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OF MARKETS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF
ORGANIZATIONS VOLUME 63

THE CONTESTED MORALITIES OF MARKETS

EDITORS

SIMONE SCHILLER-MERKENS

Witten/Herdecke University, Germany

PHILIP BALSIGER

University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
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CONTENTS

List of Figures and Tables vii

About the Contributors ix

PART I INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 Moral Struggles in and around Markets 3
Philip Balsiger and Simone Schiller-Merkens

PART II EMPIRICAL STUDIES

SECTION A STRUGGLES AROUND MORALLY CONTESTED MARKETS

**Chapter 2 Contested Markets: Morality,
Market Devices and Vulnerable Population** 31
Philippe Steiner and Marie Trespeuch

**Chapter 3 Relational Work as a Market Device:
An Analysis of the Contested “Voluntary”
Carbon Offset Market** 49
Alice Valiergue

**Chapter 4 “This Market Changed My Life”:
Aspirations and Morality in Markets for Counterfeits** 67
Matias Dewey

SECTION B COPING WITH MORAL STRUGGLES IN MORAL(IZED) MARKETS

**Chapter 5 The Moralization of Labor: Establishing
the Social Responsibility of Employers for Disabled Workers** 87
Eva Nadai and Alan Canonica

**Chapter 6 Playing the Double Game: How Ecopreneurs
Cope with Opposing Field Logics in Moralized Markets** 107
Lisa Suckert

Chapter 7 Ethical Banks Between Moral Self-commitment and Economic Expansion <i>Sarah Lenz and Sighard Neckel</i>	127
---	-----

SECTION C MORAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MORAL STRUGGLES IN THE MARKET FIELD

Chapter 8 Protest Rhetoric's Appeal: How Brands as Moral Entrepreneurs Recruit the Media into Moral Struggles <i>Verena E. Wieser, Andrea Hemetsberger and Marius K. Luedicke</i>	151
---	-----

Chapter 9 Activists as Moral Entrepreneurs: How Shareholder Activists Brought Active Ownership to Switzerland <i>Daniel Waeger and Sébastien Mena</i>	167
---	-----

Chapter 10 Contesting the Digital Economy: Struggles over Uber in Poland <i>Marcin Serafin</i>	187
--	-----

PART III CONCLUSION

Chapter 11 Reflections <i>Patrik Aspers</i>	205
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<i>Index</i>	211
--------------	-----

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

Fig. 9.1	Political Process Model for Moralization of Economy	170
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TABLES

Table 6.1	Overview of Strategies for Coping with Competing Institutional Logics	110
Table 8.1	Data Pool for Our Protest Rhetoric and Protest Mediation Analysis	157

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Patrik Aspers holds the chair of sociology at University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. His main interest is in sociological theory, phenomenology and economic sociology, especially markets. He is the author of several books, including, *Orderly Fashion, A Sociology of Markets* (Princeton University Press, 2010), and *Markets* (Polity Press, 2011). He is currently working on uncertainty reduction.

Philip Balsiger is Assistant Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. His work analyzes the moral embeddedness of contemporary markets, including the struggles around the institutional and cultural order of markets, the emergence of moral categories in markets, and ethical consumption. He is the author of *The Fight for Ethical Fashion* (2016) and has published papers in journals such as *European Journal of Sociology*, *Business & Society*, and *Journal of Consumer Culture*.

Alan Canonica holds a PhD in history from the University of Basel, Switzerland. He is a research associate at the School of Social Work of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Switzerland. His main areas of research are sociological and historical perspectives on the welfare system. He especially focuses on unemployment, poverty, and disability.

Matías Dewey is a Sociologist and Senior Researcher in the project area on the sociology of illegal markets at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, Germany. His research is centered on economic sociology, illegal markets, social theory, and qualitative research. Together with Jens Beckert, he edited *The Architecture of Illegal Markets: Towards an Economic Sociology of Illegality in the Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2017). His articles appear in *Socio-Economic Review*, *Current Sociology*, *Latin American Research Review*, and *Journal of Latin American Studies*.

Andrea Hemetsberger is a Professor of Branding, Head of Department of Strategic Management, Marketing & Tourism, and Speaker of the Research Platform Organizations & Society at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Her research focuses on branding, interpretive consumer research, social media, and open source, and has been published in *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Management Learning*, and the *Journal of Macromarketing*, among others.

