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**THE RELATIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR:  
DISENTANGLING THE BALLAST OF STRANGERS**

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**ABSTRACT:**

We propose that voluntary sector geographies are best understood from a systematic relational approach, drawing upon neo-Marxist and symbiotic perspectives. We focus on relations between the voluntary sector and the (shadow) state, internal spaces of client interaction, and external urban spaces. Our relational approach advances alternate understandings of the voluntary sector: one that is partly but not fully in the orbit of the shadow state; more mediator than conduit for neoliberal policies; partly punitive, and firmly in relation with other ambivalent measures for clients; and both spatially uneven and fixed, but always unbounded in its practices.

**KEYWORDS:** voluntary sector; relational geography; shadow state; care; service hub; symbiosis

## INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Fyfe and Milligan wrote in *Progress in Human Geography* on the need to bring the voluntary sector “out of the shadows” within human geography, through a focus on its crucial intersections with the (waning) welfare state, citizenship, and social capital. Since this publication, there have been precious few agenda-setting overviews of the geographical literature on the voluntary sector (but see Milligan and Conradson, 2006; Milligan, 2009; Skinner and Power, 2011). Moreover, these papers have generally ignored emerging trends within human geography, particularly the ‘relational turn’ in which geographers have promoted a more path-dependent, contingent and connected approach to a variety of urban, health and poverty-related matters (e.g. McCann and Ward, 2010; Elwood et al., 2017; Hall and Wilton, 2017).

In this paper, we wish to once again pull the voluntary sector out of obscurity, but move beyond simply updating work since 2003, pressing as it is. We first propose that the voluntary sector cannot be readily understood without seeing it as a series of far-flung and proximate entanglements, relationships and encounters both spatial and social. While some work has begun this expressly relational conversation – DeVerteuil’s (2014) engagement with the voluntary sector and its relational spaces of punishment, care and sustenance, as well as Cloke et al. (2017) on how the voluntary sector operates between revolution and reform – they remain relational only in parts (see also McIllwaine, 2007). We therefore advance a more *systematic* relational approach to the voluntary sector. This is done by revisiting not only the key relationships that have marked the geographical literature on the voluntary sector since 2003 – with the state, within internal spaces of voluntarism and external spaces of the city – but also capturing new relationships within and across these three. To do so, and as a second proposition, we advance an innovative relational approach that reconstitutes neo-Marxist relational work with post-structural critiques and more symbiotic approaches, articulating a framework of interactions and dependencies that cover parasitism, commensalism, mutualism and synnecrosis. Interweaving these interactions are varied enactments of citizenship, understood here as a dynamic engagement between different actors and institutions as to who belongs and who does not. As a third proposition, we seek to elevate the centrality of the voluntary sector within human geography – especially within debates on the state, civil society and urban space - while also challenging certain dominant but narrow representations: that the voluntary sector is unilaterally part of the shadow state; that the voluntary sector is primarily engaged in the punitive oversight of vulnerable populations; and that the voluntary sector is parochial and locally-bounded. So this paper is a critique and a reframing of existing knowledge by using an explicitly relational approach – while also proposing how this approach can contribute to new avenues of research in the conclusions.

Before advancing our propositions, we provide a working definition of the voluntary sector. The title of the paper underlines a key element – that the voluntary sector supports vulnerable populations ill-served by the state, the market and informal communities, and so in need of the ‘ballast of strangers’, and that this is provided voluntarily. The phrase ‘ballast of strangers’ originates from Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands* (2010: 21) about the Ukrainian terror-famine (1932-33), where he described how people had to hold on to each other for stability and support whilst standing in day-long lines for food while starving. In this case, the act of holding on to each other was an obligatory, life-and-death dependency. We use it

here to describe the obligatory nature of voluntary support by those who are neither kin nor neighbour. We argue that this concept has special relevance in the contemporary context of advanced global neoliberalism, given the steady withdrawal of the state from welfare and care provision and the need to rely on external support by those without familial, informal, state and market ties; the act of holding on to and supporting strangers sets the voluntary sector apart from the informal, intimate social relations of family and friendship (Hall, 2018), but also from the state itself, emerging as an institution that straddles community and public spheres, legally recognized but self-governing and non-profit distributing (see Salamon and Anheier, 1998). Or put differently, the “voluntary sector is distinguishable from the state by its independence; from the market by its emphasis on the non-profit principle, mutualism and altruism; and from the family/community by its formality” (DeVerteuil, 2015: 41). What needs disentangling, however, is the directionality and extent to which the voluntary sector is related to these other social agents, especially the state, as well as its own internal spaces and external relations to (urban) space, the cornerstones of this paper. While we acknowledge the rich vein of work on rural voluntarism (see Yarwood, 2011, for an overview), the urban is thought to be the main stage upon which the challenges faced by regions in the current international economic climate play out. Contributions have sought to conceptualise the effects of this climate as ‘a particularly urban phenomenon’ (Donald et al., 2014: 12). Urban spaces have also been at the forefront of geographic concerns regarding the uneven socio-spatial impacts of austerity – wealth and power, inequality and impoverishment (Hall, 2018).

