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Drawing the Line?
Critical Notes on Commodification[1]

Luís Francisco Carvalho
DINÂMIA and
Dep. of Economics,
ISCTE Lisbon, Portugal
lfc@iscte.pt

João Rodrigues
DINÂMIA - ISCTE
Lisbon, Portugal
joao.rodrigues@iscte.pt

1. Introduction

The expansion of markets and of market rhetoric can be seen as the alpha and omega of neoliberalism. It is not surprising, then, that the concept of commodification has been gaining a wide currency in various branches of critical social theory. We intend to clarify the meaning(s) acquired by the concept of commodification in section two. This is justified by the neglect of the concept in mainstream economics, in contrast to its widespread use in such fields as moral and political philosophy, legal studies, anthropology, economic sociology or human geography. Although mainstream economists do not explicitly use the concept, we argue, in sections three and four, that their theoretical practices actually convey and promote what may be termed "commodification by discourse" (or economic imperialism), and provide a theoretical and ideological legitimation for neoliberal policies.

Mainstream economists unproblematically presuppose, and simultaneously foster, the universalisation and naturalisation of a particularly narrow conception of the market. The pervasiveness of this discourse can paradoxically be identified by looking at some strands of critical discourses on commodification. In fact, when authors such as Michael Walzer or Elizabeth Anderson try to "protect" certain spheres of social interaction from

[1] Very provisional version. Please do not quote.

market interference, they implicitly accept this univocal and ultimately utopian representation of the market. As Nelson (2004), among others, argues, real markets are sites of complex human interaction. Given the embedded nature of real existing markets, one cannot simplistically equate market institutions with commodified understandings of the world. Nevertheless, the expansion of markets, and of the ideological apparatus which legitimates it, is not without consequences in terms of social meaning and of power relations, as it will be discussed in section five. A brief final summary is given in section six.

2. Defining Commodification

If one is talking about commodification, then one should clarify what is meant by the term. Firstly, one should point that this concept has wide currency outside economics, most notably in areas such as moral and political philosophy, law, anthropology, economic sociology or human geography. In economics, the term commodification has virtually been monopolized by heterodox economists – be they of a Marxist, feminist, institutionalist or socio-economic persuasion.

We define commodification as a process whereby an object (in the widest sense of the term, meaning a thing, an idea, a creature, etc.) which was previously provided, or represented, in non-market ways, is transformed into a commodity, becoming the object of a real or symbolic market mediated exchange. Therefore, the process of commodification can take place, alternatively or simultaneously, at an institutional level and at the level of discourse and social understanding.

At the first, institutional, level we refer to the process by which goods come to be produced and services provided by individuals or firms, through markets, to gain access to money. Its generalization presupposes a historically rooted socio-economic system – capitalism – whose provision process is organized around markets and money-mediated exchanges (Wood, 1999). The market institution, conceived as the institutionalised exchange of commodities whose property or temporary control can be freely transferred between individual or collective private actors and whose public value is crystallised in a price, is central to this system (Hodgson, 1988). Following Castree (2003: 277) important remark that the “commodity status of a thing, object, idea, creature, person or what-have-you is not intrinsic to it, but rather assigned”, one can say that behind a commodity lays an institutional process which assures that private property rights can be defined and guaranteed. These are essential for the alienability of the commodity, i.e., its physical and/or morally separation from its owner, the seller, on a formally volunteer basis, if the buyer and the seller agree on its monetary value.

At the second level, of social understanding, commodification is conceived as the process by which the price tag metaphorically or really associated with a socially valued item exhausts the value individuals put on it (Radin, 1996). This means that commodification is associated with the hegemony of a calculative agency and of instrumental rationality at an individual level, to the exclusion of other forms of agency/rationality. It is, thus, a situation where the plurality of human values disappears and is reduced to a private-gain, money-minded, mentality.

This definition of commodification tries to capture the various understandings that can be found in the literature emanating from heterodox economics (Folbre and Nelson, 2000; Fine, 2002a) or from other fields of inquiry (Anderson, 1993; O’Neill, 1998; Radin, 1996, Castree, 2003; Williams, 2005).

