

## **Begging Rome**

Norms at the margins, norms of the in-between

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# Begging Rome.

## Norms at the margins, norms of the in-between

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**ROMEO** (act 5, scene 1)

You're this poor and wretched and still afraid to die? Your cheeks are thin because of hunger. I can see in your eyes that you're starving. Anyone can see that you're a beggar. The world is not your friend, and neither is the law. The world doesn't make laws to make you rich. So don't be poor. Break the law, and take this money. (*he holds out money*)

**APOTHECARY**

I agree because I'm poor, not because I want to.

**ROMEO**

I pay you because you're poor, not because you want me to buy this.

[*APOTHECARY gives ROMEO the poison*]

“Most relationships among men can be considered under the category of exchange. Exchange is the purest and most concentrated form of all human interactions in which serious interests are at stake”

Georg Simmel.

“To accept a gift is to be bound to the giver”

Arnold van Gennep.

## Begging from the Center of Christianity

I would like to open with a news story which ticked in as this article was in the writing, and which risks becoming anachronistic by the time these lines go into print – although I hope not. On March 13, 2013, the Vatican announced and welcomed the new Pope in the traditional ceremony on St. Peter's square. The candidate himself was a slight surprise to most observers, but even more so his chosen Papal name: Francis I. The choice was clearly symbolic of the message the new Pope wanted to communicate: humbleness, care for the poor and sick, social justice, renouncing of material values, and a general ambition to rejuvenate Francis of Assisi's exemplary theodicy in the contemporary setting.

The central role played by the formative experience, and ethical awarding, of begging is nowhere clearer than in the life of Saint Francis, and the story takes us right to the heart of Rome. On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis begged with the beggars at St. Peter's. The experience changed him for good, and moved him to live in poverty. As Francis returned home, he began preaching on the streets, and soon amassed a following. The story of the Good Samaritan, so central to Christianity, emphasizes the deed of giving to the unknown stranger - indeed, to one's enemy. In order to accomplish salvation (according to Weber, the motivating question behind personal life conduct and civilizational development, so no minor issue), we must rid ourselves of possessions and give away what we have. This puts premium both on the giving act and on the status of poverty, which the beggar exemplifies. The two ends came to meet in institutionalized Monasticism, with the entire brotherhood forsaking earthly possessions. Many of the most significant religious orders in early Christianity were mendicant orders.

Seen in this perspective of religious history – and it is a perspective which one must keep in mind within the city of Rome<sup>1</sup> - Bergoglio's choice of Papal name symbolically brought us back to that core message in Christianity. And yet, the theodical elevation of the begging act, as we shall see, far from always finds resonance in the receptions and perceptions of the begging phenomenon as it these days spreads across the streets of Rome. Set against this background, Rome, the symbolic heart and administrative center of Catholicism, represents a particularly salient setting for understanding the moral economies of begging and attitudes towards it.

Begging constitutes one of the most visible and observable types of social interaction that exists, and as such is has perhaps been somewhat neglected by anthropologists. Begging is a significant micro-economy at the global level. It is also a moral phenomenon, and with a deep history. Judging from the unsolicited emails I receive every day, cyberbegging is in constant development: unknown people who, for one or the other reason, ask us to donate them money. The stories behind such pleas are quite unlikely, but they are also interestingly similar: some named person, somewhere in the world, has lost everything, and is in need of *your* help, here and now. Somehow it functions. There is now a very popular website which sets up a cyberbegging account for customers, facilitating your entry into the trade for just 60 \$. And here, of course, the begging has clear affinities with the larger charity industry, where it is not individuals but collective bodies (NGOs, international development programs, and sometimes even states themselves) whose economies depend upon people giving donations – e.g. they depend upon gift-giving.

In this article I argue that begging represents and must be analyzed through a twofold prism: as an economic exchange taking place at the margins but amply within the structures of the market economy and as a social relationship and cultural exchange that, due exactly to its in-between liminal nature,

touches upon and generate *central* values; it is an exchange in which crucial norms are negotiated and established. Begging activities are just one example of how the market oriented economy intertwines with underground networks and “informal economies”, and how these interconnections produce implicit and explicit norms. Begging creates moral reciprocities that go along with an economic exchange. The margins of those norms are often put into question connected to perceptions of begging: begging is acceptable, and often even considered “respectable” – and, as already indicated, this has much to do with a religious genealogy<sup>ii</sup> - but is it acceptable to use children to beg? Is it acceptable to “fake” your age and invent amputated legs in order to call upon people’s pity/piety<sup>iii</sup>, and make money from it? These questions go to the heart of some of our most crucial – but also contested – norms.

