Keywords
for American Cultural Studies

Edited by
Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler

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Market

Meredith L. McGill

References to “the market” abound in contemporary American cultural studies scholarship, but historians and critics who use this term are not always referring to the same thing. As an abstract noun, “market” can refer to the potential demand for a commodity or service, or to the actual state of trade at any one moment; it can refer to the trading network for a particular commodity, or, more generally, to the business of buying and selling. The phrases “market society” and “market culture” are frequently used to invoke the promises and constraints of a capitalist economy, even though the buying and selling of goods, often to distant consumers, is not specific to capitalism. Economic historians and political theorists have elaborated distinctions that can help us to use this term with greater precision: to distinguish stages in the historical development of the U.S. economy; and to attend to the uneven growth of markets for different kinds of goods.

From the early modern period through the nineteenth century, the dominant meaning of the word “market” was highly specific. Markets happened at a particular time and place; they involved groceries and other provisions, but were built around the sale of perishable goods such as meat. Butcher-turned-historian Thomas De Voe’s Market Book (1862), for example, details which butchers occupied which stalls in the public markets of the major Eastern seaboard cities. The kinds of barter and commerce—and the social mixing—that occurred in such markets are ancient in origin and remarkably persistent as cultural practices (Agnew 1986; Stallybrass and White 1986). When scholars of the nineteenth-century United States use the term “market,” however, they are usually thinking of the shift from marketplaces to a market economy—the articulation of local and regional markets into a national trade system. Economic historians have a number of ways of judging when the coordination of local markets has occurred: when prices fluctuate in sync with one another, and when they converge, that is, when the inter-regional practice of buying in cheap markets and selling in expensive ones works to narrow the price differentials that fuel such trading (Rothenberg 1992). Other threshold conditions of a market system include the establishment of a competitive market for labor and the removal of geographic, social, and cultural impediments to the mobility of goods and labor. In the United States, a national trade system linking geographically distant and diverse regions was in place by the 1850s, but it was not until the final decades of the nineteenth century, when the Supreme Court began routinely to use the Constitution’s “commerce clause” to overturn state and local regulation of interstate trade, that a truly national market was created (Bensel 2000).

Historians and theorists disagree as to when and how markets have made a difference in Western societies. Karl Polanyi (1944/2001) regards the nineteenth-century attempt to set up a self-regulating market—one subject neither to government regulations nor to
the interventions of individuals—as the crucial pivot point between an economy that was embedded in social relations and one that turned social relations to market ends. Polanyi identifies the separation of economic relations from government superintendence and the exposure of individual workers to a competitive and often ruthless market for their labor as the most consequential legacies of what he called “The Great Transformation.” By contrast, C. B. Macpherson (1962) locates the shift from a status society to a simple market society as early as the seventeenth century. In a customary or status society, neither land nor labor could be sold freely, while in a simple market society workers began to be bound by contracts rather than by their position in a social hierarchy rooted in relationships to the land. For Macpherson, the shift to a “possessive market society” characteristic of mature capitalism depended on an emerging consensus that all individuals maintained the right to sell their labor, a right that outstripped land as the primary locus of property and the engine of capitalist expansion (Haskell and Teichgraber 1996).

Part of what makes “the market” a tricky concept is that its character shifts depending on one’s vantage point. From the perspective of government agencies and private organizations seeking to regulate corporate behavior, the market is aligned with the private sphere and is often depicted as dangerously independent of public oversight. And yet, from the perspective of women seeking economic independence or merely to work for wages outside the home, or from the perspective of emancipated slaves seeking to loosen their ties to the land, the market is aligned with the public sphere and is cast as a site of potential liberation. Bruce Robbins (1993, xiv) has suggested that “the capitalist economy, which figures as both private (for liberals) and public (for feminists)” is “a crucial place both where the public/private opposition breaks down, and where it demonstrates its resistance as well.”

Some differences in scholars’ usage of the term can be traced to the transfer from history to literary and cultural studies of the idea of a “Market Revolution,” a term popularized by Charles Sellers (1991). Sellers focuses on the social and cultural effects of economic change in order to forge a closer relationship between political history and economic history, recasting the period that had been known as the “Age of Jackson” or the “Second Party System” in explicitly economic terms. Sellers argues that in the antebellum United States, the shift from subsistence farming to a market economy was at every stage politically contested—in debates over centralized banking, national transportation networks, and tariff rates, as well as in the struggle over slavery. Literary and cultural critics, on the other hand, have tended to treat the “Market Revolution” as inexorable and apolitical, something that happened more or less in a single stroke, leaving only aftershocks for criticism to trace. The resulting emphasis on the market as an all-encompassing set of forces has obscured the differences between and among markets that developed at different rates in different regions, offering different sets of constraints and opportunities. After all, to note that there is a “mar-
a particular good or service doesn't begin to describe how that market works, or what it is like to be subject to or subjects of that market. For instance, the market for literature in the United States was shaped by a host of local, institutional, and state forces; it was uneven in its development and uncertain in its reach, differed markedly by genre and format, and was complicated by the persistence of barter, exchange, patronage, gift economies, gentlemanly publishing, vanity publishing, and the substantial publishing operations of religious and charitable organizations. While cultural critics often use "market" as a synonym for "audience," the purchasers of books may not read them, and readers, such as those who read this book in a library, may not be purchasers.

