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Entry Games and Free Entry Equilibria*

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Abstract

This Chapter reviews the theoretical liteature on entry games and free entry equilibria. We show that a wide range of symmetric oligopoly models share common comparative statics properties. Individual profits and quantities decrease in the number of firms, and tend to competitive or monopolistic competitive equilibria when the number of firms increases indefinitely. The maximum number of firms sustainable in a symmetric long run equilibrium depends on technology (economies of scale), preferences (market size) and strategies (toughness of price competition). On the normative side, in homogeneous product markets the business stealing effect drives the result of excessive entry, whereas adding product differentiation and the utillity from variety may revert the result. We then consider asymmetric free entry equilibria that exploit the aggregative nature of many oligopoly models. Finally, we discuss endogenous sunk costs and persistent concentration and frictionless entry and contestable markets.

JEL Codes: L1, L13, D43

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1 Introduction

Which elements may explain why certain industries are populated by a large number of firms, each covering a small fraction of total output, whereas other markets are dominated by a small number of large firms that supply a relevant fraction of customers? These questions are at the core of the topics studied in Industrial Organization from the very beginning.[1] These research topics have been approached in the early phases of Industrial Economics mostly in an empirical perspective [2] within the Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm, while

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[1] See Bain (1956) and Scherer (1980).

[2] See for a comprehensive survey of the empirical literature Schmalensee (1989).

the theoretical foundations of endogenous market structures have been explored more rigorously in the game theoretic framework of the new Industrial Organization. The analytical framework that has been developed looks at market entry and exit as the process that endogenously determines the number and characteristics of active firms. In this setting, then, other research questions emerge. How do these market structures change in reaction to a variation in some key parameters? Are we able to identify a set of robust comparative statics properties in oligopoly markets, despite the rich variety of models in the IO literature? And finally, on the normative side, does entry into the market, a key component of the competitive process, leads to a welfare maximizing outcome, or the number and characteristics of firms may be excessive or short of the efficient one?

This Chapter deals with the theories of market equilibria when the number and characteristics of the active firms are endogenously determined through the process of entry. More precisely, we shall review the literature on entry games and free entry equilibria in a multi-stage game framework. A large number of potential entrants decide first whether to enter or not; once all the firms have undertaken their entry decisions, the active firms compete according to some oligopoly game. The Chapter is organized as follows. In Section 2 we present the general analytical framework. In Section 3 we analyze a wide range of symmetric oligopoly models to identify the relationship between the number of firms and the market equilibria: we start with homogeneous products and competition in strategic substitutes (Section 3.1), moving then to differentiated products and competition in strategic complements (Section 3.2), offering a general explanation of the comparative statics properties (Section 3.3) and concluding with cartels (Section 3.4). Next we consider free entry equilibria and the determinants of the maximum number of firms (Section 4). Finally, we consider symmetric entry games under a normative perspective (Section 5), looking at the comparison between the free entry and the welfare maximizing number of firms. In Section 6 we move to asymmetric free entry equilibria that exploit the aggregative nature of most oligopoly models. We then present the case of endogenous sunk cost and persistent concentration (Section 7) and the one of frictionless entry and contestable markets (Section 8). Concluding remarks follow.

2 Entry games

There are several ways to model the entry process and the market interaction among active firms. The various set-ups allow to highlight different issues, focussing on distinct effects that interact in the overall market dynamics. A key distinction can be drawn between the environments in which the entry decisions precede the market strategies, and those where entry decisions of some firms are undertaken after market strategies of others have been already chosen and observed.

In the former case, the *market strategies* of individual firms cannot be chosen with the purpose of affecting the entry decisions of any firm, since these latter have already been undertaken, although the features of the *market equilibria* affect the early decision to enter. In this perspective, multi-stage games represent a suitable formal framework. There is a large group of m potential entrants $j \in I_m$ that choose whether to enter, incurring a fixed set-up cost $F > 0$, or not; then, once they have taken their decision and the set of $n \leq m$ entrants $i \in I_n$ is common knowlege, the active firms play a market game. This set-up is usually adopted to study long run free entry equilibria, in which a set of exogenous variables referred to the primitives of technology and preferences explain the long run market structure.

Alternatively, in a second class of strategic environments, a subset of early entrants (incumbents) commit to observable market strategies before the other firms (entrants) decide whether to enter or not. The incumbents' initial strategy, then, may affect the entry decisions, explaining why this set-up is widely used to study strategic entry deterrence and foreclosure. In this environment, the market structure is explained by foreclosure strategies, based on a rich set of strategic tools, rather than on market fundamentals.

The two set-ups are useful to explore different and complementary issues and are characterized by a different time horizon. Sequential entry with incumbents and entrants is a more realistic representation of short run market dynamics, since entry is typically an on-going process where already established and new firms interact. The possibility of foreclosure, then, is an empirically relevant issue that characterizes the evolution of markets. At the same time, multi-stage entry game allow to abstract from these short run phenomena and focus on the underlying features of preferences and technology as long run drivers of market evolution. By moving the attention to this complementary perspective we can identify fundamental forces that, despite the frictions that in the short run may slow down the process and foreclose the market, push towards a more or less concentrated market. Since in this Chapter the focus is on long run market structures rather than foreclosure, we will consider several and different specifications of multi-stage entry game.

A second relevant feature that is recurring across models is the assumption of symmetric firms. Supply side symmetry is a natural assumption in a long run perspective, since we may think that any barrier to access to best practice technology, as patent protection or private know how, tends to vanish in the long run. Demand side symmetry, consistent with homogeneous products or horizontal product differentiation and different varieties, is a convenient assumption when we want to analyze the number of entrants and the distribution of market shares.[3]

[3] As it will be clear in the next sections, this approach does not prevent from considering also environments where, for instance, firms offer goods of different quality, being therefore differently attractive for consumers. What we maintain is that, even in these cases, there is a further dimension of (horizontal) product differentiation such that for each level of quality several firms may further differentiate their products by variety. In this case, symmetry is preserved at each layer of quality.

The different models considered in the next sections make use of the symmetry assumption at different levels, either applying it to the whole population of potential entrants, or to a subset of them identified as marginal entrants, while allowing for asymmetries across majort market players. We shall see that the symmetry assumption is also at the core of the analysis of potential competition and contestable markets.

3 Symmetric Oligopoly Markets

We start our analysis of entry games by considering the (second stage) market games where n firms are active, having decided to enter in the first stage. In this section we consider symmetric market games where all the n firms share the same (best practice) technology and no one has an advantage on the demand side, e.g. a higher quality product. In this setting, when firms adopt the same strategies $a_i = a$, $i \in I_n$, then they obtain the same level of profits. A symmetric environment greatly simplifies the analysis of free entry equilibria, since the equilibrium profits, as well as the equilibrium strategies, consumers' surplus and welfare, all depend on a vector x of parameters related to the properties of costs (technology) and demand (preferences), and on the number of firms n: $\Pi_i(a_i^*, a_{-1}^*) = \Pi^*(n; x)$. Market equilibria once the entry process has been completed, therefore, can be analyzed simply in terms of the number of firms n. The individual equilibrium profits $\Pi^*(n; x)$ are therefore the object that potential entrants consider when, at the initial stage of the game, they choose whether to enter or not, given their expectation of the number of firms that will enter.

Oligopoly theory offers a very rich set of models that describe market interaction among n competitors, ranging from homogeneous to differentiatied products and distinguishing competition in strategic substitutes or complements. In all these environments, moreover, demand and cost functions can be specified differently. Finally, beyond static, possibly multi-stage games, the literature on tacit collusion adds to the toolkit the analysis of cartels. A general theory of free entry equilibria has to encompass all these classes of models, admitting a variety of business strategies, modes of strategic interaction and features of demand and costs. In this perspective, then, the key point is whether there exist some regularities across different models in the relationship between the number of (symmetric) active firms n and the equilibrium profits they obtain $\Pi^*(n; x)$. A first, relevant result, that we are going to present in the next sections, is that, despite the significant differences in oligopoly equilibria across models, we can establish under very general conditions a negative relationship between the equilibrium profits and the number of firms.

We organize the discussion considering three different cases: homogeneous products and strategic substitutes, differentiated products and strategic complements and repeated games.

3.1 Homogeneous products and strategic substitutes

Our first look at symmetric oligopoly equilibria refers to a market with n firms producing a homogeneous product and competing in strategic substitutes, usually associated with the Cournot model. Since the pioneering work of Cournot (1838) a large set of contributions has explored the conditions for the existence and characterized the equilibria when n firms compete in quantities. McManus (1962) and (1964) and Roberts and Sonnenschein (1976), independently proved the existence of a symmetric equilibrium in symmetric Cournot games with convex costs. Novshek (1985) showed that an n-oligopoly has a Nash equilibrium if each firm's marginal revenue is decreasing in the other firms' aggregate output. A step forward in proving the existence of Cournot equilibria under general conditions is in Vives (1990), who showed in the duopoly case the relationship between the assumptions of the previous literature and the submodularity of Cournot games. Supermodular games and the techniques of monotone comparative statics[4], have proved to be extremely useful tools to explore the properties of Cournot oligopolies and to identify the general conditions under which the comparative statics of equilibria can be analyzed. We summarize here the main results following this approach as in Amir and Lambson (2000).

Consider an oligopoly with n firms offering a homogeneous product and producing with the same cost function $C(q_i)$ and incurring no capacity constraint over the relevant output range. Market inverse demand $P(Q)$ is a continuous and differentiable function of total output $Q = \sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i$. The profit function of firm i, then, is:

$$\Pi_i(q_i, \mathbf{Q}_{-i}) = P(Q)q_i - C(q_i)$$

where $\mathbf{Q}_{-i} = \{q_j\}_{j \neq i}$ is the vector of outputs of the other firms. In this traditional specification, each firm maximizes its profits by choosing a level of output for given strategies of the other firms, $\mathbf{Q}_{-i}$. It is well recognized that under standard assumptions firm i's best reply $\widehat{q}_i(\mathbf{Q}_{-i}) = \arg\max_{q_i} \Pi_i(q_i, \mathbf{Q}_{-i})$ is downward sloping, implying a submodular game and competition in strategic substitutes.

Let us define

$$\Delta(q_i, Q) := -P'(Q) + C''(q_i). \tag{1}$$

Then, Amir and Lambson (2000) prove that if $\Delta(q_i, Q) > 0$ on the relevant range of outputs and the inverse demand function is log-concave, there exists a unique and symmetric equilibrium, with individual output $q^*(n)$ nonincreasing in n and total output $Q^*(n)$ nondecreasing in n.[5] This condition holds, for instance, in the set-up adopted in the works of McManus, Roberts and Sonnenschein

[4] See Milgrom and Roberts (1990) and (1994) and Milgrom and Shannon (1994).

