Cultural Goods and the Limits of the Market

Russell Keat

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When is it legitimate to protect a good from market forces? Russell Keat explores this question, motivated partly by his unease at the introduction of market principles into cultural institutions such as broadcasting, education and the arts. In this context, the issue is not essentially one of distributive justice but concerns instead the proper limits of the market in a good society. The book is divided into two parts, reflecting a change of mind (if not heart) the author has undergone: the first part argues that the market is inherently incompatible with the proper organization and conduct of the activities which produce cultural goods, whilst the second backtracks, arguing that the market need not corrupt the activities which produce these goods though it may lead to their being under-supplied.

The first part of the book gives a central role to Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of a practice, understood as a form of cooperative activity that is governed by its own internal standards and which is essential for the production of particular goods. Like MacIntyre, Keat regards practices as important sources of well-being for those who participate in them. He develops MacIntyre's account in an illuminating manner by identifying an important way in which practices, and the institutions that sustain them, provide their participants with appropriate recognition for the contributions they make within these practices. The desire for such recognition is often a significant source of motivation for participants, though a practice can be distorted or corrupted if engaging in it comes to be viewed as merely a means to recognition.

Keat is sympathetic to MacIntyre's view that the market is inherently hostile to practices. Again he develops MacIntyre's account, this time employing the concept of consumer sovereignty. Consumers are ascribed sovereignty in the market not only in the sense that the market in effect gives their demands priority over the desires and interests of producers but also in the sense that they are often regarded as arbiters of what is of value. In this way, the market sets up an alternative source of 'authority' to that contained within practices. Practices may be distorted or corrupted as a result of being governed by the market, for if they are to survive in the face of market forces they may have to adjust their own standards to meet the demands of consumers. As Keat rightly

argues, there need be nothing objectionably elitist about insisting that the superior judgement of practitioners should prevail even if that requires reining in the market.

In the second part of the book, Keat backs away from the strong claim that the flourishing of practices is inherently incompatible with the market, arguing for the more nuanced conclusion that whether it is incompatible depends (amongst other things) on the nature of the practice, the particular institutions that sustain it, and the particular institutional forms taken by the market itself. He also acknowledges that even when the market does undermine a practice, it does not follow automatically that the practice should be protected from market forces. For the products of practices are of benefit to consumers, and where the interests of consumers and producers diverge we may need to decide, as citizens, which should take priority. Keat concludes the book with an ingenious argument for protecting the provision of some cultural goods that the market might otherwise under-supply, viz. those which are broadly educative, on the grounds that these goods are necessary for consumers to be able to make judgements about the overall value to their lives of the activities which consumption goods make possible.

I found the book absorbing. The argument is carefully constructed and full of insights. My only serious complaint is that the book is not sufficiently well integrated. Most of the first part of the book has been published previously as articles. Given Keat's change of mind, one might have expected him to have re-written these chapters in the light of his new arguments. He does give his reasons for not doing. He says that he may be wrong to reject his earlier position, that others may find it more convincing, and that he himself continues to find it attractive. But none of this is particularly convincing, mainly because the two parts of the book do not seem that far apart in terms of substance, even though there is a difference in tone. The first part could have been re-conceived as exploring various ways in which markets can undermine the integrity of practices, whereas the second part shows how, despite the permanent possibility of conflict, market forces can be benign in their effects on practices. The various arguments he presents need to be integrated, but there is no deep inconsistency between them.

I also had some reservations about parts of the argument in the final chapter, for example, the claim that, without extra-market protection, there is a serious and permanent danger that cultural goods, of the character required to enable people to make judgements about the value of the different activities involving consumption, will be under-supplied. I do not doubt that states may need to protect cultural goods for this reason (though this conclusion alone is unlikely to provide grounds for resisting every intrusion of market principles into the institutions and practices that produce them) but it seems to me that they need not be as endangered as Keat makes out. He employs a distinction between

goods that have transformative value and those that have demand value: goods with transformative value provide the means by which an existing set of preferences may be transformed through critical reflection, whereas goods with demand value simply satisfy existing desires. He argues that the market will favour cultural goods with demand value over those with transformative value but that it is the latter that can be expected to cultivate the requisite powers of judgement. But even if it is true that there is an incentive in a market system to create cultural products with demand value, it does not follow that they cannot have transformative value as well. The point here is not just that a cultural product may both satisfy some existing desires and create new ones. It is also that people may have desires to be excited, provoked, shocked, etc, such that cultural products can have demand value in virtue of satisfying these desires but also transformative value because they create new desires in the very process.

Andrew Mason
University of Southampton.