DEALING WITH VALUES THAT DIFFER ACROSS CONCERNED CONSUMER GROUPS AND POLICY MAKERS —
VALUES AS ELEMENTS IN SOCIETAL CONCERNS

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Consumer sovereignty is one of the pillars of the ideology of market liberalism, where Homo Economicus, is intended to operate among free market mechanisms, such as product labels and other sources of information. According to this principle, our daily purchases ought to reflect our – authoritative – decision of how society’s resources should be allocated (Klintman and Boström, 2006). The narrow version, namely that Homo Economicus ought to choose products only based on price and “quality” of the end product, might have been useful in times when food was produced close to where it was consumed: In less advanced societies, consumers did not need formal schemes of information to get a picture of how animals had been treated on the nearby farm. Yet, with the developments of food technologies and pesticide chemistry as well as with the increasing distance of food production and processing in a globalised food market, consumers’ pictures of production processes and of the whole food chain have become blurred. So rather than claiming that consumers have suddenly — or during the last decade or two — moved from an Homo Economicus position (only being concerned with price and quality of the product in a narrow sense) to a late modern diversification of consumer rationalities (by incorporating a broadening of values; ethical, metaphysical, aesthetic), the wider interests have probably existed among broad consumer groups all through history. What is, however, relatively new is the acknowledgement among several consumer groups that it may no longer trust the State to fully ensure that food production is based on values beyond those surrounding price and product quality. This is a main reason why societal concerns among various groups on the market keep getting increased attention in media and policy debates. This is, for instance, reflected in the many surveys of societal concerns among the public. The EU survey below is one such study, which indicates fairly high levels of public concerns for animal welfare, respect for the environment, and decent conditions for farmers.

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When discussing and debating societal concerns among consumers and other actors in the sector(s) of food and agriculture (e.g. surrounding various environmental risks, animal welfare, working conditions among farmers), it is impossible not to bring in, and trying to make sense of, the multi-faceted concept of values. The aim of this paper is to analyse the concept of values as well as practical challenges involved when actors and organisations in the sectors of food and agriculture are to relate to the wide array of values behind societal concerns when developing policies, not least with trade implications. Theoretically, the paper makes use of works on sociology, moral philosophy, and policy analysis. Examples and data are collected from my own recent studies on preconditions for green consumerism, and social concerns among citizen consumers. In addition to the challenges of defining values, there is the challenge that values surrounding food and agriculture encompass an immense problem area. In light of this immensity, this paper is built on a critical discussion of four myths in the area; other issues within the broad problem area are beyond its scope.

The paper claims that various types of values are multi-faceted and intertwined in our decisions surrounding food purchases. Values could – and should – nevertheless be taken into account in consumer-related policy making, such as in the development of a limited number of schemes of consumer information. In cases where there are risks of market protectionism (such as when the North tries to isolate itself from products from the South), one should scrutinise the factual claims (sometimes erroneous ones) that may lie behind such preferences — often euphemistically expressed as ethical consumer values (e.g. environmental concerns). Although facts can rarely resolve disputes across conflicting, deeply rooted values, facts may be useful for assessing to what extent a certain production
process is consistent with the values held. For instance, there are several cases where food produced far away may harm the environment less — even when transportation is taken into account — than food produced domestically. Moreover, an avenue towards improved performance on animal welfare or on the environment may be through collaboration in an open and transparent market rather than in a partially closed one.

**What are values?**

Concepts that all of us use in our daily lives are particularly important to define. *Values* is such a concept. It can be found in a wide range of disciplines, where economics is among the disciplines where values are analysed and discussed particularly intensively. Yet, the context of societal concerns makes it necessary for us to go beyond the strictly economic perspective of values, and move to broader social scientific perspectives. Turning to the social sciences and the humanities, there are indeed several definitions of values, among which two are mentioned here. In the first definition, values are said to be

“[…] interests, pleasures, likes, preferences, duties, moral obligations, desires, wants, needs, aversions and attractions, and many other modalities of selective orientation” (Pepper, 1958:7).

The second definition is briefer, and presents values as

“ideas held by human individuals or groups of what is desirable, proper, good or bad (Giddens, 1989: 732).

Notwithstanding the fact that the two definitions differ – the former could be labelled “maximalist”, and latter “minimalist” – both of them imply that values as a concept is broad and vague. Yet, this should not make us try to force values into a stricter format. What we could do, however, is to briefly distinguish between values and similar terms. Firstly, values are different from attitudes, in that the latter are more specific. For instance, a person’s negative attitudes towards compromises in animal welfare might reflect her ethical or metaphysical values. Secondly, values are different from norms. Whereas the concrete practice of purchasing meat that is labelled organic can be a norm among a certain group of people, this might reflect their values. In contrast to values, attitudes are thus specific views whereas norms concern concrete practices.

