In April 2012, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published political philosopher Michael Sandel’s book *What Money Can’t Buy*. Sandel, who is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government at Harvard University, has previously written on the “moral limits of markets” for *The Hedgehog Review*. As his new book demonstrates with a wide range of telling examples, “we live at a time when almost everything can be bought and sold.” Increasingly, marketed-oriented logic and values pervade realms of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms, raising the urgent need to “rethink the role that markets should play in our society.” As a contribution to this needed debate, we asked three scholars to offer some brief reflections on the book and the question of marketization. On the following page is a short excerpt from pages 9–10 and 202.
When we decide that certain goods may be bought and sold, we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use. But not all goods are properly valued in this way. The most obvious example is human beings. Slavery was appalling because it treated human beings as commodities, to be bought and sold at auction. Such treatment fails to value human beings in the appropriate way—as persons worthy of dignity and respect, rather than as instruments of gain and objects of use.

Something similar can be said of other cherished goods and practices…. Consider the rights and obligations of citizenship. If you are called to jury duty, you may not hire a substitute to take your place. Nor do we allow citizens to sell their votes, even though others might be eager to buy them. Why not? Because we believe that civic duties should not be regarded as private property but should be viewed instead as public responsibilities. To outsource them is to demean them, to value them in the wrong way.

These examples illustrate a broader point: some of the good things in life are corrupted or degraded if turned into commodities. So to decide where the market belongs, and where it should be kept at a distance, we have to decide how to value the goods in question—health, education, family life, nature, art, civic duties, and so on. These are moral and political questions, not merely economic ones. To resolve them, we have to debate, case by case, the moral meaning of these goods and the proper way of valuing them.

These are, I admit, contestable judgments…. Such deliberations touch, unavoidably, on competing conceptions of the good life. This is terrain on which we sometimes fear to tread. For fear of disagreement, we hesitate to bring our moral and spiritual convictions into the public square. But shrinking from these questions does not leave them undecided. It simply means that markets will decide them for us. This is the lesson of the last three decades. The era of market triumphalism has coincided with a time when public discourse has been largely empty of moral and spiritual substance. Our only hope of keeping markets in their place is to deliberate openly and publicly about the meaning of the goods and social practices we prize.

In addition to debating the meaning of this or that good, we also need to ask a bigger question, about the kind of society in which we wish to live. As naming rights and municipal marketing appropriate the common world, they diminish its public character. Beyond the damage it does to particular goods, commercialism erodes commonality. The more things money can buy, the fewer the occasions when people from different walks of life encounter one another…. At a time of rising inequality, the marketization of everything means that people of affluence and people of modest means lead increasingly separate lives. We live and work and shop and play in different places. Our children go to different schools…. It’s not good for democracy, nor is it a satisfying way to live.

Democracy does not require perfect equality, but it does require that citizens share in a common life. What matters is that people of different backgrounds and social positions encounter one another, and bump up against one another, in the course of everyday life. For this is how we learn to negotiate and abide our differences, and how we come to care for the common good.

And so, in the end, the question of markets is really a question about how we want to live together. Do we want a society where everything is up for sale? Or are there certain moral and civic goods that markets do not honor and money cannot buy?
Capitalism and Our Moral Imagination

Eugene McCarraher is an associate professor of humanities at Villanova University. He is the author of Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought (Cornell, 2000). He is completing The Enchantments of Mammon: Capitalism and the American Moral Imagination.

Michael Sandel has always been erudite, incisive, and impeccably civic-minded. Offended by the encroachment of money and “market thinking” on ever more spheres of our lives, Sandel seeks, in What Money Can’t Buy, to define “the moral limits of markets” and preserve the things we claim to cherish. To do this, he insists, we must “reason together, in public, about how to value the social goods we prize” [15]. But while his faith in reason and in his fellow citizens is inspiring, I am skeptical that such a “robust public discourse” is going to take place any time soon. It isn’t just that our political culture is a stew of snark, invective, melodrama, and vacuity. It’s that even Sandel’s conception of what is “reasonable” to say seems so cautious and narrow.

Sandel’s pages on economics and its grotesque account of human nature are lucid, penetrating, and far too respectful. At bottom he shares more with the economists than he realizes, and that points to the pervasive problem with his book: for all his forensic skill in demonstrating the unfairness wrought by “markets,” Sandel’s understanding of “markets” is essentially that of the economists he chastises.

