

THE PERSON IN THE MARKET: THREATS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract:

The market, after a long yet undisturbed evolution, has finally become an imposing superstructure that does not simply connote a place of production, exchange and purchase but has transcended the non-economic spheres of human life, even its moral-cultural order. At the core of this evolution is the human person, no more an agent but more like its slave. Everything has become commodified – literally. From goods produced by human labor and ingenuity to selling even the body of the producer him/herself.

Worse, the human person in all its integrity and wholeness can now be purchased, bargained and exchanged. Even the sphere of interpersonal relations was limited by the increase of formal and impersonal interactions. The trends of social networking, online selling and marketing, text messaging among others have now become the system of relations, however provisional and short-term. What then is the value of a human life? The reduction of human beings by market capitalism to units of productive power demands therefore a greater need to develop a philosophical position that can challenge all of these dehumanizing elements and structures.

Citing Talcott Parsons' "Social Structure and Personality" espousing the interplay between Sigmund Freud's theory of internalizing individual and Emile Durkheim's theory of constraining society, the individual will develop discourse and behavior consistent with the conditions set forth by the social structures. The interaction is not simply a case of society imposing its dominance to the individuals but rather a case of tolerant 'subjects' validating its system. This framework, from which the paper is based, believes that the very manner of market oppression can be the same manner towards possibility of liberation – a moral-cultural order.

Key words: Market, commodification, moral-cultural order, Durkheim, Parsons, Freud, reification

The Person in the Market: Threats and Possibilities

Introduction

The market, after a long yet undisturbed evolution, has finally become an imposing superstructure that does not simply connote a place of production, exchange and purchase but has transcended the non-economic spheres of human life, even its moral-cultural order. At the core of this evolution is the human person, no more an agent but more like its slave. Everything has become commodified – literally. From goods produced by human labor and ingenuity to selling even the body of the producer him/herself.

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Conceptual Framework:

Citing Talcott Parsons' "Social Structure and Personality" (1964) espousing the interplay between Sigmund Freud's theory of internalizing individual and Emile Durkheim's theory of constraining society, the individual will develop discourse and behavior consistent with the conditions set forth by the social structures. The interaction is not simply a case of society imposing its dominance to the individuals but rather a case of tolerant 'subjects' validating its system. 'As ideology is internalized by human persons, the operational structures are legitimized by ideologies' (Dagmang 2005: 80).

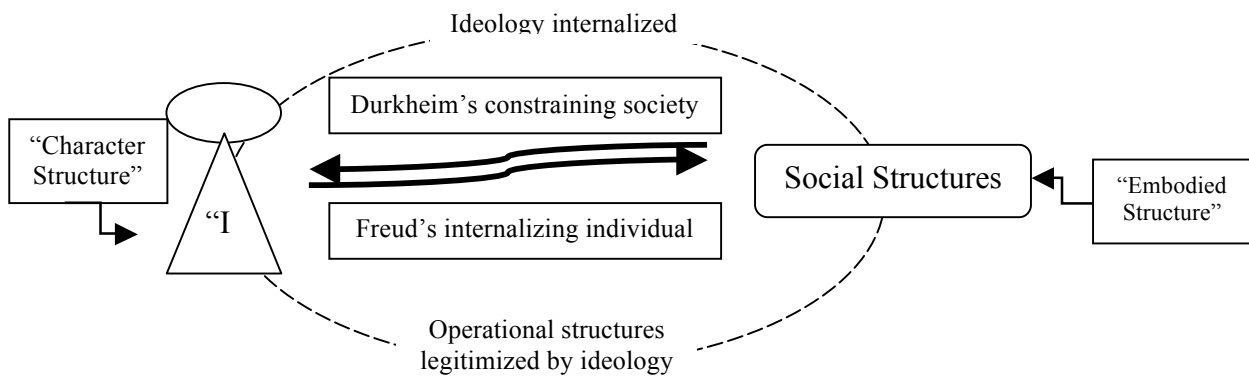


Figure 1: Parson's Interplay between the Individual and the Social Structure

In this interplay, both parties (individual and social structure) complement that one reflects the other to the point that one expresses the other and vice versa. As the individual is seen as a personified structure, he/she is referred to as 'character structure' (Lopez and Scott 2000: 4), the society meanwhile is seen as an outcome of the collective habits of individuals, hence, an 'embodied structure' (Gerth & Mills 1953: 22). (See Figure 1).