Although the above-mentioned distinctions do not turn values into something very clear cut, the best way to move forward is – in our view – to try to make use of this breadth of values when examining the role they play in issues of societal concerns. With this ambition, it is nevertheless possible to make the concept more manageable by distinguishing between various types of values. For our purposes, a division into four value types is fruitful, namely ethical, aesthetic, metaphysical, and material values (Miegel and Johansson, 1992).

Applied to values surrounding food and agriculture, ethical values are probably what first come to mind, namely as what is right and wrong (morally) about various agricultural and food-related processes, in terms of environmental impact (locally and/or globally), the working conditions for farmers or the welfare of animals. It is important to note that ethical values both refer to issues that are substantive (the impact of the actual products and production processes) and procedural (whether the decision-making processes of agricultural and food-related policies have been fair, inclusive, etc.). Aesthetic values denote the aspect of a product or production process being stimulating or unstimulating to the senses (food tasting or looking appetising, for instance). This meaning of aesthetic is the most obvious one. Moreover, influenced by sociology we would like to emphasise a different – and for our purposes even more relevant – aspect of aesthetic values, where these refer to the value in
terms of self-expression, style and identity of individuals and groups. Concepts such as “eco-chic”, “green fashion”, and “organic food trends” partly imply aesthetic values. Moving to *metaphysical values*, these refer to positions and practices corresponding or not corresponding to various outlooks of life. Halal, Kosher, and vegetarianism based on outlooks of life are examples of manifestations of metaphysical values. *Material values*, finally, have to do with conceptions of what choices of food products and production processes are economically or practically valuable, here surrounding societal values.

**Myth 1: The four value dimensions are best dealt with as distinct and clearly separable dimensions of people’s value judgements**

Whereas it is quite simple to distinguish between the above-mentioned value dimensions in theory, it is far more difficult do so when analysing concrete positions, statements and choices of people. Firstly, values have a real impact on our perceptions. As an example, tomatoes that are falsely labelled “domestic” or “organic” are actually perceived as tasting better than unlabelled tomatoes (Ekelund and Tjärnemo, 2004). Secondly, in very few cases, if in any, only one value dimension influences our concerns or preferences. For instance, several empirical studies indicate that conventionally grown, domestic products are often preferred over organically grown, foreign ones. Also, consumers often regard “local” and “domestic” production as “ethically/environmentally sound”. This is also how local production often is presented or implied by local or regional producers and retailers. Finally, the material values are particularly difficult to completely discern from the other dimensions. Although we mentioned above that we would focus on social scientific dimensions of values rather than on economic ones, it would — in our view — be far too limiting to exclude economic aspects, at least in terms of how various individuals and groups perceive the financial aspects of societal concerns surrounding food and agriculture. As food and agriculture to such a large extent are sectors connected to our roles as consumers, ethical, aesthetic and metaphysical values are always related to the practical and financial dimension of food choices. For example, when investigating people’s views on local food production or eco-labelled food, the implications of their production processes are highly intertwined with perceptions of the regional economy and employment.

In sum, to understand the value foundations of societal concerns, policy makers should acknowledge the relationship between ethical, aesthetic, material and metaphysical dimensions of values. In issues of food and agriculture, these dimensions are frequently intertwined, entailing that the ethical dimension is only one part of consumers’ societal values. This means that a mixture of value dimensions must be dealt with in market and trade policy making.

**Myth 2: Conflicts between deeply rooted values can be dealt by bringing better facts of the same kind**

The second myth refers to the common call for more information and more facts for solving controversies in policy processes across deeply rooted values, such as between those actors and organisations that are in favour of GM food, and those that are against such production processes. To be sure, information and facts should always be sought, but it may only in rare cases lead to resolution. To explain why more facts — especially facts of the same kind — often do not lead to resolution of controversies, it is useful to bring in the concept of framing. This concept refers to

“[…] a way of selecting, organising, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading, and acting. A frame is a
perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on” (Rein and Schön, 1993:146).

In Boström & Klintman’s version, the term is explained as follows:

“Framing can […] be seen as this process – calculated or accidental, explicit or implicit – of translating and making sense of a multifaceted world” (Boström and Klintman, 2008:114)

In this light, we must distinguish between two types of conflicts:

- disagreements, which take place within one common frame, and
- controversies, which take place between separate frames.