Rather than operating in a binary fashion, the sector can be conceived as a set of relational, affective and material networks of relationships and connectivities (Andrews, 2018). These networks may incorporate other bodies (caregivers, volunteers, peers), inanimate objects (buildings), technology (telecare, online support applications) and ideas (best practices, health guidelines). In the remainder of the paper, we map out our agenda for a relational approach in further detail. We first propose this approach, reconstituting various strands in neo-Marxist and post-structural thought alongside symbiotic ones. This is followed by three specific relationships that profoundly mark the geographical literature on the voluntary sector since Fyfe and Milligan’s 2003 seminal paper, and that map on to specific roles – as a para-agent of the state, as a space of encounter and voluntarism between clients and staff, and a mediator of urban change and urban space. The conclusions cover both the relations among these three, as well as set a future research agenda. When taken together, we conclude that a focus on these relations can further develop relational and multiscalar understanding of voluntarism in a contemporary context of austerity and (incomplete) global neoliberal urbanism.

## **RELATIONAL APPROACHES IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY**

The ‘relational turn’ in human geography has become pervasive but does not yet constitute a coherent field. Rather, it generally falls into two divergent camps (Jacobs, 2012): neo-Marxist (e.g. McCann and Ward, 2010) and post-structural (e.g. Hall and Wilton, 2017). These build on a long pedigree of relational work in radical geography, notably Massey’s (1993) well-rehearsed arguments around the relational aspects of place and space. To her, a ‘progressive sense of place’ binds people’s need for attachment to place, of “how to hold on to that notion of spatial difference, of uniqueness, even of rootedness if people want that, without being

reactionary” (Elwood et al, 2017: 64). This combines with “a sense of place which is extraverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world”, thereby shunning artificial separations between the local and the global in favour of a joined-up, relational socio-spatial ontology (Elwood et al., 2017: 66). This approach has proven enormously influential in neo-Marxist circles, informing more recent work on policy mobility (McCann, 2011; McCann and Temenos, 2015), the relations between cities (Clarke, 2012), comparative urbanism (Ward, 2010) and the fixity-mobility dialectic (McCann and Ward, 2010). In these approaches, there is no conflict between the relational and the territorial, but there is a rejection of a de-territorialized world of purely flows, or a purely sedentary and grounded world (Massey, 2011).

Conversely, Massey’s approach has also mutated through a more insistently post-structural perspective. For instance, Hall and Wilton (2017) outline a post-structural relational approach to understanding disability geographies, using non-representational theory and assemblage, with nods to actor-network theory. Andrews et al. (2013: 1339) combine relationality with affect when examining the geographies of aging, “recognising space and place as being relationally configured and performed, possessing a somatically registered energy, intensity and momentum that precedes deep cognition”. Fox (2011) and Duff (2014) both propose assemblage theory to capture what bodies (within the material world) can do and the relational discourses that such actions are situated within. In extending this focus, understanding a (voluntary) institution as an assemblage of bodies has some merit, with each body having capacity to act but within the constraints of other (institutional) relations, including structures, rules, hierarchies, finances, technologies and places. Finally, Elwood et al. (2017) straddle both approaches by promoting a relational geographical understanding of poverty that is as inseparable from concerns around economic restructuring and institutional practices as it is from class/race subjectivities and representational strategies that mutually constitute poverty.

We advance a reconstituted neo-Marxist perspective, given its sustained attention to issues of inequality, unevenness and asymmetry that pervade the voluntary sector’s deep and persistent relations with the (neoliberal) state, its clients and internal spaces, and its external spaces. Concomitantly, we will also critique the neo-Marxist approach to the voluntary sector itself for its overly-narrow representations at odds with a more balanced relational approach that borrows indirectly from the post-structural. How? First, we are alert to the ambiguities of the voluntary sector in its relationships, thereby avoiding simplistic, unidirectional and unbalanced representations. This parallels Sharp et al. (2000), who developed a relational construct in which domination and resistance are mutually constitutive. This construct reframes the relationship between a supposedly all-powerful state and a compliant voluntary sector. Second, we are vigilant to a wider range of motivations and agency in the city that may relate to the voluntary sector (Cloke et al., 2007, 2010), which acknowledges how voluntary sector organizations operate as vital spaces for the performance of particular conceptions about care, ethics, and belonging through direct service to others (Askins, 2016). Third, we are cognizant of both spatially-fixed realities and the more fluid ‘elsewheres’ (McCann and Ward, 2010) that potentially constitute more expansive geographies of the voluntary sector.

Fourth and crucially, our reconstituted relational approach is sharpened by finding inspiration in the biological concept of *symbiosis* (Gorman, 2017), which focuses on close,

persistent and long-term interactions<sup>i</sup>. This approach was stimulated by Harrison et al. (2004), who propose that human structures could conceivably benefit from an appreciation of the symbiotic, in which heterogeneous actants co-produce “opportunities and constraints for one another through all manner of relations including co-operation, symbiosis, parasitism, co-habitation, opportunism as well as competition” (Hinchliffe, 2007: 25). In this respect, we are especially interested in obligatory symbiosis, where both sides depend on each other (captured in the ‘ballast of strangers’, where the voluntary sector is in a mutually dependent balancing act with its clients), but we do not ignore optional symbiosis, where both sides maintain partial or full independence. We focus on four potential relationships: (1) parasitic, a one-way relationship in which one side is harmed while the other benefits; (2) commensal, in which one side benefits while the other is not affected; (3) mutualistic, a two-way relationship in which both sides benefit; and (4) synnecrosis, where the relationship is mutually and unavoidably detrimental. Keeping in mind that these relationships overlap as much as they are clearcut, we uncover symbiotic relationships in the persistent constitutive dependencies between the voluntary sector and the state, its clients and internal spaces, and its external spaces, as mapped out in the following three subsections. These relationships are entangled by the consistent sense that the voluntary sector is in an obligatory relationship with clients, providing crucial support (‘ballast’) to individuals without formal ties (‘strangers’).