3. Commodification by discourse - economic imperialism

In this section, we will focus on one of the most salient instances of commodification in discourse, the so-called “economic imperialism”[2], that is, the extension in the use of neoclassical microeconomic theory to subjects outside the conventional realm of the “economic”, thereby “invading” or “colonizing” domains that were previously occupied by other social sciences. It is interesting to note that this expansionist strategy is in marked contrast to the approach developed by the pioneers of microeconomics, the marginalists of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact, Jevons, Edgeworth or

[2] Or ‘economics imperialism’, to mark a clear distinction with the more canonical use of the expression in the theories of Hobson, Lenin, Luxembourg, and the like. In the sense retained in our analysis, it seems to have originated with Boulding (1969).

Marshall were careful to ascribe a well delimitated space of applicability to their proposed new kind of economic theory, thus establishing a contrast with the classical political economy it was meant to supersede[3].

The methodological work of Lionel Robbins (1935) marks a significant turning point that somehow paved the way and legitimated the subsequent imperialistic developments. The unifying attribute of economics' subject-matter ceased to be a specific type of phenomena; economics would now be defined by the study of a particular behavioural pattern. Hence, the well known claim that "economics is the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" (Robbins, 1935: 15). Thus defined, economics could considerably expand the issues it dealt with, far beyond the conventional disciplinary boundaries, as Robbins himself admitted: "Everywhere we turn, if we choose one thing we must relinquish others which, in different circumstances, we would wish not to have relinquished. *Scarcity of means to satisfy ends of varying importance is an almost ubiquitous condition of human behaviour*" (Robbins, 1935: 15, emphasis added).

By the end of the fifties and in the following decade, there emerged a series of deliberate attempts to expand the use of neoclassical microeconomic analysis beyond the conventional economic territory. A particularly telling example of this move is the domain of political action, where the works of Anthony Downs (1957), James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (1962) or Mancur Olson (1965), were very influential in laying the foundations for the Public Choice school, which, by extending to political behaviour the same self-interested logic of the "economic man", would prove instrumental in the critique of public activism, and hence in the ascendance of neoliberalism.

But it was Gary Becker who would be most strongly identified with economic imperialism, or, to use his own formulations, "the economic approach to human

[3] As the opening paragraph of Marshall's (1920: 1) *Principles* stated: "Political Economy or Economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with attainment and with the use of the material requisites of wellbeing".

behavior" (Becker, 1976) or "the economic way of looking at behavior" (Becker, 1993). Starting from the strong claim that "the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior" (1976: 8), Becker makes the central assumption that 'tastes' are stable and universal, so that the observed differences in behaviors across individuals, or over time for the same individual, must not be explained by changing tastes (Stigler and Becker, 1977). Becker's explanatory strategy takes a different view of the consumer/household behavior – households should be viewed not merely in the light of the conventional consumer theory, but also as producers, using market goods, time, skills and other inputs, to produce what he significantly calls 'commodities' (children, status, sex, leisure activities, etc.). This framework has been extensively used by Becker to deal with a wide array of subjects. According to the systematization he himself provided in his Nobel Lecture, one could mention discrimination against minorities, criminal activity, education/human capital and issues of formation, dissolution and structuration of families (Becker, 1993).

The importance of Becker's contribution to economic imperialism should not be underestimated, but it must be acknowledged that imperialistic efforts change over time. If we refer to the contemporary situation, we may observe a sensible transformation in the way concepts and analytical tools originated in neoclassical economics are being object of an expansionist use, to the point of being legitimate to speak of a new variety of economic imperialism. This point has been articulated by Fine (2002a), who notes the "revolutionary" nature (in the Kuhnian sense) of the work based on market imperfections, most significantly asymmetries of information, and the individual rational/optimizing responses to those "imperfections"[4]. This perspective greatly increases the scope of the issues potentially falling under economic analysis: "the new approach purports to be able to explain the presence and impact of economic and social structures, institutions, customs and culture, and even apparent violation of 'rational' behavior as their consequence" (Fine, 2002a: 13). For Fine (2002a: 12), a significant departure from old-styled, Becker-like, imperialism is implied, since the idea that "all economic and social phenomena are reduced to a world as if a perfect market" is abandoned. We should note, however, the fundamental continuity at the methodological

[4] For a general overview of the economics of information approach, by one of its leading proponents, accounting for its origins and impacts on economics, see Stiglitz (2000).

level, with the reliance on methodological individualism and on rational/optimizing behavior.