A note on the methods used for the argument is in order before we proceed. A consistent part of what is argued here builds quite simply on my own observations of begging in Rome and its surroundings. Noticing how the begging scene developed rapidly during the last 10 years, I started to take more systematic note of these changes, asking myself three descriptive questions: *who* was begging, *where*, and *how*. I made these observations almost daily, stretched over the period 2003-2013. I did not start to pay attention to this phenomenon as part of any explicitly formulated research project. However, my interest in begging was connected to my general engagement with immigration and urban change in Rome (see Thomassen 2010; Clough Marinaro and Thomassen, forthcoming). Besides observation, in recent years I also started to engage in informal conversation with co-residents of my local neighborhood on their attitudes towards begging: shop-owners, parents from my children’s school, local church-goers, study-abroad students at my university and colleagues. I quite simply asked them, whenever the situation allowed for it: do you give money to beggars? Why/why not? What do you think about the beggars in our neighborhood? As new legislation was passed on begging in Italy (discussed below) I followed the heated debates that followed, mostly in newspapers and in various on-line fora. While I did chat very informally with some of the beggars themselves (it is difficult not to!), I would like to stress very explicitly that this paper does *not* build on interviews or participant-observation with beggars. In what follows, I focus on the general social scenery and moral economies of begging in Rome, the legal construction of begging in Italy, and how the phenomenon is perceived by people who give and people who do not give. My primary focus is *not* on the beggars themselves: who they are, their life stories, how they perceive their own activity. This must await a future study. In many ways, what is presented here is part of a work in progress.

Begging evokes attitudes that range from piety, charity, compassion, to rejection and condemnation. My aim is not moralistic, and I have no wish to take sides or express judgments; my aim is to understand begging as a micro-economy and a social field of moral semantics. While begging has mostly been studied in the context of sociological/anthropological approaches to poverty (as in Bourdieu 2007), I consciously do *not* make the assumption that begging is a phenomenon simply produced by poverty; nor do I intend here to search for the social causes of begging (poverty, unemployment, family transmission or other factors typically identified by survey research). We need to understand the modalities of begging before we frame it within a socio-economic model of explanation; this is not a move away from structure and substance, but an attempt to get closer to it.

While we do have a series of studies of begging in non-Western contexts, Asia in particular (Bowie 1998; Laidlow 2000; Parry 1986; Weiner 1992), the phenomenon has received very scarce attention within Europe. Yet begging is now spreading within European cities, and this is arguably another

visible sign of “globalization”. At the same time, the *ways* in which begging develops within specific urban landscapes remains locally specific even as globally entangled, thus bearing witness to multiple modernities in their unfolding (Thomassen 2012 b; Vereni and Thomassen, forthcoming).

In my discussion I relate the more particular setting to two larger theoretical debates: first, regarding the understanding of norms and the “in-between”, the main theme of this special issue, I will propose that begging has clearly liminal, as opposed to simply marginal, characteristics, and that, consequently, the social nature and function of norms cannot be apprehended from within a Durkhemian perspective of “deviance” and lack of norms (anomie). Second, with respect to the anthropology of gift-giving, I will suggest that begging constitutes not only a total social fact but also what I call a “total economic fact”, with aspects that pertain to all three dimensions of economic systems: market, gift-exchange and re-distribution.

### **Moral geographies of begging: sketches of the Roman scene**

Every day on my short way to work I meet at least 4-6 persons who ask me for money. I live in a middle-class neighborhood in Rome. On my way home, I meet several others. They stand in front of the church, the supermarket and several smaller shops, my children’s school, and often also next to the cash machines and the newspaper stands. This means that I, as most Romans, will encounter a begging person during almost all of my daily activities and public encounters. Most are regulars: they occupy the same place or work in the same street for longer periods of time, sometimes for years. The beggar in front of my parish church has occupied the same position for nine years, to give an example. However, with the arrival of new faces, those spaces are increasingly contested. People asking for money, what I will call “beggars” in this paper (fully aware of the imprecise and perhaps problematic nature of the word – which does not translate directly into Italian<sup>iv</sup>) are extremely visible in the larger urban fabric of the entire city; and the number of beggars (although unknown) is no doubt increasing very rapidly. Beggars have in recent years also spread into the wider region of Lazio, and their presence is equally salient in the historical center, where tourists inevitably will be asked for money 20-30 times a day – sometimes to their great surprise. I loosely define “begging” as someone asking for money (or other material goods) from someone else as a charity; but as will become clear, begging is actually a rather complex social phenomenon, rendering categorical definitions rather difficult.

#### Who begs? And who do not?

There are no statistics available on people begging. It is certainly possible to identify some “groups” engaged in begging, such as the Roma, West Africans (mostly Nigerians, so it seems at least), poor and homeless Italians, “Punkabestia” youth. The Roma (acknowledging the complexity of this category, I refer to Roma as a the Romani or “Gypsy” people as a whole, not distinguishing entities composing this group - Sinti, Manus, Kale, Kalderash, Xoraxané and so on) have been dominating the scene for many years, and are evidently very organized.<sup>v</sup> This organization of begging is mostly done by subgroups of the Roma, not by the entire “group” (see Clough-Marinaro 2011; Solimene 2009). Romans (and Italians in general) most often don’t make such distinctions. In fact, there is a tendency to assume that anyone begging (except black Africans) must be a Roma (“nomadi”), which is of course far from always the case.

In the identification of beggars, one is on slightly more on safe ground when it comes to *excluding* immigrant groups: for most migrant groups in Rome never engage in begging. The Chinese is now one

of the biggest immigrant communities in Rome, yet one will never see Chinese beg; the same can be said of the numerically significant Philippines. Very few ‘non-gipsy’ Romanians engage in begging, although this is now – and by a wide margin – the largest immigrant group in the city. Why is this so? Although a full answer is beyond the limits of this article, I venture the hypothesis that the explanation has little or nothing to do with absolute level of poverty. The fact that begging is taken up in what certainly seems an “ethnically patterned” way relates to processes of integrating into Italian society, rather than people’s economic standing at the point of departure, or their “culture of origin”.