## **THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR ENTANGLED WITH THE STATE: BEYOND THE SHADOW STATE MODEL**

The relationship between the voluntary sector and the (welfare) state is vexed, and has become more complex with the (incomplete) ascendancy of neoliberalism. Using our symbiotic relational framework, what appears at first blush to be a mutualistic relationship between the state and the voluntary sector becomes more parasitic, where the state uses the voluntary sector for its ‘dirty work’ as a condition of the latter’s (increasing) dependency on state funding. However, the idea of the state benefiting at the expense of the voluntary sector is not entirely accurate either, since the latter can also behave independently of the (shadow) state beyond obligatory symbiosis, although perhaps not as an agent of revolutionary change.

The advent of a universal welfare state in the Global North precipitated a long decline of the voluntary sector in the post-war period (DeVerteuil, 2011). But since the 1980s, the scale and scope of the voluntary sector as a vehicle for service delivery for the vulnerable has increased in lockstep with the receding welfare state, a mutualistic *panacea* for ameliorating the effects of the devolved and increasingly dismantled public health and social care provision (Power and Skinner, 2019). Wolch (1990) was enormously influential in identifying a new partnership model between the state and the voluntary sector, one she defined as a *shadow state*, through which the welfare state could safely devolve risk and responsibility to non-state actors to fill the missing gaps. However, with the closer working relationship with government, voluntary organisations faced new tensions in terms of how they managed increased bureaucratization, greater expectations over its service delivery and coverage, and control over its client groups.

The dominant representation in this shadow state construct is of a subservient voluntary sector, co-opted into the aims of the waning yet parasitic welfare state, aligned with

neoliberal goals of leaner governance, a corporatist approach based on bureaucratisation, marketization and professionalization (Salamon, 1999; Fyfe, 2005). On this point, one prominent thread highlights how the radical potential of organizations is neutralized through unfair relationships with parasitic state institutions (Milligan and Fyfe, 2005). Ilcan's (2009) study of community service organizations in Windsor, Canada, highlights how volunteers worked almost exclusively in service-delivery roles and were not engaged in community organizing, social justice or political advocacy work. By using volunteers as service providers, community service organizations are providing volunteers with the opportunities to help others meet the responsibilities of being a self-sufficient member of the community. Indeed, Kivel (2017) goes further to note that involvement in service provision through grant-funded projects and government contracts keeps organizations' resources trained on managing poverty and hardship, which directly detracts from efforts to transform the systems that create these problems in the first place.

However, we can also see the voluntary sector more in tension with the welfare state. Work by Cloke et al. (2017) and Rosenthal and Newman (2018) demonstrates that the sector is sometimes subservient while other times ambivalent or even orthogonal to the welfare state, thus moving beyond a parasitic symbiosis towards optional symbiosis. This and other work shows the complex and sustained multi-scalar negotiations that connect national welfare state restructuring with local needs and community concerns (e.g. Jones 2012; Trudeau 2008; Trudeau and Veronis 2012; Warshawsky 2014). It fundamentally broadens the idea of the shadow state by demonstrating how it is translated and negotiated by the voluntary sector 'on-the-ground'. No longer merely pawns of the welfare state, voluntary sector organizations can enact their own localized agendas, exercising a certain latitude to engage with vulnerable communities in ways that diverge from a strictly neoliberal, co-opted and parasitic one (see also Williams et al., 2012). As DeVerteuil and Wilton (2009) argued, totalizing accounts of welfare state restructuring always miss the necessarily path-dependent and contingent interactions between the shadow state and the voluntary sector.

If the voluntary sector is never entirely subservient to the (parasitic) state, then neither is it an agent for revolutionary change. Rather, it emerges more as an in-between and mediating actor. In this respect, Cloke et al. (2017: 721) caution against "the tendency...to dismiss the caring work concerned as short-term pragmatism, an incorporation into neoliberal policies and postures to perform 'sticking plaster' work that at best constitutes temporary relief, and at worst acts against radical structural change". More recently, and returning to previous concerns by Fyfe and Milligan (2003a), post-2008 austerity in advanced economies has put renewed pressure upon the voluntary sector to do more with less, creating conditions where day-to-day survival is harder to maintain (Milbourne, 2013; Hall, 2018). The relational space that voluntary organisations now occupy and shape has shifted after a decade of heightened withdrawal of state funding, theoretically allowing more independence from the shadow state but also curtailing the ability to serve vulnerable populations.