[5] Amir and Lambson (2000) prove (Theorem 2.2.) a more general result that does not require log-concavity of the inverse demand function and that allows for multiplicity of Cournot equilibria. In this case the comparative statics properties with respect to n of total equilibrium output and the equilibrium output of $n-1$ firms are preserved considering the values of the extremal equilibria. We focus in the text on uniqueness to ease the exposition.

(1976) and Novshek (1985) quoted above and is consistent with the framework proposed in Vives (2000).

To illustrate this result with an example let us consider the linear Cournot model: market demand is $Q = S * [\alpha - \beta p]$, where S measures market size, e.g. the number of consumers. Then, the inverse demand is $P(\frac{Q}{S}) = a - b\frac{Q}{S}$ where $a = \frac{\alpha}{\beta}$, $b = \frac{1}{\beta}$ and Q is total supply. Firms produce at constant marginal cost $c \in (0, a)$ and compete in quantities. Then, each firm selects its optimal output by solving $q_i^* = \arg\max_{q_i} \left(P(\frac{Q}{S}) - c\right) q_i$. The symmetric equilibrium quantity $q^*(n)$ satisfies for all firms the first order conditions:

$$\left(P(\frac{nq^*}{S}) - c\right) - P'\frac{q^*}{S} = 0, \quad (2)$$

Substituting and solving for the symmetric equilibrium we get:

$$q^*(n) = S\frac{a-c}{b(n+1)}, \quad p^*(n) = \frac{a+nc}{n+1} \geq c, \quad \Pi^*(n) = \frac{S}{b}\left(\frac{a-c}{n+1}\right)^2. \quad (3)$$

When the number of firms increases, therefore, the individual quantity decreases whereas total output increases. Consequently, the market clearing price falls and tends to the marginal cost when the number of firms increases indefinitely. Finally, the equilibrium profits, gross of the fixed entry costs, decrease in n and tends to zero in the limit, due to the combined quantity and price effects.

This pattern characterizes the so called *Cournotian paradigm*, a representation of the market equilibrium that depends on the number of firms and that moves from the monopoly to the perfectly competitive equilibrium as n increase from 1 to infinity. Perfect competition, in this setting, corresponds to the limiting case when each firm supplies an infinitesimal amount of output in a market populated by an infinite number of neglibile firms.

This structural view of perfect competition can be easily derived from the first order condition that guarantee a profit maximising solution for any number of firms. Equation (2), indeed, implies that the market clearing price tends to the marginal cost when the last term vanishes. There are two possible explanations why $P'\frac{q^*}{S} \to 0$. One argues that when firms are small with respect to the market, they follow a *price taking behavior*, that is they expect the market price not to react to any change in their individual ouput. This case corresponds to assuming $P' = 0$ in a perfectly competitive market. The other explanation, that is consistent with the structuralist view of the Cournotian paradigm, instead focusses on the fact that it is the individual quantity that vanishes as n becomes indefinitely large, whereas $P' < 0$ even in the limit. In this latter case, indeed, $\lim_{n\to\infty} q^*(n) = 0$, as evident from (3).

It is interesting to notice that the last term in (2) represents also the negative externality that characterizes strategic interaction in a Cournot game, i.e. $\frac{\partial \Pi_i}{\partial q_j} = P'\frac{q^*}{S}$. In other words, with Cournot competition each firm affects the rivals' profits when it increases its quantity since it makes the price falling and reduces the revenues that the competitors obtain from their production. The level of individual production, therefore, affects multiplicatively this externality, that vanishes when each firm produces a negligible output. Then, a perfectly competitive market in a Cournotian perspective is also characterized in the limit by vanishing externalities across firms. This result confirms the idea that in a perfectly competitive market no externality occurs, a feature that is driven by the same effect ($\lim_{n\to\infty} q^*(n) = 0$) that explains why the competitive price tends to the marginal cost.

Finally, market size S increases individual and total quantities as well as the equilibrium profits.

3.2 Differentiated products and strategic complements

A different class of oligopoly models moves into the realm of differentiated products and assumes that firms compete in prices, a framework that entails strategic complementarities. In the product differentiation literature, moreover, we can assume that either differentiation does not break the intrinsic symmetry of firms' market positions, or alternatively that product differentiation introduces a competitive advantage for some firms with respect to the others. The former case reminds the idea of (horizontal) differentiation by variety, where products differ in terms of characteristics, each one being more fit to a specific subset of customers. The latter, instead, captures the idea of (vertical) differentiation in quality. Given our focus on symmetric equilibria, in this section we shall consider several approaches to differentiation by variety. We shall consider entry and differentiation by quality in Section 7.

There are three main ways to model te demand side when products are (horizontally) differentiated. The representative consumer approach characterized by preference for variety, the discrete choice model where the external observer is able to reconstruct consumers' behavior up to a random component related to unobservable individual characteristics, and the address approach, that assumes heterogeneous consumers with inelastic demand.[6]

Let $q_i = S * D_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i})$ be the demand for product $i \in I_n$, where S measures the size of the market and $\mathbf{p}_{-i}$ is the vector of prices other than p_i. Let us further assume $D_i(.)$ is continuous and differentiable and $C_i(D_i(.)) = cD_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i})$. Finally, let us assume that each firm offers only one variety.[7] Each firm solves

[6] For a detailed analysis of these three approaches and the relationships among them see Anderson et al. (1992). On the representative consumer models see, for instance, the CES representation adopted in Spence (1976) and Dixit and Stiglitz (1977) and the linear representation in Levitan and Shubik (1980) and Singh and Vives (1984). On the interpretations of random utility models Manski (1977) assumes that utility is deterministic but the external observed cannot perfectly observe it, while Quandt (1956) assumes the individual behavior to be intrinsically probabilistic. Finally, the address model approach was first proposed in Hotelling (1929). See also Salop (1979) and d'Aspremont et al. (1979).

[7] As we shall discuss in Section 4, assuming single product firms makes the analysis of the maximum number of varieties and that of firms equivalent. With multiproduct firms, instead, the maximum number of varieties will be larger than the number of active firms in a free entry equilibrium.

the following problem: $\max_{p_i}(p_i - c)D_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i})$. Under standard assumptions on the strategy space being compact and convex, and the profit function being quasi-concave, the following equation identifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for a maximum:

$$\frac{p_i^* - c}{p_i^*} = \frac{D_i(p_i^*, \mathbf{p}_{-i})}{p_i^* \frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_i}} = \frac{1}{\varepsilon_i} \tag{4}$$

where ε_i is the price elasticity of demand for product i. In a symmetric equilibrium $p_i^* = p^*(n)$, $i \in I_n$, and

$$\varepsilon^*(n) = \frac{p^*(n) \frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_i}}{D_i\left(p^*(n), \mathbf{p}^*(\mathbf{n})\right)}. \tag{5}$$

Hence, the pattern of equilibrium prices $p^*(n)$ when the number of firms increases depends on the corresponding pattern of $\varepsilon^*(n)$. If $\lim_{n\to\infty} \varepsilon^*(n) = \infty$, then in the limit the price converges to the marginal cost, and we replicate the perfectly competitive equilibrium already found in the case of Cournot competition. When, instead, $\lim_{n\to\infty} \varepsilon^*(n) = \overline{\varepsilon}$ with $\overline{\varepsilon}$ finite, a positive mark up persists in the limit, a pattern associated to Chamberlinian monopolist competition.[8] As we shall see, the limiting properties of the different approaches to product differentiation are consistent with either of the two alternatives.

Let us consider first the case of convergence to competitive equilibria. Generalizing the duopoly linear model of Singh and Vives (1984) as in Häckner (2000), the utility function of the representative consumer is quasi-linear according to the expression:

$$U(q_1, ..., q_n; I) = \alpha \sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i - \frac{1}{2}\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i^2 + 2\gamma \sum_{j\neq i} q_i q_j\right) + O \tag{6}$$

where $\gamma \in [0, 1)$ measures product substitutability and O is the money spent on outside goods. The demand system, then, is:

$$D_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i}) = S * \frac{\alpha(1-\gamma) + \gamma \sum_{j\neq i} p_j - \left[\gamma(n-2)+1\right] p_i}{(1-\gamma)\left[\gamma(n-1)+1\right]} \tag{7}$$

where S measures the size of the market, i.e. the number of representative consumers. Notice that in a symmetric price configuration $p_i = p$ for $i \in I_n$, firm i's demand

$$D_i(p, \mathbf{p}) = S * \frac{\alpha - p}{\left[\gamma(n-1)+1\right]}$$

decreases in the number of firms, since consumers spread their purchases over a larger set of varieties. The demand elasticity in a symmetric price equilibrium is:

$$\varepsilon^*(n) = \frac{\left[\gamma(n-2)+1\right] p^*(n)}{\left(\alpha - p^*(n)\right)(1-\gamma)}. \tag{8}$$

[8] See Vives (1999), pp 160-64 for a detailed discussion.

Hence, $\lim \varepsilon^*(n) = \infty$ being $p^*(n) < \alpha$. Indeed, the equilibrium price

$$p^*(n) = \frac{\alpha(1-\gamma) + c\,[\gamma(n-2)+1]}{\gamma(n-3)+2} \tag{9}$$

tends to the marginal cost when $n \to \infty$. Moreover, the equilibrium quantity and profits

$$q^*(n) = S * \frac{(\alpha - c)\,[\gamma(n-2)+1]}{[\gamma(n-1)+1]\,[\gamma(n-3)+2]} \tag{10}$$

and

$$\Pi^*(n) = S * \frac{(\alpha - c)^2(1-\gamma)\,[\gamma(n-2)+1]}{[\gamma(n-1)+1]\,[\gamma(n-3)+2]^2} \tag{11}$$

are decreasing in the number of firms n.

A similar pattern can be obtained within the address models of product differentiation. Following Salop (1979) we can extend the original linear Hotelling duopoly to encompass n active firms by considering a circular market of length 1 where S consumers are uniformely distributed according to their individual preferred version t. Firms $i \in I_n$ produce at constant marginal cost c and sell horizontally differentiated varieties x_i at price p_i, being evenly distribued at $x_i = i/n$ along the circle. Finally, a consumer of type t purchasing variety i has a net utility $u^* - p_i - (x_i - t)^2/\gamma$. Parameter γ positively affects product substitutability. When γ is large the utility mostly depends on the price and the consumers are ready to switch to a more convenient, although more distant, variety. The demand system, in this setting, is given by:

$$D_i(p_i, p_{i-1}, p_{i+1}) = S\left[\frac{1}{n} - n\gamma p_i + \frac{n\gamma}{2}\,(p_{i+1} + p_{i-1})\right] \tag{12}$$

and displays localized competition between neighboring varieties, a notable feature of the address approach. The demand elasticity in a symmetric equilibrium is

$$\varepsilon^*(n) = \gamma n^2 p^*(n) \tag{13}$$

and $\lim_{n\to\infty} \varepsilon^*(n) = \infty$, implying convergence to the marginal cost. Notice also that, for given n, the elasticity is increasing in the substitutability parameter γ.

