

THE MORAL BOUNDARIES OF THE MARKET*

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1 The problem of market boundaries

Now that the theoretical and practical contest between market and state seems largely settled to the former's advantage, at least for the foreseeable future, it is perhaps easier to focus on some important issues about the nature and place of economic markets which have often been obscured by the intensity of that contest.

First, there are questions about the specific character that a market economy might take, including both the broad contrast between capitalist and non-capitalist forms, and finer-grained distinctions between particular versions of each.¹ I shall have little to say about these questions, beyond declaring at the outset my allegiance to the kind of non-capitalist, market socialism recently articulated by writers such as David Miller², whilst also registering my belief that even within the broad category of capitalist market economies, there remain a number of morally significant differences between their particular forms.

Second, there are questions about the precise *scope* of the market domain: about how, and upon what basis, the boundaries should be drawn around the domain of activities to be governed by the market. These questions arise whatever the specific character of a market economy may be, and can thus be tackled in a largely independent manner. It is these that I shall explore in this paper. And I shall do so primarily through a critical commentary on Michael Walzer's illuminating discussion of them in his *Spheres of Justice*.³ But in order to contextualise the kind of approach that I shall be taking, I begin by briefly identifying some of the main directions taken in other work that has addressed, at least implicitly, the problem of market boundaries.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one finds rather little explicit discussion of this by the more enthusiastic supporters of market economies. It is as if their theoretical energies have been so fully exercised in demonstrating the virtues of the market that little has been left to deal with the arguably prior question of what it is that defines the nature - and hence limits - of that 'economic' domain with respect to which market and state are seen as the chief and rival contenders. Yet even here one often finds some recognition of a broad separation between economic, political and personal domains: for example, in Friedman's argument that the market is a necessary condition for the existence of a liberal-democratic political system; and in Hayek's arguments against the applicability to the market of

* First published in Colin Crouch and David Marquand eds, *Ethics and Markets: Co-operation and Competition within Capitalist Economies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, pp. 6-20. (This special issue of *The Political Quarterly* explored the possibility of European alternatives to the UK's model of capitalism),

¹ Some of these variations involve different relations between the private sector and the state, differences that are explored elsewhere in this volume; my opening paragraph concerns only the two primary forms of economic organisation.

² David Miller, *Market, State and Community*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989; see also the papers in Julian Le Grand and Saul Estrin, eds, *Market Socialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989.

³ Martin Robertson, London, 1983. There has been little discussion of this aspect of Walzer's book (see especially Chapter 4) in the critical literature, most of which has focused instead on its conception of social critique. An exception is Chapter 3 of Michael Rustin's *For a Pluralist Socialism*, Verso, London, 1985.

conceptions of justice, based on merit or desert, that belong only to personal or family life.⁴

Turning now to less whole-hearted proponents of the market - including advocates of market socialism - one can identify a number of distinct concerns amongst those who have addressed this question of market boundaries.⁵ First, there are those who have argued, from the standpoint of (typically needs-based) principles of distributive justice, that goods such as health-care and education should be provided on a non-market basis - a claim with which I entirely agree, merely noting that the greater the cultural significance of market-provided goods, the more compelling is the case for such non-market provision.⁶

Second, there is the continuing concern with a wide (and seemingly ever-expanding!) range of 'market-failures', including both those involving the under-provision of public goods, and those due to the existence of various kinds of externalities. The latter, especially, have gained increasing attention in recent discussions of environmental decision-making, including the use of cost-benefit analyses as an alternative or supplement to market mechanisms.

Finally, there has been a long-standing debate about the moral propriety or otherwise of the sale and purchase of various items of an especially intimate, and often corporeal nature, including blood, bodily organs, and both reproductive and sexual services - a debate in which Titmus's study of blood-provision has been a major reference-point,⁷ and which has been further fuelled both by more recent developments in bio-technology, and by the rise of strongly libertarian defences of the free market.

It is probably this last kind of case that would most commonly be seen as involving distinctively *moral* issues about market boundaries, together perhaps with those involving questions of distributive justice.⁸ But I shall have little to say about either of these. Instead my focus will mainly be on that broad separation between personal, political and economic domains noted above, and more specifically on the need to expand this rather minimal schema to make room for domains other than the personal and political that may also require protection from the market, and hence boundaries to be set around it.