In fact, it is often among members of immigrant communities in Rome that one will find the most condemning attitudes toward begging. Bangladeshi people tend not to beg; they would be frowned upon by members of their own community. In general, many Bangladeshi consciously pride themselves of a high work ethic, and see this ethic as part of their “cultural background”, while it must be stressed that this is still a representation articulated within the specific urban context of Rome (see Broccolini, forthcoming). The very well-organized (and illegal) sale of umbrellas is run by people from Bangladesh, as is the selling of roses in the historical center, and also the petrol stations all over the city are most often occupied by Bangladeshi after official closing time, when they provide service by helping people with the filling up. But Bangladeshi rarely engage in “pure” begging, e.g. asking for money without a service connected to it. In fact, Bengalis rarely make use of the charity services that actually do exist in Rome to help newly arrived immigrants without jobs and home; as a young man put it “No Bengali would seek help from Caritas, he would turn to his own community, he wouldn’t go to Caritas because he would feel uneasy at the prospect.” (ibid). Such a statement is sign of a conscious keeping up of cultural values and solidarity. In contrast, a few Nigerians I talked to self-consciously described their community as lacking in solidarity: everybody is on his own. Both the Bangladeshi and Chinese work in networks that often manage to pool together resources, and thereby start investments, setting up companies and shops. Such co-ordination of resources and business planning is much less frequently the case for West Africans. To some extent, therefore, the resort to begging relates to the (relative lack of) economic organization of immigrant networks within other sectors of the official and non-official economy.

### Technologies of begging

People use very different techniques and technologies (Mauss 2001) when they ask for money. Quite a few beggars write a note of attention to the public, and perform a little act, like playing music.



*Playing music & asking for money, historical center of Rome. "I am poor and ill in my legs, please help me with a little offer, thank you". The wall graffiti says "Kill Berlusconi" (photo from the internet)*

Other beggars are completely silent and use no signs. This technique is most typical in the historical center. Here the begging position is often with clear religious allegories, expressing poverty and humbleness. This is most often practiced by women (and of a certain age, mostly elderly, at least in appearance), kneeling or stretching their body on the ground.



*Silent praying/begging, Saint Peter's Church in the background.*

Some Roma women also beg together with children and it is quite common to see young Roma girls begging while carrying a baby. This type of begging is more common *outside* the tourist zones. Rarely if at all do male Roma beg. This gender pattern is interestingly enough inversed among Nigerians: practically only Nigerian males engage in begging.

Staying with this contrast, another difference stands out: Nigerians and West Africans dress “normally”, and do not in any way try on purpose to look dirty, or make themselves look older, quite the contrary: they are clean, well-dressed and smiling. The Roma woman begging in the center purposely try to look impoverished, old and miserable.

Begging is not an easily defined phenomenon. In recent years, one could witness an increasing amount of situations where people ask for money, somehow or to some (even if superficial) degree related to a “service”. In Rome, as across Italy, a parallel economy has grown around a series of daily acts, like parking one’s car, putting petrol in one’s car, paying the parking ticket, finding a parking slot – situations where people stand ready to “help”. The perhaps most curious example takes place on Piazza Cavour in the administrative center of the city, seat of High Court. The city administration finished in late 2012 a parking garage, but for decades there was no organized parking system outside court. That space was taken over by private persons who collect money, organize and park the cars – e.g. the cars of judges and lawyers administrating the Italian legal system. It is all completely illegal and perfectly transparent. Is this begging?

Leaving categorical definitions aside, it is certainly an *extension* of a phenomenon where people ask for money for doing things that no-one really asked them to do; I propose to catalogue this as “forced” begging. When parking a car in places “run” privately, people often pay the fee, not because they are happy with the service, but because they fear repercussions. It is for this reason that some Italians



experience begging as threatening; and there is an extent to which the paying of money to someone showing one a parking sport at night is not done in appreciation of the service, but simply to avoid any trouble. In that sense it is quite similar to the paying of the infamous *pizzzo* (racket money) to the Mafia: you pay for the “service” you never asked for, e.g. “protection-money”, where the protection you buy is from the money receiver himself. The very fact that such phenomena – which would simply not be socially or legally tolerated in many other parts of Europe - have spread so rapidly here must evidently be understood from the context of similar, pre-existing social practices, where social agents use public space or public resources for the accumulation of private wealth.

### Geographies of begging: Marginality versus liminality

Begging is spread out all across Rome, but it is also spatially patterned. Pragmatically, beggars quite simply occupy locations where people need to open their wallet: shops, super markets, bars, cash machines. However, there is a further spatial semantics to be noted here: beggars occupy cross-points in the urban space, such as bridges, entrances to public transport stations, road junctions, traffic-lights; they don't stand *in* shops, they stand right at the entrance. It would therefore be very wrong to say that beggars occupy marginal spaces; rather, they occupy liminal positions, in-between areas, crossings, passage points, thresholds, exactly those physical positions singled out by Arnold van Gennep (1960, 15-25) as grounding liminality as transition. Liminality is not to be confused with marginality. Liminal spaces are right enough found at the fringes, at the limits. However, there is more to it than that. Had we just been talking about the peripheral, or the ‘far-away’, we would be dealing with marginality: that which is the furthest away from the centre. Liminal spaces are in-between spaces, and therefore *central* (Thomassen 2012 c). This spatial pattern proves a crucial hint toward the understanding of the larger begging phenomenon. Begging is *not a* social phenomenon of “deviance”, placed at the margins where collective norms are weak or absent and where anomie reigns; it is placed at the moral and semantic liminal junctures *wherfrom norms emerge*.