The symmetric equilibrium price, quantity and profits, indeed, are given by:

$$p^*(n) = c + \frac{1}{\gamma n^2}, \quad q^*(n) = \frac{S}{n} \quad \Pi^*(n) = \frac{S}{\gamma n^3}. \tag{14}$$

Comparing the symmetric equilibria in the Singh and Vives and in the Salop models of product differentiation with those obtained in the Cournot linear model we find significantly similar properties of symmetric market equilibria, with price and individual quantity falling in the number of firms and the price approaching the marginal cost as the number of firms tends to infinity. Indeed, the driving effect we highlighted in Cournot, based on vanishing individual quantities still applies. In the Salop model, however, an additional interesting effect is at work. When n increases indefinitely the market is completely covered with (locally) almost identical varieties. Localized competition between adjacent varieties reproduces a Bertrand environment, leading to marginal cost pricing. This latter effet corresponds to an increasingly intense price competition between closer and closer variety. In other words, in the localized competition model of product differentiation an increase in n produces at the same time a vanishing quantity externality and an increasing price externality, both pushing towards convergence to a competitive outcome.

We can now turn to the case of monopolistic competition, when positive mark-ups are associated with a market populated by a very large (i.e. infinite) number of infinitesimal firms. We illustrate this case referring to the multinomial logit model, covering also the discrete choice approach to product differentiation. Let the utility of a consumer be described by a deterministic component $U(p_i) = \alpha - p_i$ and an additive random i.i.d. component η_i that is distributed according to the double exponential distribution $F(x) = \exp - [\exp -(\gamma x + \epsilon]$ where ϵ is the Euler's constant and γ a positive constant that negatively affects the variance. Then, the resulting probability of choosing product i given the vector of prices $(p_1, ..., p_n)$ is

$$P_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i}) = \frac{\exp(-\gamma p_i)}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} \exp(-\gamma p_j(\mu)}. \tag{15}$$

Then firm i's expected profits are:

$$\Pi_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i}) = S * (p_i - c) P_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i}).$$

We can observe that $\frac{\partial P_i}{\partial p_i} = \gamma P_i(1 - P_i)$ and that, therefore, parameter γ, once again, captures product substitability. Moreover, in a symmetric equilibrium $P_i(p, \mathbf{p}) = \frac{1}{n}$. Then, the elasticity of demand is

$$\varepsilon^*(n) = \frac{\gamma(n-1)p^*(n)}{n}, \tag{16}$$

with $\lim_{n\to\infty} \varepsilon^*(n) = \gamma p^*(n)$ finite.[9] Hence, the firms obtain a positive mark-up when n tends to infinity. The equilibrium price, quantity and profits are:

$$p^*(n) = c + \frac{n}{\gamma(n-1)}, \quad q^*(n) = \frac{S}{n}, \quad \Pi^*(n) = \frac{S}{\gamma(n-1)}. \tag{17}$$

The multinomial logit model[10] presents a different pattern of price adjust-

[9] Parameter γ, as in the previous models, positively affects price elasticity for given n.

[10] A similar result is obtained, within the representative consumer approach, assuming Cobb-Douglas preferences between a numeraire good q_0 and a set of differentiated products q_i with CES preferences:

$$U(q_o, q_{1,...}, q_n) = q_0^{1-\beta} \widetilde{q}^{\beta} \quad \text{with} \quad \gamma \in (0,1)$$

and

$$\widetilde{q} = \left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i^{\frac{\sigma-1}{\sigma}} \right)^{\frac{\sigma}{\sigma-1}}.$$

See Spence (1976), Dixit and Stiglitz (1977) and Anderson et al (1992) p. 226-9.

ment, with the equilibrium price decreasing in the number of firms and converging to a mark-up $1/\gamma$ when $n \to \infty$. Despite the positive mark-up, the firm's profits vanish in the limit, since the individual output becomes negligible, as it is in a monopolistic competition environment. We can also notice that the basic channel of interaction across firms vanishes as well in the limit: $\frac{\partial P_i}{\partial p_j} = \gamma P_i P_j = \frac{\gamma}{n^2}$. Hence, the "competitive" component of monopolistic competition is associated to vanishing externalities, as already observed discussing the Cournot model.

To sum up, the different models of product differentiation display similar comparative static properties with respect to the number of firms, with the equilibrium price, quantity and profits falling in n. The main difference rests on the convergence of the equilibrium prices to the marginal cost, as in a perfectly competitive market, or instead to a positive mark-up that characterizes monopolistic competition. Moreover, the size of the market, in all cases, pushes up profits.

The results of the product differentiation literature provide an additional insight that is related to the intensity of price competition and its effect on n-firms market equilibria. In the three models, with a little abuse of notation, we have represented product substitutability through parameter γ, with the price elasticity increasing and the price and profits falling in γ.

3.3 Explaining the comparative statics in a unified framework

In the previous sections we have shown that the market equilibria, described by prices and quantities, share similar comparative statics properties across a wide range of different oligopoly models and features of preferences and technology. This raises a natural question whether this common pattern may be accounted for through a unified explanation. The theory of monotone comparative statics developed by Milgrom and Roberts (1990) and (1994) and Milgrom and Shannon (1994) offers an enlightening perspective. Their approach allows to develop new tools to study how equilibria change in reaction to a variation in the parameters and constraints of the maximization problem, moving beyond the tradition approach based on the Implicit Function Theorem.[11] Quoting Amir (2003), "if in a maximization problem, the objective reflects a complementarity between an endogenous variable and an exogenous parameter, in the sense that having more of one increases the marginal return to having more of the other, then the optimal value of the former will be increasing in the latter. In the case of multiple endogenous variable, then all of them must also be complements so as to guarantee that their increases are mutually reinforcing". The former

[11] Importantly, the new tools allow to deal with the comparative statics of multiple equilibria, studying how extremal equilibria move in reaction to a change in exogenous variables. To the purpose of our discussion, however, we shall focus on the case of unique equilibria.

property corresponds to increasing differences (between the endogenous and the exogenous variables, and more in general between two variables), whereas the latter qualifies the function to be maximised as supermodular.[12]

When a game is supermodular and characterized by increasing differences, an increase in the strategy of one player increases the marginal payoff of the strategy of the other players, inducing them to adjust upwards their optimal choice. This case, therefore, corresponds to upward sloping reaction functions or, in the classification of Bulow et al. (1985), strategic complementarity. Moreover, increasing differences between the endogenous variables and the exogenous variable implies that an increase in the exogenous variable increases the marginal payoff of the strategy of the players, with an upwards shift in the best reply functions.

Increasing differences then can be easility turned into decreasing differences by reverting the sign of the adjustment or defining a new exogenous variable that is the negative of the original one. In this case, an increase in the exogenous variable induces a contraction in the endogenous one. [13]

We can borrow from the theory of monotone comparative statics two conditions, described in the statements of Theorem 5 and 6 of Milgrom and Shannon (1994) that, in our setting, fit the problem. The exogeneous variable[14] is the number of firms n whereas the endogenous variables are, depending on the model specification, the quantities $q_i$or prices p_i. Then, we require the profit functions to be supermodular and to display decreasing differences. Since we consider continuous and differentiable functions, the two conditions correspond to $\frac{\partial \Pi_i}{\partial a_i \partial a_j} > 0$ and $\frac{\partial \Pi_i}{\partial a_i \partial n} < 0$ for $i, j = I_n$, $i \neq j$, where a_i describes firm i's strategy, i.e. quantity or price. Moreover, in order to focus on the comparative statics, we give for granted that an equilibrium exists and is unique, by assuming that the profit function is strictly quasi-concave in the choice variable and that the best reply slope meets the contraction mapping requirement.

Starting with the Cournot case, a first problem arises since in the traditional description competition is in strategic substitutes, and the game is submodular rather than supermodular.[15] A way out of this problem borrows from an early intuition in Novshek (1985) and is developed in Amir and Lambson (2000). Indeed, a notable property of the Cournot model is that the profits can be

[12] See Vives (1999), Chapter 2. When the payoff functions are smooth and the strategy space of each firm and the exogenous parameters space are one-dimensional supermodularity and increasing differences boil down to the condition that the second cross partials between each firm strategic variable and the other firms' strategic variable and with the exogenous parameter are positive.

[13] Increasing differences is a cardinal property and can be replaced by the ordinal Spence-Mirlees single-crossing property considered in Milgrom and Shannon (1994). When this property holds, if an increase in the choice variable is profitable when the exogenous variable is low it is still profitable when the exogenous variable is high, although it is not required, as in the case of increasing differences, that the profitability is higher in the latter case.

[14] Here for convenience we measure the number of firms n as a continuous variable defined on the positive reals.

[15] While in a Cournot duopoly this issue is easily adjusted by describing one of the strategies as $-q$, transforming the setting into a supermodular game, with $n > 2$ firms this is no more possible.

expressed as a function of the own output q_i and of the aggregate level of output of the other $n-1$ firms $Q_{-i} = \sum_{j \neq i} q_j$. i.e.

$$\Pi_i(q_i, Q_{-i}) = P(q_i + Q_{-i})q_i - C(q_i).$$

Moreover, we can describe firm i's strategy, rather than referred to the choice of its own output q_i as the selection of a certain level of total output Q for given ouput Q_{-i} supplied by the competitors. In this alternative formulation

$$\widehat{\Pi}_i(Q, Q_{-i}) = P(Q)(Q - Q_{-i}) - C\left((Q - Q_{-i})\right). \tag{18}$$

Then,

$$\frac{\partial^2 \widehat{\Pi}_i}{\partial Q \partial Q_{-i}} = C''(Q - Q_{-i}) - P'(Q) = \Delta \tag{19}$$

that corresponds to (1). Then, the condition $\Delta > 0$ implies the supermodularity of the modified Cournot game. Decreasing differences can be easily established noting that when the other $n-1$ firms choose the same output q then $Q_{-i} = (n-1)q$. Then, substituting in the first order conditions for the choice of Q in the modified Cournot problem we have:

$$\frac{\partial \widehat{\Pi}_i}{\partial Q} = P'(Q)\left(Q - (n-1)q\right) + P(Q) - C'\left(Q - (n-1)q\right). \tag{20}$$

Hence,

$$\frac{\partial^2 \widehat{\Pi}_i}{\partial Q \partial n} = q\Delta > 0 \tag{21}$$

when the game is supermodular. We conclude that the equilibrium total ouput $Q^*(n)$ is increasing in the number of firms. In a symmetric equilibrium $Q^*_{-i}(n) = \frac{n-1}{n} Q^*(n)$, and therefore the ouput of the firms other than i is increasing in n as well, since both terms $\frac{n-1}{n}$ and $Q^*(n)$ are positive and increasing in n. Moreover, since firm i's best reply in the original Cournot problem is downward sloping and $Q^*_{-i}(n)$ is increasing in n, the individual output $q^*_i(n)$ is decreasing in the number of firms. Finally, since demand is bounded, when $n \to \infty$ we must have $Q^*(n) = nq^*(n)$ finite and therefore $\lim_{n\to\infty} q^*(n) = 0$. Then, given the first order conditions of the original Cournot problem, $p^*(n) \to C'\left(q^*(n)\right)$.