In the celebratory account of economic imperialism offered by Lazear (2000)[5], three "themes" are identified as the fundamental attributes of economic theory, and as the ones characterizing its expansionist use: individual rational maximizing behavior; depiction of the outcome of individual interactions as equilibrium; emphasis on the concept of efficiency. In a similar vein, Becker (1976: 4) had already stated that "the combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences, (…) form the heart of the economic approach". The economic approach so defined can be potentially extended to an infinite number of human interactions since it considers that individuals respond to explicit or implicit prices in all situations, be it in the political realm, within the family, or in the definition of the legal norms that rule their behavior[6]. Prices give individuals all the information they need in their pursuits, and market incentives seem sufficient to signal the avenues through which the maximizer should follow. When they don't, individuals rationally devise institutional arrangements that functionally allow exceptional market failures to be superseded.

Economic imperialism has its roots in what Polanyi (1991) calls the formalistic perspective of the economy. The formalistic perspective presupposes that economics can be defined as the science of individual autonomous rational choice among different alternatives in a context of scarcity. Associated with this notion of rationality is the idea of the inevitable trade-offs that every individual decision presupposes. These trade-offs can only be successfully faced if there is a careful computation of the implicit or explicit relative prices involved. Isolated individuals, concentrated on the prosecution of their self-interest, are permanently evaluating the different courses of action available through the computation of their prospective cost and benefits. This conception of individual choice contributes to the idea that markets and their price signals can be seen as if they were indeed everywhere: "the dominant model of human choice, rationality and value (…) seems tailor-made to represent the norms of the market as universally appropriate for nearly all human interactions" (Anderson, 1993: xi-xii).

[5] Fine (2002b) provides a critical appraisal of Lazear's article, from a heterodox, or 'political economy', perspective.

[6] The exemplary analysis of Law using this approach can of course be found in Posner (2002).

There is a kind of trade-off between the realism of your definition of the market and your capacity to extend its universal reach. This can be seen in the definition of a market given in a standard microeconomics textbook: “a market exists whenever two or more individuals are prepared to enter into an exchange transaction” (Gravellle and Rees, quoted in Rosenbaum, 2000: 459). The lack of institutional structure of markets can be said to be responsible for easiness with which economists’ tend to see markets as unproblematically emerging from spontaneous interactions of individuals. It is therefore not surprising that in mainstream economics “all the distinctions involved are erased, and everything is reduced to ‘goods’” exchanged in markets (Fine, 2002a: 34). We are in the presence of what Chang (2003) aptly designates by “the market primacy assumption”, leading to the incapacity of the formalistic perspective to grasp what is specific, and problematic, about commodification. Therefore, if one wants to understand markets and commodification, one has to look at an alternative way of conceiving economics.

4. Neoliberalism and the policies of commodification

Economic imperialism has been concomitant to the regaining of hegemony of the market in the public discourse that has legitimised the progressive emergence of a “global neoliberal regime”, which took root in the seventies and consolidated in the eighties and nineties (Crotty, 2000). Economic imperialism is then part of a wider set of neoliberal economic theories. These theories do not emerge in a historical vacuum and cannot be analysed without taking into account their obvious political role: “their political role is, first, to reduce capitalism to the interplay of supply and demand, secondly (subject to some specific qualifications), to reduce markets to prices and thirdly to naturalize markets” (Harriss-White, 2003: 484).