The *where* is connected to the *who*, and although it would be wrong (as always) to formulate any law-like statement, there *is* a pattern to observe. In the Roman countryside, or in villages of the hinterland, most people asking for money (for example in front of supermarkets) are Nigerians or Roma. The same pattern is visible in Roman neighborhoods outside the tourist areas. Most of the transactions taking place here have to do with local Italians giving money to West Africans and Roma.

In the center of the city (by which I mean what locals call the *centro storico*, e.g. the historical center where the tourism industry thrives) it is quite different: here begging is done mostly by “Italians” (including the Roma populations, but far from only), and most of the money flow comes from tourists. Here Black Africans are indeed present, but almost exclusively as street sellers (another activity at the legal-illegal threshold). The division of labor and ethnicized pattern changes with the spatial figuration.

Even further, the sites chosen for begging outside the center are not random: churches (and other holy sites) are occupied by “local” Italian beggars (Roma or not), while beggars in front of shops and supermarkets tend to be African. Nigerians tend *not* to employ religious symbolism in their begging, whereas the Roma do so very consciously, both in terms of location and symbolism. I stress again that this is not because of “culture” in any simple sense of that word: Many Nigerians in Rome are in fact Christian, whereas far from all Roma are so. The religious symbolism must be read as a symbolic code and a narrative that people operate as part of their begging technique.

This pattern is interesting, also because it serves to show how the exchange that takes place evidently builds, in various ways, on expectations and stereotypes about the “other” as held by the potential giver, in what amounts to a quite sophisticated and also calculated staging of the encounter. When tourists give money in the historical center, they give (or have the perception) of giving to locals. Outside the historical center, however, the situation is inversed: here local Italians give to “foreigners”. The exchange plays on a series of cultural expectations: Africans are poor, that is why they beg, and we should help them. There is little doubt that black African beggars would be able to raise comparatively less money from American tourists than they would from middle-class Romans. This is equally related to expectations, stereotypes and images of the city that tourists carry with them and that are produced in the encounter. Beggars in the center often kneel in clearly religious positions, stretching out their arms as if in prayer. Moreover, many of them attach a religious icon on the object with which they collect money (Virgin Mary is by far the most used symbol). And it might well be that for a few tourists, being in the capital city of Christianity, the idea of “doing good” presents itself more easily than in other European cities.

Clearly enough, begging is highly staged and performed; the reciprocities in play are not only economic and moral; they are equally about mirror-images, identities, self/other relations, ethnic categorization, and display aspects of class, gender, and age, staged in this specific and peculiar global urbanity.

### **At the interstices of legality: The legal construction of begging**

Begging is liminal in more than one way, for it is clearly also one of those phenomena which must be placed at the interface between legality/illegality. Begging was made illegal in Italy with the Codice Penale Italiano (the so-called codice Rocco, from 1925-30). It was, de-penalized in the 1990s, and finally so with the Art. 670, law 25, June 1999. The relevant legal clauses are to be found under the so-called Third Book of the penal code which covers less serious crimes; more specifically, under Paragraph 4, one finds a series of laws that deal with infringes upon the law that concerns “la vigilanza sui mestieri girovaghi e la prevenzione dell'accantonaggio”. The “girovaghi” is a very old-fashioned Italian word that roughly means “vagabondry”; “accantonaggio” roughly translates as begging – so the two phenomena, begging and vagrancy were from the beginning considered together, although in different laws within that paragraph. This connotation is a quite widespread legal tradition; in the UK, to give one example, begging was made illegal under the Vagrancy Act of 1824.

Law 670 is directly on MendicITÀ (“begging”) and says that whoever begs in a public place is punished with up to 3 months of prison. The second comma within that law is the most interesting one, as it states that if the begging is done in a way that is particularly “ripugnante” (“repulsive”), the penalty can be increased up until 6 months. The begging can be considered “repulsive” if the beggar simulates illness or bodily deformities, or in other ways use “tricks” to call upon “pietà”.<sup>vi</sup> This comma is interesting for two reasons: first, the legal “grading” of the penalty runs parallel to social and moral judgments of begging which tends to grade and contextualize the phenomenon, according to the who, where and how. Second, the law, written from within an explicitly secular system of regulations still makes reference to the clearly very Christian notion of pietÀ. It is an abuse of pietÀ which makes begging particularly wrong and punishable.<sup>vii</sup>

The first comma was declared anti-constitutional in 1995; the second comma, and thereby the entire law, disappeared in 1999 via law decree (e.g. via parliament); so from 1999 begging was de facto de-penalized.<sup>viii</sup> However, in 2008 new legislation came into force under the “Security Packages”,

sponsored by the then Right Wing governments. One of the clauses in the “Primo Decreto Sicurezza” (the “first security package”) stated that mayors and city councils could adopt urgency regulations (“ordinanze”) in those cases where it proves necessary with respect to preventing and eliminating serious threats to public safety and urban security.<sup>ix</sup> The law thus opened up for mayors/city councils to adopt measures toward combating security-related phenomena. And since begging by many city councils was indeed perceived as a matter of “security”, it was banned per decree (*ordinanza*) in many locations – as it eventually happened in Rome. This ban on begging<sup>x</sup> led to quite vivid public debates all around the country. Many citizens and civil society organizations found that such decrees were against the spirit of Christianity and an attack on humanitarian principles, if not indeed human rights (is it not a human right to be able to beg for help when you are left with nothing?); Italian mayors had to defend themselves from attacks from both Left-leaning NGOs working on justice-related matters and immigration, but also from Catholic NGOs and branches of the Church itself.