These tensions are explored by feminist-inflected approaches to austerity, but also within critiques of the role of the voluntary sector in the Global South. For the former strand, this hybrid positioning is emphasized by Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans (2011) with reference to the non-profit workforce, and Jupp (2012) to local neighbourhood organizing groups: while those involved are often grounded in everyday practices and entangled with policy programmes, their practices can constitute powerful forms of activism. Indeed, to illustrate

the breadth of potential entanglements within such a hybrid space, Darby (2016) identifies four positions – rejection, resilience, resourcefulness, and reflexive practice – which she argues can occur simultaneously at different organizational scales. Work by Hall (2018) has helped advance a relational account of the geographies of family, friendship and intimacy to better understand everyday austerities. Her focus on the everyday brings the institutionalised and formalised spaces of austerity – workplaces, childcare centres, youth groups, foodbanks, libraries, citizens’ advice bureaux – into the ‘messiness of everyday life’, where personal and lived experiences of using such settings has its own relational consequences.

Within the Global South, a key contribution underlines how civil society has been relationally infused with neoliberalism. Bondi and Laurie (2005: 395), in an introduction to a special issue, highlight how neoliberalism has “travelled with remarkable ease”, extending its reach globally across the Global South and North via the activities of leading international organisations such as the World Bank. This point is further elaborated by their contributors, and later echoed in Milligan’s (2007) review of voluntary sector geographies. Baillie-Smith and Laurie (2011) expand on this point, arguing that while international volunteering through NGOs has been driven by notions of collective global citizenship, solidarity, development and activism, it has also become a conduit for neoliberal state policy. McIlwain (2007) recognises civil society in the development context as a ‘potential battleground’ that can maintain the status quo as well as provide an arena of resistance and progress. This body of work thus serves as an important avenue to broaden out our focus to advocate using a relational approach to better understand civil society at a range of global scales and contexts.

In the next section, we review how the state-voluntary sector relationship maps on to the internal spaces, ethos and clientele of the latter, itself embedded in a deeply complex relationship between a neoliberalized and punitive set of motivations alongside more caring or ostensibly ambivalent ones.

## **SPACES OF ENCOUNTER AND CONTACT ZONES: VOLUNTARY SPACES, ETHOS AND CLIENTELE INTERACTIONS**

The internal spaces and motivations of the voluntary sector are symbiotically linked to the clients it serves; an organization’s ethos maps on to its internal spaces that structure interactions with clients. The dominant framing of this relationship has been pessimistically parasitic. Rather than serving vulnerable populations, the voluntary sector has been recruited into overseeing, punishing and obscuring them, overlapping with the shadow state argument but even drifting into the domain of synnecrosis, where both clients and voluntary spaces are mutually harmed. But once again, a counter-literature advances a more ambivalent relationship within these ‘contact zones’, one that could be commensal for clients, in that the voluntary sector helps to sustain them without the latter necessarily benefiting from the relationship, or even mutualistic, where both sides benefit from services rendered in terms of care and citizenship.

There has been a long-running debate in urban social geography on what exactly motivates the actions of the voluntary sector that frame its internal spaces. Alongside the shadow state construct, the dominant representation has been one of punitive and overbearing spaces, of the sector’s “enlistment...to do neoliberalism’s dirty work, of micromanaging and

punishing surplus populations” (DeVerteuil, 2015: 44). Cast as a willing partner with neoliberalism (Wilson and Keil, 2008; Gowan, 2010), the voluntary sector emerges in this framing as an overseer of vulnerability and precarity, and an obscurer of deep social and spatial inequalities. This perspective fuses with a polemical distrust of faith-based voluntary provision, seen to embody a problematic focus on personal failings rather than articulating more structural accounts of poverty and need, as well as largely eschewing the state (Hackworth, 2012).

However, this representation pays scant attention to the relationality with more ambivalent and even supportive ethos that structure voluntary sector spaces. A myriad of work has critiqued this punitive/neoliberal trope using a more granulated approach to voluntary sector spaces (e.g. Laurenson and Collins 2007; Cloke et al., 2010; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010). In effect, the motivations that structure voluntary sector space are far too multiple and diffuse to ever map exclusively onto punitive measures. Rather, the sector remains a potential and genuine site of help, caring, and sustenance to balance the fortunes of populations who cannot be easily absorbed into the labour system (e.g. the ‘ballast’ of ‘strangers’), working for, alongside, or even providing an alternative to the (parasitic) shadow state. If such spaces feature multiple and interdependent motivations, then it may be useful to see them as inherently relational zones of encounter (Valentine, 2008), asymmetrical spaces between a largely vulnerable clientele and a more powerful staff (and a diversely-motivated volunteer) that both reproduce dominant power relations and understandings yet also offer the potential for challenging them, through what Askins and Pain (2011) and Lawson and Elwood (2014) referred to as ‘contact zones’. Askins and Pain trace the origins of this term to post-colonial work that emphasises the interconnections and conflict with colonial encounters, and use it to characterize the spatialities of interethnic encounters within the context of UK integration policy. Lawson and Elwood (2014: 214) define contact zones as “interactions in which people grapple with social difference in ways that are neither a celebratory appreciation of difference...nor a disciplining and defensive position that seeks to exclude or assimilate difference”. Rather than seeing voluntary spaces as merely punitive or obscuring, we can use this ‘contact zone’ approach to see them as a series of complex micro-politics, motivations and relationalities, much as DeVerteuil (2014) and Cloke et al. (2017) did in their own research into settings such as substance abuse treatment centers and food banks respectively.

