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Symposium introduction—ethics and sustainable agri-food governance: appraisal and new directions

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This Symposium contributes to a theoretical and methodological discussion on the role of ethics and responsibility in the governance of agri-food systems, as drivers for transitions towards sustainability. The papers in the Symposium are the outcomes of a collective reflection that was initiated at the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) 2017 congress, within the Working Group on *Ethics and sustainable agri-food governance*. The session examined how ethics and ethical values drive change in the agri-food system, and how they increasingly evolve and influence food system governance. Building on the discussions and outcomes of this ESRS Working Group, the collection of papers in this Symposium fosters and deepens the discussion on the role of ethics in food systems, ranging across different food system actors, activities and contexts and presents new theoretical and methodological frameworks to understand the construction of more ethical agri-food systems.

An increasing number of observers are aware that economic behaviour based exclusively on the principles of the 'homo economicus' does not always lead to sustainability (Gibson-Graham 2008; Sayer 2015; Jackson 2017; Raworth 2017). Aligning sustainability principles with economic behaviours implies developing interventions, such as regulations, to seek to prevent or remedy otherwise unsustainable outcomes. However, regulation may prove to be inefficient, for example if costs of compliance are too high with respect to the benefits, or they are ineffective as they are unable to achieve the desired outcomes, for example due to the lack of technical and organizational solutions. Public policies can support economic actors to reflect on, and to be accountable for, the consequences of their economic action, by incentivizing decisions and actions that promote greater sustainability goals, such as contributing to public good provisioning, or by anticipating the unintended consequences of their economic actions (Young 2011; Chandler 2013). In this respect, ethical values are increasingly recognized as critical drivers of change in the agri-food system (Barnett et al. 2005; Barling 2009; Food Ethics Council 2013; Kirwan et al. 2017). As consumers become motivated by non-utilitarian principles, firms attempt to gain consumers' trust by associating their products and brands with their values. Ethical values concur to constitute product quality, affecting brand reputation and generating competition among firms. In some cases, they represent a prerequisite to attain a 'licence of operation', based on public legitimation. Societal groups, particularly through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), utilise the market and consumers, to provide certification standards that embrace particular ethical concerns, from animal welfare to

resource conservation in relation to food products and ingredients, reflecting a plurality of ethical priorities articulated across the food system. Public policies consider ethical principles, set by public authorities but adopted voluntarily by private actors, as essential components of 'soft law', which can activate transition processes based on learning and socio-technical innovation.

The embodiment of ethical values into economic behaviour has already created a range of 'ethical foodscapes' (Goodman et al. 2010), but much more can be envisaged in the future, including the ethics that underpins techno-scientific innovation. How the governance of the agri-food system is being and will be affected by ethics represents a critical issue, worth exploring further. As Sayer (2015, p. 291) argues in relation to economic markets more generally, we need to realign the ethical approach to economy, which means no longer treating the economy "merely as a machine that sometimes breaks down, but as a complex set of relationships between people, and between people and nature, increasingly stretched around the world". Critical in this regard are 'moralities' which prescribe the kinds of behaviour that are permissible, based on normative "*evaluations* of what is just and conducive to well-being" (Sayer 2015, p. 292, original emphasis). Normativity is not then about telling others what to do as a form of 'authoritarian command', acting instead as "evaluative descriptions of our states of being" (Sayer 2015: p. 292). A key challenge is how to "bring normative demands to bear upon the social world of order, rules and public policy" (Popke 2007, p. 504). In food systems the pressure of an increasingly concerned public opinion and consumers is a driver of change. We can already observe the way that firms tend to continuously update their quality systems to account for new and more advanced ethical criteria (Friedberg 2003). At the same time firms seek to shape the perceptions of consumers and to align their customers' values with their brands and product offerings, associating particular narratives to these food products and their ingredients, shaping the ethical identities of both the firm and their products (Coff et al. 2008; Goodman et al. 2010). Many firms are eager to adopt ethical values to legitimize themselves and thereby gain more power within the agri-food system. In this process of 'ethicization' of the economy, the public's attention can move from ethical products to ethical companies and to ethical supply chains. Firms must demonstrate not only their ethics as an organization but also tend to be held accountable for events that occur outside their corporate boundaries, for example misbehaviour of their suppliers. As a result, ethical management schemes, evaluation and reporting tools gain an increasing importance in firm activities and are continuously adapted and improved.