In particular I have in mind the domain(s) consisting in social practices and institutions of a broadly *cultural* character: broadcasting and journalism, museums and the arts, education, sports, academic research and many others. These include, of course, many of those institutions that in Britain today, despite the apparent demise both of Lord Young and of the political *rhetoric* of 'enterprise culture', continue to be subject to the extension of market or quasi-market forces and the introduction of commercially modelled forms of organisation.⁹

⁴ See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1962; and Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960.

⁵ One could distinguish here between those who ascribe some positive value to the market and those who do not - who regard it as a necessary evil, as it were. For the latter, defining market boundaries is an exercise in damage-limitation; for the former, it is a matter of 'keeping it in its place'.

⁶ Including, as Walzer neatly argues, the provision of money itself, the means to engage in the culturally valued activity of consumption: *op. cit.*, pp. 103-108.

⁷ Richard Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1970; see also Peter Singer, 'Altruism and Commerce: A Defense of Titmuss against Arrow', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 2, 1973, pp. 312-320.

⁸ Cf Raymond Plant, 'Enterprise in its Place: the Moral Limits of Markets', in Paul Heelas and Paul Morris eds, *The Values of the Enterprise Culture*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 85-99. Plant focusses additionally on the role of moral norms in eg the contractual relations of the market.

⁹ See Russell Keat and Nicholas Abercrombie eds, *Enterprise Culture*, Routledge, London, 1991.

Further, I suggest, the issues raised by these kinds of changes may also properly be seen as moral or ethical ones, despite the more usual restriction of these terms to the cases noted earlier. For the approach I shall be taking reflects the growing tendency in current moral philosophy to revive a broadly Aristotelian conception of the discipline, according to which the central question is 'what is the good life for humans?', and any adequate answer will include the identification of various, often institutionally organised, social forms or practices which are seen as necessary for, or at least contributing to, such a life.¹⁰ Thus morality involves not so much a set of constraints on individuals' actions, but a positive vision of the human good; and moral philosophy is inherently social philosophy.

Both Marx's work, and much of the socialist tradition more generally, may reasonably be located within this Aristotelian framework. Yet both have often been criticised for the unduly monolithic nature of their social vision, for seeing the human good as realisable within a single ideal form of social practices and institutions. I shall say more about this criticism later. But I regard it as a virtue of Walzer's position, to which I now turn, that it is based on a strongly pluralistic conception of the human good, and thus also emphasises the need to construct boundaries around the various institutional contexts - including that of the market - in which diverse and distinctive social practices can flourish.¹¹

2 Walzer and the separation of spheres

Walzer's discussion of market boundaries forms part of a more general account of the nature of social justice in modern societies. He takes it to be a characteristic (perhaps defining) feature of such societies that they involve a high degree of differentiation between various domains or spheres within which distinctive kinds of social activities take place: the economy, politics, the family, education, welfare, religion, etc. Each of these spheres involve different forms of social relationships, different criteria of permissible and impermissible actions, and different rules of distribution for the specific 'social goods' with which they are concerned: eg money and wealth, political power and office, love and friendship, knowledge and expertise, health and security, religious salvation, and so on.¹²

Walzer maintains that it is precisely the specificity - or, as he terms it, the 'plurality' - of these social goods (which themselves also vary between different societies at different times etc) that makes it impossible to defend principles of distributive justice of the kind standardly proposed by political philosophers, whether these are egalitarian, desert-based, Rawlsian, Nozickian or otherwise. For these typically involve either mistakenly assuming that all such goods are somehow commensurable with one another (eg that they are different ways of achieving the single good of utility, or even measurable in monetary terms), or attempting to apply to every social good a principle that is in fact appropriate only to some.

¹⁰ See eg Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth, London, 1981; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985; William Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989; and John O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics: Human Well-Being and the Natural World*, Routledge, London, 1994.

¹¹ 'Pluralism' here, as throughout, implies the existence of a number of distinct - and probably incommensurable - kinds of 'good', all of which may contribute to people's well-being. It thus differs from other current senses of the term, eg the presence in a single society/nation of various social/cultural groups which differ radically in their values, beliefs etc.

¹² Walzer's mapping of social goods onto specific spheres is at times rather haphazard; and some social goods, eg honour, recognition and respect, seem to be involved in several spheres. I shall ignore these problems.