Figure 2 indicates how disagreements may take place where actors (individuals or organisations) actually share basic values, i.e. within the same frame. Where there is a basic sharing of values, facts may play a major role in resolving disagreements. If, for instance, actors share strong ethical values about animal welfare, disagreements whether a certain policy scheme – for instance an organic food label – is sufficiently serious about animal welfare may be resolved by introducing the facts about the criteria and practices behind the label. Put in the language of other chapters in this volume (for a published paper, see Batie, 2008), problems that are often called “wicked” become “tame” in cases where values are shared.

As Figure 2 also shows, conflicts may take place between frames with separate, basic values. This is where wicked problems actually are wicked, intractable, and where new facts of the same kind will not help much in the effort to find a resolution. This is particularly true with intrinsic values, such as metaphysically based preferences for “natural” production process, and for “not playing God” (as GMOs are sometimes conceived). Yet, there are ways toward resolution. By “reframing” the issue into another issue, taking place in another frame, through bringing in an entirely different type of fact and/or other values that the actors have to agree on, resolution may be reached. It should be noted, however, that resolution may or may not imply that consensus has been reached. Whereas consensus might be a central goal in disagreements, it is often unrealistic, and in the end all that is possible is an acknowledgement of the strength and public resonance of the values within the new frame (Klintman, 2006).
Figure 3 illustrates an example of a resolution through reframing. Some years ago there was a heated issue of whether GMOs in the United States should have a mandatory label or not. The GMO industry was against it, claiming that consumers would erroneously perceive such a label as a warning implicitly prescribing consumers not to choose GMOs. Certain environmental and consumer-oriented NGOs were in favour of such a label. Both camps came up with several factual arguments about risks – or non-risks – to the environment, ecological balance, of GMOs. Yet, it was not the strength and quality of the facts from one of the camps, for instance about the risks and benefits of GMOs, which resolved the controversy. Instead, it was a reframing of the issue (mainly by the Food and Drug Agency, FDA) into FDA’s issue framing contending that only product characteristics, and not production processes, ought to be relevant for consumers to the extent that a mandatory label ought to be introduced (i.e. the narrow version of *Homo Economicus*, see introduction). Moreover, this reframing included the principle of “yes, unless”, namely that new technology should not be regulated unless it has been shown to be harmful – to human health (when the issue is within FDA’s domain). This is the opposite of the “no, unless”, or precautionary principle, contending that the technology should not be approved of unless it has been shown to be safe (Klintman, 2002). In the controversy over whether GMO should have a mandatory label, FDA reframed the issue into one where GMOs should not have a mandatory label, (as no “convincing” risks with the final products have been shown in humans).

Figure 3. The Controversy over mandatory GMO labels in the United States

In another controversy (Figure 4), over whether GMOs (in cases where pesticides have not been used) should be allowed to be awarded the “organic seal”, similar cross fire of facts was exchanged between the organic actors who where against a GMO inclusion, and the GMO industry as well as the US Department of Agriculture. Still, no factual claims led to its resolution. Instead it was a reframing into “consumers’ right to know”, and “consumer democracy” that resolved the issue. Those in favour of GMO inclusion under the organic seal could not continue their efforts in light of the cultural resonance among the public contending that such an inclusion would go against consumer democracy. Consequently, GMO was not permitted under the organic seal.
In the context of societal values and trade implications these two cases are particularly interesting, since the outcomes of both these controversies can be argued to resonate with one of the basic principles of market-oriented policy making: Both resolutions can be said to be of benefit to international trade, at least from the domestic, US perspective. No mandatory label on GMOs is arguably beneficial for the international trade of the United States, since GM food constitutes a substantial part of US food exports. An organic label in the United States that excludes GMOs is also beneficial for food trade of the United States, as it harmonises organic criteria across the Atlantic, for instance. This raises the issue that behind or above several policy controversies surrounding food, the principle of trade is always there, perhaps overriding the other value-based struggles and controversies. And sometimes the trade principle is consistent with societal concerns and values. So, one should not forget that trade liberalisation may contribute positively to value-based concerns: ethical, metaphysical and aesthetic, as well as the material ones.

**Myth 3: Most values within societal concerns surrounding agriculture can be handled within one or two voluntary standards, for instance an organic standard**

Disagreements that take place within a frame, and controversies that take place across frames, both imply that citizens and consumers do not constitute one group that is united in terms of societal, value-based concerns — against, for example, a united category of profit-seeking actors and organisations. This raises the following question: how should “value-based” labels and other consumer instruments be developed in order to cover the multiplicity of values behind societal concerns? Could such instruments work at all, given this value multiplicity? We will discuss this using organic food labelling as a reference. How about organic labelling? Will it do?

