

# Public sociology vs. the market<sup>1</sup>

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Building on Karl Polanyi's theory of a societal reaction to the unregulated exchange of what he called fictitious commodities—labour, money and land—this paper links the history of sociology to the history of the market. If the first wave of marketization in the nineteenth century dwelt on the commodification of labour, prompting utopian sociologies, and the second wave of marketization of the twentieth century was provoked by the commodification of money, generating national policy sociologies, then the third wave of marketization that began in the last quarter of the twentieth century includes the commodification of the environment (land, air, water), and calls for public sociologies of a global dimension.

A third wave of marketization has been sweeping the world, destroying the ramparts laboriously erected to defend society against the first and second waves of the previous two centuries. Swept away are the labour rights first won by labour movements against the marketization of the nineteenth century, but also the social rights guaranteed by states against the marketization of the twentieth century. Once again the world is being levelled down. Third-wave marketization not only abolishes hard won gains of the past but also extends commodification to new realms. The commodification of nature—from the body to the environment—came home to roost during the last quarter of the twentieth century, gathering momentum as we entered the twenty-first century. Behind this third wave is an economic class of global dimensions that harnesses nation states for its own ends, instigating wars of terror as well as superexploiting mobile populations of desperate and destitute workers. The last hold out against this economic tsunami is society itself, composed of *associations* with a measure of collective self-regulation, *movements* expressed in the formation of a collective will and *publics* of mutual recognition and communication. Will society measure up to the challenge?

In facing this worldwide threat to society and thus to human existence, sociologists have four choices. They can side with the state against the market, hoping

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was the basis of an address to Tsinghua University, Beijing, 21 June 2006.

to exploit what remains of state resistance. In some nations this might make sense, such as those with a continuing legacy of social democratic politics or a strong legacy of welfare provision. Such policy science depends on finding spaces within the state from which to contain the market juggernaut—spaces that are disappearing at rates that vary from one nation to the next. Sociologists' second choice is to bury their heads in the sand, proclaiming that science must first be built before they can sally forth. We must not risk our legitimacy, our very existence by wading out into the storm. The professional sociologists sit tight waiting for the storm to pass, hoping against hope that it will not sweep us up with the rest of society. The third choice is to agitate against the first two choices, writing tracts against their moral bankruptcy, launching jeremiads against those colluding with the evils of state and market. However, critical sociology is found preaching to an evacuated audience as the storm strikes. There is, however, a fourth road that refuses to collaborate with market and state, that says science without politics is blind, that critique without intervention is empty, that calls on sociologists to engage directly with society before it disappears altogether. This is what I call public sociology. Third-wave marketization calls forth the age of public sociology.<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Three faces of marketization: South Africa, Russia and the USA**

Third-wave marketization is global, even if sociology's reaction is still national. Let me illustrate this with three countries with which I have some familiarity: South Africa, Russia and the USA. When I returned to South Africa in 1990, after a 22 year absence, I found there, in the twilight of apartheid, a sociology energized by its engagement with the anti-apartheid struggles, particularly with the labour movement. The sociology of social movement unionism was born in the 1980s, subsequently to be taken up and further developed in other global contexts. The post-apartheid transition took place in a period of renewed market triumphalism, triggered by the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. What socialist ambitions the African National Congress had developed in the course of its struggles quickly evaporated once it assumed power. Instead, South Africa opened its borders to trade and began privatizing its considerable public sector. The flood of cheap imports from countries where labour conditions were even poorer destroyed sectors of the economy, eroded the strength of trade unions, leading to the casualization of labour and the growth of the informal sector. The move to privatize water, electricity, public transportation and telecommunications was a second assault on

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<sup>2</sup>Public sociology depends on the other sociologies—professional, policy and critical—but it takes the lead.

day-to-day survival in the townships and villages. As the inhumanity of racism was arrested, another inhumanity deepened. The elimination of apartheid coincided with the (re)commodification of labour, whether through reduced social protection or suspended industrial regulation.

South African sociology, too, unable to escape the pincer movement of state and market, was pushed toward professionalization and drawn into the competitive game of international benchmarking. As wages in the universities fell behind those in the private sector and civil service, so sociologists made up their short fall by increasing reliance on policy research. The legacy of critical and public sociology was weakened not only by the pressure for a more scientized and commodified knowledge, but also by the retreat of society itself—its associations, its movements and its publics. Third-wave marketization has shattered not only society but also the disciplinary field that is its expression.