Sarah Lenz, Dr. Phil., University of Basel, Switzerland. Her areas of research are economic sociology, social inequality, and sociology of digitization. Her latest publications include *Ethische Geldinstitute. Normative Orientierungen und Kritik im Bankenwesen*. Wiesbaden: VS (Wirtschaft + Gesellschaft), 2018. *Kulturwandel im Geldgeschäft? Potenziale einer ethischen Selbsterneuerung im Banken- und Finanzwesen* (with S. Neckel und C. Czingon), in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 2018, 70(1): 287–316.

Marius K. Luedicke is a Reader in marketing at Cass Business School, City, University of London, UK. His research explores dynamics of consumer culture and brands with a particular focus on consumer conflict and moralism. His work has been published in journals such as *Consumption Markets and Culture*, *Long Range Planning*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and the *Journal of Consumer Research*, of which he is also an Editorial Review Board Member. His research has been discussed in various international media including the *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *the Guardian*, and *Wired*.

Sébastien Mena, Cass Business School, City, University of London, UK. Sébastien is interested in change and stability in the interactions between business and society, around issues of corporate responsibility and sustainability. His research has appeared in *Academy of Management Review*, *Human Relations*, and *Journal of Management Studies*, among others.

Eva Nadai is a Professor at the School of Social Work of the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland. Her ethnographic research focuses on social policy in the field of unemployment and welfare. She is currently directing a research project on the constitution of the employability of unskilled workers as a practical accomplishment between employers, labor market intermediaries, and workers/jobseekers.

Sighard Neckel is a Professor of Sociology and Social Change, University of Hamburg, Germany. His research focus on economic sociology, social inequality, sociology of emotions, and social theory. His latest publications include *Die globale Finanzklasse*, 2018 (with L. Hofstätter and M. Hohmann); *The Sustainability Society: A Sociological Perspective*, in: *Culture, Practice & Europeanization*, 2017, 2(2); *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 2017 (with A. K. Schaffner and G. Wagner).

Simone Schiller-Merkens is a Senior Researcher at Witten/Herdecke University, Germany. She is interested in the relationship between broader societal changes - such as moralization or the current turn towards postcapitalism and degrowth - and the organizing of fields and organizations. Drawing on organization studies and social movement theories, she has looked into the role of social movements for the rise of a moral market and the self-categorization of moral entrepreneurs. Her research has appeared in the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *Historical Social Research*, and *Schmalenbach Business Review*.

Marcin Serafin is the Head of the Max Planck Partner Group for the Sociology of Economic Life at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His research interests include temporal order of markets and digital platforms. He has published in *European Journal of Sociology and Sociological Theory*.

Philippe Steiner is a Professor of Sociology at Sorbonne-université/GEMASS. His recent research is devoted to organ transplantation (*La transplantation d'organes*, Paris, Gallimard 2010), the relation between markets and morals (*Marchés contestés*, with M. Trespeuch, Toulouse, Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2015 and *Calculation and Morality*, Oxford University Press, 2019).

Lisa Suckert is a Senior Researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Germany. Her main research interests are economic sociology, sociology of time, sociological theory, organization sociology, and research on capitalism. She currently investigates the dynamics of future expectations in moments of economic and political crisis.

Marie Trespeuch (GEMASS/Sorbonne Université, France), is a Sociologist of Economics. Her works deal with digital transformations of the markets, and the relations between economic activities and moral issues. She has recently published *Marchés contestés. Quand le marché rencontre la morale*, with Ph. Steiner (2015), and different articles on collaborative consumption.

Alice Valiergue has a PhD from Sciences Po, Paris, where she worked at the Center for the Sociology of Organizations. Her research applies economic sociology, with a particular interest for the functioning of contested markets. During her doctoral research, she has conducted empirical work on the so called “voluntary” carbon offset market.

Daniel Waeger is an Assistant Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada. Her studies how organizations interact with their external environment with a focus on corporate responsibility and corporate governance. He has published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Journal of Management Studies*, among others.

Verena E. Wieser is an Assistant Professor of Branding at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Her research investigates cultural branding dynamics around brands that position themselves as moral protagonists, or meet hostility in the marketplace. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Business Research*, *the Advances of Consumer Research*, and *Research in Consumer Behavior*, among others.