Against this trend, there are also longer-standing drivers that counter the ethicization of markets. The financial system, with its short-term approach and its relative indifference to the 'real economy' (Clapp and Isakson 2018), is a constant threat to the construction of ethical agri-food systems that seek to achieve sustainability. However, the growing number of ethical investment funds are increasingly holding firms to account, including those in the agri-food sector. Global competition tends to drive the race to the bottom, squeezing farmers' and workers' incomes and stretching environmental and safety standards. Industrial logics, such as the search for economies of scale, push for standardization and specialization. Consumer income represents another constraint, as sustainable practices raise a problem of affordability, given existing socio-technical constraints. In a globalized and fragmented world, a multiplicity of ethics may coexist, not necessarily in harmony with each other. Driven by market criteria, food companies will be increasingly involved in the social construction of ethics, using their

communication and image building capacity to steer the process of values creation towards their commercial advantage, in turn shaping the purchasing actions and social identities of their consumers. This raises important questions regarding ethical foodscapes, associated values and social practices.

This Symposium tackles these questions. By analysing different case studies across Europe, the papers show how the different forms of governance that emerge reflect the contradictions and the trade-offs arising when ethics are embodied into private strategies, and show how system activities, politics and policies interact with each other. The papers show how ethical values arise and play a role in agri-food markets, as public attention is confronted with new information or a new sensitiveness to specific issues, how the private sector incorporates these values into business practices, how policies may support new pathways. The papers also illustrate how different interpretations of the same ethical values generate different policy frames. Given the contingency of prevailing ethical values in societies and the link with politics, the role of public policies can be crucial for the continuity of a process of transition. The principles underpinning sustainability have been codified into a wide consensus framework developed through deliberation and multi-party agreements in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, the breadth of the goals mask a range of ethical priorities, allowing firms and public sector agencies to select which of the goals to implement. Transparent information and deliberation arenas, in turn, generate responsabilisation of actors. Support and regulation may accompany or follow the initiatives generated by private actors or civil society to consolidate and replicate innovation processes.

A number of the papers in the Symposium adopt a food system approach or refer to food system intended or unintended outcomes, particularly those concerned with food and drink waste (Maye et al.), food poverty (Tikka) and relations between food waste reduction and food poverty alleviation (Galli et al.; Arcuri). Food systems' environmental and socio-economic outcomes highlight interconnections with activities pertaining to the food and other material and non-material systems. These interactions generate ethical questions. For example, the papers on food poverty and the relations between food poverty and food waste, provide useful insights into the way ethics is evolving in food systems. The three food poverty papers (Tikka; Galli et al.; Arcuri) all use variations of a food system approach to show connections and tensions between food waste generation, food recovery and food poverty alleviation. Galli et al., develop a system dynamics conceptualization of food waste generation, food recovery and redistribution for social purposes. Food assistance is qualified as a hybrid system, spanning food, public welfare and the voluntary sectors (Galli et al. 2018). Their analysis of feedback interactions highlights the (actual and potential) vulnerabilities of food assistance systems that occur when addressing food poverty by reducing food surplus. As the awareness on food poverty and food surplus rises, incentives to food recovery and redistribution strengthen the role of (voluntary) food assistance actors, increasing their exposure to drivers of change, such as retailers' standards for food surplus prevention. Addressing wider questions about the dependence of food aid on food surplus and the potential tensions with food waste prevention is recommended. Other papers also raise important questions about the composition of governance models that underpin food systems and the need for a systemic approach to food ethics (Bui et al) as a driver of sustainable food system transition (Maye and Duncan, 2017).

