

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Nico Stehr, *Moral Markets: How Knowledge and Affluence Change Consumers and Products*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008, 269 pp. \$US 84.00 hardcover (978-1-59451-456-2)

The central thesis of this book by Nico Stehr is straightforwardly announced by its title: a broadly distributed increase in personal wealth and proliferation of knowledge in modern Western society over the last fifty years has transformed market structures, resulting in a moral dimension being factored into exchange in addition to, and at times in lieu of, the rational calculation of utility presumed by neoclassical economics. This new market structure extends around the world as part of globalization since the 1970s. Most important is that the moralization of markets does not reflect merely heightened consumer sovereignty or changed economic conditions; it signals deeper developments in social organization. Stehr advances his argument in an equally straightforward manner, drawing upon a comprehensive body of theory, literature, and data, succinctly presented. The book engages consumer studies, economic sociology, sociologies of knowledge and culture, and general social theory. It also has implications for development studies. And it should interest anyone in those fields.

In making his case, Stehr first surveys endogenous economic critiques of the neoclassical market perspective. From Friedrich Hayek's objection to neoclassicism's static ideal of equilibrium to evolutionary economic theory's rejection of its ahistorical abstract rationality to Kenneth Boulding's positing of sentimentality in "the grants economy" that challenges the notion of pure utility maximization, Stehr finds the roots of a perspective that situates economic activity not in isolation but within the wider sociocultural and historical context. This is buttressed by exogenous critiques from the other social sciences, especially sociology. Following foundational theorists Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and in particular Emile Durkheim, Stehr further demonstrates how the standard market model generally overlooks exchange as an embedded social practice that intersects with a diverse range of activities and identities besides individual self-interest. In this way, he opens the door to the idea that markets can and do change over time in response to shifting external environments and that more can be and indeed is at

stake in market interaction than simple calculations of marginal utility. Stehr's understanding of the market as a specifically social institution also distinguishes his perspective from writers such as Jane Jacob and Paul Hawken who have tried to connect the moral imperative to nature.

The theoretical argument is augmented with empirical evidence of the overall expansion in recent decades of wealth and knowledgeability, the latter of which Stehr defines not just as an increased and more accessible database of information but also more critically as "*a capacity to act*" that augments the self-determination and reflexivity of actors negotiating the social field (p. 21, italics in original). In terms of affluence, Stehr offers statistics on GNP, GDP, and consumption expenditures that demonstrate the growth of personal wealth in advanced economies. Other statistics measure the spread of affluence to the developing world. Growth in knowledgeability is gauged in part by increased education levels.

While all this constitutes the basis for a moralization of markets, it does not demonstrate its existence. In this regard Stehr points to the rise in recent years in consumer demand for ethically and sustainability produced goods and services. The growing influence of nongovernmental organizations and other consortia advocating on behalf of ethical concerns is also noted. On the other side of the ledger is the increased attention given by producers, mainly corporations, to social responsibility (CSR) programs and other stewardship activities. Perhaps the biggest factor is the expansion of the knowledge economy itself, which has profoundly altered social relationships between individuals and also at the macro-level, resulting in a de-differentiation of roles and making subjectivities such as the consumer-citizen more readily available. The examples Stehr examines in some detail are biotechnology and the environment. In both cases, considerations that neoclassical economics understands as externalities are shown to be of central concern in pursuing market activity.

Aspects of Stehr's thesis might be challenged in some quarters. For example, is consumer resistance to biotech foods and the preference for organic and ecofriendly products a manifestation of morality or another form of self-interest? Recent consumer research (such as that by Connolly and Prothero, and Halkier) suggests that it is not so much morality that is at work in "green" purchasing decisions as the mitigation of risk. Quite simply, consumers do not want products that might kill them in the short term and that in the long run might exterminate life on the planet. Market action from this perspective is not strictly speaking moral but more accurately understood as political, operating in the civic sphere as public trust in transnational corporations, governments, and global institutions such as the United Nations has eroded.

Stehr's interpretation of certain economic data might also be questioned. Most of the evidence Stehr presents comes from top-line statistics, a sound enough method in developing a macro-level argument. And certainly the general rise and distribution of wealth in the advanced nations from the end of the Second World War up to the 1970s cannot be disputed. The continuation of that trend in Europe might also be reasonably defended. But in the United States, which accounts for a large share of global wealth, growing income inequality and the pressures on needs-related income, due to privatization of social services and elimination of employer-sponsored benefits, have reversed the trend of general affluence that anchors one leg of Stehr's thesis.

In the preface Stehr writes that the trend of market moralization is bound to expand and get stronger as time goes on, that is, "unless the regime of the dynamic economy we have known for the last fifty years collapses" (p. xii). With that event seemingly at hand, Stehr's book faces a more stringent test than any review could give it.

New School for Social Research

Vince Carducci

Vince Carducci is a PhD student in sociology at the New School for Social Research and adjunct faculty in liberal arts at College for Creative Studies and visual culture studies at Wayne State University in Detroit. His primary research interest is global consumerism and its discontents. Recent publications include entries on culture jamming for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, edited by Dale Southerton, and fair trade for the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer. His chapter "Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective" is included in *Contemporary Readings in Sociology* (Pine Forge, 2008), edited by Kathleen Korgan.

cardv366@newschool.edu