Apartheid disintegrated soon after its ideological foe, the Soviet order, collapsed—a collapse that had its own unexpected denouement. Following the chain reactions of 1989 in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union found itself competing with its erstwhile satellites for the most rapid transition to a market economy. Under the rubric of ‘shock therapy’ (which proved to be all shock and no therapy) and ‘big bang’ (schemes of wanton destruction inspired by Western economists), the party state was dismantled in order to release the spontaneous growth of the market. The quicker the destruction, so it was argued, the less likely communism would exercise revenge, and the more rapid would be capitalist reconstruction. The market did indeed spring to life, but it played havoc with production. With the liberalization of prices at the beginning of 1992 inflation spiraled out of control, businesses quickly went out of business, and wages were not paid. The realm of exchange became far more profitable than production and so resources flowed into flea markets, kiosks, supermarkets, banking, mafia, currency speculation, asset stripping and privatization. Everything was up for sale in a big grab with rapidly diminishing time horizons. The commodification of money had made it useless in economic transactions, which retreated into barter. Instead of revolution or evolution Russia faced economic involution—an economy that consumes itself, leading to a decline the likes of which had not been seen in the twentieth century. If Stalinism brought primitive accumulation, the dispossession of the peasantry and the creation of a working class with nothing but its labour power to sell, the market transition brought repeasantization, what one might call primitive disaccumulation. For so many economic survival meant falling back into subsistence production and with that an advanced society retreated into kin networks and even more narrowly into the nuclear family.

As society goes, so goes sociology. Except for a momentary effervescence in the twilight of communism, under perestroika, when civil society burst forth,

sociology had been an ideological conveyor belt for the party state. In the aftermath of communism its inherited professional base was, therefore, very weak. Marketization turned sociology into opinion polling and market research, while academic programs were as likely as not to be found in the new business schools. Without a solid foundation in professional sociology, a crude policy science prevailed. Critical and public sociology could scarcely be found.

Paradoxically we find almost the opposite in the USA. Third-wave marketization has struck here too, aiming to destroy and uproot society, stimulating a lively response from professional sociology, but this remains bottled up in the academy, unable to make effective engagement with the wider world. With a society sinking into oblivion alongside complex and sturdy research and teaching establishments, the potential contribution of a public sociology only grows. Yet its reception and adoption in society face ever greater obstacles.

Take the example of Hurricane Katrina, which brought down levees and flooded the city of New Orleans in August 2005, killing over 1400 civilians. Much attention has been rightly awarded to the abysmal failure of the federal administration to cope with this unnatural disaster. It was not as if the catastrophe was unanticipated—knowing how precarious were the levees holding back the flood waters, scientists had predicted their collapse in the face of such a hurricane with the very same consequences that befell this beleaguered city. The levees had not been rebuilt, despite appeals to Congress from local administration, because the state had other budgetary priorities, not least in recent years the war in Iraq. Indeed, militarism also explains the failure of emergency relief. For one, Louisiana's home guard, which was mobilized to handle the crisis, was depleted by postings to Iraq. More important, the Department of Homeland Security, newly created after 9/11, swallowed up FEMA (the national Federal Emergency Management Agency), as military security trumped economic and social security. Third-wave marketization has gone hand in hand with the gutting of what there was of a welfare state and with deepening inequalities, so that the poor and largely black population of New Orleans was defenceless against the flooding, losing their homes and their possessions, now scattered across the nation in their trailers. There is no excuse for the richest country in the world losing so many people to a predictable event, especially when across the Gulf a small country like Cuba considers it a national tragedy if a single person dies at the hands of a hurricane, even one as strong as Katrina.