Neoliberal economic theories, according to Chang (2002), emerged as an alliance between neoclassical economics and the Austrian-libertarian tradition, based on a more or less clear division of labour: the former provided the analytical tools with a universalistic ambition, encompassing in its analysis all kinds of human behaviours and social interactions; the latter supplied a robust moral and political philosophy, able to create, what Birchfield (1999) names, a gramscian “common sense” discourse about the desirability of a "new free-market capitalism". One can therefore conceive neoliberalism as a renewed theoretical effort to justify and argue for the universalization of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives of the discourse and/or practice of commodification, capital accumulation and profit making (Wood 1997).

It is the ideological facet of this process that Carrier (1997) has tried to analyse by making reference to the hegemony of the "market model", conceived as the dominant public language, which "shapes what can be debated and how it can be debated" and promotes a motivational structure favouring certain behavioural patterns (Carrier, 1997: 50-51). Therefore, if commodification is partially a matter of social understandings, it is important to recognise the influence mainstream economic discourse may have in shaping those understandings. This influence may be exercised through two channels: (1) the direct role that the popularised versions of neoliberal economic theory have in the creation of a new common sense; (2) The influence that neoliberal theory has in the conduction of public policy and institutional design.

In fact, if, through the influence of certain economists, public discourses and policies adhere to commodified understandings and promote commodification processes, then a "common frame" is created with an impact on the way individuals interpret the situations that they are facing, and also on the type of motivations that will be nurtured. As behavioural economists and legal scholars, have emphasized, individuals do interpret behaviour within a framework of social norms that define how the relevant goods should be valued and how people should behave. Furthermore, people do value expressive meanings because they provide information about what is expected from them in a certain context and about what they can expect from others (Kahan, 1998). In this sense, neoliberalism can be conceived as a way to create a market frame in which the choices in all areas of social life come to be conceived as if they were private choices among different commodities in a market context. One is perhaps confronted here with a kind of "cognitive simplifier" which, among other things, facilitates the commensurability among different goods, therefore generating a market evaluation which simply ignore the value dimensions that cannot be translated in monetary terms (Radin, 1987; Bowles, 1998).

Embedded in neoliberal views of society is a "liberatory economic rhetoric" that sees the market "as an uncontroversial metaphor for society at liberty to do with property what it pleases without interference from the state" (Birchfield, 1999: 32). Following, Wood (1997) this dichotomy between state interference and individual freedom in markets has always been a building block of liberal discourse. One of the main thrusts of critical discourses within economics has been directed to contest this dichotomy by emphasizing that the "road to the free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized and controlled interventionism" (Polanyi, 1957: 140). Markets, as institutionalist economists have repeatedly emphasized, require a set of legal rules that define who can participate, what are the legitimate objects of exchange (i.e., what entities can actually be considered as commodities), and the rights-obligations structure that each agent faces when exchanging those commodities in real existing markets (Chang, 2002). The recognition of the legal-institutional nexus is therefore crucial:

> Emphasizing the institutional nature of the market requires that we have to bring politics explicitly into the analysis of the market, not just into the analysis of the state and stop pretending – as the neoliberals do – that markets need to be, and can be, 'depoliticised'. Markets are in the end political constructs, in the sense that they are defined by a range of formal and informal institutions that embody certain rights and obligations, whose legitimacy (and therefore contestability) is ultimately determined in the realm of politics" (Chang, 2003: 54).

In the same vein, Harriss-White (2003) considers markets as bundles of institutions nested in other institutions. As institutions, which are structured by social norms that assure their viability, markets cannot be separated or opposed to the state or to the wider society. It is in this sense that embeddedness and impurity are non-optional in a proper understanding of a socio-economic system that has in the market one of its central institutions. These crucial and interconnected concepts, embeddedness and impurity, were developed respectively by Karl Polanyi (1957) and by Geoffrey Hodgson (1988). The former is meant to allude to the idea that the market cannot be conceived without its constituent political, social and moral elements. The later is associated with Hodgson's (1999: 126) thesis that capitalism, "like every socio-economic system must rely on at least one structurally dissimilar subsystems to function", thus pointing to the fact that, as Jessop (1997: 566) argues, society cannot "be subsumed under the commodity form and subordinated to market forces – and, indeed (…) capitalism would be impossible if this were the case". In fact, capitalism's historical and spatial dynamics are, again according to Jessop (1997: 562), dependent upon "an unstable balance between its value and non-value forms, on a changing balance between (re-)commodification and decommodification" processes which are promoted by social and political forces with antagonistic interests. This unstable balance can be temporally stabilized, crystallising around a set of institutional compromises which may give rise synchronically to a certain variety in capitalism and diachronically to different accumulation regimes as it is been showed by the post-Marxist regulation and social structures of accumulation schools (Boyer and Saillard, 2000; Wolfson, 2003).