The very way he conceptualizes the problem is illustrative: the “moral limits” of “markets,” as if “markets” had no intrinsic moral character. Sandel is revealingly muddled on this point. Early on he remarks, “markets don’t wag fingers. They don’t discriminate between admirable preferences and base ones” [14]. Yet later, when discussing gifts, he observes that the market-based, “economic case against gift-giving is not morally neutral” and that it “presupposes a certain conception of friendship” [103]. So “markets” do wag fingers and discriminate morally; “markets” do define certain “preferences” as worthy or ignoble. And if that is the case, then the issue is not the “moral limits of markets” but a clash of different moralities.

This confusion about the moral nature of markets stems largely from Sandel’s refusal to use a single word: capitalism. Sandel doesn’t use it even once, and his employment of just about any other term—“markets” and “consumerism” are favorites—suggests a calculated strategy of euphemism. But “markets” and “capitalism” aren’t identical, and Sandel’s implicit conflation lames his attempt at moral damage control. Markets and property systems are related, but they are not the same: markets are about exchange and money; property about ownership and power. Being about people as well as things, property systems are moral economies. They are ways of forming human personhood and relationships, and whatever we say about its “amorality,” capitalism is no different.

Sandel and other critics of “the market” need to appreciate that “market thinking” is a moral imagination. Capitalism is a telos of human ideals—the maximization of utility, the expansion of productivity, the enrichment of humankind—and it fosters an ensemble of mores to minister to those ends—calculated avarice, the work ethic, competition, technological “innovation,” advertising and the multiplication of desires. It’s not that capitalism “wags no fingers” at pernicious or craven desires; it encourages the exponential increase of desire as a good thing in itself. The beatific vision of the capitalist moral imagination is the Gross Domestic Product: the
yearly growth in the volume of goods and services whose increase is never questioned. Tapping into and perverting our deepest desires for creative and exuberant lives, capitalism offers a beguiling, insidious account of human nature and destiny.

Better John Ruskin, who averred that “the real science of political economy” instructs us to “desire and labor for the things that lead to life” and to “scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction.” Political economy was first and foremost an education in desire. Only in light of the right desires can we recognize a distinction between wealth and what Ruskin called “illth,” which causes “devastation and trouble in all directions.” True wealth must be evaluated, not in the enlargement of a vacuous “productivity,” but in the volume of “full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creatures.” By this standard, much “modern wealth”—the type measured by GDP—was little more than “illth.” To Ruskin, the proliferation of illth wrought “ruin in the Economy of Heaven,” the resplendent earth itself.

It is fairly obvious that Ruskin’s “economy of heaven” has no purchase in a political culture fixated on “growth.” Liberal and conservative, all across the carping and tiresome “spectrum,” the capitalist moral vision reigns supreme. We all worship at the altars of Productivity and Wealth Creation. Sandel finds it “puzzling” that people still pay obeisance to markets in the midst of their most dismal failure in eighty years. Living in America, he shouldn’t find it puzzling at all. From the Puritans onward, most Americans have believed that capitalism is divine. Under a firmament inscribed with “the American Dream,” God and Mammon have composed their ancient hostilities and formed a lucrative partnership.

Most Americans still have faith in “the American Dream” and cannot imagine their lives otherwise. Though he is far more reflective than his fellow citizens, Sandel is a believer, too—that is why he raises questions about fairness and corruption, but not about the nature of “affluence and prosperity.” He cannot wonder out loud if much of our “wealth” is really just a pile of “illth.” To do so would require him to challenge the American Dream itself, but that would put him beyond the limits of what it is “reasonable” to say in our imaginatively impoverished public life.

The American Dream is the very problem, not something to “reclaim,” as progressives love to put it. Building a beloved community on capitalist property was always delusional, however “productive” of “affluence and prosperity.” As the twenty-first century reveals to Americans the exorbitant costs of their Dream, we will need thinking as clear and generous as Sandel’s—but much more unreasonable. 

Endnotes

3 Ruskin, “Ad Valorem,” 211.
Does Money Undermine Social Relations?

Eva Illouz is the Rose Isaac Chair of Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her latest book is Why Love Hurts (Polity, 2012).