There is an interesting tension, not least among economists, on the issue about how many value-based food labels, and how much information about externalities there should be on products and services. On the one hand, there is the call for “the informed consumer” and consumer sovereignty, which is a very basis of the above-mentioned notion of *Homo Economicus*. Moreover, when asking citizen-consumers in surveys about whether they would like to know more about the wider, societal implications of the production processes, a vast majority will typically be in favour of more information, provided that the cost of the product would not increase drastically.1 On the other hand, it is very common, not least...
among economists and policy makers, to express concerns about how much information consumers really should have. The first part of this concern often refers to the cognitive risk of “information overload”, simply that too much information will make consumers blasé and/or unable to distinguish more important information from less important information in their purchasing decisions. The second part of this concern is more normative, and has a narrow Homo Economicus foundation. It contends that only values associated with the end product should matter to consumers. This restricts “relevant” values to material ones – price, consumer health, taste, and to some extent metaphysical ones, such as Halal, Kosher and some other food preferences that are very well defined and established. The influential newspaper The Economist, for instance, regularly criticises instruments such as eco-labels and certificates, which aim to make consumers act “politically”, by taking more than price and product quality into account. Underlying this criticism is the view that green and ethical consumerism aimed at reducing negative externalities for humans, animals and nature - in the long run may threaten open market competition. The newspaper’s concluding statement in one of its articles is illustrative of this view: “Conventional political activity may not be as enjoyable as shopping, but it is far more likely to make a difference” (The Economist, 7 December 2006, print edition).

Despite such criticism, the importance of bringing the wider values of consumers to the grocery shelves is well anchored among politicians, business and in civil society, not least via NGOs. As to societal concerns about food choices, there are, in addition to the traditional, organic concern (e.g. using no pesticides or artificial substances), ethical, aesthetic and metaphysical values reflected in increasing consumer interest in:

- working conditions (partly covered in organics)
- vegetarian/vegan food
- climate-smart foods (modes of transportation, land use, energy use, etc.)
- water footprints of food
- the choice of hunted animals or farmed animals
- certain GMOs endorsed with environmental arguments
- aquaculture rather than traditional fishing
- how to reduce over-consumption and waste of food.

In addition to the multiplicity of concerns, each production process may be framed in different way, for strategic or less conscious reasons (e.g. Klintman, 2006).

For instance, several opinion polls as well as analyses of disputes that pertain to GMOs or organic food indicate that people subscribe to – or oppose – production processes on at least four grounds. Firstly, people have been shown to be in favour of organic food because they believe it to be superior in terms of the quality of the end product (quality, taste, price). Secondly, some organisations and consumers believe that organic food is better for consumer health and less harmful for the environment. Product-based arguments are typically the most powerful ones in the consumer context. As several countries do not allow claims that organic food is better for health, certain organic labelling organisations use an indirect argument contending that the psychological benefits from choosing organic (by doing something good for the environment) will indirectly be good for our physical health). Thirdly, organisations and individuals commonly claim that organic production processes are superior to conventional agriculture, for environmental reasons, because they use no chemical pesticides.
and so forth. This is really the *raison d'être* of organic agriculture. Finally, some contend that organic food production should be preferred because it is “natural”, close to tradition, and because it goes against the modern hubris of high-tech food production. This is the most difficult framing to debate, since it comes close to metaphysical values which cannot be contested, other than at the meta-level where criteria for “appropriate” arguments are discussed.

This palette of societal concerns in the food sectors as well as problem framings, compares with the fairly narrow range of values that constitute organic food labelling, implies that organic food labelling is unlikely (within the current structure and organisation of the schemes) to become the “super label” that cover the main parts of people’s societal concerns in the food sector. Instead, Klintman and Boström (2010) have argued that future value-based food labelling schemes will need to be deliberated and developed closer to various consumer groups, in order to be able to adopt more of these values that are reflected in, for instance, societal concerns related to climate challenges of production and transportation, water use, and more fundamental issues of the rights and wrongs of using animals in food production.