A second theme that cuts across several papers is the analysis of how food system performance is problematised and communicated in public discourse. This includes analysis of ‘ethical disputes’ (Tisenkopfs et al), ‘hot topics’ (Maye et al), ‘consensus frames’ and ‘public discourses’ (Arcuri; Tikka). The emphasis on ‘ethical disputes’ or ‘hot topics’ is important to understand how food system activities become problematic and in turn challenge existing shared values. Negative food system impacts (e.g. climate change, meat-based diets, pollution) emerge in public discourse because of concern and/or the creation of new information. Maye et al argue that understanding how knowledge is communicated to publics is important to challenge existing norms and to trace private and public forms of food system response. They use the plastics debate and links between food and drinks consumption and environmental packaging as an example to develop this point. Examining disputes and ‘ethical dilemmas’ (Mephram, 1996) thus generates debates about performing current actions differently. In the Tisenkopfs et al. study of ethical disputes in Latvia, for example, they employ Latour’s (2004) ‘matter of fact’ / ‘matter of concern’ categorisation to show the situational and precarious nature of ethics in the food system. This is a form of framing, which contests topics that are framed in indisputable/factual ways. Such framings are partial and highly political. In moments of crisis or uncertainty issues cannot be resolved by appealing to facts and analysis of such disputes (in their case a local dog food brand linked to a disease outbreak, a private school initiative to provide organic vegetarian meals, and the development of biogas production in the country) shows how ethical concerns are addressed in food systems. The consensus frame on charitable food redistribution in Italy also reveals similar insights (Arcuri), particularly how ambiguity is important in building a consensus discourse and reductionist conceptualisation of the problem.

The literature on ethics and responsibility is already quite well advanced (Barnett et al. 2011; Evans et al. 2017) and is highly applicable to but its elaboration in food system research generally is under-utilized. The critical insight from the responsibility literature is its problematisation of moral agency and neoclassical conceptualisations of markets as abstracted economic entities. Economic actors are ‘ethical actors’ and key moral questions are posited about relations between individual responsibilities and collective social responsibilities (Young 2003, 2011). Crucially, the individualistic model of moral agency is challenged, with acknowledgement that responsibilities are complex and distributed across complex networks of actors (see Maye et al for a review). All eight Symposium papers discuss some aspect of responsibility or responsabilisation. Strategies of responsabilisation are pragmatic governance tools that embody some form of ethical value and enable or not sustainability transition. The papers collectively make some important contributions to how we understand these processes. For example, from a governance perspective we see the way that food aid and food waste practices are framed and reframed, with an important shift in welfare responsibilities. We can see this most clearly in the charitable food aid example in Finland, where food aid practices have gained policy relevance and have been reframed as a poverty problem to a circular economy (waste) solution. The case study raises wider questions about entitlement (food aid is not an entitlement but a gift) and through the reframing of welfare responsibilities from the state to church / civil society organizations. The Italian food aid cases raise similar questions about the governance and responsabilisation of charitable food distribution, which is increasingly about managing food surplus to provide welfare services. In this sense we see the socio-political construction of framings that often lead to inadequate solutions, with charitable organisations playing a key role in meeting the basic needs of vulnerable groups.

The analysis of emerging governance arrangements and strategies to introduce reusable coffee cups in UK coffee shops and food retail chains (Maye et al) is more optimistic. Recent interventions and strategies in the UK to reduce the use of coffee cups made from single-use plastic include state and industry partnerships, for example, in line with the distributed responsibility framework, as well as private retail and institutional initiatives. Whilst there is some evidence of collaborative and market-based solutions, more work is needed to assess their impact, with responsibility in this case closely connected to cycles of public problematisation. Tisenkopfs et al are more pessimistic in their assessment, suggesting that responsibility in food governance is currently limited to a small set of actors; however, their analysis of three ethical disputes highlights the potential of what they call 'ethical alliances' (e.g. public-private alliance for biogas) as enabling more shared responsibility in food system governance. Responsibility also features in Sharpe and Barling's analysis of how the actors in the conventional UK food sector identify social sustainability and in order to action it in the conventional UK agri-food sector. The actors include not only food and drink firms, but also the accompanying sustainability audit and measurement companies. These actors' responses to how to do social sustainability are improvised and often borrow from others, and so implementation is selective and inconsistent. The analysis shows instrumental responsabilisation, in the sense that responsibility actions are justified on moral grounds as 'the right thing to do' but must also be justified in business terms. They note a delegation of governance responsibilities to achieve sustainability from public authorities to the private sector, as public regulation of corporate reporting and accounting standards has mobilized these actions.