From the above illustration, the author adapts the basic interplay with the reality of the market world. In the next figure is posited various concepts acting as substructures and implications of the dominance of the market ultimately resulting to various effects. The market owes its deep foundation from the ways it has been actually created – through 'reification' (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 89; Schneider 2007: 284-285) and commodification.

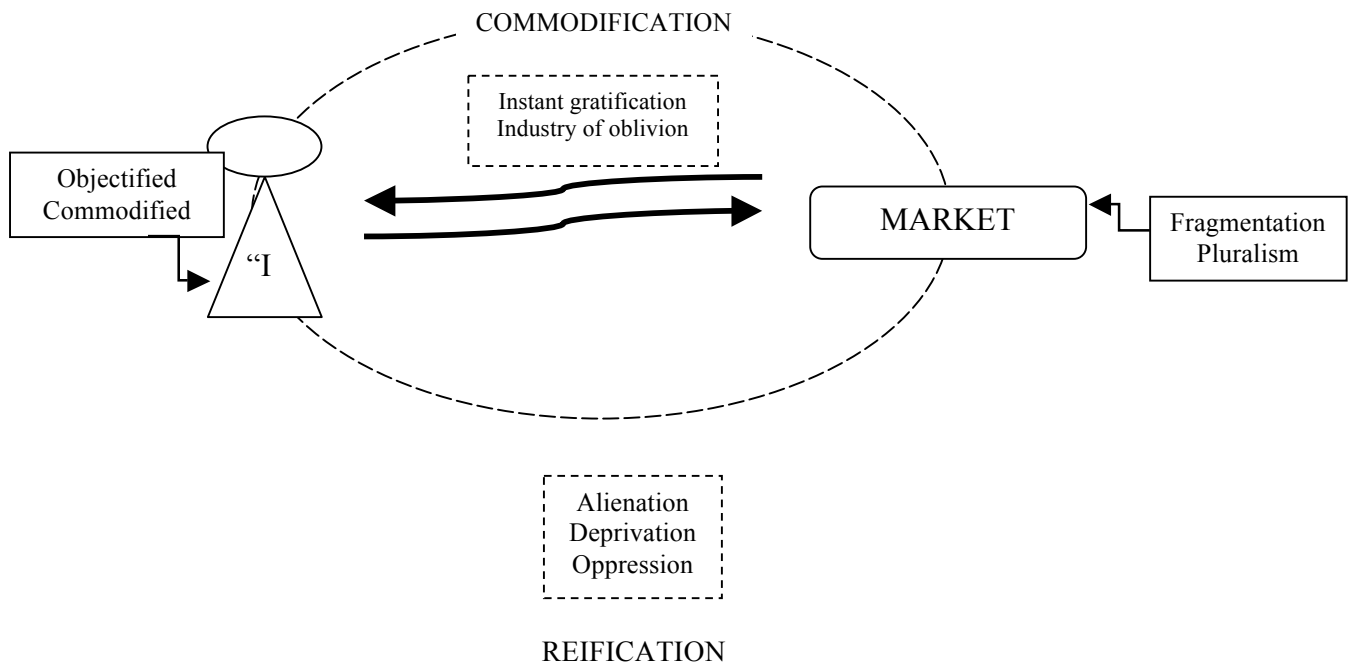


Figure 2: The Market, its Substructures and its Implications

Ultimately, this results to alienations, deprivation and oppression and has objectified the person as a commodity in the market. This cycle is constantly sustained and even bolstered by the offer of ‘instant gratification’ (Dagmang 1997: 52) and the so-called ‘industry of oblivion’ (Moreira: 1997: 41) which masks false reconciliation between individuals and the system that oppresses them. (See Figure 2).

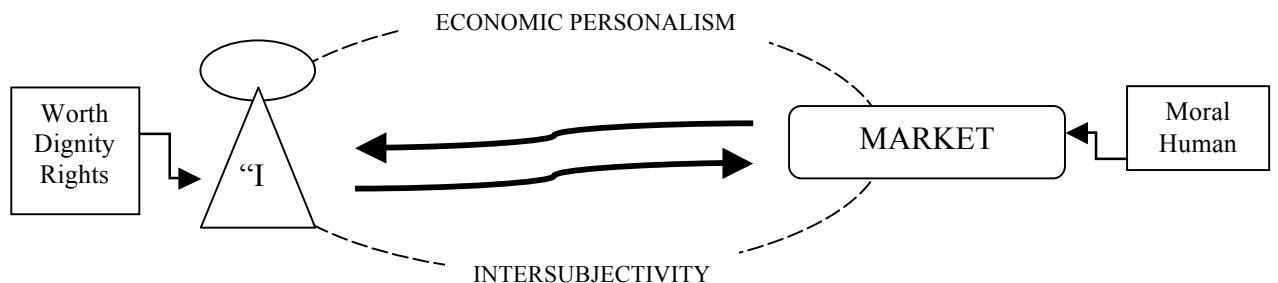


Figure 3: The Proposed Feasibility of Authentic Human Life in the Market World: Economic Personalism