These debates are interesting for a whole series of reasons, but what is worth stressing in this context is the degree to which the legal framework creates a genuine limbo of systematic in-betweenness, and in several ways. First, the *ordinanza* is not really respected or uniformly applied. When people beg in some of the central squares in Rome (such as Piazza Navona), I have witnessed how the local police tell them to leave – but they also let them know, that if they just move a bit away from the main squares it will be okay. Second, the fact that we are dealing with *ordinanze* means that there is no uniform set of rules across the country. Legally speaking, an “ordinanza” is quite different from a national law. It is not penal, but civil, which means that one can be fined for violating it, but it is not a “crime” in a technical sense (it will, for example, not appear on anyone’s penal record).<sup>xi</sup> Begging is not illegal, but is still somehow and to some degree treated as such by the authorities – at least, *sometimes* and in *some* places, and all according to contextual interpretation. The same complexity, as I will now indicate, is found at the social level of attitudes towards begging.

## To Give or Not to Give, That is the Question

Should we give money to people who beg? Moralities of giving or not giving are difficult to generalize about. In Rome (as elsewhere) one can see shopkeepers who give money to beggars under the condition that they go away. The motivation is quite simply to make sure there is no loss of sales, as beggars are perceived to be annoying the customers. Here the giving is a “gift” that serves to ward off any future interaction – hence, it is anti-reciprocal, in intent at least. Arguably, the same tendency is often involved when we chose to give money to beggars: we pay to remove, even if temporarily, something we feel less good about. While this is clearly not symmetrical exchange, it does therefore have a “balance”.<sup>xii</sup>

However, in most cases outside the tourist center, the giving actually does create a social relationship, as you are likely to meet the same person almost every day. The beggar becomes part of that group of people you say good morning and good afternoon to, and perhaps exchange a few words with.

Is it important that it is *money* being circulated? I personally hesitate to give money, and so do quite a few other Romans I talked to; sometimes, however, I offer persons who beg a coffee or a sandwich. A few local inhabitants I talked to (including quite a few shop-owners in my neighborhood) said the same, and with the justification that when you give food, “it cannot be used for anything wrong” (drugs, fx), and one can be certain that it goes to the person actually asking, and not to some “racket” (Italians know very well that Roma girls who beg on the street do not keep the money for themselves, but must

deliver it to their male patron). This giving act is a way of personalizing and “controlling” the gift.<sup>xiii</sup> However, not everyone accepts that gift; and I have managed to offend quite a few beggars by offering them a sandwich. We often say that money is “impersonal”, in contrast to thing-gifts (where we, as Mauss said, can give a part of ourselves). This contrast is perhaps less neat than we would like to assume. In Catholic churches, it is normal practice to collect money at the end of the mass, and it is given in public. This is far from “impersonal”; and the same can probably be said about the public act of giving money to the beggar sitting outside the church. One may here invoke the Chinese notion of “spirit-money”. Money makes the world go around; at least, money produces social relationships and interaction, and hence create normativity, with and beyond market value.

When is it *not* okay to give? And what are the margins of the norm which says that giving is acceptable and carries a positive moral sanction? In fact, most people hold very differentiated and sometimes ambivalent attitudes toward giving. The far majority of persons I have asked over the years if they give or not to beggars would answer: “it depends”. “I give money to musicians, because they deserve it”, as one woman stated it. Many people stated that they give money, but never to child beggars, because it is “simply wrong that they beg”. Others, conversely, said that they do give to children, because they are innocent and have no choice. I have observed Roman car drivers getting into angry discussions over whether it is right or not to give money to Roma girls/children who ask for money, typically around (and on) roads full of traffic. This can actually become very heated: while some Romans feel it is a duty to give, others see the giving of money to child beggars as extremely *wrong*.

Would people give money to beggars who fake a missing leg? The answer is almost always no (and this is in congruence with the Italian law as it was formulated until 1999). In fact, faking a bodily deformation is something that can make Romans quite upset. But we may also ask: What does it mean, to “fake” it? Are we not always “staging” ourselves if we beg? And why does it make a difference how we stage what is evidently a ritual act anyway? One could also turn it around: if someone is ready to go through what one could consider a perhaps quite humiliating act of dressing up as old and without legs in order to raise money, does this not just demonstrate the seriousness of that young woman’s situation?

