradition that accuse it of denying its own normative basis, thus becoming incapable of recognising when it contributed to actions that conflicted with that basis (notably Geras 1985). There is also a strong parallel with Erik Olin Wright’s argument for concrete utopias

in that he suggests that critique also depends on being able to demonstrate the possibility of meeting human needs better (Sayer 2000: 81; Wright 2010).

This third aspect of moral economy is implemented by examining and assessing the legitimations of economic institutions and practices (Sayer 2007: 268), as Sayer does, for example, in his book *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* (which he positions explicitly as a study of moral economy) (Sayer 2007: 268; 2015b: 18–22). The book challenges the economic relations that allow rentiers to extract unearned income while productive workers may be left unable to meet their basic needs. Moral economic evaluations, however, need not always be negative, as we see in his paper on consumer culture and moral economy (Sayer 2003). Without entirely rejecting critiques of consumer culture he suggests that some are too negative about commodification because they fail to take account of the ways in which commodities are recontextualised by their purchasers in the context of their relationships (Sayer 2003: 344, 353–4).

The influence of moral economy

The concept of moral economy is increasingly influential, and Sayer's influence on it is increasingly acknowledged, although it is typically seen as secondary to that of Thompson and Karl Polanyi. This is ironic, since there are clear differences between their perspectives, and at least some authors invoking Thompson and Polanyi employ a concept of moral economy that is much closer to Sayer's.

Both Thompson and James Scott, whose work on modern peasant villages is also influential, see moral economy in much narrower terms: not as the normative shaping of the economy in general, but rather as a very specific set of moral expectations (Booth 1994: 654). In particular, they identify it with the right to subsistence for the poor and a corresponding duty

of redistribution for the wealthy. While these moral standards have a substantial influence in the contexts studied by Thompson and Scott, they regard them as culturally particular, and argue that they are extinguished by the rise of a pervasive market that ‘has escaped the control of the community’ (Booth 1994: 657). Thompson explicitly resisted attempts to widen the concept of moral economy, arguing that this ‘would lead to a loss of focus’ (Götz 2015: 154). As Thompson puts it, ‘The breakthrough of the new political economy of the free market was also the breakdown of the old moral economy of provision’ (Thompson 1971: 136). In this respect their account maps onto the work of Karl Polanyi, who sees the rise of modernity as a great transformation in which the economy becomes disembedded from wider social traditions and norms, taking on a life of its own that is no longer subject to these constraints but instead driven by an individualistic optimising logic (Booth 1994; Polanyi 2001).

For Sayer, however, and other critics of these versions of the concept, the market economy is also and necessarily a moral economy: all economies depend on legitimacy and on moralised practices. The great transformation changes the moral environment but it does not abolish lay normativity or the dependence of economic activity on it. The market economy is just as embedded as the pre-modern economy in both an institutional structure and a set of moral beliefs (Booth 1994: 661). This perspective, rather than Thompson’s, is therefore implicit in all work that seeks to apply the concept of moral economy in the context of contemporary market-based economic forms.

Sayer’s contribution has been recognised and integrated by a number of scholars. Sharon Bolton and Knut Laaser, for example, welcome Sayer’s reintroduction of lay morality and ‘people as ethical and evaluative beings’ to the study of work (Bolton and Laaser 2013: 515). They also revisit a well-known earlier paper of Bolton’s that ‘portrayed cabin crew as deeply moral and insightful beings whose social commitments to each other and to passengers were

guided by moral dispositions and evaluations in the light of the concern for their own and others' well-being' (Bolton and Boyd 2003; Bolton and Laaser 2013: 518). They retrospectively recast the argument in terms of moral economy, arguing that the concept strengthens the framework of the argument (Bolton and Laaser 2013: 518).

If Bolton's contribution emphasises moral economy as contributing to a better understanding of economic activity at the micro level, my own work on the digital economy has also employed it with more of a meso orientation (Elder-Vass 2015; 2016). For example, open source software creation depends on a radically different set of normative commitments than commodity forms of software, notably labour as a voluntary activity undertaken for pleasure within a relatively non-hierarchical organisational structure as opposed to wage labour managed for profit; and a product that is freely available to anyone who decides to use it as opposed to a commodity. Having said that, open source software is embedded not only in this gift-oriented moral economy but also in the normative orientations of the market economy, and has become the site of an intriguing hybridisation of the two (Elder-Vass 2015).

What does moral economy contribute to explanatory work?

These applications, however, and Bolton and Laaser's discussion in particular, raise a question: if a study that was conducted without the framework of moral economy can be recast in its terms, what is the concept of moral economy actually contributing to the explanation developed in the study? Bolton and Laaser have an answer: 'A moral economy approach strengthens the existing conceptual frame by offering analytical connective tissue that more fully binds together the different strands of the cabin crews' experience of work' (Bolton and Laaser 2013: 518). This does not seem to suggest an increase in explanatory

power, or the identification of any further causal elements, but rather an increase in coherence of the set of explanations taken as a whole, perhaps in the sense that we may now see the different normative elements of the original account as all being examples of the same *kind* of explanation. The framework provides a kind of validation of the particular elements of the explanation by recognition of their relation to the general form of moral economy.