Our discussion offers a clear insight on the advantages of the techniques of monotone comparative statics. A single and general condition, $\Delta = C''(q_i) - P'(Q) > 0$, generates supermodularity of the modified Cournot problem and $Q^*(n)$ and $Q^*_{-i}(n)$ increasing in the number of firms, while the comparative statics on individual output $q^*_i(n)$ and the limiting competitive result on the price derive from the first order conditions of the original Cournot problem. Interestingly, the condition $\Delta > 0$ includes elements of demand and costs, and both jointly define the relevant condition. This extends with respect to previous contributions that explored the properties of Cournot equilibria making specific assumptions on costs or demand.[16]

[16] See Amir and Lambson (2000) for a general analysis of equilibria in Cournot games.

Turning to the models of product differentiation and price competition, in a n-firm oligopoly each one solves $\max_{p_i} p_i D_i(p_i, \mathbf{p}_{-i}; n) - C(D_i(.))$ where we emphasize that, differently from the homogeneous product case, the number of substitute products n may directly enter into the expression of the demand for product i. Moreover, notice that in our symmetric environment we assume that all firms have the same cost structure, i.e. $C_i(D_i(.)) = C(D_i(.))$.

If

$$\frac{\partial^2 \Pi_i}{\partial p_i \partial p_j} = \frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_j} + (p_i - C')\frac{\partial^2 D_i}{\partial p_i \partial p_j} - C'' \frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_j}\frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_i} > 0, \tag{22}$$

for any $i, j = I_n$, $i \neq j$, the game is in strategic complements, that is the condition for supermodularity is met. Then, the equilibrium prices fall in the number of firms if

$$\frac{\partial^2 \Pi_i}{\partial p_i \partial n} = \frac{\partial D_i}{\partial n} + (p_i - C')\frac{\partial^2 D_i}{\partial p_i \partial n} - C'' \left(\frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_i}\right)^2 < 0.$$

Substituting the first order conditions $p_i - C' = -\frac{D_i}{\partial D_i / \partial p_i}$ and rearranging we get:

$$\frac{\partial^2 \Pi_i}{\partial p_i \partial n} = \frac{\partial D_i}{\partial n} + \frac{p_i}{\varepsilon_p}\frac{\partial^2 D_i}{\partial p_i \partial n} - C'' \left(\frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_i}\right)^2 . \tag{23}$$

Differentiating the elasticity of demand with respect to n, we obtain:

$$\frac{\partial \varepsilon_p}{\partial n} = -\frac{\varepsilon_p}{D_i}\left[\frac{\partial D_i}{\partial n} + \frac{p_i}{\varepsilon_p}\frac{\partial^2 D_i}{\partial p_i \partial n}\right].$$

Hence, we can rewrite (23) as

$$\frac{\partial^2 \Pi_i}{\partial p_i \partial n} = -\frac{D_i}{\varepsilon_p}\frac{\partial \varepsilon_p}{\partial n} - C'' \left(\frac{\partial D_i}{\partial p_i}\right)^2 . \tag{24}$$

Then, if (22) holds and (24)< 0 for all $i \in I_n$, the symmetric equilibrium prices fall in the number of firms. We can notice that the conditions (22) and (24) display a combination of demand and cost elements, a feature already noticed in the Cournot model. For instance, if the marginal costs are not decreasing and the demand elasticity is increasing in the number of firms, then the conditions are met.

Turning to our three examples of differentiated products models referred to the different approaches, we have derived directly the equilibrium prices and observed that they fall in the number of firms. It is easy to check that the two consitions (22) and (24) are satisfied in our examples. Indeed, we assumed in the examples linear costs, i.e. $C'' = 0$. Moreover, it can be easily verified that when the other $n - 1$ firms set the same price p, the elasticity of demand is increasing in n. Hence, the game features supermodularity and increasing differences and the prices fall in n.

3.4 Collusive equilibria

We conclude our review of n-firms oligopolies considering the case of collusive equilibria. We refer to the infinite horizon repeated game approach pioneered by Friedman (1971) and further developed in Fudenberg and Maskin (1986). Since we are considering symmetric oligopolies, we assume that the basic market interaction can be represented in each period $t = 1, .., T$ by a symmetric and stationary constituent game $\Gamma^t = \{I_n, a_i^t \in A, \pi_i^t = \pi(\mathbf{a}^t)\}$, where I_n is the set of n firms, $\mathbf{a}^t = (a_i^t, \mathbf{a}_{-i}^t)$ is the vector of actions chosen by firm i and the other $n-1$ firms at time t, A is the set of feasible actions and $\pi_i^t = \pi(\mathbf{a}^t)$ the per-period payoff. We further assume that Γ^t has a unique symmetric Nash equilibrium $\widehat{\mathbf{a}} = (\widehat{a}, .., \widehat{a})$ that is Pareto dominated by other market configurations $A^{n*} = \left\{(a_i^*, \mathbf{a}_{-i}^*) \in A^n \left| \pi(a_i^*, \mathbf{a}_{-i}^*) \geq \pi(\widehat{\mathbf{a}}) \; \forall i \in I_n \right.\right\}$. Let $\overline{\mathbf{a}}^*$ be the maximal collusive symmetric configuration. The firms maximize the discounted sum of profits $V_0 = \sum_{t=0}^{T} \delta^t \pi_i^t$, where $\delta = 1/(1+r)$ is the discount factor. Each firm observes the other firms' actions with a one period lag. The set of observed actions at time t, the history of the game, then, is $H^t = \left\{\mathbf{a}^0, .., \mathbf{a}^{t-1}\right\}$.

In what follows we concentrate on symmetric collusive equilibria, in the spirit of the overall section. Let a^C be firm i's collusive action, $\mathbf{a}^C \in A^{n*}$ be the vector of collusive actions, and $\pi^C = \pi(\mathbf{a}^C)$ the corresponding profits. Notice[17] that $\mathbf{a}^C \in [\overline{a}^*, \widehat{\mathbf{a}}]$, that is the collusive symmetric allocation is in between the Nash equilibrium and the maximal collusive allocation. Further, define $a^P = \widehat{a}$ firm i's action during the punishment phase, corresponding to the symmetric Nash equilibrium action in the constituent game, and $\pi^P = \pi(\widehat{\mathbf{a}})$ the punishment profits. Finally, let $a^D = \arg\max_{a_i} \pi(a_i, \mathbf{a}_{-i}^C)$ be firm i's optimal deviation when the other firms stick on the collusive action, yielding $\pi^D = \pi(a^D, \mathbf{a}_{-i}^C)$. Our previous discussion implies that $\pi^P \leq \pi^C \leq \pi^D$ with strict inequalities if $a^C < \widehat{a}$. We focus on closed loop grim-trigger strategies:

$$\sigma_i^* = \begin{cases} a_i^t = a^C & \text{for } t = 0 \\ a_i^t = a^C & \text{for } t > 0 \text{ and } H^t = \left\{\mathbf{a}^C, .., \mathbf{a}^C\right\} \\ a_i^t = a^P & \text{for } t > 0 \text{ and } H^t \neq \left\{\mathbf{a}^C, .., \mathbf{a}^C\right\} \end{cases}$$

When $T = \infty$ (infinite horizon), given the strategy followed by the other firms and the stationarity of the repeated game each firm chooses to collude if the following incentive compatibility constraint holds:

$$V^C = \frac{\pi^C}{1-\delta} \geq V^D = \pi^D + \frac{\delta}{1-\delta}\pi^P.$$

Then, a well know result (Folk theorem) states that any allocation $\mathbf{a}^* \in A^{n*}$ can be implemented as a subgame perfect equilibrium in the game repeated

[17] We implicitly assume in this notation that $\widehat{a} > a^*$, as it is the case if the action correspond to an output level. If, instead, the action corresponds to a price, the boundaries of the interval should be inverted.

indefinitely ($T = \infty$) if the following condition holds[18] for all firms $i \in I_n$:

$$\delta \geq \delta^* = \frac{\pi^D - \pi^C}{\pi^D - \pi^P}. \tag{25}$$

We can now address the key issue, whether the price(s), quantities and profits change, and in which direction, when the number of firms increases. To answer these questions we can consider two examples of market interaction when firms offer homogeneous products, characterizing the constituent game Γ^t as a price setting Bertrand game or a quantity setting Cournot game. Let $\Pi^C = n\pi^C$ be the total profits of the cartel. Then, in a Bertrand setting $\pi^C = \Pi^C/n$, $\pi^D = \Pi^C$ and $\pi^P = 0$. Then, the condition (25) boils down to

$$\delta \geq \delta^*(n) = \frac{n-1}{n}$$

that is increasing in n. In other words, if the basic market interaction takes the form of Bertrand competition with homogeneous products, the incentive compatibility constraint becomes tighter the larger the number of firms. The economic intuition is pretty simple: a cartel with more members distributes the overall profits Π^C among a larger number of participants, making the individual profits falling. Deviation and punishment profits, in this setting, are instead unaffected by the number of cartel members, making the condition for cartel sustainability harder to meet. We can further observe that the incentive compatibility constraint does not depend on the specific (symmetric) collusive allocation $\mathbf{a}^C$ the cartelists agree upon, since the gains from deviations are always proportional to the collusive profits. Then, a focal outcome would be to mimic the monopoly price p^m. Our prediction, then, is that the market price will be p^m if the number of firms is $n \leq \frac{1}{1-\delta}$, falling to the Nash equilibrium price $p = c$ thereafter. To sum up, individual profits are strictly decreasing and the market price is weakly decreasing in the number of firms.