Rationalizing from Parson’s framework on the interplay of Freud’s individual and Durkheim’s society, the paper believes that creating a culture to replace the imposed values of the market as reinforced by commodification and reification resulting to oppression and self-alienation of the individual, is feasible and necessary if to hope for an authentic human life in the market world. Embracing significant features of economic personalism by Karol Wojtyla and the theory of intersubjectivity while maximizing the inevitability of fragmentation and pluralism as implications of the market, the individual is therefore looked upon as a “subject” with worth, dignity and rights. Ultimately, it is with hope that this cycle of positive values will create a moral market that enjoys material affluence anchored not on selfish and egotistical wealth accumulation but on solidarity, compassion and sharing. (See Figure 3)

This is the paper's fundamental goal: if the market world of today and its implications towards oppression is a structure that is created, sustained and maintained by the tolerant individuals, so too is the control and power to change it rests on the hands of the same individuals. If only a moral culture proposing cultivation of human values is to be carried out, it is feasible.

The Market, Its Substructures and Its Implications:

'The social environment changed from a community to society' (Tomka: 1999:27). The perpetuity of change and its constancy in the realm of almost everything around provides for the apparent instability and insecurity of constants and absolutes – held previously however as divine and all-encompassing. Implications brought about by modern historical exigencies from Enlightenment to Industrial Revolution had created The Market – a social structure that is both powerful and inevitable.

The market produces everything for its "subjects" on the basis of gratification that is both instant and immediate, however, episodic, provisional and short-term. For Dagmang (1997: 50), even the 'existence of instant gratification could also mean the presence of oppression.' People are at the receiving end of the imposing influence and control of the producers and owners.

From the simplicity of the pre-modern social world, it was replaced by a pluriform, complex totality of countless subsystems of which even the parts were difficult to understand. The stability, timelessness and immutability of the social milieu, as disturbed by change, collapsed with the rise of everything that is short-term and provisional (Tomka 1999: 26). What has become available to people nowadays offer the same goal for instant gratification however masked in varied forms. Plurality of options is not only externally and tangibly manifested as in the variety of products made, commodities produced and goods sold; it has also conditioned 'fragmentation of conventions, truths, habits and attitudes' (Grey 2006: 79).

The fact that this market dynamics has stood for so long validates its depth and structuration in both personal and societal spheres. It has become so deep-rooted. Significantly, its power is legitimized by its origin and formation – from the individuals themselves; that is, through collective cooperation among themselves, it gives birth to that which oppresses them – the market. Parson takes note of this by highlighting the case of interaction between Freud's individual and Durkheim's society; the former internalizes systems of the constraining society to the point of molding oneself with the culture of the bigger society.

The persons embedded in a capitalist society will necessarily be fashioned out according to the very character and limitations of the system itself. Inevitably, they will develop discourse and behavior consistent with such conditions (Dagmang 2007: 102).

Through reification and commodification, the market functions by its structures designed primarily to label everything as commodity – an object for purchase, exchange and trade until it has also commodified the individual person – a reified commodity understood with a price tag or label. Ultimately, this whole process, created by collective behavior of individuals who are not necessarily the entire population but the mere dominant ones, brings obvious oppression to the public, alienation to the individual and deprivation to many. The world has since seen the dawn of the created enslaving its creators.

The market is so resilient that it has also created a system to boost its ever-increasing influence with Moreira's 'industry of oblivion'. Masking the oppression with the goal to entertain people, the latter has forgotten the former. This powerful market ultimately brings about a significant change in the life and cultural patterns of society and people. Everything is transitory; the world is contingent; the space is segmented. It is the dawn of what Tomka (1997, p.9; 1999, p.31) calls as the 'thesis of individualization'.