The importance of corporate governance, the market power of retailers and supermarkets and the privatization of agri-food systems is not a new phenomenon (Marsden et al 2000), nor indeed is the absorption of ethics and ethical trading into food chains (Coff et al 2008; Goodman et al 2012). Nevertheless, a key argument running through the papers in this Symposium is the suggestion that as economic actors (in this case food chain actors / retailers) are made accountable of the unintended consequences of their economic action (Chandler 2013) the importance of ethical values grows. This affects the governance of agri-food systems, both in terms of using more advanced ethical criteria and in the way that ethicization drives markets both within and outwith mainstream systems of food provisioning. As well as understanding how food chains and markets action ethics this necessitates recognition of shared ethics and the co-existence and multiplicity or plurality of ethics. We have already seen evidence of this multiplicity in the discussion above related to welfare responsabilisation, public problematisation of food system outcomes, which challenges shared social norms.

In this final section, we consider in more detail what the Papers in the Symposium also reveal important insights about ethics in private governance and the value of niche innovations as drivers of change. The papers by Bui et al, which examines three initiatives introduced by Belgian supermarkets to source local food, and Sharpe and Barling's analysis of social sustainability framing, are particularly useful in this regard. Bui et al's paper examines the social construction of ethics with local food in the three examples. They usefully make the point that too often supermarkets are neglected in transition studies, which is surprising given their potential to enable food system change. The analysis combines a pragmatist and systemic perspective and through a detailed analysis of the social construction and negotiation of the initiatives they show

how local sourcing in all three cases is a market response to increased public interest in ethics. This in itself is not that surprising, but the cases show different organisational models. Carrefour, working with two Provinces of Hainaut and Liège, led to several innovations in terms of specific contracts, a charter to guarantee small-scale producers fairer marketing, new logistical infrastructures and new options for barcoding. A third case, in Walloon Brabant, created a dedicated organisation (Made-in-BW) for new interactions to take place between different food chain actors, with different values. The cases show how meanings and related ethical values of the 'local' are negotiated and the examples are indeed innovative. Above all, however, the case shows the way critique and problematisation of the mainstream/agro-industrial system can be, as they put it, 'absorbed and neutralised by incumbent actors', thus requiring a more systemic approach to ethics (in terms of strategies and activities).

Sharpe and Barling reveal similar instrumentalism in their analysis of agri-food actors' interpretations of social sustainability. Tiskenkopf et al's paper provides good evidence of public-private partnerships through the green energy dispute. Schäfer provides an interesting analysis of ethical organic poultry in northeast Germany, situated as an alternative food network / radical innovation. The empirical material looks at the establishment of a dual-purpose breed on small multifunctional farms in the region and in an industry that is highly concentrated and specialized. In other words, this is a niche innovation outside the mainstream poultry market. The case shows the importance of co-operation / co-operative management as a mode of governance for such a niche innovation, although diffusion of such innovations into the mainstream regime will only realistically happen if animal husbandry is challenged.

To conclude, it is our hope that this Symposium contributes to a research agenda, that aims at exploring the connections between: politics, ethics and policies; and, to contribute to a theory of (food and agricultural) markets that is more aware of societal concerns and how they play out within the food system.

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Papers that make up this Symposium

Sabrina Arcuri: *Food poverty, food waste and the consensus frame on charitable food redistribution in Italy.*

Sibylle Bui, Ionara Costa, Olivier De Schutter, Tom Dedeurwaerdere, Marek Hudon, Marlène Feyereisen: *Systemic ethics and inclusive governance: two key prerequisites for sustainability transitions of agri-food systems.*

Francesca Galli, Alessio Cavicchi, Gianluca Brunori: *Food waste reduction and food poverty alleviation: a system dynamics conceptual model.*

Damian Maye, James Kirwan and Gianluca Brunori: *Ethics and responsabilisation in agri-food governance: the single-use plastics debate and strategies to introduce reusable coffee cups in UK retail chains.*

Martina Schäfer: *Establishing ethical organic poultry production: a question of successful cooperation management?*

Rosalind Sharpe, David Barling: *'The right thing to do': Ethical motives in the interpretation of social sustainability in the UK's conventional food supply.*

Ville Tikka: *Charitable food aid in Finland: From a social issue to an environmental solution.*

Talis Tisenkopfs, Emils Kilis, Mikelis Grivins and Anda Adamsone-Fiskovica: *Whose ethics and for whom? Dealing with ethical disputes in agri-food governance.*

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