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MORAL MARKETS. HOW AFFLUENCE AND
KNOWLEDGE CHANGE CONSUMERS AND
PRODUCTS

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Nico Stehr is now Karl-Mannheim-Chair for Cultural Studies in Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, Germany.¹ To the field of his current research interests belong such issues as knowledge society, modern economy, globalization studies and cultural studies. His recent publications deal with the social impact of climate change, methodological problems of social theory, the influence of expertise in contemporary society, cognitive capitalism etc.² The reviewed book is dedicated to the situation when the so-called «consumers' sovereignty» becomes the main force of the transformation of the modern market economy. The asymmetry between production and consumption which took place before is obviously surmounted nowadays. This asymmetry was founded by those thinkers of 18th century (A. Smith, Th. Payne, A. Ferguson) which focused on the specific features of economic life as opposed to the other domains of social life.

The growing transparency of boundaries between different domains implies inscription of social goals, individual apprehensions, and modes of consumption in products and services offered at the marketplace (p. vii). That is why we are able now to consider the product just as a mere economic phenomenon. The independent value of rational choice yield to the pressure of sociocultural practices of certain communities based on voluntary sharing of knowledge which has each member of such community. «*Knowledgeable consumption*, having opinions about a variety of cuisines, different foods or distinctive commodities, becomes a sign of communicative competence and social distinction» (p. 208). In other words today if you want to consume «properly» you have to cooperate with other consumers. The level of active participation in different social networks defines the quality of consumption. It is especially true when individual conduct as a consumer gets closer to his activity as a citizen as it is for instance in case of using alternative sources of energy.

This consumers' sovereignty is grounded by an unprecedented level of prosperity achieved by western society after World War

¹ See: http://www.zeppelin-university.de/frameblast_eng.php?url=/english/departments/stehr.php.

² Knowledge Politics: Governing the Consequences of Science and Technology. Paradigm Books, 2005; Knowledge and Economic Conduct: The Social Foundations of the Modern Economy. University of Toronto Press, 2002; (mit Hans von Storch) Klima-Wetter-Mensch. (C.H. Beck, 1999).

II (p. 33). The satisfaction of primary material needs paved the way to the new style of living representing «significant deviation from the virtues of an ethos that values frugality, thrift, and hard work» (p. *xiii*). The fact that such ethos is no longer relevant to new social structure induced wide range of pessimistic approaches to the future of «affluent society» (in terms of J.K. Galbraith)³. However, as Stehr puts it, we need not to be afraid of moral vacuum because moral values do not vanish at all, they rather substituted with the new ones defined by new style of consumption. Instead of bare utility the it is oriented to the satisfaction of human needs inseparable of the unique existential experience of a person (p. 210).

The human need for the commodities necessary for survival is limited, but the need for other goods and services is unlimited. So the more opportunities you have the more responsible and self-restricted your consumers conduct should be. Consumption free from the everyday care about survival leaves a hole for the implementation into the (self) description of economic conduct ethical terms. This process reveals intrinsic possibility of capitalist economy for constant undergoing of self-reconstruction and self-improvement. That is why the leftist critique of capitalism while referring to the injustice of the former is not relevant to the present state of affairs. Capitalism is now embedded in the capacity to distinguish not only more or less profitable choices, but also to understand how these choices could be more or less ethically or even aesthetically attractive. And that is what is called moralization of market in *statu nascendi*. However, moralization does not mean that markets appear to be more moral. Their change is related with the satisfaction of immaterial needs which means that traditional «economic discourse *about* the market is not the language *of* the market» (p. 94).

Moreover, the reviewed book tends to confront overestimated claims of economics to be totally methodologically independent and autonomous science demonstrating intellectual prevalence over social sciences. Describing common trends instead of specific occurrences the author avoids the usage of mathematical models and statistic data and tries to insert economics back to the domain of social sciences. The other aim of such description is to resist to the predominance of economists as experts. The unified notion of market is split to the undefined multitude of various kinds of markets, actions of consumers and producers considered not in splendid isolation, but rather enrooted in specific historical context and social structures (p. 164). But can we say that moralization is the consequence of development or some kind of progress in the state of market economy? It seems that we have a kind of an innocent fraud here: market economy is not getting *better* but it obviously *widening*. So Stehr prefers to outline general changes and the state of marker economy rather than to explain what these changes are. In that case the very concept of change is becoming nothing more than a specific mode of speech. market economy as the product of human

³ Galbraith J.K. *The Affluent Society*. Mariner Books, 1998 (1st ed. 1958).

activity remains the same. The only difference is that today if you want to have profit you need to have a reputation too (p. 49). And let's forget for a while that sometimes this reputation is false as it was with *Enron* and *Parmalat*. It is not clear from what point the author is viewing the field of economic activity. Avoiding leftist Marxist thought as well as right-wing conservative position Stehr himself could not suggest his own methodology.

This weakness is connected with the mobility of modern markets which appears as a result of porous boundaries between social subsystems. Any possible action within the framework of particular subsystem impacts the whole social system just like glue. Even the of little amount of this substance leaves no voids. We see the total expansion of moral terms. This glue of morality which extent through the different regions of market economy is itself an unpredictable sequences, the externality of rational actions. Moral conduct is unconscious for those who has to practice it. Today consumer has the right to choose any product but in order to consume it. Market morality has its own intrinsic power and logic which stands behind the individual reason and defines new order for the affluent knowledge society. The right to choose is indeed the obligation to consume. So, the collective logic of consumption allows to overcome the individualism of modern man. Individual decisions are inscribed in a specific style of consumption practiced by particular communities. In this respect modern capitalism could become dangerously close to new apartheid, apartheid of consumption.

Consumption divides not only individuals, but also societies. Moralization of markets is connected to the globalization but is not synonymous to it. Moral markets are first and for most western ones. Then participation in this process of other non-western society is only an evidence of their inevitable westernization which reminds the idea of Talcott Parsons⁴. Then Stehr's critique of *homo rationalis* and *homo economicus* is just a catch in order to save the western type of rationality at the level of social structure as a whole. Stehr stands for exclusive or so to say eliminating other possibilities western rationality and that turns his book precisely into an apology of neoliberal world order which he apparently tries to criticize.

Anyway, we see one very fruitful idea which can be derived from Stehr's book. That is an idea of communitarian capitalism, capitalism managed by the communities of consumers, which can resist to the force of big corporations and experts. However, the presentation of this idea is too fragmentary and that makes Stehr's work more a guide or an outline for future investigations rather than a detailed social research. The question about the nature of communities is left apart. By all means community is the matter and that is the matter of immaterial consumption.

Alyona Kharitonova, Peter Safronov

⁴ Parsons T. *The system of modern society*. Prentice-Hall, 1971.