

CHAPTER 11

REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This short text argues that a single moral – the notion's etymology refers to the mores of a group or a society – must not be contested, but as soon as more than one morality is in play, there is a great chance that at least one or both are contested. It is also argued that man is moral by definition. Markets come, by definition, with struggles, but not all struggles in markets are moral. Most struggles in markets are economic, and most markets are not contested. Future research in the field of moral struggles could benefit from clearer distinctions of types of struggle.

Keywords: Market; struggle; competition; history; organization; embeddedness

Which moralities are not contested? A single moral – the notion's etymology refers to the mores of a group or a society – must not be contested, but as soon as more than one morality is in play, there is a great chance that at least one is contested. The simple reason is that human beings are constituted as social (Heidegger, 2001), and not egos who can freely choose one's values and institutions. Put differently, human beings are moral; we cannot exist with no moral, that is, be amoral. Aristotle and many others would, for example, have great problems making morality binary, that is, meaning that some have moral and others not. The most profound thinker on morality, also from a sociological point of view, is Friedrich Nietzsche (1911, 1994), who points both at how deeply rooted the institutions of morality are, and at the way morals are made.

Contesting views and struggles around markets presume differentiation of life spheres (Weber, 1946, pp. 331–362), or put differently, that the economy and markets are disembedded, originally from the religious sphere. However, until Adam Smith the economy was not really analyzed as a separated sphere.

It is Karl Polanyi (2001), who presented the idea of the economy as embedded in social life. The problem with the notion of embeddedness is that it presumes the separateness of the economy and the rest of society, also when applied to traditional societies. A separate economy sphere with some autonomy, however, emerged only gradually. Hence, when analyzing traditional societies, it makes little sense to speak of embedded or disembedded economies, since these notions project the modern perception of the economy on traditional societies.

The point that is made in the introduction, and that I share, is that both traditional and modern societies, social life – including activities that are economic – have a moral dimension (cf. Etzioni, 1988). The question, then, is, what is moral? Only in relation to something else does it make sense to speak of an economic moral; we notice morals when difference is turned into dissonance. Moreover, difference implies a more profound similarity in the sense that they are both morals.

It should, moreover, be clearly stated that though markets are peaceful, all of them are characterized by struggle (Weber, 1978), between sellers and buyers over the deal, and struggle between competing seller and buyers. It is of importance to clarify what one is for or against, but this has not been a main issue in the old literature. This volume takes a big step in the right direction. One can be for or against the market in general (Hirschman, 1986). It is also possible to be for or against a certain activity, such as gambling, an example discussed by Steiner and Trespeuch, or prostitution. Actors can accept certain activities, but be against that these are traded in a market, for example a market organized for gambling. Not the least for policy matters, the issue of what actors are for or against should be clarified.

MORAL STRUGGLE

In the introduction to this volume, the general argument about the debate of markets as good or bad is outlined. Much of this debate relates to Polanyi. My reading of Polanyi is that he is not categorically against market, but argues against a society in which everything would be run by what happens in perfect markets. The idea of the perfect market was presented as a thought-experiment by Frank Knight (1921). Knight devotes the bulk of his book, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, to the scenario of a system of markets in which actors have perfect knowledge. In this system, it is not uncertainty, but risk, that prevails. Knight, to whom Polanyi alludes, however, stresses that in real life uncertainty, and not risk, is the condition facing economic actors. My view is that Polanyi, who offers a balanced historical analysis of economics and economic development, is raising a finger to warn us rather than giving us an accurate account of reality.

The more tangible level of analyses in this volume is concerned with specific markets and the trade of specific goods. This type of analysis addresses the extent to which some markets, goods, or services are contested. It is on this level of

analysis that I think the book makes its most distinct contribution. This contribution is clearly to be seen in the light of the valuable literature review in the introduction by Simone Schiller-Merkens and Philip Balsiger. I share with the editors the view that the phenomenology of morality in markets is the central question. Thus, the empirical phenomenon, rather than the meta-analysis of different discourses of moral, plays the key role. The introduction puts the phenomenon in its disciplinary and social context.

Since there is always struggle in markets, and that some of these are moral, a key question becomes how actors deal with these issues, most notably the question of coping with moral struggle. From my theoretical vantage point, and in my reading of the contributions to the volume, the role of organizations are central for understanding many markets (Ahrne, Aspers, & Brunsson, 2015), albeit not yet used much as a theoretical tool in market analyses. However, some of the contributions of this volume discuss the organization of markets.

Alice Valiergue analyses the moral struggles around the organized carbon offset market. This empirically rich project highlights the relational work in which sellers and buyers are engaged, to alleviate the struggles in this market. The purchase of carbon credits means that sellers get money to invest in the reduction of CO₂ emissions. Sellers make sure that the buyers are emotionally attached to the projects.

