

AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARGARET JANE RADIN

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The tendency to commodify has intensified in far-reaching ways, both in the number of things that are commodified and in the appropriation of market concepts to make sense of areas of life typically seen as non-economic. Why is this happening now and what do you think drives the tendency to commodify?

The United States is particularly committed to market ideology, by which I mean the idealization of property and contract and the mythology of purely private ordering. In this era of globalization, the United States also has the economic power to control the rest of the world to a great extent, for example by using bilateral trade agreements to force other countries to accept our rules on intellectual property, which are very expansive in the extent of their commodification of information. Another important factor is that U.S. market ideologues jumped in and tried to establish unregulated markets in the former Soviet nations. So one reason that this is happening now is that the U.S. is committed to market ideology and is spreading it. But honestly, I don't know whether ideology drives economics and technology into this channel,

or whether economics and technology drive ideology. That is an old debate. I also suspect that commodification is mostly a one-way ratchet—it can grow, but it doesn't diminish. Consider a nation that does not want to commodify life, so refuses to issue patents on life forms—that nation will not be able to have a biotech industry. Industry will migrate to the nation of greatest commodification, and that drives the ratchet. At least, industry will do this until somehow it realizes the rationality of preserving a public domain for future creativity.

You have suggested that there is a spectrum of views about commodification, stretching from Marx, who argued against commodification, to the Chicago School of Economics, which applies market principles to almost every realm of human interaction. Where does your view of commodification fit into this spectrum?

About a year or two ago, an article in *The New Yorker* (not a radical publication) argued that it is now common wisdom that Marx was right about capitalism, even though he was wrong about socialism. I think I agree with that common wisdom. He was right that capitalism would spread globally and undermine the nation state. (Look at how market logic has led to European unification. Today Europe, tomorrow the world.) He was right that one capitalist kills many. And he was right that commodification increases to encompass more and more of the social world. But my view is that commodification is not monolithic. Non-market aspects of life, of human interaction, of communities and culture, permeate our social world, even the market transaction part of it. Chicago rhetoric ignores those aspects and distorts our picture of ourselves and our world. Even a corporation is not just a black box for profit-maximization, but also a social world with a culture of its own.

Can you say more about the ways that Chicago School rhetoric distorts our understandings of personhood and what it means to be human?

I can do no better, still, than to point to Hilary Putnam's parable of the super-Benthamites, which appears in his book, *Reason, Truth and History*, and which I discussed in my book, *Contested Commodities*.

These hypothetical beings are just like us except that they think and feel 100% in Chicago rhetoric. And they are not recognizably human—or rather, they are recognizably *not human*. The reason is that Chicago rhetoric cannot allow us to *think* authentic love and connection, authentic human solidarity, so if that rhetoric becomes all we have, we lose those authentic hallmarks of humanity.

In *Contested Commodities*, you suggest that there are realms of social life that should be off-limits to the market and suggest ways for how we should delineate those realms.

The realms are delineated in a way that is evolutionary and provisional, based upon commitments to basic humanity, the realities of authentic love and connection in families and communities. The analysis is based upon values of humanity. I want to stress not only the traditional liberal values of freedom and identity, but also the more contemporary pragmatic understanding of contextuality—that freedom of persons requires particularized enabling contexts. Those enabling contexts are partly structured by the law, and especially by propertization and alienability. Maintenance of the necessary enabling context can sometimes require non-propertization or inalienability.

One appeal of free markets is that they do not pass judgment on the goods that are bought and sold, and otherwise leave people free to do what they want with their money. You suggest that a number of restrictions are needed in order to protect the social context necessary for the development of personhood. What are these restrictions? Why don't these restrictions amount to market paternalism or an unjustifiable infringement of peoples' market liberties?

Yes, one of the appeals of free markets is that (theoretically) the seller is equally willing to take the money of white people and people of color, of Christians and non-Christians, etc. That hasn't worked out in practice, but there is hope for the Internet, where no one knows enough about you to be prejudiced. But your question about "peoples' market liberties" begs a significant question. Exactly how are those "liberties" to be defined? They are, of course, limited. Some of the limitations come from internal logic: if coercion were allowed (the opposite of

liberty) then no one would have liberty. Coercion shades into other kinds of duress and undue influence, so the definition of market liberty is fuzzy at the edges and always contested.

There are other limitations that stem from personhood, the core case being that we disallow selling oneself into slavery, perhaps because propertizing the very self leaves no self to exercise the liberty we are trying to honor (this is the argument of Kant and Hegel). This core case has a significant and contested penumbra—selling our sexuality? Our child-bearing capacity? Our bodily organs? Our personal privacy? And so on. The question on “market liberties” presupposes a stable system of propertization (entitlements) that one can use that “liberty” to dispose of, yet this system of entitlements also is fuzzy at the edges and deeply contested. Should my sexuality be treated as my “property”? (If so, is it an asset that can be taken into account when deciding whether I am needy enough to receive aid for my children, without selling this asset?) To what extent can information be propertized without depriving people of free speech? I do not deny that there can be such a thing as unjustified paternalism. It may be that in a nonideal world in which poor people have no choice but to sell their bodies, we ought to let them sell their bodies if we are not willing to change the world to afford them more choices, when that is clearly within our power. I just want everyone to realize that “market liberty” is not self-defining and does not occupy the universe of human interaction.

In *Contested Commodities* you suggest that it is possible that “...the practice of conceiving of politics in market rhetoric is actively bringing about in us those very motivations and characteristics that it presupposes and reifies” (223). Could you provide an example of how the rhetoric of the market, which is used rather widely—even in relation to realms of life that we normally think of as “off-limits” to the market—may actually act upon those realms to make them resemble the market in significant ways?

Our culture has hitherto been committed to the notion that political freedom involves value-based democratic dialogue. Our culture is changing, though, it seems, because of the obvious power of money to buy legislation and elections. As just one example, now that we have

seen so clearly exactly how elections are bought by multi-millionaires, and how legislation is bought by industry lobbies, people have less of a conviction that democracy is about their individual votes and their individual value commitments. Our voter participation reflects that understanding.

As for what this does to ourselves, it appears to leave us without a foundation for any trust that our society can seek and achieve justice. And for anyone who believes that the search for justice is essential to humanity, our humanity is in deep trouble.