Third-wave marketization provides the context for the social paralysis of the state in its response to the hurricane, but marketization was also a more direct cause of the devastation. The rapid and unregulated growth of New Orleans's leisure industry recovered land at the expense of those wetlands that are crucial for absorbing flood waters. Capitalism also drove the oil drilling in the Gulf

just off the New Orleans shoreline, causing subsidence of the land, making the city that much more vulnerable to flooding. Finally, scientists have shown that global warming, another product of third-wave marketization, intensifies the ferocity of hurricanes by warming the sea. Thus, with a profligate and unconstrained capitalism we can expect disaster damage to only increase. The US state was deaf to all the warnings of scientists, whether it be those predicting the stronger hurricanes, the weakness of the levees or the unequal social impact of such a disaster.

Perhaps economists with their interests in expanding the market or political scientists with their complementary interest in guaranteeing the political conditions for market expansion may have the ear of capitalists and the state, but sociologists with their commitment to society can have no such illusions! Indeed, the US state, for example, rather than deploying society to secure its own ends, has declared war on civil society, attacking one trench after another. Sociologists, therefore, have to turn away from the policy worlds of state and economy that know only too well what they do not want. Sociologists have to seek out and cultivate other audiences, namely publics, which might restore the power of society organized for its own self-defence, and as a countervailing force to third-wave marketization.

## 2. Three waves of commodification: labour, money, and land

My three cases—South Africa, Russia and the USA—show how third-wave marketization intensifies and is intensified by the dissolution of organized capitalism, state socialism and the last hold-outs against decolonization. Today state regulation deepens rather than contains the commodification of labour, money and land, or what Karl Polanyi called fictitious commodities. Polanyi argued that commodifying these entities, that is subjecting them to unimpeded market exchange, destroyed their use value and undermined their utility as factors of production. The mode of exchange rebels against the mode of production.

Much of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* is devoted to the commodification of labour in nineteenth-century England. With the revoking of labour protection under Speenhamland and the proscription of outdoor relief, labour was buffeted by the seismic shifts in market forces. Capital could hire and fire labour at will with no concern for its survival, destroying the traditional community within which it had been embedded, yet at the same time desperation forged a new society out of social movements, such as the factory movement to restrict the length of the working day, and out of associations, such as burial societies, trade unions, cooperatives and utopian experiments (e.g. Robert Owen's New Lanark). In brief, the commodification of labour led to the spontaneous defensive self-reconstitution of society.

Polanyi carries his analysis into the twentieth century, shifting from the focus on labour to the focus on money. When money becomes the subject of unregulated market exchange, as in Russia immediately after the collapse of communism, uncertainty of value becomes so great that businesses cannot function. Already in the nineteenth century states created their own nation banks to regulate currencies and exchange rates, but the adoption of the gold standard led to business-threatening fluctuations in the value of currencies. States responded with protectionism, insulating their national economies from global markets in more or less draconian ways. Fascism, Stalinism (collectivization and planning), Social Democracy and the New Deal were divergent ways of coping with second-wave marketization, but they all involved restoring certain labour rights and extending them to social rights, including minimum wages, pensions, education and welfare. To be sure these social rights could come with narrower political rights and the regulation of society. Even colonialism might be included within such a protectionist reaction to the market, in particular, strategies of indirect rule that sustained rather than destroyed traditional communities, thereby reproducing colonial working-class connections to subsistence economies. Second-wave marketization and the counter-movement by states coincided with Eric Hobsbawm's short twentieth century that begins with World War I and ends with the fall of communism.

Polanyi never anticipated a third wave of marketization. Perhaps this was because he did not distinguish between a first wave and a second wave within his single 'great transformation.' More likely it was because the Fascist and Stalinist reactions to the second wave were so calamitous with respect to human freedom, laying the basis of World War II. Polanyi thought human kind would never again take the road of market fundamentalism. Instead, he projected a far more optimistic future in which markets and states would be subject to the direction and regulation of self-organizing society. He was wrong on both counts: first, there would be a third wave of marketization and we are in the middle of it now and second, no self-regulating society would emerge strong enough to keep market and state at bay. How should we characterize third-wave marketization that begins in the middle 1970s and what societal reactions can we observe? I propose three dimensions.