Scholars as different as Fernand Braudel (1982–84) and J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) have questioned the comprehensiveness of the reach of market culture at any one point in time. Braudel distinguishes market behavior, which he considers to be universal, from the historically specific development of monopoly capitalism, which he regards as a subversion of the ideals of market-exchange. Gibson-Graham provocatively argues that left-wing critics of capitalism have exaggerated its power by popularizing the image of a unified, totalizing market-system. Gibson-Graham details a range of anticapitalist and noncapitalist economic practices, such as self-employment, domestic labor, and producer cooperatives, which resist the logic of capitalism, even as they overlap with and depend on the market system. Both scholars enjoin us not to assume that the dominant economic system absorbs and subsumes all forms of social and economic activity.

Along these lines, critics frequently use the term "market" as part of a compound noun, referring to the condition of trade with respect to a single commodity: book market, slave market, marriage market, stock market. Critical attention to the differences between and among multiple markets could reorient American cultural studies, encouraging us to consider different histories, rates of nationalization, and patterns of local and regional resistance. Attention to the specificity of markets might also help us to think about the ways in which a focus on the market-in-general has obscured a history of markets that is centrally shaped by race and gender. The print market provides an early instance of the general sense of the word. With the exception of publishers' trade sales, books and periodicals were not sold at a particular time and place but were made available at multiple sites and, for much of the nineteenth century, circulated chiefly through the mails.

By contrast, the dominant nineteenth-century image of a market localized in time and space came to be the slave market—a spectacular commodification of human labor that was, paradoxically, bound up with a critique of labor-as-commodity. Slaveholders frequently defended the slave system through passionate criticism of the degradations to which wage-laborers were subject in British and Northern factories. In order to sustain this critique, slaveowners needed to deflect attention from horrific scenes of buying and selling slaves to the supposedly more favorable labor conditions on the plantation (W. Johnson 1999). And yet
the centrality of the slave market to the spread of the slave system should complicate the idea that the establishment of a market for labor could in any simple sense mark the threshold of a market system. The origin of the very notion of economy in household management similarly calls out for an account of how the idea of the market was wrenched away from contexts that included or privileged women. Scholars of nineteenth-century U.S. culture such as Gillian Brown (1990), Amy Dru Stanley (1996), and Lori Merish (2000) have detailed the centrality of gender to the legitimation and inner workings of an emergent market society, while Wendy Gambr (1997) has called our attention to the thriving millinery and dressmaking trades, which employed hundreds of thousands of women but which are frequently overlooked in male-centered definitions of what counts as commercial enterprise.

There is much to be gained by considering how the market-in-general—the abstraction of value, mobility of labor, and regional integration necessary for economic development on a national scale—has shaped U.S. society, transforming modes of sociality and fostering ideals of self-regulation and economic rationality. But there is also much to be gained by attending to the historical specificity of markets and the processes by which they are transformed into what is typically imagined today to be a single economic system, synonymous with capitalism. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies the understanding of the singular noun “market” as “the operation of supply and demand in the competitive free market,” and the understanding of “market forces” as independent economic factors, as extremely recent coinages—1970 for the former and 1942 for the latter. As we strive to understand the changing relations between economic conditions and U.S. culture, we should be careful not to project backwards a vision of the saturation and global reach of a market economy that many take to be characteristic of the twenty-first century.

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**Marriage**

Elizabeth Freeman

Marriage seems to be an ordinary fact of life, not a contested concept. In U.S. culture, however, the term “marriage” has pointed to two simultaneous but incompatible functions. As a component of U.S. kinship law, marriage sanctions particular sexual alliances, from which property relations are determined. It thereby defines a sphere of protected sexual and economic interests, whose exterior is marked by sexual “deviants.” Yet as an aspect of modern emotional life in the United States, marriage is the ideological linchpin of intimacy—the most elevated form of chosen interpersonal relationship. At the core of political debate and much critical debate in American cultural studies is whether marriage is a matter of love or law, a means of securing social stability or of realizing individual freedom and emotional satisfaction. These have become national questions; marriage seems so tied to