Philippe Steiner and Marie Trespeuch analyze the conditions that enable, and those that block, markets from coming into being. Empirically they look at markets for gambling, and for organs that will be used in transplantations, both of which are indeed contested. They convincingly show that the risks involved in these markets are addressed by decided institutions, that is, rules and regulations that restrict entry and increase control to “protect” those who are vulnerable in the market for gambling that has been “set up,” that is, what I would call “organized” markets.

Markets for illegal goods are almost by definition contested. However, that something is illegal does not mean that it is necessarily immoral, though in in most cases there exists an overlap between something being immoral and being illegal. Matías Dewey, in his chapter on counterfeit goods, argues that there are also moral issues in illegal markets. The chapter nicely shows the large apparatus of decided institutions, in the form of property laws, tax laws, etc., that embed all markets. In an almost Nietzschean fashion, those engaged in the illegal activities turn the tables of values upside down, and justify their illegal activities as a means for a better future. Dewey thereby leads us to see how the often taken for granted institution – that people follow the law – is rejected in favor of values that justify alternatives. In this case, central moral assumptions of market interaction are contested, as are the moral rights of patents and brand names.

Marcin Serafin analyzes the role of the Uber platform, which is a contested form of selling and buying transport services. In his important contribution, we learn that Uber is contested in multiple arenas. Serafin also shows that one should not reduce contestation to moral issues only. Different economic interests, to take one example, may very well be the dominating reason why something is contested. In many cases, entrepreneurs are actively pushing for certain values, and this may lead to conflicts and struggle. Value conflict is also the theme in the chapter by Daniel Waeger and Sébastien Mena, on how Swiss stock exchange companies

faced the demand for active ownership, and how this eventually came to be the norm. This is clearly a struggle, interesting, and definitely economic, with some moral elements, but is it primarily a moral struggle? In yet other cases, such as in the analysis of how a company tries to create debate about its brand reported by Wieser, Hemetsberger, and Luedicke, there is clearly a struggle, but it is perhaps less clear what is moral. My initial remark was that moral struggle can be interpreted broadly, but at the same time it may be useful to demarcate the field of moral struggles over markets to give future research more edge. This ambition I thus share with Philip Balsiger and Simone Schiller-Merkens.

Struggle between actors holding different values are common in social life. The chapter by Sarah Lenz and Sighard Neckel reports on the rationale used by those employed at ethical banks to juggle the two, sometimes-conflicting values – profit and ethical concern. In their text the two ethics, business ethics and social ethics, are put in relation to one another in the practice facing workers. This is a fascinating story that in the contemporary context analyses the question Weber shed light on in his Protestant Ethic, namely what happens to those who cannot compete. The short answer is that it is simply not possible for these banks to keep up with other banks in a competitive market if they are to pay heed to their own ethical ambitions. Thus, markets may be blocked from coming into being because of existing institutions.

Other markets are more profoundly contested. Directing advertisements at children as customers is a phenomenon that is often regulated. Moreover, most countries have regulated labor contracts, including for example the conditions under which children can work, by having laws regulating the age at which a child can be employed and how many hours a child is allowed to work (see also the discussion by Steiner and Trespeuch in this volume). In the text by Eva Nadai and Alan Canonica, the struggle over if, and if so, how, disabled workers should be included in markets is analyzed. They show that for these, often less productive workers, firms must use other yardsticks than what they use when they normally are hiring. However, the employers must be persuaded to enact these yardsticks in conversations to make these compromises between competing conventions of justification of actions. In her chapter, Suckert shows how milk producers, more specifically ecopreneurial dairies, can draw on two markets, one ethical-economic and one economic, by channeling the produced milk in two streams, each with its logic, regulations and ethics. In this sense, they can sell their milk in two markets, as “truly organic” milk and as “normal” eco milk. Taken together these chapters nicely show not only how markets are embedded, but also how moral struggles often are embedded in other struggles, and that these struggles can unfold in many different ways.

FUTURE WORK ON MORAL MARKETS

As a researcher, one can of course take moral standpoints on markets, specific objects, or the objects of market trade. It is possible to take the perspective of the producer, or, perhaps more “naturally,” the perspective of consumers. The scientific approach, however, is not aiming at only reflecting perspectives. Markets

as an institutionalized way of economic coordination are in some fields highly contested. Today, however, most seem to accept markets, and they have proved to be a highly efficient coordination form. In fact, as long as the goods or services are taken for granted and accepted as being “economic” (which by itself may be the outcome of a struggle in the past), most markets are not contested; they are simply accepted means of coordinating actors’ interests.

I have in my reflections taken a position that to some extent creates some dissonance in relation to the contributions of this exciting volume; this is a deliberate strategy to continue discussing the issues raised in the introduction by Schiller-Merkens and Balsiger. The volume offers an excellent source and point of departure for anyone interested in moral issues in our capitalist society. After having read this volume, it is in my view clear that sociological analyses, using empirical material, can make important contributions to our understanding of morals in and around markets, as Schiller-Merkens and Balsiger state in the introduction to the volume. Obviously, a single volume cannot address all questions, and this and yet other questions are tasks that researchers in this field can address in the future. This volume has taken a major step in the right direction.

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