Following Polanyi we see that first-wave marketization generates a counter-movement against the commodification of labour, while second-wave marketization generates a counter-movement against the commodification of money. Third-wave marketization, I claim, generates a counter-movement against the commodification of land and the environment, or, more generally, against the commodification of nature. Although land and the environment were commodified in the first and second waves of marketization, they had yet to lead to the wholesale devastation that now besets this planet. The effects of the

commodification of nature have crept up on us, but they have been cumulative. Thus, so many of the struggles to-day are around the protection of access to land, whether it be squatters or shack dwellers defending themselves against local governments trying to clean them out of the urban landscape, whether it be middle class residents of the city opposing high-rise developers, whether it be indigenous peoples refusing to give up their land, or farmers battling against dams that would destroy their existence, whether it be the struggles for clean air, against the dumping of toxic waste, against privatization of water and electricity. And so the list goes on. The commodification of labour and money, of course, are still important, indeed are as important as ever, as I indicated above in my accounts of South Africa, Russia and the USA, but the reaction to the commodification of nature is the distinctive feature of third-wave marketization.

The second way to characterize the third-wave marketization is its scale. It is truly global in its causes and its ramifications. Once the barricades of state socialism, colonialism and to a lesser extent social democracy crumbled, there was no place to hide from the storm of marketization. There is progression in the scale of reaction. If the response to the commodification of labour under first-wave marketization was often local but aspiring to be national, and if the response to the commodification of money under second-wave marketization was national but aspiring to be global (IMF, World Bank), then the response to the commodification of nature under third-wave marketization may set out from the local but it aspires to be global. Since the effects of global warming, nuclear accidents and contagious diseases are global, so the response, in the final analysis, also has to be global, even if this global response involves knitting together local movements.

The third way to characterize successive waves of marketization is not the advance from one fictitious commodity to the next, but in terms of the successive roll back of defences erected against marketization. If second-wave marketization first destroys the ramparts of labour organization before building new ramparts of state social protection, then third-wave marketization rolls back both labour and social rights. We see this everywhere as trade unions decline, as real wages of working classes fall, as social security, pensions and welfare all contract and not just in one country but across the world—although to be sure very unevenly. On what foundation then will the next round of defences be built—defences that will fend off the degradation of nature but also recover labour rights and social rights? The deeper the challenge to humanity and community, the deeper the reaction. In response to third-wave marketization we will need to develop the defence of human rights—the defence of a community of mutual recognition as human beings—that will necessarily incorporate labour and social rights.

Human rights, like all rights discourses, are easily appropriated and narrowed to suit particular interests. The USA defends its imperial adventures

and colonial-like occupations as the furtherance of human rights, all the while denying basic human rights to its own citizens. Electoral democracy becomes a human right that justifies invasion, killing and subjugation abroad while hiding it at home. Markets themselves are advanced in the name of the human right to freedom of choice and the protection of private property. Human rights that are universal rather than particular, and that, therefore, include labour rights and social rights must begin with the protection of human community, that involves first recognizing and treating each other as ends rather than means. Human rights then is a complex terrain of struggle in which groups stake their claim on the basis of their own interests, but ultimately human rights is about the protection of humanity, galvanizing radical struggles of global proportions against third-wave marketization.

### **3. Three waves of sociology: utopian, policy and public**

The thesis of this paper is that, to each wave of marketization there corresponds a distinctive sociology. Sociology grew up in the nineteenth century together with civil society, itself a response to first-wave marketization. Sociology began as a moral enterprise defending society against the market, especially the destruction of community as newly proletarianized, destitute and degraded populations made the city their home. Sociology indulged in all sorts of schemes to circumvent or leap beyond the market, drawn from such schemes as Robert Owen's in England, the Narodniki in Russia, the cooperative and the commune movement in the USA. This was the era of utopian sociology. One might say that Marx and Engels were the original utopians in their postulation of communism that would arise out of the ashes of the inevitably self-destroying capitalism. Auguste Comte imagined a familial order led by sociologists while Durkheim postulated an organic solidarity built on corporatist organization of the division of labour, a form of guild socialism.

Of course, Marx and Durkheim would rail against being labelled utopian. After all, they saw themselves as scientists, committed to what is and what would necessarily be by virtue of the laws of society. Still, from today's standpoint, for all the revolutionary breakthroughs they brought to the study of society, their science remained speculative, especially as regards the future, strongly imbued with moral concerns to reverse the degradation brought about by nineteenth-century capitalism. Both focused on the division of labour as the foundation of their science and the central role of labour in their utopian projections.