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

MORAL STRUGGLES IN AND AROUND MARKETS

Philip Balsiger and Simone Schiller-Merkens

ABSTRACT

Moral struggles in and around markets abound in contemporary societies where markets have become the dominant form of economic coordination. Reviewing research on morality and markets across disciplinary boundaries, this introductory essay suggests that a moral turn can currently be observed in scholarship, and draws a direct connection to recent developments in the sociology of morality. The authors introduce the chapters in the present volume “The Contested Moralities of Markets.” In doing so, the authors distinguish three types of moral struggles in and around markets: struggles around morally contested markets where the exchange of certain goods on markets is contested; struggles within organizations that are related to an organization’s embeddedness in complex institutional environments with competing logics and orders of worth; and moral struggles in markets where moral justifications are mobilized by a variety of field members who act as moral entrepreneurs in their striving for moralizing the economy. Finally, the authors highlight three properties of moral struggles in contemporary markets: They (1) arise over different objects, (2) constitute political struggles, and (3) are related to two broader social processes: market moralization and market expansion. The introduction concludes by discussing some of the theoretical approaches that allow particular insights into struggles over morality in markets. Collectively, the contributions in this volume advance our current understanding of the contested moralities of markets by highlighting the sources, processes, and outcomes of moral struggles in and around markets, both through tracing the creation, reproduction, and change of underlying moral orders and through reflecting the status and

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power differentials, alliances, and political strategies as well as the general cultural, social, and political contexts in which the struggles unfold.

Keywords: Moral struggle; market; political contestation; sociology of morality; organization studies; economic sociology

MARKETS AND MORALITY

One cannot think about markets without touching upon questions of morality. Should cannabis be legally exchanged on markets? Should elderly care be organized by public authorities or left to the invisible hand of market exchange? Is it fair to allow anyone with a car and a driver's license to compete with licensed taxi drivers simply by signing up on a digital platform? Should animal husbandry in the meat industry be regulated or should meat be affordable for anyone at low prices? What is a fair price for coffee? Such questions point at the appropriateness of markets for the exchange of specific goods, at valuation in markets, at the legitimacy of certain market practices, and at the formal and informal rules guiding market exchange. To answer them presupposes thinking about what is good or bad, right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate in a market arena. It often involves heated debates in which actors struggle over what is considered moral in a certain market context, and contest each other's underlying values, beliefs, and worldviews.

Moral struggles in and around markets are omnipresent in contemporary capitalist societies in which markets have become the dominant form of economic coordination, and in which marketization, or the expansion of market mechanisms and ideologies to ever more spheres of social life, is ongoing (Aspers, 2011; Beckert, 2009; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001). Yet these struggles are not new. The relationship between markets and morality has been discussed for centuries, culminating in the broader question of whether markets are generally good or bad for societies. As presented by Hirschman (1992), rival views of market society differ radically in their interpretation of the moral consequences of markets (see also Fourcade & Healy, 2007). For the majority of economists, markets are the most efficient form of organizing the economy and are praised for their moral benefits (e.g., Friedman, 1962). Although generally associated with the pursuit of self-interest, markets are considered as nourishing moral behavior such as honesty, trustworthiness, collaboration, and even altruism. This in turn is said to have a positive effect on society as a whole: "Societies with higher levels of trustworthiness have faster rates of economic growth, and have happier citizens" (Zak, 2011, p. 230). In short, many economists suggest that markets turn private vices into public virtues.

Many critical social thinkers seriously question this "doux commerce" thesis and take the opposite view. Classical theorists – most prominently Marx and Polanyi – have criticized markets for their detrimental effects on individuals and society. They hold markets responsible for the destruction of the social fabric of societies and for environmental degradation. At the level of individuals, markets

“morally fail” (Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2015) by encouraging greed and insatiability. The increasing pervasiveness of market values across all spheres of society, encouraged by neoliberal reforms and marketization processes, are said to contaminate and effectively destroy moral values such as solidarity, equality or professional ethics (Brown, 2015; Sandel, 2012; Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2015).

What these opposing views have in common is that they position morals and markets as belonging to separate spheres and see one either profiting from or destroying the other (Stehr, Henning, & Weiler, 2006; Zelizer, 2011). However, not all social scientists share the idea that markets lie outside the realm of morals. Economic sociologists and anthropologists in particular see markets as being deeply intertwined with moral values, and argue that every “market exchange (is) saturated with moral meaning” (Fourcade & Healy, 2007, p. 300). Markets are morally embedded, and morals are both a condition to and an outcome of ongoing social practices in the market. We build on this perspective and argue that moral considerations are a central source of contestation and struggle in and around the marketplace. Actors involved in moral struggles do not share a common view on what is moral in a certain context and diverge in the moral judgments they make; they dispose of different kinds and amounts of power resources, and rely on the mobilization of various allies from the political arena and beyond to impose their worldviews. And arguably, three recent historical changes make contestation around morality in the market arena a defining feature of our times: first, the rise and triumph of the neoliberal “free market” ideology; second, technological innovation and the rise new market infrastructures in the form of “disruptive” digital platforms (Srnicek, 2017); and third, the fast pace of globalization. As Polanyi’s (1985) famous double movement thesis reminds us, such troubling developments may provoke counter-reactions and instigate processes of moral contestation and conflict in societies.