Any adequate theory of justice must therefore recognise the essential plurality and incommensurability of social goods and their specific meanings; and this Walzer attempts in his own account. The requirements of social justice are twofold. First, within each sphere social goods must be distributed in accordance with the criteria appropriate to those goods - criteria which are implicit in what he terms their 'social meanings'. Second, and more importantly in his view, each sphere must be prevented from 'colonizing' others: in particular, people's success in one sphere must be prevented from enabling them to achieve corresponding success in another, despite their lacking the attributes that would justify such success according to the criteria regarded as appropriate in that other sphere.

What I have here termed 'colonisation' involves what Walzer himself refers to as 'dominance': "I call a good dominant if the individuals who have it, because they have it, can command a wide range of other goods" (p.10). Examples of dominance include 'nepotism' - the illicit colonization of the economy by the sphere of the family/kinship relations; and the use of wealth to gain political power or office - the illicit colonisation of the political sphere by that of the economy.¹³

Walzer regards the (market) economy, or what he terms 'the sphere of money and commodities', as the most dangerous potential (and actual) colonizer in modern societies. As he puts it at one point, in a way that should give pause for thought to those enthusiasts for the market who see it as the main bulwark against totalitarian dominance by the state:

One can conceive of the market [if one is not careful, that is] as a sphere without boundaries, an unzoned city - for money is insidious, and market relations are expansive. A radically *laissez-faire* economy would be like a totalitarian state, invading every other sphere, dominating every other distributive process. It would transform every social good into a commodity. This is market imperialism.¹⁴

He thus devotes much attention to how the market's imperialistic or colonizing tendencies are and can be controlled. Part of his solution I shall not discuss here: it concerns the internal organization of large-scale capitalist firms which, he argues, should be reconstructed as co-operatively owned and controlled 'socialist' enterprises so as to prevent economic power illicitly being translated into political power at the micro-level.

The other part consists in specifying a series of what he calls 'blocked exchanges' - prohibitions on the sale and purchase of various goods, which are intended to limit the market's dominating tendencies, and thus to 'separate', to mark out the boundaries of, the economic sphere. On Walzer's strikingly heterogeneous list of blocked exchanges one finds the following items: human beings themselves; divine grace (cf the sin of simony); political influence, votes and office; prizes, honours and all outcomes of verdicts based on criteria of desert; marriage partners, love and friendship; harmful or dangerous goods and services such as drugs and homicide; and several

¹³ Notice that the very idea of nepotism as a vice is thus perhaps a distinctively 'modern' one, presupposing a separation of kinship from other spheres which is probably absent in many pre-modern societies. This may cast some light on the ambivalent attitudes towards nepotism that some commentators detect in Japanese politics.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 119-20. Walzer correspondingly sees a central role of the state as the maintenance of boundaries between other spheres, and is sensitive to the problems of how this can be done without the state itself colonising them: see especially Chapter 12.

others.¹⁵

But Walzer is aware that even if these blocked exchanges are successfully enforced - which is itself no mean task - this may well not ensure their primary objective, the prevention of market dominance. For example, even if political office cannot *directly* be bought, it may as it were be *indirectly* purchased, through the undue influence of wealth or economic power on the outcome of political processes. Walzer proposes a number of measures that might prevent such injustices; but I shall not discuss these here. Instead, I want to suggest that there is an important dimension of market colonisation which Walzer's pluralistic conception of social goods and institutional spheres potentially enables one to discern, but which he himself tends to ignore - perhaps because of his relatively narrow focus on questions of distributive justice. To introduce this further dimension of the boundary problem, I shall make some remarks about the relationship between Walzer's pluralism and some central themes in the work of Marx and Hegel.

3 Marx, Hegel and the separation of spheres

In an article published shortly after the appearance of *Spheres of Justice*¹⁶, Walzer notes how unconvincing, and indeed unattractive, his position will appear to those who endorse certain key features of Marx's thought. On the one hand, the very idea of separating and limiting the sphere of the market may seem absurd in the light of even quite modest versions of historical materialism - of overall determination by the economy of the character of other social domains. And on the other, his pluralistic account of the good society - which includes, *inter alia*, the sphere of the market - seems clearly at odds with Marx's vision of communist society, which not only leaves no place for the market, but is also, at least arguably, essentially non-pluralistic in its ideal conception of social relationships.