The growth of the viatical industry is one of the many examples discussed by Michael Sandel in his new book *What Money Can’t Buy*. A viatical settlement is the sale of a policy owner’s existing life insurance to a third party for less than its net worth at death. Typically, such sales are performed when the person selling is terminally sick; they provide the policy owner with a lump sum, which she can use to improve her life until her death. In this scheme, the third party becomes the new owner of the policy, pays the monthly premiums, and receives the full benefit of the policy when the insured dies. For economists, this is an optimal transaction, which improves the fate of all parties involved. For a moral philosopher, conditioning a profit upon the death of someone represents a serious corrosion of moral values.

The same economic reasoning is behind selling the naming rights on public property (for example, a corporation buying the right to have its name given to a subway stop or advertised on government police cars) and behind the phenomenal rise of gift cards, which have replaced the social meaning of the personal gift with cash transfer. What is common to all these phenomena is the fact that they substitute sheer economic transactions, defined as a cash transfer between two parties that each stand to benefit financially, for moral norms. These are illustrations of what rightly worries Michael Sandel in this book. Making a profit out of an impending death, selling a public space to a corporation, or substituting the social meaning of a gift with its cash value constitutes a corruption of our moral intuitions, civic institutions, and social relations. In lucid and elegant prose, this book pursues Sandel’s previous preoccupations with the erosion of civic sense and community and documents the crowding of norms by markets.

Undoubtedly, this book will prove to be immensely useful to sociologists of capitalism, despite the fact that there are no references to Marx’s, Weber’s, or Simmel’s various claims that money has debased social relationships through reification, rationalization, or abstraction. More surprising perhaps, because closer in spirit to his thought, is the absence of reference to Karl Polanyi’s classic study of capitalism, *The Great Transformation*. Indeed, the book elegantly pursues Polanyi’s reflection in its claim that voluntary action based on norms is often as or more efficient than action motivated by financial reward, thus suggesting a powerful insight: the corrosion of norms is morally problematic, and economically irrational. Yet, despite its focus on norms, the book remains unsatisfying because conceptually sketchy.

In a series of brilliant and by now classic studies, Viviana Zelizer has disposed of the sociological cliché that money debases social relations. She has shown that instead of corroding them, money espouses the forms and cultural meanings of social relationships. For example, intimate and economic transactions are closely, regularly, and routinely intertwined. More than that: money sustains social relationships in a variety of ways (think of dowry, inheritance, pocket money—all fundamental to family relationships). If that is the case, how and where does Sandel suggest to draw the line between norms and interests, between a social relationship that is pathologically structured by money and one that is “normally” structured by money? It is impossible
to say. Sandel does not address Zelizer’s powerful call on changing our conceptualization of the relationship between money and social relationships.

Zelizer has further shown an even more perplexing phenomenon: that commodification and decommodification can and often do go hand-in-hand. For example, the rise of the insurance industry—which no less than the viatical industry represents a commodification of life and death—was accompanied by a sanctification of the child’s life. Norms do not simply melt or evaporate under the pressure of monetization or even economization; they sometimes take a different form and migrate to different spheres (for example, contractualism, which is central to economic exchange, is generative of norms). Along similar lines, one may think of the spectacular growth of gift-giving practices that has accompanied consumer culture. In contrast to gift in traditional society (exchanged for status), the capitalist “West” has developed the ideology of the “pure gift,” according to which the ideal gift has a strictly emotional value, presumably disconnected from its monetary or social value. This ideology of the pure gift is not foreign or extraneous to the monetization of relationships. On the contrary, such gift-giving holidays as Mother’s Day or Valentine’s Day are simultaneously emotional celebrations and ways to commodify relationships. If both processes can occur simultaneously, this is bound to offer a more complex picture of how money shapes or corrodes social interactions. Indeed while the denunciation of interest and money preceded the market per se, these were intensified precisely with the rise of the market.

Finally, and perhaps more crucially, Sandel never tries to rise above the myriad powerful examples he gives to conceptualize what is at stake in them. Many of his examples seem to illustrate a process of economization of relationships (my phrase, not his). “Economization” is distinct from the more familiar “commodification”: it designates the fact that economic thinking transforms social relationships and goods hitherto governed by such norms as civic duty, fairness, or moral values (for example, the sanctity of the body and of death). The book would have been considerably stronger had he made some important conceptual clarifications, such as distinguishing between economization and commodification, identifying the power of economists as a social group of experts (rather than “money” per se), and discussing the pervasive infiltration of economists’ mode of thinking into social life. It is somewhat unclear whether the crowding of norms by markets is the result of monetization, commodification, or the domination of the specific form of thinking of economists.