Contact zones offer the potential for both ‘boundary-making’ and ‘boundary-breaking’ between clients and staff (Lawson and Elwood, 2014: 224), between enabling a more supportive approach and a mutually-detrimental hardening of punitive oversight of vulnerable populations. The feminist-inflected approach to care features similar accounts, with Jupp (2013) highlighting how early parenting centres in ‘disadvantaged’ neighbourhoods in the UK are framed by contradictory emotional dynamics. These dynamics are mutually produced by processes that seek to engage residents in change and efforts to foster a space of closeness and inclusion. Yet such processes to invoke change have largely been driven by neoliberal notions that individuals are primarily responsible for their own fates, and initiatives are thus typified by ideas of individual autonomy, self-improvement and responsibility, which can eclipse more solidaristic forms of social change (see also Chouinard and Crooks, 2005).



The idea of no-strings attached generosity and goodwill directly challenges the narrow representation of self-serving (or self-perpetuating) charity allied to neoliberal social policies. Williams et al. (2016) illustrate the contradictory political dynamics of food banking in the UK, in that they reinforce but also rework and generate new ethical and political attitudes, beliefs and identities. The authors also draw attention to the limits of progressive possibilities within such spaces, and examine how the religious affiliation and political ethos of small-state conservatism is still evident among many food bank volunteers, working to depoliticise food poverty. This resonates with Mohan and Bulloch's (2012) idea of 'civic core' – referring to the most likely people who volunteer – drawn predominantly from the most religiously active, prosperous, middle-aged, and highly educated sections of the population.

With this 'melting pot' of political sensibilities in mind, not all voluntary spaces can be regarded as exclusively caring spaces - some inspire fear from clients (Johnsen et al., 2005), while others are intersected by more instrumental motivations, what Johnsen and Fitzpatrick deemed 'coercive care' (2010) in which certain groups (such as the homeless) are coerced into services ostensibly for their own good, but also to remove them from public space. This complexity can be seen in terms of a contingent ethical performance. In their study of volunteers providing emergency services to homeless persons in England, Cloke et al. (2007: 1090) note "that volunteers contribute to the discursive construction, and perhaps deconstruction, of the institutional order of the field in which they work". This approach thus foregrounds the ways that organizations' missions are translated into social practice in contexts that are contingent on national and local situations. Attention to contingency and performance is further evident in Evans' (2011: 31) study of a homeless shelter in Canada. This work theorizes how voluntary sector organizations play a crucial role in "re-calibrating social inclusion in the city". In assembling broader societal conversations circulating in place about who is worthy of support and which lives matter, and governmental programs that dictate service eligibility and incentives for certain care practices – as well as resistance to these – voluntary sector organizations enact different modalities of social belonging and citizenship.

Alongside care, the voluntary sector can act as a space of sustenance and everyday survival for clients whose links to the market, the state and the informal community are limited at best. To Evans (2011: 24), "voluntary sector organizations maintain a critical layer of social protection that...can mean the difference between life and death". Martin (2011) underlines the crucial importance of voluntary spaces in the social reproduction of precarious work migrants in the American context, likening the voluntary sector to the (absent) state's role in curbing the excesses of an unregulated labour market. But voluntary spaces can also be sources of labour that sustain the lives of former clients. In an intense ethnography in Philadelphia, Fairbanks (2009) emphasizes how staff in sober living homes are invariably recruited from former clientele, who would have gained the tacit experience to ensure sobriety in the absence of professional staff.

We can now detect a series of motivations that structure voluntary spaces, and that alternately work against each other, work in certain sequences, or depend on each other, thereby producing a range of commensal and mutualistic relationships between organization and client. For instance, Cloke et al (2010) contend that the recent groundswell of care emerges directly from the on-the-ground excesses of the punitive approach, while DeVerteuil

(2014) argues that punitive measures depend on, and cannot exist without, the offsetting foil of care and sustenance for clients – all stick and no carrot is not usually tolerated in democratic societies. Of course, not all care is in the client's interest, as Johnsen and Fitzpatrick (2010) as well as Lancione (2014) warn. As a result, all voluntary sector internal spaces are amalgams of ambivalent motivations "...between shame and gratitude, stigma and acceptance, moral judgement and emotional support" (Cloke et al., 2017: 714), and that the various inherent symbioses can be as much overlapping as clearcut.

In turn, these symbioses present varied spaces of citizenship, which have emerged as a significant concept for the critical examination of social inclusion/exclusion. In this approach, citizenship is both legalistic and social, and ultimately relates to a person's ability to claim rights within a political community (Mills, 2013). Furthermore, it provides a vehicle for relational thinking and analysis in at least two ways. Attending to the construction of citizenship provides a way to examine how logics about political sovereignty, personhood, and obligations to others intersect and combine in place to affect subjects' ability to claim rights as a member of a political community (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003b). Building on this, we also see that the construction of citizenship reflects dynamic interplay of legal and social institutions in time and space, which provides a way to examine how inclusion and exclusion are conditioned upon the complex and contingent relations between such institutions that form in place. Citizenship is consequently part and parcel of the social production of scale as the politics in which societal membership is situated is territorialized in specific ways (Mills and Waite 2017).