For example, when Marx argued in his essay 'On the Jewish Question' that human emancipation requires overcoming the separation between civil society (a market economy) and the state (liberal-democratic political institutions), he seemed to imply that both political *and* economic life should ideally be conducted on the same basis, displaying similar kinds of social relations, attitudes, motivations, values, and so on. Thus, in particular, truly human production is, *inter alia*, an activity in which humans self-consciously aim to satisfy one another's needs, and to realise a common good; and it is conducted in that same co-operative and communal manner that also characterises, at least in theory, a democratic political system. By contrast, of course, market-governed production represents the very antithesis of such social relationships.¹⁷

In these respects Marx's position differs crucially from that of Hegel, whose well-known trio of family, state and civil society is much closer in spirit to Walzer's pluralism. For each of Hegel's 'spheres' involves its own specific forms of social relationships, attitudes and values; and all of these - albeit also through their dialectical relations with one another - are seen as positive and indeed necessary features of the good society.

In particular, this applies to the individualistic, contractual relations of exchange involved in one key element of

¹⁵ Walzer's list is intended to represent what are currently regarded as blocked exchanges in the USA and similar societies. For a recent discussion of various possible rationales for disallowing such exchanges, see Judith André, 'Blocked Exchanges: A Taxonomy', *Ethics*, vol. 103, 1992, pp. 29-47.

¹⁶ 'Liberalism and the Art of Separation', *Political Theory*, vol. 12, 1984, pp. 315-330.

¹⁷ Here I rely on the interpretation of Marx's essay proposed in my 'Liberal Rights and Socialism', in Keith Graham ed, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 59-82.

Hegel's 'civil society', the economic market - despite his evident concern that some of the latter's potential effects should be held in check by other elements, including both 'corporations' and the system of welfare. But Hegel is even more concerned that the model of contractual exchange - which has a quite proper role in the economic domain - should not be allowed to distort or undermine the quite different kinds of relationships involved in other spheres, including that of marriage and the family.¹⁸ In this respect, he can be seen as recognising precisely that dimension of potential market colonisation that, as I shall argue shortly, needs to be added to Walzer's account.

But how might the viability - as distinct from the desirability - of this pluralistic ideal be affected by Marx's historical materialism? Would not the latter, if true, make the idea of limiting the dominance of the market absurdly unrealistic? Here I want to suggest that even if the character of the economic domain does (broadly) determine that of others, this is not *necessarily* damaging to Walzer's 'Hegelian' separation of spheres. For such determination might take either of two distinct forms, which I shall call 'replicatory' and 'non-replicatory'; and it is only the former that would be clearly problematic.

Replicatory determination would involve the specific character of, eg market relations, being 'projected' upon other domains. In Marx's own work, perhaps the classic example of this form of historical materialism is found in his remarks about Utilitarianism in The German Ideology. Here he claims that the apparent plausibility of what is assumed by this theory, ie the possibility of comparing all human actions in terms of the amounts of utility they generate, itself results from the projection onto all forms of social activity of the character of exchange relations in the economic market - a generalised 'commodification' of social life stemming from the market's colonising powers.

But elsewhere in Marx's work, and in that of later Marxist theorists, one also finds examples of the non-replicatory form of historical materialism. Consider, for instance, the claim that the rise of the market has brought with it the creation of a particular form of family life, one in which personal intimacy, romantic love and emotional intensity predominate. Here it is precisely the *dis*similarity of market and personal relations that is emphasised; and this may then be explained, in a broadly functionalist manner, by reference to the need for some 'haven' in the 'heartless world' of economic life if the economy is itself to operate successfully.¹⁹ Whether or not such explanations are correct, they seem both consistent with historical materialism, and to show the possible consistency of this with Walzerian separation.

4 Markets and commodities, literal and non-literal

Returning now to Walzer, and drawing implicitly on this brief discussion of Marx and Hegel, I shall make two sets of comments about his account of blocked exchanges which are intended to indicate what is missing in the way he conceptualises the problem of boundary problems.

The first concerns the relationship between markets and commodities. Walzer tends to identify the sphere of the market with that of money and commodities, themselves defined as things that can be bought and sold. Yet the question of what we regard as legitimately bought and sold is by no means the same as that of what we regard as

¹⁸ G.W.F.Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans T.M.Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952: Third Part, especially paras 158-169.

legitimately produced and distributed specifically through the mechanisms of a market economy. (Indeed, in light of recent experience with the European exchange rate mechanism, some might like to protect money itself from the market!). For example blood may be bought and sold in a centralised, state-controlled economy; and whatever arguments there are against this will thus apply to both state and market economies.