Turning to the Cournot model, we can indentify a further element in the comparative statics. Indeed, in a Cournot setting the profits in the different states vary non proportionally in the collusive allocation Q^C the firms choose to implement. More precisely, the incentive compatibility constraint becomes tighter when the firms coordinate on an allocation, summarized by total output Q^C, that is closer to the monopoly output Q^m. Hence, in a Cournot setting the critical discount factor $\delta^*(Q^C, n)$ is decreasing in the collusive output Q^C, whereas it continues to be increasing in the number of firms n.[19] The most collusive sustainable output in a symmetric cartel, $\overline{Q}^C$, then, is (weakly) increasing in the number of firms: if we start from $\overline{Q}^C = Q^m$, we can find a number of firms $n(Q^m, \delta)$ such that $\delta^*(Q^m, n(Q^m, \delta)) = \delta$. For a larger number of firms

[18]Notice that, having assumed symmetric firm, the incentive compatibility constraint and the threshold discount factors are the same for each and every firm.

[19]For instance, it is easy to show that, in the linear Cournot model when firms implement the monopoly output the critical discount factor is $\delta^* = \frac{n^2+2n+1}{n^2+6n+1}$ and is therefore increasing in n.

the cartel would collapse. However, the firms can coordinate on a less collusive output (i.e. $\overline{Q}^C > Q^m$) such that the incentive compatibility constraint is satisfied. In general, when (25) holds as an equality, for given δ we have

$$\frac{d\overline{Q}^C}{dn} = -\frac{\frac{\partial \delta^*}{\partial n}}{\frac{\partial \delta^*}{\partial \overline{Q}^C}} \geq 0.$$

Hence, for $n \leq n(Q^m, \delta)$ the individual profits are decreasing in n while the market price is p^m, whereas for $n > n(Q^m, \delta)$ both the individual profits and the market price are falling in n.

Finally, an informal argument that is often set out refers to the impact of a larger and larger cartel on the monitoring activity that the firms have to perform to prevent cheating. It seems realistic that such activity may take more time the higher the numer of firms to be scrutinized. We can include this further argument considering that the length of the period in the repetead game framework may increase when more firms participate in the agreement and have to be monitored. A longer period, then, corresponds to a lower discount factor δ, leading to a decreasing relationship $\delta(n)$. In this latter case, the incentive compatibility constraint would become $\delta^*(\overline{Q}^C, n) \geq \delta(n)$ and the effect of the number of firms on the maximal collusive allocation would be

$$\frac{d\overline{Q}^C}{dn} = -\frac{\frac{\partial \delta^*}{\partial n} - \frac{\partial \delta}{\partial n}}{\frac{\partial \delta^*}{\partial \overline{Q}^C}} \geq 0,$$

implying a stronger expansion in the cartel output when n increases. Finally, when $n \to \infty$ both π^P and π^C tend to zero and the only sustainable output $\overline{Q}^C$ becomes the competitive one.

The effect of market size S on collusive equilibria is twofold. Under constant marginal costs, market size and the scale of production affect multiplicatively the profits in each of the relevant states. Then, S cancels out in the expression of the critical discount factor. In other words, under constant marginal costs the incentive compatibility constraints are unaffected by market size. On the other hand, the level of collusive equilibrium profits π^C increase with market size.

To sum up, even the cartel equilibria display comparative statics properties similar to those already highlighted: the individual profits decrease, as the market price, when the number of firms increases, and they tend to the perfectly competitive output when $n \to \infty$. Market size positively affects collusive profits while being neutral on the conditions for sustainability of the cartel. Moreover, the level of profits in a cartel are higher, for a given number of firms, than those of the oligopoly equilibria analyzed in the previous sections.

4 Free entry symmetric equilibria

We can now endogenize the entry decision that determines how many of the m potential entrants will decide to become active, sinking the entry cost F. In a symmetric setting, the post entry profits depend on the number of active firms n and is decreasing in it, as analyzed in detail across a wide set of models in the previous section. We can summarize the main findings in the relationship $\Pi(n, S, \gamma)$ between the individual profits, the number of firms n, the market size S and the variable γ that captures the intensity of price competition. This latter, therefore, can be referred to the degree of substitutability among differentiated products, as we did in Section 3.2, as well as on the mode of competition (price, quantity, collusion). Hence, the individual profits are decreasing in the number of firms, increasing in market size and decreasing in the intensity of competition.

The maximum number of firms n^* in a symmetric free entry equilibrium (SFEE) is then captured by the two conditions:

$$\begin{aligned} \Pi(n^*, S, \gamma) &\geq F \\ \Pi(n^* + 1, S, \gamma) &< F \end{aligned} \tag{26}$$

The former ensures that all the active firms make non negative net profits, whereas the latter implies that in a market equilibrium with n^*+1 firms each one would not cover the sunk entry costs. Given the monotonicity of the individual profits in n we can therefore write[20]

$$n^* = n(S, F, \gamma), \tag{27}$$

where

$$\frac{\partial n^*}{\partial S} = -\frac{\partial \Pi / \partial S}{\partial \Pi / \partial n} > 0, \quad , \frac{\partial n^*}{\partial F} = \frac{1}{\partial \Pi / \partial n} < 0 \quad \text{and } n^*(\gamma') < n^*(\gamma) \ \text{ if } \gamma' > \gamma. \tag{28}$$

Hence, our main predictions state that the number of firms in a symmetric free entry equilibrium is increasing in market size, decreasing in the sunk entry costs (economies of scale) and decreasing in the intensity of competition.[21] Interestingly, relaxed competition (a lower γ), as it may arise if products are weakly substitute, or in case the industry is cartelized, goes along with an increased number of firms. We can further notice that if marginal costs are constant, market size increases multiplicatively the profits and therefore the number of firms depends on the ratio F/S that captures the relevance of economies of scale with respect to market size.

[20] We consider here for convenience n as defined on $\mathbb{R}^+$ ignoring the integer issue. Then, given the monotonicity of profits in n the two conditions for a SFEE boil down to $\Pi(n^*, S, \beta) = F$.

[21] We express the relationship between n^* and γ to encompass both the case when γ is defined over a compact interval (the substitutability parameter in the differentiated products models) and when it is a discrete index measuring the intensity of competition (as when comparing collusive and non-cooperative equilibria).

The SFEE identifies the maximum number of firms sustainable given market fundamentals and the prevailing strategic behavior. More specifically, in differentiated products markets we have identified the maximum number of varieties sustainable in a SFEE, assuming that each variety requires to sink a cost F to be produced, whereas the number of firms may be lower if some of them offer a portfolio of different varieties.[22]

5 Free entry and social efficiency

Moving from the positive to the normative analysis, we are interested in evaluating whether the entry process leads to an optimal, excessive or insufficient number of firms. A frequent presumption is that guaranteeing conditions of free entry is desirable from a social point perspective. The analysis we have developed in the previous sections allows to address this issue and to verify whether and under which conditions free entry leads to socially desirable outcomes. Spence (1976) and Dixit and Stiglitz (1977) have explored the issue in a monopolist competition set-up, finding that the number of varieties in a free entry equilibrium falls short of the social optimum. In a homogeneous product environment, instead, von Weizsäcker (1980) and Perry (1984) established an opposite result, with too many firms entering with respect to the social optimum.

We discuss the social efficiency of SFEE following Mankiw and Whinston (1986) and Amir et al. (2014) and adopting the same two-stage game of the previous sections. We analyze a second best welfare maximization problem where the social planner is assumed to control the number of firms but to be unable to affect or determine the behavior of the active firms once they enter. We start with the case of homogeneous products and quantity competition and then move to a product differentiation and price competition environment.

We can borrow from the analysis of symmetric market equilibria three conditions that we proved to hold under fairly general conditions in the Cournot model:[23]

1. In the symmetric equilibrium the individual output is decreasing in n: $q(n) > q(n')$ for $n' > n$;

[22] This statement should be further qualified according to the different models of product differentiation. In general, if in a symmetric multi-product setting each firm offers k varieties some cross-variety effects are internalized, and therefore the market price should be different (higher) than in the case of single-product firms. With higher individual profits in the symmetric k-varieties firms equilibrium some further entry should be profitable. Therefore the number of multiproduct firm should be larger than n^*/k, where n^* is the SFEE number of single-product firms.

[23] In their paper, Mankiw and Whinston do not model explicitly the post-entry game and assume that certain features characterize the firm and aggregate pattern of the equilibrium strategies. We can, instead, explicitly refer to the properties of the equilibria developed in the previous sections. A similar approach is in Amir, de Castro and Koutsougeras (2014).

2. Total output is increasing in the number of firms: $Q(n) = nq(n) < Q(n') = n'q(n')$ for $n < n'$;

3. The price cost margin is non negative for any number of firms, and strictly positive for a finite number of firms: $P(Q(n)) - C'(q(n)) \geq 0$ for all n and $P(Q(n)) - C'(q(n)) > 0$ for n finite.

Given these features, the social planner maximizes total welfare by choosing the number of firms:

$$\max_n W(n) = \int_0^{Q(n)} P(s)ds - nC(q(n)) - nF \tag{29}$$

Let us define n^W the solution. Then, under $1-3$, the SFEE number of firms is higher than the social optimum, that is $n^* > n^W$. The result can be easily proved by noting that the first order conditions in problem (29) are:

$$\begin{aligned} W'(n) &= P(.)\left[n\frac{\partial q}{\partial n} + q(n)\right] - C(q) - nC'(q)\frac{\partial q}{\partial n} - F = \\ &= \Pi(n) - F + n\left[P(Q(n)) - C'(q(n))\right]\frac{\partial q}{\partial n}. \end{aligned} \tag{30}$$

Since in SFEE $\Pi(n^*) = F$, $\frac{\partial q}{\partial n} < 0$ by condition 1 and $P(Q(n^*)) - C'(q(n^*)) > 0$ for n^* finite given condition 3, it follows that $W'(n^*) < 0$ and therefore $n^* > n^W$.

The economic intuition of the excessive entry result is straightforward: when an additional firm enters, it adds to the social welfare the profit $\Pi(n) - F$ but, at the same time, it steals output, and therefore profits, from the other firms, the last term in the derivative (30), second line. The *business stealing effect*, captured by condition 1 above, creates a wedge between the private incentives of the entrant, and the social effect of entry, explaining why too many firms enter in a SFEE.[24]

The case of differentiated products adds an additional effect of entry on welfare, since more firms imply a larger set of varieties available to the consumers. Following Spence (1976) we capture this effect assuming that the gross consumers benefit is

$$CS(\mathbf{q}) = G\left[\sum_{i=1}^{n} f(q_i)\right] \tag{31}$$

where $\mathbf{q}$ is the vector of outputs, $f(0) = 0$, $f\prime(.) > 0$ and $f''(.) \leq 0$ for all $q_i \geq 0$ implies a preference for variety and $G'(z) > 0$, $G''(z) < 0$ for all $z \geq 0$ qualifies products as substitutes[25]. The social planner then solves the problem

$$\max_n W(n) = G\left[nq(n)\right] - nC(q(n)) - nF.$$

[24] Mankiw and Whinston show that, when the integer problem is taken into account, $n^* \geq n^W - 1$.