This is not to deny that there is something very worrisome about the sell-out of public services, space, and goods to private interests. But the critique of this process cannot be divorced from the larger and already existing critiques of capitalism. It is a pity Sandel has ignored them.

Endnotes

An Alternative Economy

Juliet Schor is Professor of Sociology at Boston College and author, most recently, of True Wealth: How and Why Millions of Americans Are Creating a Time-Rich, Ecologically Light, Small-Scale, High-Satisfaction Economy (Penguin 2011).

Only ideologues and scoundrels welcome the world in which we now find ourselves. Being neither, I find myself in sympathy with Michael Sandel’s concerns in What Money Can’t Buy. Purchasing power is increasingly held in the hands of a few, whose resources allow them to dominate a wide range of allocations, from scarce seats at entertainments to health care to human organs. I understand the dynamic somewhat differently than a markets-versus-morals clash, or what Viviana Zelizer called the “hostile worlds” thesis, because I lay more stress on the role of inequality than the market. After all, there are many types of markets, operating under a wide range of rules and practices. And the expansion of inequality began in the 1970s, predating the marketizing thrust of neo-liberalism.

In my view, the growing concentration of income, wealth, and power is the driving force behind the undermining of more egalitarian allocations. The latter include the strictly equal distributions of time (each person has 24 hours per day), body (each person has one), voting (again, a per capita allocation), and human rights (in theory guaranteed for all, in practice not fully so). In this view, marketization occurs because the excess money and assets of privileged agents seek new outlets that are incompletely or not at all monetized. These include time, bodily labors or sale of body parts, and political rights. In such a scenario, it is difficult to build a moral firewall without redressing the mal-distribution of assets.

But we needn’t only think in conventional redistributive terms. One of the most exciting developments of the last few decades is the rise of an open-source, collaborative, peer-production economy. It operates with a different set of norms and values than the conventional "capitalist" market. People contribute because they get reputation, satisfaction, or other nonmonetary benefits. Products are shared, rather than owned. Production for social benefit is increasingly common. While these practices expanded dramatically in the 1990s and 2000s with software, information music, videos, and text, recently they have been spreading to the offline “material” world. Under the monikers of collaborative consumption or the sharing economy, there are now a wide variety of economic exchanges and relationships that are wholly or largely money-free. These include freecycling, couch-surfing, bartering, ride-sharing, food swapping, and time-banking (exchange of services on an equal time basis). Of course many of these practices have long been a feature of cash-strapped poor and working class communities. What’s new is that highly educated, middle-class households are rejecting what Arlie Hochschild has termed the outsourced self, preferring the enhanced social connection, lower costs, and reduced eco-impact of these lifestyles. The rise of this sector provides a pleasing reversal: mainstays of marketization, such as food, clothing, travel, and transport are being de-commodified. In my research on these practices, I find that participants employ a similar discourse to Sandel’s: they are morally disgusted with capitalist markets and searching for an alternative set of values. And in another delicious twist on the arguments of mainstream economics, the rejection of proprietary information and content, the sharing of goods and services, lower eco-impact, and the building of social capital are all more efficient than status quo practices. So while the old economy gets increasingly corrupt, as Sandel argues, a vibrant, honest, egalitarian, and efficient alternative is emerging.
Michael J. Sandel Responds

I am grateful to Juliet Schor, Eva Illouz, and Eugene McCarragher for their thoughtful engagement with my book. Professor Schor worries more about inequality than marketization; she suggests that the concentration of buying power in the hands of the privileged leads them to seek new things to monetize, thus propelling the tendency toward the commodification of everything. I think this is part of the story, but not the whole of it. The past three decades have been a time of rising inequality, but also a time when market reasoning and economic thinking have deepened their hold on social and political life. Each of these tendencies reinforces the other.

In What Money Can’t Buy, my primary goal is to provide a philosophical framework for thinking through the question of where markets serve the public good, and where they don’t belong. For example: Should schools pay students for good grades, or to read books, as a number of schools have begun to do, in hopes of improving academic achievement? What about the charity that tries to prevent drug-addicted women from having babies by paying such women $300 to undergo sterilization or long-term birth control? Would there be anything wrong with an elite private university deciding to auction off 10 percent of the seats in the freshman class to the highest bidder? Should we set a price on citizenship (say, $100,000) and sell the right to immigrate to the United States? To answer questions such as these, we need to consider two moral issues. One is about inequality: paying an impoverished, drug-addicted woman $300 to be sterilized exploits her dire circumstances; selling university admission would put students from poor backgrounds at a disadvantage; putting a price tag on the right to immigrate would make things difficult for the poor, huddled masses who aspire to come to our shores.