Taking this point a little further one might suggest that, somewhat paradoxically, many of the blocked exchanges that Walzer draws to our attention have themselves, historically, been associated with the *rise* of the market as the primary means of economic organisation; and hence - if one accepts Polanyi's influential thesis - with the very emergence of a 'separate' (in his terms 'disembedded') economic sphere.²⁰ Indeed, this historical process of 'separation' may itself have been linked to significant limitations on at least some of 'the things that money could buy' in *pre*-market societies.

But whether or not this last speculation is correct, it at least seems clear that if one's concern is with the boundaries of the market domain, an exclusive focus on what can properly be bought and sold may well not fully capture what is at issue, and may even be misleading. For example, any worries that one might have about the extension of the market to include higher education are unlikely to be confined to the possibility of qualifications such as university degrees becoming straightforwardly purchaseable. They will additionally, and perhaps more significantly, be directed at the possible effects of market forces on the character of educational institutions themselves, on the kinds of commitments and attitudes that may be encouraged in their participants, and so on.

My second set of comments concern what is meant by the term 'commodity' itself. If one considers Walzer's list of blocked exchanges one can, I think, distinguish two kinds of cases. First, there are those where the item could, as it were, perfectly well be bought and sold (and/or provided through the market), but where one has reasons either for not allowing this, or for also securing provision through non-market means - for example, dangerous or harmful goods; or bodily organs, health-care, etc. Second, there are those where one feels that the item concerned just *cannot* be purchased, or at least not without radically transforming or devaluing its existing or desired character - for example, love and friendship, 'things' which, it is often said, 'money can't buy', and which are de-valued when any attempt to do so is made.

However, if one considers why one believes that these latter kinds of items 'cannot' be bought or sold one will, I suggest, need to focus not so much on the purely formal/legal fact of their being 'purchased', but rather on what might be called the social meaning (or perhaps meanings) of such transactions - to what is involved in treating or regarding something **as** a commodity. And once this is recognised, one will also realise that things (including people) may be treated or regarded in this way without their literally being commodities, in the sense of formally purchaseable items; and that it is perhaps the former, rather than the latter, that is the morally significant feature here.

Thus, being literally a commodity is not a necessary condition for being regarded as one in the morally relevant sense - and indeed it is quite possibly not a sufficient condition either, though I shall not pursue this latter point.

¹⁹ For discussion of this, and especially its implications for gender relations, see Ross Poole, *Morality and Modernity*, Routledge, London, 1991.

²⁰ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Rinehart, New York, 1944.

Correspondingly, therefore, a system of blocked exchanges, however successful, may still prove seriously inadequate in preventing the colonizing tendencies of the sphere of commodities.²¹

At this point what is needed is some substantive account of the social meaning(s) of 'commodities'. One such account has been provided in a recent article by Elizabeth Anderson.²² She suggests that the meaning of commodities should be understood primarily in terms of how they are valued by people: for their use to their possessor (and in particular for their ability to satisfy their possessor's desires or preferences), rather than for any intrinsic value of their own; in impersonal ways which make them exchangeable with, or replaceable by, others that are seen as commensurable with them; and as exclusive rather than shared goods - ones whose enjoyment by someone excludes, rather than depends on, their also being enjoyed by others.

Anderson goes on to show in some detail how the process of commodification, defined in this way, is destructive of the kinds of relationships and activities involved in the 'personal' sphere of love and friendship, of the family, and so on. But I shall not pursue this particular form of potential market colonisation any further. Instead, I shall now draw together the preceding comments about the limitations of Walzer's account of blocked exchanges, and consider briefly their implications for boundaries between the market and the political domain.²³ I shall then go on to discuss the kinds of cultural institutions and practices referred to at the outset, which cannot be seen as belonging to either the personal or political spheres, yet may likewise need protection from the colonizing tendencies of the market.

5 Political judgments and market preferences

If one accepts that the market domain is not merely that of commodities, in the sense of what can be purchased; and that commodities themselves are not merely what can be purchased, but also what is socially 'meant' by this; then one must also accept that the dominance of the market domain might itself take the form of an illegitimate extension of its social meanings and norms to other institutions and activities, without these being straightforwardly (re-) located within the market. The political sphere provides ample illustrations of such potential (and indeed actual) forms of colonization. I will focus briefly on just one, whose significance has emerged in recent discussions of environmental decision-making, but whose implications go well beyond this particular context.