Second-wave marketization that took off after World War I challenges the rights that had been won by labour through trade unions and political parties. However, it was the ravages of international trade and exchange that threatened the conditions of capital accumulation and prompted protectionist reactions



**Table 1** Waves of marketization and sociology

|                           | <b>First-wave marketization</b> | <b>Second-wave marketization</b> | <b>Third-wave marketization</b> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Fictitious commodity      | Labour                          | Money                            | Nature                          |
| Locus of response         | Local community                 | Nation state                     | Global civil society            |
| Rights                    | Labour                          | Social                           | Human                           |
| Orientation of sociology  | Utopian                         | Policy                           | Public                          |
| Science                   | Speculative                     | Positivist                       | Reflexive                       |
| Geographical locus/origin | Western Europe                  | USA                              | Semi-periphery                  |

from the state. The reactions ranged from fascism to the New Deal and from Stalinism to social democracy, but they all instituted a measure of social (but not political) rights, including security in unemployment, pensions, welfare and education. Sociology developed accordingly. In those countries that reacted to second-wave marketization with authoritarian means, whether Fascist Germany or Stalinist Soviet Union, there sociology was eclipsed, but where it reacted with some form of social democracy, whether in the USA or Sweden, a new type of sociology developed that collaborated with the state to defend society against the market. This was the era of policy sociology of state-funded research into social problems. Indeed, in England an autonomous sociology barely existed—but instead the field of social administration had grown up, integrally connected to the welfare state.

In the USA we see the development of a professional sociology that had greater autonomy from the state. Still, this sociology was concerned with the stabilization of society—stratification theory based on a given prestige hierarchy of occupations, functionalist theories of the family, the regulation of deviance, industrial sociology concerned with the pacification and extraction of labour, political sociology focusing on the social bases of electoral democracy and the containment of extremism. The overarching theoretical framework was defined by structural functionalism—the delineation of functional prerequisites to keep any social system in equilibrium and how those prerequisites are met by the institutions of society. During this period sociology developed its own positive science, namely detailed attention to empirical research, new methods of data collection and data analysis and the elaboration of so-called middle range theories that nestled in the scaffolding of structural functionalism. Positive science was a reaction against the earlier speculative science that was propelled by moral reform. Positive science wanted to expel moral questions to a completely different sphere, antithetical to science. If the first wave of sociology was utopian, the second policy wave tended to think that utopia had already arrived and

mistook it for reality. It was riveted to the present, concerned only with ironing out its small irrationalities.

So what sort of sociology marks the response to third-wave marketization? As we have seen, this latest round of marketization rolls back the statist defence of society, it takes the offensive against labour rights and social rights. Unlike the second wave of marketization that provoked an anti-market reaction from the state—protectionism, planning, wage guarantees, welfare and public ownership of the means of production—third-wave marketization elicits the collusion of the state. Still a regulatory state, it is nonetheless regulation for rather than against the market. It undoes all that was achieved against second-wave marketization. Society is, thus, under a double assault from economy and state. Unable to gain much leverage in the state or with the market, the fate of sociology rests with society. Sociology's self-interest lies in the constitution of civil society where it barely exists and in its protection where it is in retreat. Hence the claim we are living in the age of public sociology.

We are, in a sense, returning to first-wave marketization of the nineteenth century but with a difference. First, sociology cannot limit its engagement to local publics, but, as I have argued, it has to be concerned with knitting together a global civil society. Second, there is a utopian dimension but linked not to imaginary utopias but to actual existing utopias, whose conditions of existence and expanded reproduction it is our task to explore with all the technical instruments at our disposal. Third, this calls for a science very different from the speculative science of the nineteenth century. It calls for a science that is no longer rooted in value consensus and stability, but one that seeks to develop alternative values, hence the importance of value discussion, what I have called critical sociology. We no longer strive for a single paradigmatic science but a discipline made up of multiple intersecting research programs, founded on the values of different publics but, at the same time, working out theoretical frameworks through engaging their external anomalies and internal contradictions. I call this a reflexive science, a science that is not frightened of reflecting on its value foundations nor of articulating them publicly, but a science nonetheless.

