

MARKET BOUNDARIES AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE*

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1 Justifying limitations on the market¹

Both in Britain and elsewhere over the past 20 years, governments have implemented radical programmes of institutional change imposing market or quasi-market principles and forms of organisation into a wide range of social institutions and practices which had previously operated in quite different ways. I have in mind here not so much the privatisation of publicly owned industries, but the commercially-modelled reconstruction of local government, educational and health-care institutions, and also, especially, of broadcasting, the various arts, academic research and so on. It is with the possible grounds for opposing the marketisation of these 'cultural' institutions and practices, and hence more generally for resisting the 'commodification of culture', that I shall mainly be concerned in this paper.²

In making a case against the commodification of culture it will not, I believe, prove helpful to rely on general critiques of commodification of the kind to be found in the socialist tradition, and hence to argue that since the market is an undesirable institution in any possible area of application, its further spread or expansion must always be resisted - that if something is bad, the more of it the worse. For the socialist case against the market *tout court* faces a major, and as yet unresolved, problem. It depends on the claim that there is some alternative form of economic organisation which preserves what is best about the market, eliminates its specific ills, and does not generate additional and more serious ills of its own. But it is highly doubtful whether any such alternative has yet been constructed, either in practice or in theory.³

Instead, I suggest, it will be more fruitful to approach this issue by thinking of it in terms of 'market boundaries', of possible reasons either for excluding certain social institutions and practices from the market or for supporting their operation outwith the market, yet without thereby rejecting its overall merits as a way of organising economic production. Such reasons must refer to the specific character of the institutions and practices concerned, and show why it is that their being subject to the logic of commodity production would be inappropriate, damaging etc. It may then be possible to justify their 'protection' from the market through various forms of intervention by the state.

In broad terms, the idea that the market has its place, but should not be permitted to exceed its proper sphere, is a quite obvious and familiar one. It is connected both to the insights of everyday wisdom - 'there are things that

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¹ This section of the paper is a much condensed version of material presented in greater detail in Keat (1996).

² Along with the politically-driven expansion of the market domain noted here, there has also been an 'intensification' of the logic of commodity production in areas such as publishing, commercial broadcasting etc; the argument I shall present would apply also to these developments.

³ This is not to deny that there is any alternative to the specific form of the market termed 'capitalism'; it is quite possible, at least in principle, to replace capitalism's distinctive modes of ownership and control of the means of production by those proposed in 'market socialist' theories (see eg Miller 1990). However, the adoption of market socialism in place of the capitalist market economy leaves unresolved the question with which I am concerned, which is why I have stated it as a question about the expansion of the *market* and not of *capitalism*.

money can't buy' (and are at least as important as those that it can) - and to various influential theorisations of modernity, such as Hegel's differentiation of society into the family, civil society (including a market economy) and the state, with the activities in each sphere being conducted on the basis of distinctive kinds of social relationships, institutional structures and ethical norms which would be inappropriate and destructive were they to operate outside their proper domain.

Indeed, most theorists who extol the virtues of the market at least implicitly assume that what they are supporting are organizational principles for a specific domain, and not for 'society as a whole'. Admittedly, some of the arguments they deploy to support the market may turn out to be inconsistent with this assumption: they have so general a character that they would seem to imply that every sphere of society should be organised on this basis. For example, if the price-mechanism is such a brilliant device for transmitting information about individuals' preferences, why shouldn't we allow political offices and votes to be bought and sold in a thorough-going 'political' market - and likewise for marriage and friendship markets as well?

However, what is problematic about the marketisation of cultural institutions is not easily assimilable to what would be objectionable about the marketisation of the political and familial or personal domains. For instance, the sale and purchase of political offices would clearly be at odds with the underlying principles of liberal democracy, and would rightly be seen as 'corruption'. But nothing analogous to this could plausibly be said in making a case against the commodification of cultural goods.⁴ Likewise, the buying and selling of 'friendship services' would be objectionable because it would undermine the essential nature of friendship as a specific kind of relationship between people.⁵ But the same could not be argued in the case of theatre tickets or books about political theory.

Further, whereas the sale and purchase of political and personal goods is something one might reasonably wish to prohibit or try to prevent happening altogether, the same is not true in the case of cultural goods. The question is not whether it is desirable for these to be produced as commodities at all, but whether there should *also* be some major provision of these outwith the market, combined in at least many cases - such as the media - with the regulation of their production within it. Thus the political programme of marketisation which I noted at the outset has consisted in the removal of such regulation, the reduction of state funding for non-commercial provision and, perhaps most significantly, the attempt to make such funding conditional on the cultural institutions concerned adopting organisational structures which are modelled upon, and intended to ensure that they operate 'as if in fact they were', commercial enterprises.

But on what grounds might this commodification of culture be resisted? If one 'listens' to what is said by those who oppose these changes, one will often hear claims of the following kinds: that the market-oriented reforms of the BBC will lead to a decline in programme quality and misdirected audience-chasing; that the de-regulation of commercial broadcasting will reduce the proper coverage and analysis of political issues; that the attribution of consumer-status to university students will undermine the academic integrity of degrees; that the commercially-

⁴ Of course, there may be principles of distributive justice which would require the free provision of such goods, but this is a different issue.

⁵ For this kind of argument about friendship, see Anderson (1990); for a more general defence of the idea of 'separate spheres', see Walzer (1983), and the critical response to this in Waldron (1995).

modelled funding requirements placed on subsidised theatre and dance companies will inhibit artistic innovation and the production of challenging work; that transforming museums into part of the leisure industry will put at risk the proper purpose of their collections - and so on.