An increasingly influential approach to environmental decision-making has been to employ an extended version of standard forms of cost-benefit analysis - extended, in particular, so as to include in its calculations some measurement of the value that people attribute to features of the environment through their hypothetical 'willingness-to-pay' for them, or 'to-be-compensated' for their removal. But, as Mark Sagoff has recently argued, this approach involves an illicit transformation of political decisions into analogues of market decisions.²⁴ That is,

²¹ Note that the problem here is not the previously mentioned one that money may indirectly buy access to inappropriately purchased items, but that such items may inappropriately be 'thought of' in the way that purchasable items are. An example of this is perhaps unwittingly provided by Walzer's own account of the social good of 'recognition': *op. cit.*, pp. 249-259.

²² 'The Ethical Limitations of the Market', *Economics and Philosophy*, vol. 6, 1990, pp. 179-206.

²³ Anderson also considers commodification in the political domain; but whereas her account emphasises the contrast between preferences and *needs*, mine will focus on that between preferences and *judgments*.

²⁴ In *The Economy of the Earth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988. Cf Jon Elster, 'The Market and the Forum', in J.Elster and A.Hylland, *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986; and John O'Neill, *op. cit.*

although recourse to the techniques of cost-benefit analysis is typically made precisely where the straightforward use of market mechanisms is thought to be inadequate - ie in cases of 'market failure' - it is Sagoff's view that these techniques nonetheless preserve certain basic features of the market which are inappropriate to decisions that should instead be made politically, and indeed democratically.

One crucial element in this illicit transformation is, he suggests, the assimilation of what should be regarded as *judgments of value* to what are 'no more than' the expression of individual *preferences*: ie to those rather mysterious entities which - at least in neo-classical economic theory - are indicated by a consumer's willingness to purchase something, and whose 'satisfaction' the market is supposedly so efficient in achieving. And certainly it is a central feature of the market that consumer preferences require no justification, no basis in defensible judgments, for them to be 'permitted' to affect what is produced - a feature which is reflected in the insistent agnosticism of neo-classical theorists about the desirability or otherwise of such preferences.²⁵

By contrast, claims Sagoff, neither judgments of value in general, nor political judgments in particular, should be understood as the expression of preferences. Instead they should be seen as attempts to make justifiable claims about 'the good' (in the case of politics, the common good), stemming from reflective processes and open to critical evaluation, debate and so on. And since this is so, the reduction of political decision-making to a technique for the satisfaction of preferences, 'taken as given and beyond the bounds of critical debate', must be resisted. It would, in effect, be to confuse what Sagoff regards as the entirely distinct social meanings of people's roles as citizens and as consumers, and thus to transgress the boundaries between politics and the market.²⁶

6 The domain of cultural practices

Whatever the merits of Sagoff's specific claims about environmental decisions, his argument nicely illustrates some of the issues involved in thinking about market boundaries if one conceives of separation and colonization in the ways I have suggested. I shall now take these further by considering their possible application to the kinds of cultural practices and institutions noted earlier - to broadcasting, sports, academic research, journalism, the various arts (whether 'high' or 'popular'), and so on.

The proper place of these in relation to the market sphere is, I think, much more difficult to determine than those discussed so far. For whereas there would be widespread agreement about the need for boundaries between the market and the domains of personal and political life - even if there is disagreement about precisely why this is so, and how such boundaries can in practice be maintained - there is clearly much less agreement in the case of these kinds of activities. I shall proceed by first trying to indicate a number of features that, at least in their ideal form, they may have in common.

I take as my starting-point two central elements in Alasdair MacIntyre's account of what he refers to, in his own

²⁵ For further discussion of the neo-classical conception of preferences, see my 'Scepticism, Authority and the Market', in Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley and Nicholas Abercrombie eds, *The Authority of the Consumer*, Routledge, London, 1994.