This volume builds on the perspective of markets as sites of moral conflicts in which actors committed to different values, norms, beliefs and interests, and equipped with various kinds of resources struggle to enact and sustain divergent moral orders (Farrell, 2015; Fligstein, 1996; Fourcade & Healy, 2007). It aims at providing deeper insights into the sources, processes, and outcomes of moral struggles in and around markets. It takes a closer look at how the underlying moral orders of markets are created, sustained, and changed. It points at the political nature of these struggles as they reflect status and power differentials, alliances, and political strategies, as well as at the general cultural, social, and political contexts in which they play out. Such a focus on processes of moral contention is a powerful heuristic strategy to uncover the multiple moral dimensions of markets.

The contributions to this collection have their origins in a workshop on moral struggles in and around markets that we organized in 2016. It gathered scholars from a variety of disciplines of the social sciences (anthropology, economic sociology, organization studies), all of them sharing an interest in studying the moral dimensions of markets. In the following, we briefly and selectively review how questions of morality and markets have already been studied in the aforementioned disciplines. Reviewing the literature, we argue that a “moral turn” can

currently be observed in the study of markets – not in the sense of an increased normative orientation of scholarship but of a growing attention to analyzing markets as morally embedded spheres. We relate this emerging theme to the renewal of the sociology of morality (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010b, 2013), and argue that the chapters in this volume allow deeper insights into understanding how morality plays out “in the wild” (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010a). The introduction then identifies three different types of moral struggles in markets, and describes the various chapters in the volume that exemplify these types. We conclude by highlighting and discussing three general properties of contentious processes in markets, and pointing out the kinds of theoretical approaches that allow particular insights into struggles over morality in markets.

RESEARCH ON MORALITY IN AND AROUND MARKETS

Authors from a variety of disciplines have studied questions regarding the morality of markets.¹ In the following, we briefly review the main threads through which organization studies, economic sociology, and economic anthropology have addressed these questions.

Organization Studies

It is fair to say that organization studies are currently witnessing a “moral turn” in the study of organizations. While not always explicitly referring to such notions as morals, morality, or moralization, an increasing part of scholarship reflects a deep concern for morally laden issues such as social injustice, inequality, poverty, and climate change, to name but a few. Yet concern for moral issues is not new to organization studies. It has long been central to critical management studies (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Grey & Willmott, 2005) whose “common core is deep skepticism regarding the moral defensibility and the social and ecological sustainability of prevailing conceptions and forms of management and organization” (Adler et al., 2007, p. 119). Out of all the theoretical perspectives reviewed here, this is the one with the most explicit normative orientation. Research in this field has uncovered persistent moral failures in contemporary business practices (e.g., Banerjee, 2008; Crane, 2013), oftentimes countering conventional wisdom in organization practice and research, such as when describing the harmful consequences of the elimination of child labor in soccer ball production for members of the affected communities (Khan, Munir, & Willmott, 2007), or when challenging the role of NGOs as moral agents (Bartley, 2018). However, critical management scholars do not consider particular organizations or managers as culprits for what they see as “de-moralized state” of the economy. They rather argue that the main obstacle toward a more moral economy is the destructiveness of the broader structures in which organizations are embedded – including capitalism, patriarchy, and neo-colonialism. Without an encompassing change of these broader societal structures, they do not see how moral values can gain a superior role in governing organizations.