Thus the basic concern here is that various kinds of cultural goods, to which considerable value is attributed, are likely to be 'lost' and displaced by others of lesser value. But why should this be so? For surely, it could be argued, the value of cultural products, like that of any others, resides in their contribution to human well-being, in the benefits they make possible for those who 'consume' them, and it is precisely the ability of the market to generate such beneficial products that justifies its overall use as the means of organising economic production. So why should it fail to achieve this in the case of cultural goods, but not of others - bearing in mind that what is being opposed here is not any and every use of the market, but only its exclusive and unregulated application in the specific case of cultural institutions and production?

Furthermore, this objection might continue, a crucial feature of the market is that it is left to consumers to judge what will contribute to their own well-being, and hence the value of the different products available to them - 'expressing' these judgments through their willingness to pay. So it would seem that the critics of cultural commodification are simply unwilling to allow this. Instead, they take it upon themselves to assess the value of cultural goods, refusing to trust the judgments made by consumers; by doing so they lay themselves open to the charges of elitism, paternalism and the like.

But I think there is a way of 'turning the tables' here. If the chief virtue of the market is its ability to generate goods which enhance people's well-being - which may be termed the 'classical' justification for the market - and if it does so by ensuring that consumer judgments about the value of these goods hold sway in decisions about what is produced, then it is clearly important also to ensure that these judgments are made as well as they can be. But suppose it could be shown that this is itself dependent on the availability to consumers making these judgements of *cultural* goods, and that there are strong reasons for doubting that the market alone will secure their adequate provision? One would then be able to justify the *non-market* provision of cultural goods on the grounds that this is required if the market is to achieve 'its own objective', at least in 'classical' terms, ie to contribute to human well-being through the production of consumer goods.⁶

This is what I shall try to show in what follows, and I shall also defend this case for non-commodified culture against the accusations of elitism noted above. I shall begin, in section 2, by arguing that the significance that should be given to (improving) consumer *judgments* in market economies is obscured by their neo-classical representation as *preferences*. In section 3 I shall look at various ways in which the ability to make these judgments is dependent both on

⁶This classical defence of the market is not the only one available, though I believe it is the most plausible. There is also the 'liberal' defence, according to which what is desirable about the market is that it guarantees individual liberty, relying as it does on contractual exchanges between free and equal parties. For the liberal, the material outcomes of the market are irrelevant, as such; all that matters is the liberty-preserving character of the transactions which generate them. Classical justifications of the market are consistent with intervention by the state, wherever the market can be shown to fail in achieving its objective; liberals typically oppose such intervention. See Keat (1996) for further discussion of these differences, and Keat (forthcoming/2000) for an argument that liberals are mistaken in such opposition. The position taken in the present paper is, I believe, consistent with those forms of liberalism,

the engagement by consumers in various social practices and on the availability of cultural goods. I conclude, in section 4, by arguing that the market cannot be relied upon adequately to provide these cultural goods.

Even if this argument is successful, however, it may well seem unappealing to critics of cultural commodification: to support non-market cultural institutions on the grounds that they will improve the market's performance seems like arguing for the importance of trust by showing that it reduces the costs of economic production, rather than by demonstrating its role in social relationships which are intrinsically valuable. But the overall position which I will defend has several additional features which may serve to remove this apparent weakness.

In particular, I will argue that what it is about cultural goods which enables them to enhance the effectiveness of the market, namely their thematisation of the nature and sources of human well-being, *also* enables us to recognise the *limitations* of the market as a source of such well-being, and hence the need to retain a wide range of social relationships and activities which are both conducted outwith the market and characterized by the absence of market mentalities. Further, one of the key reasons for the support of non-market cultural institutions will turn out to be their critical role in challenging the self-promotion of the market through advertising and related forms of 'cultural' production which, I shall suggest, can generally be relied upon to *mis*represent the relationship between consumer goods and human well-being.

2 Judgments v preferences; well-being v efficiency

Let us assume that the primary reason for people's purchasing consumer products is their belief that that these will contribute to their own well-being. Of course, this assumption is not altogether correct, since consumers may also apply ethical or political considerations in making their purchases, and since goods are often purchased for the joint use and benefit of the purchaser and others, or as gifts. But these complications can be put aside.

What I have just called a 'belief' might also be termed a 'judgment': the consumer's decision to purchase some item is based on a judgment about its expected benefit to them. Correspondingly, the decision made to purchase one such item rather than another is based on a comparative judgment about their respective merits, defined in these terms. (Again, I shall simplify by ignoring differences of price, and hence of the differential impact of one purchase as against another on the consumer's budget).

This benefit, I shall take it, is what is normally referred to as the product's 'use-value'. From the standpoint of the consumer, this is what matters about the product; from the standpoint of the producer in a market system, it is not, since the producer is concerned only with the product's 'exchange-value', and hence with the profitability or otherwise of its being produced (at a certain cost) and sold (at a certain price). But according to classical defenders of the market, the great virtue of this system is that it operates in such a way that - generally speaking - the attempt to maximise profits or exchange-values on the part of producers turns out also to maximise use-values for consumers.

such as Mill's, which both value individual autonomy and recognise that this is a socially contingent achievement rather than a pre-established fact of human nature.