Building on the notion that there is a continuum of shadow state relationships, relational geographies of the voluntary sector have pointed to a varied political economy shaping the social construction of citizenship – for both service recipients and providers. Trudeau (2012) shows how migrant-serving organizations that work with state institutions in the United States that reproduce neoliberal discourses of personhood and societal belonging even as they may try to contest these. Gordon (2013) extends this idea as she finds that service-providing organizations are similarly constrained by private funders, leading otherwise progressive organizations to circulate neoliberal tropes about the deserving poor. Even faith-based organizations' work around poverty alleviation has advanced neoliberal notions of personhood and state austerity (Hackworth 2012). Voluntary sector organizations with limited dependence upon government agencies can, however, circulate alternative notions of membership through the work they perform. Martin (2011) shows how organizations that are differently positioned with respect to state institutions reach for specific strategies to either outflank worker precarity, buffer workers' hardship, contest their exploitation, or engage in a mix of these. Mills' (2015) examination of volunteering within informal youth education work relates to the performance of good citizenship and the valorization of volunteer labor amidst austerity. Yet Woolvin et al. (2015) and Martin (2014) firmly underline the inequalities that pervade the construction of citizenship through volunteering, as the standing of unpaid volunteers contrasts with the influence and expectations of professionalized and paid staff.

## **THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR'S RELATIONSHIP TO URBAN SPACE: FIXED AND UNBOUNDED GEOGRAPHIES**

The relationship between the voluntary sector and its (urban) location is mutualistic in that the former depends on a dense, accessible pattern to attract clientele, while the community benefits from a helping resource. This co-location dynamic is lacking in more suburban and rural areas (Yarwood, 2011) but is traditionally seen as intensely localized and dense – a ‘geography of the nearby’ (Bull, 2014). As we argue, however, it is also the product of more distant relationships and policy models, a tension between fixity and mobility. Fyfe and Milligan (2003a), much like subsequent work on the outward-facing geographies of the voluntary sector (e.g. Skinner and Power, 2011), focus on its necessarily uneven imprint and spatial expression, with a complex relationship to need and neighbourhood. The dominant representation has been one of spatial unevenness characterized by remarkably fixed clusters. But we also wish to expand the purview of what it means for the voluntary sector to mutually relate to (urban) space in a beneficial manner, building on the rich legacy of its fixed co-locations of client and services (e.g. Wolch, 1980; Dear and Wolch, 1987; DeVerteuil, 2000), while extending to practices beyond the local that move the voluntary sector into more unbounded, scattered territories.

Geographers have long recognized that the spatial imprint of the voluntary sector is not just uneven but remarkably fixed and constrained (Wolch and Geiger 1983; Wolch, 1990; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003b; Cloke et al., 2010). While largely unplanned, uncoordinated and unregulated by the state, most voluntary sector organizations tend to gravitate towards areas of need as well as high accessibility and visibility. This co-location created conspicuous and beneficial agglomerations of voluntary sector organizations and clientele known as ‘service hubs’ (Dear et al, 1994). These patterns are not neutral – they are also the product of constraints in that “...voluntary-sector organisations that serve the most stigmatised surplus populations (for example, those who are substance abusers, homeless people, those on parole, people with a mental illness) are systematically excluded from middle-class areas through community opposition” (DeVerteuil, 2015: 52). NIMBY remains an important structurer of voluntary sector geographies and can lead to service saturation, which taints the mutualistic relationship with parasitic overtones, in that too many services in one place harm local cohesion and makes it difficult for clients to escape their (degraded) surroundings (Dear and Wolch, 1987).

Over time, these patterns can become resilient, with a stubborn tendency towards highly-centralized and highly-accessible inner-city locations. Varied mappings of voluntary-sector geographies across metropolitan areas ranging from Glasgow and Manchester to Los Angeles (Wolch and Dear, 1993; Ruddick, 1996; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003b; Marr et al., 2009; Clifford et al., 2013) reveal that service hubs remain steadfastly inner city and positively correlated with areas of high deprivation. This co-location of need and supply has interested geographers since Wolch (1980) and Wolch and Geiger (1983) mapped the non-working, service-dependent poor in cities. Alternatively, some have questioned the spatially fixed and constrained characterisation of the voluntary sector. When considering the activities of voluntary care organisations, Power and Hall (2018) argue that they can be more diffuse and unanchored than their organisational setting may imply; they point to the increasing use of community asset-based approaches to care by voluntary support organisations for older and disabled people. Care in the form of friendship and peer-support groups, for example, is

increasingly taking place in local mainstream settings, including bars, bingo halls, libraries and museums. A divergence therefore appears to have emerged between voluntary support initiatives for clients deemed more acceptable by mainstream urban society than for those considered more marginal.