What becomes clear is this: When people are asked to explain why they give or not give money to beggars, they almost systematically launch into wider considerations; and it is also in this concrete sense that begging, far from being at the margins of norms, should be seen as central to how we establish and think about norms in the first place. Charity and begging is not only about giving and receiving money; it is about judging each other and making value statements. As indicated also in McIntosh’s and Erskine’s (2000) sociological study of attitudes towards begging in Edinburgh, moral considerations regarding what constitutes a “real” or “genuine” beggar are crucial when deciding to give or not. Ambivalence and contradiction are common characteristics of understandings of, and attitudes towards, those who beg. People can feel sympathy for homeless people, and link it to their own experience of struggling to buy a house (housing in Rome is extremely expensive), and then launch into more general considerations that having a home should be a human right. I witnessed a woman giving money to a man sitting with a sign “I have lost my job”, while saying in sympathy “I also lost my job”. The expression, “it shouldn’t be like that”, often comes up when people talk about why and when they give. In short, when giving or not, we are making a statement about what we think are right and wrong; the concrete giving act is moralized as a general social statement. Of course, in quite a few cases this also means that the fact of begging allows people to air anti-immigrant attitudes: the beggar becomes

the evidence that “these foreigners” are up to no good, are lazy, dishonest, and just come here to get (or steal) “our” money. Beggars are often the targets of racist cry-outs in public; and they are sometimes also targeted, cruelly, by racists, and sometimes violently so.

### **Theoretical Relevance: Durkheim and the Study of Norms and “Deviance”**

Durkheim is routinely thought of as founder father of the social sciences; he is even more routinely thought of as the great sociologist of norms – and, relatedly, the great sociologist of deviance. The framework provided by Durkheim also became mainstream in American sociology via Merton’s classification of behavior, as related to various types of norms, and our attitudes towards deviance. Deviance is something that happens, according to Durkheim, when norms are weak (Durkheim 1982, 1951). Deviance is a violation of norms. According to Durkheim, the spread of deviance was caused by the underlying factor of anomie and loss of norms (linked to the division of labor), while deviance, brought to a certain “volume” would start to undermine norms.

Let me be quite straightforward here: it is not a terribly helpful starting point for understanding begging to place it within this conceptual universe of deviance, as urban sociologists tend to do with this and related activities (such as crime and violence). As I have argued elsewhere in a different context, the alternative framework suggested by Durkheim’s opponent, Gabriel Tarde, comes to our help here (Thomassen 2012a; Szakolczai and Thomassen 2011). In fact, Tarde’s approach helps us to identify a serious shortcoming in Durkheim’s entire work, namely the still pervasive tendency to establish “norms” from statistical averages - “external” to the individual. But norms are not averages! An average is a statistical median for behavior within a group - nothing less, nothing more. Norms must come from within, they must be felt. As argued by Martire (2011: 26) in his application of Foucault to the legal sphere, norms do stand in relation to *normality*; a norm functions as a scheme to categorize reality, as well as a paradigm on the basis of which to regulate it. But as Foucault would always insist, the regulatory nature of the norm can only be brought to function via a bio-politics which involves, from within, the living subject.

Tarde would also insist that one cannot subtract “norms” from an abstracted “society” – a term he never used. Norms exist as they emerge in interaction, in “circles” of human relationships. The point here is quite simple: it is *not* the case that separate groups hold norms that differ between them, and that those norms then come into contact, function together or clash, via social interaction. The norms quite simply do not exist except outside that social interaction and the exchange that takes place. The metaphor of a “grey area” existing between the “black” and “white” economies is perhaps not useful at all, as it again leads to a view of different norm-sets and practices based on diverging moralities, which then mingle in the grey zone, where there is a lack of clarity as to which norms prevail. Quite the contrary is the case: norms emerge from within the center of the total space of social acts toward which we assign and attribute value and meaning, emanating outwards in circles, serving us as guiding principles to judge and make sense of other phenomena and social situations. Norms grow out of the interstices, of the in-between.

To invoke a perhaps trivial example: it is *not* the case that Nigerians in general hold norms about begging that they bring with them to Rome, as an activity that makes sense to them because of their cultural background (or pre-established cultural norms), as it is *not* the case that Romans hold absolute or general values concerning people begging – this depends on the where, the who, and why, and the nature of the encounter. The norms that individuals attach to Nigerians or Roma begging, and the

reasons why they consider this acceptable or not, emerge out of the specific context in which this is enacted – and the same can be said from the viewpoint of the young Nigerian man who begs for money outside my coffee bar. Of course, people do beg in Nigeria, and it is relatively widespread in the growing urban settings; but the same can be said about so many other places. The Nigerians who beg in Rome, are they also begging in Nigeria? No, is the answer, *they stage themselves like that in Rome*. The reasons behind begging are certainly multiple, but it is rather safe to assume that “anomie” has very little to with it, quite the contrary: begging is possible *because of* normativity, as it emerges from within social exchange where, as Simmel said, serious interests are at stake.

## Moral Economies: Begging as a Total Social Fact

Begging evidently represents a kind of gift-giving, and hence puts on display anthropological logics of exchange and reciprocity. Certain ‘gifts’ are obligatorily given, said Arnold van Gennep, and gift-exchange lies at the heart of everyday sociability. The circulation of goods and objects serves to create continuous social bonds (van Gennep 1960: 31). Gift giving is the “confirmation of a bond”, and “to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver” (ibid: 29). In line with this, Mauss called gift-giving a “total prestation”. Seen from this perspective, begging involves a peculiar kind of exchange, as it seems to be rather one-sided: there is a giver and a receiver, and the roles cannot be inverted. As argued by Parry (1986), with reference to alms giving in India, it is exactly when alms are given with no expectation of return that they can become “poisonous”. “Pure gifts” given without a return (even as a possibility), place recipients in a structural debt, and hence in dependent (and at times stigmatized) status: the poison of the gift.