²⁶ This is by no means the only example of such colonisation: similar issues are raised in eg the displacement of political argument by the techniques of market research and advertising.

philosophically specific sense of the term, as a (social) *practice*.²⁷

(i) Any cultural practice involves a set of standards or criteria which serve to identify what counts as a good or bad, exemplary or worthless, competent or incompetent etc instance of the activity concerned, and by reference to which the merits of particular attempts to achieve the practice's overall aims or goals are to be judged. Its participants must thus be willing, at least initially - for these standards are not sacrosanct or unchangeable - to subordinate their individual judgments to the authority of the practice's own criteria; and

(ii) Only by doing so can they come to appreciate and enjoy what MacIntyre terms the internal goods of the practice - such as the elegance of a scientific theory, the truthfulness of a theatrical performance, or the brilliance of a sequence of passes in a game of football. The nature of these goods can be understood only in relation to the specific character of the practice concerned; and in this, amongst other respects, they differ from what he terms external goods, the primary examples of which are money, power and prestige.

I will now elaborate and develop this account in ways that are intended, *inter alia*, implicitly to suggest how cultural practices differ from the two non-market domains of personal and political life considered earlier.

(iii) Amongst the primary motivations of those who participate in any cultural practice is their enjoyment of its internal goods; and, more generally, of their acquisition and exercise of the various skills and capacities which its standards both make possible and require. By contrast, the pursuit of external goods, whilst by no means necessarily absent, must not come to predominate, especially if this leads to actions that are at odds with the practice's internal goals and standards. Hence financial rewards, in particular, should function as material forms of deserved recognition for practice-defined contributions - as goods whose absence may cause resentment rather than as primary motivators.

(iv) Cultural practices typically involve some broad division between, as it were, 'performers' and 'audiences'. I use these terms in rather extended senses, to refer to distinctions such as those between writers and readers, players and spectators, broadcasters and viewers, curators and visitors, and so on.²⁸ Typically also, the 'performance' of a practice's activities is seen as radically incomplete, as less valuable or successful, in the absence of such audiences - whose members may themselves at least partly share the kinds of enjoyment of the practice's internal goods that are experienced by performers.

(v) But this is not to say that performers are primarily concerned to promote the well-being of their audiences by providing them with the opportunity to enjoy the practice's internal goods. They are not, that is, *altruistic* in this respect; nor in their primary motivation for engagement in the practice. Neither do they (need to) see themselves as

²⁷ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, especially ch.14. MacIntyre's explicit (broadly Aristotelian) definition of a practice is as follows: "...any socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (p. 175). This definition would apply to many cases other than specifically cultural ones; correspondingly, by no means everything I shall say about cultural practices applies only to them - a point to which I implicitly return in the concluding section.

aiming to realise 'the common good'. Nonetheless, they may well be inclined to think there is something worthwhile, pleasurable, valuable etc about what their practices 'produce'; and because they believe this - believe, as it were, *in* the practice - they may hope that their audiences will think or come to think likewise.

(vi) Relatedly, both performers and audiences are likely to form various kinds and degrees of *attachment* to these practices and their 'products'. Such attachments may often involve admiration, respect etc for particular individuals who are seen as exemplary of the practice concerned, or as contributing to its development and flourishing. But such attachments are often also to 'the practices themselves' - to music, football, athletics, literature etc - rather than to particular individuals. Nor should these attachments - which may range from 'interest in', through 'concern for', to 'love of' - be understood as requiring participants to see the practice as an essential element of their own, individual identities.²⁹

(vii) Finally, it would be misleading to represent a cultural practice's participants as necessarily involved in a self-consciously co-operative or collective project - in the way that, eg, political activity is often depicted by radical democrats. Certainly the internal goods of a practice are at least potentially 'shared' rather than 'exclusive' ones (cf Anderson's definition of commodities, above); and also, as already indicated, participants will tend to recognise their dependence upon, and enrichment by, the efforts and contributions of others. But the kinds of bonds that may be generated by this are, as it were, mediated by the practice itself, and are quite compatible with various forms and degrees of competition, rivalry, and the like between its participants.

7 Markets and practices

Given this highly schematic account of the nature of cultural practices, one can then consider the question of how far, and for what reasons, their existence might be vulnerable to colonisation by the market - to the kinds of processes that people frequently object to when they criticise, eg, the 'commercialisation of sports', the deregulation of broadcasting, or the introduction of new forms of intellectual property in academic research. I shall present a quite brief, and deliberately hypothetical answer to this question: the subordination of such practices to the market is at least potentially damaging to them *if* one accepts something like the standard account of the market provided by neo-classical economic theorists. (But if one does not...).