By contrast, it is claimed, attempts to construct an economic system in which producers aim to maximise consumers' use-values will be much less successful. This is partly because one cannot rely on producers actually being governed by this unselfish aim, but also because even if they were, they would usually be less well-placed, or less competent, than consumers to make the necessary judgments of use-value, ie of the contribution their products would make to the latter's well-being. This, it is claimed, is because each individual is 'the best judge of their own well-being', ie a better judge of this than is anyone else. It is the fact that this is so, and that production decisions in a market system are so responsive to consumers' judgments, expressed through their willingness-to-pay, that accounts for the market's success as a system for generating human goods.

Although it is possible to challenge the 'best judge' thesis, I shall not do so here.⁷ Instead I want to point out that this thesis does not entail that every individual is, as it were, 'always already' the best judge of their own well-being that they could be. For even if it is true that each person is better than anyone else at judging (what will contribute to) their own well-being, it may also be true that their ability to make these judgments may itself be better or worse. That is, it is possible for individuals to improve their ability to make such judgments; the ability may be less well developed in some people than in others, or at some times in someone's life than at others; the extent and subtlety of its development may depend on various conditions and circumstances, and so on.

What this implies is that although the market may be superior to other systems in its goods-generative capacities, it may itself do better or worse in this respect depending on the extent to which people are able, as consumers, to make correspondingly better or worse judgments about how the purchase of various products will contribute to their well-being. So any particular market economy with consumers who are good at making these judgments will be more successful, in its own (classical) terms, than one where this is not the case. To maximise the advantages stemming from the market, one must maximise the judgment-capacities of consumers.

What I have said so far should seem obvious enough, yet with some partial exceptions noted later (see section 4 below) it is largely ignored in standard accounts of the market provided by neo-classical theorists. For in neo-classical economics the vocabulary of 'judgment' and 'well-being' which I have employed is replaced by that of 'preferences' and their 'satisfaction', with the consequent exclusion of significant questions about the market's ability to generate human goods. This can be seen by considering briefly the neo-classical understanding of *efficiency*, which is taken to be the chief criterion by which the merits of different economic systems, and/or of specific instantiations of these at any one time, are to be judged.⁸

Utilising the concept of Pareto-optimality to avoid what are seen as insuperable problems of interpersonal welfare comparisons, the allocation of productive resources in an economic system is said to be *efficient* when there is no other allocation which would make at least one person better-off without anyone else being made worse-off. Further, and crucially, someone's being 'better-off' is interpreted as their *preferring* the consequences for them of one

⁷ Notice that even if the 'best judge' thesis were not correct, there would be a standard anti-paternalist objection to allowing others to make such judgments instead. Thus both classical and liberal defenders of the market (see note 6 above) tend to support the idea of consumer sovereignty, albeit for different reasons.

such allocation of resources over another, with this preference itself being expressed by their willingness-to-pay, ie in the choices they make, or would make, as consumers. Subject to various 'ideal' conditions obtaining, which I shall consider later, market systems can then be demonstrated, by deductive argumentation, to be efficient.

What is problematic about this conception of efficiency - at least when viewed as a criterion by which the contribution of economic systems to human well-being is determined - is the weakness of its interpretation of well-being simply as the satisfaction of expressed (consumer) preferences, whatever grounds they may happen to rely upon.⁹ As implied in my initial remarks in this section, one typically thinks of a person's preferences for certain consumer goods as based on the judgments they make about the likely contribution of these to their own well-being. It is because they make these judgments that they have, and act upon, these preferences; they prefer these goods because they judge them to *be* such. Correspondingly, the extent to which consumers succeed in improving their well-being through such purchases depends upon how well-supported these judgments actually are.

But these points get lost in the neo-classical account, a loss marked by the displacement of the vocabulary of judgment and well-being by that of preferences and their satisfaction. The effect of this is seriously to weaken the normative significance of what it is that the market can be *demonstrated* to achieve, namely efficiency, since for all one knows, the preferences satisfied by an efficient allocation of productive resources may be quite arbitrary or ill-considered ones that lack much basis in sound judgment. So whilst it may be true that, other things being equal, an efficient economic system is better than an inefficient one, the extent to which an efficient system enhances the well-being of consumers remains undetermined on the neo-classical account.¹⁰

It is important, however, not to overstate this objection to the neo-classical conception of efficiency. In particular, it may be tempting to think that, because the demonstrable efficiency of a market system is something that may, for all one knows, have relatively little value, there is no good reason to expect any actual market economy to contribute significantly to human well-being. But this would clearly be a mistake. For although the neo-classical *proof* of market efficiency does not by itself establish very much, it might perfectly well be the case that *actual* market economies achieve a good deal more than they can be proved to do. This would be so if, in fact, the consumer preferences satisfied by an efficient allocation of productive resources were supported by well-grounded judgments on their part.

⁸ I shall put aside here, as do neo-classical theorists, considerations of justice or equity. For a useful account of efficiency and the conditions for ideal markets - including the possibilities for 'market failure', which I discuss in section 4 below - see Buchanan (1985); for a standard 'textbook' account, see Sloman (1991) ch. 10.

⁹ The neo-classical account of the market has rightly been criticised for failing to recognise its inherently *dynamic* character, but I do not think this failing is relevant here - nor that the Austrian School's alternative to neo-classical theory, which does address this crucial feature of the market, brings any improvement on those aspects of neo-classical theory I criticise here. For a sophisticated critical assessment of both neo-classical and Austrian conceptions of economic well-being, see O'Neill (1998), ch.s 3 and 4. I have discussed neo-classical approaches to environmental decisions in Keat (1997b).