As argued by Testart (1998) in his critique of Mauss, there *is* in fact on occasions something like a “free” gift, when passers-by give money to beggars they never see again. There is no obligation to give and no obligation to reciprocate. But *is* there no return-gift? Arguably the giver receives (or feels like receiving) a moral gratitude, a feel-good experience. In *The Gift*, Mauss briefly discussed “alms” as an example of a stratified society where, in the absence of a material return, the recipient gives back spiritual deference. So arguably there *is* a return, and the giving is therefore not simply altruistic (see also here the argument of Bowie (1998) with reference to alms-giving in Thailand). In Shakespeare, it is the beggar who gives the poison – not the other way around.

However, one can also approach the reciprocity with another question: what do beggars do with their money? Apparently, from a strictly economic viewpoint, the exchange is one-sided and unidirectional; yet, the money given *does* in fact circulate - and some of it travels to Africa. As studies of the global remittance economy indicate, quite often money raised by migrants in Europe is used to finance economic activities elsewhere. So the gift is in fact passed on, at least some of it; and from this point of view the economy involved is rather one of generalized reciprocity.

But is begging *only* about gift-giving? Can it simply be catalogued within that category? The answer is no. First, and most generally, Mauss never saw gift-giving as an opposition to market economy (of the capitalistic type). For Mauss there was no absolute free gift. We create a historical and ethnographic fiction when we separate gift economies from exchange economies on the ground that the former is primordial, collective and “good”, while the latter is modern, individualistic and rational. We should abandon the self-interest gain-oriented versus “free” and “altruistic” dichotomy. Gift giving in what Mauss called “archaic” societies can indeed be very competitive; it is inherently asymmetrical and hierarchical.

Second, and more specifically, begging is part of an exchange system, but it is equally part of the other major types of economic exchange. Begging is, in many cases at least, oriented toward capital accumulation and gain.<sup>xiv</sup> Beggars develop their own strategies to maximize their income, which is often invested. The point is, and as argued so persistently by Keith Hart on his precious on-line forum, that “gift-giving” simply cannot be reified as an exchange form distinct from market economies. If anything, begging is market economy! The beggars in my Roman neighborhood get up in the morning, dress for work, catch the bus to work, work all day, and then take the bus home again – just like any other worker. They are of course not capitalist producers, but they carve out their own market and operate within it with more or less skill. And they operate and optimize their trade within those very structures that make up global and local capitalism.

Begging also belongs to a parallel type of redistribution to that which we engage in via tax-paying: the state offers social services, but where it fails, we, as individuals, redistribute our income to those who we feel might need it. In short, as a social phenomenon, begging displays aspects of reciprocity, redistribution and market oriented behavior, and thus involves all of the major types of economic behavior long ago singled out by Mauss and Polanyi: it is a “total economic fact”. Begging also moves between both extremes of what Sahlins (1965) identified as redistributive systems and those based on individualistic reciprocity. Begging furthermore involves all three reciprocity ideal-types singled out by Sahlins: “pure” reciprocity, balanced reciprocity and “negative reciprocity” – the latter essentially being a “theft”, akin to the one that takes place when Roman inhabitants try to park their car in the evening, a forced extraction taking place under a thinly veiled threat disguised as protective kindness.

This all indicates – and I will end here - that we have to analyze begging as a total social and economic fact, only that we have to reposition and ground our notion of the “social fact” outside a Durkhemian methodology based on externality. Trying to understand begging in contemporary urban societies serves as a key into the logics of the anthropological foundations of our moral economies. Begging is a way of making a living, a chain of reciprocal acts, a continuously staged series of social relationships and casual-causal encounters, a web of money exchange in which moral attitudes are invested, argued and subverted, a liminal space of exchange in which norms rise and fall, across the bridges of the Tiber, on the thresholds of the urban gateways, on our way to Heaven or Hell, from the center of the margins.

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<sup>i</sup> Let me stress from the outset that I am *not* assuming that Romans are more religious than most other Italians or Europeans; probably the opposite holds true. However, as will be indicated, it is the setting itself which invites for a symbolic appropriation of Christian themes in the begging situation, as it is played out most visibly in the tourist center.

<sup>ii</sup> I am unable, within the limits of this paper, to outline how and why the ethical value of begging took on different contours within the various world-religions. It is of course important to stress that, within Christianity, with the Protestant Reformation, begging lost the ethical premium earlier bestowed upon the practice, as giving money to beggars would become seen as a sign of acceptance towards unproductivity, and hence *against* the Protestant ethic.