![Figure 5. Framings of products and production processes](image)

**Myth 4: Downplaying the value-based conflicts that take place in policymaking surrounding societal concerns will reduce confusion and increase trust among the public**

In consumer-related policy making, values play a role on at least two levels. At the most obvious level, values play a fundamental role as they constitute the basis for the stated goals of the instruments. Reduced negative climate impact or better conditions for workers in the South are examples of goals where ethical, metaphysical, aesthetic and material values have an obvious and necessary role. At another level, there are the value-based conflicts that take place “back-stage”, as criteria, methods, and priorities that are needed to reach the above-mentioned goals. There is indeed a broad array of values, politics, and ideology taking place back-stage (Boström and Klintman, 2008). Given the above-mentioned flexibility of value-based framings behind societal concerns in policy disputes, it is very tempting to try to leave value-based multiplicity and disputes aside from the front-stage, from labelling information and its related information on the Internet. And for those involved in the politics behind value-based consumer instruments, many are inclined to talk in terms of washing away the value multiplicity, and instead having science lead the way to developing these value-based standards. Phrases such as “is your organic food really organic?” (Rickardson, 2008) imply a
scientific basis of organic food, as do several claims in favour of value-based alternatives to organic.

In reality, value-based food standards and certificates are trans-scientific. This means that the value-basis of these instruments is intertwined with scientific knowledge claims and scientific methodology. Why not then spare citizen-consumers from this confusing multiplicity that exists, and that is a necessary part of policies handling societal values? The reason, in my view, concerns the issue of trust among consumers. Several studies indicate features that exist among all consumers, but are particularly prominent among the typical, broad group of green consumers, particularly inclined to base their purchasing choices on societal concerns (i.e., values). Firstly, these consumers are particularly uncertain and ambivalent in their choices (Connolly and Prothero, 2008), both surrounding the value-based goals, and about the roads towards these goals. Secondly, these concerned consumers have particularly reluctant attitudes towards claims among various organisations of fully meeting societal concerns (Crane, 2000). This means that this group is not likely to develop the simple (blind) trust in these information instruments, which would be the objective of downplaying or obscuring the value-based conflicts and negotiations behind the instruments. Instead, the typical, green and socially aware consumers demand that value-based conflicts be dealt with openly and, in order for the instrument to deserve a more reflective trust (phrase coined by Boström and Klintman, 2008 in the policy process). In sum, oversimplified information schemes where the negotiated and value-based back-stage politics are entirely hidden are unlikely to get the reflective, active trust of the broad group of green, socially aware consumers.

Conclusions

This paper has pointed out four things to consider when it comes to values as parts of societal concerns on the market:

- The four value dimensions of ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics and materiality are always, and should be understood as, intertwined.
- For resolving controversies where there is no agreement on basic values, it is mainly frame-critical debates, refra- mings of the problem, and new types of facts that are useful.
- Value differences should be discussed as openly as the facts, since a clarification of value differences is often as important as clarifications of details in facts.
- The entire range of values cannot be entirely adopted into one or a few policy schemes (e.g., organic labelling); instead the range of values behind the long list of societal concern should be deliberated in public, and in close relation to the current schemes in a critical manner.

While the topic itself of this paper is highly relevant for issues of consumer policy and trade, this paper’s conclusions raises a particularly challenging one: All values should be discussed, but should all value dimensions be seen in policy decisions? As to local and domestic products, these are often preferred over foreign products, for a number of reasons. In some cases the animal welfare record actually is better in one’s own country, either due to tradition or to a more stringent regulation than in other countries. The same may be true with the environmental record. In such cases, information about local and domestic production should be able to work as a seal indicating environmental and animal-friendly performance.
Yet, information about local production becomes problematic in cases where local or domestic production is marketed as environmentally friendly simply due to shorter transportation of the product from farm to fork. As much research indicates, the transport distance — other than transportation by plane — frequently plays a less prominent role than the other steps in the food chain for environmental impacts (Carlsson-Kanyama and Gonzales, 2009). In geographically large — or long — countries, the domestic preference becomes particularly awkward in cases where food produced at one end of the country is preferred for geographical reasons over food produced across the border. Sweden serves as a good example here, where the distance from north to south roughly corresponds to the distance between southern Sweden and northern Africa. When examining in-depth studies about the common consumer preference for local and domestic products, it is frequently based on material values, in terms of a special concern for work opportunities in one’s own country or region. Although such a concern is sometimes argued to go against the principle of free trade, local concern has been shown to be strong in several countries. And since it is so closely intertwined with the other values — ethical and aesthetic (the latter in different cultures of food production) — consumers ought to get information about the country of origin. Yet, at the higher societal levels there should be restrictions of marketing claims, where local and domestic food products are portrayed as corresponding better to ethical, metaphysical and aesthetic values, where there is actually little ground for this.

Notes

1. For instance, an extensive survey carried out in 2000 by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates indicates that 85% of Americans were in favor of mandatory labelling of GM food.
References