The idea of the necessary impurity of capitalism can be assessed empirically. One of the recent attempts to do so was made by Williams (2005) who tries to present empirical evidence to argue against what he calls the "commodification thesis", i.e., against the idea of an unstoppable and inexorable increase in recent decades of the proportion of services and goods which are "produced for monetized exchange by capitalist firms for the purpose of profit, rather than by the state or community" (Williams, 2005: 2). Using, among other indicators, the results of time-use surveys or the percentage of employment generated by the non-profit sector, Williams' study seems to attest the resilience, even in the most affluent societies, of non-paid work, non-monetized exchange or monitized exchange which is not for profit. Together, non-commodified forms of work seem to account for a significant proportion of the economic practices in those economies. If Williams provides a correct picture of the tendencies of our times, the institutional plurality and the diversity of economic practices are here to stay and commodification, very strictly defined, does not exhibit any tendency to grow.

Nevertheless, since the seventies, there is a neoliberal reassertion of commodification not only in discourse but also in a diverse set of practices promoted by specific policies. Even Williams, otherwise sceptical about the strength of commodification, recognizes the pervasiveness of this trend when he declares: "wherever one looks public policy is actively engaged in supporting the development of a commodified economy as the path to progress" (Williams, 2005: 187). This should have made him aware of the limits of his highly empiricist methodology of time-use surveys, in assessing the reach of commodification processes.

Even acknowledging the uneven and complex nature of commodification processes, one can still discern a common trend. This trend can be apprehended by noticing the tremendous transformations in the structure of most economies induced by policy choices which include the liberalization of financial and commercial flows (Helleiner, 1995); massive processes of privatisation of state-owned enterprises accompanied by state sponsored process of submission of a number sectors to competition (Pittelis and Clarke, 1993); efforts to deregulate 'labour markets', i.e., to change the 'rights-obligations' structure in favour of employers (Chang, 2003); or efforts to scale down the welfare-state regimes which previously assured a non-commodified provision of a vast array of social services (Esping-Andersen, 1994).

The transformations mentioned have been notorious in realms of social life where markets and market norms have previously not played a significant role. Indeed, the reforms witnessed, in several countries, in education or health care provision, can be seen as instances of a process where market norms progressively become the reference point in the conduction of public policies. The recent accounts of reforms and tendencies in health care provision and in education reveal some major trends in public policies' agenda, promoted by national governments and by international institutions. Health care and education – especially higher education - have been increasingly treated as if they were commodities by market-oriented reformers, and state and other public organizations are generally adopting commercial practices typical of private firms (McMaster, 2002). The synthesis provided by Dolfsma et al. (2005: 351) for the case of health care provision can then be seen to have a wider application:

> The value of the activity is concentrated on exchange-value as opposed to use-value, hence the requirements of measurement, encouraging a focus on outcomes, through such indices as performance indicators. A consequencialist tendency and attitude is thus promoted. In essence this involves "the market", and references to the market, adopting greater prominence than other organizational mechanisms.

The promotion of individualized monetary incentives for the professionals involved in these activities, combined with the fostering of a competitive environment, are also central to this market-oriented reform process[7]. Encouraging organizations to assure, by their own means, the financial resources needed for their own functioning is one of the mechanisms used to achieve the desired transformations. As Pellegrino (1999) and Dolfsma et al. (2005) have argued for the case of the commodification of health care and Levidow (2001), and Noble (2002) for the case of the commodification of higher education, one important part of the process involves recasting the relation among providers and recipients involved in these areas as a commercial relation. This can be attempted not only by changing institutional arrangements that structure the interaction, but also by changing the language used to depict it. In health care, for example, the patient is represented as a consumer, which, as in any market, should be free to choose among different alternatives according to its preferences. These preferences tend to be backed by money, as the "consumer" is increasingly called to support a greater part of the costs of health care provision.