<sup>iii</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing to the intricate relationship between these two notions, which of course have the same etymology, from the Latin “*pietatem*” (nominative “*pietas*”). It is not possible here to offer a detailed discussion of the question. It is however important to stress that in contemporary English usage, “pity” most often denotes a simple “feeling sorry” for someone. Very crucially, it was not until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, and no doubt resulting from the Reformation and its effects, that the adjective “pitiful” (which earlier had meant to be compassionate or deserving of pity) came to signify a mean, unworthy and contemptible person. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “pity” was then finally distinguished from “piety”. A similar linguistic development never took place in the Latin languages, nor could it have done so, and certainly also for sociological reasons. Historically speaking, “*pietà*” was often symbolized by a virgin holding the dead body of Christ, as in Michelangelo’s graceful masterpiece of the same name, still housed in St. Peter’s Basilica. *Pietà* referred to noble human sentiments of compassion and a humble, loving heart, with the implicit message that such a noble heart will also *act* accordingly, caring for the other, a set of connotations closely linked to the concept of “*misericordia*” the Christian term that came to another crucial concept still used in contemporary Italian, and often in the context of giving to someone in need. To turn “being full of *Pietà*” into a negative is from a perspective of Latin Christianity a categorical and moral impossibility. These semantic differences, needless to say, go to the heart of the ethical splits that took place in Europe after the Reformation. *Misericordia* literally means a heart full of *mercy*, another concept with tight and important connections across the historico-semantic field of begging. In early Church Latin, mercy applied to the heavenly reward of those who show kindness to the helpless. Mercy is, in a myriad of languages, the root word for God’s forgiveness, gift and gift-giving, various expressions of thanks (most directly in French) and, of course, markets and material goods exchanged in market economies (as in merchants), all related activities from a semiological perspective. Marcel Mauss would have found it of interest that the entire Indo-European vocabulary of market-related terms very likely derives from the Italic root \*merk-, which is almost surely from Etruscan, originally referring to various aspects of social economics.

<sup>iv</sup> In Italian, a beggar is technically called a “*mendicante* (da povero)” or “*accattone*”; interestingly enough, these terms are not very much used by Italians. When I asked my Italian students what they call people who ask for money, they sat long without coming up with an answer, until one of them said: “*barbone*” – which roughly translates as “vagabond”.

<sup>v</sup> While many beggars work on their own, their activities are often quite organized, and not only by the Roma (although they may seem particularly protective about the spaces they “occupy”; one day a Roma woman physically chased away a Nigerian man at the entrance to my supermarket claiming it “hers”). If the begging act is not necessarily in and by itself illegal, it seems evident the organization of begging might, in some cases, be connected to organized criminality. In 2012, in several locations in the center of Rome, one could witness big cars dropping off young men early in the morning, all similarly dressed up with dirt in the face, wearing long dirty coats and worn-out shoes, in order then to pick them up again in the evening. There is little doubt that this is part of a racket system: the beggars have to give back the money, keeping at the most one part to themselves. We don’t know who the organizers are, and this is a relatively new phenomenon (I base this on news reports); guesses are that the “bosses” might be the same as those who run the prostitution industry. It also seems the

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case that organized criminal groups in some areas divide the territory between them, as happens with prostitution.

<sup>vi</sup> “La pena è dell’arresto da uno a sei mesi se il fatto è commesso in modo ripugnante o vessatorio, ovvero simulando deformità o malattie, o adoperando altri mezzi fraudolenti per destare l’altrui pietà”.

<sup>vii</sup> It should be noted that the Italian penal code is generally *not* strongly inculcated with Catholic terms. *The Codice Rocco* followed the French secular tradition of law, where moral judgments made no reference to religion (hence, a “religious crime” like suicide was lifted out of the penal system). The ways in which Catholic principles are sometimes smuggled into secular principles of state administration in the Roman context have been wonderfully described by Herzfeld (2009).

<sup>viii</sup> Law 671 is still in function, and it says that anyone who uses a minor for begging (less than 14 years old), can be arrested from 3 months to 1 year. If the crime is committed by parents, the parents (or “tutore”) will have the child taken away. Evidently enough, this law is not systematically applied toward those Roma who openly employ minors in begging.

<sup>ix</sup> “I sindaci potranno adottare provvedimenti urgenti (cosiddette *ordinanze*) nei casi in cui si renda necessario prevenire ed eliminare gravi pericoli non solo per l’incolumità pubblica ma anche per la sicurezza urbana.”

<sup>x</sup> The decrees adopted are known as “ordinanze anti-accattonagio”.

<sup>xi</sup> And even the legal aspects turned out to be more than dubious: The aspects of the Maroni law that touched upon begging was also appealed to constitutional court, by an anti-racism NGO – an appeal which they won in April 2011: The city councils actually do not have a right to confiscate money raised by beggars, as they actually cannot prohibit begging.

<sup>xii</sup> The general point being that our classificatory tradition to lump together symmetrical and balanced reciprocity needs reconsideration.

<sup>xiii</sup> One can here note how beggars in other parts of Europe (but I have only seen this in Northern Europe), consciously – and with humor - turn around this expectation, putting up a sign with texts saying “Need money for BEER!”.

<sup>xiv</sup> This is so even in cases where the beggars pay back their gains to their ‘bosses’, although evidently enough, here the beggar him or herself is not accumulating anything – it is the boss who does that. There are of course beggars – in Rome as elsewhere – who live from hand to mouth and only cover their daily basic needs with their income, without the slightest idea or hope of ‘career advancement’. We simply do not know the statistical proportions here, but my qualified guess is that this type of beggar is *not* the most common one, contrary to common-held stereotypes.