We could also argue that the moral economy as Sayer understands it corresponds to a general class of causal mechanisms and their influence: those mechanisms in which ethical commitments oriented to human needs and capabilities and implemented by evaluative actors influence economic practices. To take a moral economy approach is to recognise that all economies depend on such mechanisms, and to employ accounts of such mechanisms in economic explanations. It thus sensitises us to the presence of certain kinds of mechanisms, but it does not in itself define specific mechanisms or structures. Thus (like critical realist philosophical ontology, but at a somewhat more concrete level) it remains a framework that needs to be filled out with specifics, and indeed could be filled out in many different ways.

This also helps to explain the division between Sayer's perspective and Thompson's. Thompson's moral economy thesis identified a specific set of causal mechanisms, relating to the moral sense of entitlement to subsistence and the way in which workers reacted when they felt this had been breached. His concern about generalising the concept of moral economy arose from his desire to maintain the focus on this specific explanation. As Götz has argued, this narrows the meaning of the concept relative both to earlier historical usages and to the sense of generality implicit in the term itself (Götz 2015). Still, Thompson's version has an obvious explanatory pay off that more abstract versions of the concept must do without. For these more abstract versions, an explanatory inquiry conducted in the moral economy mode will always have to identify specific normative forces to do its explanatory work.

How does moral economy contribute to critique?

Sayer's commitment to basing critique on explicit ethics is an enormous step forward from the crypto-normativity of traditional leftist and poststructuralist critiques (Sayer 2012). 'Critical social science,' as he says, 'needs to acknowledge its often hidden or repressed premise – that its evaluations of practices imply a conception of human flourishing' (Sayer 2011: 245). Surfacing that premise requires critics to explain how the objects of their critique impede human flourishing and how those obstacles could be removed in a way that would improve things, rather than relying on vague allusions and tenuous assumptions about possible alternatives. It also requires that we recognise the positive contributions to flourishing made by existing institutions alongside the harms they create and thus leads to a more careful and caring radical politics rather than an irresponsible politics that disregards its possible consequences.

Again, though, there are limits to what moral economy can do for us in this space. Tying moral economy to an ethics based on human flourishing is attractive but Sayer does not provide us with a firm meta-ethical justification for doing so nor does this principle lead directly to specific ethical conclusions. It may seem self-evident that human flourishing is a good thing, but on the one hand it is not clear that it is the *only* good thing and on the other there may be many different understandings of what produces flourishing in a given case. Some might argue, for example, that we should also be concerned with the flourishing of other animals, or even with the flourishing of the planet or the universe as a whole. I tend to agree with prioritising human flourishing, but we need to be able to justify that priority and more meta-ethical work is required to do that (Elder-Vass 2010).

Nor does moral economy provide us with tools to solve the practical ethical questions that arise when people have different needs and different beliefs about how to encourage flourishing. As in the explanatory argument, moral economy functions here as a framework that needs to be filled out with more specific claims about what contributes to human flourishing. Sayer, for example, bases much of his critique of the rich on the distinction between earned and unearned income, seeing the former as contributing to human flourishing and the latter as not (Sayer 2015a: 293). No doubt this corresponds to a strong moral instinct for fairness – that people’s incomes should reflect their contributions to society – but it is all too easy to overplay any single moral principle when there are so many different angles on human flourishing that we need to consider. He overplays this one, I suggest, when he uses it to oppose a Universal Basic Income (Sayer 2018: 29–30), because there are also many flourishing-based reasons for *supporting* it. One might argue, for example, that we all should have the right to subsist without being demeaned and potentially excluded by a disciplinary state administering conditional benefits. Or that when much of the work available is alienating and exploitative we should provide people with the dignity of being able to refuse it. The more general point, though, is that a commitment to human flourishing, while thoroughly desirable, is not in itself enough to provide an unambiguous basis for critique. This is not an argument, however, *against* Sayer’s moral economy, only a caution against asking the concept to do more work than it is capable of.

Conclusion

Sayer’s work on moral economy is a major contribution to reforming critical social science. The idea that our economy *is* a moral economy cuts the ground from under an economics that detaches its rationalistic model of the economy from any trace of humanity or sociality. The idea that we should study it by examining the norms and sentiments that influence the actions

of evaluative ethical actors *restores* humanity and sociality to our understanding of the economy. And the idea that critical social scientists are also ethical actors who should be explicit about the nature of their evaluations is a demand for critique to advance into a responsible adulthood in which we explain the reasons for our calls for change and think seriously about how things could actually be improved for people. Moral economy as a concept does not in itself provide us with explanations or justifications. These still need to be developed on a case-by-case basis, taking account of many different mechanisms and contributions to flourishing, and there will always be scope for debate about the best way to do that. But moral economy provides us with a framework that helps us to develop more realistic social explanations of what happens in the economy and more human evaluations of what *should* happen. It is simultaneously more realistic and more humanistic than prevailing social science – just what one would expect from Andrew Sayer.

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