Should we castigate or praise the largely fixed nature of the voluntary sector for socially-excluded populations? Building on Harvey (1996), Elwood et al. (2017: 750) note that “fixities are important because they produce political identities, constituencies and struggles...”; in this respect, resilient spatial fixity is important when urban space restructures to the detriment of voluntary sector geographies established before the revalorization of inner-city space via gentrification. But a celebration of fixity is challenged by the increased emphasis on movement and mobility within human geography, as well as the role of the ‘elsewhere’ in increasingly unbounded cities. Just as cities can be thought as “open and constituted in and through relations that stretch across space and that are territorialized in place” (Ward, 2010: 481) so too can the outward-facing geographies of the voluntary sector, open and contingent to outside forces as well as grounded in particular places, able to ‘jump scales’ in their relationships to the local, regional or national (Kitchin and Wilton, 2003). While the voluntary sector is to a large degree spatially uneven and fixed, it is not spatially bounded. Within this more openly relational platform, an emerging foci on (1) comparing voluntary sectors across various national contexts, and (2) voluntary sector organizations as marginal agents of policy mobility, are worthy of further elaboration.

Given the growing centrality of the voluntary sector in many advanced economies, it is no surprise that an interest in the differences and similarities across national and urban boundaries has emerged, opening up to work beyond the usual US/UK focus. Bode’s work on Germany and France (alongside Britain) highlights how the voluntary sector sits within a process of permanent dis- and reorganization, where long-established patterns of a system-wide coordination via negotiated public-private partnerships have turned into volatile configurations, with a growing albeit varying influence of the market rationale. This is compounded further in France by the complex territorialization of the French state, which Hoyez et al. (2016) argue defies simple explanation and lacks direct parallels in most Anglophone countries.

Meanwhile, Warshawsky (2014) offers an important reminder of the complex terrain non-governmental organisations must occupy in the Global South, drawing on a case study of food security organisations in South Africa. These organisations must carefully position themselves alongside the central state which chooses how to intervene in internal food markets, their donors, and their respective communities. Realizing this complexity, Mercer and Green (2013) on Tanzania and Baillie Smith and Jenkins (2012) on India both examine how this complexity demands the performance of certain subjectivities amenable to their interstitial positionality. They use the terms ‘contracted- or strategic-cosmopolitanism’ respectively to capture the ambivalent, intermediate position of civil society subjectivities and strategies. A cosmopolitan openness to difference, they argue, is key to developing more equitable development practices yet sits alongside a professionalised perspective in the wider sphere of the international development industry. Along these lines, Baillie-Smith and Laurie (2011) highlight how growing numbers of NGOs find that their primary sources of income come from donors and state agencies that share a propensity for neoliberal forms of governance, and their initiatives are thus exemplified by ideas of individual autonomy,

improvement and responsibility, which can overshadow more collective forms of social change.

The basis for comparative voluntary sector studies was Salamon and Anheier's (1998) overview of various voluntary sector regimes, mirroring Esping-Andersen's welfare state regimes (1990). The authors identified liberal, social democratic, corporatist, and statist regimes, each reflecting different social, political, and economic trajectories around the scale, scope, funding and role of the voluntary sector. Using this comparative approach, Lee and Haque (2008) compare two developmental city-states—Hong Kong and Singapore—to show how a “statist-corporatist” model works. Diverging conceptually from the European model, the statist-corporatist approach firmly embeds the voluntary sector in a highly interventionist state with low commitment to social welfare provision, a product of long colonial rule. Hsu (2012) compares the voluntary sector in cities across Mainland China and how the heavy-handed state constrained their independence. Finally, Leiter (2008) compares the voluntary sector regimes in Australia and the United States, both considered to be liberal regimes, and finds that the proportionally larger and better-funded American system was a result of a weak national welfare state.

By emphasizing the importance of places and processes beyond the local, the comparative approach is but the first step in considering the more mobile policies and practices that can impact the voluntary sector, such that the voluntary sector can itself be a vehicle for policy mobilities. These policies have included Housing First and homeless governance (Baker and Evans, 2016), harm reduction (McCann, 2011; McCann and Temenos, 2015), as well as neoliberal modes of development (McIlwaine, 2007). McCann (2011) and McCann and Temenos (2015) trace the travels of harm reduction policies, particularly in the form of safe injection sites, from Frankfurt and Zurich to Vancouver via the voluntary sector and underpinned by broader urban policy practices in these same cities. The work underlines the importance of marginal agents of policy mobility, as well as how certain ‘healthy city’ models are potentially mobile, creating a mish-mash of local and ‘elsewhere’ practices, “...a physical manifestation of local politics and policy-making, but one influenced by decisions at other scales” (McCann & Temenos, 2015: 216). However, the authors are cognizant that these same policy models are not picked up by voluntary sectors everywhere – many larger nations, such as the United States, Russia, China and India are adamantly against harm reduction with regards to safe injection sites. This relates to larger critiques that a focus on following mobility frequently obscures the manifold policies that are effectively immobile and fixed. So while the voluntary sector is both fixed in urban space and connected to unbounded urban spaces, one should not exaggerate either when approaching the external (urban) geographies of the voluntary sector.

## CONCLUSIONS

The very act of using a systematic, neo-Marxist relational approach to the voluntary sector has enabled a more nuanced and wide-ranging characterization largely implicit within the human geographical literature. This ‘ballast of strangers’ challenges a series of dominant representations: the voluntary sector is only partly in the orbit of the shadow state, and acts more as a mediator than a conduit for neoliberal policies; the voluntary sector is only partly punitive, and is firmly in relation with other ambivalent or even supportive measures for

clients; and the voluntary sector is both spatially uneven and fixed, but always potentially unbounded in its motivations and practices. Our approach has enabled a more rigorous understanding of the direction and measure of these relationships, be they mutualistic (e.g. relations to external space), commensal (e.g. clients' use of internal spaces), parasitic (e.g. shadow state), synnecrosis (e.g. mutually harmful punitive measures), or independent (e.g. voluntary sector acting beyond the shadow state), while bringing the voluntary sector to the forefront of key debates around the welfare state, care, comparative studies, urban restructuring and unbounded urban space.