¹⁰ This objection does not assume the existence of some objective, authoritative definition of human well-being, by reference to which the preferences of consumers and the beneficial effects of their potential purchases are to be evaluated. As will be seen in the following section, it requires only that consumers may make better or worse judgments of what will contribute to their own well-being, with the evaluations of these judgments being made in terms which they themselves would willingly accept. The neo-classical position cannot therefore be defended by appeal to the supposed 'subjectivity' of conceptions of the human good, nor to the value of individual autonomy.

So if one is to assess the extent to which market systems are in practice likely to fulfil their 'classical promise' of generating goods which contribute to human well-being, there are at least two crucial questions which need to be answered. (i) First, what kinds of conditions are required if the preferences of consumers are to be based on sound, well-informed and considered judgments - what is it that will enhance their ability to make such judgments? (ii) Second, having arrived at an answer to (i), what confidence can one have that the market can itself be relied upon generally to provide these conditions to a sufficient or maximal degree?

In the next two sections I shall argue, in response to (i), that amongst these judgment-enhancing conditions are both the discriminative abilities developed through the various social activities in which the use-value of consumer products is realised, and the existence of cultural goods which provide resources for critical reflection on the nature and possibilities of human well-being; and in response to (ii), that there are good reasons for doubting the ability of the market to ensure the adequate provision of these goods - and indeed for expecting its unbounded operation to put them at considerable risk. If these arguments succeed, one will have strong grounds for securing these conditions through *non*-market means, and hence for opposing 'the commodification of culture'.

3 Cultural goods and the social bases of consumer judgments

One can begin by noting that the use-value of consumer goods is typically realised not through their purchase or acquisition as such, but through their further deployment by their purchasers so as to achieve certain purposes which they value. Consumer goods are not 'final' goods, but 'intermediate' ones: their value to the purchaser, their potential contribution to the consumer's well-being, depends both on the extent to which they enable these purposes to be achieved, and on the value of those purposes' achievement. So for consumers to make sound judgments about the use-value of consumer goods they must be able to judge both the 'fitness for purpose' of these goods and the value of those purposes for their own well-being. The better they are at making these judgments, the greater their prospects of enhancing their overall well-being through consumption.¹¹

In some cases, both types of judgment are of a relatively simple kind, namely for those consumer products whose main purpose is to enable 'necessary' tasks to be performed in effective, time-saving and minimally unpleasant ways. The home has to be cleaned, one's clothes have to be washed, one has to get to one's place of work, and so on: these are 'necessary' tasks in the sense not merely that they must be performed if other things to which value is attributed are to be pursued, but also that - typically - they are not themselves seen as valuable, and are indeed often experienced as unpleasant, irksome, mere drudgery and the like. The performance of these tasks makes it possible to engage in other activities seen as contributing positively to one's well-being, but these tasks themselves are not: the less time they take, and the less unpleasantly they can be performed, the better.

Correspondingly, the 'fitness for purpose' judgments made about such consumer products require only access to, and the ability to understand, relatively straightforward empirical information - about the performance, cost and so on of the vacuum-cleaner, washing-machine or car - together with basic introspective capacities enabling one to discern how much boredom, noise, tiredness etc is involved or avoided in their use. Further, there is little if any

¹¹ The following discussion of different kinds of consumer products is strongly influenced by Scitovsky (1986), especially ch. 14, including both his distinction between what he calls 'defensive' and 'creative' products and his more general thesis that consumer well-being depends on consumer 'education'.

need to engage directly in the second kind of judgment, since the value of the purpose achieved through the use of these goods is essentially that of 'making space' for the pursuit of other, positively valued aims of a more or less unspecified nature. Provided there is reason to believe there is *something* worth doing in the space created by the deployment of these goods, there is no need to engage in any further reflection about its specific character and value in judging whether, and how far, these 'convenience' goods are indeed convenient.

In many other cases, however, judgments of the use-value of consumer products requires far more than this. One can see this, first, by considering those whose value is realised through their employment in 'productive' activities, ie in making other things to which positive value is more directly attributed: for example, the foodstuffs purchased to cook meals, the paint bought to decorate a room, the fabric purchased to make clothes etc. In such cases the judgments made about fitness of purpose depend on corresponding judgments about the things they are used to make or produce. What count as good ingredients depend on what is judged to be a tasty etc meal; good paint, on a well-decorated room; good fabrics on attractive clothing, and so on.

Judgments such as these may often require significant powers of discrimination, the ability to understand and apply the criteria associated with the kind of product concerned. These powers are acquired partly through experience, and partly also through access to various kinds of actual and virtual 'communities': those who cook, decorate, sew etc will often consult others who do likewise (especially those who are more experienced, skilful etc than themselves), and also food-columns, home-decorating magazines, fashion-pages and so on, thereby learning not only about the techniques of doing these things and 'what to buy', but also about the criteria by which the outcome of their efforts may be judged. So the soundness of the judgments they make about the fitness of purpose of the products they may purchase depends not only on their access to information about the relevant characteristics of the items concerned, but also on their ability to understand and apply the criteria by reference to which the merits of the 'final' products are to be judged. For it is these criteria which determine what count as the *relevant* characteristics of the items concerned.