Having provided some elements that may serve to identify the tendencies for commodification at an ideological and policy levels, one should be careful not to overemphasize their capacity to structure the world at their own image. In fact, and as we have already mentioned, this is a much contested process.

5. The "commodification debate": a critical overview

The seemingly unstoppable processes of commodification in discourse and practice gave rise to a very interesting discussion, involving scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds, about the proper place of markets – the so-called "commodification debate". One can perceive two major positions in this debate: (1) the idea of "separate spheres", market and non-market, with their own distinctive sets of practices and meanings, which should remain autonomous; (2) an opposing view which refuses to subscribe to this supposed dichotomy and insists on the complex and hybrid nature of market (and non-market) arenas of human interaction.

[7] Hodgson (1997) and Le Grand (2003), among others, have identified a general tendency for public policies to redesign institutions so that they become similar to a certain vision of the market with its emphasis on monetary incentives and disincentives, assuring that self-interested individuals pursue the ends best favoured by policy makers.

The "separate spheres thesis" argues for the appropriateness of drawing a line between those things which can properly be conceived as commodities, and those things that cannot, at least not without disturbing consequences, be thought of and transformed into mere commodities exchanged in markets. Among the most influential proponents of this view are Michael Walzer (1983), Elizabeth Anderson (1993) and Michael Sandel (1998).

We think that Sandel's (1998) analysis is representative of the main issues involved in this position. He argues that commodification can be critically assessed by a discourse centered on "the moral limitations of markets", primarily justified by their corrosive effects on the plurality of values in society. Therefore, certain things and social relations should be insulated from the market.

A point emphasized by Sandel (1998: 104), typical of "separate spheres theorists", is the association between the moral corrosion induced by market expansion and commensurability, (i.e., the idea "that all goods can be translated without loss into a single measure or unit of value"). Since commensurability is rejected because there is an irreducible plurality of values, the door is opened for Walzer's concept of "blocked exchanges", i.e., of the careful definition of areas of social life that should not be governed by market norms:

> (…) often enough money fails to represent value; the translations are made, but as with good poetry, something is lost in the process. Hence we can buy and sell universally only if we disregard real values; while if we attend to values, there are things that cannot be bought and sold (…) the abstract universality of money is undercut and circumscribed by the creation of values that can't be easily priced or that we don't want priced (Walzer, 1983: 97).

Walzer (1983) presents a list of disparate items that fall under the heading of "blocked exchanges", ranging from votes to marriage and friendship. Indeed, it is possible to conceive that certain goods should be insulated from the "cash nexus", due to their intrinsic characteristics [8]. Additionally, the moral limits of markets can also be

[8] Friendship and trust are cases in point. In fact a plausible understanding of trust makes it logically contradictory with commodification: when we buy it, we cease to have it (Arrow, 1974).

apprehended from a perspective that stresses the type of relations involved in markets and the self-interested behaviors favored by them (Cohen, 2003).

In fact, the main problem, according to this perspective, is that there are certain values, that cannot flourish in the private realm of commodity production and consumption, presupposing instead shared public understandings that the market by itself does not favour. Anderson's (1993) distinction between commodity values, gift values and shared values tries to capture the essential difference in social relations when goods are provided through market and non-market institutions. Gift values find their worth in being given for reasons other than self-interest. Therefore, they have an expressive dimension, associated with the intrinsic value of certain social bonds[9]. For goods to be conceived as the expression of gift relationships they must be provided through non-market institutions, the only way to preserve a space for the acknowledgement of individual motivations not reducible to self-interest. Shared values, on the other hand, imply that goods can only be valued when held in common by the members of a certain group, signalling the existence of goals to which its members are jointly committed. This also presupposes non-market institutions nurturing the idea that the fruition of the shared good expresses the participation in a collective endeavour. Anderson's main point is that shared and gift values are shattered when certain goods previously delivered by non-market means are brought under the market. Therefore, according to "separate sphere theorists", individual motivations and social expectations, like trust and mutual obligation, themselves the product of non-market institutional arrangements, can be threatened if the market becomes the central institution.