[25] Consumer's utility maximization implies that in a symmetric equilibrium the price is equal to $G'(nf(q))f'(q)$ and therefore the profits can be written as $\Pi = G'(nf(q))f'(q)q - C(q) - F$.

Contrary to the case of homogeneous products, when products are differentiated in general we cannot rank the number of firms in a SFEE and the socially optimal one. The reason is immediately evident from the first order conditions of the problem:

$$\begin{aligned} W'(n) &= G'\left(nf'\frac{\partial q}{\partial n}+f\right)-C(q)-nC'(q)\frac{\partial q}{\partial n}-F= \\ &= \Pi(n)-F+n\left(G'f'-C'\right)\frac{\partial q}{\partial n}+G'\left(f-f'q\right) \end{aligned} \quad (32)$$

Condition (32) shows that an additional firm adds to total welfare the profits generated $\Pi(n)-F$, and further affects total welfare with two additional terms. The first one corresponds to the business stealing effect already identified in the case of homogeneous products, and captures the fact that the new firm subtracts output and profits to the competitors, with a lower net social gain than the private one and a bias towards excessive entry.

The last term is new and refers to the impact of an additional variety on consumers' surplus. $G'f$ is the marginal social effect of the new variety, whereas $G'f'q$ is the firm revenue. Since the firm does not internalize all the social benefit of the additional variety, the private incentives are lower than the social ones, leading to underprovision of varieties.

In this general setting the two conflicting terms do not allow to sign $W'(n^*)$ and evalutate whether an eccessive, insufficient or optimal number of firms enter in a SFEE. Under more specific assumptions on the utility function, we can generate examples where the ranking can be established. For instance, Dixit and Stiglitz (1977) using a CES utility function obtain that the SFEE number of firms is short of the social one, reverting the case of excessive entry that characterizes a homogenous product environment.

6 Free entry equilibria without symmetry

Although a symmetric environment is a natural reference when analyzing long run free entry equilibria we may be interested in the effects of free entry in oligopoly markets when some kind of asymmetry has long lasting effects. This may come from the existence of patents or other frictions in the adoption of process innovations that prevent the equalization of production techniques, from persisting advantages on the demand side coming from quality or brand image, as well as from institutional features that affect the behavior of firms, as for instance the coexistence of different ownership structures or the presence of state-owned firms. Since free entry equilibria suggest the pattern of adjustment when the entry process unfolds, asymmetric oligopolies are an interesting and relevant case to be addressed.

Once firms intrinsically differ, the number of firms is no more a relevant statistics to describe, in a positive or normative sense, the long run equilibria.

However, many of the oligopoly models we have already considered in a symmetric setting share a particular property, that of being aggregative games, that allows dealing easily with asymmetric environments.[26]

The profits of firm i in an aggregative oligopoly game can be written as a function of a choice variable (action) a_i and of the sum of the actions of *all* market participants $A = \sum_{j=1}^{n} a_j$, that is $\Pi_i(a_i, A)$. A very simple illustration is the Cournot model already considered in Section 3.1. Setting $q_i = a_i$ we can write $\Pi_i(a_i, A) = P(A)a_i - C_i(a_i)$. We recognize an aggregative structure also in some of the models of product differentiation[27]. In the linear model from Singh and Vives (1984), indeed, setting $p_i = a_i$ the profits write as:

$$\Pi_i(a_i, A) = (a_i - c)\frac{\alpha(1-\gamma) + \gamma A - [\gamma(n-1)+1]\, a_i}{(1-\gamma)\, [\gamma(n-1)+1]}$$

Even the logit model shares the feature of an aggregative game, once we define $a_i = \exp(-\gamma p_i)$: the profits can be written as

$$\Pi_i(a_i, A) = (-\log(a_i)/\gamma - c_i)\frac{a_i}{A}.$$

To illustrate the main features of aggregative games, we use here the linear Cournot model $\Pi_i(q_i, Q) = (a - bQ - c_i)q_i$ as an example. The traditional setting describes the profit function as depending on the own output and the aggregate of the other firms' production $Q_{-i} = \sum_{j \neq i} q_j$, that is $\Pi_i(q_i, Q_{-i}) = (a - b(q_i + Q_{-i}) - c_i)q_i$ and identifies the best reply

$$\widehat{q}_i(Q_{-i}) = \frac{a - c_i}{2b} - \frac{Q_{-i}}{2}.$$

Alternatively, following the aggregative setting we can identify the inclusive best reply first introduced by Selten (1970), where the optimal individual output is consistent with a given aggregate level of production[28]:

$$\widetilde{q}_i(Q) = \frac{a - c_i}{2} - Q.$$

Notice that an equilibrium exists only if $\sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{q}_i(Q) = Q$, that is if the sum of the inclusive best replies has a fixed point.[29] Further we can define firm i's profits,

[26] See on free entry equilibria with aggregative oligopoly games Anderson et al (2015).

[27] It is immediate to notice that address models with $n > 3$, as the Salop circular road model described above, are not aggregative games, since the profits of each firm depends only on a subset of prices.

[28] It is immediate to notice that both expressions come directly from the first order conditions

$$\frac{\partial \Pi_i}{\partial q_i} = a - c_i - b(q_i + Q_{-i}) - bq_i = 0.$$

[29] Anderson et al (2015) introduce a set of assumption that guarantee the existence and uniqueness of an equilibrium in inclusive best replies. Moreover, under these assumptions the nature of interaction (strategic substitutability or complementarity) of the original best replies translates in an analogous feature of the inclusive best replies.

when it and all firms choose their inclusive best reply, as a function of total output Q:

$$\Pi_i(Q, \widetilde{q}_i(Q) = \Pi_i^*(Q) = \frac{(a - c_i - bQ)^2}{b} \tag{33}$$

that is strictly decreasing in Q. The function (33) plays a fundamental role in the analysis of free entry equilibria when asymmetries are admitted. Indeed, it allows to map the total equilibrium output - in general the aggregate A - into the profits of the individual firms, where therefore Q replaces the number of firms as the key driver of equilibrium profits in an asymmetric setting.

Continuing with our Cournot example, a Free Entry Equilibrium (FEE) can be defined as a set of quantities $\{(q_i^*)_{i\in I}\}$ and a set of entrants $I \subseteq I_m$, where I_m is the set of all m potential entrants, such that

$$\begin{aligned} \Pi_i(Q_I^*) &\geq F_i \text{ for all } i \in I \\ \Pi_j(Q_I^* + q_j^*) &< F_j \text{ for all } j \notin I \end{aligned} \tag{34}$$

where $Q_I^* = \sum_{i\in I} \widetilde{q}_i(Q_I^*)$ is the aggregate output of the entrants I. Notice that we are not imposing symmetry in gross profits Π_i nor in the sunk costs F_i. As a final step, it is often argued that the marginal entrant in a free entry equilibrium gains zero profit, a condition that is shared by all firms in a symmetric equilibrium. Anderson et al (2015) assume that, among the potential entrants, there is a subset $e \subset I_m$ of *symmetric* marginal firms[30] with identical profit function $\Pi_i = \Pi_e(q_i, Q)$ and entry cost $F_i = F_e$ for all $i \in e$. Some of these marginal firms may be active, belonging to the set $e_a \subset I$.

In a Zero Profit Free Entry Equilibrium (ZPFEE) a non empty set of marginal firms e_a is active and gains zero profit. More formally, a ZPFEE is a FEE with a set I of active firms such that $e_a \subset I$ and $\Pi_i = \Pi_i^*(Q_I^*) = F_i$ for all $i \in e_a$, where $\Pi_i^*(.)$ is given by (33). The existence of a fringe of symmetric active marginal entrants allows to combine the zero profit condition of the marginal firms with a unique level of aggregate output Q_I^* and with a variety of profit levels of the inframarginal (asymmetric) firms. Indeed, since $\Pi_i^*(Q)$ is decreasing in Q, from the zero profit condition for the active marginal firms we obtain Q_I^*, and this latter determines the profits of the other inframarginal firms $\Pi_i^*(Q_I^*)$. The number of active marginal firms e_a is then adjusted through the entry process to find the ZPFEE.

To illustrate these properties it is interesting to analyze how the ZPFEE varies when exogenous changes in the set of inframarginal firms occur, modifying their profit structure and, consequently, the optimal output they deliver to the market. Let us consider an exogenous shock that affects a subset I_C of inframarginal firms (the changed firms), as for instance a process innovation, or a merger, or a privatization, while leaving the other inframarginal firms in subset I_U (the unchanged firms) unaffected. Hence, in the initial state, $I = I_C \cup I_U \cup e_a$.

[30] A possible justification of this key assumption rests on the following argument. The industry is populated by a set of larger firms, that display rich strategies and, through them, are able to introduce some competitive advantage, i.e. asymmetry. Then, there is a fringe of small firms (the marginal entrants) that are not strategically sophisticated and adopt a standard and similar technology and are therefore less efficient that the larger ones.

Then, after the shock the set of active firms in a ZPFEE moves from I to I'. All the changed and unchanged inframarginal firms remain active both before and after the shock, i.e. $I_C = I'_C$ and $I_U = I'_U$. The adjustment to the new ZPFEE works through a variation in the set of active marginal entrant: $e_a \neq e'_a$. Since $e'_a \neq \emptyset$ in the new equilibrium, $\Pi_i = \Pi^*_e(Q^*_{I'}) = F_e$ must hold for $i \in e'_a$ and therefore total output remains the same, that is $Q^*_{I'} = Q^*_I$. Consequently, the profits of the unchanged inframarginal firms do not vary. Hence, for instance, a reduction in the marginal cost of the changed inframarginal firms I_C leads them to produce more in the new ZPFEE whereas the unchanged inframarginal firms I_U maintain the same level of production. Since total ouput does not vary, the set of marginal firms shrinks as it does their overall production, adjusting the larger production of the changed inframarginal firms and maintaining total output Q^*_I at the initial level.