But inequality is not the only reason to worry about a society in which everything is up for sale. A further reason involves the corruption of goods and the tendency of market values to crowd out non-market values worth caring about. Even in a world without substantial inequalities of income and wealth, there would still be some things that money should not buy. Bribing students to read books might be corrosive of the attitudes that a good education cultivates; auctioning admission to a university might taint its integrity and corrupt its purpose; selling the right to immigrate might cheapen the meaning of citizenship. And so on.

In order to decide whether marketizing a social practice corrupts it, we have to deliberate about the attitudes and norms appropriate to the practice and determine whether market values are likely to erode or displace these attitudes and norms. This is why I resist the notion that inequality is the only reason to worry about the growing commercialization and commodification of social life.

Professor Illouz asks where I would “draw the line between norms and interests, between a social relationship that is pathologically structured by money and one that is ‘normally’ structured by money.” She wants me to “rise above the myriad of powerful examples” I offer and “conceptualize what is at stake in them.” If by this she means I should offer a general principle that can tell us, once and for all, which goods should be bought and sold on the market, and which should be governed by non-market norms, then I am bound to disappoint her. A central claim of my book is that the “corruption argument” against commodification—the one that points to the corrosive effects of market values on non-market attitudes—has to be made case by case, social practice by social practice.

To take the examples I’ve just mentioned, procreation, education, and citizenship are different goods, and the corrosive effects of money will vary in each case. This does not mean we cannot engage in moral deliberation
and political debate about how these goods are properly valued. But it does suggest that we need to overcome our hesitation to bring controversial conceptions of the good into public discourse. To keep markets in their place, we need a public discourse more morally robust than the managerial, technocratic politics to which we have become accustomed.

Professor McCarraher appreciates my critique of economistic ways of thinking, but complains that I am “too respectful” of the economists I criticize and share their view that markets are morally neutral. This last point is based on a misunderstanding of a passage he quotes from the book: “markets don’t wag fingers. They don’t discriminate between admirable preferences and base ones” (14). In this passage, I am trying to explain the allure of markets: they seem to be nonjudgmental. Market reasoning seems to be a way to avoid moral reasoning, a way of avoiding difficult debates about how to value goods. But I go on to show, with example after example, that this appeal is spurious. When we decide that certain goods may be bought and sold—whether sex or kidneys, citizenship or votes—we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use. But not all goods are properly valued in this way” (9).

McCarraher cites my discussion of gifts, which illustrates the point. The economic argument against gift giving, I write in the book, “shows how market reasoning smuggles in certain moral judgments, despite its claim to be value neutral” (103). The economist’s notion that cash is more efficient than a well-chosen gift “is not morally neutral,” but “presupposes a certain conception of friendship” (103), one that is arguably impoverished. My case against economistic ways of thinking is unabashedly judgmental. To argue about the proper role of money and markets in our society, we have to argue, case by case, about the right way of valuing the goods and social practices we prize.

Caring for the Elderly

Concerns about the graying of the population often center on how to sustain entitlement programs in the years ahead. Often lost, because often invisible, is the actual time people spend caring for elderly family members and friends. In 2011, the annual American Time Use Study, prepared by the Department of Labor, began tracking the time people spend assisting those over the age of 65 “who needed help because of a condition related to aging.”

According to the study, nearly 40 million people provided some type of elder care in 2011 (care of a spouse or partner is almost certainly underreported). We learn that:

- A majority—56 percent—are women.
- Care givers have other significant time obligations. Nearly a quarter have minor children in the household, and roughly two-thirds are employed, either full- or part-time.
- Care givers are themselves not young. Some 63 percent are 45 or older. In fact, about 1 in every 5 people over the age of 45 is providing elder care, compared to 13 percent of younger people.
- Elder care is time-intensive. Three-quarters of care givers have been assisting an elderly person for over a year; fully a third for over 5 years. Over 60 percent give care at least weekly; 20 percent give it every day. On the days people do provide care, they spend 3.12 hours doing so. By comparison, parents of children under 6 spend 1.97 hours a day in “primary childcare.”

The study shows that significant numbers are heavily involved in the care of the aging. With 10,000 people turning 65 every day for the next 19 years, that number is only going up.