Margaret Radin has been central figure in the commodification debate, particularly among law scholars. Her contributions directly confronted economic imperialism, as expressed in the Law and Economics movement inspired by Richard Posner – the quintessential commodified view of the world (Radin, 1987 and 1996). By doing this, she exposed the gap between the self-portrayed axiological neutrality of economic imperialism and its inescapable adherence to and promotion of certain values. According to Radin (1987), the rhetoric of economic imperialism has dangerous consequences on the way individuals perceive themselves and their motivations, but

[9] This point was voiced by Titmuss (1970) in his influential study on blood donation.

also on the way they perceive others with whom they interact and on the type of institutional context where this interaction takes place. In fact, economic imperialism, as any totalising view of the world, should not be seen as an innocuous exercise – as Radin (1996: 2) argues, "there cannot be any sharp divide between action and discourse – between the nature of the transaction and conceptual scheme or discursive framework in which we understand it".

Simultaneously Radin (1989, 1996), criticised the compartmentalization of social life proposed by "separate spheres" theorists, arguing for against a strict association between spheres of life, values and motivations. According to Radin (2001: 30), the "separate spheres" perspective "prevent us form appreciating the non-market aspects of many of our market relations; it prevents us from seeing fragments of a non-market social order embedded or latent" in market interactions. Therefore, the contested nature of market relations is not taken into account. The coexistence of many understandings of what is involved in markets, and of how this different understandings can give rise to several forms of "incomplete commodification" (i.e., forms of defining the rights-obligations structure of the market transaction to protect certain social interests), is not grasped by 'separate spheres' theorists. For Radin (1989), it would be more realist to fight over the meaning of social interactions within the market, than simply to try to erect barriers walling off certain transactions, therefore leaving an important part of human interactions non-scrutinized[10].

Finally, the "separate spheres" theory is equated with a "domino theory", since, it favours the idea that, for certain social goods, market expansion necessarily entails the corrosion of non-commodified representations, thus opening the road to "a slippery slope leading to market domination" (Radin, 1987: 1912). Markets are therefore naturalised and viewed as a more resilient domain against which only a few artificial and fragile barriers can opposed.

By refusing the dichotomous logic of "separate spheres", Margaret Radin sets the stage for the second major view on the commodification debate: a "post-modern" turn which

[10] "Blocked exchanges" are conceived only as an extreme case within a continuum, raging from total market inalienability to unfettered commodification (Radin, 1987),

insists on the complex and hybrid nature of market (and non-market) arenas of human interaction. In this perspective, the "separate spheres" critique of commodification is dismissed as too a unilateral view. As Williams and Zelizer (2005: 368) claim: "a more useful approach is to recognise that many market transactions have elements of emotion and sociability, and that many intimate transactions have economic dimensions - so much so that Hamlet question of whether to 'commodify or not to commodify' only serves to confuse us"[11]. Three implications are drawn from this position: (1) the market does not entail the erosion of the plurality of values since it is permeated by them; (2) the process of market expansion contains a potential for emancipation from non-market oppressive structures; (3) the interesting research question cease to be whether to "commodify or not to commodify", becoming one of grasping "who controls the process and the proceeds" of market transactions (Williams and Zelizer, 2005: 373).

Some feminist economists have been important in bringing this position of the debate into economics (e.g. Nelson, 1999; Folbre and Nelson, 2000; Van Staveren, 2001). They argue that the conception of the market (and, more generally, of the economic realm) implicit in separate spheres thesis is, paradoxically, close to mainstream economics accounts. The economy and economics are thus equated with the "market sphere", while politics or morality are seen as belonging to exterior "spheres"; therefore the provision processes that ensure material reproduction, and the science that studies them, end up dissociated from moral and political concerns (Nelson, 2004). These economists favor instead an alternative theoretical approach to "real" markets, as arenas of human interaction which are richly textured with different social meanings:

> In hypothetical idealized markets, in which purely self-interested autonomous agents interact mechanically, commodification is a given. In contrast, real world markets are often domains of rich and complex social relationships, including aspects of reward, appreciation, reparation, gift and so on (Folbre and Nelson, 2000: 11-12).