This property of the ZPFEE encompasses also the case of the "aggressive leaders" in Etro (2006) where one firm, the leader, is the inframarginal agent and the other symmetric firms, the followers, belong to the active marginal entrant group e_a. A change in the profits of the leader, for instance due to some investment, as Etro (2006) writes, "does not affect the equilibrium strategies of the other firms, but it reduces their equilibrium number". Interestingly, in this setting with an endogenous number of followers, if the investment increases the marginal profit of the leader, this latter has an incentive to overinvest, no matter whether competition is in strategic complements or substitutes. Indeed, if the market equilibrium output does not change with its investment whereas its market share and profits increase, the leader will overinvest. In the limit, if the investment is not costly, the leader has the incentive to produce more than the usual Stackelberg leader's output and to monopolize the market preventing the entry of the followers.

This result of generalized over-investment is strikingly different from what happens when the number of followers (entrants) is given and exogenous. In the taxonomy proposed by Fudenberg and Tirole (1984), when the investment increases the marginal profit, the leader over-invests (top dog) if competition is in strategic substitutes but it under-invests (puppy dog) when it competes in strategic complements.

Aggregative games greatly simplify also the normative analysis of asymmetric environments. Starting with the case of homogeneous products, we observe that consumers' surplus depends on aggregate output only,[31] i.e. $CS = CS(Q)$, with $CS(0) = 0$, $CS'(.) > 0$ and $CS''(.) \leq 0$ for all $Q \geq 0$. Then, when a shock affects a subset of inframarginal firms while leaving unchanged total output Q^*_I, consumers' surplus does not vary as well. The only impact on social welfare comes from the variation in profits of the changed inframarginal firms I_C. Indeed, the profits of the unchanged inframarginal firms I_U do not vary and the change in the number of active marginal firms from e_a to e'_a does not

[31] This is true if the firms' activity does not entail any externality, as for instance different levels of pollution. If this were the case, the composition, and not only the total level of output would matter from a welfare point of view. In our discussion we are assuming that these composition effects do not arise in a homogeneous product market.

affect welfare, since they gain zero profits. We conclude that if a shock induces a profitable adjustment in a subset of firms and a shift in output composition, total welfare increases of the same amount of the profits of the affected firms, quite in constrast with the impact in the short run when the number of firms does not vary.

To appreciate the result, let us consider the welfare impact of a merger between two firms absent any efficiency gain. The short run effects are well known in the IO literature: the merged entity internalizes the negative externalities and contracts output, the outsiders react by expanding their production. The net effect is a fall in total output, consumers' surplus and total welfare, an increase in outsiders' profits and, in case of constant returns to scale, a fall in insiders' profits.[32]

Once we consider entry and ZPFEE, however, the effects change significantly. Since additional active marginal firms enter in reaction to the short run adjustments, total output, consumers' surplus and outsiders' profits (I_U and e_a) do not change. The insiders' (I_C) profits, due to their output contraction, are weakly lower. If, however, the merger allows to realize efficiencies, insiders' profits, as well as their incentive to merge, increase, as it does total welfare. This result brings in a strong policy implication in favor of lifting ex-ante merger control and authorization policies. Indeed, since the long-run private and social effects of a merger coincide, if private firms have an incentive to merge, then social welfare will raise, whereas socially damaging mergers would never be implemented given the lack of private incentives.[33]

In the welfare analysis of homogeneous product markets, we assumed that consumers' surplus depends only on total output but not on its allocation among the active firms. Moving to a differentiated products environment a similar assumption may be more problematic. Indeed, Anderson et al (2015) show that in aggregative oligopoly games with differentiated products a riallocation of a given aggregate among the different varieties, although neutral on the ZPFEE conditions, may affect total surplus and welfare. In other words, it may be that consumers' surplus does not depend only on the aggregate, but also on its composition.

They show that the dependence of consumers' surplus on the aggregate only still persists with differentiated products if the demand functions satisfy the Indipendence of Irrelevante Alternatives (IIA) property, that is if the ratio of any two demands depends only on their own prices and not on the prices of other, unconsidered, alternatives. Notably, the logit model, as well as the demand functions derived from the CES utility function, satisfy the IIA and therefore the corresponding oligopoly game not only is aggregative, but allows to express

[32] See Salant et al. (1983).

[33] Notice that the hands-off policy implications of free entry on merger control are much stronger than the usual argument that low entry barriers may constitute a favourable element when analyzing a merger. In this latter case easy entry conditions may constitute a pros to be balanced with the cons of enhanced market power in the evaluation of a merger. In the ZPFEE case, free entry is instead sufficient to generate mergers only when they are welfare enhancing.

consumers' surplus as a function of the sum of the prices only.[34]

7 Endogenous sunk costs and persistent concentration

The entry decision in the previous sections involved sinking a fixed set-up cost F that was related to some initial indivisible investment. We have not further specified the nature of these outlays. Assuming that the level of the sunk cost F is an exogenous parameter with respect to the entry and market strategies may be explained referring to technology (e.g. investment in a minimum efficient scale plant) or institutions (e.g. the payment of a licence fee needed to operate). The sunk cost may vary, allowing us to estrapolate comparative statics properties, but for reasons orthogonal to the market strategies adopted by the active firms once entered. In this sense we can label the environments considered so far as characterized by *exogenous sunk costs.*

In this setting, the amplitude of the sunk costs F compared to the size of the market S was a fundamental driver in determining the maximum number of firms sustainable in a free entry equilibrium. The limiting case, when F becomes negligible with respect to S, leads to convergence to a competitive equilibrium with an infinite number of firms, vanishing externalities and price converging to the marginal cost.

Although this paradigm can apply to several industries, there are many other sectors where a relevant part of the sunk costs arise due to specific market strategies of the firms, that in general we may connect to the effort of reaching a competitive advantage and market leadership. This is the case with investments in advertising, that enhance the perceived quality of the product, or with R&D expenditures aimed at improving the efficiency of the technology or the quality of the products.[35] Similar effects take place in industries, as media and entertainment, where market leadership can be reached by securing specific, non reproducible inputs as, for instance, talent and premium contents.[36] In all these examples, a competitive advantage is reached through enhanced efforts and, therefore, higher sunk costs. We label this second class of economic environments as *endogenous sunk costs.*

When sunk costs react to market incentives, we may expect that the entry process, that is constrained by the need to repay all the sunk outlays, is affected. Indeed, market size, that drives the tendency to fragmentation in an exogenous

[34] It should be stressed that aggregative product differentiation models not necessarely satisfy the IIA, as it is evident, for instance, considering the linear model drawn from Singh and Vives (1984). In this case consumers' surplus depends not only on the aggregate price but also on its composition.

[35] A pathbreaking contribution in the theory and empirical analysis of these industries is due to Sutton (1991) and (1998) books, the former referred to advertising intensive industries and the latter to R&D intensive sectors. See also Sutton (2007) for a comprehensive review.

[36] See on these examples Motta and Polo (1997) and (2003).

sunk cost industry, has the additional effect of increasing the marginal return to market leadership, pushing up efforts for leadership and endogenous sunk costs. A central result of the endogenous sunk cost case claims that, if the incentives to high effort are sufficiently high, an increase in market size does not lead to a more and more fragmented market structure. There exists an upper bound to fragmentation such that, even in the limit, large firms and concentration persist.

We illustrate this result through a very simple model due to Schmalensee (1992)[37] that conveys the main ideas and intuition. In this setting we set the price $p > c$ fixed and concentrate on the investment in advertising A_i. The demand for product i has a structure similar to the one in discrete choice models: $D_i(A_i, A_{-i}) = S * P_i(A_i, A_{-i})$ where S is market size and P_i firm i's market share. Moreover,

$$P_i(A_i, A_{-i}) = \frac{A_i^\gamma}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} A_j^\gamma} \tag{35}$$

where $\gamma \in [0, 2]$ is a parameter that measures the mobility of consumers in reaction to advertising outlays. Notice that $\frac{\partial D_i}{\partial A_i} = \frac{\gamma}{A_i} P_i * (1 - P_i)$.

The profit function of firm i, then, is

$$\Pi_i(A_i, A_{-i}) = (p - c)S \frac{A_i^\gamma}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} A_j^\gamma} - A_i - F \tag{36}$$

where the last two terms refer to endogenous sunk costs in advertising (A_i) and exogenous sunk entry costs (F). In this setting there exists a symmetric Nash equilibrium in advertising levels

$$A^* = (p - c)S\gamma \frac{n - 1}{n^2} \tag{37}$$

that is increasing in market size S and in consumers' reactivity to advertising γ.

Plugging into the profit function and taking into account that in a symmetric equilibrium $P_i = 1/n$, the zero profit condition can be rewritten as:

$$\frac{1 - \gamma}{n^*} + \frac{\gamma}{n^{*2}} - \frac{F}{S(p - c)} = 0, \tag{38}$$

where n^* is a solution of the above equation, that is the SFEE number of firms.

The last term is referred to exogenous sunk costs F and vanishes as the size of the market S increases indefinitely. However, the first two terms, that are directly related to the endogenous sunk costs in advertising outlays, present a different pattern: they do not depend on market size[38].

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[37] A full fletched model based on quantity competition and investments in quality can be found in Sutton (1991) and (2007, Appendix B).

[38] This feature, literally speaking, depends on the specific set up of the very simple model we

When $\gamma \leq 1$, corresponding to consumers poorly reacting to advertising, and therefore a weak competitive pressure for market leadership, the single positive solution n^* of (38) increases indefinitely in market size S, reproducing a pattern we already observed in pure exogenous sunk cost models. However, for $\gamma \in (1, 2]$ the incentives to invest in market leadership bite and advertising increases in larger markets, pushing up the endogenous sunk costs. In this latter case

$$\lim_{S \to \infty} n^* = \frac{\gamma}{\gamma - 1}.$$

The entry process in this case is predominantly governed by the endogenous sunk costs, an the number of firms sustainable is bounded above for any market size, implying persistent concentration.[39] Moreover, the endogenous sunk costs tend to raise more quickly when consumers are more responsive to advertising, increasing concentration. Interestingly, in exogenous sunk costs environments more intense competition is associated with a lower n^* and a more concentrated market, although these features dilute and vanish when the market size increases indefinitely. This patter of a higher concentration when competition is harsher, instead, persists in endogenous sunk cost industries even with growing market size.