We can now also map the relationships among the state, internal spaces and external spaces of the voluntary sector, beyond the relations within each. For the *state and internal spaces*, the relationship is at first blush commensal, in that welfare state imperatives around funding and service requirements have direct impacts upon voluntary sector spaces, as well as the motivations and relations towards clientele. This relationship is challenged by organizations who do not take state funding and therefore maintain independence, as well as those organizations that deviate from state imperatives while still taking funding. It is more of a struggle to grasp situations where the internal spaces of voluntary sector organizations influence welfare state policy, but one scenario is how certain voluntary practices – such as harm reduction – can be identified and propagated by state actors in faraway places, speaking to the relationally unbounded nature of such practices (McCann, 2011). For the *state and urban space*, there is little obvious dependency, save for local state-sponsored redevelopment and gentrification that threatens to displace service hubs from inner-city areas, thereby implying a parasitic relationship where the local state benefits. Yet the local state can also prop up service hub resilience through a variety of measures, including land use zoning, the buying of buildings, and the direct financial assistance that speaks to a more mutualistic relationship. Conversely, for *internal and urban spaces*, there is an undeniable influence of the urban (neighbourhood) upon the internal, in that (1) voluntary sector geographies heavily structure the sustenance of vulnerable groups, especially the homeless (Takahashi, 1998), and that (2) voluntary sector organizations need to restructure their internal spaces to fit in with the restructuring of urban space, with the example of gentrifying areas necessitating more strict control to manage the visibility of (potentially abrasive) clientele. As such, the relationship can be mutualistic, but becomes parasitic when there are too many facilities in the same neighbourhood – usually the product of intense NIMBYism – which creates a saturation effect that besieges internal spaces.

We can now set a future research agenda on the relational voluntary sector. The first priority is to conceive the voluntary sector as part of a “politics of possibility” (Elwood et al., 2017: 746). This would recast the voluntary sector as a non-commodified platform of care, sustenance, incremental commons and alternative citizenship, proving a barrier to further marketization and state parasitism. Exploring the two-way processes that link the internal spaces of the voluntary sector with the network of institutions in which its opportunity structures are embedded can enrich the relational understandings of the function of the voluntary sector. Extending this point further, we could see the emergence of new kinds of networks that move beyond the state-voluntary binary to other kinds of formations, such as private philanthropy (Martin, 2011; Gordon, 2013).

The second priority is to more fully grasp the voluntary sector as a 'contact zone' for motivations beyond care, sustenance or abeyance to include social justice and 'being-in-common' (Cloke and Conradson, 2018). One practical strategy is to investigate further the ways in which the voluntary sector's influence on citizenship flows in multiple directions. Existing research shows that voluntary sector organizations serve as significant mediators in translating societal ideas about membership to specific communities. But how do the actors within organizations engage this process and how are they affected by it? Examining how organization employees, volunteers and service recipients influence and are influenced by the construction of citizenship would generate more detailed relational geographies of the voluntary sector.

The third priority is to see how the resilient fixity and density of central-city voluntary sector facilities means a lack of services elsewhere, particularly in suburbs and rural areas of the Global North. This social infrastructure deficit for poor people in terms of housing, mental health, employment, and substance abuse treatment is especially apparent within the orbit of regenerating cities where the poor are being displaced by gentrification outwards. This could connect to larger debates around infrastructure provision and urban space, including the navigation of everyday urbanism in the absence of obvious state and welfare provision (McFarlane and Silver, 2017), which extends the study of the voluntary sector to the Global South and the Global East where civil society remains relatively gelatinous.

Fourth and finally, this paper has articulated the utility of a symbiotic approach to relationality, which could prove fruitful for the study of other social structures advanced by feminist/care scholars and others, including poverty and place, race/gender/class and matters of intersectionality. Within such wider assemblages, symbiotic relations remain contingent on those affected by adversity but also those affecting adversity and those imbricated in supporting and trying to ameliorate experiences of adversity (Power et al., 2018). People's 'contact points' can thus be understood as a melding of their relative position of power and how (much) they are inclined to engage reflexively with wider social and spatial mediating factors and discourses that shape other people's contact points. In this paper, we argued that a more fluid, reflexive understanding of the voluntary sector as mediator rather than conduit can help to better capture people's journeys in and through the various spaces 'captured' by its activities. This returns us to the 'ballast of the strangers', the sense of obligatory dependencies and symbiosis between the voluntary sector and clients that can enable new avenues of research. In this respect, we would encourage further geographical work that engages with the relational plurality of voluntary sector geographies from other regions in the world and from non-urban geographies, underlining the crucial contributions of rural, development and feminist geographers.

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<sup>i</sup> We are well aware of the dangers of a deterministic, ecological framing of the social – to that end we avoid using these ecological metaphors uncritically (Harrison et al, 2004), but rather as a helpful addition to a reconstituted neo-Marxist approach.