[11] This article is inserted in a recent edited volume – Ertman and Williams (2005a) – that not only maps the contested terrain of the commodification debate, but also signals an apparent predominance of theoretical views that refuse "a world bifurcated into separate hostile spheres whose boundary is policed by commodification anxiety" (Ertman and Williams, 2005b: 4).

Real markets are of course full of contradictory elements. This means that commodified understandings do not deterministically follow commodified modes of provision. Nevertheless, as commodification of social life is institutionally promoted, one may expect that the multifarious meanings and qualitative distinctions associated with social values can become increasingly narrow. In fact, some particular understandings are, in market contexts, more powerful than others. Their power is rooted in the capacity that the social groups who control the commodified mode of provision have to produce and reproduce structural inequalities and the ideological apparatus which legitimates them. By doing so they assure a provisional, and always contested, hegemony over social meaning which of course favours a "rhetoric of economic correctness" (Aune, 2001).

The issue of power is related to the social relations that form the background conditions of individuals who participate in markets, thus engendering a potential asymmetric capacity to structure the terms of market exchanges, and conditioning the degree of autonomy possessed by individuals (Nussbaum, 1998). Fabienne Peter has recently argued that the tendency of mainstream economics to adhere to a very narrow conception of individual choice in markets obscures one critical issue: "the fact that one makes a choice between given alternatives does not mean that one has consented to the constrains that shape the set of alternatives, nor, for that matter, that one has the possibility to express one's consent and dissent in the first place" (Peter, 2004: 6). Therefore, one should look carefully into the context of the transaction, asking if the seemingly voluntary agreement to sell and buy a commodity does not arise, for example, from the material destitution of one of the parts of the relation (Lutz, 1995). Radin and Sunder (2005: 16), in their discussion about the limits of market exchange, have put the matters bluntly but clearly by using the most extreme examples of commodification:

> Markets affect the rich and poor differently. The poor are more likely to be the sellers, and the rich, the buyers, of questionable commodities such as sexual services and body parts. Unequal distributions of wealth make the poorest in society, with little to offer in the marketplace, more likely to commodify themselves – their bodies for sex, their reproductive capabilities, their babies and parental rights.

In sum, commodification involves power relations within a market institution that is unavoidably an "arena in which some have freedom and some are exposed to that freedom" (Schmid, 2002: 135). The inquiry on why and how the parties involved in a market relation can become, due to the structural asymmetry of their conditions of departure, "object and subject of commodification" (Radin and Sunder, 2005) is crucial. One should then recognize and give an analytical proper place to the potential moral agency of those who are the "objects" commodification, which may explain the multiple expressions of "social resistance" to these processes. Socially embedded groups and individuals[12] may tend to look to certain goods, to the practices associated with their provision, and to the values expressed by those practices, in ways which are totally or at least partially incompatible with market modes of provision. This kind of analytical framework could account for the continuing efforts to block market exchange, or at least to structure markets so that full commodification is never a reality.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to discuss contemporary trends of commodification within the context of neoliberalism. Commodification was seen, simultaneously, as a dominant discourse (economic imperialism, among others) and as a set of transformative practices. An effort was also made to critically assess the commodification debate.

Our overarching goal was to bring the concept of commodification and some of the debates that surround it into economics. In fact, with some few notable exceptions – namely Marxian and Feminist political economy – commodification is revealingly absent from economic discourses. We think that this void impairs the capacity of economics to understand pressing real world problems. Given the developments of discussions on commodification outside economics, the way to fill this void necessarily entails a willingness to engage in a more thoroughly interdisciplinary dialogue.

[12] These embedded individuals, as defined by Davis (2003), have multiple attachments and social relations, market and non-market.

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