Similar points about the potential complexity of fitness for purpose judgments emerge if one considers a further important category of consumer goods, those deployed in the conduct of various activities engaged in 'for their own sake', rather than as a means of generating some further, distinct product or outcome. So, for example, one may purchase boots to go climbing, an electronic keyboard to play music, binoculars to observe wild-life, a boat to go sailing, a brush to paint water-colours, and so on. In a broad sense of the term, these consumer goods may be conceived as 'equipment', whose purpose is to enable one to engage successfully and enjoyably in activities experienced as intrinsically satisfying.

Whether those who engage in such activities choose to do so alone or with others, the activities themselves are nonetheless essentially *social*, in that each is constituted as the specific kind of activity it is through the existence of an established and generally recognised set of norms and criteria by reference to which the performance of the activity is conducted and evaluated.¹² Thus learning to perform these activities is not only a matter of acquiring various

¹² In what follows I draw heavily on MacIntyre's account of social *practices*, in MacIntyre (1981) ch. 14, though the examples are mine, as is the use of this account to make claims about consumer goods; see Keat (1990) for a discussion of practices in relation to issues about consumer sovereignty. What I say is also influenced by Joseph

technical skills and abilities, but also of coming to understand and apply both the criteria which serve to define what counts as a competent etc performance, and the ethical rules and etiquette governing appropriate conduct. It is only through the acquisition of such capacities - which typically require what is, in effect, a period of 'apprenticeship' - that the potential benefits of engaging in these activities can be realised.

Correspondingly, the ability of those concerned to judge the equipment they may purchase and deploy in these activities is likewise dependent on their knowledge and understanding of the activity concerned, or at least on their willingness to seek the advice of those whose expertise they recognise. Thus the relevance of empirical information about the respective characteristics of different possible purchases is determined by the criteria by reference to which the activity itself is conducted and judged; the judgments made about fitness for purpose depend on complex discriminative capacities based on people's experience and understanding of the socially established criteria governing the activity concerned. The greater the extent and depth of their understanding and experience, the better-grounded are the judgments made by consumers, and the more the products they purchase will contribute to their well-being.

However, as I noted at the beginning of this section, the judgments made by consumers must take account not only of the fitness for purpose of the products concerned, but also of the value of such purposes being achieved for their own well-being. Yet there is no reason to expect that the criteria internal to the kinds of social practices I have been describing can also provide an adequate basis for this second, equally important element in consumer judgments. I shall illustrate this point through the kinds of 'own-sake' activities or practices just described, though what I have to say has a wider application.

Those who engage in the practice of sailing will typically be able to appreciate - and hence also to enjoy - all those things which count as competent, good or even excellent instances of the activity, and likewise all the attributes of 'a good sailor', whether displayed by themselves or by others. The same will be true of painting, mountain-climbing, music and so on. But their ability to make judgments of this kind does not ensure that they will also be able to answer the following kinds of questions: what is the good *of* sailing, or of painting, climbing, playing music etc? Yet these are the questions they need to answer if they are to judge whether engagement in these activities is valuable, worthy of the time (and money) they might spend on them, and so on.

It seems implausible to believe that these social practices possess the conceptual resources necessary to answer such questions about their own value: for example, the criteria which enable mountain-climbers to judge what counts as 'a challenging ascent well performed' do not tell us why it is worth making such ascents in the first place. Correspondingly, whilst the criteria internal to these practices provide the basis for judging the fitness for purpose of potential equipment purchases, they do not likewise enable consumers to judge the value of the activities which such purchases equip them to engage in.

Nor is it a matter simply of judging the value of each of these considered separately. For although each consumption decision made by an individual may be made primarily on the basis of specific judgments about the

Raz's account of 'social forms', in Raz (1986) ch.12, including his remarks about the significance of fiction and drama to our understanding of the goods made possible through these.

item concerned and what its purchase makes possible, the aggregative effect of these decisions is to give a particular character to the life being led by that individual. So ideally at least, each such decision should be made in the context of some overall conception of the kind of life the individual concerned 'wishes' to pursue, and hence, inter alia, of the relative priorities to be attributed to different areas of their life, to the different purposes they may value. Clearly, the criteria internal to the social activities through which these purposes are pursued cannot themselves provide the basis for making such 'overall' evaluations in an informed and considered way.

What is needed, then, is the ability to make judgments both about the value of particular purposes, and about how these contribute to the overall value of one's life, from some perspective other than, and external to, those embedded in the various social practices through which one's life is largely led.¹³ It is here, I suggest, that the potential significance of *cultural* goods can be seen. For it is a characteristic feature of at least many cultural goods that, directly or indirectly, they address and explore the nature and possibilities of human well-being itself.

I have in mind here not so much the abstract, theoretical practices of academic philosophy and the like - though doubtless they may have some value - but the more concrete and engaging representations of the various ways in which human life may be conducted, the nuanced depictions of social relationships and individual characters, which are to be found in novels, films, plays, TV drama, soap operas and many other cultural 'products'. What is crucial about these cultural goods is that they enable us vicariously to extend our own range of experience, freeing us from the limitations imposed by the contingencies of our own existence, and thereby provide us with some understanding of the possibilities, dangers and attractions of lives we have not (yet) led, and some means of reflection on those which we already have. A certain critical 'distance' is thereby made available, but in a way that relies mainly on things being 'shown' rather than 'said'.