Indeed, the market endures and will stay to last. The paper does not espouse to eradicate the market *per se*. Rather; there is an urgent need to inject a new system, culture, and values to the market, something that will eradicate oppression while maintaining the fundamental purpose of material affluence, bounty and self-determination. While it is true that the market has become so evil, the paper believes it is rather a case of individuals abusing the market to veer away from its inherent goodness. The equation is simple. If the blame for the market's oppressive structures is to be pinned on the collective individuals who espouse commodification, reification and instant gratification, the solution is on the same set of individuals acting out collectively with new paradigm, moral culture and properly cultivated values that are radically opposite of the parameters of oppressive conditions. Ultimately, the old blood will be flushed out of the system as the new and fresh blood circulates in the market system helping breathe a new situation for a person in the market world.

Parson's Interplay Framework between the Individual and the Society:

Drawing out from the findings of both psychology and sociology, Parsons (1964) highlights the theories on Freud's psychoanalysis and Durkheim's sociology proposing that the interplay between them can explain the formation of systems and structures inherent in a society and in the behavior of the individual.

In itself, Freud's discovery of the internalization of moral values as an essential part of the structure of personality itself constituted such a crucial landmark in the development of the sciences of human behavior and so is Durkheim's. What is remarkable about Parson's theory is that he is able to link the two and find that their interplay can provide a clear theory of action. The limitation of each has been filled out by the other and this complementarity is evidenced as such.

Freud and his followers, by concentrating on the single personality have failed to consider adequately the implications of the individual's interaction with other personalities to form a system... Durkheim and other sociologists have failed, in their concentration on the social system as a system to consider systematically the implications of the fact that it is the interaction of personalities which constitutes the social system... (Parsons 1964: 18).

How does the interplay work? Freud believes that an individual, in the course of his/her personality formation, is capable to internalize not only the moral values of the social structure through a series and network of interactions with other personalities. Durkheim believes that an individual, as a member of society, is not wholly free to make his/her own moral decisions and is quite "constrained" by orientations common to the society of which he is a member. Placed vis-à-vis together, Parson believes that this constant and perpetual interaction among individuals, trying to form one's own personality while somehow constrained by the society itself, creates the social systems and structures. Henceforth, the market as it is today is borne out of the interaction of individuals and that its dominance and power is possible due to the ability of society to constrain the not-so-free individuals.

This is a very important discovery as it places the individuals, interacting together and collectively, in control of whatever social system and structure will be created to reciprocally “constrain” its own progenitors. What oppresses therefore the people today is basically what the same people have created through their interaction. What can change then in today’s system and structure depends on the collective efforts of all. The society is what we make of it. In this interplay, both parties (individual and social structure) complement that one reflects the other to the point that one expresses the other and vice versa. The market owes its deep foundation from the ways it has been actually created – through reification and commodification.

Rationalizing from Parson’s framework on the interplay of Freud’s individual and Durkheim’s society, the paper believes that creating a culture to replace the imposed values of the market as reinforced by commodification and reification resulting to oppression and self-alienation of the individual, is feasible and necessary if to hope for an authentic human life in the market world.

Ultimately, it is with hope that this cycle of positive values will create a moral market that enjoys material affluence anchored not on selfish and egotistical wealth accumulation but on solidarity, compassion and sharing.

This is the paper’s fundamental goal: if the market world of today and its implications towards oppression is a structure that is created, sustained and maintained by the tolerant individuals, so too is the control and power to change it rests on the hands of the same individuals. If only a moral order is proposed and lived out in a culture of sharing, solidarity and compassion, then it is feasible. A person in the market world is practicable and so its threats can actually be opportunities understood from a shifted paradigm.

Economic Personalism: An Offer of Paradigm Shift

John Paul II in his writings offers a new approach to provide a synthesis of the market, its implications and the Catholic social thought – ‘economic personalism’ (Gronbacher 1998: 1).

Briefly, its aim is to promote human economic order that benefits from market activity but does not reduce the human person to just another element in economic phenomena. Its maxim is, ‘affirm the person for his or her own sake (29). This theory is not proffered as the sole nor rightful paradigm for any person in the market world.

With John Paul II as its intellectual progenitor, many others (Michael Novak, Rocco Buttiglione among others) have invaluable contributions, taking him as their inspiration and model. They approach the free market as a ready and willing partner of promoting Christian morality and authentic human values. It is neither to see oneself isolated among others nor to see the market as antithetical to a Christian life. The Christian, more than anything else, is a person who does not stand on his/her own and develops out of nowhere. It is a person with others and a person in context. In the circle of phenomenology, this is called ‘intersubjectivity’.