While critical management studies were among the first to seriously question the moral impact of organizations, nowadays a growing number of scholars criticize the long-term research canon of organization and management studies that has avoided seriously touching upon questions related to morality. However, in the light of the urgent problems of the twenty-first century including climate change, rising social inequality, persistent poverty, migration, food and water scarcity, and the exploitation of developing countries, organization scholars increasingly advocate research that addresses these “grand challenges” (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; Suddaby, Bruton, & Walsh, 2018). To tackle these challenges, scholars have in particular studied and discussed alternative forms of organizing such as social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, and hybrid organizations – organizational forms that strive to reconcile social and environmental goals with the profit motive (e.g., Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Mair & Martí, 2006; Mair, Mayer, & Lutz, 2015; Montgomery, Dacin, & Dacin, 2012). Some have argued that institutional entrepreneurs “who can leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004, p. 657) and who are able to navigate in pluralistic environments by exploiting the moral ambivalence of different orders of worth (McInerney, 2014) are particularly suited to address fundamental social problems (Crane, 2013; Levy & Scully, 2007). Others have looked into how the institutional complexity (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011) or moral multiplexity (Reinecke, van Bommel, & Spicer, 2017) of various kinds of moralities create opportunities and constraints for political action, including moral entrepreneurship. How actors negotiate meaning around multiple orders of worth and engage in processes of justification in their daily moral life has also been the subject of research that builds on the French economies of worth framework (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Cloutier, Gond, & Leca, 2017).

Business and society scholars have proposed that collaboration with civil society actors who are mobilizing for broader social change allows corporations to turn into political actors and to further the public good (Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). This argument has been furthered in particular by scholarship on corporate social responsibility (CSR) that looks at how firms can become “morally engaged” (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015) by operating according to broader social values such as human rights, labor rights, and environmental principles (Rasche, Morsing, & Moon, 2017; Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016). Multi-stakeholder initiative such as the Forest Stewardship Council or the Fair Labor Association, in which corporations collaborate with non-market actors to develop forms of private regulation (standards, labels, certifications), has been considered a central way of such “cooperation-for-collective-benefits” (Bartley, 2007, p. 299; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), although some see it as an overly optimistic approach given the broader capitalist dynamics as well as the asymmetries of interests, values, and power between market and non-market actors in these initiatives (Banerjee, 2008; Bartley, 2018; Fleming & Jones, 2013; Willke & Willke, 2008).

The “moral turn” can also be witnessed in the rising subfield of organization scholars working at the nexus to social movement studies. This field has studied

the processes that lead to organizations attending to moral issues and considers movement activism as the main origin and central driver behind an increasing moralization of the economy (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010a; Stehr et al., 2006). Some studies look at movements as an external moral authority that target firms through contentious outsider tactics such as boycotts, protests, and lawsuits. They show how “anticorporate activism” (Soule, 2012) can affect processes within organizations despite a lack of direct access to the firms (Balsiger, 2018; Bartley & Child, 2011; King, 2008; King & Soule, 2007; McDonnell, King, & Soule, 2015; Weber, Rao, & Thomas, 2009). Other studies are interested in the constitutive role of movements for alternative, supposedly more moral ways of organizing the economy. Movements are thereby referred to as a central source of resources that allow a wide array of changes toward moralizing organizations and fields. At the organizational level, movement resources have been shown to help organizations change their structures, strategies, and identities (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Lounsbury, 2001; Schiller-Merkens, 2017; Schiller-Merkens & Balsiger, 2013; Weber et al., 2009). At the level of fields, studies showed how movements can foster the formation of private regulatory bodies (Bartley, 2007), of new organizational forms (Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000; Schneiberg, 2002; Schneiberg, King, & Smith, 2008) and help give rise to moral(ized) markets² (Dioun, 2018; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003; McInerney, 2014; Sine & Lee, 2009; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008).

Economic Sociology and Economic Anthropology

In economic sociology – a field which in some parts overlaps with organization studies – the overall structuring issue of studying morality in markets is the Polanyian question of whether and how markets are socially and morally embedded. Zelizer’s pioneering work has been particularly influential, as it challenges the customary distinctions between markets and morality in terms of what she calls “separate spheres” or “nothing but.” She calls for more nuanced descriptions, pointing in particular at the fact that markets can also be sites where moral projects are formed and meaningful social relations are asserted (Zelizer, 2011). Most economic sociologists follow this perspective and see markets as also morally embedded, although a market’s moral order is often portrayed as fragile and threatened by the forces of competition and utilitarianism. Studying the forms of moral embeddedness is one major aspect of the literature.

Beckert’s (2012) useful distinction between three roles morality plays in markets – enabling, limiting and accompanying – allows an ordering of the literature on morality in economic sociology. The *enabling role of morality* relates to shared moral values that make market exchange possible – Durkheim’s “non-contractual” element of contracts. Some studies, in particular on financial traders, have shown how even in extreme cases of a supply and demand logic, opportunistic and hostile interactions do not prevail. Instead, repeated interactions lead to the development of local moral orders around values of seniority and trust, which structure interactions on trading floors (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003). One could add to this enabling role of morality the discursive moral legitimization of business