Thus cultural goods of this kind should not be conceived, as they often are in discussions about the commodification of culture, simply as 'one set of goods amongst others'. Rather, they should be seen as *meta*-goods, ie as goods whose nature consists at least partly in addressing questions about the nature of human goods and their potential contribution to human well-being. Relatedly, it would be a mistake to think of such cultural goods exclusively or primarily in aesthetic terms. No doubt their aesthetic qualities play some part in their appreciation and enjoyment by those who 'consume' them - by their 'audiences'. But at least in many cases their significance resides to a considerable extent in providing a means by which those audiences can reflect on *other* goods, and hence make better judgments about their value for them.

These 'other' goods include those that may be purchased through the market, and hence the various further activities, experiences and practices which these make possible. But cultural goods *also* enable us to reflect on the extent to which any amount or kind of consumption can contribute to our overall well-being, and hence what part the pursuit of this should play in our lives. We may thereby learn, not merely through our own experience, that much of what is most valuable to us is largely independent of the benefits that consumption can confer, or may even be threatened by too great an attention to these: that the things that matter most to us are simply not attainable

¹³ For MacIntyre, the answer to this problem is provided partly by an Aristotelian conception of the human *telos*, of the overall purpose of human life. Although I have some sympathy with this, I do not rely on it in what follows; cf note 10 above.

in this way.¹⁴ Thus cultural goods are a resource which not only improves our ability to make judgments about consumer goods, and the contribution these can make to our well-being; they also enable us to judge the value to be attributed to consumption by comparison with the many other sources of human well-being. They can thereby enhance both the benefits available through the market and our ability to keep these in a proper perspective.

4 Against the commodification of cultural goods

I have argued so far that the ability of the market to contribute to human well-being is dependent on that of consumers to make sound judgments about the extent to which the goods they may purchase will do this in their own case, and that this latter ability is itself dependent, inter alia, on their access to cultural 'meta-goods'. I turn now to the second of the two questions posed earlier, namely whether the market can itself be relied upon to provide the conditions for its own success; more specifically, in light of the preceding discussion, to generate sufficient cultural goods of this kind. I shall argue that the market cannot be relied upon to do so, and that there are good grounds for expecting it not to.

To see why this is so, one can usefully start from the neo-classical recognition of the possibility of 'market failures', ie the failure of actual market economies to achieve efficiency (in the sense of Pareto-optimality).¹⁵ The possibility of such failures arises from the fact that although it can be demonstrated that, under certain specifiable conditions, a market system will be efficient, there is no guarantee that all these conditions will in practice obtain. These conditions serve to define an 'ideal' market; amongst them are the absence both of external costs and benefits and of public goods, and the presence of perfect competition, including perfect 'information'. Any failure of such conditions to obtain implies that the market will fail to be efficient. Since in the 'real' world such failures may often occur, it may then be necessary for non-market procedures to be employed - including those involving intervention by the state - if efficiency is to be achieved.

This neo-classical conception of market failures has sometimes been used to construct justifications for government subsidies for the arts, by claiming that these can properly be regarded as 'public goods' and hence as items which will be under-produced by the market alone. There are, however, notorious difficulties facing such attempts, and I shall not pursue them here.¹⁶ Instead, I suggest it will prove more illuminating to focus on another of the conditions just noted for ideal markets, that of 'perfect information'.

Neo-classical theorists typically conceive of such information in straightforwardly empirical terms. For producers, it will include such things as knowledge of the costs involved in producing different goods etc; for consumers, knowledge of the different products available, their relevant characteristics and respective prices etc. I have already argued, implicitly, that this conception of information is too narrow and simplistic. But putting aside this issue for the moment, the important point which emerges from this neo-classical perspective is that although the efficiency of

¹⁴ See Lane (1991), especially Part VII, for an exhaustive discussion of the empirical evidence supporting the view that consumption is far from being the main source of well-being, and of how and why people often fail to recognise this. To his suggestion in Part VIII that it is the responsibility of social scientists to help correct this error I would add 'and also that of (other) producers of cultural goods'.

¹⁵ See note 8 above for references.

actual markets is dependent on the presence of such information, so that they will perform sub-optimally to the extent that it is absent or defective, there is nothing about the nature of the market as an economic system which ensures its adequate provision.

This is so, 'despite' the fact that the kind of information concerned is itself quite capable of being produced and purchased as a market-commodity. The problem is not that information cannot be commodified, but that there is no guarantee that whatever information is thus produced will be adequate or suitable for the purpose of achieving overall efficiency.¹⁷ Indeed, in any unregulated market there will strong pressures towards the production of *misinformation* by producers about their own products, and considerable difficulties for consumers in assessing the trustworthiness of any such 'information' they encounter. There is thus a strong *prima facie* case for the support of non-market information sources and/or for the regulation of commercial ones.

A parallel case, I suggest, can be made for the support of non-market *cultural* institutions, and/or for the regulation of their commercial counterparts. To establish this parallel one must accept that the judgments made by consumers require not only 'empirical information' but a reflectively grounded understanding of their own well-being, and that (at least certain kinds of) cultural institutions and their products can provide a significant resource for their achieving this. I have already argued for these claims in the preceding section. One can then apply to this much extended conception of 'information' the same arguments about market failure that neo-classical theorists apply to their narrower conception. But the implications are a good deal more radical: they point not only to the need for publications such as *Which?* magazine, or for consumer protection legislation concerning dangerous products etc, but also for such things as publicly funded broadcasting which produces humanly truthful soap opera, and the regulation of its commercial counterparts to ensure that serious attention is given to matters of ethical, political and cultural concern.