Two arguments for this answer can be outlined here.³⁰ The first invokes the concept of consumer sovereignty, according to which the operation of the market involves the control of producer-decisions by consumer-preferences. But there is no guarantee that such preferences will be informed by, or in any way respect the 'authority' of, the goals and standards of the practice concerned: the market refuses to discriminate between preferences, whereas practices insist on doing so. Any particular group of 'marketised' cultural practitioners is thus highly vulnerable to competition from rival 'producers' who are willing and able to cater, more profitably, for

²⁸ I ignore here the many divisions *within* the category of 'performers' (and indeed of 'audiences'), which are often of considerable significance - eg between actors, playwrights, directors and producers in the case of theatre. A similar point applies to the distinction between 'producers' and 'consumers' in a market economy.

²⁹ Here I want to resist the tendency amongst recent 'communitarian' philosophers to espouse a re-socialisation of individual identity. My own account is intended to be consistent with certain versions of liberal 'individualism' (as in Kymlicka, and Raz, *op. cit.*): the best forms of attachment are, I believe, formed by individuals with clear 'boundaries' around them.

³⁰ For more elaborate versions of these arguments, see my 'Consumer Sovereignty and the Integrity of Practices', in Keat and Abercrombie eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-230.

consumers whose preferences may be entirely antithetical to the meaning and standards of the practice concerned.

The second argument concerns the respective roles of internal and external goods. Market activities are oriented primarily to the competitive acquisition of external goods. Thus the participants in a market-governed practice will treat it primarily as a means of acquiring such goods, regarding its internal goods as of relatively little significance. Whilst it is possible that the actions resulting from these different motivations will at times coincide, it is equally possible that they will not; and when the latter situation obtains, the 'logic of the market' dictates which will be performed. The outcome will tend to be damaging to the integrity of the practice, given the close connection between the nature of its internal goods, the maintenance of its standards, and the effective pursuit of its goals.³¹

But suppose instead that the neo-classical account of market economies is mistaken, or seriously flawed? Then, not only might these kinds of arguments for the exclusion of cultural practices from the market domain lose some of their force; it might even turn out that economic activities conducted within that domain could themselves display at least some of the features that I have ascribed to (cultural) practices. And if, as I would argue, engagement in such practices is itself a significant element in human well-being, in the realisation of 'the human good', then perhaps there are particular forms of a market economy that at least come closer than others to enabling such practice-dependent well-being to be realised.

At this point, what I have said in this paper might begin to engage more directly with some of the themes that are addressed in other contributions to this volume. For example, perhaps some of the 'varieties of capitalism' are ones in which, as it were, businesses are conducted as practices. And certainly I am often struck by the ways in which, for example, ICI's recent defence against a take-over bid from the 'predatory' Hanson, or Granada TV's opposition to the de-regulation of broadcasting, sound so similar to the opposition of academics to the commercialisation of their institutions, or of subsidised theatre companies to the kinds of business plans and marketing strategies foisted upon them by the Arts Council.³²

But I will end on a cautionary note. There is a danger here of being seduced by a particular kind of optimism: the optimism of believing that capitalism works best, most effectively, when it also works in a way that is most 'morally desirable' - far less brutally and nastily than the neo-classical picture suggests. Co-operation, education, concern for long-term consequences: how admirable these are - and how fortunate that they are just what the effective operation of capitalism requires anyway! It would be nice if this were so, but I doubt that it can altogether be justified. To take just a single example. Any one commercial enterprise may well depend for its success on co-operation between its managers and workers, and even with its suppliers. But it is still engaged in a competitive struggle with other firms; and even if this is mitigated by further co-operation at the level of the nation-state, this itself may be required only to give that nation a competitive advantage over others.

³¹ Such damaging outcomes can be avoided only if the practice's members *altruistically* resist the logic of the market, being willing actually to sacrifice their interest in external goods rather than merely being relatively unconcerned with them. See John O'Neill, 'Altruism, Egoism and the Market', *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. XXIII, 1992, pp. 278-288.

³² Notice here that when commercial forms of organisation, and/or market mechanisms, are introduced into public sector services through government policy, they typically express that government's conception of how the private sector and/or the market actually or best operates. In the UK, this has mainly been based on highly disputable and ideologically inspired versions of neo-classical theory.