From among the many forms of ‘personalism’ through the course of philosophical discussion, Gregory Gronbacher singles out the kind of personalism embraced by John Paul II - termed as ‘Polish personalism’. It has the following tenets from which this paper adheres to as possible moral paradigm for the problem of the Christian in the market world.

First is on the *centrality of the person*. ‘The dignity and value of the person resides at the very center of personalist philosophy and provides the foundation for all subsequent philosophical analysis’ (5).

Second is on the notions of *subjectivity and autonomy*. ‘A person through free action actualizes himself; fulfills his destiny and becomes a person in a higher degree’ (Britto 2003: 94).

Third is the idea on *human dignity*.

It speaks of the human being’s God-given greatness. Despite their sinful and fallen nature humans are ontologically superior to everything else in created reality. The value of the person is not derived from an individual’s contributions, talents or achievements but has to do with the ineffable ontological significance of their being (Gronbacher 1998: 7).

Fourth is the role of *person within a community*.

‘The progress towards vertical transcendence, according to [Karol] Wojtyla, is not a solitary journey. For the actions that transform a person are for the most part taken together with others’ (Britto 2003: 95).

Last is on the concept of *participation and solidarity*.

Solidarity as understood by Wojtyla can be called a synthesis of personalism and communalism, because solidarity does not promote conflict between the good of the person and the good of the community, but these goods are achieved together (95).

In the market world, individuals are presented with a multitude of situations which they must choose between and among various options. Which good or service to select? With whom to engage in trade? Where to buy necessary items? The economic life is complex as social structures have developed around simple exchange. The average individual of today is faced with a plethora of complex economic transactions. Despite this however, human freedom remains the fundamental operating principle of this vast economic network.

Gronbacher even adds that while there are areas beyond the control of human persons due to the market’s vast network, it reflects the character of the persons involved in it. The market is what the persons are as a group.

Markets are not abstract entities but are composed of individual human persons. The flaws and imperfections of these limited persons will be apparent in the marketplace. The entire catalog of human sins found in the human heart eventually finds expression in commercial society. The moral health of a market is only as strong as the overall moral health of the culture in which the market operates. Markets do not operate in a vacuum.

While economic personalists support economic liberty and private property as congruent to human dignity, they also acknowledge the need to restrain the market to avoid exploitation and abuses. However, as to what form of restraints should there be, they call for *moral* restraints.

A persuasive moral code that encourages self-regulation and socially cooperative behavior is most successfully promoted through voluntary associations such as the family, church,

general educational institutions, and local community structures... A morally healthy culture would ultimately encourage a morally healthy marketplace.

The market world is therefore here to stay. Its necessity is evident; its sinful effects however are contingent upon human persons. It is a matter of forming a culture juxtaposed on the notions of human dignity, love and solidarity that a moral market is born. 'It is not enough to be a member of one or more community; we are also called upon to be neighbors' (Britto 2003: 96). Indeed, the need to create a moral market starts with individual's commitment to integral transformation.

Conclusion

While individuals are born into a world of social facts that precede them, and probably will persist for long after they have died, they themselves both create and maintain the social structures. The complexity of the market is something that has accumulated in the events of the past by which today's generation apparently does not have control of. Actions and practices have formed habits; individual habits, collectively practiced, have created the systems and structures. From this is traced the birth of the market with its implications. The complexity of its activities offered alternatives beyond the usual choices of good or evil. Shades of gray add ambiguity and confusion, thereby, affecting patterns of actions, behavior, and perspectives. Ultimately, this has resulted to fragmentation and pluralism. Human freedom is not anymore a choice between good and evil. While it may ultimately be between the two, the manner and way of identifying which is which has become more difficult and obscured. Eventually, this situation also conditioned the rise of oppression in various kinds and levels. In all these, philosophy and its discourses are never exempted.

Philosophy looks for its relevance in the market world. Philosophy inquires about the person and his/her meaning in this market world. Philosophy traces its rich deposit and evolving interpretations to at least offer few answers.

The market *per se* is not to be seen as inimical and hostile to the values of the ideal person. The person's ideals can exist in the market as long as the culture that will form the market embrace the values of that ideal and that cultivation of personal virtues of each and everyone in the community may upset the sinful structures. The person in the market world never despairs. While arduous, it is a hopeful situation.

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