Now it might be objected that, even if this parallel with standard neo-classical arguments about market failures is correct, this is not enough to establish more than a *prima facie* case for such non-market provision. The most that has been shown is that there is no *guarantee* that the (unaided and unregulated) market will generate adequate information or cultural products. But this does not entail that, as a matter of fact, it will always or typically fail to do so: to show that this is so requires additional arguments. Furthermore, to do this in the case of cultural products and the availability of adequate resources for reflection on human goods is presumably more difficult than in the case of neo-classical 'information'. For instance, it is relatively easy to determine whether, for example, consumers have

¹⁶ See eg the discussions in Peacock (1976) and Dworkin (1985); for corresponding debates about education, see Bridges and McLaughlin eds (1994).

¹⁷ That markets cannot be relied upon to generate information of a suitable kind is partly just an instance of a more general point, that their outcomes are always indeterminate with respect to *any* specified objective. This is why it is normally unwise to 'leave things to the market' if there is any specific aim one wants to achieve. So, for example, war-time economies typically require a high degree of state intervention and planning, to ensure that the requisite supplies of armaments will be produced. But the 'information' case is not simply an instance of this general point, since here what the market fails to ensure is something necessary for its own effective functioning. In this respect it is closer to cases such as trust. More generally, the dependence of the market on non-market institutions and social relationships has been a recurrent theme of 'conservative' thought which, unlike both liberalism and socialism, provides considerable conceptual resources for thinking about the question of market boundaries. In the case of cultural institutions, however, conservative approaches have typically been marred by elitist defences of 'high culture' which I have attempted to avoid in the overall argument presented here.

access to relevant health data about food. But it is less easy to know whether they have sufficient access to cultural resources which enable them to reflect on the vice of gluttony.

There are, nonetheless, a number of reasons for expecting the market to 'under-produce' cultural goods of the requisite character. I shall consider two in particular. The first is based on the specific character of the cultural goods at issue here. As I argued in the previous section, what is distinctive about these goods is that they are themselves concerned with the nature of human well-being, and hence function as a means by which people can evaluate and reflect upon the contribution that may be made to this by, inter alia, their possible purchases as consumers and the overall pattern of life made possible by these. Such cultural meta-goods enable people to make 'strong evaluations' of their current desires and preferences etc. They may thus be said typically to possess *transformative*, as distinct from *demand* value: ie their value consists, at least in part, in providing the means by which an existing set of preferences or desires may be transformed, through critical reflection, into more considered ones - rather than in directly satisfying those preferences, which is the characteristic of goods possessing only 'demand' value.¹⁸

It can then be argued that the producers of cultural goods with transformative value can be expected to fare worse than those producing goods with demand-value in the competitive processes of an unregulated market system. TV 'ratings wars' provide plentiful examples confirming this theoretically based expectation: programmes which have been carefully constructed to provide audiences with 'just what they (happen to) want' are likely to force out those which, precisely because of their potentially transformative value, present something to their audiences which may challenge those preferences. Correspondingly, the producers of cultural goods with transformative value need to secure some degree of 'free space' in which they can act without immediate threat from their demand-value competitors, and without being wholly constrained by - and fixated upon - their potential audiences' existing preferences. Without such partial insulation, goods with transformative value will be 'under-produced', to the long-term disadvantage of consumers in terms of the well-being they may achieve through the market.¹⁹

Now it might be objected to this that if people want goods with transformative value enough, they will pay for them, and it will be profitable to produce them; but if they do not, there is no justification for supporting their provision through non-market or market-regulated means, since this would be unacceptably paternalistic, elitist, undemocratic etc. But this objection relies on an unduly simplistic view of people's motivations and values, and the different contexts in which these may be expressed and acted upon. One can see the error here through the following, partly hypothetical example.

Suppose that, as the result of an (unregulated) ratings war between TV channels, substantial news and current affairs programmes are forced out of peak viewing time. Despite this being the outcome of a competitive market process

¹⁸ I take the distinction between transformative and demand value from Norton (1987), ch.s 2 and 10; he argues that the environment has transformative value, but I think it would have been better for him to claim this for cultural goods, which inter alia enable us to reflect upon the value of the environment. On 'strong evaluations' see Taylor (1990).

¹⁹ Of course, the effect of such cultural goods may also be to encourage people to give less attention to consumption-dependent well-being, and more to other areas of their lives; but there is no reason why this should worry anyone who justifies the market on classical grounds. In Keat (1990) and (1994) I have tried to show in more detail why it is undesirable for cultural institutions to be directly subject to consumer preferences.

based on people's actual preferences, expressed through their willingness to pay/watch, these same people might perfectly well vote in favour of some form of regulation which required such programmes to be shown. This would be because, in their role as citizens, they recognised that programmes of this kind play an essential part in maintaining the 'health' of the democratic system to which they are politically committed. They are therefore quite prepared to use the regulatory powers of the state to achieve this objective, and hence to prevent what they judge to be the damaging effects of an unregulated market which responds only to their expressed preferences as consumers. There is, I would suggest, no inconsistency on their part here; nor anything undemocratic or elitist about the decision they make.²⁰