If first-wave sociology emanated from Europe, and second-wave sociology reached its apotheosis in the USA, where will third-wave sociology find its energy? In thinking of vibrant public sociologies, I turn to such countries as South Africa, especially in the climax to its anti-apartheid struggles, Brazil under post-authoritarian regimes, or France with its intellectualized public sphere, open to sociological perspectives. We might say that public sociology is driven on the one side by the need to construct or defend an autonomous civil society where it is absent or weak or, on the other side, by a vibrant civil society that calls forth an engaged sociology. However, there are other conditions for a public sociology. It has longevity when it has a well-developed scientific

foundation in professional sociology, but it also requires a sense of its own values that comes from a critical sociology. As sociology becomes more global, borrowings across national lines become more feasible and more important. Portugal, for example, after its 1974 revolution, overthrowing nearly 50 years of dictatorship, drew on critical and professional traditions within American and French sociologies, harnessing them to a vibrant civil society.

Global borrowings present dangers as well as possibilities—the hegemony of US professional sociology can constrain the responsiveness of national sociologies to local concerns. Writing in English for foreign professional audiences inevitably threatens the vitality of local public sociology. Whereas inspirational public sociologies may appear first in semi-peripheral countries, their effects, too, can ramify across the world, but even such a counter-hegemonic movement will rely on inputs from other countries. Whereas the hegemonic globalization of sociology might harness a public sociology become policy sociology to a dominant professional sociology, the counter-hegemonic globalization will subordinate professional and policy sociology to the conditions of expansion of public sociology, especially an organic public sociology.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this brief essay I have tried to show why sociology has to take a public turn. Sociology lives and dies with society. When society is threatened so is sociology. We can no longer rely on the state to contain the market and so sociologists have to forge their own connections to society, i.e. to develop public sociology. We have to do more than passively serve society, but have to conserve and constitute society. In this sociology has many potential allies and partners within society as they too come under increasing assault from state and market. That is the broader contemporaneous context within which sociology operates.

We cannot think of the contemporary context outside its past. The three waves of marketization and their corresponding configurations of sociology cannot be compartmentalized as three successive but separate periods. Each wave deposits its legacy into the next wave in a dialectical regression or progression. So the waves of commodification deepen as they move regressively from labour to money to nature, each wave incorporating the commodification of the previous period, just as the counter-movement leads progressively from labour rights to social rights (which includes labour rights) to human rights, which includes all three. The dialectical development of sociology is rather different. Policy sociology with its value neutral positive science is a reaction against utopian sociology with its moral infusions and its speculative science, while public sociology tries to bind the value commitment of the first period to the scientific advances of the second. Commodification and its counter-movement for decommodification

deepen with every wave, whereas sociology develops through thesis, antithesis and synthesis. However, even here we should be careful not to think in terms of discrete sociologies, but rather reconfigurations of the four elements of sociology, in which the weight of professional, policy, critical and public sociologies shifts over time. Indeed, a public sociology cannot really take off in a sustained manner unless it is impelled by critical sociology and grounded in a professional sociology.

The rhythm and spacing of the waves also varies from country to country. In the advanced capitalist world of today, the waves are more clearly separated in time, whereas it might be said in countries such as Russia, India or China that there is a compression of waves. Certainly in Russia the commodification of labour, money and nature was simultaneous and intense upon the fall of the Soviet Union, so much so that counter-reaction was suffocated before it began. Sociology suffered in parallel. In China, on the other hand, the intensification of the commodification of labour, money and nature also coincided in the post-Mao period, yet they were still regulated by the party state, which made for economic development rather than economic involution, imprinting itself on the different legacies of sociology. National variation notwithstanding, we can still identify the present era as one in which the commodification of nature concentrates within itself the cumulative impact of commodification more generally. It becomes the planet's most pressing problem and also becomes generative of social movements, held together by the language of human rights.

Can sociology meet the challenges of third-wave marketization, can sociology partake in the knitting together of organizations, movements and publics across the globe? Or will it too submit to commodification—the commodification of the *production* of knowledge in the university and elsewhere, subject to criteria of profitability, but also the commodification of the *dissemination* of knowledge by the mass media? On both counts it will be important for sociology to work directly with organizations, movements and publics so that its production and distribution compose a singular process outside the control of market and state.