8 Frictionless entry and contestability

The general result in the endogenous and exogenous sunk costs cases claims that there exists a maximum number of firms sustainable in a free entry equilibrium, and that it is decreasing in the amplitude of the sunk costs F compared with market size S. A concentrated market, in turn, is associated with non competitive mark-ups and allocative inefficiency. In the limit, when the economies of scale are particularly relevant, then, we might find that only one firm can operate in the market, a case of natural monopoly. The firm will set the monopoly price p^m, being able to cover the high fixed costs with the monopoly margins. A second, symmetric entrant, pushing down with its additional output the market price to $p(2) = P(Q(2))$, would make losses since by definition in a natural monopoly it would be unable to cover the fixed costs. Then, there is a range of fixed costs such that the monopoly price is charged and no entry occurs. Similar

adopt. However, a general property of this class of models is that when market size increases indefinitely, gross profits and investment costs once we reach a certain number of firms tend to increase at the same rate. In this case, when S increases, boosting the gross profits, the incentives to invest in market leadership increase accordingly and the endogenous sunk costs increases at the same rate, preventing entry of additional firms.

[39] Shaked and Sutton (1983) identify a second case when the number of firms does not increase when market size raises. When firms offer different qualities $x_i \in [\underline{x}, \overline{x}]$ and the burden of quality improvements falls on fixed rather than marginal costs, price competition squeezes the margins. With relatively similar prices the demand for lower quality products vanishes and a limited number of firms survives (Finiteness property).

cases can be generated where a small number of firms can be sustained in a free entry equilibrium.

The contestable markets approach[40] challenges this view, arguing that when entry is frictionless, structural monopoly or oligopoly environments do not lead to monopoly or oligopoly pricing and the associated allocative distortions. Indeed, potential competition may exert a sufficient corrective effect on the incumbent, inducing it to set a (second best) efficient price to prevent temporary (hit and run) entry. Allocative efficiency is therefore ensured by (potential) competition even when economies of scale are so relevant to prevent actual competition.

This striking result re-establishes in a free entry environment a central feature of the Bertrand result, that claims no relationship exists between the number $n > 1$ of active firms and the (socially efficient) oligopoly equilibrium. Indeed, as the exogenous sunk cost paradigm extends to the free entry case the Cournotian result, the contestable market approach brings on the stage of the free entry story a Bertrand-type flavour.

It is now time to specify more in detail what, in a symmetric setting, we mean by frictionless entry. As a general point, the incumbent firm and the (potential) entrant are, under any respect, perfectly identical.

Since we are considering a natural monopoly, the first issue to address is the nature and amplitude of the fixed costs. Let us consider the following example. On the supply side, suppose that, in order to operate in the industry, it is necessary to bear a total investment F for an indivisible capital good that provides production services over a time horizon T. Let us divide this total time in t periods, whose length we are going to specify below. The incumbent firm I, then, has to cover a fraction $f = F/t$ of the fixed costs in each of the t periods it is active in the market, and has variable costs $C_I(q_I)$. Let us consider the case $f \in (\Pi_2, \Pi^m]$, where Π_2 are the gross profits from duopoly and Π^m the monopoly gross profits. Under this assumption the number of firms sustainable in the market is $n^* = 1$, that is the market is a natural monopoly.

The potential entrant E, if it is willing to enter, has to pay $F = t * f$ to purchase the capital good. If, after one period, E decides to exit, the residual value of the capital good is $(t-1)*f$. Let $\alpha \in [0, 1]$ be the fraction of the residual value that can be cashed back by reselling the capital good or by using it in other markets. This parameter measures the sunkness of the initial investment, with $\alpha = 1$ corresponding to the case when the capital good can be efficiently recovered after exit and $\alpha < 1$ to some level of sunkness. If E enters and produces, its costs are $C_E(q_E)$. It is evident that, since the incumbent can efficiently use the capital good in the market for the entire length of its economic life, the entrant is in a symmetric position on the supply side only if $\alpha = 1$ and $C_E(q) = C_I(q)$.

[40] See Baumol et al. (1982). To ease the exposition we present here the case of a contestable natural monopoly. The authors generalize to natural oligopolies the contestable market approach showing that second best efficient allocations arise also in these cases when entry is frictionless. The case of multiproduct firms and economies of scope is a third, relevant extension of the analysis.

Turning to demand, for a given price p the entrant's demand is $D_E(p) \leq D_I(p)$ where the equal sign corresponds to a symmetric position towards the customers, that are uncommitted and can switch to the entrant if the price p_E is more attractive than the incumbent's one p_I.

The timing of the game is as follows: at $s = 0$ the incumbent sets a price p_I *that cannot be changed* for a period of length T/t; just after p_I is set the entrant posts its own price p_E; once the two prices are set, the customers choose which of the two firms to patronize and are supplied immediately; at $s = T/t$, before the incumbent changes its price, the entrant exits and resells (or re-uses) the capital good collecting $\alpha(t-1)f$.

Once unbundled the contestable market story, some key ingredients become evident.

1. There is no administrative restriction on entry, as licences or authorizations;

2. Demand and supply quantities adjust instantaneously while price changes take time.

In this environment, the incumbent sets a (limit) price that prevents the temporary entry of the competitor:

$$\widehat{p}_I = \frac{C_E\left(D_E(\widehat{p}_I)\right) + f\left[\alpha + t(1-\alpha)\right]}{D_E(\widehat{p}_I)}. \tag{39}$$

If we compare (39) with the second best Ramsey price

$$p^{sb} = \frac{C\left(D(p^{sb})\right) + f}{D(p^{sb})}$$

we can immediately notice that the limit price set by the incumbent is second best efficient if three further conditions hold:

3. The entrant has access to the same technology as the incumbent, with no restrictions coming from patents or privately owned know how: $C_E(q) = C_I(q)$; moreover, it can instantaneously change the level of production at the desired level;

4. The customers look at the entrant and the incumbent as offering perfect substitutes and have no restriction or costs in switching from one to the other: $D_E(p) = D_I(p)$;

5. The fixed indivible investment is not sunk and the entrant recovers entirely the residual value of the capital good: $\alpha = 1$.

Under assumptions $1-5$ potential competition is able to discipline the incumbent and induces second best efficient outcomes in markets plagued by substantial economies of scale and concentration. Intuitively, perfect symmetry of the incumbent and the entrant and frictionless entry allows the market to be supplied, indifferently, by either of the two firms. If the incumbent commits to a profitable price, it is temporarely replaced by the entrant through undercutting. In this case, the identity of the provider changes for a period, although the market remains a monopoly. To avoid undercutting, the incumbent is forced to adopt the efficient limit price equal to the average costs. This remarkable result is derived under a set of specific assumptions, and can be evaluated both with respect to its empirical relevance and theoretical robustness. On the theoretical ground, the limit price expression (39) clearly shows that substantial departures from the second best efficient price occur when any of the assumptions is weakened.

Turning to the empirical relevance, the contestable market approach has inspired the liberalization of the airline industry in the US in the late Seventies.[41] In this sector a market corresponds to a route, and therefore the large investments in aircrafts are not specific to a market: the aircrafts can be moved to other routes or resold in an efficient market. Alternatively, the carriers can lease the aircrafts The other fixed costs, check-in and handling services, are specific to airports, and therefore to the routes served. In the market reform the airports, rather than the carriers, supplied these services, leasing them to the carriers on a variable cost basis. Hence, assumption 5 of no sunkness seems consistent with the empirical data, as well as the access to the same technology (Assumption 3). Price stickiness may derive from contractual constraints on fares posted in advance (Assumption 2), and lifting authorizations was a key measure of the reform (Assumption 1). However, Assumption 4 was the Achilles' heels of the reform, since slots were assigned under grandfather's right, and the peak-hours more profitable ones remained in the portfolio of the incumbents. Moreover, in the years after the reform the carriers reorganized the routes from a spoke-to-spoke to a hub-and-spoke pattern, enhancing their dominant role on large hubs and achieving high load factors. With $D_E(p) < D_I(p)$, after an initial phase of turbolence, the incumbents were able to profitably prevent entries and maintain dominance on their key hubs.

Hence, although intellectually brilliant, the contestable market approach hardly can be considered a general theory of free market equilibria due to its lack of robustness. Although potential competition is an important ingredient in entry games, its impact on the behavior of active firms has to be carefully evaluated from an empirical point of view.

9 Conclusions

In this Chapter we have reviewed the different branches of the IO literature that analyzes free entry equilibria and the endogenous determination of market structure. A recurrent theme refers to the assumption of symmetric firms, that

[41] See Bailey and Panzar (1981) and Fawcett and Farris (1989).

in a long run perspective can be justified when the friction to access to technology and the features of demand allow all firms to refer to a common set of best practice techniques and to exploit the possibility of (horizontal) product differentiation. In this perspective, a very rich class of oligopoly models is characterized by significantly similar comparative statics properties of the market prices, quantities and profits when the number of active firms increases. Two limiting cases emerge, the perfectly competitive and the monopolistic competitive outcomes, when the number of firms increases indefinitely. The monotone comparative statics tools allow identifying the general conditions behind these results. Long run market structures under free entry are determined by a small set of elements referred to technology (economies of scale) and preferences (market size), with an additional ingredient related to strategies and the intensity of price competition. Hence, the general result of free entry enquilibria provides a solid theoretical foundation to the traditional approach of Industrial Economics based on the Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm.

The normative properties of free entry equilibria show that in a homogeneous product setting the business stealing effect is the key element that creates a wedge between the private incentives and the social planner, determining an excessive number of firms. When product differentiation is introduced, however, an opposite externality leading to underprovision of varieties comes in, since the private incentives to enter do not include the benefits of an increased number of substitute products on consumers.

While symmetric market games are a useful reference for the long run evolution of markets, asymmetric settings may be relevant both in the long run, when frictions persist, and as a starting point to study the evolution of market structure under free entry. It is relevant to notice that some form of symmetry is maintained also in this framework, that exploits the aggregative nature of many oligopoly models, by assuming that the (relatively inefficient) marginal entrants are all alike. The zero profit condition on the marginal entrants, together with the aggregative nature of the market games, then generates unconventional long run effects when a shock hits the active firms. Indeed, in the new free entry equilibria the total output remains unchanged, while its composition varies, with the change in output of the firms affected by the shock absorbed by an opposite variation in the number of marginal entrants. A hands-off policy implication comes together with these results.

Endogenous sunk costs related to market strategies provide a different pattern of adjustment characterized by persistent concentration even in very large markets, in contrast with the tendency to fragmentation when sunk costs are exogenous. Finally, we review the attempt to establish efficient entry equilibria even in markets characterized by huge economies of scale and structural concentration, including natural monopolies, by assuming frictionless entry and giving a role to potential competition. The contestable markets paradigm refreshes in a free entry set-up the features of Bertrand competition, in contrast with the Cournotian paradigm of the exogenous sunk costs approach. Once again, symmetry plays a role, since the effectiveness of potential competition in disciplining dominant firms rests on the assumption that the entrants can perfectly replace the incumbent during their temporary raid in the market.

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