But there is also a second, quite different reason for doubting the likelihood of exclusively commodified cultural production providing an adequate 'supply' of appropriate cultural goods. This is based on the fact that an increasing proportion of such production nowadays consists, not in producing cultural commodities such as films, books and radio programmes directly for sale, but in constructing the cultural means through which the sale of *other* commodities can be achieved - ie through advertising and related forms of 'promotion'. What we find here is the deployment of cultural products concerned with the representation of various kinds of human well-being - happy families, challenging deeds, exciting encounters, proud achievements etc - to persuade people to purchase some other commodity supposedly connected with these.²¹

But the very fact that the aim of such promotional cultural production is to sell something other than itself should surely make us sceptical about its likely value, whether as a means for exploring the possibilities of human well-being or as a credible account of the relationship between the commodity being promoted and the good that is promised. We have no more reason to trust the integrity or truthfulness of these representations of the human good than we have for trusting the claims of the tobacco industry about the effects of smoking on people's health. Admittedly one cannot, in the case of claims about human goods, appeal to the results of independently conducted 'scientific' research to assess the extent to which such suspicions are justified, as one can, in principle at least, in the case of smoking and health. There is nonetheless a sufficient parallel between the two kinds of case to justify support for some analogously 'independent' sources of cultural reflection about the nature and sources of human well-being which are less likely to be corrupted by the strategic logic of promotional 'culture'.²²

²⁰ On the contrast between the standpoints of citizen and consumer, see Sagoff (1988). The example I have used here is more obviously concerned with the need for non-market institutions if democratic politics is to flourish than with their contribution to reflective judgments about the good of consumption etc. However, the example is relevant to the latter case also if one accepts, as one should, that political decisions are themselves dependent on collective judgments about the human good: see Keat (1996) and (1999) for an argument to this effect.

²¹ On the idea of 'promotional culture' see Wernick (1991), though my use of this phrase here is much looser than his. Some theorists of consumer culture would argue that I have mischaracterised what is going on here, preferring to see this as indicating the increasing significance of 'sign-value' over 'use-value': instead of consumers being persuaded of the use-value of various commodities through the attribution of certain 'meanings' to these, it is 'the meanings themselves' that are being bought and sold. I find this pretty unconvincing, but cannot pursue the matter here. See Slater (1997) for an illuminating account of different theories of consumer culture.

²² The point here is not that one should be sceptical about the market's ability to generate goods with genuine use-values, simply because they are being produced for some *other* purpose, ie to generate exchange-values or profits. This form of doubt would make one worry whether those who purchased the services of advertising companies could expect to get good advertising copy from them - and this is not the point at issue here.

Further, there are reasonable grounds for believing that cultural production aimed at the selling of commodities other than themselves tends to exaggerate and misrepresent the extent and nature of the contribution to human well-being that can be achieved through the purchase - and 'use' - of consumer goods. It is true, for example, that having a drink with one's friends is a pleasant and satisfying experience, and that without the drink it may be a little less so. But it is not true that the availability of any particular such drink is crucial to the success of the occasion; nor that merely by purchasing a drink one will find oneself in the company of others with whom a relationship of friendship exists. Likewise, although going for a walk in the country is aided by having a suitable pair of boots, the capacity for enjoying this activity is neither consequent upon their purchase nor especially easy to develop if one's life is unduly influenced by the desire to acquire such things.

Yet everything one is 'told' and 'shown' through the promotional culture of consumption conspires to weaken one's grasp of such facts. For even in those areas of one's life where the availability and use of commodities plays an important part, it is typically also the case that their contribution to human well-being depends upon relationships, attitudes, motivations etc which are quite at odds with those required or fostered by the market itself. As I argued earlier, consumer goods are 'intermediate', not 'final' goods. Their value is realised not *within* the market, but *outside* it, through an array of social activities whose character is antithetical to that of market-governed transactions.

But the non-market character of these activities is increasingly put at risk by the self-promotional culture of the market, which encourages us both to see the value of such activities as residing in the opportunities they provide for the deployment of consumer goods, rather than the reverse, and also to adopt, in our conduct of these activities, the attitudes and motivations which belong to the market domain. Yet our relationships with friends will not flourish if conducted on the model of economic exchange; our enjoyment of making a home will be damaged by treating it as an investment; our ability to appreciate the skills and performance of others will be soured by an exclusive concern with our own advancement; and so on.²³

Of course, the market is by no means incapable of generating cultural products which themselves challenge the potentially damaging effects of its own operation. But the fact that such considerable resources are now devoted to the self-promotion of the market surely strengthens the case already made for the provision of other resources to support cultural institutions of a non-market character, and hence to secure the conditions for more reflective and critical, less demand-driven and compromised, cultural goods.²⁴ By supporting such provision - by resisting both the commodification of culture and the spurious culturalisation of commodities - one will be able to enhance both the extent to which the market *can* contribute to human well-being and one's appreciation of the limits of that contribution. To rely on the market alone to achieve such aims is would be wishful thinking.

²³ What is implied by these remarks is the need to avoid the various social practices which take place outwith the market, and through which the use-value of consumer goods is often realised, being 'colonised' by social meanings derived from the market itself. I have discussed one example of such colonisation and its damaging effects in Keat (1997). It is in these terms, I suggest, that one can best understand Habermas's account of the 'colonisation of the life-world', including his view of the life-world as the basis for consumer use-values: see Habermas (1987), Part VIII.

²⁴ As I have tried to suggest throughout, 'critical reflection' is neither an abstract theoretical process nor something which relies solely on generic intellectual capacities; it takes place through engagement with cultural practices which often possess a concrete rather than abstract character.

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